

WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON HERE?
CASE STUDIES IN MUSICKING

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For Christopher Small, who died only days before my research began

“What’s really going on here?” is a question that musicologist Christopher Small poses often throughout his seminal book, *Musicking: The Meaning of Performance and Listening*. He asks this question as a synthesis of several questions he poses about the nature of musical performance. He begins his inquiry in a deceptively simple manner: “*What is the meaning of music?* and *What is the function of music in human life?* in the life, that is of every member of the human species.

“It is easy to understand why” no one has offered a definitive answer, he continues, and states plainly, as if at point blank range, “Those are the wrong questions to ask. There is no such thing as music. (Small, p. 2)”

He argues here not that what we hear as music is a figment of our imagination, but that music is simply not a *thing*. We have had a tendency to semantically reify music ever since the days of Plato in order to consider it for the Kantian idea of “disinterested contemplation” or the appreciation of formal aesthetic qualities for their own sake. Thus Small advocates for the usage of music as a verb, *to music* which he defines as “[taking] part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing. (Small, pp. 1-18, p. 135)”

He is not merely making a semantic correction of word usage, but rather challenging the way we approach music. Music journalist Marvin Lin, a reader of Small, relates what this means: “I’ve always hated the phrase ‘music is just music.’ It’s dismissive and shortsighted, even antagonistic.... We apply the phrase when discussion of music

becomes overly analytical.... It's a tautology designed to short-circuit conversation and obliterate context. (Lin, p. 30)"

If music is not a thing, than musicking is a cultural activity. It is a performance bound up in the context with whose "obliteration" Lin is concerned. Every agent within that context is a part of the performance: the players; the listeners; the composers; and Small goes so far to include "ticket collectors, piano movers, roadies, cleaners and all. (Small, p. 10)"

Small assigns primacy to performance in order to intellectually reverse the tendency to reify musicking and writes with emphasis, "*Performance does not exist in order to present musical works, but rather, musical works exist in order to give performers something to perform.* (Small, p. 8)" We engage in this performance because we need creative practices like musicking in order to express ideas socially that are unfit for the "one-thing-at-time" nature of words. (Small, p. 94) We use ritual, myth, and metaphor to understand the social relationships we inhabit. "Metaphor... like ritual and like myth is concerned with relationships, and all three are aspects of the same process, in which the physical and sensuous ... experiences of the world are used to understand those often extremely complex and abstract concepts with which we, like all living beings must deal. (Small, p. 104)"

Small is reframing the conversation. He is not actually concerned with musicking, but instead with people and the way their actions define their relationships as social groups. Often throughout the book he refers to three ways by which musicking informs our social being: **exploration**, **affirmation**, and **celebration**. I have chosen three

cases studies that correspond to each of these types of musicking. In truth, any work of musicking could be studied in this way because the theory of musicking is “*descriptive* not *prescriptive*.” All “music” is musicking, and all musicking is valid. (Small, p. 9, p. 13) Aside from his abstract “interludes” of theoretical writing on musicking and art in general, Small uses only one major cases study, the classical concert tradition, a good control subject on account of its four hundred years of cultural omnipresence.¹ I offer these cases if for no other reason than to widen the scope of his methodology.

I

Small writes that musicking “allows those taking part to try [relationships and values] on to see how they fit, to experience them without having to commit themselves to them, (Small, p. 183)” and he defines this process as **exploration**. My first case study will show how a haphazardly performed work of musicking “tries on” a much larger cultural meaning.

William Basinski is a Brooklyn-based classically trained composer working for over twenty-five years with experimental media, particularly analog tape loops. A recent feature on Basinski produced by Mark Phillips for WNYC’s Radiolab discusses a body of work called *The Disintegration Loops* that he started on in the summer of 2001 and released in four volumes over the next two years. It started when he began digitizing old tape loops from the eighties. He noticed that as the tape ran through the player, the iron

¹ Small takes on the classical tradition also to give the venerated medium a much needed dose of criticism for programmatically downplaying the inherent socially performative nature of musicking. He administers this critique on slow release throughout the book as to avoid contradicting his claim that all musicking is valid. I chose these cases specifically as positive counters to his understandably negative example.

oxide by which the music was recorded began to gradually flake off of the plastic backing of the tape, physically and sonically disintegrating. He tried this with several loops allowing each to run until they completely disappeared or sounded entirely different. The tapes disintegrated at different rates, ranging from just under eleven minutes to just over an hour. Phillips and Radiolab host, Jab Abumrad discuss the sound that resulted:

Phillips: *The music disintegrated. He put more loops on and it kept happening, but the really interesting thing was, while some disintegrated quickly and some slowly, they all sort of had the same pattern.*

Abumrad: *What do you mean?*

Phillips: *Just listen to this one, so this is one of his loops at the beginning. ["DIP 5" plays] And after it went around for about twenty minutes or so the dust started to fall off and then it started to sound like this. [skips ahead in "DIP 5"] All the notes are still there, but the tails...*

Abumrad: *Are getting shorter.*

Phillips: *Yeah, and that's what would always happen.*

Prerecorded voice of Basinski: *The sustains and decays of the notes seem to fall away like from the back, moving backwards... backwards.*

Phillips: *They would get shorter and shorter, instead of being held for four seconds it's held for three seconds... two seconds... until finally you just really hear...*

Basinski: *The attacks and the accents.*

Phillips: *Just the beginning of the notes, only the beginnings.*

Basinski: *Those seem to hold on...*

Phillips: *At least for a little while.*

Basinski: *I was thinking, "Wow this is like I'm recording the life and death of a melody." It just made me think of human beings you know, and how we die.*

This piece creates an interesting problem for the theory of musicking because at first it seems unperformable. I argue, however, that it enacts a performance in a particular way by engaging in circumstances and events in real time.

This kind of performance, by which the artist demonstrates lived experience, rather than complete control, has precedence in the visual arts, particularly in diaristic photography. The work of Nan Goldin comes to mind, especially her 1983 photo *Nan*

One Month After Being Battered, a shoulders-up, frontal self-portrait in which Goldin is wearing a pearl necklace, nice earrings, and red lipstick. She has a dark shiner under her right eye, a larger bruise around her left eye, the white of which are entirely stained with blood. Like this photo, *The Disintegration Loops* capture life as it is performed and, also they both share a haunting quality within their straightforwardness.

What *The Disintegration Loops* defy is not performance, but rather composition. Throughout his text, but primarily in his chapter on “Score and Parts,” Small challenges the primacy of composition in the appreciation of musicking. Scores, he argues, are not musicking themselves, but means to the end of performance. Composition occurs through repeated performance so that a performable version of a piece can be codified. However, when the resulting score is used to permanently codify the piece for the sake of “authenticity,” a means-ends reversal occurs between performance and composition resulting in numerous problematic social hierarchies: between living and dead composers; between conductors, who decide upon “authentic” readings of pieces, and concert musician play as they are directed; and between those who can and cannot read scores.² (Small, pp. 110-119)

By avoiding these problems *The Disintegration Loops* is a perfect slate for creating meaning, and it is open-ended enough to allow participation by the listener in this respect. Rather than composition, what is described in the excerpt from Radiolab is

² Small reveals a number of other problematic aspects of classical composition. A most noteworthy example is certain tonal qualities of musicking that are regarded as gendered by four centuries of semiotics in the classical concert tradition (Small, pp.148-157). Moreover, these tonal patterns abstractly follow a narrative structure, even when there are no words telling the story. He calls the violence in narratives’ conflicts “disturbing” and maintains that the supposed protagonist is always male. (Small pp. 170-182)

syntax, or a “way of controlling the relationships between the sounds that are made.” This is the formal way, though not the only way, that musicking expresses meaning. (Small, p. 122)

To Basinski, the syntax of his piece, the “life and death of a melody” as he puts it (Phillips), is entirely bound up in the experience of September 11. Again, syntax is not the only factor expressing meaning in musicking; context expresses it as well. Basinski is exploring a vast metaphor, applying meaning to chance to see how it fits. To signal the connection, the album covers for the four volumes are photos from his studio window facing Manhattan during the last daylight hour of September 11.

As if to mock my lengthy and fervent attempts to justify *The Disintegration Loops* as a performance in its own right, the first piece in the volumes, titled “DIP 1.1,” was indeed performed live for the first time earlier this year. It was arranged for orchestra by composer Maxim Moston and premiered by the Brooklyn-based Wordless Music Orchestra at the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Temple of Dendur as part of a tenth anniversary of September 11 memorial concert. The forty-minute piece comprised the entire second half of the program. It was clear the meaning that Basinski explored was not lost on the audience, who (as evident from the audio recording) sat in a heavy, contemplative silence for an astounding two-and-a-half minutes after the completion of the piece before applauding. Conductor Ryan McAdams compared “DIP 1.1” to the events of September 11, calling it “destruction that no one could have anticipated. (Huizenga)”

II

My next case study is concerned with the ways musicking functions as an **affirmation** of social identities among groups. Small explains how the social nature of musicking tends to preserve traditions while the temporal nature of musicking allows traditions to change. Since this is a tricky, paradoxical phenomenon, I quote Small at length:

We can ... see why it is that musicking has always functioned so powerfully as a means of social definition and self-definition. For if members of different social groups have different values, that is, different concepts of relationships and of the pattern which connects, then the enactment of those relationships that takes place during a musical performance will differ also. Each musical performance articulates the values of a specific social group, large or small, powerful or powerless, rich or poor, at a specific point in history, and no kind of performance is any more universal or absolute than any other. [...] "At a specific point in history" is important also, for groups change, in both their constitution and their values; and as they change, so do their styles of musicking.

(Small, p. 133)

It is through this dialectical tension that social groups of all kinds use musicking to affirm that "these are our values, these are our concepts of ideal relationships, and consequently, this is who we are. (Small, p. 183)"

Heavy Metal is a perfect realm of inquiry on this issue, because it is for all practical purposes not a musical genre, but rather a constellation of subgroups each with a unique sound and, more importantly, public identity. These subgroups have been evolving, splitting, and hybridizing since the seventies, not without infighting and controversy. Metal is notoriously sectarian, each subgroup believing they are the only true metal. "Death to false Metal!" is a commonly invoked rallying cry.

Sasha Frere-Jones also invokes this phrase in a recent article for *The New Yorker* attempting to explain and justify Black Metal for the magazine's assumedly curious-but-not-too-curious readership. "The Dark Arts: How to Approach Black Metal" discusses what is going on now in Black Metal, its relationship to its own history, and what that means for the listener. He describes Black Metal's sound thus: "The elements of the genre that are common to its bands – even those which don't subscribe to the term, since Black Metal's borders are fiercely policed – are extremely fast strumming of guitars, equally fast drumming, and singing that is either extremely low and almost gastric or very high and vaguely spectral."

He generally dismisses the history of the Black Metal as steeped in contrivance and violence, poking fun at its traditional costume of black and white "corpse paint" and bands' typically illegible logos. Many contemporary, self-proclaimed Black Metal bands are moving away from these traditions and even towards mainstream venues. He categorizes the band Liturgy's recent performance at MoMA PS.1 as symptomatic of this change, with insidious backlash: "Most Black Metal fans would not only reject that kind of fine-art credential; they would punish a band thus associated, and Liturgy has recently been caught up in a fight about identity, the limits of pretentiousness, and the point of Black Metal itself."³

³ Frere-Jones is in part referring to a pamphlet essay written by Liturgy's outspoken, Columbia-educated frontman Hunter Hunt-Hendrix called "Transcendental Black Metal," a term which he has coined as a subgenre which ostensibly only applies to Liturgy. I have never been able to find an unabridged copy, but it seems to be an attempt to justify changes in the genre embodied by Liturgy, consequently portraying original Black Metal as hackneyed and outdated. The ensuing internet-based hailstorm of hostility and name-calling is worthy of its own lengthy socio-musicological essay.

To understand why these changes are even an issue, we need a more thorough history of Black Metal than Frere-Jones provides, and turn to the 2008 documentary *Until the Light Takes Us* by Aaron Aites and Audrey Ewell. The film mostly follows three original Norwegian Black Metal bands who began in the early nineties, Mayhem, Burzum, and Darkthrone. They were a group of young people deeply disillusioned by a conservative upbringing in Norway and the increasing corporatization of their country, which they believed came in through hegemonic paths carved by the spread of Christianity for centuries. They made music with the worst equipment possible to avoid marketability outside of their group, but also to reflect the eerie coldness they felt from their time and place.

Varg "Count Grishnackh" Vikernes of Burzum was the most vocal, believing that Christianity had violently erased all indigenous cultures in the world. He and a few others burnt down about a dozen churches in 1992 and 1993 starting with the Fantoft Stave Church in Bergen, Norway built in 1150 CE. He believed that 1150 was nothing compared the millennia of Norse tradition and maintained that this church was built on an ancient pagan holy area. He tells Aites and Ewell, "It's hard to know what to do to oppose something because dissident voices are not tolerated in contemporary society."

Vikernes wanted the group to take responsibility publicly, but Øystien "Euronymous" Aarseth of the band Mayhem sold him out to the police because he liked the resulting attention his record store gained from what Vikernes called "Brain-dead metal-heads." The news categorized them as Satanists, much to Vikernes's dismay, and a British metal magazine wrote a scathing article about them saying much the same thing.

The article opened the floodgates of followers who took on this Satanist image and continued to burn more churches, which Vikernes would later take blame for. Growing tensions led to the disputed murder or self-defense killing of Aarseth by Vikernes. (Aites & Ewell)

This story exemplifies both how Black Metal was used as an affirmation of specific values, while also becoming an object of change. Gylve “Fenriz” Nagell, of Darkthrone, arguably the first Black Metal band, had this to say about how the genre’s popularization in an interview split up throughout the film:

I refuse to stand court-martialed for making this whole underground moment into a trend thing. If it's anyone, it's not us. But I guess most people would say that. [...] The mission statement was not escaping the Death Metal trend, but definitely we were thinking of not stepping in the garish footsteps of what became commercial Death Metal. [...] But the thing is, it's out there now. It's everyone's property. Like, for people who want to do humor or whatever. It's out of our fucking hands. Black Metal, for me, is still those secluded things that people are not the fuck interested in, you know? So Black Metal is like a brand now.... Everyone can deal with it. If someone does it in a completely ... disgusting way, I might go, like, 'Damn it!' But what can I do? What's the point?
(Aites & Ewell)

He eloquently articulates a number of very important issues from *Musicking*. First, he describes Black Metal not as a genre, but a “moment,” a specific, culturally sensitive event that expressed a group’s role in their own setting. The question shifts from whether or not contemporary Black Metal bands are legitimate (“Death to False Metal!”) to how much they share in that cultural sensitivity of that “moment.” The answer to this question differs for every listener/musicker; note Nagell’s poignant use of the phrase “for me.”

Even if the church-burning moment has passed, there are still traditions to carry on through performance. Frere-Jones writes of the “larger project” of Black Metal: “If

you're going out of the house to hear amplified music, why not take that to its logical end? You may eventually find a TV that is sufficiently large that it makes going to a movie theatre pointless, but you are never going to replicate anything like a Black Metal show at home, no matter how fancy your stereo is.”

III

Musicking is an instrument of **celebration** “in empowering those taking part to explore and to affirm their values, [leaving] them with a feeling of becoming more completely themselves, more in tune with their fellows. (Small, p. 184)” My third case study is most of all about having fun and consequently about disenfranchised social groups finding agency among a wider group of peers.

“Sissy Bounce” is a name commonly referring the work of a group of gay or transgender and primarily African-American rappers and producers based out of New Orleans. They, however, outspokenly see themselves simply as “Bounce” musicians and reject the term (I will continue to use it simply for clarification sake). For over a decade, the goal of “Sissy Bounce” practitioners like Big Freedia, the self-proclaimed Queen Diva of Bounce, is to work their way into an often violently hetero-male driven club scene by being too over-the-top, working too hard, and having too much fun to be ignored or brushed aside. (Dee)

Bounce as a twenty-year-old musicking style is as much about sound as it is about dance. A 2010 article by Jonathan Dee on “Sissy Bounce” for the New York Times Magazine described Bounce:

Like most hip-hop varieties, it's rap delivered over a sampled dance beat, but it has a few characteristics that give it a distinctively regional sound: it's strictly party

music, its beat is relentlessly fast and its rap quotient tends much less toward introspection or pure braggadocio than toward a call-and-response relationship with its audience, a dynamic borrowed in equal measure from Mardi Gras Indian chants and from the dawn of hip-hop itself.

(Dee)

Big Freedia and other “Sissy Bounce” artists were forced to evacuate in 2005 in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and used the move to gain a wider audience, but also to fill a cultural vacuum in the clubs upon return. Sometimes playing six shows a week, even more than one a night, Big Freedia became a mainstay for whole scene not just gay scene. The emotionally charged time no doubt fueled the fury of the dance styles. (Dee)

Big Freedia and other “Sissy Bounce” artists seek to put women at the forefront and make them more in charge of the club situation. The female position at Bounce shows usually involves hands on the floor or wall posterior in the air bouncing (obviously) vigorously up and down. At “Sissy Bounce,” shows this dance is more of a centerpiece than an object of male control, and men are often pushed to the periphery. (Dee)⁴ Dee recounts situations during which Big Freedia has stopped the music upon seeing unwanted sexual advances from men.

“Sissy Bounce” bears many similarities to other dance cultures that grew out of the frustrations of marginalized groups. The documentaries *Paris is Burning* (1990) by Jennie Livingston and *Rize* (2005) by David LaChapelle immortalized the New York “Voguing” and the Los Angeles “Crumping” scenes respectively. In both of these

⁴ Since the article was published, Big Freedia has attained enough widespread notoriety to warrant a national tour, sponsorship from the car manufacturer Scion, and collaborations with other rappers outsider of her scene. More importantly she has gained attention from fans that are not gay or transgender, not female, and not African-American. I can personally attest that, amid this popularity, her shows are more inclusive of men – or anyone for that matter – than the article would imply.

examples, economically or socially disenfranchised African-Americans develop communities around a specific dance performances that provide a degree of social agency and an outlet other than violence. “Sissy Bounce” is similar that it achieve these goals but differs because, unlike Voguing and Crumping, it is not competition based; everyone is encouraged to participate.

A quote from Rusty Lazer, Big Freedia’s DJ and de facto manager, sums up the agenda of “Sissy Bounce” beautifully:

It’s as if punk had been reinvented for women. I remember going to punk shows when I was thirteen, slam-dancing, stage-diving. It was a kind of reckless abandon, something you really couldn’t stop yourself from doing. If the girls weren’t just outright afraid of being in there, there was somebody literally shoving them out of the way. Now, it’s exactly what was happening when I was young, but in reverse: the girls literally push the dudes right out of the middle. It’s just pure empowerment, physical aggression that’s not spiteful or vicious. I think it’s no accident that the slang term for a gay kid in New Orleans is ‘punk.’ It’s pretty rewarding.
(Dee)

Why use *The Disintegration Loops* to contemplate September 11 when there are so many other angles? Why discuss the arson medieval Norwegian churches as a function of Black Metal when it is culturally loaded enough notwithstanding? Why is the dance club an intellectual venue to discuss sexual politics in post-Katrina New Orleans? Why ask the question “*What’s really going on here?*” at all? I believe that any entry point into understanding cultural phenomena is valuable. I mean this as a mirror-image idea to Small’s assertion that all musicking is serious musicking, serious meaning full of cultural significance and within a specific context. (Small, pp. 212-213) The methodology of *Musicking* throws out any chicken-or-egg considerations of whether musicking practice

causes cultural activity or vice versa, but rather concerns itself with the new ideas that can be uncovered by considering their overlap.

Undoubtedly, the current critical climate in art would consider incomplete a reading of, to choose a canonical example, Picasso's *Guernica* that made no mention of World War II. Is critical discourse on music really so this far behind that of visual art as to exclude context in this manner? Small certainly believes so,⁵ and recall Lin's grievance against the phrase "just music." But even one with a rosier view of contemporary musicology can see the generative innovation at play in Small's theory of musicking: performance as an inclusion on the listener. If musicking is temporal rather than reified (performed rather than made), then it comes into existence via listening. This notion goes beyond the proverbial tree-falling-in-the-woods; it also implicates all musicking audiences as agents in cultural moments. As someone constantly listening to and reading about musicking, I believe Small's mode of inquiry is indeed unique amid to the larger musicological conversation, and I have intended with these cases studies to continue this legacy because our task as participants and audiences in all creative practices is to examine our own role in public discourse in ever-changing ways.

⁵ Small argues that there are two main school of musical thought on emotional motivations behind musicking, one of extreme Kantian formalism and one claiming that all music is a communication of an emotion from a single composer to a listener. He criticizes both for not questioning the role of musicking in human life, for reifying musicking, and for generalizing musicking from a western perspective. (Small pp. 135-156)

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