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Living Music vs Hearing Music. A Case of Musical Understanding in Popular Music's Live Performances

Much of the popular music studies are focused on how several contextual phenomena – such as technological advances, contexts of production, social or moral issues, political and economic events, and so on – contribute to the emergence of meaning in the development of popular music's genres (for instance, talking about certain genre as being the expression of 'rebellion'). However, as useful as it might be, this method has been questioned, for instance by Roger Scruton, as a sociological approach to the notion of understanding, and not as a proper aesthetical one.

For this reason, the philosophical tradition devoted to the understanding of music tends to restrict its study to the audible characteristics, and to the musical traditions and styles in which a certain piece of music is constructed. However, is there anything else that configures our musical understanding? I believe that the border between the 'musical' and the 'extra-musical' can be explored by analysing the practice of 'hearing a live performance' within popular music. This idea demands us to: firstly, explain our notion of 'hearing'; secondly, define the object of our listening; and, finally, to show the distinctiveness of these 'live' performances within the framework of popular music.

I take as a case study those performances that, despite the extreme 'poverty' of their execution, are considered genuinely 'successful' and legitimately 'musical'. Much of the



enthusiastic literature devoted to such performances do not hesitate to recognise its chaotic nature, their technically poverty or even the ‘audible torture’ of the recordings. My goal in this paper is to explore in what sense we are still talking about ‘hearing music’ or ‘being in a musical performance’ when many of these performances are deliberately bad, segmented, or even capriciously disordered.

I will analyse if those judgments, even if they appear to be based on subjective evaluations or extra-musical social agreements, actually reveal the way in which a society conceives its notion of music, and the way they account for it through certain overt criteria. My hypothesis is that the conception of ‘music;’ shared in these communities arise not only from the sound structure unfolded in front of us, but also from the perception of a phenomenon that is evident through all our senses, that is, that the ‘musical phenomenon’ is dispersed over the various actions that we perform around it. Defining what musical understanding is, therefore, seems to involve studying such ‘other’ and ‘peripheral’ actions as well.

Darío Loja Illescas is a doctoral student in Philosophy specialised in Aesthetics and Theory of the Arts at the University of Murcia, Spain, under the direction of María José Alcaráz Leon. His doctoral research focuses on the contemporary theories on musical understanding, particularly those derived from the reflection on meaning in the Wittgensteinian tradition of language. His research applies this notion to the study of musical meaning and fully exploit the explanatory possibilities of this perspective. Darío seeks to develop a theory sufficiently comprehensive to include diverse musical traditions and to account for the different types of meaning identifiable in all of them. Once the specificity of understanding had been researched, it will be possible to suggest an account of this phenomenon in effective cases of musical practices.