

metamusic: On the Metamorphosis of a Term

By alien productions

“Any new thing doubtlessly requires new terms to describe it.”¹ The term “metamusic”, which we use as the title for our art project, evokes that which we hope to attain through our work and are in search of, be this a potential outcome or the method or path we pursue.

metamusic kicked off when we came up with the idea of developing interactive sound installations for zoo animals: “metamusic inquires into whether animals in zoos – i.e. wild animals living in captivity – are able to develop a sensitivity to music and thereby modify their behaviour”. alien productions “fathoms whether animals become musically active beings on their own, without any Pavlov-style training; it asks whether they show an interest in instruments especially designed for them; and if so, which contexts are most likely to foster this development”.²

When artists introduce a new term, it serves not simply to *describe* a thing but also to *understand* it, as well as to *communicate* how a prospective venture is seen. Initially, the term metamusic was empty; it served merely as a *container* for an attitude, an approach, for the first step into an epistemological adventure.

As Brian Eno said, we artists stand “before and after science”. The idea comes first and it’s only later, when implementing and scientifically analysing the idea, that we are gradually able to refine our term (the container) by filling it with meaning. Artistic practice generates the meaning of a term and is likewise decisive for its future fate.

We have already realised three editions of our project: the first week-long event – four days of which we had an audience – under the “musikprotokoll” banner at the Graz Museum, as part of the Austrian arts festival steirischer herbst 2013; four weeks in the Kittenberger Adventure Gardens in Schiltern, in the Waldviertel region of the Austrian province Niederösterreich; and one week at the Hellerau European Centre for the Arts in Dresden during the CYNETART Festival 2014. We learned a lot from these events – from parrots, from zoologists, from colleagues and, not least, from the general public.

Many visitors were of course drawn first and foremost to the parrots. The parrots thus helped to quickly dissipate the moment of alienation that arises between the visitor/ recipient and an art project, to such a point, in fact, that the “art project” itself took a backseat at times. Moreover, the presence of the animals prompted visitors to seek conversation with us artists and with zoologists. Some visitors stayed a long time and others came more than once. As for the parrots, we were very surprised to see how quickly they adapted to each new situation, how much they enjoyed having an audience, and how intent they were on attracting visitors’ attention and interacting with them.

Instances of social interaction between the animals and human beings were always very much centre-stage during the “exhibitions” as well as at the specially organised “concerts”. The latter had little in common with usual performance practice. The traditional separation of (loud) instrumentalists and (silent) listeners would have hampered any concert with the parrots, since these basically imitate the audience’s behaviour. If the people present are expectant/ passive then the parrots are too. They become active only when their public actively move around, sing, whistle or dance. The birds

¹ Ulrich Dibelius, *Moderne Musik nach 1945*. Munich/Zurich, expanded revised edition 1998

² http://cynetart.de/#cynetart-2014-info_msTitle_4

reflect the audience and the audience the birds.

When animals live in a domestic setting they adapt to human beings more than we do to them.³ This is why parrots are so good at recognising, interpreting, and reacting to signals given by the humans around them. We therefore cannot assume, in this project, that we never manipulate the animals. Our initial intention was to avoid conditioning and dressage. But it is just as impossible to *not* manipulate, as it is to *not* communicate. In our case, it is always a mutual experience: it is never totally clear who is manipulating whom. It is impossible to completely avoid manipulation (fuzzily definable as “conditioning”), in the sense that communication strategies are constantly being learned (or unlearned). But this of course is a far cry from dressage. Dressage robs an animal of its dignity.

To lend an animal its dignity means to fully acknowledge an animal in its animal being, i.e. to not seek to judge it by human standards. For example, we tend to forget the extent to which making music depends on our fine manual motor skills. But birds have wings, not hands, so things are not quite so handy for them. “(Many) human beings can think, (many) birds can fly.” To treat human beings with less respect simply because we are unable to fly would be highly problematic and it likewise makes little sense to judge birds on account of their lack of excellent cognitive capacities. [...] Animals are not deficient human beings and are under no obligation to prove that *they are somehow similar to us*.”⁴

“To speak of *the animal* or of *the animal in and of itself* is to give expression to the essence of animals, which is to be systematically approached here, with the aid of the term nature. [...] In this reading, “nature” is “*anything that is not brought forth by premeditated activity*. [...] Anything that qualifies as natural is *not* man-made.”⁵ True, our animal counterparts are shaped by (their co-existence with) human beings yet they are nonetheless natural beings, not artefacts. Whether tamed, held captive, or bred in captivity, an animal always has the status of *the other*: it is a creature that cannot be judged on human or cultural terms and that is in no way implicated in “being (man-) made”.

The non-cultural profile of our animal band members is to their advantage. Since they, unlike human beings, are not products of culture, they never face the dilemma of having to put up a front. As far as we know they never feel stage fright – although they do occasionally put on diva airs. They are not misted-up, distorted mirrors. Animals have no ideology and no religion and yet “Boode assures us that he once had a parrot on board that would lead the sailors in prayer while counting its rosary beads”.⁶

Owing to the close relationship between metamusic and music it seems appropriate to also apply some musical terms to metamusic and to inquire to which extent musical terms may be found in the metamusic context. Musical terms that appear apt to describe metamusic, such as aleatorics, permeability, and harmolodics, can be found, for instance, in the writings of Ulrich Dibelius, Vilém Flusser, and Ornette Coleman. These terms come together quasi as ascending stages of one’s expectations of metamusic.

Aleatorics (from the Latin *alea*, meaning “dice”) “has become the blanket term for a whole string of diverse procedures

³ “Companion animals meet the human being’s need for an empathetic partner. [...] Furthermore, companion animals are largely able to adapt asymmetrically while human partners generally demand a measure of mutual adaptation.” Kurt Kotrschal, “Warum Menschen mit anderen Tieren sozial sein wollen und können”, in: *Tiere. Der Mensch und seine Natur*. Vienna 2013

⁴ Herwig Grimm, “Das ,Tier an sich“ in: *Tiere. Der Mensch und seine Natur*. Vienna 2013

⁵ Op. cit.

⁶ J. G. Krünitz, *Oekonomische Encyclopädie*, Berlin 1773ff. <http://www.kruenitz1.uni-trier.de/>

that somehow involve chance yet are nonetheless subject to certain rules – or, briefly put, for controlled chance”.⁷ A consciously aleatoric sound installation can in any event bring forth metamusic. In our case, parrots provide the chance parameters: there is no feedback and the animals themselves are not necessarily aware of the effects they trigger. The audience too has little sense of how the (sonic) occurrences come about. The whole system is a *black box*, within which nest several other black boxes.

Permeability: “The human body is permeable by sound waves but not in the same way as by x-rays. [...] One feels them; one knows one is sustaining them. [...] The reception of music in one’s belly [...] is pathos, and its effect is empathy for the message”.⁸ Likewise for Vilém Flusser, the recipients of music at least were black boxes while composers “acted cybernetically: they dealt with the *input* and *output* of the black box-bodies”.⁹ But since sound permeates the entire body, music creates harmony between the person making it and the one hearing it and so enables them to experience the world, “not as the contradiction of subject and object but as a ‘pure relationship’, namely as an acoustic vibration. It is only when listening to music that one experiences physically, tangibly, emotionally and literally that which scientists mean when they speak of ‘field’ and ‘relativity’”.¹⁰

Since our birds not only initiate sounds but also, thanks to monitoring via a built-in speaker, are acutely aware of them one is inclined to ask how they experience them physically. In order to attain the same effect in the parrots as in human beings, we would perhaps have to play music for them three octaves higher (assuming that the body mass of a parrot is around one per cent of that of human beings and its length around one tenth, so that the sound frequency would have to be increased tenfold in order to attain a similar physiological resonance effect. If we want to remain in the same key, three octaves higher would be about right).

The permeability concept is an endeavour to explain how sound triggers an emotional response. It is a well-known fact that animals too are emotional beings. They are able to communicate their present state and perceptions through their species-specific body language. Parrots can, in addition to that, express their perceptions in human language (which for them of course is a foreign language). Whether animals can also reflect on their emotions is altogether another matter. Is the ability to describe and evoke an emotion determined exclusively by cultural parameters? What we are in search of in our project is the animal counterpart’s primary, immediate expression – its *here and now*. Animal musicality (as far as we can tell at the present time) is non-reflective – it doesn’t contemplate that which it happens to be communicating – and is non-evocative, at least in its intention. Inasmuch as “composition” implies the separation of the conception and the interpretation of a musical occurrence, which is to say, a consciously planned process, then animals do not compose. The responsibility for conception therefore lies with us. Yet, as composers, we must be open also to the abilities of interpreters – if we want the latter to invest in a project. So whether we can find a way of expressing emotions through metamusic and of sharing emotional states with parrots remains as fascinating an issue as it was at the start.

Harmolodics: The immediacy, i.e. the dialogic real-time nature of metamusic makes it akin to improvised music, which likewise comes into being thanks to the dialogic, real-time relationships of the musicians involved. The “freedom” in improvisation lies not so much in the notion that *anything goes* as in the fact that *the rules of the game are inscribed in freedom*: these rules take on the role of composer, so to speak, and establish the setting. “Free Jazz” is a

⁷ Ulrich Dibelius, Op. cit.

⁸ Vilém Flusser, *Gesten. Versuch einer Phänomenologie*, Bensheim und Düsseldorf 1991

⁹ Op. cit.

¹⁰ Op. cit.

term for a certain type of music as well as the title of an album released by Ornette Coleman in 1960, quasi as his musical manifesto. The disposition here is very interesting: two quartets play simultaneously, one on the right-, the other on the left-hand channel of the stereo recording. A border runs down the middle, between these channels, simultaneously standing for separation and communication as the two quartets continually bridge it, acoustically. There is a *setting* that allows for communication on various levels.

“And I think improvising is even freer because everyone gets a different feeling from improvising. It’s not different where everyone’s hearing the same movements, you know, because in the music I do, I write out the music but I write everyone a different part so they can make a contribution to the whole. For me, I mean, it’s, I don’t call it composing, I’ve been calling it Sound Grammar and for a better technical part I call it Harmolodics.”¹¹

“Harmolodics is clearly something in between traditional composing and improvising. However, Coleman is more interested in creating a space for individual-improvisers to work together, rather than in presenting a rigidly defined composition. [...] It is a theory that intentionally evades definition. He seems to be rearticulating it all the time, even as he shifts the name Harmolodics to Sound Grammar. What gets read as evasiveness is perhaps Harmolodics itself performing its dynamism.”¹²

We are reaching a point, here, at which theory and practice fuse. Ornette Coleman’s theorising on Harmolodics is virtually a performance in its own right – a cycle. In our case, music and metamusic fuse at the point where action and reflection merge. And from then on, there is no more judgement. Just as all musical parameters are equally valid, so too are all the players and participants. That doesn’t mean that differences are overlooked. Our animals are still products of nature, not of culture, and will therefore never be in a position to plan anything. Or, put more positively, they live and act in the here and now.

Translation: Jill Denton

¹¹ Ornette Coleman, interview transcript: <https://thoughtsandmusic.wordpress.com/2011/03/31/the-rhetoric-of-ornette-colemans-harmolodics/>

¹² Roger K. Green, *The Rhetoric of Ornette Coleman’s Harmolodics*
<https://thoughtsandmusic.wordpress.com/2011/03/31/the-rhetoric-of-ornette-colemans-harmolodics/>