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Exploring Micro-worlds of Music Meanings

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Abstract

A musical practice may have exclusive meanings shared only by some groups of people within a society. In fact, music has the capacity to create spaces for reserved communication between groups of individuals. Within these ambits, performance activity accompanies more or less articulated forms of thinking of the same performers and parts of competent listeners, since, if nothing else, each musical event is imagined previously and discussed afterwards. This shared knowledge impregnates the concreteness of musical expression, often explaining the variability which is perceptible when listening from outside the group. To investigate this kind of ambit of construction of meanings, it is necessary to try to get as close as possible to the cognitions shared by those who belong to it. To this end, a very significant contribution can come from heuristic approaches based on the strategies of dialogue, above all, negotiated dialogues (and not simple juxtapositions of different opinions) where, on the basis of deep mutual trust, through the intertwining and interaction of different points of view, elements of interpretation emerge for the scholar. This text aims to deal with this, based on a concrete methodological experience.

Keywords: Performance, dialogicality, multipart singing, individual/collective creativity, small local musical scenarios

Explorando los micro-mundos de los significados musicales

Resumen

Dentro de una sociedad, una práctica musical puede tener significados exclusivos compartidos sólo por algunos grupos de personas. La música, de hecho, tiene la capacidad de crear un espacio para la comunicación reservada entre grupos de individuos. Dentro de estos ámbitos, la *performace* acompaña formas de pensamiento, más o menos articuladas, entre los ejecutantes y una parte de quienes son oyentes competentes, ya que todo evento musical es imaginado con anterioridad y discutido con posterioridad. Este conocimiento compartido impregna lo concreto de la expresión musical, a menudo explicando la variabilidad de audición que se percibe desde fuera del grupo. Para investigar este tipo de construcción de significados es



necesario tratar de llegar lo más cerca posible a la conciencia compartida de quienes pertenecen a un mismo grupo. Con este propósito, una contribución muy significativa puede provenir de los enfoques heurísticos basados en las estrategias de diálogo, sobre todo de diálogos negociados (y no de una simple yuxtaposición de opiniones diferentes), a través de los cuales, a partir de una profunda confianza mutua y de la interacción de diferentes puntos de vista, surjan elementos de interpretación para el estudioso. El artículo se propone abordar este tema a partir de una experiencia metodológica concreta.

Palabras clave: *performance*, dialogicidad, canto a varias voces, creatividad individual y colectiva, pequeños escenarios musicales locales

Explorando os micromundos dos significados musicais

Resumo

Numa sociedade, uma prática musical pode ter significados exclusivos partilhados apenas por alguns grupos de pessoas. De facto, a música tem a capacidade de criar espaços de comunicação reservada entre grupos de indivíduos. Dentro destes âmbitos, a *performance* acompanha formas de pensamento, mais ou menos articuladas, entre os executantes e uma parte dos que são ouvintes competentes, uma vez que cada evento musical é previamente imaginado e posteriormente discutido. Este conhecimento partilhado impregna a dimensão concreta da expressão musical, muitas vezes explicando a variabilidade da audição que se percebe de fora do grupo. Para pesquisar este tipo de construção de significados, é necessário tentar chegar tão perto quanto possível da consciência partilhada dos que pertencem a um mesmo grupo. Para isso, uma contribuição importante pode surgir de abordagens heurísticas baseadas em estratégias de diálogo, sobretudo de diálogos negociados (e não de sobreposições de diferentes opiniões) através dos quais, a partir de uma profunda confiança mútua e da interação de diferentes pontos de vista, surjam elementos de interpretação para o académico. Este artigo propõe-se abordar este tema a partir de uma experiência metodológica concreta.

Palavras-chave: *performance*, dialogicidade, canto a várias vozes, criatividade individual e coletiva, pequenos cenários musicais locais

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Nowadays, the field of studies generally identified by the term ethnomusicology is more diversified than ever, articulated in a myriad of research activities rooted in different theoretical and methodological approaches. As a matter of fact, no unanimously shared disciplinary statute (or even an agreed definition) exists, and the plans of interest, the analytical procedures, the heuristic objectives of the scholars who claim to be ethnomusicologists are practically unlimited¹.

Whatever the approach, every investigation on human music making does of course imply relationships –in terms of a contact/exchange– between a researcher and a group of people, at the very least the singer(s)/player(s) performing the music practice considered by the researcher. In other words: to do ethnomusicology means, whatever the case, to have to do with persons; ultimately, it is a matter of inter-individual relations, so that the quality of these relations gives the measure of the quality of a research. Therefore, in any research scenario, the researcher/music maker relationship is definitely crucial and preliminary for any type of analysis: something which may be taken for granted in our field of studies where works, all too often, do not provide a specific focus on the conditions of the “special transfer of knowledge” on which any of our research is founded.

Practices, cares and competences

Making music is more than just producing sounds. Any musical practice has a component of engagement and passion whose involvements go beyond the performative act. As a rule, those who make music do it with awareness. Music is not something that “happens” but something one chooses to do. What one decides to do as musical expression is part of our being in the world among people. To perform music of any kind is always something more than a simple reproduction of sequences of notes, and any performer is never a mere producer of sounds and musical gestures.

In fact, whosoever makes music reflects on what he/she does, imagines his/her performance in advance, discusses his/her sound makings with other performers and/or with the listeners, reflects on the aesthetic categories expressing his/her opinions, and listens to performances of other interpreters of “his/her music” (indeed, a continuous re-listening due to the widespread diffusion of sound reproduction equipment, unimaginable until recently, such as MP3players, iPhones and the like)², he/she is interested in knowing its historical events, its

¹ Furthermore an increasing number of scholars feel increasingly uncomfortable with the idea that it is a discipline and with its denomination, mainly refusing the ideological weight of the prefix “ethno”, calling for a sort of (new) global and general musicology, or for other new disciplinary approaches rooted in sound analysis, such as, to mention just one of the most stimulating proposals, Steven Feld’s (2012) acustemology proposal. This is not the place to deal with this matter, for which I refer to the current literature (but I underline Cook 2008).

² Nowadays mediated performances are often the primary medium for experiencing music. Technologies have determined a “new age” of orality, the so-called “secondary orality” –i.e. the “fictitious orality” of the electronic media, or according to Walter Ong “the orality of telephones, radio, and television, which depends on writing and print for its existence [...] essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality” (Ong 1982: 2; 136). This has transformed communication between people everywhere in the world so that, as a matter of fact, we should go

spread, variability of expression, and so on: a kind of awarenesses affecting the musical behaviour right to the concreteness of the tiniest details of any musical act.

The idea of a deep reflexivity/awareness about music making is usually connected with the figures of professionals in the field of the so-called western-art music (composers, musicologists, great performers, etc.). Outside of this sphere, it usually tends to emphasize/evoke components of (a presumed) spontaneity or to give it minor (or relative) importance: but, every organized sound production inevitably involves a certain degree of consciousness, if it is nothing more than the recognition that what one is playing/listening to belongs to a certain genre of music and not to another one.

Special awareness is customarily required by the peculiar circulation of music knowledge by oral transmission (including the “secondary orality”), that brings men and women into play as the active actors in promoting, interpreting and creating distinguishing processes of musical signification which as a rule are as far from an idea of music as the passive reproduction of impersonal/immaterial structures. This is particularly true in the case of performance mechanisms that have an exclusive/specialized character (or music in *numerus clausus*) being mastered by apposite groups of performers who have been trained through a peculiar *iter* of musical apprenticeship, including the acceptance of unwritten rules of social life settled by local customs. Among these, there are the specialised multipart musics performed by one voice for one single part on which I have carried out research (Macchiarella 2012a).

In my own personal experience, I have always paid particular attention to the relationships with the people I have come to know in more than thirty years of professional research. I have never considered them as mere informants or holders (two distasteful terms that till now I have never used in my written works) to be interviewed/recorded in order to collect songs and memories of the past. This deliberate choice may have been influenced by my peasant origins, and by the fact that I carried out my first research on my native island of Sicily, within environments which were culturally not distant from my personal one. On the contrary, I have always thought the people I have encountered had something to teach me even beyond the specific aspects of the musical practices I was interested in, and I have tried to establish affable relations, pivoted on mutual trust. With many singers and musicians from different regions, I have spent more time with them than actually required by my research, and with some of them I have developed (or rather, I think I have developed) intense friendships which have been going on for several decades. A constancy in relationships supported by the fact that, a little by choice and somewhat out of necessity, I have always done my research activities not too far from home.

In recent times, based on various suggestions from the literature (including, in particular, the idea of dialogic editing by Steven Feld 1987), I have been trying to look deeper into the relationship between scholar/music makers, in an attempt to develop an approach focused on a debated dialogism as a strategy for interpretative studies.

beyond the usually situational and participatory concept of orality pivoted on the passage ‘from mouth to ear’, placing greater focus on the real condition of transmission of music knowledge: this is not the place to develop this point, see Macchiarella 2013 for a specific case of the use of technology within an orally transmitted music practice. On the relevance of technologies for music making, inter alia, see Katz (2004).

Basically, I aim to work on a sort of systematic collaboration with music-makers which, moving from a negotiated description of their own performance acts, beyond the formal and technical features, seeks to approach the shared meanings conveyed by the sounds, their representations, the cognitive elements of the music production and so on.

Roughly, developing heuristic functions of the dialogue, the basic idea underlying my project is to try to come as close as possible to the self-representations that people give of their music behaviours at large. In particular, beyond the exchange of information usually connected with so-called field work, I believe that an articulated dialogue, oriented towards achieving a negotiation between different points of view, is an active space of mutual confrontation, offering the possibility for an approximation between different logics of (music) thought, and, at the same time, the chance for a noteworthy human experience. This peculiar human experience is not a goal *per se*, but is an opportunity that a scholar may use in his work as an author, and that the music makers may elaborate within their music consciousness and within their social life.

Of course, a dialogue of this kind needs particular research conditions, and a special relationship between the researcher and music makers.

An *a cuncordu* writing

With this type of methodological orientation, I published a large volume on the practice of four part-singing, each performed by a single singer, which is orally transmitted in the Sardinian village of Santulussurgiu, belonging to the type of the so-called *cantu a cuncordu* (Macchiarella 2009). The book is the result of more than three and a half years of negotiated dialogue through a collective writing, which was developed with four music-makers from the village: Giovanni Ardu, Mario Corona, Roberto and Antonio Iriu Migheli, i.e. the quartet called *Su cuncordu 'e su Rosariu* (i.e. the quartet of the religious confraternity of Our Lady of the Rosary).

I had intended for a long time to deepen my studies on this local music practice which belongs to a kind of music making that immediately caught my interest when I started working in ethnomusicology. I first met the four singers of the group *Su cuncordu 'e su Rosariu* in 1984, and on and off for many years, I used to visit them and the other singers from the village, studying their music practice from a conventionally musicological point of view, i.e. in terms of the analysis of chords combinations. Back in 2004, when I started working at the University of Cagliari, I realized that I had an exceptional opportunity to deepen my interest on the *a cuncordu* singing of the village: so almost immediately I set up home in the village (i.e. about 100 km away from my Department) in order to develop both my knowledge about the context of the *cuncordu* singing and my relationship with its local actors, i.e. the numerous singers and many competent local listeners³. From the very beginning of my stay in the village, I stepped up my study on the *cuncordu* practice, listening (and recording) performances by many quartets, and having intensive discussions about these performances with hundreds of people.

³ Santulussurgiu has around two thousand inhabitants and among these, there are about more than three hundred men who are able at least to take part in a *cuncordu* performance, and some dozens of local expert listeners who interact with it (women are not allowed to perform the *cuncordu* singing in public contexts, but they can debate about it).

Very soon, I realized that different attitudes existed towards the singing practice. For the majority of the village inhabitants, the *cuncordu* was a generic element of the “local specificity”, a sign of both religious and profane festive times, entertainment for collective gatherings, and so forth (and there was no shortage of people who considered it as a boring and outdated legacy of the past). On the contrary, for one group of performers (not for all of them) and for some passionate and competent listeners, the *cuncordu* was much more than a musical activity, since it was a crucial element of their social life: it was something “to think about constantly”, something of “inestimable value” for their “personal life”, a “reason for living” as some of them quite emphatically told me. Very frequently, they tackled lively discussions about the *a cuncordu* singing during their meetings at the bars, within *sos magasinios* (the private cellars where men gather in the evenings after work), during working activities (the group includes mainly farmers, artisans, shepherds and shopkeepers), at the meetings of the confraternity members in the oratory or in the church, and so on. These dialogues concerned technical aspects of the performance (the details of the movements of single parts, the resulting chords, their length, etc.) but, above all, they regard the people who took part in the performance and its circumstances –i.e. who sang with whom, what were the results, their amalgam, eventual critical issues, and so on. In point of fact, this intense talking about the singing practice seemed to me very relevant because of its unexpected complexity and variety over and beyond the performative aspects. They were showing a depth of music thought of their own.

In short, I became determined to develop this, by directly involving some *lussurgese* singers in my project to write a book about their *cantu a cuncordu*. In particular, I addressed the group of four singers whom I have known the longest and with whom I was maturing relationships of deep friendship (they all are about four/five years older than me). No doubt they were the most authoritative singers of the village, not only for the musical quality of their performance, but also for the fundamental contribution they gave to the continuity of the singing practice in the 1970s-1980s, when there was a great crisis in the mechanisms of generational transmission. Very often the leaders of lengthy discussions on singing, they were often discussed by other singers (and by the competent listeners) with admiration and respect (but also with a bit of envy). Their musical talking was rich with subtleties, metaphors and idiomatic phrases in both Italian and the Sardinian language. They therefore constituted the privileged gateway to the restricted ‘micro-world’ of the village pivoted on the *cuncordu* singing.

At first, they were very surprised by my proposal to work together on a book about their singing. Indeed, they were convinced that I was going to write a book like the one by Bernard Lortat-Jacob (1996) on the multipart singing of Castelsardo (a similar *a cuncordu* practice from another Sardinian village), a book they knew and had often discussed (obviously in their own way, arguing that this kind of book would establish the real and authentic local practice –which of course it does not). Moreover, they had difficulty coming to terms with my idea of trying to “write together” because of their low level of school education and consequently, their unfamiliarity with writing (and reading). I therefore proposed a way around this problem by means of making recordings, and as they trusted me, they agreed to collaborate.

In short, through up and down periods, our negotiated work developed in three main

phases, which (I have to admit) I was elaborating intuitively. Initially, we had a very long discussion (hours and hours) about the aspects of the music practice that ideally, we would have all liked the book to deal with. I recorded all these discussions, in the course of which my role was essentially to stimulate the debate by proposing different themes. However, once the discussion got underway, I took part in it, proposing my own external point of view –for instance, regarding the relationship between singing and ritual, the diffusion of the performance practice in village life, and so on. I should stress that I did not provide them with any kind of questionnaire, and I was not an interviewer, but I made myself an interlocutor in the discussion, albeit a “special interlocutor” because of my professional status (and obviously my comparatively limited experience of listening to their music practice).

They quite often disagreed among themselves and/or we disagreed (individually, or all of us) and sometimes this also led to heated arguments before we found a point of agreement.

Just to give an idea of our disputes, we had a lengthy debate about the diffusion of the practice within the village, because two of my discussants invited me not to consider the singers outside the confraternity because they “do not sing well”, and a compromise had to be found just to write the names of some of these singers in the book; when I observed that there were also some very good singers outside the confraternity, they objected that these men were not “good persons” in the social life of the village, “so what did it matter if they sing well” –later on, I understood just how relevant this point was in their conceptualization of their singing practice (I shall return to this later).

After several meetings, I elaborated a written text transcribing our points of agreement (or at least the points I assumed we had agreed on), giving a copy of the text to each participant for their private reading⁴. After a while, we started our meetings again in order to read and discuss the first draft together, in order to approve it and negotiate a “compromise point” when our opinions diverged. Once again I recorded these new collective discussions, using this information to draw up a second draft of the book, which they also read individually, followed by a collective reading/discussion, and so forth. In the end, after goodness knows quite how many collective meetings, we agreed that we had “our book”, that is to say, a final version which had been entirely subscribed by all five discussants: in actual fact, the four central chapters of the final editorial result.

On the whole, the book has different levels of writings: the main part, in Roman type, is constituted by the collective text we all agreed upon, pivoted on a large description of the *acuncordu* music practice within both the local religious and secular contexts of daily and festive times; below this, there is a series of footnotes, in italics, containing my comments as a scholar on different theoretical issues related to the main text, including the highlighting of some relevant points where our opinions significantly diverged. Then there is a chapter in the form of a written debate signed only by the four singers where they recount the history of their confraternity singer group. In actual fact, I wrote the chapter, extrapolating from what they had said about the theme of our discussions, without any interventions on my part except for normal

⁴ Someone told me he listened to the text read by his wife, and discussed it with her.

adaptations for writing, such as arranging the phrases like a dialogue and specifying the name of the “speaker”: a solution they were very keen on. The volume is also supplemented by a short analytical essay with my interpretation on the basic musical pattern and the main improvisational mechanisms; a glossary of technical words and expressions in the Sardinian language, which accompanies the musical practices written by all the five discussants, plus other documentary materials⁵. Finally, the book has a CD that my friends completely edited, from the recording to the sound editing in studio, with the support of a specialized sound engineer. I was only allowed to listen (as agreed) to this CD for the first time when it was ready to be printed, because (as they explained me) it would have contained “some surprises”, i.e. two “new pieces” which they had elaborated as their own contribution to “our book” (I developed this point in Macchiarella 2012b).

What can we know about how they think (their) music?

Like any research, my one in Santulussurgiu is unique because of the uniqueness of both the conditions in which it was held and the actors and their relationship (including myself), which means it cannot be repeated in any other (and even in the same) music scenario. And just like virtually any research, I am well aware that it is not finished (since it is a lively expression, a musical practice that is in continuous transformation, which gradually makes our interpretations outdated). In this case, ever since I tried to involve at least some of my friend-singers in my project to write a collaborative book, I have assumed (and I wrote this in the introduction) that this book is not be the “definitive book” of the *cantu a cuncordu* in the village, but only a step in a research path that is to be continued.

Above all, it was an experience which, I believe, has given me special understanding so as to approximate the musical “micro-world” shared by my four friend-singers and the other reserved group of singers and listeners in the village.

Thanks to our long discussions (and often to our mutual misunderstandings), and despite our “cultural proximity”⁶, I gradually realized that my friend-singers have a different idea of music to mine. In particular, they think of music, firstly, in terms of “people producing sounds”, and then in terms of combinations of sounds. In other words, they generally tend to reverse the logic arising from our habit of thinking of music as, first of all, an immaterial combination of sound and rhythm which is then interpreted and personalized (a pivot idea of our educational system, in academies, music schools etc.). In their awareness, music coincides with the people who give it life, so that –for instance– they do not consider the vocal part of the *bassu* (the lowest of the four part system) as a line that is differently performed, because they say, “without

⁵ Some of these materials are also on a specific web space devoted to the book: <http://musicaemusiche.org/?q=node/211>

⁶ My discussants and I are all Italian citizens, using the Italian language to communicate (although they have their Sardinian native language –and I my Sicilian one), sharing the same social system, exposed to the same mass media, and so on. Actually, the idea of diversity is not conceived in terms of cultural otherness, but as a variability of musical knowledge and related representations: in a nutshell, they are able to make music in forms and manners they learned within local contexts and situations (the confraternity, evenings with friends in the basement) differently from what I learned at the conservatory and university.

a person the *bassu* does not exist” there is *Giovanni-the bassu*, *Marcello-the bassu* and so on, i.e. as many *bassus* as there are individuals able to sing it. The *bassu* is *what an individual does* both on the basis of what he learned from the other individuals and what he has been experiencing, and in the respecting of the shared rules with the three other individual-parts which has an immediate feedback in the sound outcome.

Thus, every performance ends up by essentially representing an interaction between individuals expressing different intentionalities, affections, answers to social expectations, wishes, and so forth. For “my *lussurgese* singers” –but I have heard the same things in other Sardinian and Corsican villages where I have carried out research– to share a sound experience is above all to share a human experience. Very often they repeat phrases like “to sing *a cuncordu* means to be very close to other men, to be side by side, touching their shoulders, catching each other’s eyes...: how can you do it with a person you cannot bear?” Thus, far from being an absolute aesthetic experience, singing *a cuncordu* was conceptualized mostly in terms of a privileged, refined and reserved way of manifesting each other's feelings between people (not by chance, I believe, the term *cuncordu* in the Sardinian language means harmony between people, that is, getting along well)⁷. However, this does not mean that an aesthetic of the music outcomes is non-existent! In fact, every detail of the sound emissions, the amalgam between the voices, the quality of individual participation and so on, are all elements which are carefully judged in discussions following performances on the basis of their own shared categories. But these judgments are always intertwined with the consideration of the human situation from which a performance derives: there is no absolute aesthetics of sound in and of itself, but a sort of aesthetics of the relationships represented by the sounds does indeed exist, where aesthetics is close to ethic⁸.

At the same time, in the cognition of the “music actors” almost every performative element (from the details of the melodic behaviour of the parts to the nuances of dynamics and vocal timbres) is linked to the distinctive personalities of each different singer –both present day singers or ones from the past. Far from any idea of impersonalized or anonymous music, they think of their practice as a manifestation of clearly identified individualities that are evoked in one way or another by means of the real singing. In their opinion, every singer or quartet of singers customizes their performances and something of this “dwells in the local tradition” and is picked up by other singers in other performances. Therefore, in accordance with the basic assumptions of the musical grammar of the local *cuncordu* singing, every quartet thinks about its real performance in term of “its own passages” and “borrowed passages”: there is a sort of mapping of paternity of the music outcomes that has a basic importance in both the representations of the music practice and the performative dynamics. Of course, these “maps”

⁷ Furthermore, in the two languages that are spoken in Sardinia the term *musica* (music) and the relative concept is a recent importation from Italian (Macchiarella-Pilosu 2011).

⁸ Thus, for instance, according to some competent listeners, there are four individual voices that aesthetically wish to amalgamate together in the best way. This, however, can probably never be verified because they belong to men who have no personal dealings with each other, since they are in mutual contrast (one old man told me that he dreams of the four of them singing together during the Holy Week ritual and giving the “best performance ever” but he has resigned himself to taking this wish to the grave).

are not “official” or “objective”, and every quartet (or individual singer or listener) expresses different opinions and ascriptions, so that the same element might be attributed to different singer/group individuality⁹.

In this way, during a performance the game of embodying and reshaping relations between the actors acquires even more special meanings. Friendly liaisons, private rivalry and other kinds of relations between individuals and quartets could be represented, developed or questioned by means of the musical practice. For those who are able to understand it, every performance –even in its smallest nuances– says something about the status and quality of personal rapports between some people. For instance, during an evening gathering in a cellar, I observed R**, a *cuntraltu* voice (the highest part of the quartet), singing a quite uncustomary special passage; as he sang, all the other listeners turned their gaze to another listener, an aged man who looked extremely happy. Everyone in the cellar knew that this passage was one of his favourites and –as they explained to me– who knows why, R** was publicly honoring him, so that, the day after, this homage would be known in the restricted “micro-world” of the *cuncordu* of the village. In another case, after I had been away from the village for a few months, I noticed a few problems in the correlations of the musical passages between the two highest parts (*cuntraltu* and *boghe*) performed by two brothers; in particular, they lacked the reciprocal games of anticipations and delays that characterized their style, and the two parts were moving rather homo-rhythmically: in the end, a man sitting next to me, more or less literally, told me: “Oh, yes, I’ve heard that the two brothers have had problems with each other; and unfortunately it’s true!”. Moreover, my presence at performances has also often been an occasion for clearly expressed differences between men with clear sound feedback: in Bortigali (another village where I have been carrying out my studies for more than ten years, and have a close-dialogical relationship with one of the local singer groups), I listened to a performance where the *bassu* was singing a repeat sequence of ascending and descending thirds¹⁰ when this part usually remains still on the fundamental sound of the first chord: a friend of mine told me that it was A**’s specialty, allowing him to show that he had studied “classical music theory” and solfeggio, because he was a “vain man”, and another one added that, maybe, he had performed this passage because I was there, intending to make my ears “despise” the “other bassus of the village”. Many other similar examples combined with hours and hours of “passionate”, interactive and even collusive speeches clearly demonstrate special intentionality and meanings of the performance, reserved for “special ears”, which are manifested by the sound outcomes¹¹.

As is known, in orally transmitted music practices, performances, far from being a mere

⁹ Of course, this construction of a sort of “mapping of paternity” is heavily advantaged by the continuous re-listening due to the use of the devices for recording / reproducing sound.

¹⁰ In actual fact, there were intervals close to the usual thirds, as usually Sardinian multipart singing does not exactly adopt the temperate system.

¹¹ I should point out that it concerns performances within the time and space of village social life, in circumstances when there are people able to understand it, within a participative performance in the sense of Turin 2008. Several Sardinian multipart singing groups (including my friends from Santlussurgiu) also have a more or less relevant activity outside the village, giving concerts on the stage of the so-called *world* or *folk music* sphere during which they propose a sort of standard version of their music practice.

repetition of “something” (a mnemonic trace, the memory of a previous listening, etc), are fruit of the choices made by singers/players in relation to the real circumstance in which they have life –and this, above all, means the identities of the other singers taking part in the music making, and the listeners to whom the performance is addressed. It is not just about the production of certain sound sequences, just as it is not always simply a matter of “musical inventiveness” (or “music fancy” –an ambiguous expression that is all too often still romantically applied to oral transmitted musics and to music in general): or at least, music inventiveness does not always have an absolute value in and of itself, as we consider it in “our” so-called cultivated music¹². As is well-known, each performance re-creates, re-establishes, or alters the significance of singing and of the persons, times, places and audiences involved (Seeger 2004: 65). This is because, after all, to make music is firstly a matter of actual meeting/concrete relationships between human beings.

Towards a more humanising ethnomusicology

“La musique, c’est toujours beaucoup plus que la musique” is the phrase by Gilbert Rouget (1995) that summarizes very efficaciously a basic assumption of our field of study –or at least, of a very large component of our unlimited and extremely diversified field: any musical expression is always more than a simple combination of sounds, and to study any “musical fact” means going beyond the concept of music as a combination of sounds, beyond the mere analysis of the sound’s structures.

To (try to) demonstrate this is the main characterizing goal of many works: in actual fact, it is an impossible goal to develop to its extreme consequences, if only because of the limits of language, which lacks the words to render what the mind perceives when listening to sounds, namely that which is inherent in symbolic communication. However, this does not mean that it is not necessary to inquire how far the interpretation of music meanings can go. Interpretations which, more than a simple attempt to decode messages, are a process of the construction of sense based on cognitive experiences.

As a complex social activity, involving role-games, music has the capability to represent relationships between people. A large, consolidated ethnomusicological literature investigates this capacity of music in representing the social organization of a people, demonstrating often efficaciously how “musical performances may enact past or present social structures” modelling “alternatives to existing structures, or they may help to imagine future structures” (Rice 2004: 165). Furthermore, several studies have been devoted to interpreting sound weavings as iconic representations of collective relationships (hierarchical relations, rivalries and challenges, equal participation, etc.) within and between groups¹³. And so on. In this literature, the study of performance (understood as a “process”, in the sense of the idea of musicking by Christopher

¹² Although accurate investigations on music making are evident even in this context, the dynamics are much more complex, see the excellent work of Steven Cottrell (2004).

¹³ Inter alia, the analysis of this kind of representation is one of the main tasks of the Ictm Study Group on Multipart Music: cf. Macchiarella (2012a), and see also the web site www.multipartmusic.org. See also Ahmedaja (2013); Castéret (2013).

Small 1988) acquires the crucial place as being a special moment for observation: a moment where music is really lived, manifesting the interactions both between the performers and between the performers and the listeners. A moment where body and knowledge coexist, internalized skills and extemporaneous decisions interact, combining experience and action in a unique event that has the features of an “uncertain adventure”, since when the first sound is produced nobody can foresee the concrete results that may arise (Lortat-Jacob 2011). In short, it is a very special moment in which the co-presence of performers-listeners means that social communication or interaction takes place at some level.

Usually, performance is considered for its regularities: these constitute a privileged and irreplaceable way to approach and define the systematicity of a musical practice. However, irregularities have much to tell us, since in the very act of performance, music is generated by people of flesh and blood, coinciding substantially with the one who gives it life, so that any music event allows individual existence to manifest itself through the sounds: every performer *is* the sound he/she is producing.

In fact, music grants the manifestation of individual existences, because as music is achieved by human bodies, it has a “bodily dimension” whose traits lie in the absolutely distinctive way of moving the body in order to make music. Every performer has their specific and unrepeatable music quality (their specific vocal timbre, their instrumental touch, their blowing technique, etc.) which they put into play with other individual qualities on the basis of shared rules. Thus, a performance includes an irreducible element of personalization that qualifies the inevitable diversity of every event. Under different singers/players the same musical trace is cognitively represented in different ways –never static and constantly changing according to the continuous maturation of experience– and musical events spring from this which are inevitably diverse and not random in substance. In any performance, one should postulate and probably further explore (since up till now we have mainly concentrated on the study of disembodied music structures) an element of human inventiveness, a component of personal creativity, diversely mastered by its actors, which is not an end to itself, since it displays individual choices of behaviours within horizons of shared interpersonal relationships that the intertwining and interacting of sounds make discernible.

In other words, one needs to go beyond the idea of the variability of performance as fortuity and/or self-referential music artistry (far too influenced by what we might call the “western mainstream tradition”) to pinpoint performative variety as (possible) conscious meaningful acts addressed to people who are able to understand it¹⁴. Even the use of nuances and small details may be an expedient for shared constructions of meanings within a group, giving life to reserved sophisticated communications, which are not identified or understood as such from outside, through the simple hearing of sounds. Thus, to focus specifically on this component of creativity means to concentrate on the specificity of each individual in his/her distinguishing intentionality and action within a network of inter-individual relationships. In the

¹⁴ Until recently, there have not been many studies on authorship and creativity in our field, perhaps because these concepts are usually associated with the so-called elite high art. Among the most distinguishing recent contributions on this, see again Feld (2012).

sound manifestations of variability there are conscious and deliberate communicative purposes at different levels that are differently understandable, depending on “who is musicking”. Alongside the studies on the “in large-scale” processes of signification of sound structures, the exploration of the mechanisms of construction of music meanings within small human groups enlarge our general knowledge about the different capabilities of music to “signify something” – capabilities that could be far wider than we might expect and which go beyond our understanding.

Otherwise, the concern to qualify different manners of making music and thinking about it (and through it, thinking of their being in the world among people) is insinuated by the indefinable contemporary mosaic –in continuous redefinition– of a small society, and by the imponderable multiplying of what Mark Slobin (1993) has called “micro-musics”. This attitude is very important in order to overcome a legacy carried on from our study tradition –strongly influenced by anthropological conceptualizations of the past– which is the uniforming tendency to think that anyone belonging to other people, the members of a given society, even the inhabitants of a (more or less remote) village should roughly share the “same music”, i.e. through it, the same representations of the world. Furthermore, in apparently homogeneous (even small) human agglomerations, zooming in on individual and inter-individual behaviours might offer representations of internal music differentiations, representing articulations in different groups and the relationships between them, similarly, *mutatis mutandis*, to the complexity which we assume “our musics” represent in “our society”.

This kind of “zooming in” requires a special quality of the relationships between scholars and music-makers, implying a mutual complete trust, a great willingness for cooperation, and yet a kind of complicity. It means penetrating as deeply as possible within a group, with its distinctive personalities and its network of relationships in order to understand what is significant for them, what elements mean something to them and how. Of course, it does not signify naively aspiring to become “one of them”, or entering into the “lives of the others” exchanging gossip, or just for curiosity’s sake listening to their anecdotes, and so forth: the scholar must not lose his status as the “author” (our real role, since we are not “reporters”) and the stories of his interlocutors and their relationships are indispensable for understanding their sound representations and for the interpretation of the signification mechanisms put into action by the music –this is the most we can aspire to, since we can not get inside their heads.

Of course, a dialogical attitude is a privileged requisite, capable of opening up significant perspectives for qualitative deepening relationships with people –obviously, those “special people” who are the protagonists of the musical practices on which the scholar focuses his attention¹⁵. Dialogue is a fascinating metaphor of our times and its adoption in music studies is crucial, encouraging readings of the complexity of musical events from different perspectives. To be fruitful, a dialogue should be as equal as possible, without any hierarchy of roles, and above all, there should be an attempt to avoid the privilege of the scholar having the “last word”

¹⁵ As regards the use of dialogue in studying making music, a large bibliography exists from different perspective: inter alia, see the suggestions by Keil-Feld (1994), Guilbault (1993 and 2007), Araujo (2006).

about the final outcome of his work (often, the “voices” of the music makers appear as a couple of phrases in quotation marks just to confirm what the scholar is stating in his treatise).

Of course, a dialoguing collaboration with the performers is an immediate way to approach technical and formal aspects of a music making, as soon as a common language allowing mutual communication has been established¹⁶. Dialoguing about music meaning is a completely different thing, because of the betrayals of language (which are multiplied when different languages are used). The basic question is how to bring out the voices of the others on the meaning of music, and how to do it through a particular medium such as writing, within the specific context of a scientific essay, or something similar. Beyond the juxtaposition between different opinions, dialogic negotiations may open up new perspectives to try and get inside the micro music world of a group. Above all, assuming the form of a shared editing outcome (meaning that the music makers can check it to a certain extent), negotiation is a sort of compromise capable of giving a great *atout* (if nothing else, in terms of mutual trust) for the reciprocal approach to the respective musical consciousness by of the scholar and the music makers. However, in this perspective, other dialogic strategies could be profitably brought into play, depending on the different research scenarios –that is to say, both the scholar’s and the music makers’ personalities. The dialogue flows in time in a similar way to music performance and conceptualization: it is not a reiteration of something that has been said, but it is something that is continuously changing depending on the personalities of the individuals involved, the circumstances in which it takes place, and so on. Consequently by default, a dialogical research can never be declared definitively closed and within it, it is impossible to locate where the so-called phase “of fieldwork” begins and where it ends.

Music can mean many things to different people, and to the same person at different times: it has to do with the human condition. Deepening this condition –along the way traced by John Blacking and other “maestros”, is a horizon towards which we should strive. Above all, I believe, we must strive to think of our interlocutors as *musically thinking heads*, who often have very sophisticated ideas which are, however, extremely fascinating to intercept, along with the music experience.

Ultimately, any music practice *is* the men and women with their specific individuality, their motivation and strong will, particularly as regards the continuous (re)definition of the inter-individual relationship within groups and between groups. To focus on them as sound-bodies, to seek a “person centred musical research” encountering other musical cognitions is one of the strong contributions we could give to understanding “participation in the performative generation of meaning that is music” (Cook 2001).

¹⁶ See for instance Widdess’ (1994) dialogic analysis of improvisation in Dhrupad music based on the deep knowledge of Western score notation on the part of both the scholar and the music maker.

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Ignazio Macchiarella, born in Palermo (Sicily), teaches ethnomusicology at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Cagliari Sardinia (Italy). As researcher, he works at the Department of History, Cultural Heritage and Territory of the same University of Cagliari. At present he is Chair of Italian National Committee of the ICTM (International Council for Traditional Music/Unesco), and Vice-chairman of the Study Group on Multipart Singing of the same ICTM (<http://www.ictmusic.org/>). His main interests are: multipart singing, music and ritual, analysis of oral music patterns, improvisation in vocal music, and music and identities. He has carried out fieldwork in Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, and other Mediterranean Regions. He has worked in other Italian University, and has collaborated with both Italian and European ethnomusicological research institutions. He has been invited as lecturer in conferences and courses both in local and foreign universities and has presented papers at the meetings of the most important world ethnomusicological societies (SEM, ICTM, ESEM). He has published about one hundred works, including books, essays, and articles in specialized journals in Italian, English, French, Spanish and German (more information in <http://people.unica.it/ignaziomacchiarella/>).

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