

Reflections - Music and Resistance

Tito

The one thing I liked throughout the course is how it really felt like a continuous discussion that we were building upon. No topic was irrelevant at the end of the day, there was always some relationship or point that could be expanded on from previous classes. For the sake of providing an example, we had discussed the limitations in modern music productions and sampling, imposed by the necessity of fitting musical elements to a grid, in softwares, and more generally to a specific conception of music. This, as limiting as it is, seemed inevitable to produce some enjoyable music. However, after Rolando's guest lecture where we had a discussion around the influence of aesthetic education on our experience of the world, I came to realise that the necessity of a 'grid' is just a consequence of our own acculturation. Alternative ontologies hold the opportunity to experience music and sounds differently. The issue really lies in our inability to escape our own ontology, and this is quite inevitable. It is in these alternative ontologies that musical meaning is to be looked for, at the edges of what is possible within and between them. Later in the course we had a guest lecture held by Sadia Khatri that talked about Sufi music and the chances it offers to escape binary existence and how it is believed to be a tool to connect with the supernatural. This then made me see how music can actually offer a glimpse of ontologies different from ours and by doing so it can become a tool in our struggle to redefine our aesthetic judgement of the world.

Other than this I personally developed a much more nuanced approach to discussions surrounding music. This came about thanks to the subject matter and because of the discussions with the class. I was actually very surprised by how some discussions took place and how they developed and am greatly appreciative of the group of people that participated in the class for having fresh and critical views. This, I think, is also partly due to the informal setting we were able to create, especially on Wednesdays when we met without a supervisor in the UCSA office. The fact that we weren't in a classroom and that it was only students really blurred the line between education and sociality that makes the conversations flow in a much more natural way I believe.

Lastly, the organisational aspects of the course were the biggest challenge. I personally never committed myself fully to the organisation of a university related event so organising a full class was an ambitious task. Here again I must express my thankfulness to the group where some people had more experience in this field than me. Getting a whole course together with proper considerations regarding the syllabus and guest speakers really isn't an easy job. We had to push each other to maintain deadlines and continuously contact people for information. Luckily the task division worked well and we all did our job without the need to have anyone 'take charge'. This proved to me that also with a group of people that doesn't necessarily know each other well, a lot can be achieved.

All in all it was a pleasant experience that not only gave me the opportunity to view music in a different way but also offered a peek in non-orthodox education settings and the potential they offer for learning in a meaningful way.

Estere

Going into the course, I was very curious to see how it would all shape and work knowing that Tarah wasn't going to be a part of it. Despite that, all the students, the lecture topics, the supervisor, and the guests came together in a very wholesome, creative, and engaging way. We started with the philosophical side of music, trying to define it through sound and silence, but we soon realised that this is essentially an impossible task and that all our questions and angles always ended up with the same result - that there is no 'result'. To be completely honest, I found this to be extremely frustrating but also perfectly clear. Music is inherently non-dual. Unfortunately (or fortunately, as these lines blur) as human beings we are wired to categorise and conceptualise everything so that we don't feel lost in a reality that shouldn't really make much "sense". This is the beauty of life and the beauty of music - that we don't have to restrict it when it is beyond restrictions. It is everything and nothing and thus is entirely an intersubjective experience. We brought those unique experiences to this course - philosophy, AI and sampling, biology, Sufi poetry, music of the Baltic States, Serious Request. Together with our own relationships with music like Johann playing the accordion or Filippo making and writing songs, it manifested as 7 musicians (whatever definition you see fit) participating in a musical mental exercise. Our Wednesday classes in the Student Council office and then Friday afternoons in Voltaire together with Sander were the classes I was most looking forward to. Listening to everyone's ideas and perspectives was inspiring every time. The multitude of lectures and examples like Sufi poetry or PI learning, kept expanding our perception of music which only made it more exciting to dive into.

When it was finally my turn to share the music of the Baltic States, it only hit me after I had presented how important my topic is. Growing up, pagan traditions and historic songs were simply part of who you are. Since not many people know much about the Baltic States, when I would try to 'briefly' explain, people would assume we like to sing. But it has always been frustrating to just stop there - the relationship with music is so much more than a few traditional songs. So, when I had to talk about it in an 'academic' way, it became very confusing and sometimes felt impossible because it was so "obvious" in my eyes. How do I explain something blatantly clear but rich in history and culture that can only be fully grasped when experienced? Daunting as it sounded, I feel like it turned out to be very interesting and I learned a lot about the topic from the eyes of someone who isn't Baltic. It was sometimes difficult to see it differently and try to formulate my thoughts and experiences in a way that made sense, but either way, I am very grateful for the challenge.

What helped a lot in understanding the bigger picture when it comes to these abstract notions like music, art, life, time (pretty much all the same thing...) was my philosophy class on Zen Buddhism. It inspired me to further deconstruct everything and anything around me, including music. I did so by following Dogen's steps of "studying the self" to "forget the self" in order to see

the nature of reality - the utter chaos which is only experienced in the present moment. Applying it to music, I tried to practise centering and decentering, that is, I tried to listen mindfully. Seems like nothing new - don't we all mindfully listen? We all have the power to pick, skip, like, dislike the songs we listen to. But that is exactly the point. We do this all the time so why not use it as something through which we can study the self to find the totality of reality and gain a more valuable moment of life.

So, by sitting down with a random song on shuffle, I tried to mindfully listen. What this entails is to understand the practice as a balance of flow between awareness of the self (thoughts, emotions, physical space, etc.) and the music (melody, lyrics, intensity, etc.) as well as the relation to time in the act of "switching" between centres and the knowledge that is gained when doing so. You must sit with your thoughts/emotions and then tune into the music to hear the answer which is the perfect response needed to return back to the centre to further study the self. I understand that I am conceptualising the act of listening which might be painfully obvious to any human being, but the key here is the amount of knowledge and growth you gain from this eye-opening and transformative way of learning. Suddenly, you see yourself completely differently - more refreshed and clear or more overwhelmed and confused. Either way, it's an awakening experience that drives you to continue studying. The trick is to not view it as some complex and layered task, it's what we do everytime we listen to music, we just are not aware. That is why the emphasis on time or present moment (in relation/with the music) is necessary in order to not let the previous constructions of your ego distract you. Through this understanding, music becomes a powerful tool of enlightenment which is the conclusion I find most satisfactory after being pushed and pulled about its elusiveness for an entire semester.

Throughout the course, with our continuous musical conversations and funny stories, with free coffee from Johann's magical UU card and going outside no matter the weather (it never rained!), I think we really grew on each other and appreciated our collective effort in getting lost in the world of music. With more practical classes like trying out sampling or going to see Joyland, it only made me wish we had more free time to do things outside of class. I do, however, find each time I see one of us dancing by the DJ deck at a party to be very wholesome and symbolic. <3

Fien

When hearing about this course through many people that helped initiate it made me incredibly excited and enthusiastic to apply and become a part of this unique experience it ended up being. Though I had to take the course as a fifth course this semester, the work I have put in never felt like much extra work on top of the general workload of my courses, because I enjoyed the topics, the people and the lectures very much. The first few weeks of the course were spent on music philosophy and mapping out the course bit by bit. First going through Western music philosophies and exploring the difference between music, sound and silence and if there even was a distinction to begin with. One of the experiences I most enjoyed during this section of the course was the guest lecture we had, given by Tjitze Vogel. I had organised this lecture which is a process that I did not anticipate to enjoy as much as I did. We had just aimed in the previous

weeks to define sound and music and Tjitze spoke to us about silence and completely changed our perspectives again. We started talking about our lecture topics in our breaks, always going outside with coffee from the vending machine, to take a breather from our heated philosophical debates, however we seemed to continue these in our breaks. Time and time again we would not stop talking about the topics we were all so passionate about. This first bit of the course really connected us as a group made us feel free to openly have these free flowing conversations and discussions. Due to this comfortable environment our discussion became more and more fruitful as we all felt free to participate and share more.

As the course progressed we explored interdisciplinary approaches to music and later on focused on exploring music in connection to forms of resistance. In this area of the course it was beautiful to see everyone's personal interests and connections to music and the specific topics we were discussing. Daan providing a guest lecture by one of his teachers at the conservatory gave us incredible insight to not only how the conservatory in this instance works and operates but also Daans individual connection to music and how he became involved with it in the first place. This being the case for all my fellow classmates. Hearing about the role music played in political situations in both the Baltics and Pakistan from Estere and Rania was incredibly special and personal to both of them and gave the topics so much more depth. Again here we tried to apply the philosophical connections we made in the first part of the course to music as a form of resistance and why music "works" in this context. How does music serve us and influence us in this context became important questions we discussed. In this part of the course I also provided a guest lecture by my father which was quite special to me. My father has worked for a Dutch radio station for as long as I can remember and is the main reason I am as enamoured by music as I am.

Furthermore I think the group dynamic we had is what made this course so special and fruitful for all of us. All coming from such different backgrounds with music, allowed us to explore the topic broadly and as in depth as we did. We all offered unique perspectives and opinions as well as unique ways of approaching and speaking about music due to our backgrounds with the topic. I think this was the main driving force behind how the course eventually turned out. This shows in our organisation of the symposium, in which we experienced quite some difficult moments. By coming together and supporting one another we all pulled together and made the symposium a very special experience. I treasure the time I have spent discussing my favourite topic in the entire world with some of my favourite people. Not only that, I feel like my understanding of music, the role it has in our world, the way it affects us as people and its everlasting influence on us, became much deeper and richer and for that I am thankful.

Daan

I decided to take this course simply because I love listening to and playing music. I grew up with a lot of music around me and carried that with me throughout my education, always with the idea that it was nothing more than a hobby. At the same time, I've been noticing myself losing interest in 'pure' science, having a feeling that there is something else out there for me. This course opened my eyes to a whole new perspective on the rest of my studies, realising that

there is a way for me to integrate my scientific interests with my passion for music and other humanities related subjects.

Having one session a week with just our group of students and a separate session with Sander was a very unique way of engaging with the subject matter. None of us have formal experience with musicology, meaning that we had to draw on knowledge from our own disciplines and direct it into the field of musicology. As fun and valuable as it was to hold these discussions with full freedom on our own, it was really good to have Sander's academic philosophical perspective to steer us in a direction where we have a balanced view of the broader concept of music. For me personally, it completely transformed the way that I think about music, realising that there is no way of accurately defining it. I think I became a bit obsessed with the idea of this indefinable concept which plays such a big role in my life. As a science student, I get taught that there is always a definition or answer to be reached in an investigation, or at least an accurate model which represents the 'truth'. I was fascinated by the obliteration of this framework by talking about music. Especially in tandem with the guest lecture from Rolando, it made me reorient my ideas about the value of my education in a broader sense than just societal 'progress' at the hands of science. I guess that this is the idea behind UCU's interdisciplinary nature, something which I now feel like I'm truly grasping.

I think that the low stakes (pass/fail) of the course really encourage the freedom to explore any topic adjacent to the course's theme. I know that for my own lectures I just sat down and thought about what I wanted to talk about, rather than what would be 'useful'. With everyone having the opportunity to do the same, it made for some extremely interesting lectures. I enjoyed every single lecture. It was amazing to see how the academic parts of the lectures were imbued with passion, which also speaks to the power which music has on a subjective level. One lecture which particularly stood out to me was one with Sadia Khatri, organised by Rania, about the power which emerges when existing outside of the binaries constructed by society; the parallels between the deconstruction of music with gender, art and identity all added to this new holistic, integrated view on academics. I think at UCU we tend to lose ourselves in the theoretical discussions of big ideas, to the point where it feels difficult to ground our conversations in reality and sense. This course struck a perfect balance where we would have endless ramblings with Sander, followed by completely informal conversations within the group still thinking about the topic at hand.

To elaborate on our informal conversations, I think our group was the best part of this course. It was amazing to be surrounded with people so genuinely interested and passionate about music. Everyone was willing to put in as much effort as possible to make this a successful experience for all of us. I think we all matched extremely well, making preparations for this course feel like fun, not work. Spending time working together and going to the cinema has been a highlight of my UCU career. Although the lack of credits for this course has severely tightened the rest of my curriculum, I am extremely happy and grateful that I was able to take part in it.

Rania

I came into this course a little afraid that my lack of theoretical knowledge of and experience with music would hinder my learning, but I leave this course understanding that music is so much more than its theory and practice. It is intertwined with, at least, history, culture, politics, and biology. It was because of every student's connection to each of these things that we were able to create a truly interdisciplinary environment where we got to dabble in a new kind of perspective, a new angle of approach every week. This course has been the perfect example of the fulfilment of learning completely independent of a hierarchical structure. Even if our sessions were specific to us, we were always working together to engage and support. I feel very lucky to have been able to experience music through the eyes of everyone else in the group for a while.

One of my favourite sessions was when Filippo introduced us to sampling and we just played around with music for an hour. I remember vividly the unending snow outside, so far away from the cosiness we had managed to fill up in the music room with fun ideas of interesting bits of songs and shocked, inspired aweing at Filippo's magic sampling. It was something I would not have learned otherwise, and it felt refreshing to be doing something I could make use of in my everyday life.

My investment in this course, and I think none of ours, was purely academic (or academic at all). I wanted to be a part of it because I thought I had something to share that people wouldn't be exposed to otherwise. This meant that I really wanted to present as much as I could but also as specifically as I could about my topic. It being non-western, something that already has such limited representation in academia, I felt an added pressure of it having to be holistic enough and for nothing to be capable of being misconstrued. But the people in the class made it so much easier. It was incredibly heart-warming to see the class so enthusiastic about all the material. The meeting after we watched Joyland, we were on our break and ended up discussing the movie sitting in the sun for the rest of the session. Everyone talked about specific moments from the film, how they felt about the characters, the parts they were confused about. It was after that that I realised I, of course, cannot singlehandedly represent all relevant information regarding South Asian music, but what I could do was trust that the people around me would continue to carry forward our reflections on the coloniality and Westernization of music and access that knowledge from various resources.

I was also really amazed by the amount of thought everyone put into the symposium. It was evident in each display how involved the student had been with the content, and how it was not limited to the classroom but also their personal lives. I thought that Tito's experiment with the dark booths was super fascinating- it put into practicality some of the questions we had been contemplating. The music felt really well-chosen too, something that kept me engaged and continuously forming associations in my head.

This was one of my favourite courses I have taken at UCU because it was not about finding answers, it was about coming up with the right questions. While I don't have a definition for music, I know that I never want to define such a thing as music. I want to perceive music as

something deeply connected to but also separate from the human self; something that exists within us but also exists outside of us. Something we cannot capture or erase.

Johan

The journey we embarked on as a group was truly transformative. I entered the course with a deep passion for music and a desire to explore its meaning and boundaries. Throughout the course, we delved into thought-provoking questions such as "What does music mean?" and "What is music?" These discussions led us to explore the profound significance that can be found in music. It offered a fresh perspective on music and provided thought-provoking discussions that challenged my preconceived notions. The engaging lectures and guest speakers pushed me to reconsider my understanding of music. What made the experience even more remarkable was the absence of a traditional classroom setting, which fostered open and natural conversations among participants

We explored music through both academic and non academic perspectives, such as philosophy, biology, ethnomusicology, AI and sampling, biology, Sufi poetry, and even explored the music of the Baltic States. In Filippo's AI music lectures, we delved into the conflicts surrounding the authenticity of generative AI technologies in both visual and musical realms. These debates echo historical controversies in photography and computer art, revealing the societal upheaval that arises with the introduction of new artistic tools. We explored different philosophical perspectives that contribute to this controversy, particularly in the context of AI art. Our discussions extended to Daan's lecture on biomusicology, where we contemplated the question of whether music is exclusive to humans or if animals possess musicality. Furthermore, Rania's captivating lectures on Sufi poetry inspired us to explore the profound impact of artistic expression. Through these enlightening conversations, our understanding of music's origins, the emergence of AI in music, and the potential for cultural change expanded significantly.

The guest lecture by Rolando fit our course perfectly. It became clear that we are often not trained or conditioned to truly receive music that is different from what we are accustomed to. This dominance of a certain epistemology, particularly evident in Western forms of notation and equal temperament, restricts our capacity to engage with diverse musical expressions. This limitation extends beyond music and reflects a larger issue of the global consumer culture, which perpetuates an impoverished sense of self and a narrow worldview. Being confined to a singular self, the global consumer fails to appreciate the richness and plurality of others' musical experiences.

These diverse connections broadened my horizons and showcased the immense potential of non-traditional learning environments. We likened music to the act of painting a landscape, where artists strive to capture the essence of what they see before them. Similarly, we attempted to imitate the divine proportions of music through our own musical creations. However, we soon realized the impossibility of finding a definitive definition of music. Instead, we embarked on a journey to explore the meaning of music. During this exploration, I had the opportunity to contribute my own perspectives influenced by Confucianism and Daoism. I shared how a Western perspective of music can be limiting due to the constraints of scales and tonality, and contrasted it with a Chinese understanding. These discussions opened up new avenues of understanding and revealed the transformative power of music.

The symposium was a culmination of the immense effort and dedication put forth by everyone in the course, and I couldn't be prouder of our collective achievement. Through the exhibition, we had the opportunity to share the transformative journey we embarked on, sparking profound conversations about the nature of music and its essence. We challenged the notions of what music is and how it can be characterized, inviting the audience to question their preconceived ideas that seemed so firmly set in stone. It was truly inspiring to witness the impact of our discussions as we challenged and expanded the audience's understanding of music. The symposium served as a platform for sharing our newfound knowledge and perspectives, leaving a lasting impression on both ourselves and those who attended. Our collective effort and the success of the exhibition reinforced the importance of pushing boundaries and exploring the limitless possibilities within the realm of music.

Overall, this music course has not only expanded my knowledge but also deepened my appreciation for the transformative power and limitless possibilities of music. It has been an enriching and fulfilling journey that has left a lasting impact on my understanding of music and its significance in our lives.

Filippo

The honors seminar has been quite a journey. I started talking about this project with Tarah almost a year ago and joined out of my passion for music. My idea was to back the way I enjoyed music with some academic explorations of its meanings and possibilities. Within the limited time of a semester, I think we achieved this. Walking into the course, I expected to find answers to the feelings that music transmits to me, as well as those that I can channel into it. Interestingly, I came out of it with more questions than before starting. Nevertheless, I got the chance to question my previous assumptions about what music is, where its boundaries lie, and what creative work can be interpreted as. For example, one week of the course was dedicated to AI music, a topic which I investigated a lot and used as a starting point to reflect on what actually creates music and whether creativity can only be found in humans. To do that, with the class, we discussed this topic, bringing in philosophical views such as Confucianism and Shinto.

The guest lecture by Rolando Vázquez also helped me expand my understanding of music, showing ways of conceiving music different from the ones I grew up with. During the lecture, I felt extremely happy to see that my classmates and I could confidently get involved in the discussion and bring up topics we discussed throughout the course. I had the same feeling during the final symposium, where we were able to carry an interesting discussion on what constitutes a song, trying to break the music/silence binary. However, the part of the course that interested me the most was Daan's lecture on biomusicology. It was fascinating to see how musical skills and awareness are present in the nonhuman and may have existed even before humans themselves. Linking this back to AI music, it may even mean music has never been a "human thing" at all!

At a personal level, the course (and most certainly the discussions with Sander) heavily influenced my relationship with music. I like to listen to, write, and perform music, and my habits changed drastically. I started going beyond simple taste, which is shaped by preconceptions, and instead, I began exploring musical spaces and combinations that try, in their own way, to challenge the status quo of listening to music. In fact, after the honors seminar, I began to develop my use of music to transform it from a mere product to a means of connection. Instead of consuming music like any other product, I try to appreciate its existence, creation, and uniqueness, and examine the ontologies and understandings of music it presents. As shown, for instance, by the Baltic singing revolution or Sufi poetry, music is a meaningful cultural artifact that carries discourses and beliefs.

Last but not least, I want to express my gratitude for the classmates I spent this semester with. The course required a lot of work, reading, and planning, which took a significant amount of effort and teamwork. Everyone contributed their own perspectives to the class, engaging in extremely interesting discussions that would usually continue in the dining hall cafeteria during breaks. Our commitment was evident at the symposium, which turned out to be very positive. As mentioned above, I was extremely happy to see our class being able to discuss music at complex academic levels after a long and intense journey. I especially enjoyed talking about AI music with the visitors, who responded well to the information I presented and were pleasantly challenged in their assumptions. I am also glad that Sander van Maas was our supervisor. He has been extremely flexible and always provided good discussion points and captivating ways of conceiving music. I still remember our first class when we were all discussing music, and he stopped us to ask what music was. Nobody could answer. I think that, in that moment, the seminar was set on the path it eventually took.

Overall, this has been one of the nicest academic experiences I've had at UCU. It truly allowed me to engage with the material and my classmates, and to choose what topics to explore. It was a lot of work, but it was definitely worth it, and it feels like I learned much more than in many other courses I took. To conclude, I provide a quote by Damon Albarn that best explains my adventure in this seminar: "Music is something that should speak for itself, straight from the heart. It took me a long time to understand that."