

Danish Yearbook of Musicology

41 • 2017

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Danish Yearbook of Musicology · Volume 41 · 2017

Dansk Årbog for Musikforskning

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Each volume of *Danish Yearbook of Musicology* is published continuously in sections:

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Published with support from the *Danish Council for Independent Research | Humanities*.

ISBN 978-87-88328-32-5 (volume 41); ISSN 2245-4969 (online edition)

Danish Yearbook of Musicology is a peer-reviewed journal published by the Danish Musicological Society on <http://www.dym.dk/>

Research project

A Phenomenology of Expert Musicianship

The dissertation, which was defended in 2015 at the Centre for Subjectivity Research at the Department of Media, Cognition and Communication, University of Copenhagen, develops a phenomenology of expert musicianship through an interdisciplinary approach that integrates qualitative interviews with the The Danish String Quartet and philosophical analyses bearing on ideas from phenomenology, philosophy of mind, cognitive science and psychology of music.

The dissertation is structured through the asking, analysing and answering of three primary questions: 1) What is it like to be an expert?; 2) What is the general phenomenology of expert musicianship?; 3) What happens to the self in deep musical absorption?

The first question targets a central debate in philosophy and psychology on whether reflection is conducive for, or detrimental to, the bodily unfolding of the expert skill. In other words, can you think about what you're doing while doing it? My analyses show that the concepts in this question are poorly defined and glosses over the more important features of expertise. I conclude that thinking about one's performance while playing does not necessarily impede it, but also that it is important for the individual musician to learn which forms of thinking are conducive to, and which ones are detrimental to, beautiful performance.

The second question asks as openly as possibly what happens in the consciousness of a performing musician and leads to the construction of a taxonomy of absorption, showing that expert musicians can perform well irrespective of whether they are mind-wandering, under stress, feeling like 'another day at the job', or deeply absorbed. This implies, among other things, that the key to understanding musicianship is not to be found in a discussion of reflection, but requires a more inclusive phenomenological analyses which I provide focusing on 'passive synthesis', 'embodiment', 'intercorporeity', 'sense of agency' and the emotions.

Finally, the third question targets a key dimension of musicianship, namely deep absorption, sometimes experienced as selfless or blackout-like, which challenges core philosophical conceptions on the nature of the self. Through the work achieved by the second question, I account for the conditions of possibility of deep absorption, that is, how it is possible to perform well, even if one 'is not there'.

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Research project

Robots in Music Videos: A Study of the Non-Human as Political Statement in African-American Popular Music Videos

This Ph.D. project (2017–2020, Section of Musicology, Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen) aims to provide a musicological perspective on how robots appearing in popular music videos by black American artists serve as a figure for racial oppression and inequality. My contention is that these robots should be read as both a way to communicate racialized otherness and as a way to construct a collective sense of identity in relation and opposition to a racial majority. The word ‘robot’ originally translates to ‘slave’ or ‘serf’ which makes it a fitting figure for the history of a people who were seen as objects and forced to work like machines, especially if seen in relation to stereotypes about African-Americans as being more ‘natural’.

By means of work interpretation, I attempt to determine the multi-layered relationships between sound, image, and text – that is the music video as an isolated piece – on one hand, and the social media landscape in which the videos are situated and consumed on the other. I do this in order to establish what, how, and where the robot as figure in popular music communicates. The project is situated in the intersection of music video studies, post-humanist studies, sound studies, and critical race theory, each field relating to its own project branch (music video, the robot, technology, and racialization).

I hypothesize that the form and space of the music video is able to facilitate African-American experiences in a digital and technological space in a way that emphasizes the human/robot duality as a valid historical narrative – that of the racialized subject as mechanized subject. I argue that the tradition of minstrelsy among black (and white) performers is still very much present and that it determines the ways that racialized artists can inhabit sonic and digital spaces.

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Research project

Ad Hoc Entrepreneurs: Middle-Layer Musicians and the Contemporary Media Landscape

The Ph.D. thesis *Ad Hoc Entrepreneurs: Middle-Layer Musicians and the Contemporary Media Landscape* is a study of key structural changes in the working conditions of popular music artists, specifically within two rock music scenes in Copenhagen and Boston. The aim is to understand how organizational and communicational practices of middle-layer musicians are related to media-driven changes in the music business. This is studied through an integration of analyses of structural changes in the music industries based on quantitative industry data, and qualitative case studies.

The thesis, which was defended November 2015 at Roskilde University, Department of Communication, Business and Information Technologies in cooperation with the Rhythmic Music Conservatory in Copenhagen, contributes to music industry research with a particular interest in the musicians' perspective, and integrates micro and macro perspectives on the economic, organizational, communicational and social consequences of digitalization.

The thesis is organized in three main parts. Part one reviews literature and concepts from three distinct research traditions that cover different aspects of the nexus between music industries (Horkheimer & Adorno 2006/1944, Hirsch 1972, Negus 2011/1993, Hesmondhalgh 2012, Wikström 2013), media theory (Baym 2012, Baym & Boyd 2012, Benkler 2006, Jenkins 2006, Hearn 2008, Meyrowitz 1985) and cultural labour (Ryan 1992, Banks 2007, Stahl 2013).

Part two analyses the structural and economic change in the music industries since the advent of digital distribution from a macro perspective, and explores the effects of these changes on the conditions for individual musicians by analysing empirical case studies of the organization of professional activities and media practices of four musicians from Copenhagen and Boston in the early 2010s. The case studies illustrate the idiosyncratic approaches musicians take in shaping their professional practices in response to the structural challenges. Both in terms of strengthening their independent professional organization, and in terms of utilizing new media to develop their communication, media production, and business models.

Part three develops two primary analytical themes. First, the conception of musicians as entrepreneurs is developed, and the emerging social role of middle-layer rock musicians is conceptualized as *ad hoc entrepreneurs*. Second, the relation between new media and social change is developed drawing on Meyrowitz's (1985) conception of *feedback*

loops as a way of understanding how organizational changes in response to new media practices can lead to a reestablishment of structural equilibrium, while substantially changing the social roles of the musicians.

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Research project

Pop as Minimalism: Objectivity, Repetition, and Spatial Staging in Pop Music's New Software

Music technology has developed rapidly in the past decades. The shift from hardware to software has manifested itself noticeably in pop music where composition, performance, and production have converged in the computer-based DAW (digital audio workstation) and its additional programs.

The Ph.D. project (2017–2020, Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen) seeks to explore how this change towards software manifests itself aesthetically in contemporary pop music. The project proposes minimalism as a way to explore and analyse the relationship between pop and the digital methods that produce it. Three central attributes of minimalism will be at the centre of the investigation: objectivity, repetition, and spatial staging.

Increasingly, pop shares its use of new music technology with electronic genres such as EDM (Electronic Dance Music) and hip-hop. Aesthetic traits of disco, house, techno, and hip-hop – including its African-American roots – can be found in pop's use of sampling, MIDI-sequencing, quantization and vocal pitch correction. These ambiguities and repetition-prone production methods will be investigated in relation to minimalism which sought to negate subjectivity through *grid*-based non-teleological processuality and additive shifts between musical patterns.

Early minimalist art and music were largely based on the repetition of a fragment in a given space, or, in the case of recorded fragments, on the built-in space of the recording being repeated. The works contained an inherent spatial staging and a focus on materiality and instrumental unity where sounds were used as monolithic fragments pointing away from expression and the human body. In contemporary pop, spatial staging becomes almost eclectic when techniques such as sampling, envelope-control and reverb are combined with dynamic controls like gating, compression, and side-chain compression. This new kind of spatiality is often interwoven with an increased use of EQ-filtered sounds such as sub-bass, digital noise, and distortion that emphasize frequency over tonality. Using a phenomenological approach, the project will investigate how this development can be seen as an enhancer of a more textural, corporal, even tactile, musical experience.

To exemplify, test, and challenge the theories, the thesis will contain musical analyses of songs after 2010 by artists such as Justin Bieber, Rihanna, M.I.A., Beyoncé, and The Weeknd.

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