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Tuning into the Unfamiliar

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This research project sits at the intersection of Community Music, Ethnomusicology and Arts Practice Research. The overall aim to explore a more ecological way of being in the world in which sound rather than vision is the primary source of knowledge. This acoustic epistemology (coined 'acoustemology' by ethnomusicologist Steven Feld) differs from standard ocular-centric epistemology in several respects. Where vision distinguishes objects as fixed and separate from the perceiving subject, sound is intensely relational. For sociologist Jean-Paul Thibaud, attending to sound produces "a resonant body that gets in tune and in sync with his environment." (Thibaud, 2018) Sound does not belong to any object, but is a production of the interaction of objects, or "the event of the thing, not the thing itself." (Connor, 2004, p.157)

This form of knowing is familiar to musicians who interact in ensemble situations, but I wish to broaden the application of the idea, following ethnomusicologist Jeff Todd Titon, who imagines a "sound community" which, in concord with the qualities of sound, is "just, participatory and egalitarian." (Titon, 2015, p.25) Sound is always mediated by environmental factors, travels with no respect for borders and permeates every single body (human or otherwise) that it encounters, drawing our attention to the inherently ecological nature of each soundscape. (Schafer, 1977)Recent developments in the philosophy 'things' allows me to identify musical sounds as agentive forces, decentring the human subject and "positioning it as just one kind of body amongst many through which sound propagates." (Gallagher, 2016, p. 43) In *Vibrant Matter; A Political Ecology of Things*, philosopher Jane Bennett urges us all to cultivate a capacity to sense the vibrancy and agency of objects such as hurricanes, viruses or food, in the hope that we move "away from an ontologically ranked Great Chain of Being and toward a greater appreciation of the complex entanglements of humans and non-humans." (Bennett, 2010, p. 112). The aforementioned qualities of sound are my means of taking up her challenge, but what are the particular affordances of the *gamelan* that make it up to the task?

The standard Javanese *gamelan* orchestra comprises between 20-50 tuned bronze percussion instruments (all suspended in some way from/above their wooden supports) This included gongs, metallaphones, a two-stringed fiddle and a bamboo flute, accommodating between 12-20 musicians. Different families of instruments play different musical roles, with some delineating the structure, some cradling the melody and some adding layers of rhythmic elaboration. A *gamelan* orchestra is relatively easy for beginners to join, reducing to barrier to participation and the enjoyment of copresence and 'tuning in' (Schutz, 1964) particular to ensemble music performance.

It is also an example of an egalitarian ensemble, in that the players learn multiple instruments and must surrender to a certain degree individual expression for the cohesion of the group. The intense relationality allows the

possibility of embodying alternative values of participation and reciprocity informed by *gamelan* aesthetics.[1] Embodiment is crucial too, as playing *gamelan* for many is something felt as much as heard. The players are surrounded by tonnes of swinging vibrating bronze - and their own bodies become resonating elements of the ensemble - player, instrument and listener joined in the same circuit of sounding and resounding.

A research approach is needed that is appropriate to the fluid, mutable, emergent nature of knowing through sound. The Arts Practice Research approach is unorthodox, in that composition and performance are methodologies employed, but appropriate because performance as research is "embodied, sensual, fluid, interactional and affectively engaged." (Fleishman, 2012, p.13) The music produced will be specific to the individuals who play it, the space in which it is created, and the instruments which facilitate its creation. In this way, I am responding to new materialist approaches to art, which as makers to be sensitive to the "embodied entanglement of matter and teaching as pedagogy - the moments when materials and spaces impact on bodies and bodies impact on ideas." (Hickey-Moody & Page, 2015, p.12)

[1] For a small selection of work on the interdependent and ecological nature of *gamelan* music, see (McIntosh, 2009) (Brinner, 1999) (Sumarsam, 2013, Ch. 5) (McLean Macy, 2016)

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