

Ethnomusicology, Folklore, and Social Relevance

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Abstract

This article raises the need for (Spanish) ethnomusicology to replace rigid nineteenth century approaches with renewed anthropological and sociological concepts and analytical tools, Through the notion of “social relevance,” the author responds to this need and advocates for the study of horizontal influence (dynamic, meaningful), rather than vertical roots (ancestral, quasi-sacred) in a musical repertoire. “Social relevance” would be the academic opposite to “cultural paternity” (as ethnic ascription), prioritizing the importance that a song, instrument, or dance has for a community in a specific moment. Therefore, the main task of an ethnomusicologist is to understand the musical life of a society, because the relevance does not depend on music itself, but on its context. Consequently, the concept of social relevance rejects perceptions of popular music studies as marginal, and instead accepts the study of popular music as a discipline that deserves full scholarly attention, eliminating mythologized hierarchies of elite groups. The article discusses how social relevance manifests in three interrelated dimensions: meaning, or how a musical piece is perceived; the uses to which it is put; and its social functions. These analyses apply to different genres such as opera, jazz, rock, folk, classical, and avant-garde music, and point out the universal attributes they all share according to the principle of their social relevance.

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Josep Martí

Josep Martí i Pérez (Barcelona, 1954) studied cultural anthropology in Barcelona and Göttingen and received his PhD in 1985 at the Philipps-Universität, Marburg, Germany. In 1989 he joined the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology of the Institución Milà i Fontanals in Barcelona (belonging to Spanish CSIC) as a researcher, where he has held various positions to date, including that of director. In the course of his activities, Martí was co-founder and first president of the Sociedad Ibérica de Etnomusicología (SIBE, 1991); official representative for Spain in ICTM; member of the scientific committee of the International Organization of Popular Arts (IOV-UNESCO); and vice-president of the Institut Català d'Antropologia (ICA).

He has collaborated with numerous universities and academic institutions, deploying an intense teaching and research schedule, including, especially for Spain, the promotion of cultural studies as an innovative methodology. He has also been a member of editorial boards and research projects, carrying out fieldwork in different European countries, Japan, and Equatorial Guinea. A versatile and prolific author, Martí's official publications exceed 250, with countless participations in conferences, lectures, organization of events, translations, and publication reviews. Among his books, *El Folklorismo* (1996) had a great impact on the realm of Spanish speaking ethnomusicology.

A list of his research interests should include social meanings of ICH (e.g. folklorism); the relevance of popular imaginary, collective identities (mostly focusing on ethnicity and multiculturalism); and the broad field of nationalism versus globalization. Martí has also paid a great deal of attention to specific areas like music and the body, the feast, and ambient music. One of the recurring motifs in his work is the epistemology and scope of ethnomusicology.

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Manuscript Editor's Introduction—Javier Campos Calvo-Sotelo

The belief that Spanish traditional music possesses a unique richness has long been commonplace among scholars and the public. Due to its strategic position as a crossroads between Europe and Africa, the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, the Iberian Peninsula has been the site of multiple influences, invasions, and hybridizations throughout history, as well as a rather slow permeation of progress and modernity, resulting in remarkable cultural variety. According to Gilbert Chase, Spanish music forms a "unique body of music" in the world (Chase 1959, 304). It has attracted the attention of such renowned foreign scholars as Kurt Schindler, Marius Schneider, Gilbert Chase, Alan Lomax, Ramón Pelinski, and Salwa El Shawan Castelo-Branco. Medieval and Renaissance songbooks are early sources of Spanish music, and they included many pieces that were popular in their times. After the colonization of America, an immense new world became part of the Spanish empire, and the interaction with the metropole would be as traumatic as it was fertile in some cultural respects, music included. Overall, the Spanish-speaking ethnomusicological scene owes much to Spain but has in each country (mostly in South America) its own achievements, authors, and trends/schools (see for example the related bibliography by Bernd Brabec, Victoria Eli, José de Menezes, Anthony Seeger, and in the *Latin American Music Review/Revista de Música Latinoamericana*). The first "Conferencia Interamericana de Etnomusicología" took place in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, in February 1963. However, in the 21st century, institutionalization in the field of ethnomusicology remains

scarce in most Latin American universities (Santamaría 2009). Despite the looming shadow of colonial ethnocentrism, the lingua franca of Spanish provides a crucial bridge among these nations, a sense of cultural unity that brings scholars like Josep Martí to the fore.

During the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, important anthologies and songbooks of regional repertoires were compiled in Spain—following the romantic-Herderian tendency to portray peasant life as the soul of the nation. However, in the Spanish realm, the origins of the discipline we call ethnomusicology are rather recent. Important pioneers since the late nineteenth century were Inzenga, Pedrell, Olmeda, Sampedro, Bal, Torner, Donostia, Amades, and especially García Matos. After the Civil War (1936-1939) the task of controlling regional folklore fell to the Sección Femenina, a group of folklorists who appropriated folklore in their efforts to boost the status of the Francoist regime. Josep Crivillé's 1988 compendium of Spanish traditional music from its earliest manifestations is a useful guide to the history of Spanish ethnomusicology up to that time. By the end of the century, it was the figure of Josep Martí—in combination with Argentinian ethnomusicologist Ramón Pelinski and other critical authors mostly located in Catalonia—who triggered a critical turn for national ethnomusicology, opening the door to a young and ample generation of specialists following the “cultural trend.” Martí took on a leading role in that challenge, and faced opposition from conservative sectors (e.g., Manzano 2011). Campos (2012) provides a critical evaluation of some of the schools and paradigms with which Martí is related.

Martí was a key figure in transitioning from a formalist comparative musicology to the anthropology of music, replacing conventional description and classification of songs, instruments, and dances, with an interpretation of the underlying mechanisms of their respective geocultural communities. Unlike purists who are indignantly against what they consider a corruption of the “authentic,” Martí finds it important that the newly generated repertoire be interesting and consistent—independent of the “original”—on the basis of “social relevance.” With works like “Ethnomusicology, folklore, and social relevance,” (hereafter EFS) Martí was to a large extent the apostle of a new ethnomusicology in Spain, turning the page on the seemingly outdated and positivist musicology that had dominated these studies since its origins. Martí not only modernized Hispanic ethnomusicology, but also put a spotlight on the cultural meanings of popular repertoires. Popular music ceased to be subsidiary to “cultured music” of the kind exalted by the “guardians of tradition” as a sacred and untouchable good. In EFS the idea of

“social relevance” takes on this critical stance, against the museumization of folklore. Martí carried out the task with clarity and depth, introducing complex terms characteristic of the scholarly community and achieving convincing results. In particular, he was a pioneering advocate in Spain for cultural studies as an innovative research and outreach practice. In this period of extraordinary productivity, Martí released eleven publications in 1996 alone; some of them reworked earlier material, thus refining and consolidating his scientific approaches. Of his more than 250 recorded publications in total, quite a few have been published in English, so some readers may already be familiar with his contributions.

In EFS, Martí developed a sharp critical discourse to challenge the status quo in Spanish ethnomusicology by opposing “the traditional approach” favoring the “social relevance” approach. He accused the former of conveying ideological distortions and being “clearly insufficient”; he stated how “the most traditional musicologists...have not yet taken on board the new reality...[they] pay attention to only a small proportion of the musical world of the communities they study.” Importantly, he not only updated Spanish ethnomusicology, but also extended its ethnographic and geographic scope; this was a core advance, because until about the 1990s, Spanish ethnomusicologists generally limited their research to the national territory, in many cases extolling folklore and traditional music as symbols of the motherland and, therefore, reinforcements of Spanish-ness. In this sense, Martí’s works conveyed the de-nationalization of the discipline.

Martí’s most influential book has perhaps been *El Folklorismo* (1996 [1993]), the cornerstone for several generations of teachers and students in the Spanish-American academic realm. This book triggered the publication of four crucial volumes at the very beginning of the 21st century: Martí himself published in 2000 *Más allá del arte*, a general introduction to ethnomusicology from an anthropological perspective; that same year, Ramón Pelinski released a book in which he analyzed specific traditional practices, while considering the dichotomy between formalism in comparative musicology and cultural interpretation in the anthropology of music (taking Simha Arom and John Blacking as representative figures), and generally advocating for the latter. Pelinski and Martí thus undertook an important pedagogical task for a Spanish academic community still rather outside (or against) these debates; in 2001 Francisco Cruces was the editor of a fundamental set of translations into Spanish of paradigmatic texts from international ethnomusicology (by Erich M. von Hornbostel, Alan Merriam, Steven Feld,

Margaret Kartomi, Bruno Nettl, Mantle Hood, Simha Arom, and others); and in 2003, Cámara de Landa published the first comprehensive treatise on ethnomusicology in the Spanish language. Thus, around the turn of the millennium, there was an outstanding renewal of Spanish ethnomusicology with these volumes appearing almost consecutively. Undoubtedly, this growth was also caused by the entry—late but definitive—of musicology as a discipline represented in Spanish universities from the 1980s onwards. The international boom of the discipline contributed to this local expansion too.

The article now published in *Ethnomusicology Translations* belongs to the period that followed *El Folklorismo* (1996) and largely follows the themes introduced in that book. EFS is a brief but fine sample of Martí's rich output in those years. It reflects his scholarly struggle to revise the paradigms of ethnomusicology and presents the insightful views that paved the way for a different discipline. The paper grew out of an oral presentation at the 1994 conference “Spagna e Sardegna: contatti e analogie nella tradizione e nell' esperienza musicale contemporanea,” and was expanded the next year at the I Congreso de la Sociedad Ibérica de Etnomusicología. Also in 1995, in the inaugural issue of *Trans* (the journal of SIBE), Martí put forward his view that paying attention to the notion of social relevance should be a desirable goal for a “numb” Spanish ethnomusicology. In 1996 EFS expanded on those works and anticipated Martí's next book (*Más allá del Arte*, 2000), whose sixth chapter was entitled “Musicología y relevancia social,” and was a development of the former paper. EFS shows Martí's characteristic methodological approach: he would focus on one or two key themes and illustrate them with numerous examples from his vast and varied ethnographic and musicological work. EFS advocates opening the door to the study of rock, Gregorian chant, salsa, and opera alike because of their presence and significance in modern societies. In this sense Martí's works cross genres: the initial status of a repertoire is irrelevant if it lacks contemporary social significance, and from this point of view any musical piece could potentially occupy the top of the hierarchy, regardless of its real merits and artistic value. (It is inevitable to compare this perspective with formalist approaches, such as Hanslick's classic *On the Musically Beautiful* which was written more than a century earlier.)

Therefore, the main task of an ethnomusicologist is “understanding the musical life of a society at a given time” (EFS). Hence, the ontology of the piece becomes secondary: “The social relevance of a piece of music does not depend on the music itself, but on its context,” perfectly

summarizes the content of EFS. In this vision the audience is not a group of mere recipients, but rather create meaning by perceiving the music in one way or another and acting accordingly. Empowered by the audience, music becomes a popular force of cultural mediation, redressing social values and building cultural meanings. Due to the emotional nature of collective feelings (within this analytical context of social constructivism), relativism is a key element in the respective analyses—for example in EFS by understanding Catalonia and Andalusia (Spanish regions) as “ideological constructs” (here the influence of Benedict Anderson, 1983, is clear). In recent works Martí has expanded these notions, insisting that music is essentially an act of communication: “music without society would be unthinkable,” (Martí and Revilla 2018,1); “Music is not merely something about the social but rather a social life itself” (Martí and Revilla 2018, 2-3). Thus, formal and aesthetic values are secondary before these sociological categories (for a different opinion, see Yung 2017).

After *Más allá del arte* Martí has not devoted attention to “social relevance” as the main subject of a paper, but the notion nevertheless continues to appear regularly in his works. According to Marcia Loo, *Más allá del arte* was “a decisive contribution toward promoting the development of Ethnomusicology in Spain [from a] constructivist approach” (Loo 2003. Spanish original, our translation). No one would doubt his dedication and experience; on the same book, Cureses’ review concluded that, “Josep Martí has spent many years researching a discipline that he knows in every respect” (2000: 633. Spanish original; our translation). This did not prevent him from questioning the very existence of “ethnomusicology” under that name as such (Martí 1997). Perhaps Martí and other authors were applying at the end of the 20th century what Merriam had developed for the anthropology of music, Berger and Luckmann for sociology, Geertz for cultural anthropology, Hobsbawm for the deconstruction of tradition, and Anderson for the study of nationalism.

In summary, Martí’s contribution to the ethnomusicology of Spain and the Hispanic realm has been exceptional. He was—and still is—the pivotal scholar in the modernization of the discipline, and his work has been the reference guide for countless students, teachers, and researchers. Indeed, his legacy permeates the ethnomusicological work done in Spain in the 21st century. Given Martí’s constant activity and the dissemination of his work, his legacy grows year after year. Spanish ethnomusicology in the twenty-first century must take up his excellent work, expand it, and push to catch up with other recent trends in the discipline—which has been

subject, if only in the last two decades, to an intense and ongoing debate (a true academic fervor) about its epistemology and functions. Applied ethnomusicology, progressive traditionalism, transcultural musicology (local scholarly approaches), ecomusicology, sustainability theories, studies on ICH and UNESCO projects, multispecies ethnomusicology, decolonial musicology, and multiple other contributions are knocking at the door, as evinced within a varied sample by the latest issues of the journal *Ethnomusicology*.

A few words on the translation: For this edition it has not been problematic. The Spanish original text was precise and direct, and the English version by Peter Collins accurately reflects this. There were neither untranslatable local terms (apart from some Spanish genres and dances, that have been preserved in the original language, like *flamenco*, *salsa*, and the *Sardana*) nor overly complicated technical locutions. Quotations in Spanish, Catalan, and German are given in the original language in footnotes.

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Ethnomusicology, Folklore, and Social Relevance

Encompassing rock, world music, salsa, revivals of ancient traditional music, operatic hits, and countless other styles, the range of music now permeating the streets of European cities is extremely varied and highly complex. Alongside music that boasts deep ethnic roots or aristocratic lineage, there is also the music imported by multinational labels or smuggled in on small boats by immigrants. In a world in which styles are here today and gone tomorrow, even the Gregorian chant of the now-popular monks of Silos is bound by the dictates of fashion. All this demands the close attention of the musicologist. Scholars of musical folklore, comparative musicologists, and (ethno)musicologists are gradually being compelled to embrace the immense challenges (and possibilities) presented by the modern world.

The most traditional musicologists, however, have not yet gotten on board the new reality. Clinging to such notions as, “Musicians have their corresponding costumes, whether those be tails, jeans, or traditional forms of local dress,” some ethnomusicologists sound like early folklorists. In fact, the current interest in collecting is not much different than that of those who carried out the initial studies of traditional music in the nineteenth century.

The main concern of musical folklore, whose roots can be traced to the nineteenth century, is to collect local traditional music inspired by regionalism and create repertoires of regional music. In their fieldwork ethnomusicologists pay attention to only a small proportion of the musical world of the communities they study—the part that can be described as local ethnic music. The idea of “ethnic paternity” in relation to certain musical works clearly indicates the ethnomusicological focus of interest.

The focus on “ethnic paternity” means an overwhelming preference for anonymous, rural music that is proud of its deep roots (Martí 1992). This taxonomic label is perfectly coherent with the ideology that sustains it and is therefore valid for those who believe in it; less clear is that study of the musical life of a given community should focus exclusively on musical production of this nature. The use of the phrase “local tradition” entails privileging a historicist perspective, and in this respect, one would do well to recall Claude Lévi-Strauss’s statement, “I am not far from believing that, in our own societies, history has replaced mythology and fulfills the same function” (Lévi-Strauss 1978, 42 [English]; Lévi-Strauss 1987, 65 [Spanish]).

A hypothetical society that lived in complete isolation from the rest of humanity and had its own musical repertoire would clearly draw on its own exclusive ethnic paternities, which, moreover, would also be a faithful reflection of its musical life. For our society, however, things are very different. The criteria for determining what is musically Catalan or Andalusian, for example, are very difficult to pin down, and no systematic study has ever been undertaken to clarify the matter. The truth is that an ethnomusicological task of this kind is very difficult and most probably doomed to failure owing to the nature of ideological constructs such as “Catalonia” or “Andalusia.”

Ethnomusicologists of local music have given great importance to distinguishing between music that *belongs to* a given community and is considered their own and music that in one way or another is considered to be foreign. Evidently, this distinction has always interested musicologists more than the population at large, at least before the appearance of “revivals” and the reawakening of interest in folk music. Ethnic ascription has always been seen by scholars of musical folklore as both a criterion for selection and a source of value for the musical repertoire concerned.

It is the duty of all Menorcans to ensure that the island’s folklore be free of impurities and that they fight for an understanding of folklore as an uncontaminated expression of the feelings of Menorca’s inhabitants. (Mercadal 1979, 12)

[...] the inhabitants [of some villages of Teruel] have certainly not agreed to the introduction of songs from other regions and even less to them being preserved, thus giving a gallant proof of their affection for their own region and for what is traditional and unique to them. (Arnaudas 1927, 8)

There are two basic arguments underlying this kind of discourse:

- a. That people have a very clear idea of what they consider to be their own.
- b. That such people reject anything that does not meet that condition.

This idea of what is one’s own, which must be safeguarded against the interference of outsiders, underlies the pattern of rejection directed at anything from outside and is expressed

with particular virulence when these musical products are modern.

[...] take note that [the Twist, the Madison, etc.] are rhythms and modes that are foreign to our musical culture, which is why they must ultimately be rejected by our people, who are uncomfortable with them no matter to what degree propaganda and snobbery conspire to impose them upon us. (Larrea 1968, 316)

Ethnomusicologists who identify closely with their subject of study do not limit themselves to merely observing; they take a clear stand in favor of an age-old musical legacy and frequently refer to the need to “maintain one’s roots.” The word “roots,” however, alludes directly to the idea of verticality, of depth, and is all too close to the well-known Germanic concept of “*Blut und Boden*” (Blood and Soil). But it is clear that in the musical life of a community, roots are not everything, and it would not be out of place to pay some attention to “horizontal” roots as well.

If a musical culture were limited to music produced only within the culture bearer’s own borders—assuming this were possible—it would undoubtedly be very poor. But, fortunately, the musical culture of a locality, a region, or a country is not restricted to music of supposed local origin; it is much more varied. It goes without saying that the musical culture of a human group cannot be reduced to the creative potential of just one group; it goes quite a bit further. Despite this, ethnomusicological practice tends to identify the musical culture of a people with the idea of their cultural paternity. Local genetic paternity is one thing and the idea of belonging another.

In fact, if we look at the criterion of use, it is evident that the much-mythologized “roots” are far from being all-important in our everyday musical life. They can even be said to be of minimal importance. Not everything considered to be one’s own comes from tradition, or at least from tradition as we usually understand the concept. In fact, etymologically, “tradition” implies “transmission,” so nothing prevents us from understanding it as being horizontal as well. What better definition can be found for the idea of belonging than that of the Catalan musical group *Los Rebeldes*? They assert, “Rock is the music you make at home with the instruments you have at home” (cited in Hernández Ripoll 1991, 42).

But ethnomusicologists still have difficulty in accepting such a broad meaning of the term “tradition,” and they are unlikely to do so until they realize they are playing into the hands of one

of the ideologies that made such an overpowering impact on Western history, the ideology of roots and national spirit. In the field of folklore this ideology can be seen clearly in the illusion that only certain popular works express Herder's idea of national spirit, when in fact it is the dynamics of ethnicity that determine—in line with a clearly social subjectivist approach—what should be considered ethnic (Martí 1996, 209-213).

It would not be entirely off the mark for ethnomusicologists to attempt to contrast or complement the traditional approach, which is so given to “pedigree” and cultural paternity, with one that focuses on social relevance. When what interests the ethnomusicologist is understanding the musical life of a society at a given time, the criterion of ethnic ascription, besides the risk of distorting reality for ideological reasons, is clearly insufficient, since musical life is always much broader than this criterion would enable one to accept.

The idea of social relevance, however, provides an approach that clearly avoids certain ideological distortions because it seeks to reflect sociocultural reality. While within a traditional approach one normally speaks of music *of* (or *from*) a given place, within an approach based on social relevance, one would speak of music *in* a given place. Concerned less with *where music is from* and more with *where it is played*, we downplay the importance of a deeply subjective idea of ethnic ascription, and we give greater prominence to the manner in which musical production is intertwined with society.

The concept of social relevance applied to the domain of music refers to the degree of pertinence of a music for a given society. Drawing on the experiences of linguistic pragmatics, one might argue that a music is relevant if it gives rise to contextual effects (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 122). The social relevance of a piece of music does not depend on the music itself, but on its context within a specific spatiotemporal framework.

But the concept of social relevance would be empty or unhelpful if it did not serve to articulate several categories of sociocultural analysis. In principle, the first category that comes to mind when thinking of social relevance is meaning. Thereafter, the way in which a music is perceived by a human group involves certain uses and, therefore, also certain functions within the group. These are therefore three basic elements that provide a clear idea of social relevance. It can be asserted that, in any given musical production, the social relevance of music for a given sociocultural area will be revealed by interactions among the music's meaning, the music's uses, and its functional implications. One can therefore say that regardless of history and genetic

peculiarities, a music *belongs* to a given sociocultural area when it has social relevance. And a music has social relevance when it has meanings, uses, and certain functions in the community. Things acquire meaning when they are associated with or refer to something beyond themselves: meaning implies association between the intrinsic and the extrinsic. This means that when we refer to the possible meaning that a certain music may have for society, we are referring to the associations that are granted to it by society. In other words, we refer to the “meaning of a piece of music,” when we can establish a *link that identifies it with a cognitive category of a social nature*. A specific piece of music becomes a “sign” that represents an idea. Gregorian chant, for example, is associated with religion, heavy metal with young people, flamenco with Andalusia, opera with the social elite, and so on. Obviously, the meaning that can be ascribed to a music is neither unambiguous nor stable. Although nothing prevents there being a dominant or more characteristic meaning, all music is polysemic and the meaning is different at different times and for different audiences. As Carl Dahlhaus pointed out, “The semantics of a musical text—the meaning expressed—depends on the pragmatics, the situations in which it is located” (Dahlhaus 1981, 201).

The meanings assigned to musical genres and styles can play a very important role in their social relevance and affect the extent to which they are accepted. The negative effects of semantic implications can be found, for example, in the negative reception of flamenco in Catalonia for ideological reasons (based on class and nationalist sentiment). By contrast, a factor contributing powerfully to the diffusion and wide social acceptance of rock has been its identification with youth. There is no doubt that, given the development of rock music from the legendary Elvis Presley to the present day, nothing would be more erroneous than to consider it the property of only one generation. But in spite of this, this is in fact how it has long been “sold.” For many years rock music has continued to signify “youth,” and even many years after its emergence, it is still associated with innovation, rebelliousness, non-conformism, independence, etc., when in fact it has long since ceased to be young. Given the prefigurative character of our society, it is not surprising that part of the attraction of this music consists precisely in followers identifying with what it means: the world of young people. For this reason, although rock music has long since been fully assimilated by the system, it still retains some of the signs that were characteristic of it when it first appeared: young performers, with a young ideology, and a young audience.

Meaning is intimately associated with beliefs, that is to say “cognitive acts structured around the dimension of certainty,” (Kornblit 1984, 46) and with attitudes and values, all of which constitute selective criteria that determine action. This brings us to the dimension of use.

For a community, a music exists above all when it is used, and the extent to which music is used and its social relevance are directly related. The use of music is regulated by conscious or unconscious rules and principles which cannot be ignored by musicologists. Any musical event entails adapting a particular musical phenomenon to suit a given situation, the social and cultural mechanisms that make it possible to assimilate the music, and the social and cultural rules that govern musical behavior. The uses of a music are determined by the meaning and purpose assigned to it.

The concept of use plays a central role within the concept of social relevance. A community may be aware that a particular kind of music exists and, therefore, may ascribe a certain meaning to it, but if the music is not used, we can hardly affirm that it has genuine social relevance. This could be said, for example, of *flamenco* for any given rural locality in Catalonia where there are no immigrants from Andalusia. The population of this locality will be aware that *flamenco* exists and will also assign it a meaning, but unsurprisingly, *flamenco* lacks social relevance for them. Similarly, opera has no social relevance for certain segments of the population, although they are not unaware of its existence. Thus, it is above all the idea of “use” that makes it possible to speak of whether music is socially relevant or not. And a given music is used when it is manifested by means of musical events.

When a music has social relevance for a given group, it will always perform functions in accordance with the meaning and uses given to it. In 1992 the popular Spanish singer Joaquín Sabina was pained to recognize:

Concerts at the moment are not music, but rituals where the tribe gathers to celebrate that they are together and that they have heard the songs and know them, no matter who is on stage. (*La Vanguardia*, June 2, 1992, 53)

Joaquín Sabina was exaggerating, perhaps because he had noticed something that is often ignored, the fact that music has functions that go beyond simply aesthetics or entertainment. Young people, possibly the social sphere with the greatest need to display their identity for

inherently generational reasons, not only enjoy their music, but also need to believe in it and in everything it represents. And the wide spectrum of current musical styles also serves this purpose: they distinguish new generations from old ones and provide urban tribes, groups, cliques, and communities with signs of identity.

Knowledge of the functional implications of the collective practice of a given music is essential for understanding the practice's social relevance. It helps us to explain, for example, the apparent paradox of so-called "contemporary" music, a type of music that is assigned a certain importance by society, despite the fact that its social relevance—the extent to which it is woven into the social fabric—is evidently very little.

Today's Spanish composers often complain about society's poor response to their music. Not so long ago, Tomás Marco blamed those responsible for the fact that modern compositions were so poorly disseminated: "Part of the blame certainly lies with the audience, who form the majority, but audience members are the ones least responsible. A large portion of the blame lies with the public authorities and with the players themselves." (Marco 1983, 302). Subsequently, in an interview in the Barcelona newspaper *La Vanguardia*, Tomás Marco said the media were also mainly to blame for our society's lack of interest in "contemporary" music (Guerrero 1992, 70).

The composer, however, at least on the basis of these comments, seems to be blissfully unaware of the fact that, in principle, the media report on everything that arouses the interest of their readers, however momentous it may (or may not) be. So, if the media do not report on contemporary music, it is reasonable to believe that this is due to the particular type of social relevance of this music for Spanish society.

"Contemporary" music clearly fails to fulfill some of the most important and well-recognized functions of music in Western culture—emotional expression, aesthetic enjoyment, entertainment, and symbolic representation. Its characteristically fragmented and individualized aesthetic code prevents communication, which is essential for the music to function in these ways. The music's message does not reach the general public, and this lack of communication is recognized by the composers themselves. Moreover, "contemporary" music also fails to fulfill another function traditionally assigned to elite music, that of a model. In the past, popular music used to model itself on highbrow music. Today, however, what we know as "popular music" has a tremendous range of models of its own and generally ignores avant-garde, highbrow music.

This phenomenon started with the advent of jazz. There are significant parallels with the world of fashion, where, with the universalization of the system of mass production and the introduction of prêt-à-porter and its different creative centers, the elitist avant-garde productions no longer possessed the power to impose themselves on the public as exclusive models (Lipovetsky 1990, 127).

Nevertheless, in spite of society's poor response to "contemporary" music, it cannot be denied that contemporary music is nevertheless performed widely in such contexts as concerts, festivals, competitions, and radio broadcasts. This is largely possible thanks to the considerable efforts of institutions, reflected in subsidies and a number of protectionist measures such as free concerts or the obligation of concert halls to program contemporary works in concert cycles. Although this support is powerless to achieve broad public acceptance of "contemporary" music—as demonstrated by the fact that the main problem of Spanish composers does not lie in premiering in new works, but in ensuring that they are played subsequently (Marco 1991, 27)—the very existence of contemporary music demonstrates that society, through the institutions that represent it, is indeed interested in this type of music. It therefore seems logical to believe that the phenomenon must fulfill certain functions that justify its maintenance.

"Contemporary" music, still a bastion of the elite, is socially recognized for its merits at the cutting edge of art and as a crucible of thought, which serves to justify its existence, despite the general incomprehension with which individual pieces of contemporary music are met. It therefore has a representative function in the area of human endeavor known as "progress," in this case, the progress of the art of music. Let us not forget that in our culture, unlike some others, the idea of progress is a truly important concept in our imaginary.

The fact that jazz and rock are not usually included within the concept of "contemporary music" indicates another clear function fulfilled by "contemporary music": academic reproduction. These compositions justify the validity of conservatories as privileged centers of musical creation; they are the current manifestation of the creative tradition of these institutions, one that has existed since these institutions were established. It is unsurprising that a large proportion of the audience, which is highly insular, is composed of conservatory students, teachers, and music professionals, etc., who are directly involved with academic institutions.

In terms of meaning, the functions of "contemporary" music are associated with the high degree of historical awareness of its advocates. On the one hand, it is understood as the

continuation of the great Western musical tradition: “Today’s music is the logical continuity of the past,” says Carmelo Bernaola (Antolín 1993, 6). History is its strongest point of reference, so that even its current social failure is made more palatable by recalling the lessons of history:

Beethoven was also condemned as extravagant. (Valentí 1970, 239)

New music has always been resisted and fought against, because every new phenomenon is resisted out of principle. (Valentí 1970, 237-238)

In other words, artists who are ahead of their time are never understood.

At the same time, it is expected that history itself, the history written in the future, will end up justifying these contemporary musical creations as it is believed that a work’s value can only be decided in the course of time.

If we take the academic world as an area of pertinence, it is clear that the social relevance of contemporary music is high. If we take, on the other hand, Spanish society in general as a point of reference, this “contemporary” music has little social relevance. But due to the cognitive orientation of our society, one that assigns this music the function of progress, this does not prevent it from enjoying a certain degree of social prestige.

I believe that the idea of social relevance may have a certain utility for the academic practice of musicology. On the one hand, it makes it possible to break free from the criterion of ethnic ascription based on genetic paternity that has so limited ethnomusicological work. I have already mentioned above how misleading it is to seek to understand the folkloric musical culture of a people through what is usually understood as “tradition.” Moreover, the idea of social relevance requires one to take into account a music’s meaning, use, and function, making it possible to apply greater precision to the study of musical experiences articulated throughout history. Musical historiography is often based on very weak criteria (related to the area of pertinence or a superficial chronology) that fail to take into account the highly nuanced picture offered by the idea of social relevance. Thus, for example, the history of the *Sardana* from the famous reforms of Pep Ventura in the middle of the last century to the present day is normally described in a very uniform manner, given that the discourse is based on formal criteria; but an approach based on

social relevance reveals the fact that the practice of playing and dancing *Sardanas* has changed beyond all recognition since the mid-nineteenth century, despite little formal evolution during this time. Social perceptions of *Sardanas* have changed enormously, a fact that is reflected in the important changes that have taken place in the spheres of belonging, meaning, uses, and functions relating to *Sardanas* (Martí 1994).

The idea of social relevance provides greater precision in the task of understanding the musical life of a community. It is not antiquity that dictates whether or not a given music belongs to a given sociocultural sphere, but rather the fact that it is experienced by society. The application of the concept of social relevance in musicological research, ensures that popular music is not treated as marginal and is accepted as a field of research that deserves musicologists' full attention. An approach that takes into account the idea of social relevance would add to the efforts of many musicologists to overcome the traditional restrictions that for so long, at least in Western culture, have ensured that they only study music that has social relevance for elite groups or is associated with a mythologized rural world.

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