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Music as a way of knowing. Comment on “Music, Empathy, and Cultural Understanding” by Clarke, DeNora and Vuoskoski

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In their critical review, Clarke, DeNora and Vuoskoski (this issue) integrate and make sense of a diverse range of theory and evidence to argue that music has the capacity to facilitate empathy and aid cultural understanding. The invitation to comment on this paper arrived in my email in-box at a time when Europe was witnessing one of the largest movements of people in modern times and when thousands of refugees were dying in the attempt to cross the Mediterranean. For a short while at least, empathy, or the lack thereof, became a socio-political lever, galvanizing European citizens to demonstrate their willingness to give asylum to refugees (#refugeeswelcome), and shaping domestic and European immigration policies. In this context, it would be hard to refute the importance of understanding empathy, albeit through its musical incarnation.

The rationale for Clarke *et al*'s paper is a more general attempt to query claims regarding music's ability to unite people, instantiate common feeling, and enable perspective taking. Underlying Clarke, DeNora and Vuoskoski's critical account is an acceptance that musical engagement (of the empathizing sort here, but arguably of any sort) depends on the human propensity for social interaction and connection. The authors' account is persuasive and provides a framework for future research on this topic. They offer an original model of musical empathising, and sketch some first empirical evidence gathered using the proxy of an implicit association test. As they acknowledge, there are various possible explanations of their empirical results, not least due to the (understandable) absence of a pre-test for implicit association prior to music exposure in their experimental design, meaning that we cannot be certain that the participant groups assigned to the music exposure conditions did not already differ in implicit bias. Putting aside this unlikely eventuality we are still left with the possibility that those scoring higher in IRI (the measure of dispositional empathy) may be more influenced by knowledge activation processes than those lower in IRI. The ramification of this possibility, and the finding that music exposure influenced bias only in those high in dispositional empathy, raises the question as to whether music would be at all effective with those disposed to low empathy.

By way of thinking through and with the authors' ideas of musical empathising, I turn my attention to one issue to be unpacked in more detail. Specifically, the extent to which the proposed model captures the *mechanisms* by which empathy might be afforded through musical engagement and/or the *content* of that empathizing – and, if indeed the two are separable.

The 'model of musical empathic engagement' (Figure 2), is not explicit as to whether it is modeling the structure/mechanism for empathy to occur ('how'), or the content/manifestation of the empathy ('what'). The model presents 'channels

of primary empathic engagement, or “resonance” (p.51), also labelled ‘empathic processes’ (p.54). This terminology suggests mechanisms, and yet one of the strengths of the model is the co-constitution of these channels that come about through the mutuality between musical events and music listener (an ecological perspective familiar from Clarke (2005) and DeNora’s (2000) previous work). Implicit in the model is the idea that *what* we are empathizing with is also the medium in which we empathise. From this perspective, Clarke *et al* have provided a model of musical empathizing part of whose strength is its compatibility with a broader understanding of musical experience as a ‘way of knowing’ (Hodges & Sebald, 2011).

Similar ideas expressed by others beyond the realm of empathy can help elaborate this perspective: the notion expressed by Stokes (1994: 2), for instance, that ‘music is not just a thing which happens “in” society. A society...might also be usefully conceived as something which happens “in music”’, and the idea that music provides knowledge *of* emotions not knowledge *about* emotions (Reimer 1989, cited in Hodges & Sebald 2011: 27). The key aspect highlighted by these descriptions, and by Clarke *et al*, is the embodied character of these ways of knowing. Taking their ‘physical engagement’ channel as an example, the idea and evidence that the mind is shaped by bodily experience (Casasanto & Chrysikou, 2011) would lend support to the notion that certain kinds of musical performance could give rise to certain kinds of bodily experience. This might take the form of the kind of embodied experience described by cellist Le Guin’s account of performing Boccherini (2005), or other ways of being in the world, such as the domestication of the female body via nineteenth century female pianism (Cusick, 1994; Head, 1999). Performing that music (in a historically-informed performance style) would in theory then allow us to embody and perhaps empathise with those states. From this perspective, embodied music analysis could offer a means to flesh out the ‘ways of knowing’ currently hinted at by the model’s ‘physical engagement’ channel.

The perceptual-cognitive channel is the one that seems closest to a traditionally ‘representational’ form, through its ability to activate a range of historically sedimented musical meanings according to listener stylistic competencies (In the model this is framed as the “stylistic competence” of the listener which meets “stylistic novelty/familiarity” of the musical event). From the brief description of the empirical study in this paper one might infer that the perceptual-cognitive content takes the form of knowledge activation of the associated cultures by virtue of relevant musical features and the labelling of the music presented to participants. In the experiment, empathy is facilitated towards an associated ethnic group as manifest in differentiable facial and musical features. But to what extent would we empathise if the content were less palatable in some way? Would we be drawn in, none the less? The implication is we would. Clarke *et al* are careful to note the negative as well as positive ramifications of music’s ability to facilitate empathy, citing music’s divisive attributes and its contribution to establishing and maintaining differences that we might under other circumstances want empathy to overcome. Similarly intriguing in this regard is evidence for music’s effects on compliance – the idea that ‘good music can make us do bad things’ (cf. Ziv 2015). Naomi Ziv found that people exposed to ‘positive’

music they liked were more inclined to cause harm to others afterwards. Reflecting on Ziv's findings, we can imagine a scenario in which we might empathise with music (and virtual others) we are exposed to, to the detriment of our behavior towards immediate and real others.

I started this commentary by drawing attention to the immediacy and currency of empathy in reactions to recent events. Clarke *et al's* research on empathy has its funded origin in a different political and cultural agenda – one focused on *valuing* music - manifested as a thematic call from the Arts and Humanities Research Council as part of its Cultural Value Project. Within this context music's value lies partly in its ability to facilitate empathy, which can then become a justification for music's continued existence under the auspices of state support and education. Turning for a moment from the question in hand (the relationship between music and empathy) to what that question and its answer does in the world, we could say that it enables us to speak the same language of economic imperative that has shaped debates over the environment (and other domains) for better or worse: e.g. the natural world as 'natural *resource*' which conceptualises it as something to be carved up, monetized, exploited - and defended (Montbiot, 2013). By this logic we can choose to understand music as an 'empathic resource', such that part of music's value is its ability to facilitate empathy towards others (at least those already disposed to empathy). Against this, some would argue that the greatest value of the arts are their ability to oppose dominant ascriptions of value (Ladkin, Mackay, & Bojesen, 2016). Clarke *et al's* argument that music facilitates empathising, and their framework for figuring out how that might work, gives us another way in which we might *choose* to value music.

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