

Beethoven's Laugh and Tyagaraja's Voice: Musing on the Musical Knowledge We Do not Wish to Have¹

(Invited Contribution the Keynote Panel, British Forum for Ethnomusicology, Annual Conference, Oxford, UK, April 8, 2010).

Our knowledge is vast and impressive...
Our ignorance is boundless and overwhelming
(Sir Karl R. Popper)

“Mankind have a great aversion to intellectual labour; but even supposing knowledge to be easily attainable, more people would be content to be ignorant than would take even a little trouble to acquire it.” (Samuel Johnson)

Is all knowledge in principle equally desirable? To be sure, not all of it is equally sought after, or equally prestigious to have. At times Christianity regards knowledge as sin. Schiller, would speak of scientific inquiry as leading to what he called *Entzauberung der Welt* (disenchantment of the world).² One could go even further and question whether useful knowledge should be a priority. But whatever knowledge we have, once we have it, we might as well try to keep it – which is not always easily done. In fact, the historians of science Robert Proctor and Londa Schiebinger call the study of why we do not know, or no longer know, things well within our reach “Agnotology”; the study of “ignorance making” if you wish.³ In other words: part of our ignorance may be culturally produced.

¹ This article is based on an invited paper that was delivered at the Keynote-Panel of the British Forum for Ethnomusicology, April 8, 2010.

² Here the idea is expressed that to know that there are things that one cannot, and even need not know, is to be able to live once more in a world of rich and varied meaning, quite unlike the joyless two-dimensional universe we should inhabit if ever the human race were to succeed in uncovering the last physical secret of the cosmos. W.H. Auden put it way: This passion of our kind / For the process of finding out / Is a fact one can hardly doubt, / But I would rejoice in it more / If I knew more clearly what / We wanted the knowledge for, / Felt certain still the mind / Was free to know or not. (W.H. Auden, “After Reading a Child's Guide to Modern Physics” in *About the House*, London, Faber, 1966).

³ As she and her co-author ... put it: “Our primary purpose here is to promote the study of ignorance, by developing tools for understanding how and why various forms of knowing have not ‘not come to be,’ or disappeared, or have been delayed or long neglected, for better or worse, at various points in history.” (Robert Proctor und Londa Schiebinger 2008: vii)

Now a few examples concerning musical knowledge, some of them referring to the written music of the West - a tradition uniting all of us, regardless of our specialization in the study of other cultures, and also one badly in need to be studied anthropologically and comparatively, rather than historically.

We often fail to acquire knowledge, or lose it on the way, when it is procedural: the individual's knowledge of how to deal with particular situations. Charles Seeger called it "music-rationale", in contrast to the "speech-rationale of music". My old professor of composition was a good example of the former. He could produce fascinating music at the drop of a hat, but he never could explain what he was doing; and only in part could his skills be handed down by way of example. Much knowledge is not easily communicated, and gets lost.

Knowledge is lost when we forget how often music is not really meant to be listened to, but to be experienced while making it. Bach's Well Tempered Keyboard and Shakuachi music belong to that category.

Knowledge is often missed in an incredible number of ways; some even amusing. Jaap Kunst, reportedly, failed to learn many things about gamelan because the musicians loved him dearly; they did not have the heart to tell him that some of his ideas on their music were wrong.

Knowledge may also be lost when a body of scholarship is so valued that we put it on the pedestal and take it out of context. It happened to Carl Dahlhaus back in the 1980s, when he was almost entirely translated into English, and the English-speaking public was in no condition to realise that Dahlhaus' writings were just one side of an undeclared argument he had with East-German musicologist Georg Knepler – who was not translated into English.

Some of our knowledge is anchored in the memory the body has of its own reactions to music, of how its practice connects to our sense of being there and then (what Heidegger called our Dasein). Our culture developed the concept of "absolute music", no wonder we often forget it was meant to be physical: in Europe we often listen to African music, in Africa people dance to it. Some of us may have a physical memory of Waltzing, but no one here today has ever danced a Chaconne. The Chaconne was a dance with strong erotic connotations; at the time of Bach these were possibly still lingering in people's mind and bodies. But there is no chance for us to know what hearing a Chaconne meant for them – knowledge lost.

And knowledge is easily lost when fields of intellectual endeavor split (just think of C.P. Snow's book *The Two Cultures*, published in 1959). What I am thinking of in this example is that music, however defined, is "nature" long before it becomes "culture", and when we study it as "culture," the natural layer drops out of sight; sciences of nature may be dealing with it, but their results are unlikely to integrate with ours.

Knowledge is similarly lost when musical scholarship itself becomes fragmented, and its provinces do not communicate with one another – which they usually don't. Such division happened when the Society for Music Theory was born out of the American Musicological Society in 1977. And of course historical musicology, in America, in the UK, and everywhere else, pays little attention to ethnomusicology, and vice versa. Not too many ethnomusicologists are eager to give primary school music teachers the knowledge we have, in a format they can use, to deal with multicultural classrooms – an example of knowledge not adequately taken advantage of.

I am intrigued by what is happening to ethnomusicology now. Jazz studies are not generally a part of it. Popular music, as much as many of us are passionate about it, is by now a field in its own right and possibly the new paradigm to reckon with.⁴ A biomusicology or zoomusicology is being born, but in the hands of scholars who study animal behavior; apparently this is not going to be part of ethnomusicology either. Maybe we are anthropocentric enough, not to be interested in organised sound when produced by species other than the homo sapiens...

As I mentioned at the outset, knowledge is often ignored, de-activated, made no longer operative, so that it has no impact; it just sits on the shelf.

We have one hundred years of sound recordings: Fritz Kreisler and his lush violin sound; cellist Pablo Casals and all the notes he left out in order to keep the pulse going; the many mistakes pianist Alfred Cortot could collect in one single piece!

One would imagine recordings could be used to learn about performance in the early XX century – but they are not. No one knows how Bach used to perform or conduct his own music, but we can hear how Saint Saëns, Grieg, Leoncavallo, Mahler, Paderewski, Debussy, Strauss, Reger, Hindemith, Busoni, Elgar would perform their own. And yet nobody listens. No contemporary performance of Grieg takes Grieg seriously (with his

⁴ I do not suppose popular music scholars such as Philip Tagg or Franco Fabbri think of themselves as "ethnomusicologists".

freedom of tempo, approximate durations, etc.). The sound exists but musicians and scholars reject (what they think) is the bad taste of Grieg, Rachmaninov and Debussy sitting at the piano. No one who would play today their music as they used to play it would ever get a piano degree in any reputable conservatory. Historical authenticity may be proclaimed, but seldom enforced when it clashes with the aesthetics of our time. Once again, knowledge ignored!

I mentioned it at the outset: it is arguable, whether useful knowledge should be a priority over that which is not liable of practical use. By the latter I do not mean trivia, but rather knowledge that elicits the pleasure of knowing; a pleasure that – on an individual level may influence our relationship to certain forms of artistic behavior. And here I can only mention my own attitudes. As Henry Thoreau once wrote: "I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well". There are a number of things I would love to know, although you might possibly not give a hoot about them, but they would be valuable to me. Two examples: I grew up listening to Beethoven's music, and I would really love to know what his laughing sounded like, and what kind of warmth could it communicate. Later in my life I listened to a lot of classical Indian music, where tonal inflection is so important. That's why when I think of the great Carnatic musician Sri Tyagaraja, author of more than 800 songs (more than Schubert even composed!) then I wish I could hear the tone of his voice. That is, of course, an impossible wish to fulfill; which only goes to show that there is also such a thing as unattainable knowledge. And all the attainable knowledge in the universe, sadly, does not compensate for that which we will never have. André Malraux called it "la condition humaine".

Well now - Renaissance theorist Zarlino, ended his treatise, *Harmonic Institutions*, with the words: "Much more could be said about all that". And that's a statement that surely fits better this paper of mine, and its "few remarks about the nature of the universe".

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AUDIO

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