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How to cite:

Clayton, Martin (2003). Comparing music, comparing musicology. In: Clayton, Martin; Herbert, Trevor and Middleton, Richard eds. *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Routledge, pp. 57–68.

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Martin Clayton

Comparing music, comparing musicology

My aim in this chapter is to offer some observations on the past, present and future of comparison in musicology. These comments concern the necessity of comparison, but also the profound difficulties it presents: understanding both the importance and problems of comparison is an important part of any cultural study of music. In order to introduce and to illustrate these observations, I will make reference to a couple of quite different examples, both of which include an autobiographical element. The first of these will concern a particular performance event, my experience and reaction to it. The second example refers to my own research on the temporal organisation in North Indian classical music, which I published in the book *Time in Indian Music* (2000).

The rationale for introducing such different examples is precisely in order to ask to what extent they may be compared: in fact my concern is not only how can *music* be compared, but also how far can *modes of describing music* be compared. I will move from the description and comparison of my own examples to a more general discussion of comparison in musicology, and in particular the legacy of the academic field known between about 1880 and 1950 as ‘comparative musicology’. I will begin my argument with a musical performance as experienced, and a discussion of the relationship between such experiences and musical discourse.

London, 16 December 2001

The event I alluded to above was the Icelandic pop singer Björk's performance at the Royal Opera House in December 2001. I shall not present a review of the concert here, still less will I burden you with an account of the emotional roller-coaster that my co-celebrants and I enjoyed over the course of the evening. On the contrary, I would argue that much of what I consider important in the event could not be adequately expressed in words. Suffice to say, as we stumbled out into the chilly London night my companion and I were all but speechless. We tried, with little success, to share our reactions to the evening's performance, until – abandoning the attempt – we digressed into a comparison of ‘all-time

top five live performances', as if transformed into characters from Nick Hornby's novel *High Fidelity*. Fascinated by our inability to even attempt a verbal account of the evening's experience, the next day I checked Björk's website (www.bjork.com/unity) for the reviews which I knew our fellow concert-goers would soon be posting. Somehow, although the challenge of transforming the experience into words had defeated me, it seemed important that someone should at least *try*, and perhaps delay the dissipation of our memories...

At the heart of any musicological work, comparative or otherwise, lies the relationship between our experiences, and the discourse we generate around those experiences (and through which we explain and interpret them). Musicology cannot enter the domain of unmediated experience, since the academic discipline is by its very nature discursive. This is an essential condition of the musicological enterprise: a condition which becomes problematic only when we confuse that discourse with a true or sufficient account of music, rather than recognising it as an adjunct to experience.

In 1885 Guido Adler began a famous and influential article defining the scope and aims of musicology by suggesting that the experiences of singing, playing and listening were not in themselves sufficient for the operation of 'tonal art', which required self-conscious reflection. As he put it, from the top:

Musicology originated simultaneously with the art of organising tones. As long as natural song breaks forth from the throat freely and without reflection; as long as the tonal products well up, unclear and unorganised, so long also there can be no question of a tonal art. Only in that moment when a tone is compared and measured according to its pitch [...] only then can one speak of a musical knowledge as well as an art of working with tonal material. (Mugglestone 1981, 5)

While I would express the relationship between music and discourse somewhat differently, I think Adler's observation on the importance of this relationship remains valuable. For a century or more after Adler's article, most musicologists fell shy of discussing the epistemological basis of music-theoretical discourse. Yet, as the music theorist Benjamin Boretz has suggested, such questions are actually crucial to our endeavours. For Boretz theoretical description was not so much a necessary condition of music, more a description erroneously taken for the experience, which in the process

became simplified and impoverished (1992). I will argue (with acknowledgement to both Adler and Boretz) that musicology needs to resist this error, something I characterize as the collapse of experience into discourse.

Musicology, while it cannot *contain* unmediated experience, can at least enact a sense of its own complex relationship with the material fact of people experiencing music. I call this relationship 'complex' because musicological discourse does not only comment on practice and experience: it is not merely parasitical. It also influences that very practice and experience, insofar as musicians and listeners are aware of it. Verbal and graphical discourse can describe, interpret or otherwise account for musical experience; at the same time, the music we make or choose to listen to is inevitably influenced by this paramusical activity; thus, each feeds off the other.

Time in Indian Music as comparative musicology

A decade or so back I was preparing a doctoral thesis on rhythm in North Indian classical music. Through a combination of tuition, practice, informal ethnography and reading, I felt that I was well on the way to acquiring an understanding of the matter at hand – the system of temporal organisation operating in this repertory – and would in due course distill something I might usefully share with others. When I did so my readership would be made up of people expecting me to tell them something comprehensible about Indian music: in particular, *how does it work*, and *how does it relate to Indian culture in general?* (Perhaps also, *how does it differ from Western music?*)

In order to meet this challenge I needed a language: a body of terminology, and of the concepts and ideas to which those terms refer. There was no shortage there, since I had two sets of terms and concepts: one Indian, which I imagined would be useful in explaining how the music works, and the other English, which I assumed my readers would understand.¹ Naturally then, my task seemed to comprise the translation of Indian musicological discourse into English.

So far so good? Well, not exactly. I had understood my task as the translation of a set of repertory-specific and culture-bound concepts (tala, laya, laykari and so on) into a general, ahistorical, and culturally neutral set of concepts (rhythm, metre, anacrusis, etc.).

But as I also knew, these concepts are anything but culturally neutral, general terms, but have their own history, tied up with a long tradition of Western musical thought. What I was doing, in fact, was implicitly comparing Indian rhythmic organisation to Western rhythmic organisation. But I didn't want to write a comparative study, but rather to write about Indian music 'on its own terms', so for a while I neglected to resolve this contradiction.

Ultimately I took on the comparative challenge somewhat more explicitly, acknowledging at the same time the problematic nature of the English concepts and terms when applied cross-culturally. Bitten by the comparativist bug, I also tried some comparison within the tradition, examining the relationships not only between different genres, but also between what musicians' discourse was telling me and what I could observe empirically in the music. I became convinced of the need in ethnomusicological analysis to examine both musical sound and discourse, and to interpret the relationships between the two.

Ethnomusicological orthodoxy at the time, to which I subscribed no less than any of my contemporaries, held (as Bruno Nettl put it) that one must 'study each music in terms of the theoretical system that its own culture provides for it' (1973, 151). I came to believe that this model was too simplistic, and that any theoretical system must itself be considered critically, *alongside* the music with which it is associated. In the case of North Indian classical music the relationship between the two proved to be rather complex: I have no doubt that the same would be true elsewhere, and is equally true of the relationship between European music theory (of whatever period) and the music it describes. It can hardly be otherwise.

So much for studying Indian music 'in its own terms'. Firstly, those terms can only belong to the discursive field which surrounds music. Secondly, musical discourse does not have its own terms: on the contrary, the terms of musical discourse are precisely those which metaphorically link sound to other domains of experience. This is a significant problem with discussing the connections between 'music' and 'culture': the language we use to construct 'music' is language which already embodies metaphorical links to other domains of culture and experience – the high and low, large and small, balanced and

symmetrical, all of the materiality and structure we impute to music (see Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

The implication of this line of argument is that notions of musical text, structure and system are exposed as problematic. Each (text, structure, system) inheres in discourse: but what ontological status do they have as part of a musical experience? Does sonata form exist in music as experienced, or only in music as discussed? Does raga exist as a system in our pre-verbal musical percepts and memories, or only in our internalisations of paramusical discourse? Such questions have rarely been considered in mainstream musicology, although they are touched on in psychological studies of topics such as categorisation and schema formation – in other words, studies attempting to clarify what kind of cognitive structures or processes are implicated in an individual's experience of music (see e.g. Krumhansl 1990, Leman 1995, Zbikowski forthcoming). Given the present state of the field, these questions do not dispose themselves to easy answers.

Attention to the distinctions and relationships between sound, experience and discourse (such as I am proposing above) does not simplify the business of musicology. This attention does however help us to face up to some problems we have generally avoided. It also opens up an important space for empirical work: what features of the sound energy can be specified in a way which permits meaningful comparison? More productive than a retreat from comparison (or indeed a headlong rush towards it) would be an acknowledgement of comparison's inevitability, and a concerted attempt to deal with the epistemological and ontological questions which inevitably arise (what kind of things are we comparing, and how do we know?).

Comparing music, comparing discourse

What, if anything, does this have to do with my experience of Björk's performance at the Royal Opera House? I speculated above that the impulse to discuss and interpret this experience might be linked to an urge to fix my memory of that moment – my angst at the slow evaporation of an emotionally charged state. The reason I found it so hard to do is, I suspect, connected to that very experiential intensity: verbalising intense musical experiences is as difficult, and perhaps as futile, as verbalising other moments of emotional

intensity. And the reason I resisted – I could, after all, have said *something* – is perhaps that given the choice, allowing the moment to fade slowly is easier to bear than reducing it quickly to something known, controlled, and impotent. Another factor is revealed by my reaction to those website reviews – *Ah yes, it wasn't just me then*. In this way discourse can reassure us that intense personal reactions are to a degree shared within the community of listeners, which in turn acts as a kind of validation of that experience.

However reluctant I may be, Björk's performances and recordings are nonetheless surrounded by webs of discourse: some generated by the artist herself (in her book, in published interviews, in her lyrics); some by critics and reviewers; a great deal by fans. A sample of the latter can be observed in the form of fans' concert reviews, in which one can discern some common themes. A great deal of this informal public exchange concerns practicalities (what did she sing, what did she wear, what was the sound quality like, and so forth), while some is explicitly comparative (Was this better than Union Chapel?? (SC); one of the best [concerts] I have ever experienced in my life (JD)).² But the issues which seem to me to emerge as most important are the emotional intensity of the performance, and the sense of relationship members of the audience feel with the singer. A few examples:

Björk wanted to give us the full experience and succeeded beyond expectations. (SC)

This evenings concert was extremely powerful and emotive, I felt Björk wanted us to experience something quite different... (SC)

I was very lucky to see Björk in concert on Sunday night. I'm having great difficulty finding words that can describe how brilliant the whole evening was. (JD)

Last night was definitely a religious experience (PP)

Can this kind of discourse be compared to the theorising of tala in Indian classical music? I suggest that it can: not that these discourses function in exactly the same way or have precisely the same effects, but that both exist in a dialectical relationship with particular musical repertoires and performances. In both cases familiarity with the discourse affects the way one experiences subsequent performances. In both cases, discourse begets discourse, metaphorically creating a field within which consensus may be reached over the meaning and importance of the musical experience.

An obvious difference between the two cases is that fans' reviews of Björk's concerts do not generally address musical theory per se. Such an approach is possible, and one imagines it is realised in some contexts – perhaps by the musicians when rehearsing and recording the music, or by a minority of fans in other situations. But the dominant mode of discourse among fans is one in which the primacy of the occasion and the quality of the experience are affirmed and not transgressed. Experience and discourse cannot collapse into each other in this case.

In the case of music-theoretical discourse, such as I commented on and contributed to in *Time in Indian Music*, this collapse is all too likely. Since all music theory is discursive, it is always to some degree alienated from the experiences it describes. Much musicological writing tacitly assumes the existence of musical works, repertoires, forms, styles and systems: entities which can be described by a musicological discourse which nonetheless appears to remain outside those musical facts. Since I am arguing that these 'facts' are all actually discursive artefacts, it follows that the work of musicology is not to describe musical facts but to be implicated in a wider discursive field. This implication has a purpose, and part of that purpose is the control or delimitation of musical practice and its interpretation. The illusion is that musical works and forms exist, but are only imperfectly described – in fact they exist only as imperfect descriptions, while the more immediate business of musical experience is denied serious attention.

In the one example then, fans' exchanges preserve the centrality of the experience, and refuse to collapse everything into discourse. This has the effect of strengthening the sense of community shared by listeners (and, perhaps, further estranges those who 'don't get it'), but does little in terms of the production of academic knowledge: it tells us very little about why we felt as we did. In the second example the theoretical discourse has vastly more to say about the music 'itself'. On the other hand (as Boretz suggests) the production of this discursive knowledge threatens to substitute itself for our musical experience, in such a way that we listen only for that which signifies the structures described by theory, and to deafen us to all other features of a given performance.

Comparative musicology compared

How, finally, do the issues I raised above relate to the legacy of ‘comparative musicology’? This discipline, now remembered as ethnomusicology’s forerunner, was in fact listed by Adler as one of the subdivisions of his science (his field was divided into Historical and Systematic approaches; comparative musicology came under the latter). It is clear from Adler’s work however, that comparison – alongside ethnography – was reserved for ‘other’ music, that it had little to do with the serious business of ‘tonal art’. The succeeding generation, in the form of scholars such as Carl Stumpf and Erich Moritz von Hornbostel, confirmed the place of comparative musicology on the academic map, although the comparative method was mainly implicit in their development of general analytical principles (principles which were not, of course, applied to Western art music). Where Western art music and other repertoires were considered together was in compendia such as Hubert Parry’s *Evolution of the art of music* (1896). In such works it was abundantly clear that, while all musics might be part of the same evolutionary scheme, they by no means enjoyed equal status.

We must thank Hornbostel for setting out his vision of comparative musicology with great clarity. In an article of 1905 entitled ‘The problems of comparative musicology’ he explained his debt to anatomy and linguistics and their shared reliance on an evolutionary model.

Systematization and theory depend on comparison. In this sense all learning is comparative, and comparison is a general and not a special method. Yet one generally speaks of *comparative anatomy*, *comparative linguistics*, etc. This surely infers the application of a particular approach. Medical anatomy is almost exclusively concerned with the structure of the human body; zoology ... treats the anatomy of the individual animal species separately ... Now comparative anatomy presents cross-sections, so-to-speak, of the entire complex: it traces the individual organs through the entire realm of living beings and thus recognizes, for instance, vertebrae in the cephalic bones of man and a sort of eye in the outer epidermis of a leaf. The knowledge thus acquired yields new principles of classification and at the same time stimulates new and specialized investigations.

The development of linguistics followed a similar course. Initially, philology examined the individual languages separately, until comparative linguistics began to tie connecting threads. Here again the concept of evolution presented itself: it pointed to new paths and led to new groupings. (Hornbostel 1975 [1905], 250)

Whatever Hornbostel thought he was comparing in music they were clearly *entities*, made up of *parts* which fitted together logically and according to common structural principles. The individual entities were moreover exemplars of species – the logic of his own comparison with other disciplines is that comparative musicology would look for deep similarities and differences between *types* (repertoires, music cultures?), and would not be concerned with the detail of individual *instances* (performances?). Another implication of this approach is that the boundaries between musical repertoires would be seen as relatively stable, and hybridisation a slow and difficult process, while individual music cultures were related to each other more or less closely, like languages or animal species.

It is notable that early comparative musicology offered few attempts at large scale comparison (Carl Stumpf's *Die Anfänge der Musik* being the most obvious exception.) Grand surveys and sweeping generalisations were on the whole more the preserve of music historians such as Parry. If the hope was to rewrite such evolutionary history on a more scientific basis, the aim was hardly realised before the political traumas of the 1930s shattered the academic status quo. Comparative musicology reemerged in north America after the second world war with what proved to be a brief florescence. The most ambitious and commented-upon post-war comparative project was Alan Lomax's *Cantometrics* (see Lomax 1968), a brave attempt to correlate features of singing styles with aspects of social organisation. However, if anyone in this period can be regarded as Hornbostel's intellectual heir it must surely be his student Mieczyslaw Kolinski, who developed a series of ingenious empirical (or quasi-empirical) methods of comparative analysis, described in a series of articles published from the 1950s to the 70s (for a bibliography see Beckwith 1982). By this time however the intellectual climate was changing, and as a result Kolinski's work was largely ignored and most of the potential his methods offered was wasted.

The comparative musicology project had effectively collapsed, and part of the reason for this was the place Adler and his followers had allotted it in the greater scheme of things.

Evolutionism meant that however marginal comparative musicology may have been in Adler's scheme, it nonetheless formed an inseparable part of musicology as a whole. Back in the late 19th-century musicology and comparative musicology had been united in their goal of describing a comprehensive history of world music. Once social evolutionism collapsed, Western music scholarship didn't feel the need for comparative musicology and could retreat into the insular stance from which it is still slowly emerging, while comparative musicology's marginality intensified. On the other hand if the ideology which had given comparison its urgency was now dead, why should comparative musicologists worry any more about comparison?

Comparative musicology was gradually superceded by ethnomusicology, with its anthropological methodologies and mistrust of grand comparative schemes. Where early comparative musicologists sought to compare different musical structures on a common basis, later ethnomusicologists tried to replace this with another view, structuralist in a different sense, in which the structural principles of music related to those found in other cultural domains. As I argued above, there were two major problems with this: (a) that comparison is inescapable, and a retreat from comparison results only in irrational implicit comparisons; and (b) that structure in music is itself contingent, and needs to be recognised as a discursive artefact. From the point of view of the epistemological basis of comparison in musicology, neither 19th-century comparative musicology nor late 20th-century ethnomusicology satisfies: it can hardly be denied that a new paradigm is needed.

* * *

I have argued that comparison is inevitable in musicology. I have also argued, however, that comparison is problematic so long as we confuse experience with discourse, and so long as we do not recognise the contingency of musical 'structure'. What we *might* look for is a kind of metatheory which is able to take into account the contingency of the very idea of the musical structure. The underlying intention of this metatheory would be to address the relationship between *sound*, as an integral aspect of human interaction, the *experience* of producing, perceiving and responding to that sound, and the processes by which people imagine that sound to possess structure or to convey meaning.

I have discussed and illustrated comparison on a number of different levels, in order to demonstrate the point of its inescapability: to either retreat from or rush towards comparison would be equally futile. What can we learn from comparing Indian musical practice with Western music theory? One concert with others? The way fans talk about a Björk concert with the ways musicologists analyse a classical symphony? These examples are not far removed from the everyday business of musicology, although they perhaps make the basis of comparison more explicit than is normal, or take comparison into areas not previously explored. My point is not that we need more comparison, but that we could be more conscious of what we compare, and on what basis.

It would also be a long-overdue step to acknowledge that Adler was wrong to restrict comparative musicology to the study of Others, and wrong to place comparative musicology as a subdivision of musicology rather than vice-versa. Establishing a rational basis for comparison in academic musical discourse may one day prove to be the critical step in the still unconsummated rapprochement between sub-disciplines, and the development of a post-Adlerian consensus on the organisation of our field... if indeed such a hope is realistic in self-consciously postmodern times.

Further Reading

bjork.com/unity. Web site: www.bjork.com

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¹ The use of the adjective 'Indian' here for musical terminology is a shorthand for 'in various Indian languages, such as Sanskrit, Hindi and Urdu'.

² I am very grateful to the authors of these comments, Simon Cheung, John Dalgano and Pierre du Plessis, for permission to quote them; also to Lina/lunargirl at bjork.com for her help in contacting these reviewers. Please see the web site for these and other complete reviews.