

Chapter 7

Musicological and ethnomusicological perspectives

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Popular music and religion are in a doubly challenged position as an amalgamated subject area of academic enquiry. On the one hand, the reactionary conventions of music education prevail, whereby music tends to be conceived as High Art and thus dominated by the classical canon, in both practical tuition and scholarly analysis. Consequently, the more music is associated with so-called 'extramusical' or 'functional' dimensions – such as entertainment or religion – the fewer resources are devoted to it in higher education. On the other hand, there is an exclusionary tension between the popular and the religious, or between entertainment and religion, on the basis of different philosophies and conceptions of the world especially, regardless of the vast quantities of religious devotees. Thus, until the twenty-first century it was equally rare to encounter discussion about religiosity in popular music studies as it was to run into deliberation about music in the study of religions.

To some extent, such disciplinary insularity may be understandable on the basis of common ideas about the secularity of popular music and the specificity of both music and religion as fields of academic enquiry. As a result, the immense variety of religious music has been marginalized within popular music studies and musicology alike, and arguably for blatant ideological reasons by replacing the religious sacred with a praise of subcultural authenticity in the former field and with myths of ingenuity and musical autonomy in the latter. It may be slightly more surprising to find similar biases in ethnomusicology, particularly when considering its allegiance to anthropology as well as the centrality of conceptual thinking and belief systems in theorizing 'music as culture' (e.g., Merriam 1964; Titon 2009). To a considerable degree, at issue here is, again, the modern scientific compartmentalization whereby religion in particular has not only been separated as a subject matter but also conceived in a Eurocentric fashion with Christianity as the yardstick. This might have changed in the twenty-first century, yet it is yet more than a matter of mere nomenclature, as even if African, Asian, Oceanian and Native American belief systems were labelled as cosmologies, myths or spirituality earlier in ethnomusicology, relevant studies are few and far between.

Music, of course, is an equally Eurocentric conception, or even more so: it is the only Western art form named after pre-Christian deities, and arguably occupies a central position as a surrogate for religion in the alleged processes of secularization. As ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl (2005: 190–1) suggests, an outsider like an 'ethnomusicologist from Mars' would most likely perceive the Western conservatoires and music schools as 'a religious and social system ruled by the personalities, compositions, and principles ... of a few great composers', with 'the

dictatorship and rigid class structure implied by the orchestra' as the admired model of social relations. It is hardly a coincidence that the notion of the canon has been adopted willingly in Western art music, by replacing saints and scriptures with composers and masterpieces – and 'God' with the 'Music Itself', a transcendent force whose ineffable qualities can only be mediated by select exceptional individuals. Indeed, there are numerous ways to mythologize music, for instance by emphasizing its mysterious origins, autonomous effects, ingenious intermediaries or self-affirming authenticity, and by disregarding the contradictory logics between these. Importantly, this is not characteristic of Western art music alone, but affects all types of music, especially as they become incorporated in the global educational and economic structures (see Kärjä 2022).

Circulating soundly organized humanity

Despite the ideological baggage of Eurocentric elitism and whether or not the term 'music' is appropriate or sensible in all cultural contexts, the practices associated with the term are universal in the sense that in all human communities people sing and dance and play instruments – and evaluate and exchange the outcomes in one form or another (see Nettl 2005: 16–26). Thus one might argue that music is popular by definition (i.e. 'of the people'), and that through the constant debates about good and bad (or evil) it is implicated in a variety of belief systems, whether explicitly 'religious' or exhibiting some other conceptions of transcendence or sacredness. One way to encapsulate this is to consider music as a form of 'soundly organized humanity', as ethnomusicologist John Blacking (1973) put it. The idea may be further elaborated on the basis of the 'music-culture' models, where the emphasis is on the inextricability of cultural, social and material planes from each other. In other words, how people learn to conceptualize music depends on certain activities and forms of behaviour, as well as on the physical conditions. The prime outcome of these triangular interrelations is musical sound, which then has an impact on the concepts, behaviour and material resources alike (see Merriam 1964: 32–3; Titon 2009: 18–30). For example, the epithets 'popular' and 'religious' imply certain kinds of words, outfits, gestures, instruments and sounds, as well as how to organize the commercial relations involved. As indicated by phenomena such as Hillsong and contemporary US gospel, sometimes the epithets become all but indistinguishable, with the institutional involvement of a church and explicit evangelizing as the few meaningful differences.

The key point to be made is nonetheless that the sounds do matter when deeming or labelling a musical instance either popular or religious, or both. While in principle any sounds can be part of any kind of music, the consistency of sonorous combinations is pivotal the further one gets in distinguishing subgenres from each other. Musicologist Richard Middleton (2000: 11) notes that 'in a sense the best commentary on music comes in the form of music itself', and consequently all such commentary tests the boundaries set by epithets and genre labels. Incidental sonic transgressions may be taken as stylistic effects, but if and when they become systematic and common, one may begin to refer to an emergence of a new genre. Yet as genre scholars are eager to point out, at issue is not a fixed set of textual features but a discursive formation – or a music-culture – where symbolic content merges with social relations and value systems (see

Frith 1996; Fabbri 1982; Holt 2007). One can exemplify this with the post-1960s derivatives of rock music: the sound of electric guitar, preferably slightly distorted, has become sanctified as the indispensable sonic emblem of the genre cluster, and gendered to an extent where female guitarists are more likely to be taken as men who just look like women than to be acknowledged as appropriately skilled women (see Waksman 1999: 5–6).

The compartmentalization of music and its scholarship may have prevented many from recognizing the similarities between ethnomusicological music-culture models and the theorization of (popular) music genres, and the same applies by and large to approaches introduced in explicitly religious contexts. David Morgan (2007: 26–7), for one, writes about ‘culture as circulation’ based on a ‘practice-centered approach to the study of popular religious culture’ where the variety of relevant symbols and objects are enfolded ‘as a material reality into the ritual or routine or daily habit that puts it to work in the world-constructing and maintaining behavior’. More recently, he has defined ‘the material study of religion’ as an examination of ‘whatever artifacts, bodies, substances, or environments do to produce and to maintain a web of relations that brings human beings to what really matters to them’, or, an investigation of the material connections within an ‘assemblage of things whose interaction constitutes a religious event’ (Morgan 2021: 76). Music is present in these discussions only tangentially, yet its material qualities and importance for rituals and social participation are duly acknowledged (e.g., Morgan 2021: 73, 128).

Sonic theology

Some have approached the inextricability of the religious from the social and the material in terms of *sonic theology*. Here, the study of religions enmeshes explicitly with ethnomusicology or the cultural study of music. Jeffers Engelhardt (2012: 299), for instance, stresses the ‘profound relation between the sonic and the sacred’ for musical practice and music scholarship alike, as well as the recurrent ‘applied musicologies of reform and renewal movements’ whereby the sonic expression becomes measured against a given doctrine, the spiritual and social needs of the community, and the material particularities of the soundscape. Whether orthodox, reformist or extremist in orientation, the sonic theologies at issue are furthermore implicated in mediation and commerce. This may involve the use of instruments and amplification, as well as capitalizing on the mass media with both financial gain and proselytizing in mind. Consequently, ‘material ontologies are the bases of sonic ontologies, which are recognized and reproduced in religious practice’, and thus ‘mediations and materialities index the historical specificity and worldliness of religious musics and sounds’ (Engelhardt 2012: 304–5).

Andrew Alter (2019: 322) in turn summarizes sonic theology as ‘a belief system based on the presumption of sound’s divine essence’ and ‘projected materially through the [ritual] actions of officiates, participants and ... musicians’. This is akin to the notion of *sonic liturgy*, as suggested by Guy Beck (2012: 26–7) for ‘describing sacred sound in practice as opposed to sacred sound in theory’ and to serve as ‘a flexible template with which to understand the constantly changing and developing process of human interaction with the divine in the context of ritual and music’ (see also Beck 1993).

In the treatises of sonic theology and liturgy, the emphasis is yet on religious music, however conceived, and there are only incidental insinuations of connections to popular music in the conventional sense. For instance, Engelhardt (2012: 300) mentions ‘the Christian music of Pentecostal Romani in Hungary[,] House of God sacred steel musicians in the United States[,] popular Catholic ensembles in Brazil[,] Trinidadian Full Gospel musicians [and] the popular, marketable, public religiosity of ... Aretha Franklin, Mos Def, or Lupe Fiasco[.]’ Alter (2019) and Beck (2012) in turn deal exclusively with Hindu musical practices without any considerations of how the sonic theologies at stake might relate or contribute to conceptualizations of popular music. Yet as the references and allusions to gospel, soul and rap suggest, there are no reasons to dismiss the possibility of, let us say, ‘popular sonic theologies’. As any particular sound – whether emanating from pipe organs, a distorted electric guitar or a human throat – can be perceived as the material projection of a divine essence, at issue are not the sounds themselves but how they become ritualistically combined with other sounds, symbols and materials as deemed appropriate within a given belief system. The liturgical rules of a Grateful Dead concert or a techno rave (see Sylvan 2002) may be far more flexible than those of a Catholic Mass, but as internally logical constellations of ideas and beliefs, activities, repertoires and materialities all three serve as examples of ethnomusicological music-cultures (see Titon 2009: 18–30).

However, to equate sonic theologies with music-cultures straightforwardly is questionable if not potentially misleading. First of all, as the etymology of theology suggests, at issue is the study of God, or gods, and thus the variety of non-theistic religions and belief systems are excluded from its remit by definition. Additionally, as in the case of all modern ‘ologies’, there are good grounds to interrogate the Eurocentric assumptions behind the notion of theology, and to what extent Christianity in particular serves as a model for what bona fide theology, or religion to begin with, should be. Similar concerns apply to music and culture; depending on the dogmas and their interpretations, the sonic qualities alone are not necessarily enough to classify certain sounds as ‘music’, as exemplified by the debates about ‘halal pop’ and other forms of music in Islamic contexts (see Otterbeck & Ackfeldt 2012; also Otterbeck and Larsson in this volume). Culture in turn is notoriously slippery and ambiguous conceptually, and concerning theology or religion there are risky tendencies to essentialize culture by treating it as a synonym for a nation, which for its part is often implied to be homogenous both in terms of ethnicity and religiosity. While a variety of state apparatuses – the musical marketplace included – may perpetuate such tendencies, there are no ethnically homogenous countries, and within ethnic communities there is always some degree of religious diversity.

Thus, if and when considering the possible popular sonic theologies and their music-cultural dynamics, one should first ascertain the extent to which the popular music in question relates to organized religions or other systematically developed dogmas about deities, or to some other belief systems that may or may not function (quasi)religiously; and second, whether the theologies at issue address the sonic component or remain more or less indifferent to what counts as ‘proper’ music or otherwise aesthetically appropriate. Yet it may indeed be, as Engelhardt (2012: 301) implies, that ultimately such indifference does not exist but is merely a consequence of the rampant epistemic compartmentalization in modern science and scholarship. ‘As spiritual life, ethical and moral action, theology, and the sonic converge in the secular modern’, he maintains,

‘music makes religion, and vice versa’, and this ‘universal relation between music, sound, and religion’ has only been ‘intensified through recognition, fascination, violence, ethnocentrism, and civilizational stereotype’ (Engelhardt 2012: 299–301).

Sounds sacred

In the twenty-first-century cultural climate where debates about new religious movements, alternative spiritualities and post-secular societies abound, the conventional conceptual compartments of religion and theology may nevertheless require careful re-consideration, not only to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings but also to acknowledge the variety of cosmologies and belief systems in the world. To this end, an alternative and possibly more inclusive approach rests on the notion of the sacred, defined by scholar of religion Gordon Lynch (2012: 29) as ‘what people collectively experience as absolute, non-contingent realities which present normative claims over the meaning and conduct of social life’. It is indeed noteworthy that this definition of the sacred does not remain limited to explicitly religious contexts, but involves all kinds of belief systems or ‘cultural structures’ (Lynch 2012: 7) that rest on unquestioned ideas about transcendent truth, be it national identity and its geopolitical boundaries, democracy and political utopias in general, human rights and (sub)cultural diversity, or the financial value of it all (see also Bielo 2015: 21–2). Relatedly, sociologist Matthew Evans (2003: 44) emphasizes the Durkheimian ‘set-apart’ qualities of the sacred and distinguishes between the religious, the spiritual, the personal and the civil sacred; ‘From war, to politics, to advertising, much energy goes into the creation, co-opting, capturing, and/or desecration of sacred things’ (Evans 2003: 42).

The relevance of the sacred as a historically contingent cultural and communicative structure is particularly weighty when considered in terms of the global postcolonial condition. This entails addressing the diversity of sacred commitments and their moral ambiguities (Lynch 2012: 47–8) in the context of global migration and cultural diversity, especially as the latter tends to be associated with the ‘ethno-religious mix’ introduced by the multiculturalist policies of the Western world (Modood 2013: 8). Indeed, it may be that instead of multicultural societies one should refer to multiethnic ones, whilst also trying to proceed ‘to a more sophisticated phase [of] more democratic and egalitarian forms of intercultural governance’ (Rattansi 2011: 5). Given the ubiquity of music in all societies, it has been put to use in official multi- or intercultural settings, frequently with educational or integrative aims (e.g. Marsh 2017; Frankenberg et al. 2016). Such noble aspirations notwithstanding, related projects or curricular revisions have often suffered from so-called content integration that rests on unfounded assumptions about ‘a direct line between ... students’ national–geographical, ethnic or cultural backgrounds and their musical identities’ (Karlsen 2013: 163). Moreover, even with the best of intentions, ‘cultural’ may inadvertently become a euphemism for ‘ethnic’ or ‘racial’, thus foregrounding the fundamental links between multiculturalism, racialization and cultural essentialism (Rattansi 2011: 9, 27).

It is therefore no surprise that representatives of African-American or Caribbean gospel, soul and rap feature above in Engelhardt’s (2012: 300–1) list of examples that challenge the conventional ‘*sui generis*, secular, Enlightenment categories of religion and music[.]’ Concerning gospel and

soul especially, the genre labels alone explicate a racialized conceptual connection between spirituality and blackness, further fortified historically by the centrality of spirituals in the black entertainment industry in the United States, with the fiction of racialized authenticity exploited to the fullest and primarily for the pleasures of white audiences (see Graham 2018: 249–51). In many if not all genres of ‘black music’, then, one encounters a complex web of relations where commerce enmeshes with racialization and religiosity, again rendering the distinction between the sacred and the secular idle or even impossible, whether or not emphasis is laid on religiosity or racial purity. Depending on the societal context, the religious institutions may in fact function as training grounds and a support base for musicians who, like Jacky Clark Chisholm of the Clark Sisters, wish ‘to be commercialized on top of being anointed’ (quoted in Öhman 2017: 280). In the contemporary US gospel industry, an affiliation with a particular church may indeed be a key part of the musician’s ‘brand’ as they embrace ‘the commercialization of gospel music ... to sell the sacred’ (Öhman 2017: 16, 79–80). Relatedly, one may note the emergence of ‘hip hop’s hostile gospel’ that is informed by ‘the nefarious social and living conditions of the urban context,’ rather than the support of religious institutions. Here, theological concerns merge with questions about social consciousness and justice, and ‘the secular and profane are intertwined with weed, alcohol, sexuality, and “living a good life/being successful”’ (Hodge 2017: 24–5). Thus, fame and fortune may be perceived as an eschatological blessing, conventionally supported by congregational structures and hierarchies. Alternatively, at issue may be a type of ‘urban theodicy’ that is based on socio-spiritual geopolitics of structural racism (see Dyson 2015: 61–2).

The musical race (against race)

Issues of structural racism have been duly discussed in ethnomusicology for decades, but they have resurfaced fervently in recent years. Here, the sanctification of racial difference for economic purposes becomes foregrounded, and indeed the histories of popular music have been recounted invariably as sequences of appropriating ‘authentic’ black expression culturally and financially. Especially in the United States, musicians have been classified on racial rather than stylistic grounds, and even if rock ‘n’ roll for instance ‘proceeded from an aesthetic impulse that viewed cultural borrowing as both natural and desirable, it developed in a commercial context where the ordinary process of cultural borrowing can become theft, and artists can be categorized incorrectly or excluded from the marketplace altogether for reasons that have little to do with talent or musical style’ (Garofalo & Waksman 2014: 8). Given the global dominance of the US entertainment industry, its racial dynamics have infiltrated everywhere; thus while acknowledging the import of Mediterranean, French and Latin American influences in the development of Italian popular music, for example, one is compelled to stress the consequences of the black/white dichotomy in music, introduced to Europe through the minstrel shows and ragtime and blues since the late nineteenth century and consolidated subsequently in early jazz and post-Second World War rock ‘n’ roll. ‘It is not possible’, writes Franco Fabbri (2008: 32) in his excavation into the topic, ‘to imagine a history of popular music that is not also a history of African-American music’.

Gospel, soul, rap and other ‘Black’ genres constitute a prime instance of racializing music, as does the broad category of ‘Latin music’, whether considered a predecessor of or an outmoded

synonym for salsa. I leave the debate over the accuracy of the terms for those obsessed with authenticity, and stress the centrality of the politics of racialization in all cases instead, not least to underline the relevance of ethnomusicological music-culture models again. Writing about both Latin music and salsa, Lise Waxer (2002: 5–6) discusses them as stylistic complexes ‘with multiple sites of articulation’ where ‘a social and cultural way of looking at the world (concept) is welded to praxis (making) through the creation and reception of musical sound’. This corresponds to the triangular interrelations between cultural, social and material planes of music as suggested by Alan P. Merriam (1964: 32–5; see also Titon 2009: 18–30), as well as the theorization of musical genres as assemblages of ideological, behavioural, commercial and sonic conventions (Frith 1996: 94; see also Fabbri 1982).

The models in question have been developed separately within ethnomusicology and popular music studies, but they evince undertones of cultural materialism in the sense that the interdependencies between the physical, the philosophical and the political are openly acknowledged (see Williams 1980: 106–7). These principles inform also the study of material religion as delineated by Morgan (2021), for instance, and in recent years the gravity of the physical has been emphasized increasingly within ecocritical strands of scholarship. A foundational argument in these studies is that ‘the environmental crisis is a crisis of culture’, that is, ‘a failure of holistic problem solving, interpersonal relations, ethics, imagination, and creativity’ (Allen 2011: 414), thus foregrounding the interrelations between the material and the conceptual. Moreover, the environmental anxieties become associated with the sacred and induce new forms of normative commitments that may draw their justification from neo-paganism, Indigenous cosmologies and scientific evidence alike (see, e.g., Lynch 2014: 74).

It has become commonplace to refer to the cultural materialist entanglements in question as ecosystems, even if this risks replacing concerns about environmental sustainability with mainly financial ones. Music educator Huib Schippers (2016: 11–13) introduces a ‘five-domain framework’ that covers ‘crucial elements of the ecology common to most music practices: systems of learning music, musicians and communities, contexts and constructs, regulations and infrastructure, and media and the music industry’. He lists aesthetics, cosmologies and ‘obstacles such as ... restrictive religious attitudes’ as belonging to the domain of ‘social and cultural contexts of musical traditions’, though the references to educational philosophies, cross-cultural influences as well as to legal, political and commercial decision-making in the other domains make it clear that there are various overlaps and interrelations between them (Schippers 2016: 11–13). One might note, though, that in this framework ‘ecology’ points to ‘a complex, integrated system’ of sustainability and stewardship (Schippers 2016: 4–5) rather than primarily environmental issues. Yet such an emphasis aligns with the ‘crisis of culture’ approach in that instead of taking preservationist claims for granted, value-laden notions such as authenticity and tradition are subject to constant dynamic reinterpretation (see Schippers 2016: 8–9).

The relevance of cultural materialism as it informs the models of music-cultures and musical ecosystems becomes accentuated further because music, as sound, is matter. This may be easily forgotten in a world where myths about musical transcendence abound and where the fiercest debates about music are conducted in court rooms over immaterial property; indeed, the music industry is nowadays best understood as a ‘copyright industry ... driven by the development of digital media technologies’ (Wikström 2020: 19, 87). But even if the revenues based on physical distribution continue to descend, the energy required and emissions caused by the music industry

are more likely on the increase (see Devine 2019: 158–60). Copyright scholars and political ecologists may note here that immaterial property becomes lucrative only when it is given a material form, for instance, as someone sings a copyrighted song publicly and with financial remunerations in mind. This is also where crucial tensions may emerge between religion and commerce as the foundations of ultimate social values, and for example in legal interpretations of the US ‘fair use’ principles, arguments based on a ‘divinely religious purpose’ of reusing protected material are likely to be taken as copyright infringement (Kelderman 2002: 1115). Then again, even if the financial weight of religious institutions tends to be ignored in the treatises of the music industry (cf. Wikström 2020), the commercial value of gospel and contemporary Christian music (CCM) has been recognized long since, with increasing attention paid more lately to evangelical ‘worship capital’ by scholars of congregational music (e.g. Romanowski 1992; Mall 2018).

The ‘entanglement of evangelical and capitalist sensibilities’ in the CCM industry (Romanowski 1992: 79, see also Chapter 11) foregrounds the material plane of the music-culture in two peculiar ways: financially and aesthetically. In other words, at issue are the monetary resources available and to be gained, as well as the expressive techniques and materialities required to sell the sacred and trade the transcendent. Regarding the latter, sound as matter is key, though also a cause of much chatter about how to demarcate religious music from other types on the basis of its sonic as well as lyrical features. According to some, CCM for example is rather a ‘catch-all term for popular music that features evangelical Christian lyrics’, amounting to mere ‘Christian variants of hard rock, dance-pop, adult contemporary, and hip-hop’ (Lindenbaum 2013: 112). As this suggests, the debate is implicated in a curious combination of romanticist, theological and legal argumentation and interpretation of creativity, where especially the instrumental sounds of religious music tend to be dismissed as stylistically derivative and opposed to either secular or celestial ingenuity. The legal team in the court room, in turn, builds its case on earthly authorities yet ultimately considers all audible renditions of a song the same, thus relying on equally metaphysical ideals of a Work (of Art) and an individual Creator. As demonstrated by a number of scholars of Indigeneity, postcoloniality and racialization, the Western copyright system serves the interest of global corporate capitalism, not individual authors, and considers other (cosmological) conceptualizations of creativity and immaterial property as not much more than primitive fantasy. Especially if and when ‘Indigenous’ is exploited as ‘traditional’ and situated in the public domain without acknowledging different conceptions of ownership, doubts about ‘selective free riding’ and other forms of abusive ‘neo-imperialism’ surface quickly (see Drahos & Frankel 2012: 8; Hilder 2015: 153).

Related concerns become manifest when addressing the importance of ‘versioning’ in the ‘African diasporic model of culture’ (Toynbee 2004: 135). This leads immediately to questions about interlinkages between the legal primacy of composed works, the sheet music market and the division of labour in the industry, and about the racial dynamics of such a ‘regime of enforced originality’ where the imitative and improvisatory creative qualities of ‘phonographic orality’ are denied (see Toynbee 2004: 125–7). An instructive example of how the interconnections and dynamics at stake can be approached with the aid of formal music analysis is provided by Rob Bowman (2003) as he compares different versions of ‘Try a Little Tenderness’, a soul classic by Otis Redding from 1966 but composed some three decades earlier in the Tin Pan Alley idiom for white entertainers such as Ruth Etting and Bing Crosby to perform. Before Redding ‘completely redefined the nature and meaning of the song’, it was also recorded by Aretha Franklin and Sam

Cooke as part of a ‘transculturation process’, or, as part of attempts to plug in to the white ‘pop’ market of the early 1960s (Bowman 2003: 105, 123–4). By carefully dissecting the structural, melodic, harmonic and timbral differences between the Crosby, Franklin, Cooke and Redding recordings, Bowman (2003: 129) is able to expound the centrality of the performance style and ‘nuances such as timbral variation, rhythmic articulation, pitch gesture and arrangement’ in ‘transforming the ultimate meaning, impact and prospective audience in the process’. The treatment is all but exclusively directed at problematizing authorship and ownership as they have become constructed in copyright legislation on the basis of nineteenth-century Western art music with pronounced socio-economic effects as pertains to financial rewards and historical acknowledgement. Thus there is very little explicit commentary on religious or spiritual issues; yet the popular intersects with the religious sacred in particular as ‘Franklin cannot and does not completely shed her gospel background and consequently, at least to a small degree, transforms the song when compared to ... Crosby’ (Bowman 2003: 105, 123).

The attentiveness to timbre foregrounds the limitations of conventional formal analysis and also serves as a reminder of the intricate connections between aesthetics, social strata and the legal system: a particular type of graphic notation based on elite music is used to fix the properties – melody, harmony, rhythm – that determine the integrity of a musical work (Bowman 2003: 129). Ethnomusicologists and scholars of popular music alike have been quick to note how such a socio-techno-legal constellation fails to recognize not only the centrality of timbral qualities in musical meaning-making but also the varieties of collaborative and collective authorship. Similarly, music philosopher Lydia Goehr (1992) has demonstrated how the ontological supremacy of the notion of the musical work is a socio-historical invention, and therefore the reasons to sustain it are ultimately political and evince a belief in Music Itself with expectations of material rewards. The ethnomusicologist from Mars might treat this as an indication of a prosperity religion amongst others.

To critique the copyright system with the use of notation-based formal music analysis may appear counterintuitive. Yet this can result only from a confusion where mere prescriptive – or, like in Bowman’s (2003) case, descriptive – notation is taken as analysis (see Seeger 1958). As pointed out by musicologist Allan F. Moore (2003: 5–6), music analysis involves addressing perceived differences between or within musical pieces, and only some of the differences can be presented graphically with standard notation. Given the disciplinary stranglehold of authorized notated scores or annotated ‘critical editions’ in conventional musicology, and regardless of stylistic and technological shifts, there is still a strong tendency to associate music analysis with interpreting visual reductions rather than what one hears, or with ‘structural listening’ where the ideal coherence of a composition rests on ‘precision not just of pitch ... but also of notation and instrumentation’ which in turn are based on the Western tonal canon, thus excluding most of musical expression in the world (Subotnik 1996: 157–8).

Sound and musical meaning

The exclusive cultural politics of conventional music analysis based on notation become apparent when considering the importance of timbre, or ‘the sound’, in making music meaningful. Especially when assessing the religious or otherwise sacred relevance of a given musical

performance or recording, it is quite often if not invariably the unique acoustic properties of an instrument or singing style that makes the difference. It may be true that the use of so-called church modes in hymns and pop songs alike, instead of common tonal harmonies, ‘convinces us that some kind of religious affirmation may be the only answer to society’s distress’ (Mellers 1981: 147), and those versed in Indian music can most likely attest to the same when hearing *ragas* that are meant to ‘arouse aesthetic and emotional states ... meant to please the gods’ (Beck 2014: 360). Also in the treatises about ‘music in the world of Islam’ there has been considerable attention paid to modal theory, ‘with specifying the manifold affiliations of the [modes] to ethical, therapeutical and cosmological values’ (Shiloah 1995: 120). While such compositional solutions are undeniably part of what makes music ‘sound religious’, in the Western world there is one musical contrivance above all signifying the presence of God: the pipe organ. The acoustic association or any such ‘ideas of what church music sounds like, ... are not inherently sacred but instead have become accepted as such through processes of repetition that enculturate our practices as “tradition”’ (Nekola 2015: 3), but the fact that usually the most elaborate of pipe organs are to be found in Protestant cathedrals makes the interconnections between musical sound, material resources and religious institutions blatantly clear. This apparent historical and cultural conditioning notwithstanding, there are those who are willing to assign decisive import to the sounds themselves, particularly because of the possibility to produce sustained distorted sounds and so-called power chords with pipe organs – though such acoustic enactments of ultimate and overwhelming power are more commonly associated with the use of electric guitars in metal music (see Walser 1993: 42–3).

The significance of modal scales and awe-inspiring timbres for analysing the details of any sonic theology becomes further pronounced in the context of racialization. Not only are Medieval, Indian or Arabic modes and scales central in conveying ideas about religiosity and spirituality, but in the Western sphere the latter two in particular have become implicated in ‘musical Orientalism’, or, how to represent the non-Western cultural other musically by using stereotypical approximations. The scales and timbres in question may in fact have very little if not virtually nothing to do with the ‘exotic, foreign places’ they allegedly refer to, as following the ground rule of Orientalism at issue is not imitation even in the crudest form but representation of insurmountable and indiscriminate cultural difference (Scott 1998: 309, 326–7). Thus all things Oriental become lumped together and consequently misrecognized both musically and spiritually, to the extent that the same logic applies by and large to all non-Western musical practices and forms of expression, whether one deals with the ‘gapped scales’ of African-American spirituals (Graham 2018: 2) or the ‘Eskimo tetratonic’ (i.e. four-tone) scale to be found in *The Exciting Universe of Music Theory* online.

Concerning timbres, the remarks made by Bowman (2003) about the centrality of vocal delivery in African-American soul music are worth reiterating. According to him, there are dimensions of ‘timbral play’ and ‘sublime moment[s] of sonic design’ which engender ‘emotional engagement’ that is further intensified by ‘the dynamic interplay between [the vocalist and] accompanying instrumentalists, as is commonly the case within the gospel tradition’ (Bowman 2003: 117, 123). This resonates with cultural scholar Paul Gilroy’s (1993: 73–5) postulation about the traces of ‘the ineffable terrors of slavery’ being audible in the various styles and genres of ‘black music’, not structurally discernible but instead by attuning oneself towards the phatic, the gestural and the performative. This is further linked to ‘the politics of transfiguration’ and

‘the slave sublime’ whereby communication moves ‘beyond the grasp of the merely linguistic, textual, and discursive’ with ‘wilfully damaged signs’ but without fulfilment: ‘This politics ... is played, danced, and acted, as well as sung and sung about, because words, even words stretched by melisma and supplemented or mutated by the screams which still index the [slave experience], will never be enough to communicate its unsayable claims to truth’ (Gilroy 1993: 37).

Concluding remarks

To conclude on a more elevating note, the emphasis on the ineffable and the phatic qualities of music points towards a general applicability of the approach. By foregrounding the relevance and limitations of the linguistic and the conceptual, the material – the sound – emerges as equally central for socially meaningful communication to ensue. Once again, this may be theorized as a music-culture or a musical ecosystem or culture as circulation, depending on one’s disciplinary commitments. And, instead of succumbing to self-aggrandizing credos of interdisciplinarity, it might yet be more prudent to simply acknowledge the multimodal foundations of music and religion alike, as well as to embrace the analytical challenges that inevitably emerge. Given the popularity of religious authorities as objects of ridicule, a particularly propitious avenue for critical scrutiny is provided by parody. As an investigation into a phenomenon, whether musical or religious or both, by using its own expressive techniques and modalities, it not only constitutes analytical commentary but, as the proverb goes, affirms the canonized position of its object. And, like scholarship sometimes, it can be quite a bit of fun.

