

Martin Clayton

**"The social and personal functions of music
in cross-cultural perspective"**

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**Discussion: the functions of
music**

Music is not a single form of behaviour any more than it is a single kind of sonic product, but a composite of different forms of sound and behaviour. The behaviours we describe as 'musical' are founded principally on two distinct, yet interrelated phenomena: the human capacity for vocal utterance, and our innate tendency to mutually entrain our actions, especially those involving sound production and quasi-periodic behaviour. Neither of these factors can be reduced to the other, yet in practice most musical behaviour draws on both to varying degrees. Vocal utterance may also be considered as the origin of language, while music as coordinated action relates to other forms of group activity such as physical labour, marching and dance—the last of these frequently as inseparable from music as gesture is from speech. Musical behaviour generates humanly organized sound beyond the limits of normal speech communication: it is distinguishable from non-human sounds, from noise and from language, although each of these boundaries is inevitably fuzzy. In light of these discussions, I propose that musical behaviours tend to perform one or more of the following functions:

- 1 Regulation of an individual's emotional, cognitive or physiological state. Musical performance has physiological effects—singing

has implications for respiration and body posture, many instruments develop bimanual coordination skills, and so on. Given that physiological changes can influence emotional and cognitive states, it is not surprising that in many cultures musical behaviours are employed in the regulation of these states—involving mild effects such as temporary calming or excitation or more dramatic changes such as trance. Since music can be used in the regulation of emotional and cognitive states, again it is not surprising that performances are frequently taken as indexes of these states, and performers as expressing emotions. Music listening—whether in a live performance situation or to sound recordings—can be used in parallel ways as a tool for self-regulation (for example in managing mood), thanks to the role of mimesis and identification with the music's subjects (if the singer on the record is indicating an excited state, then to the extent that the listener sympathizes with the singer he or she may also become excited).

- 2 Mediation between self and other. Music has been used for centuries as a tool for interaction in instances where normal speech communication is found to be inadequate. Examples include the use of special forms of song or music to communicate with Gods, spirits or ancestors in ritual contexts. More mundane examples might include the use of song to communicate emotional states felt to be beyond the scope of everyday speech, or to communicate intimately with large numbers of people. Musicking can be both a powerful and an extremely flexible tool for modelling and mediating relations between self and other. These functions can be interpreted either as communication between the group and an external other (such as an ancestral spirit), or as a function of intra-group interaction. The 'other' could be the spirit or other entity felt to be singing through a performer (as in the case of the spirit guide described by Roseman above);⁵

it could be another being (human, divinity or spirit) addressed in song; or it could be another entity constructed and represented through song. In the last sense musicologists have drawn attention to the multiplicity of voices created through a musical performance (Cone 1974), and to the role—in opera in particular—of the play of identity and alterity (Abbate 1991; McClary 1992, pp. 29–43).

- 3 Symbolic representation. Although music seems in some respects to display ambiguity in specifying its referents, it can also be extremely efficient as a semiotic medium. Just as gesture can indicate the direction and velocity of a movement, or the shape, size and spatial disposition of objects with more precision than does the speech it accompanies (McNeill 1992), and facial expression can indicate emotional states more economically than can language, so too musical sound and action can specify aspects both of affect and of movement more precisely than words. Conventional musical signs as deployed in cinema or advertising, moreover, can specify their referents with unmatched precision and economy (Tagg and Clarida 2003). This play of signs has a different emphasis to that in language, perhaps because musical signs tend to be concerned with identity and alterity, bodily motion, and relationships between self and other. If world music is an index of encounter, as Bohlman argues, this music of encounter in fact relies on a degree of ambiguity between the perception of 'self' and 'other' (Leante 2004). Music can clearly evoke issues of alterity and identity without articulating an unambiguous message on the subject.
- 4 Coordination of action. Human beings display a tendency to entrain their physical actions, either to each other or to an external sound reference (such as a musical performance or recording): the fact that entrainment occurs even when resisted (Clayton 2007; Clayton *et al.* forthcoming) indicates the pervasiveness of the phenomenon in human interactions. The use of music to facilitate coordinated action hardly needs demonstration: what is

⁵Similarly, I have elsewhere quoted Indian singer Veena Sahasrabudhe's view that her main relationship is an identification with the raga she sings rather than with her audience (Clayton 2005, p. 373).

striking is that in many instances the urge to coordinate action is accompanied by a development of 'fellow feeling', with the emergence or strengthening of bonds of shared mood or emotional state, and in some cases shared ideologies. As Dueck has argued, musical performance not only entertains existing groups, it plays a key role in constituting publics (2007); numerous examples have been described in which music is deployed in order to maintain, revive and/or to create a sense of 'tradition', or to facilitate a sense of identity amongst particular social groups—for instance in diaspora.

There may be examples in which one of these functions outweighs each of the others to such a degree that we may identify it as the principal function of music in that instance. Perhaps, as Nettl suggests, the balance between functions varies between cultures (or indeed between genres, or even between different moments in a single performance). Possibly more common, however, are instances in which several of these functions operate simultaneously. For instance, a popular song such as Robbie Williams's 'Angels' might (1) originate in an urge towards the regulation of an emotional state; and (2) be used in an act of communication between singer and audience that could not have been accomplished by speech alone. It (3) represents a particular pattern of feeling dynamically and precisely, and points to numerous referents, from the singer's public persona to English culture at the end of the twentieth century. Its singing at large public concerts (4) elicits a coordination of both action (singing along, swaying bodies in time with the music) and emotion on a massive scale; and bringing the matter full circle, individuals partaking in this communal experience can be seen to deploy their listening experience and participation as a means of emotional regulation. In this way, this and many other forms of musical behaviour simultaneously perform several distinct yet interrelated functions. This example may also remind us of Durkheim's 'effervescence': it is not simply that multiple functions are performed simultaneously, rather the very intensity of

experience provides a basis for its many effects and interpretations.

The four headings above are largely concerned with relations between the personal and the social—identity, alterity and mediation. Music is a tool for the discovery, manipulation and projection of individual identity; an individual's identity construction is however inherently social, implicating a variety of groups to which the individual feels he does or does not belong. Music is a tool for facilitating intimate interactions, and an index of such interactions: it therefore helps to bring social groups into being. Music is also a tool for constituting publics, for allowing social groups larger than the family, clan or village to create themselves and to include or exclude individuals. It can help to dissolve the boundary between self and other in a way speech generally does not; but music can also be deployed to reinforce boundaries and to distance or exclude. This is why it can be described as a flexible tool for managing relationships between self and other.

Like Merriam, I argue that underlying the bewildering variety of uses to which music is and has been put around the world we can define a finite set of global functions. My list is shorter and more synthetic than Merriam's, but this greater concision is offset by more emphasis on the idea that these functions can not be reduced to one: it is not simply that a particular writer, or the language itself, is incapable of specifying *the* function of music; rather, music frequently depends for its efficacy precisely on the indeterminacy of its 'true' or underlying function. We can say, nonetheless, that musical behaviour is deployed in the management of relations between self and other, and that it can and does perform this function at multiple levels simultaneously.

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