The Problem of Ethnocentricity in Music Archaeology

Gjermund Kolltveit

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

„Musik" ist eine überraschend späte Erfindung. Den meisten Sprachen der Welt mangelt es an einer Begrifflichkeit für Musik, und doch wird in allen bekannten Kulturen musiziert, gesungen und getanzt. Musikhistoriker verwendeten zu oft ein von westlichen Traditionen geprägtes, ethnozentrisches Musikverständnis. Bietet die Musikarchäologie eine Alternative, um die ethnozentrischen Annäherungen an die Musik zu hinterfragen?

Musikarchäologen betrachten die materiellen Hinterlassenschaften als ihren Ausgangspunkt, dadurch gelangen sie zu anderen Forschungsansätzen als Musikhistoriker, die mit Schriftquellen arbeiten. Die meisten Musikarchäologen werden vermutlich ein sehr weit gefasstes Verständnis von „Musik" haben.

*Braucht unsere Disziplin überhaupt den Begriff „Musik"? Einige Musikarchäologen tendieren dazu, den Begriff aufzugeben und sprechen stattdessen von (beabsichtigten) „Klängen" (*intentional sounds*) o. Ä., andere wiederum ziehen es vor ihren Forschungsbereich „Archäomusikologie" oder „Archäoorganologie" zu nennen. Derartige Vorgehensweisen können als Alternative für die nicht gewollte, ethnozentrische Perspektive betrachtet werden.*

An acknowledged work on Norwegian history contains a section about bronze lurs. It says that the lurs are "not real musical instruments, but were used in cultic contexts"[1]. We can also read that "it is impossible to play proper melodies on them, only simple phrases consisting of eight partials"[2].

The first volume of the work where these lines appear was written by two distinguished professors of archaeology with no special knowledge or interest in music archaeology. Their understanding of music and musical instruments probably conforms to the general public view. There are two motives underlying their denial of lurs as real, actual musical instruments. First, the authors fail to classify them as musical, because the instruments were used in cultic, religious rituals, not in settings of concerts or entertainment. Secondly, the authors seem to be reluctant to regard lurs as musical, because they lack valves and therefore do not function like modern brass instruments.

Regardless of the motives, there is a modern understanding of music underlying the text, adding an ethnocentric bias to it. Since the Bronze Age is not only a remote period of time but also a remote culture, the authors face the same problem as ethnomusicologists who encounter new or unknown musical traditions. "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there", the British author L. P. Hartley wrote[3].

This paper is about ethnocentricity in music archaeology, concerning both research and outward activities. This issue is fundamental to music-archaeological work. The intention is not to criticize music archaeologists or others for having ethnocentric tendencies, but to point out and discuss areas where we potentially have to deal with ethnocentricity.

1 ETHNOCENTRICITY AND CHRONOCENTRICITY

Ethnocentricity (or ethnocentrism) is the tendency to evaluate other people and cultures according to the standards of one's own culture. The extreme version, to see one's own culture as more important and more highly developed than other cultures, might take the same form as racism. More relevant here is the unconscious act of projecting ideas from our own culture onto those we study.

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1 Magnus/Myhre 1995, 169. My translation. Original: "Lurene er ikke noe egentlig musikkinstrument, men ble brukt i kultsammenheng."

2 Magnus/Myhre 1995, 168. My translation. Original: "Det lar seg ikke gjøre å spille egentlige melodier, bare enkle strofer av åtte naturtoner."

3 Hartley 2002 (1953). The opening sentence, "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there", has become almost proverbial. David Lowenthal later used it as a title for his book (Lowenthal 1999).

Social anthropology has for a long time made great efforts to overcome ethnocentricity, by stressing the importance of ethnographic fieldwork and by the principle of culture relativism, stating that every culture should be understood on its own premises. Music anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have followed up this paradigm, trying to approach the musical systems and practices of the world from the viewpoint of the cultures where the music is made. This intention is reflected in the important ethnomusicological credos 'music in culture' and 'music as culture'[4].

An anti-ethnocentric position in ethnomusicology should ideally observe and describe the musical activities from the perspective of the actors themselves. The term *emic* is sometimes used to describe this perspective of the actor, while the corresponding term *etic* denotes the view of the observer, from a perspective outside the culture. When archaeologists describe bronze lurs as non-musical instruments, or musicologists recreate lur music with a European 18th century art-music idiom, their approach is consequently etic. It might in this case also be described as *chronocentric*, meaning looking at other times from the perspective of one's own time. In other words, chronocentricity is a notion equivalent to ethnocentricity[5]. For a long period of time the dominating ideology and performance style in classical music had a chronocentric bias, with the tradition, extending some generations back, as the only reference to the past. All music was performed in the same way, in accordance with inherited custom. Bach's music was understood on the same aesthetic terms as Beethoven's or Wagner's music. Later, the early-music movement changed this way of thinking, and had a significant influence with its insistence on 'authentic' performances on historical instruments.

While the problems with ethnocentric, chronocentric and etic approaches to history are obvious, there are also some philosophical and historiographical problems with the opposites. No matter how much we strive to get into the minds of our objects of study, whether we speak of persons, cultures or periods of time we face the problem that we always are where we are, at a particular place and time. We must acknowledge that we as researchers see the world from our own viewpoint. Consequently, the concepts emic and etic are very problematic. In ethnography as well as history or archaeology, we can never avoid the etic perspective, from the outside. Similarly, we cannot avoid a certain chronocentricity, because of the simple but important fact that we cannot escape from our own time. Our knowledge of the past will always be limited by our own perceptions, mentalities and values. The past belongs to the present. Having said that, what we can and should do is to develop a critical attitude towards our ethnocentric and chronocentric tendencies, in order to make reliable interpretations of the sources. If the aim is to take the periods and cultures we work with seriously, it means that we should try to understand them from the insiders' point of view.

2 MUSIC ARCHAEOLOGY AND MULTIDISCIPLINARITY

The established history of music as found in books and syllabuses of schools and universities often takes Gregorian chant as the point of departure, while the prehistory is left out. One reason is that historical musicology is based on written sources, texts and music. The concept of music employed is often narrow, having arisen from the Western art music tradition that gives priority to the written music of the learned social elites. In contrast, music archaeology provides a much wider scope, culturally and conceptually. It takes another perspective, not starting in the Middle Ages but in the Palaeolithic, and does not only tell about music, but also about other sonic activities and phenomena.

What is the reason for this wide outlook? Does the emphasis on material records as a point of departure in archaeology lead to a different view on music? With risk of overgeneralization, I would argue that music archaeologists get closer to everyday, vernacular musical and auditory activities than do historical musicologists and others. Archaeology brings us down to earth, literally as well as conceptually[6]. More importantly, material sources typically require a multidisciplinary treatment. In order to explore the sonic expressions that archaeological material has been part of, it is in the nature of the case to make use of different types of data and search for any kind of evidence, for example by using literary and iconographic sources (when available), as well as all relevant contextual data from the work of colleagues involved with other aspects of the culture in consideration. The result of a multidisciplinary methodology where music is treated as a cultural expression – a meaningful activity around the making and experience of sound – rather than an isolated object is a culture-sensitivity that, perhaps, avoids an ethnocentric bias.

From one point of view, an understanding where music is synonymous with the sound object might conform to a modern consumer-oriented understanding of music, meaning merely an 'aural

4 Merriam 1964; Herndon/McLeod 1979; Feld 1990.
5 Haynes 2007, 26.
6 Buckley 1998, 12.

commodity'. On the other hand, giving special attention to sound, rather than to 'music', could point to another direction than the traditional Western concept of music. A focus on sound might open up perspectives on a variety of sonic and acoustical phenomena, inside or outside the realm of music. For some years there has been an increasing interest in the acoustic archaeology of megalithic and other archaeological sites[7]. Whether such contributions are placed within the discipline of music archaeology is a matter of choice, based on strategy and individual preferences. They are nevertheless clearly *related* to the discipline, being symptomatic of the broad and multidisciplinary perspectives taken in music archaeological research.

3 TERMINOLOGY: MUSIC OR NON-MUSIC?

Some music archaeological projects are clearly about music, while others focus on acoustic spaces or other topics only related to music. For other times, however, it is difficult to decide whether one works with music or non-music. This is reflected in an ambiguity about terminology, recognized in previous discussions from the music-archaeological scene. Some prefer to use 'archaeomusicology'[8] or 'palaeo-organology'[9], avoiding an emphasis on 'music', and preferring 'sound-tool' rather than 'musical instrument'.

The problem with music versus non-music comes to the surface in a way of thinking that places prehistoric sound-producing activities in separate domains, classified as, for instance, sounds for 'ritual purposes', sounds for 'signalling' (such as hunting, calling, scaring, etc.), or sounds for entertainment, the latter being the equivalent to the modern concept of music; something people make so that other people can listen to it for pleasure.

We should reject a classification that separates music from other activities where intentional sound is involved. It would be a mistake to dismiss ritual sound as non-music, although it might be said that it is more about 'religion' than 'music'. As for hunting calls and signalling, it is not obvious that they should be labelled music. But the point is that it is unproductive to sort artefacts with respect to some borderline between music and non-music, resulting in unwanted boundary making. It is much better to operate with wide categories, especially at the outset. But whether this category should be labelled 'music', 'intentional sound' or something else is not apparent.

In this case, there is no right or wrong terminology. The 'safest' choice, however, is to stick to 'intentional sound' in combination with 'sound-producing devices'. Both terms cover music as well as non-musical activities. Moreover, they avoid taking part in the difficult and often unfruitful debate about what is music and what is not.

The avoidance of the term 'music' might be considered to be a choice for escaping ethnocentric problems. For example, to describe bronze lurs as non-musical instruments (cf. the introduction of this article) could be a strategy to avoid the trap of ethnocentricity, recognizing that music is a modern concept that does not belong in the Bronze Age. We cannot get away from the fact that music as we use it today is a narrow European concept. For hundreds of years this term was reserved for the music of the Christian church. In the 17th century scholars operated with a division between *musica*, which meant proper music of the church, and *amusica*, which meant the non-music of the common people and peasants[10]. What is interesting is to ask if these scholars' comprehension of music was characteristic of a common understanding, in the sense that people were not concerned about classifying their activities as music.

We do not know much about folk classification in the distant past, but some ethnographical sources indicate, interestingly, that sound expressions we would regard as music today have been classified differently earlier. The ethnomusicologist Timo Leisiö has studied popular 'emic' classification of Finnish pastoral aerophones[11]. They are classified in several categories according to their function, but in no single context have the instruments been considered to be 'musical instruments'. The pattern we call music, says Leisiö, did not exist in Finnish or Sámi folk culture before the 20th century[12]. Leisiö's findings correspond to other ethnographical data, that music is not a universal concept. Actually, most of the languages of the world lack a word corresponding to the modern concept of music. Singing, playing, dancing and related activities are structured and conceptualized in various ways. Well known examples come from Africa, such as the word *ngoma* in Bantu languages, meaning drum, dancing, singing, or healing rituals[13].

Nevertheless, it is difficult to abandon 'music' entirely. Even though music as we understand it today is a relatively new Western concept, we should keep in mind that it derives from the Greek term *mousiké*, the art of the nine muses. Their 'poetic art' included forms of song, dance, rhetoric, poetry, tragedy, comedy, and astronomy. An understanding of music that incorporates dance and other related activities placed safely in a social arena will better

7 Lawson *et al.* 1998; Watson/Keating 1999; Devereux 2001; Mills 2005; Scarre/Lawson 2006.
8 Olsen 1990; Dumbrill 2005.
9 Rimmer 1981; Hakelberg 1995.
10 Ling 1983, 2.
11 Leisiö 1986.
12 Leisiö 1986, 186.
13 Janzen 1992.

agree with the musical practices in other cultures, and very likely in the remote past, too. Accordingly, a choice approving 'music' and 'musical instruments' might also reflect a strategy for a broad viewpoint that avoids ethnocentric and chronocentric tendencies. This is especially true when music refers to an activity, something people do actively, rather than to sound or sound tools as isolated objects, used merely as a means of entertainment. The musicologist Christopher Small suggests, rhetorically, to use the term 'musicking', referring to the various activities involved in making and performing music: "There is no such thing as music. Music is not a thing but an activity, something that people do"[14].

There are indeed good arguments pro and contra the use of 'music' in music archaeology. I still believe we will never give up this concept, because it is so deeply embedded in our culture, among laymen as well as scholars. In particular situations, however, we may choose another terminology. We should anyhow use terms contextually and situationally. This is especially relevant concerning the relation to the general public and the media, where clarity is always required.

In connection with CDs presenting reconstructions of prehistoric sound, it is unusual to find 'music' in the title. Typical titles are *Horns of Ancient Ireland, Knochenklang, or Sounds of Prehistoric Scandinavia.* The latter, which is Cajsa S. Lund's record from 1984, has met with some criticism in Sweden, notably from classical music critics and the folk music movement, who claim that its sound reconstructions are boring and simple. The critical voices have failed to see that they are meant to be simple, not showing more than the sources allow. And they have not grasped the meaning of the title, apparently. If the title of the record had been *Music of Prehistoric Scandinavia*, it would be a different thing, and it would promise more. Paradoxically, such a record would also be less interesting, with less chance of surviving in the market for 24 years, as Lund's record actually has done.

When we know too little about the sounding music, in the modern sense, we should choose other words than 'music'. Maybe 'sound tool' sounds more boring than 'musical instrument', but it is important to communicate in the best way what we are doing to the media and the general public, if we want to be taken seriously. Accordingly, we cannot use 'music' without any discussion of its meaning or a contextualization.

4 RINGING ROCKS RE-RINGING TODAY

In some instances one should be especially reluctant to speak of music. One example is the sound producing activities around ringing stones or rocks. They belong to a distant past and deviate from most modern conceptions of making music. Moreover, we do not know what kinds of intentional sound people made on these blocks of stone. In the case of Norway the material base is small; around ten stones have been recorded so far[15]. The reason to believe that these stones were used as lithophones is based on data from folklore and written history in combination with archaeology, such as findings of cup marks. A local name of one stone is *The Dønnstein* (Lyngdal, Buskerud county), from the Old Norse verb 'dynje', meaning 'to sound' or 'to produce sound'. Another stone is mentioned in written documents from the 18th century as the most treasured antiquity in the parish of Lom (Oppland county), because of its sounding qualities. It was supposed to have a clear bell-like sound when struck with a small stone. It is still called the "Bell Stone" or the "Singing Stone" in the local village.

In this case, it is possible to make use of oral tradition and folklore, at least to identify the ringing stones. But ethnographic analogy hardly helps us to come any closer to the prehistoric actors who played and used these lithophones, provided they were played at all in prehistory. We do not know who possibly played them, and in which circumstances. In which ways did they play? Did the sound production include any ritual activities?

These difficult questions must be approached carefully, by involving contextual analysis based on archaeological knowledge. However, as an additional investigation, in order to reflect on these questions and ways of approaching the aural activities belonging to another world than ours, I will suggest three hypothetical concert performances involving a reconstruction of the sound of a ringing rock. The intention is to gather various views and ideas about playing on such lithophones. Common to the projects is that they take place at the locality of one of the original rocks in Norway, which means in a field, in a forest, or in the mountains. Concerts in the middle of nature are quite popular, often attended by a lot of people.

The first possibility would be an avant-garde performance, involving musicians from contemporary classical or jazz scenes. There are actually musicians specializing in music making on ice and stone who presumably would be interested in such a project.

[14] Small 1998, 2.

[15] The documentation of these stones is done as part of a pilot project about ringing rocks in Sweden and Norway, a joint project started by Cajsa S. Lund and Gjermund Kolltveit in 2009. The purpose of the project is to assemble and document the corpus of ringing rocks with a possible ancient origin in the two countries, and to propose interpretations of their function and use, based on comparative sources.

A second possibility would be to involve musicians from the New Age movement or from associated groups. This is a growing community with hunger for ancient and archaic expressions. Musical instruments like the didgeridoo, the fujara, hand bells, and shaman drums are popular, along with various other 'ethnic' sound tools. A third possibility would be to include schoolchildren in a pedagogical project. In general, projects involving the creativity of children are encouraged, and many teachers would be enthusiastic about such an idea. Moreover, composing is one of the components of music teaching in the curricula of Norwegian primary schools.

The three concert suggestions are perhaps not directly comparable, since they are so different, and since they appear here as rough ideas only. What is interesting, however, is to ask which of the projects would work 'best'? Which of them would most likely take the original, presumed prehistoric sound making most seriously and sincerely?

First of all, the three concerts are similar, because they are modern in scope and setting. Since they all appear as contemporary performances, there is no difference between them as such. In the avant-garde performance we would probably meet the performers who are most experienced in playing on rocks. There have been several projects with ringing rocks in modern art and music, where lithophones have been used as accompaniment for dance, at happenings, at serious concerts or in various kinds of sound art. The musical and artistic approach of a modern musician belongs to another world than the minds of the prehistoric people, but where do these worlds overlap?

We should expect the New Age musicians more than others to emphasize the ritual side of the performance. Perhaps they will bring the audience along into a 'shamanistic' atmosphere[16]. No matter how close to Stone Age man this performance would lead us, the ideology of New Age is deeply rooted in Western modern life, of course. Indeed, ethnocentricity is not only produced by the ideological prevalence of Western classical culture but also by such modern phenomena as the New Age movement.

Children are often less bound to constricted thinking and ideology than adults, and might come up with innovative interpretations. The concert by schoolchildren would perhaps be most interesting because of the open-mindedness of children. Their performance has a potential for avoiding ethnocentricity, provided that everything is well supervised and organized.

If a ringing rock concert could take place in reality, with good funding options and music archaeological leadership, the ideal solution would be to include all of these three suggestions in one, or to invite different musicians and others to suggest ways of playing and using the ringing rock. The challenging exercise would involve being innovative and analytical at the same time, creating the illusion of escaping, for a while, from the modern understanding of music making.

[16] Admittedly, this characterization is coloured by some prejudice against this movement, which is in reality quite heterogeneous.

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