



Locating Music

ACADEMIC
TEXT

by [Dahlia Borsche](#)

«Where is Music?» The task of locating something as immaterial as sound has, thanks to the digital revolution, become more complex than ever. Sounds today are de-territorialised, revealing their capacity to break free and take root again, continually generating new associations and meanings. However, location remains an important, if not preferred, classifier when it comes to describing music and its creators. It is thus more imperative than ever to challenge the strategies and interests that underpin this tendency toward identification. Dahlia Borsche examines the importance of questioning today's music mapping practices and the necessity of maintaining fluidity in our classifications so as to overcome nationalist agendas and foster new forms of hybrid processes and social communities.

1.

Sound has no place. Sound is immaterial and dynamic, conceivable solely as motion, for sound is nothing other than air made to vibrate. True, such vibrations permeate a certain space, but they also fade away, remain

intangible. This is why even the sound-based art form, music, can never be pinned down to a specific place. Indeed it is difficult to say exactly where music is manifest: in a score, perhaps, of which generally several versions exist? In cultural memory, which is equally elusive? In the knowledge of those who perpetuate or make music? In concerts and performances? In the brains of listeners, who process sound waves? Or in a recording, a CD or a file?

There are no simple and, as a rule, only unsatisfactory answers to the question: «Where is music?» It is nonetheless indisputable that location is the first classifier of choice when it comes to music. The idea that music or culture is generally site-specific is a seemingly self-evident and therefore rarely challenged topos (Cf. Connell and Gibson 2003, 90). That it has taken root linguistically is obvious when we speak of music or culture «taking place» (van der Meer 2005). The idea that music (or culture) and place are mutual determinants is so widespread and so deeply anchored in our conception of sound culture that it cannot be overlooked. It is as clear as day in the names given to different musical genres, for one could quickly fill a page or more with terms such as Detroit Techno, Britpop, Hamburger Schule, J-Pop, Neue Deutsche Welle or Balkan Beat, all of which reference a real geographic location. In addition – although not all of the following reference a real location – there are band names, such as Portishead, Phoenix, Boston, Calexico or Beirut, and to cite this year's CTM Festival programme, Jerusalem in My Heart or Dwarfs of East Agouza. Frequently, too, thanks either to the evolution of a certain genre or the work of a trendsetting musician, a city or an entire region comes to stand for a specific sound: Seattle is associated with grunge and New Orleans with jazz while Iceland, courtesy of Björk, is now on the innovative Pop map. Classifications of this sort are quickly snapped up in various fields, for example in the tourism sector. The website visitliverpool.com announces: «Liverpool is proud to be the birthplace of the best band in the world [...]». The associations triggered by music thus become a trademark, an image, and hence an auditory cliché yet they also generally remain potent – after all, don't the sounds of sitars, ragas, or of Bollywood instantly transport us to India, the sound of samba to Brazil, and of gongs and the pentatonic melodies of a guzheng to the Forbidden City of Beijing?

Interestingly, the supposed antithesis of these local anchoring strategies, the aspiringly utopian, we-are-all-one world music genre, draws on these very same clichés (Stokes 2012). All the hybrid forms of this allegedly crossover music share a firm belief in the authenticity of local musical styles and rely almost exclusively on sounds that may be unambiguously associated with specific (preferably exotic and at the least unfailingly «non-European») cities or regions of the world. As Johannes Ismaiel-Wendt rightly points out, even «world music» is sorted in record shops according to its region and country of origin (Ismaiel-Wendt 2011, 17).

Explicit reference to an artist's nationality is still commonplace, moreover, in event programmes and advertisements. The CTM Festival itself has always featured the bracketed abbreviation denoting an artist's country of origin behind her or his name, and one click on its website suffices to sort the year's list of artists either «by random», «without image» or «alphabetically by country». The only exceptions to such attribution are cases of dual nationality, such as Evelina Domnitch (BY/NL) or Deena Abdelwahed (TN/FR), or those in which «international» is the more preferable term, either because an artist consciously rejects identity attributions (as in Tara Transitory aka One Man Nation) or because the project line-up is de facto international (as in Sublime Frequencies).

Likewise in artists' biographies and music journalism, to define a person or genre by naming numerous attributes is practically standard practice. The artist pages of this year's CTM Festival thus reveal that Tianzhuo Chen's activities range «from LGBTQ hip hop to the London rave scene, Japanese Butoh, New York vogue, manga, and the fashion world [...]», while Radwan Ghazi Moumneh of Jerusalem in My Heart was «[b]orn to Lebanese parents, spent his early years in Oman before relocating to Canada after the second Gulf War [and was influenced] by post-punk and the raw, psychedelic quality of folk recordings from Beirut and neighboring Syria [...]». Wukir Suryadi, for his part, «[hails] from Malang, in Eastern Java, and [is] currently based in Yogyakarta, [as a] composer and instrument builder [who] fuses ancient Javanese tradition with contemporary music practice». About Honey Dijon we read: «She has held residencies at the chicest of NYC venues, including Hiro Ballroom, Cielo and the Chelsea Hotel»: evidence thus, that not only countries, regions or cities but also cultural venues sometimes play a decisive role in these identification strategies.

2.

Reasons for defining music can be found both in the respective production context and the reception/consumption context in the broadest possible sense of these terms. The contexts in which music is produced are constitutive of it to a significant degree: specific local factors – be it the role of, and value attributed to music in a society, the resources there, the opportunities for education and performance, the legal framework and societal norms, the types of cultural venues and their attendant habitus – all have an enormous influence on the production and perception of music.

The site-specificity of music rests in part on actual geographic circumstance. The development of alpine horns, for example, can be explained solely in connection with the mountainous environment in which they originated and the specific nature of sound transmission there, while Futurism, by contrast, must be understood as a direct reaction to, and processing of, industrialised, urban conditions in Europe in the early twentieth century. Regional geography as early as the 1920s began to address the fact that sounds and

music shape not only visual and haptic conditions but also local characteristics and hence the «landscape tradition» (Connell and Gibson 2003, 11).

Differences between regional musical styles and music concepts are often enormous, and different readings of them at times almost impossible to translate. The use and development of specific musical instruments give rise to specific sound characteristics. Different tonal systems have evolved in keeping with the potential of these instruments, and instruments have in turn been adapted to meet the demands of these tonal systems, as is evident in the European musical tradition from the invention of the well-tempered piano. Tonal systems are underpinned not only by an ordering principle but also by a concept of what music is. And such concepts have not only changed often and radically throughout history, but have also taken extremely varied forms in different regions of the world. For music is always embedded in local cultural practices, value systems, social structures or rituals and hence constitutes a cryptic system of signs that can only be read (decrypted) by those familiar with the aforementioned factors. Accordingly, music played or listened to outside of its original production context is subject to a transformation that automatically embeds it in a new system of signs.

Another not inessential reason to define the biographies of musicians, artists and producers in these terms is their respective credibility rating. Resident Advisor's documentary film series *Real Scenes*, which examines the local techno scenes of various major cities, shows the enormous effort that DJs and producers from Mexico City, for example, have to make to acquire a certain standing, whereas their peers from the techno capital Berlin are given the red-carpet treatment just by virtue of where they are based. That Honey Dijon was a resident in the chicest club in New York automatically says something about her status. And the fact that Wukir Suryadi was born in Java lends plausibility to his interest in Javanese traditional music. He has a nuanced understanding of the references in Javanese music as well as virtuosity with a range of local instruments – and such skills suggest authenticity.

Just as an artist's degree of credibility determines her or his ranking within a global hierarchy, so, too, does her location assure a measure of orientation. The ranking of venues, cities or regions serves to put people «on the map» in terms of their geography or style, and hence, with nothing more than a few words or intimations, guarantees any reader insight into some reassuring mines of information. Since the 1970s, cartographic tools have become an increasingly popular means to visualise complex cultural processes in various disciplines. Music mapping, i.e. cartographies of the origin, production and distribution of different musical styles or genre «family trees», is used to portray broad-ranging research findings – yet there is always a risk that it

may oversimplify, or, at worst, prove unable to convey the complex interweaving and mutual impact of music and economic, social and political processes.

In addition to this kind of cultural mapping, location data is processed first and foremost on the various virtual maps present in the mind's eye of the listener. Artists are identified namely against the backdrop of the listener's own personal experience and tastes, which, like the artist's music, inform the imagined community of fans to which s/he feels s/he belongs. The identification potential offered by music plays into the hands of these location mechanisms. One associates with a particular locale, stands willingly in a certain tradition, a certain system of signs and meanings, and identifies oneself with these. The social alliances that music triggers and maintains, such as local, translocal or virtual music scenes (Cf. Bennett and Peterson 2004), are a decisive factor in the construction of personal identity; and like any factor or practice constitutive of personal identity, they are viable only if the person in question clearly marks her or his separation from the Other. To compare anything with the personal map of one's experience, tastes and sense of community hence necessarily implies the designation of, and assignment to, one of two categories: «Own» and «Other».

Such processes prove volatile above all when used for the purposes of identity politics. Music tends to be appropriated especially for the construction of national identities. In colonised, conquered or newly founded states, as in times of upheaval or post-war reconstruction, the myth of a locality's «own» musical culture is revived or simply invented in order to better cement the «We-sense» among the more or less arbitrarily thrown together members of a labile community. Whether it's a case of right-wing movements recalling nationalist hymns or minorities invoking their musical traditions as a means to counter cultural hegemony, the intent is always to foster or strengthen a sense of common identity. Music serves in such cases to stake out certain territory, either ideological or (as with national borders) geo-political. The practice of music mapping can therefore reveal a great deal about social orders, about power and empowerment, about political interests and resistance. In his pioneering book *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha turned the spotlight on this political dimension by describing processes of cultural hybridisation and the political implications of cultural identification strategies; and he thus made a far-reaching contribution to the then still relatively young discipline of postcolonial studies (Bhabha 1994).

3.

The answer to the question, why places play such a major role in an expressive art form that does not lend itself to localisation, at least puts an end to the erroneous but persistent idea that music somehow exists in and of itself, as an object with no connection at all to its production and reception contexts – an idea fostered by the misleading expression «a piece of music».

Musicology and ethnomusicology have long since mistakenly assumed that music can be treated as an object, and that works of music and musical traditions can be studied and read as complete, unchanging entities. The reference to so-called traditional music implies a connection not only to ancient but also to unchanging times, as if music cultures in their «pure form» were complete constructs with clearly classifiable properties and might be preserved and protected. This essentialist approach and the notion implicit in it of the authenticity of traditional music cultures often ensues from a romanticising image of exotic-primitive cultures and always entails the dual risk of defining the otherness of cultures as a foil to one's own, and of thereby distorting perception of the heterogeneous and dynamic processes inherent to local music cultures.

But to regard music as cultural practice is no longer a groundbreaking new idea, not even among musicologists. The performative turn has long since ensured that performance and practice now rank among the predominant themes. Moreover, a group of scholars has been seeking for some time to accomplish a further turn by once and for all dispelling the last remnants of the classical notion that music is representation or an object. Prompted by the Actor Network Theory (ANT),¹ new paths to describing, localising and analysing social issues have been trodden in recent years in many disciplines – tellingly, also in the fields of geography and musicology. In geography it was first and foremost Sarah Whatmore, who succeeded in turning the discipline topsy-turvy with her controversial book *Hybrid Geographies* (2002), in which she posited that: «geographies are not pure or discrete but hybrid and constituted through relations» (Whatmore 2002). In musicology it is authors such as Antoine Hennion or Georgina Born who have drawn inspiration from the ANT. A central premise for Georgina Born is that music must be imagined not as representation but as a myriad of mediations. Neither music nor society exists «per se», i.e. in and of itself, in a vacuum, since each is the outcome of instances of mediation. Music takes place on many different levels simultaneously. It is a diffuse and heterogeneous assemblage, «an aggregation of sonic, social, corporeal, discursive, visual, technical and temporal mediations» (Born 2015, 359). It is not only a social practice but also generates social factors (for example, in the form of imagined communities). By this reading, to locate music is of relevance only when it serves to explain a certain practice, i.e. when it brings to light associations and agency; and it only ever takes place, moreover, on imaginary, transient maps.

This mediation theory is a helpful means to grasp the great diversity and contrariety of transcultural processes, to address the dynamics between global music streams and local variations, and to understand the permeability, fluidity and motion of sound and musical cultures. It is all the more helpful given that these dynamics have accelerated dramatically over the last few decades. Recording techniques make it possible to separate sounds from the local specificities of the place they were produced.

Previously, all sounds could only ever be heard at their point of production and for as long as they lasted. Sound recordings and sound storage have put an end to this however. R. Murray Schafer has coined the term «schizophonia» for this phenomenon (Schafer 1977). Thanks to the digital revolution, sounds today are more placeless than ever, de-territorialised, and are revealing their capacity to break free and take root again, time after time, and thereby continually generate new associations and meanings.

Location processes have not become any less important in light of this development. It is more imperative than ever to question the strategies and interests that underpin localisation. Mapping is not innocent. Andrew Herman, Thomas Swiss and John Sloop have written in this regard of the need for «a cartography of sound as a territory of power» (Herman, Swiss and Sloop 1998, 17). It is not that I am in favour of diluting or denying local differences, or of the homogenisation so long anticipated by critics of globalisation. On the contrary, music is the best medium through which to experience global diversity. But at the same time, it opens our eyes to the fact that cultural processes are fluid, permanently in flux, and that creativity and innovation are often particularly strong at points where cultural production is ambivalent, hybrid and transgressive. In his visionary book, *Noise. The Political Economy of Music*, Jacques Attali argues that: «[Music] heralds, for it is prophetic. It has always been in its essence a herald of times to come» (Attali 1985, 4). If one shares his view, one can understand music to be a harbinger of an ever more rapidly networking hybrid world in which borders shift and dissolve. Transcultural musical processes can then serve both to foster understanding of how to overcome national states, of migratory movements and of new forms of social community, and to foster appreciation of the enormous potential and opportunities inherent to accelerated hybridisation processes.

→ footnotes

[1.](#) For further information see e.g. Latour 2005.

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