



Evert Bisschop Boele

THE MUSICAL OTHER



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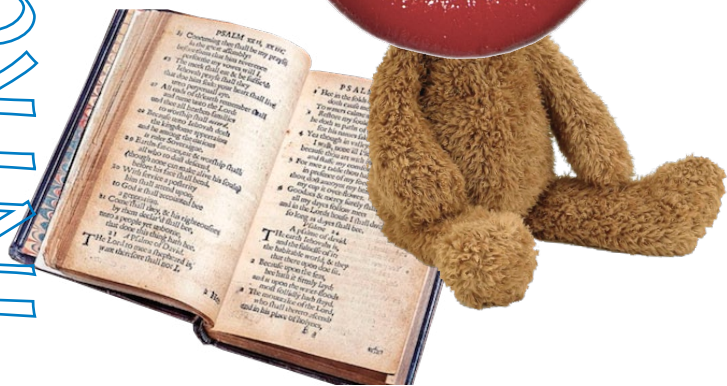
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1. Michel Foucault. *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972 (1969/1971), p. 215.

2. Dylan Thomas. *Under Milk Wood*. London: Dent/Everyman's Library, 1985 (1954), pp. 2-3.

Introduction

I would really like to have slipped imperceptibly into this lecture, as into all the others I shall be delivering, perhaps over the years ahead. I would have preferred to be enveloped in words, borne way beyond all possible beginnings.

There would have been no beginnings: instead, speech would proceed from me, while I stood in its path – a slender gap – the point of its possible disappearance.

I wish these were my words, but of course they are not. They were pronounced by philosopher Michel Foucault¹ upon accepting the chair “History of the Systems of Thought” at the Collège de France in 1971. I love the hesitation with which he starts to speak, the feeling that rather than speaking his words, he is spoken by them. The feeling that language is there before you were there; that you express a pre-existing world, and while expressing it you call it into being. It reminds me, for reasons I would like to explain but have no space for, of the cello concerto of Ligeti, and of the music of the Australian Aborigines.

But equally I would have liked this essay to begin thus:²

Time passes. Listen. Time passes.

Come closer now.

Only you can hear the houses sleeping in the streets in the slow deep salt and silent black, bandaged night. Only you can see, in the blinded bedrooms, the coms. and petticoats over the chairs, the jugs and basins, the glasses of teeth, Thou Shalt Not on the wall, and the yellowing dickybird-watching pictures of the dead. Only you can hear and see, behind the eyes of the sleepers, the movement and countries and mazes and colours and dismays and rainbows and tunes and wishes and flight and fall and despairs and big seas of their dreams.

From where you are, you can hear their dreams.

Music is important to everyone

And it starts off with the basic notion that music, for some reason, is important to nearly everyone. Not in the same way perhaps, but all of us – you, me, the neighbor, the fishmonger – live our own idiosyncratic musical life. It is, actually, hard to find a human being who is not leading a musical life. In fact, a couple of years ago I needed a completely unmusical person, a music hater, for my research, and I cannot tell you how hard it was to find one. And when I found one, it of course turned out that eventually music was in no way meaningless to her. It wasn't a strong force in life, but it was a force. One of the research projects on my list of projects-to-start-in-the-future-if-there-is-time-and-money-available is definitely a project on studying people suffering from severe [amusia](#)⁴ – a psychological state comparable to aphasia where music is meaningless to people in varying degrees. Such a study would shed light on the – not often realized – importance music has in the social life of people.

Music is important for everyone. As [Daniel Cavicchi](#)⁵ wrote:

—when you ask ordinary people (that is, not music professionals) to talk about their musical lives, most of them initially respond with incredulity, protesting that they “don't know anything about music.” Then they talk for two hours about all sorts of activities and feelings that apparently have no name.

We may wonder why that is, which would bring us into the domain of music psychology. We may also wonder how that originated, which would take us into the speculative domain of evolutionary studies. I will not go there. On the contrary, I would rather – maybe surprisingly – like to state here, just as a way of thinking, that music is evolutionary meaningless, and that we should refrain from explaining music's existence in evolutionary terms. Because (paraphrasing Dutch

4. The website <http://www.brams.umontreal.ca/plab> offers information from music psychology on amusia.

5. Daniel Cavicchi. 'My Music, their Music, and the Irrelevance of Music Education.' In: Thomas A. Regelski & J. Terry Gates (Eds.), *Music Education for Changing Times*. Springer, 2009, p. 101.

This feeling of the omniscient storyteller which Dylan Thomas expresses in *Under Milk Wood* – the feeling that you are able to see everything, to hear everything, yes even to crawl into the heads of other people and witness their dreams – is the dream of any social scientist, I suppose. At least it is my dream. In my dissertation I tried to answer the simple question what people – you, me, the neighbor, the fishmonger – do with music and what music does for people. At some point I wrote:³

The uses of music are incredibly varied. In 34 interviews 30 interviewees told me innumerable things they did with music. They pictured small (and sometimes bigger) scenes in which music figured, scenes you could document on video and broadcast on TV as documentary pictures of ordinary lives – a girl on holiday cries in her bed in the evening because her father plays the violin downstairs; a boy comes home from school for the afternoon lunch and his mother listens to the radio while preparing lunch; a woman sings a psalm for her children during a thunderstorm; another woman gives away her handmade bamboo flutes she loves so much to an artist friend out of fear of doing the wrong things with them... not always huge dramas, but the material of which individual musical lives are made up.

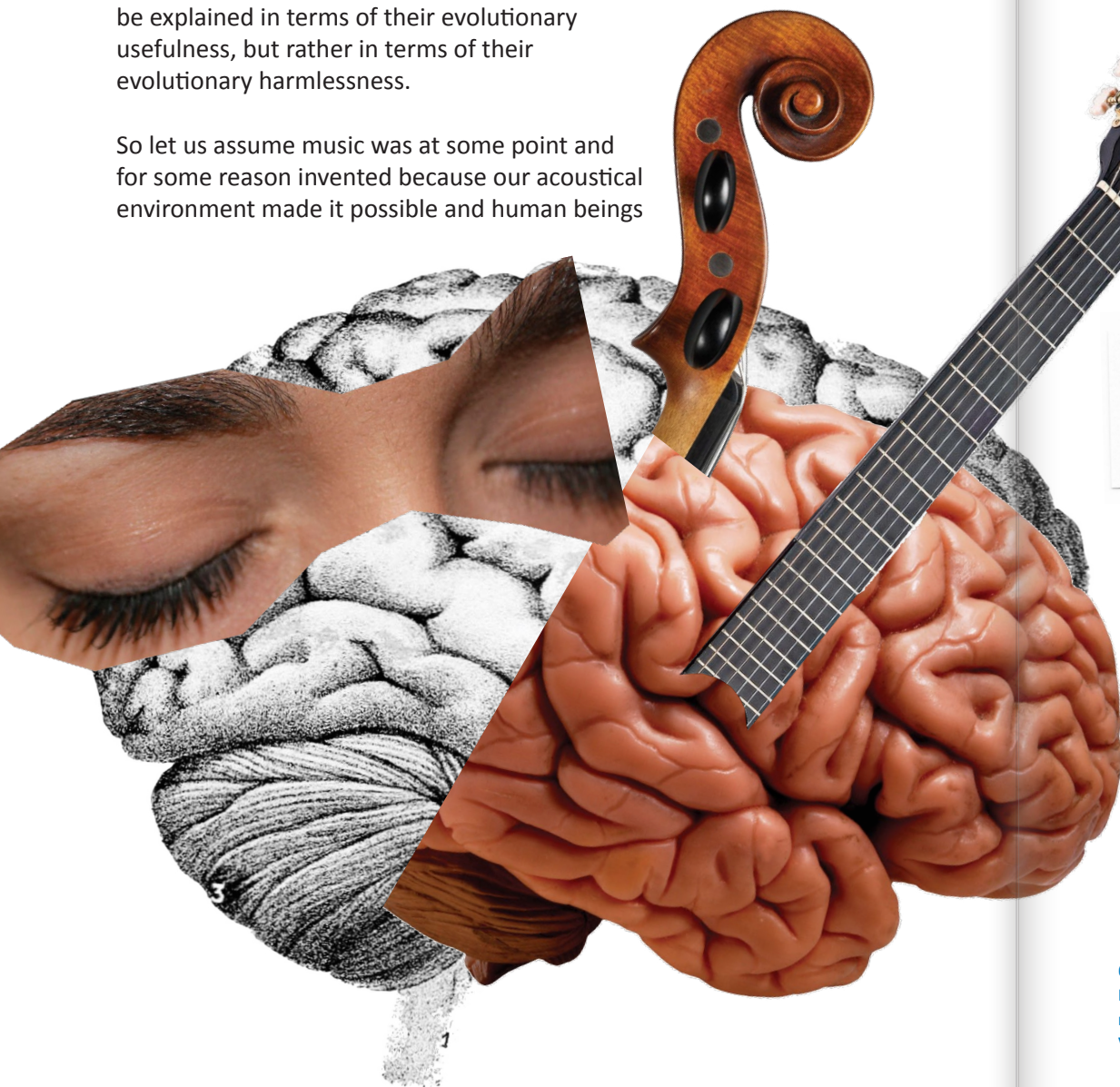
The material of which individual musical lives are made up. That, and the question how professional musicians might connect to those individual lives, is the topic of this essay.

3. Evert Bisschop Boele. 'Musicking in Groningen. Towards a Grounded Theory of the Uses and Functions of Music in a Modern Western Society'. Dissertation Georg-August-Universität, Göttingen, 2013 [<https://ediss.uni-goettingen.de/handle/11858/00-1735-0000-0001-BBA5-2>], p. 229. 60000-0001-BBA5-2], p. 229.



writer [Karel van het Reve's](#)⁶ work on the Ptauroides Volans – the “Reuzenkoeskoes” in Dutch) the traits of living beings should not be explained in terms of their evolutionary usefulness, but rather in terms of their evolutionary harmlessness.

So let us assume music was at some point and for some reason invented because our acoustical environment made it possible and human beings



are inventive. Once invented, it just stayed, because it led to no significant disadvantages (a slight rise in repetitive strain injuries and the much later invention of stage fright put aside) and basically became meaningful for various people in various ways.

It is precisely that – that music is in itself neutral and harmless but may be put to a thousand household uses – that makes music intrinsically interesting. It is, as I said above, not hard to show that for nearly everybody music is an important factor in life. The way music is put to use is endlessly varied; as [Eric Clarke](#)⁷ puts it:

Music affords dancing, singing (and singing along), playing (and playing along), working, persuading, drinking and eating, doing aerobics, taking drugs, playing air guitar, traveling, protesting, seducing, waiting on the telephone, sleeping . . . the list is endless.

It is this important power of the neutral phenomenon of music to serve as a vehicle for an endlessly varied list of meaningful human behavior, of ‘musicking’, as [Christopher Small](#)⁸ would have called it, that is in itself enough demonstration of the importance of music.

6. Karel van het Reve. *Een dag uit het leven van de reuzenkoeskoes*. Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, 1979.

7. Eric Clarke. *Ways of Listening. An Ecological Approach to the Perception of Musical Meaning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 204.

8. Christopher Small. *Musicking. The Meanings of Performing and Listening*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1998.

The functions of music

In my doctoral research I presented such an endlessly varied list of human musical behavior in the lives of 30 extremely diverse individuals living in the province of Groningen today. Crying in bed as a child when hearing music, singing psalms during a thunderstorm, and giving away handmade bamboo flutes to friends in spite of oneself – examples I mentioned before of what people do with music– were only three instances out of an enormous range of items. Finding out what this enormous range of human musical behavior meant to those people – finding out the basic functions of human musical behavior as performed in everyday life here and now – then became my project.

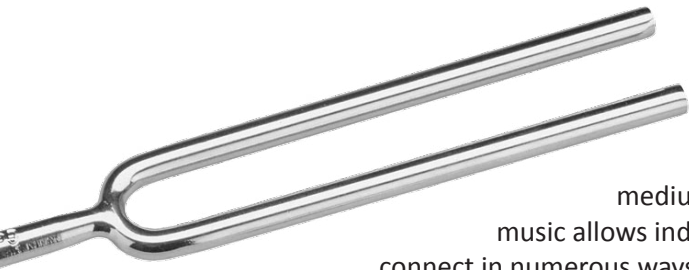
So let me introduce briefly the main functions of music in everyday life. Music does three very important things for individuals: it affirms, it connects and it regulates. Let me start with the affirmative function of music. At the heart of the musical lives of people stand the stories about how music ‘speaks’ to their ‘self’. They are unable to explain this phenomenon, and if they talk about it, they speak in metaphors – often very material metaphors. “I don’t know why,” someone may tell you, “but that piece of music simple touches me; it goes straight to my core; it gives me goose bumps; it tears my heart apart; it makes me silent;...” , et cetera.

People will go to great lengths trying to explain why that is so, why it is so that some music touches them. They will refer to beauty, to quality, to personal experiences. But in the end they will probably admit that there is nothing left to explain. It is what it is: music touches them. Period. And because music touches them, they are able to say who they are, musically. That is the affirmative function of music. Music enables people to affirm themselves as an individual, a musical individual. As a person with an individual musical identity, closely tied to what they consider as their ‘inner core’.

But the power of music is not confined to this. Music gives people not only the possibility to affirm who they are, to affirm that they exist as a musical person, to solidify the idea of a (musical) ‘self’⁹. Music



9. George Herbert Mead.
Mind, Self & Society. Chicago:
 Chicago University Press,
 1962 (1934).



is not a solipsistic medium. On the contrary, music allows individuals to connect. To connect in numerous ways to numerous aspects outside the self – to the world out there. That ranges from connecting to others (by visiting a concert and meeting other audience members), connecting to the past (by playing the Beatles’ red double LP remembering your childhood living room on Sunday mornings), connecting to place (by listening to music in the Groningen dialect), connecting to God (by singing a psalm while cleaning the house) or to the inner self (by using Tibetan singing bowls in the yoga session in the local community center), or connecting to the realm of the beautiful (by listening intensely to Arnold Schönberg’s ‘Verklärte Nacht’ late in the evening).

This connective function of music, the possibility for individuals to connect through music to the world around them, leads to the third function of music. Connections lead to effects: it feels good to connect to your peer group through music; it is great to relive your first love by putting on the song connected to that time; it is repulsive to hear right-wing music because it pictures you a future where there is no place for the deviant. People use those effects to influence themselves, and use them to influence others. They regulate themselves and others, sometimes consciously, sometimes not very consciously.

It is amazing to realize the power music – that neutral and in itself harmless invention – plays in the life of individuals, in so many different ways, through those three functions of affirmation, connection and regulation. I say “in so many different ways” on purpose, because I do not feel there is any need to look for one reason for music’s strength. I also think there is no empirical evidence for that. Music is not mainly a ‘tool of the self’, as important thinkers in the [sociology of music](#)¹⁰ would state. Nor is music first and foremost an aesthetic phenomenon, as important thinkers in music philosophy, music psychology or [music education](#)¹¹ – people inhabiting the conservatoire included – may tell you.

Music is not one thing. Music is always many things at the same time. It is different things for different people in different places and in different times. It is always a lot of things at the same time, in an ever changing constellation. Its character changes over time. It is everything, always, and for everyone. Independent of age, of educational background, of socio-economic status, of cultural background, of gender. And independent of style and genre, I must add. It is demonstrably not the case that classical music is an artistic phenomenon, that rock is intrinsically connected to the functioning in young peer groups, or that singing in a shanty choir is first and foremost a socially – rather than musically – oriented phenomenon. Borrowing a phrase from Dolly Parton ([one of my musical heroes](#)¹²), music is a coat of many colors. Or, as the [theory of practice](#)¹³ (the social theory I endorse) would proclaim: music, as an everyday phenomenon, is ‘messy’ and inherently hybrid. Always. And for everyone.

10. See e.g. Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

11. Bennet Reimer. *A Philosophy of Music Education*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, 1970.

12. How is it possible not to have her as a hero, given the fact that she refused her composition “I’ll Always Love You” to be sung by Elvis Presley, that she owns a Dolly Parton theme park, and that she is reputed to have said about one of her wigs: “It takes a lot of money to look this cheap”? And then I am not even talking about her qualities as a composer and a performer.

13. Andreas Reckwitz. ‘Toward a Theory of Social Practices. A Development in Culturalist Theorizing.’ *European Journal of Social Theory* 5/2 (2002).



Music in culture

With that in mind, the professional musician should look at his future with confidence, one should think. Music is important for nearly everyone, and the variety of uses and functions music has in the lives of individuals gives musicians endless opportunities to connect to them, to be meaningful in their lives.

How then is it possible that the professional music world feels so threatened nowadays? How is it possible that musicians, and conservatoires, have trouble convincing government officials, funding authorities as well as the general audience that their possible contribution to their lives, to the life of everyone and anyone, is worthwhile? How is it possible that, rather than being acknowledged as one of the most powerful humanizing media around, able to affirm, connect and regulate human life in such a powerful way, music is put aside as a rather unimportant epiphenomenon, as belonging to the fringe of human life?

The answer is simple. It is because of what I just said about the three main functions of music is empirically correct but culturally far from generally acknowledged. There is a huge difference between what we actually do with music in our messy everyday lives, and what we 'officially' say we are doing or should be doing. There is a huge difference between practice and discourse, between our 'ways-of-doing' and our 'ways-of-talking', between how we act and what we proclaim. And because our proclamations are, of course, also acts (we all know the power of words, we all know that saying something is doing something), an inextricable knot comes into being of what we actually believe the essence of music is. We underrate some forms of musical behavior and some genres, and overstate the importance of others. And when I say 'we', I mean that highly intangible thing called 'society', or 'culture'. We don't feel we do it; it is being done, nobody really does it; it is discourse in the Foucauldian sense at work.

The essence of what 'our culture' sees as musical is the following: music is a specialist skill; music is an artistic 'work'; and music is an expressive



performance. That is the way we look at music. That is the standard we measure music, musical behavior, individuals against. That is what we base our official musical policies on. That is what we see as the basis of our music education. And that is what the conservatoire, the top of our music educational pyramid, stands for, and what it teaches the future professional musician.

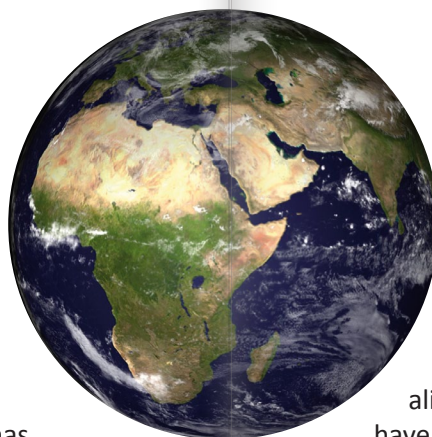
I am of course the last to deny that this cultural dominant definition of the essence of music as an artistic-expressive skill has led to beautiful results. It has given rise to the existence of Beethoven's violin concerto and of Bach's St. Matthew's Passion as performed today on the stage. It has given rise to Ravi Shankar's acceptance on the stages in the western world, to the acceptance of Lou Reed as an Artist with a capital A, and to the incorporation of New York jazz in the conservatoire curriculum. Because let us not forget that: the idea that music is essentially an artistic-expressive skill is culturally so dominant that it does not confine itself to classical music. It is so dominant that it expresses itself in the Concertgebouw Orchestra as well as in The Voice of Holland.

And it is here that tensions arise. On the one hand, this definition of "what it means to be musical in this world"¹⁴, of music as essentially an artistic-expressive skill, is inscribed in the genes of our culture – it is discourse in the true sense, hidden, inescapable, owned by no-one but omnipresent, a manner of speaking which only exists in the speaking and at the same time determines the speaking, contested and acknowledged in that contestation at the same time¹⁵. But it is a discourse that only partially describes our messy and hybrid world. And, I believe, it actually less and less describes the actual musical world many people live in.

14. Cavicchi, o.c., p. 97.

15. Harold Garfinkel. *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984 (1967), p. 36.

People, I would pose, more and more live their musical lives independently of this official discourse of music as an artistic-expressive skill. People do with music what I described before – they affirm



themselves, they connect to the outside world in many ways, they regulate themselves. And they do that in a variety of ways which is irreconcilable with the cultural dominant model of musicality as expressed in the discourse of music as an artistic-expressive skill.

I believe that is one of the main reasons of the tensions in the professional music world nowadays. On the one hand, music is alive and kicking in the daily lives of ordinary people as it may never have been before, given the wealth we live in and the medialization music has undergone. On the other hand, people seem to connect less and less to the model our 'official' culture outlines of what music essentially is. For many people, music in their daily life is not a highly skilled expressive performance of an art work per se – it is background to make doing homework easier, it is something to dance to, it is a CD to be collected, it is a way to make your parents angry, or a way to reconnect to God, the inner Self, or the happy days of childhood.

When I was interviewing a wide variety of inhabitants of the beautiful province of Groningen about the role of music in daily life, interviews which took place while the Dutch discussions about the budget cuts on culture were at its peak, I was therefore not surprised that hardly anyone even mentioned those budget cuts. It simply was a discussion which was felt not to be connected to their musical life in any way. In daily life, music for most people is not only, not exclusively and even not mainly, Art. It is so much more than that. It is their coat of many colors, their 'duizend-dingen-doekje' ('wipcloth for a thousand household uses'), their individual way of affirming their selves, of connecting to the world, of regulating their lives. And that is much more important.

The conservatoire in society

This, then, makes the place of the conservatoire, as an educational institute, so interesting. The conservatoire is not just a school. It is not simply an institute where musical 'training' at the highest international level is offered, as we – the conservatoires – are so proud to proclaim. The conservatoire is not a neutral place, as has been shown time and again in important [research](#)¹⁶. It is also a place where 'official' culture is replicated, where the discourse of music as artistic-expressive skill finds itself at its peak, where power relations in our world of music are again and again defined and transmitted.

The conservatoire is a beautiful place, I can say, having worked in conservatoire settings for over twenty years now; but it also is potentially an inward-looking place. And for young musicians who want to become professional musicians in the boundless, hybrid and messy musical world out there, it is potentially a dangerous place. Dangerous because its reproductive tendencies may give a few of the graduates a full-flung start into an 'officially approved' professional career but may leave all those less lucky other students with an unfavorable disadvantage already right at the start of their career.

That is one of the reasons for the existence of our research group Lifelong Learning in Music. Our research group hopes to contribute to the possibilities of students to step into the world as a musician looking for opportunities, looking for connections, looking for a meaningful contribution to the lives of all those people out there for whom music is such an important force in life. It hopes to foster in our students an attitude which combines, on the one hand, excellent professional musicianship with, on the other hand, a desire to meet The Other out there. Not on 'our' terms of artistic-expressive skills, in the taken for granted ways and the taken for granted places we know so well: the stage and the music classroom. And also not exclusively on 'their' terms; but somewhere in the middle. Somewhere where the musician is able to look for a potential audience not by telling them what he is as a 'product' captured in a glossy folder, a glitzy website and an impeccable musical product. But by showing them what he



has on offer as a musical individual, and how that might be of use to his counterpart, that musical Other.

This is what I consider to be the core of the professorship of New Audiences which I fulfill as of January 1, 2014. The core is: understanding why other people do with music what they do, why music is such a powerful force in the lives of nearly all our fellow citizens; and what we, as professional musicians, may contribute to their lives.

Many of the projects we have executed over the past ten years are examples of this. Our project on teaching elderly people to learn to play an instrument, for example, showed us the important role that starting to play the saxophone at age 67 has for people, and denies the truth in the in professional music circles often flatly accepted axiom that there is no use in taking up the violin after the age of eight. It actually puts a huge question mark behind the tendency – which has become widespread in the past few years – to equate music activities to 'talent development' and to aim at 'professionalization'. Everyone who takes a good look at the website of for example the Dutch Foundation for Culture Participation (['Fonds voor Cultuurparticipatie'](#)¹⁷) cannot but be worried about the way those ideas of talent and professionalism more and more reach out from – to use Jürgen Habermas' terms – the system

world through the powerful channels of music policy and music education into the life world of our fellow-citizens who – believe you me – have thousand and one other reasons than talent and professionalization to be musically active.

It is why we are carrying out a research project into the future of the brass orchestras in the North of the Netherlands. Because we see what is happening there and are worried about it, and together with the key players from that world we want to prepare the future conductors of those wind bands to operate in a context where those orchestras continue to fulfil the important societal

16. See a.o. Henry Kingsbury. *Music, Talent & Performance. A Conservatory Cultural System*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988; Bruno Nettl. *Heartland Excursions. Ethnomusicological Reflections On Schools of Music*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995; Rosie Perkins. 'Learning Cultures and the Conservatoires. An Ethnographically-Informed Case Study.' *Music Education Research* 15 (2013).

17. See www.cultuurparticipatie.nl.



role they have fulfilled in the past: allowing people to make music, allowing people to meet each other, allowing people to live a musically fulfilling life, allowing communities to celebrate their highlights.



It is the reason why we carry out research on the role music may play in the lives of people with dementia. Not because we believe that people with dementia need Art, but because we believe that through music people with dementia are empowered to show who they are musically. To affirm their self, a self that is lost to them in so many different ways and that can be reclaimed so powerfully – if only for a moment or two – through music.

And it is the reason why I am currently carrying out a research project on a shanty choir and therefore have joined it. Not because I am deeply interested in the artistic qualities of shanties and sea songs – although singing them on Tuesday nights brings me a fulfilment which I would not hesitate to describe as also a deeply aesthetic experience – but because I want to understand what exactly this shanty choir brings to my fellow-members. How such a choir enables them to affirm, connect and regulate themselves, and thus live a fully musical life. In order to, eventually, connect my findings to what we might teach our students in the conservatoire.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

That, then, is my 'project'. Looking at anyone as a possible audience member. Creating new work, yes, of course. But also: creating a new professional ethics. An 'other-centered' professional music ethics. An ethics in which we learn our students, our future professional musicians, to think about the Other, and about what is musically meaningful on their terms, which may not always be our terms. It means for the conservatoire – which I described as a beautiful but also as a potential dangerous place – a radical openness. It means a different way of looking at what teaching is, and what learning is. It means introducing new topics of study, opening new fields of practice.

It means attaching ourselves to the great initiatives happening in the outside world: to Music for Life/Wigmore Hall Learning working with people with dementia, to Music Generations, that intergenerational song festival, to the world of community music, to our North-Netherlands Orchestra and its ABBA- and Beatles-concerts, to new allies in music education.

I hope I may contribute the coming years to that openness I described above. To contribute to taking the Other seriously, even if her identity is very different from our own. That project connects directly to my identity as a researcher. An identity defined by looking at music as a social phenomenon; by practice theory; by ethnomusicology and anthropology; by qualitative research, especially ethnography.

In that vein, I finish this essay with a quote of one of my favorite researchers, anthropologist Clifford Geertz¹⁸. It is a quote which in the past few years has grown into a sort of personal motto, because I feel it reflects one of the basic needs of our so complex society. I hope my research may

It is to enlarge the possibility of intelligible discourse between people quite different from one another in interest, outlook, wealth, and power, and yet contained in a world where, tumbled as they are into endless connection, it is increasingly difficult to get out of each other's way.



18. Clifford Geertz. *Works and Lives. The Anthropologist as Author*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988, p. 147.