

Lecture 1.2 What is Music?

MUS 20 Exploring the Musical Mind

Summer Session II 2025

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What is Music?

Some definitions...

- *“Sounds combined to produce beauty of form, harmony, or expression of emotion”* (Dictionary)
- *“Humanly organized sound”* (Edgard Varèse, composer; John Blacking, ethnomusicologist)
- *“Humanly organized sound ... outside the scope of language”* (Bruno Nettl, ethnomusicologist)
- *“Sounds organized by humans and intended for musical purposes”* (Jonathan C. Kramer, ethnomusicologist)

We tend to define music *anthropocentrically*.

What is Music?

Definitions continued...

- “*Sounds organized into patterns which are socially or individually accepted [as music]*” (Susan Hallam, Education & Music Psychology)
- “*Music is not sound, it is listening to sound.*” (Henkjan Honing, Music Cognition)

Music seems to involve **sounds**, **organization**, and **intent** in both *creation* and *reception*.

Five Propositions from World Music Chapter 1

Proposition 1: The basic property of all music is sound

- Any and all sounds have the potential to be tones, that is, to be music sounds. This includes obvious candidates such as notes that are sung or played on a piano, guitar, or violin, but it also includes the sounds of slamming shutter doors, pig squeals, water rushing in a stream, or anything else.
- But what about John Cage's 4'33", a work in which sound seems conspicuously absent?

Five Propositions from World Music Chapter 1

Proposition 1: The basic property of all music is sound

- Perhaps not. Actually, there are sounds—many sounds—in every performance of 4'33". There are the sounds of the performers' footsteps as they walk onto the stage, of the audience applauding, of the clicking on and off of the stopwatch, of the turning of pages at prescribed time intervals, of the random assortment of coughs, chair squeaks, heating and air-conditioning system hums, and whatever else may emerge during a given performance.
- Indeed, one of the main “points” of 4'33” is that it creates a framework for music listening that compels people to reorient their hearing, to hear “the music” inherent in a range of sounds and silences whose musical qualities are conventionally ignored or go unnoticed by music listeners.

Five Propositions from [World Music Chapter 1](#)

Proposition 2: The sounds (and silences) that comprise a musical work are organized in some way

- One marker of difference between music sounds and other types of sounds is that music sounds always emerge within some kind of organizational framework, whereas other sounds may or may not.
- Music, then, is a form of *organized sound*.
- The organizational element is culturally and individually based. It can be music from a foreign culture that is based on unfamiliar organizational schemes, such as the [Japanese gagaku music](#); or the late John Cage's music that intentionally subverts the common and familiar organizational principles that make music recognizable.

Five Propositions from World Music Chapter 1

Proposition 3: Sounds are organized into music by people; thus, music is a form of humanly organized sound

- Music is a human phenomenon: it is a form of “humanly organized sound”.
- There is no doubt that many animals express themselves and even communicate using organized systems of sound that have music-like qualities. However, it is proposed that music, understood as such, is essentially a human invention. It is something that people either make, hear, or assign to other kinds of sounds.
- Birds and whales did not “sing” until human beings saw fit to label their distinctive forms of vocalization with that musical term. Moreover, birds and whales do not necessarily “make music” any more than pigs do, but the “songs” of birds and whales seem to have been more amenable to musical interpretation by people than the grunts of pigs.

Five Propositions from World Music Chapter 1

Proposition 4: Music is a product of human intention and perception

- When any sound, series of sounds, or combination of sounds is organized by a person or group of people and presented as “music”—that is, with the **intention** that it be heard as music—our point of departure will be to treat it as music. Similarly, when any person or group of persons **perceives** a sound, series of sounds, or combination of sounds as “music,” our point of departure will be to treat that as music too.
- **HIP (human intention and perception) approach:**
 - Privileges inclusiveness over exclusiveness.
 - Emphasizes the idea that music is inseparable from the people who make and experience it.

Five Propositions from World Music Chapter 1

Proposition 5: The term music is inescapably tied to Western culture and its assumptions

- Even though every human culture in the world has produced forms of organized sound that we in the West consider music, many of these cultures do not categorize their own “music” as music at all. It seems that our concept of music, however broad and open-minded we try to make it, cannot transcend its *Western cultural moorings*.
- **Ethnocentrism:** we cannot help but impose our own culturally grounded perspectives, biases, and assumptions on practices and lifeways that are different from our own.

Five Propositions from World Music Chapter 1

Summary

1. The basic property of all music is sound.
2. The sounds (and silences) that comprise a musical work are organized in some way.
3. Sounds are organized into music by people; thus, music is a form of humanly organized sound.
4. Music is a product of human intention and perception.
5. The term music is inescapably tied to Western culture and its assumptions.

We can now say that music is a category of humanly organized sound that takes its core identity from the musical **intentions** and **perceptions** of its *makers* and *listeners*.