Prolegomena to a Biomusicology

Sinha Arom

The very idea that there is a continuum of living creatures that encompass music elicits in me two types of questions, one concerning the kinds of criteria we use in defining that thing we call music, the other concerning the learning and transmission of musical knowledge. I have had occasion to comment briefly on the question of learning in my published work on traditional African music (see especially Arom 1990, 1991) and so I focus here on the first question, which relates most closely to my expertise.

How can we decide if there is or is not a type of continuity between zoomusicology (Mâche 1992) and what one would have to call anthropomusicology, which would be the scientific discipline, supposing we could create it, that would deal with the suite of human musical properties as they are manifested in the ensemble of known musics? Is it possible to determine a minimal set of criteria for defining music, and can we identify these criteria in some form or another in the songs of animals?

Concerning the kind of music produced by human beings, one could make a list of criteria, a type of inventory of universals specific to music. The first of these criteria is intentionality. A given music—in fact, all music—implies an act of intentional construction, in other words, an act of creation that actualizes an intention. There is purpose and finality to it, shared between the creators of the music and members of their culture, through which they confirm their common identity. This is demonstrated especially in ritual behaviors, most notably in analogical symbolic rituals (e.g., using the stylized imitation of the sound of rainfall to induce the coming of rain). But human beings also possess the capacity to “decontextualize” these constructions by performing such chants independent of all such contexts, “for free” in a manner of speaking. Music possesses a self-referential system that ignores the signifier-signified contrast. It has an immemorial relationship with language, and most especially with poetry.

All human music is set into motion by a formal process, itself the result of convention. In so far as this formal process is operative, music is detached from the sound environment in which it is produced, giving it a delimited time frame all its own, a kind of rupture with all that precedes and all that follows. The substance contained in this time frame is internally articulated in terms of proportions, in other words, temporal ratios. This, together with the existence of measured music—music subject to an isochronous temporal pulse—constitutes a quasi-universal. Measured musics are often associated with collective activities, thus contributing to the social life of the group, first and foremost to dance. In
measured above by combining them by at least two.

In conclusion, it seems to me that if a homology is possible, it must
be able to integrate in one way or another, certainly of the criteria and
musical principles: scale, mode, metric arrangement, meter, rhythm.
Can one say that these vocalizations are found on both continents? Certain animals possess vocal performances considered in certain
ways. Certain criteria can be observed such as association in the highest and lowest, here is necessary an association between at least
from what is supposed to be the music of the animals is based, such as a
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Note

Translated from the French by Steven Brown.

References