

**Expressing, Communicating, Sharing, and Representing
Grief and Sorrow with Organized Sound
(Musings in VIII Short Segments)**

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Section I. Marcus Cato and I

In Ancient Rome Marcus Cato (234–149 BC), commonly surnamed the Censor, or the Wise, would often speak up in the Senate and, whatever the topic under discussion, he would unfailingly start out with words such as: "the City of Carthage must be destroyed" ("Carthago delenda est"). He was obsessed with the idea that Carthage, the great power competing with Rome for dominance in the Mediterranean, should be annihilated. At some point, the Phoenician city was indeed destroyed by the Romans.

it is impossible for me to feel strongly about power struggles that took place in antiquity, but I myself carry an obsession, somewhat like Marcus Cato did, and I know what it feels like having one; just, the one I have, is luckily very harmless. Whatever musical topic is put on the table, I cannot help taking it as an opportunity to observe and check whether it offers any good reasons to review, refine, possibly correct, our general idea of what "music" is. That is probably because, already at the beginning of my professional life, I had to completely revise my own concept of music.¹ There was a lot of revising to do because my early training took place at the Milan conservatory, whose atmosphere could not have been more exclusively rooted in the Western tradition, to the exclusion of all others.² Moreover, in Milan I was indoctrinated to believe in that cluster of romantic left-overs that still linger in most conservatories: "great art is immortal", "its import is intrinsic to the work itself", "produced by a genius", "result of a single creative mind", etc.; they are all residual Romantic attitudes that later, during my doctoral training in sociology and ethnomusicology I completely rejected. Now I am constantly on guard, ready for clues that may lead me to change my mind once again on concepts and ideas we may uncritically take for

¹ My latest re-visitation and revision of the concept is expressed in a recent article of mine (Sorace Keller 2010).

² Puccini, Mascagni, Ponchielli, Berio, Muti, Pollini, only to mention a few, all studied there and make up the Pantheon students are supposed to venerate; never mind if they are never told about Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, A.L. Webber, the Trimurti of Indian classical music (Syama Sastri, Tyagaraja, Muttuswamy Dikshitar), or the historically more recent Ravi Shankar, or the contemporary Bollywood wizard composer A.R. Rahman.

granted.³ After all, our understanding of reality, is at best incomplete and, therefore, always provisional.

The subject of “laments,” chosen for the ICTM Colloquium that was held at ANU in Canberra in 2010, for which this article of mine was prepared, immediately appeared to me as a wonderful opportunity to cultivate my “obsession,” and venture a few considerations that go a bit beyond the subject itself.

Section II: Laments and Their Archaic Features

The experience of sorrow is certainly universal. Forms of behaviour meant to express, communicate, and share loss and bereavement - with or through organized sound - exist across most cultures - just like other practices where organized sound relates to the life cycle: lullabies, nursery rhymes, love songs, marriage songs, carols, etc. Early XXth century German ethnologists of the *Kulturkreislehre* School believed forms of sonic behavior expressing grief and sorrow, along with jodel, healing songs, and cattle calls, represent an archaic surviving layer of European (and possibly universal) folklore (Albrecht Schneider 1976; 1987).⁴ *Kulturkreis* theories, never adopted in France, Britain, and North America, are today abandoned, given the more culture-specific and historically shorter range interests of work done today.⁵ And yet no one has proved the *Kulturkreis* approach to be wrong so far. Indeed, laments, jodel, healing songs, and cattle calls, frequently exhibit a characteristic “tumbling strain profile” (a gradually descending melodic contour and a “decrescendo”, as the singer runs out of breath) that Curt Sachs, Marius Schneider, and Walter Wiora – all of them influenced by the *Kulturkreis* approach – described as an archaic feature (Sachs 1977; Marius Schneider 1969; Wiora 1949, 1957, 1960). Laments, jodel, healing songs, and cattle calls are also usually, at least

³ There is no shortage of opportunities to do so, as in the course of time new areas of intellectual endeavour emerge – like, for instance “zoomusicology” and “ecomusicology” – that antagonize and challenge my accepted views on organized sound (Sorce Keller 2012a; 2012b).

⁴ Fritz Graebner formulated the theory of cultural strata and cycles, named in German *Kulturkreislehre*, and organically developed it in *Methode der Ethnologie* (1911). His central idea was that the distribution of culture traits indicates not only former cultural contacts (monogenesys), but also strata of cultural history.

⁵ Cultural relativism, as formulated by the school of Boas, Mead, Benedict and Bateson, assumed cultures to be intrinsically and almost impossible to compare. Their attitude was very influential in triggering the transition from “comparative musicology” to “ethnomusicology” and, indeed, ethnomusicology moved away from comparative studies, and emphasized acquisition of in-depth knowledge in circumscribed contexts. As ethnomusicology gained ground Europe, the German *Kulturkreislehre*, oriented as it was towards world-scale comparisons, went out of fashion.

in the Mediterranean area, made up of few tones (less than five), and their frequent non-strophic character also seems to point to their antiquity. Whether we look at them from a diffusionist (i.e. monogenetic) or, on the contrary, a polygenetic outlook, it does not ultimately make any substantial difference, as both would lead us to believe that that such widespread cultural traits go back to a past, prior to recorded history.⁶

Section III: Laments, Oral and Written

Not only laments, that is sound-complemented performances in honour of the dead, conveying grief and sorrow, exist in most cultures but, intriguingly, often take up diverse form in different layers of the same culture.⁷ In the West they are widely present in the oral environment, but its literate tradition as well has cultivated all along forms and genres meant for mourning. In Classical Greece a poetic form (which of course, like all ancient Greek poetry, also entailed organized sound) the *Epikedeion* was nothing but a funeral lament and a eulogy for the departed; and the *Seikilos Epitaph* (of 200 b.C.), the oldest surviving example of a completely notated composition, from anywhere in the world, is nothing different (West 1994: 23-24).

A popular form in the Middle Ages was the *Planctus*, a lament to be sung, either in Latin or the vernacular (De Martino 1975: 195-210). Students taking a course in medieval music get to know at least the *Planctus Karoli* written for the death of Charlemagne (814) and, in the XIII century the *Planctus Mariae* (dedicated to the Virgin Mary)(Reese 1940:198; Hoppin 257-259, 258). In Italy during the XIX century an anonymous “estampie,” called “Il Lamento di Tristano” was widely circulated (Reaney 1962). There was, of course, the *Requiem Mass*, the

⁶ The diffusionist theory in anthropology, one denying that in the aggregate people think and behave in similar ways under similar conditions, or that history can ever repeat itself, is contrasted to that of polygenesis which holds that very similar stories, artifact, cultural attitudes more generally, may originate independently in different parts of the world since man was often confronted by similar needs and challenges. For the purpose of my argument the two positions are, paradoxically, similar. In fact, both processes require a time scale of considerable magnitude in order to unfold. The diffusionist holds it that there is homology between universal distribution of cultural traits and their antiquity, because distribution takes time to occur; the polygeneticist, comes to the same conclusion, because for something to be re-invented, and then be present, in different parts of the world, much time is necessary. One is reminded in this connection of Jonathan Swift who, in his *Gulliver* visiting Laputa, suggested that there is a very small probability, but finite, that one could write a profound book by simply scrambling around the letters of the alphabet; which is a way of saying that, given a sufficient amount of time, all cultures could in the end independently come up with the same inventions.

⁷ I call them “sound-complemented” performances, because organized sound is necessary in order to achieve the performance goal, but it is not in itself “the” goal; it will not exist for the sake of having a public to listening to it with concentrated attention, and appreciate the quality of its design.

Miserere and, in the Baroque period, the French *Tombeau* (Vendrix 1989). In late madrigals and in Early operas (by Monteverdi and Cavalli, for instance) a “Lament” was often encountered and it stylistically required a descending ostinato bass figure (Hill 2005:197).⁸ In the oral environment of Western culture an even greater variety of forms and genres exist as well, serving the purpose of expressing grief or, more generally, some sense of loss like, for instance, in “weeping wedding” ceremonies (Ling 1997:50-53, 58-59).

Yes, grief is universal, but cultures deal with it differently (De Martino 1975: 111-116). Depending on where and when we live, grief is something we may need to express, communicate, share, or even “represent”. Incidentally, one needs to be careful because terms such as “express” and “communicate” are not interchangeable. We may express ourselves through organized sound, and yet that form of expression may be meaningless to anyone else. If, on the contrary, it is regarded as meaningful and is understood - in that case the result is both expression and communication. We may actually wish to go even further and not just communicate but, also, share with others the experience of loss, and one way to do so is by bringing people into a ritual meant for that purpose. We may even wish to have our grief “represented”, framed, put on stage so to say, for ourself and others to see, and contemplate; which also is one way to let everybody know we are going through a traumatic experience, and should be treated accordingly, because, under emotional strain as we are, we may not behave or react in our usual manner (De Martino 1975: 12-24).

Section IV: *Expression vs. Representation*

“Representation” over direct “expression” is often a cultural choice. In fact, in music history courses we explain our students how, whereas Nineteenth Century composers were expected to “express” their feelings and pour them into their music, in the Baroque Period the *Affektenlehre* (the “Doctrine of Affections”) required a different, totally “un-Romantic,” attitude. It maintained that, by using proper standard procedures (the descending ostinato bass figure mentioned above was one of them), a capable composer could “represent” emotions so effectively as to produce in the audience a corresponding response (not unlike what happens in film music, where the composer is not supposed to express

⁸ This “lamenting bass” (a bass line descending by half steps) was a standardized procedure, presumed by 18th-century composers to “represent” the Affekt of sadness.

his own emotions, but, rather, those felt by the portrayed characters, or suggest to the audience how they should feel about the action). Theories of acting developed during XX century were also concerned with the expression vs. representation dilemma - both finalized to communication. Konstantin Stanislavskij and Lee Strasberg (the founder of the Actor's Studio in New York) believed actors should forget who they are, and become the character itself (it is easy to sense in this wish to offer the public true emotions, some late Romantic overtones) (Stanislawski 1981). Johann Wolfgang Goethe, on the contrary, did not believe theatre (musical theatre included) should even try to give the illusion of reality, because the audience, by attending a performance automatically accepts the idea of representation (Goethe 2005). Berthold Brecht with his "Dialectic Theatre" where acting is a form of social critique, by-passed with one single stride the whole expression vs. representation dilemma (Reich-Ranicki 1996); and the celebrated actor Marcello Mastroianni in several interviews simply expressed the idea that actors do not have to feel like the character they portraying, they just need to put some conviction into his or her actions.⁹

I find this whole question of "expression" versus "representation" intriguing, because ethnographic experience shows that even oral cultures either go one way or the other. In fact, when grief needs not only to be expressed but also communicated, socially shared, then it is often felt that the effectiveness of communication can be increased through a formalized behaviour that will give grief a somewhat theatrical dimension. In which case people learn to express and channel their sorrow according to patterns that the community understands and appreciates. Cultures do not just let us cry and despair in any way we might possibly like doing it. They give us constrains, which are part of the socialization process, that we assimilate as we grow up, and that lead us to react to sorrow in a manner that is culture-specific and not universal. That is why Scandinavians are usually surprised at how grief is expressed in Mediterranean cultures – and viceversa. The perception in Northern Europe is that in the South grief becomes spectacle (when mourners not only cry, but may even need to be restrained, lest they pull their hair off, or self-inflict bleeding wounds). The perception in the South is, on the contrary, that Scandinavians (who may not even shed a tear during the funeral ceremony) react in such an introvert, "cold" manner that "southerners" may even wonder whether they really experience any

⁹ Back in the 1980s I watched Marcello Mastroianni on American Television, interviewed by Dick Cavett. On that occasion I heard him say an actor does not need to feel like his character does. Only, if the character has to say "good morning," than the actor should simply be fully aware he is wishing somebody a "good morning" and do it properly!

profound sense bereavement and loss...which, of course, they do.

Section V: The Professionalization of Sorrow

In traditional societies the formal vehicle for communicating and representing of sorrow may have to be so sophisticated, that the “performance” has to be delegated to professionals. They are people, usually women, who obviously do other things as well in life, but develop specialized skills that can be exhibited during mourning ceremonies, and that they will exhibit with adequate compensation. Nothing to be surprised about. Let us consider how expensive funerals are in urban society and how, although often without music, they serve a similar function.

In the Mediterranean area from antiquity, and for sure in Southern Italy, Corsica, and Romania up until the 1950s, professional wailers were usually hired to perform laments. In Apulia and Calabria they were named *rèpute* or *chiangimorti*; in Sardinia *attitadoras*; in Corsica *voceratrici* (and there is in Corsica “categories” of lament: the *voceru* for those who die a violent death and the *lamentu* for those who die a natural death). In Romania the lament is called *Bocet*. A study of the Romanian *Bocet* by Constantin Brailoiu, was one of the elements on which anthropologist Ernesto De Martino developed his epoch-making study of “Death and Ritual Wailing in the Ancient World” (De Martino 1975).

Professional wailing in Mediterranean cultures was only performed by women, and by those capable of giving in their performance the appearance of a total, unrestrained, overwhelming emotion, accompanied by streaming tears and sobbing that intermittently cut off the narrative of their wailing: the life, merits, deeds of the deceased. Such an effective representation of sorrow it was, that could have (and was expected to have) some kind of a cathartic, healing effect for the immediate circle of the deceased, and inspire a sense of respectful empathy by the more distant relatives or the village at large.

Section VI: When Ritual Mourning Goes Literate

Let me now go back to the Western literate tradition, and recall how the first and most vivid memory of a lament I have relates, in fact, to the written music of Europe. It is a piece my professor of composition

gave me once to analyse and admire: Josquin des Prez, *Déploration sur le trépas de Jean Ockeghem* (lament on the passing away of Jean Ockeghem)(Reese 1954:118, 235, 245). Here Josquin des Prez, arguably the greatest composer of the Renaissance, expresses his sorrow for the passing away of Johannes Ockeghem, who had been his teacher. That piece by Josquin, already famous in his own time, made the sad news public across Europe: that the great Ockeghem was dead.

Compositions of this type have had a long history, although they are seldom mentioned and remembered. It is one intriguing and puzzling aspect of our Western mentality, that so-called masterpieces can only occur within certain genres or through specific instruments or ensembles. A Symphony can be a masterpiece (and many of them are considered such), but not a brass band fanfare, or a piece for mandolin. In fact, Beethoven once wrote four mandolin pieces for a friend who played that instrument – and none of them have ever been elevated to the Pantheon where the great (supposedly) immortal works are collected and venerated. Music in commemoration of, and expressing regret for the passing away of someone has also little chance to be recognized as a masterpiece - unless it is pretentious, monumental, and by losing its original connotation becomes a concert piece. The Requiem Mass usually qualifies, and many great composers produced one that entered the repertoire (thereby losing its original “lament” quality): Mozart, Cherubini, Brahms, Berlioz, Verdi, Gounod, Fauré, Lygety, Penderecki.¹⁰ Mysteriously other composers failed: Haydn, Donizetti (he wrote a Mass to lament the death of Bellini), and Schumann, among several others.

We do find in the literate tradition compositions that in spirit are more connected to the idea of “lament” as we find it practiced in the oral environment. I am thinking, for instance, of Igor Stravinsky's “Dirge-Canons and Song” In Memoriam Dylan Thomas of 1954. If we made the effort of putting together the whole repertoire of pieces composed with a similar intention, an interesting aside to music history would appear; one very rich in curiosities. For instance, just imagine, Viennese composer Anselm Hüttenbrenner (1794-1868), a good friend of Schubert's was almost a specialist in the genre. He is in fact the author a musical lament (to be played on the piano) for Beethoven's passing away in 1827 (*Nachruf an Beethoven in Akkorden*) and, one year later, for Schubert

¹⁰ Giuseppe Verdi's Requiem composed for Alessandro Manzoni, is probably the most famous and often performed of all. It is also an example of how theatrical a “Lament” can be. In fact, it was described with the following words: “Verdi's Requiem is a work which defies all the canons of good taste. It is melodramatic, sentimental, sometimes almost cheap; it employs without shame such well-worn means to excitement as the diminished seventh and the chromatic scale. Yet it is one of the greatest works of art and gained the reluctant admiration of a composer with a much different artistic philosophy, Brahms.” (Vaughan Williams, 1953, p. 57)

(Nachruf an Schubert in Trauertönen).

The reason why I find it appropriate to mention in this article much music that does not fall under the purview of ethnomusicology is that, if we look at the literate tradition anthropologically, here we recognize once again – just like we do in the oral environment – the need to have sorrow professionally interpreted, expressed, and represented so that it may become publicly contemplated and shared. What we find in the literate tradition, ultimately is the surface manifestation of needs and practices widespread all along, and much earlier also, in the oral environment.

Section VII: Is It Music or What?

But, of course, what we find in the literate tradition is...“music”! Funeral laments as we know them in traditional environments, on the contrary, are not necessarily to be categorized as such; not in the Mediterranean area. Here we are talking about forms of behaviour that have their roots in classical antiquity (when the word “music” or *μουσική* meant a blend of organized sound, poetry, dance, physical exercise and even medical practice, that is profoundly different from what it means today) and managed to survive into contemporary Christian and Islamic cultures – often frowned upon by religious orthodoxy. Surely the Christian Church tried as much as possible to erase everything reminiscent of pagan practices: traditional “laments” among others.

Indeed, in antiquity the concept of “music” was so quite unlike the one we have today (that could be a story in itself), that when we say that the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans had “music” we are simply looking at the past, as if it were an extension of the present. That is a risky thing to do because, as Leslie P. Hartley reminds us at the outset of his celebrated novel “The Go-Between” (1953): “The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there”. In antiquity our concept of music was unknown, and that is why I feel uncomfortable in calling “music” what back then went by other names. For the purpose of scholarly investigations I would feel it more appropriate to use terms that have no historical or ideological connotations; terms such as “sound-centred,” “sound-dependent”, “sound-enhanced,” “sound-complemented forms of behaviour”. It is actually worth considering whether it makes any sense at all – in scholarly and scientific discourse – to speak about “music” in general as well. Here we have a veritable “word of mass deception”, charged with Romantic overtones, indeed, not a scientific term at all, and one that helps us overlook nuances rather than help us

assess subtleties (Sorce Keller 2010). We categorize far too many things under this label: a funeral Lament, a Bruckner symphony, a Medieval Organum, a TV jingle. They all are forms of organized sound, although made for essentially different purposes. It almost is as if we spoke of “metal things,” while failing to observe that a knife does not really deserve to be put into the same category with a nail or a screwdriver). It almost is as if we put into the same category such different things as Princes Highway in Australia, the Magnificent mile in Chicago, the floor of my Lugano apartment and the surface of the desk I am using right now, only because – if one really wanted to – one could dance on such surfaces, and then created the category of “danceables”. It would make no sense at all.

Be that as it may, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have expressed mixed feelings towards organized sound all along (because of its physical, sensual and body-activating power), especially when referred to as “music”, and elaborated an entire philosophy of what music is appropriate to have, and when.¹¹ So, just like Coranic cantillation is not classified as 'music' in Muslim cultures (it would be disrespectful to sing the Word of God), by the same token, lament practices across traditional Mediterranean cultures are not classified as “music” either; as it would be inappropriate to sing a “song” in the presence of the dead. In other words, a lament is a “lament” and nothing else. In many cultures funeral laments may be seen as falling into the category of excited speech, emotional speech, solemn speech, call, address, invocation, weeping, etc. Rather than putting too many things into the same basket, and calling them “music”, as we so often do, it would be worth considering to retain the terminology actually applied by the people who do those things; unless we wish to apply a term that can be applied cross-culturally, and speak of “sound-dependent” activities – because in most traditional cultures a lament, although not considered “music,” is simply not conceivable without its reliance on organized sound.

In the literate tradition, on the contrary, it is quite appropriate to call “music” expressions and representations of grief and bereavement. , It is the literate tradition that in recent times (historically speaking) has developed a concept of “music” and “art” that is quintessentially noble, and a religion of sorts. Art and music in the cultivated tradition are supposed to elicit not just pleasure and emotional response but veneration. I fact, in a concert setting, when confronted with the *absolute Musik*, with a musical work regarded as “immortal,” we are expected, if

¹¹ During Lent, for example, many Catholics refrain from forms of sonic behaviour that may be construed as “music”.

not to actually to genuflect, at least to sit motionless and keep silent.¹² When organized sound comes to be conceived in such unusual terms (an anthropological singularity it is, limited to the West and cultures that have come under its influence), than it surely can be seen as the appropriate means to express and represent grief and sorrow. At that point one could almost maintain that without “music” no such expression and representation is complete.

Section VIII: *Conclusions (sort of...)*

By way of conclusion, in order to end on a lighter tone, I would like to remind my readers that laments also exist, that are not entirely serious: they range from the grotesque to the tongue-in-cheek. They make up a mixed genre. The “Ballad of Mack the Knife” in Kurt Weill's *Threepenny Opera* is one such case. It belongs to the German genre called *Moritat*. A *Moritat* (from Latin *mori* meaning “deadly” and *Tat* meaning “deed”) is some kind of a murder ballad performed by strolling minstrels. In *The Threepenny Opera*, the *Moritat* singer with his street organ introduces and closes the drama with the tale of the deadly Mack the Knife, the character based on the dashing highwayman Macheath in John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*.

There is Gluck's famous aria “J'ai perdu mon Eurydice, rien n'égale mon maleur”, whose music according to Eduard Hanslick equally well fits words expressing the contrary sentiment: “J'ai trouvé mon euridyce, rien n'égale mon bonheur” (Hanslick 1858); in which case we would have a lament about “presence”, rather than about absence and loss; and another lament about a condition of presence would be the old song in which Louis Armstrong used to sing: “What Did I Do, to Be so Black and Blue”.

Another intriguing case exists in a 1938 set of recordings, made for the Library of Congress by Alan Lomax with Jelly Roll Morton, the legendary pianist-composer from the bygone days of New Orleans jazz. In one of them (“Funeral Marches”), softly strumming the keys, Jelly Roll Morton conjured up a New Orleans funeral, from the wailing dirge to the graveyard, to the raucous march back to the wake, with all its sorrow

¹² The irony of the *absolute Musik*, of music that wants to be appreciated as “music” and nothing else, is that the concept was formulated by Richard Wagner, precisely to suggest that such a thing could not possibly exist; and then it became the flag of formalist aesthetics formulated by Wagner's enemy, Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick, who actually believed that the *absolute Musik* is the only music worthy of this name!(Hanslick 1854; Pleasants 1988)

and jubilation - in his words, "the end of a perfect death" (Roll Morton 2005).

The last case I would like to mention is actually not about death at all, although it is about loss; the loss of something very precious indeed: the ability to see. Saverio Mercadante (1795-1870), in his time arguably the most famous opera composer in Europe, became completely blind in 1862. That very same year he managed to dictate to his pupils, a full-scale orchestral piece, with the apparent autobiographical title of *Il lamento del bardo* (*The Bard's lament*). Contrary to what one might imagine, it is an entertaining, witty piece, in which Mercadante, far from feeling sorry for himself, actually communicates a sense of comic irony. That of the blind musician is one of literature's oldest themes; it dates back at least as far as the Middle Kingdom of ancient Egypt. And then there is of course Homer and the Irish bard O'Carolan, with many others in between and afterwards. Mercadante in a way makes us understand how he felt that, by becoming blind, he was now in very good company. A good case as any other to remind us all the therapeutic value of expressing, communicating, representing and sharing grief and sorrow.

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