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Cultural Musicology
iZine

Jacopo Robusti detto il Tintoretto, Le Paradis (détail), Musée du Louvre, Paris

Barbara Titus – Musicologica, or, the ownership of (musical) knowledge, A South African story

Barbara Titus

This essay was supposed to be about the uneasy position of music analysis in current post-colonial (ethno)musicology. I was motivated to address this because I started wondering whether the act of dissecting a musical experience into parts and 'discover[ing] or invent[ing] modes of internal relating' (Agawu 2003, 197) is solely an academic preoccupation, or whether everyone who musicks does it. Since I have just published an article on this matter (Titus 2013) and intend to write a whole book about it, I decided to make this question part of a larger concern: whether and how we should distinguish between various discourses of knowledge about (or through) music. Modes of thought *about* music as well as *through* music are of particular concern to cultural musicology, because they often elucidate how music is situated culturally (e.g. Feld 1982, Seeger 1987, Widdess 1995, Solomon 1997, Ramanna 2005, Titus 2005). Wim van der Meer – inspired by the title of Menezes Bastos's research (1978) into the 'world hearing' (rather than 'world view') of the Amazonian Kamayurá – calls these modes 'musico-logica' (Meer & Erickson 2013).

What I find so fascinating about musicologica (singular and plural) is that we, music researchers, are part of a musicologica ourselves, whatever that logic may be. This prompts me to culturally situate my own thinking. I generally advocate a post-colonial, non-racial(ist), constructivist and democratic 'musicologicking',[1] but to some extent this is mere rhetoric, since there is a huge imbalance of power between my musicologica and those of 'others'. (It will become clear through this paper why I still feel the need to make this self-other distinction.) The means that are available to a reasonably well-paid scholar like me to travel the world and to be part of a global exchange of thoughts and ideas as we encounter them today and tomorrow bring me in a position to submit other musicologica to my musicologica. This is an appropriation even though it might lead to valuable insights.

This conclusion will not come as much of a surprise to most of us, and I do not intend to present it here as a neo-colonial guilt complex,
rather as a parameter in our engagement with musicologica. It is sometimes easier to investigate musicologica a
framing, interpreting, or deconstructing them) than it is to treat them as knowledge systems in their own right that
of my musicologica, through mutual exchanges of knowledge and experience. For often these musicologica do n
sometimes even repel me. I became increasingly aware of this during my fieldwork research in South Africa betw
(musico)logical toolbox helps me and my readers gain insight into South African music, but also causes knowledg
opinions to be obscured or overshadowed, and directions of thinking to be barricaded. This potential loss, obscur
primary concern.[2] What do we ignore or tone down in order to make our arguments comply with our own cultura
What are the implications of this for our efforts to foster a 'relational musicology' (Cook 2012) or a 'cultural music

In post-apartheid South Africa, the ownership of knowledge has become highly politicized. Many South Africans h
education for decades on the basis of racist stereotyping practices. Possibly due to this, discussions about knowl
binary opposition of experiential knowledge versus book(ish) knowledge. This binary comes with a range of other long-standing essentialist

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binaries: musicians versus musicologists, primitivism versus civilization, authenticity versus artificiality, oral versus written culture, and last, but certainly not least, black (indigenous) knowledge versus white (imported) knowledge. No matter how readily I could deconstruct such binaries, the more I participated in the discussions about them, the more I felt the need to make my own hermeneutical practices part of them— to relate to them. Deconstruction, after all, can also be a convenient way of dismissal. And are we, music researchers, not caught in a similar binary by trying to grasp musical experiences in words, wondering whether there is a difference between what we understand *about* music and what we understand *through* music (Mahrenholz 2013), and trying to get beyond this difference by 'think[ing] through theory musically and think[ing] through music theoretically' (Abels 2013)?

These questions are urgent in the context of the history and current role of *maskanda* practice in South Africa. Maskanda, the Zulu pronunciation of the Afrikaans word *musikant* (musician), emerged in the early twentieth century from the condition of the South African labour migrant system. Hundreds of thousands of people were forced to change their rural existence for work in cities and mines, but since black people were not allowed to settle in urban areas they moved back and forth between their villages and the towns. Maskanda emerged in this space 'in between' village and town. Lodged in urban hostels, workers encountered languages, customs, belief systems and musical conventions from all over southern Africa, in addition to popular musics broadcast on the radio, and instruments such as the guitar, concertina and violin. All these musical experiences were reworked in *maskanda* performance (Rycroft 1977, Clegg 1981, Olsen 2009). Initially, *maskanda* performance entailed the songs of individual labour migrants plucking their guitars on their long commute from home to work and singing about the events they encountered on their way. It also encompassed fierce guitar, dance and spoken self-praise (*izibongo*) competitions in the hostels. Currently, *maskanda* is primarily studio produced with a mainstream pop band format complemented with concertina and *ingoma* dancers.

Maskanda's transition from individual musicianship in the early twentieth century towards a band practice in the early twenty-first century in many ways exemplifies South Africa's colonial and apartheid history. At its inception, *maskanda* could not be attributed to any of the many communities that South Africa harbours, but, especially after the institutionalization of apartheid in 1948, state media and governmental cultural policies transformed *maskanda* into what some scholars call 'the musical equivalent of a homeland' (Olsen 29.06.2009), allotting language, dance, dress, and societal values to *maskanda* that were actively framed as Zulu, often in stereotypical terms. At present, almost twenty years after the *de jure* demise of apartheid, *maskanda* is still firmly located as an authentic and traditional Zulu musical practice by those who perform, distribute and listen to it. After all, it is predominantly *experienced* as Zulu music.

The binary of experiential versus book(ish) knowledge is not only explained in musical terms, but also reaches into economic, social, and political realms. Maskanda producer Tshepo Nzimande elucidated this binary by explaining his political support for the current South African president Jacob Zuma. Most *maskanda* musickers support Zuma, not because of Zuma's Zulu decent, but for his superior experiential knowledge:

> It's like our former president [Thabo Mbeki]. He didn't have kids, so how can he advise me about my kids? With Zuma, I can sit down and relate my problems and he can come and say: 'You know what? I had this same problem with my son, but this is what I did.' So if you don't have [a kid], you're reading it from the book. You might miss it when it comes to practice. (Nzimande 23.09.2009)

Mbeki, the academic, disqualifies himself for the South African presidency in Nzimande's eyes, because he allegedly lacks experiential knowledge of the things that matter when one needs to run a country. Moreover, as Nzimande explicates, by deriving this knowledge from books instead, Mbeki allows himself to side-step the experience: in a way, he is cheating. Some *maskanda* musickers phrased their distrust of indirectly achieved, non-experiential knowledge in occidentalist terms, such as Zulu hip-hop artist Mxolisi Majozi, a.k.a. Zuluboy:

> And the thing about us [the Zulu people] is that once we realize who we are, … we start telling good stories… I mean, we have so much, and I think the difference between the West – them and me – is that they are trained… their theory… they are installed [in] a lot of theory and they become machines, you know, instead of just getting something from your soul. (Majozi 07.07.2011)

My position as a white, female academic from Europe was, hence, an important 'hidden transcript' (Scott 1990) determining the manners in which I could talk to, and learn from, *maskanda* musickers about *maskanda*. My embarking on *maskanda* territory was a platform for the dynamics that feature the area of tension between book(ish) knowledge and experiential knowledge in post-apartheid South Africa, and this area of tension featured academic discourses as much as non-academic discourses. An illustration of this is the feedback I received on a paper I presented at the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM) Conference in Durban on 4 July 2009, called 'A globalized locality: "Zuluness" in contemporary maskanda performance' (Titus 2009). By that time I had carried out about three months of field research, including *maskanda* lessons from Skho Miya and Shiyani Ngcobo, and I was about to start another four months of such research.

In the paper, I dwelt extensively on my fieldwork experiences as well as on my attempts to interpret and understand the knowledge of *maskanda* musickers in the context of post-colonial theory. I explained that my contextualization often failed, exposing a gap between essentialist and constructivist discourses of knowledge. My explanation of this gap became subject to a bizarre discursive *mise en abyme* during the Q&A session that followed my presentation. The knowledge gap I had addressed in my paper recurred in my contact with the audience, exposing an abyme/abyss/gap in a literal sense between us. Instead of discussing my problematization of constructivist versus essentialist approaches in ethnographic research, the audience – mainly from South Africa, Kenya and Tanzania – considered my deconstructivist theorization itself (positioning *maskanda* as a fluid practice that cannot easily be attributed to a demarcated group of people) as a weakness in my argument. They demanded, and tried to help me find, an unequivocal answer to the question of whether *maskanda* is Zulu or not, and whether it is a truly South African performance practice if, in its formation, it has been informed by so many different musics. My explanation of identity as a construct was dismissed. As a stereotypical European academic, I had demonstrated my theoretical knowledge without being able to say anything conclusive about the subject I pretended to investigate. One of my friends overheard a conversation by two members of the audience after my talk. These audience members allegedly concluded from my unwillingness to locate *maskanda* that 'those people from outside Africa keep treating African musics as "world music" [i.e. as a rest category, as not located].'

The distrust of my knowledge that I had predominantly (but certainly not exclusively) gained from reading books is not entirely unfounded, especially if one considers the importance of participant observation as an anthropological and ethno-musicological method, and the modest amount of fieldwork I had been able to carry out by that time. Whereas I found that the limited aims of my paper (an elaboration on a theoretical problem that I had thought long and hard about) matched my equally limited experiential knowledge of *maskanda*, the audience perceived this blatant demonstration of my lack of experiential knowledge as a weakness that did not match the theoretical complications I spouted. The tension that emerged from the binary between theoretical and experiential knowledge gained various dimensions, involving my background (from outside Africa), and possibly my age and gender as well, although I have not found any explicit references to this. Most important, though, was the implication that my alleged orientation towards theorization (that can almost exclusively be derived from abstract thought in writing) had enabled me to 'cheat', like Thabo Mbeki. It had enabled me to side-step the experience itself and talk smart about something I had never really been part of. Any post-colonial scholar can draw a long list of examples of how colonial power used to rely, and still relies, on such acquisitions of accumulated but never experienced knowledge. In South Africa anyone who has experienced apartheid can create such lists.

I could mention several more instances in which I was warned against my propensity towards theorization, both inside and outside the South African academy. I realized I am no longer able to write or think sensibly about music, or even observe it, without my knowledge of German idealist philosophy (the subject of my doctorate [Titus 2005]), without phenomenology, without structuralist and post-structuralist discourse analysis, or without a post-colonial theoretical commitment. These theories and ideologies enrich my thinking, but they also locate me, imposing limits on my thinking. I have often contemplated ditching theorization altogether. Of course I could deconstruct the allegedly false binary between academic theorization and on-the-spot musicking by saying that they necessarily go together. And I am not particularly keen to buy into tropes of intellectual primitivism and *bon sauvage* ideology either. Still, I started to sense the directions of thought that were barricaded by my musicologica that not only features my work, but also that of many of my colleagues: since we know that 'Zuluness' has been constructed through decades of apartheid policy, detailed study of *maskanda's* Zulu features is no longer considered viable musicological research. Similarly, there have not been serious musicological attempts to describe the sounding differences between the various *maskanda* styles, even though *maskanda* musickers argue time and again that these differences contain the key towards understanding *maskanda*. Such studies are not there yet, because, as I found out myself, it is very hard to describe these differences if the sources are allegedly 'inconsistent' in their description of these differences and in their allocation of styles to specific songs. I suspect that much of the difficulty lies in the incompatibility of academic documentation and conceptualization with musical experiences.

In my view, the challenge for a new ethnomusicology, a relational musicology, a cultural musicology, or whatever one wants to call this discipline, lies in addressing these issues of cultural situatedness and relating. They touch on the most basic means music researchers use to 'musicologick': theories, concepts, and words. Some Zulu South Africans claim that the Zulu never utter a word without dance. This may be a cultural stereotype, but there we are. Nor do the Zulu dance without uttering a word. Hence, one can, and actually should, dance a statement (*igama*) in Zulu culture: uttering an *igama* with mere words is an incomplete way of communicating. I don't know yet how to dance the contents of this paper on 24 January, but the idea of an *igama* as a multi-modal utterance unquestionably alludes to the embodied and experiential aspects of music that complement conceptualization and that (fortunately) force music researchers to keep revisiting the musical experience. That may be as much one can say about it; all the rest is dance…

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[1] Although 'musicologicking' might be perceived as another neologism, I have specific reasons for coining it, since I want to focus attention on the *variety of acts* of *understanding music* – acts that necessarily impact on each other (cf. Small's concept of *musicking* [1998]). Thus, *musicologicking* encompasses all acts that attribute meaning to music: thinking, talking and writing about music, but also sensing, performing or recontextualizing it, among others.

[2] I am aware that I am articulating my musicological self against musicological others here, but I do this more or less strategically (cf. Spivak's [later retracted] idea of 'strategic essentialism') in order to draw attention to blind spots.

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