A Methodological Scrutiny of Music Thinking

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Can a person who cannot play in real-time be considered a "musician"?

Abstract:

When one considers what a 'musician' is, a concert violinist, or a rock vocalist may spring to mind. There is probably no question that these are musicians, but what about the person who wrote the songs that they play, or the producer who sculpted their recordings in a studio? Are these people who don't play music in real-time still musicians? If someone can hum or whistle a song, does that make that person a musician? The writing that follows uncovers answers to these questions, and provides an in-depth investigation on music thinking. The findings of this discussion are finally employed to answer the question of if a non-real-time music maker is a musician or not.

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Introduction

Can a person who cannot play in real-time be considered a 'musician'? When posed with this question, one would envisage responses to fall into one of three categories:

1. The subjective – A "Yes", or "No" answer based on the persons unique system of beliefs,
2. The objective – Responses such as, "It depends on the circumstances", or
3. The philosophical pragmatist – Responses such as, "The answer will not change the reputable facts available (what we already know)".

While these opinions differ greatly amongst one another, it must be said at the outset that none of them are inherently wrong - or at least entirely devoid of truth. The article that follows will thus investigate thinking about music from all three perspectives, and attempt to uncover, or clarify, what it means to be a musician, and ultimately, if a person who cannot play in real-time can be considered a musician. To unearth answers to this onerous question, the definitions of 'music', 'musician', and 'musical understanding' must first be discussed. Following this, examples of non-real-time practitioners in the music industry are investigated, and the intricacy of this matter is revealed. These topics are viewed with insight into the changes that have occurred throughout the Modern and Post-Modern eras, and how these changes have contributed to forming the present. The first matter though, is the widely overlooked question of "What is music?"

Defining 'Music'

If the English language were to be a precursor for understanding, one would expect the word 'musician' to mean, 'Someone who does music'. For this reason, we must first interpret the meaning of 'music' on our journey of musical thinking. There is little doubt that humans have been attempting to characterize music since its unknown beginnings, with evidence of this as early as the Ancient Chinese (Fiske, 2008, p. ii). Gardner comments on the possible origins of music saying, "Many scholars suspect that linguistic and musical expression and communication had common origins and, in fact, split off from one another several hundred thousand, or perhaps even a million, years ago" (as cited in Raffman, 1993, p. 15). This is not necessarily to say that music *is* language, but may go some way to explaining why music has proven so difficult to describe under the boundaries of language until the present day.

The most widely publicised way of looking at music is probably through the eyes of the Euro-Americans, where music can be described through a combination of melody, harmony, rhythm and form (Titon, 2009, p. 5). Meyer neglects this concept, stating, "An account of the repertory of materials used in a piece of music and their manipulation cannot serve as an analysis of the work of art itself" (1967, p. 268). Such conflicts of thinking can also be seen in dictionary translations of music. In 1996, the Oxford English Reference Dictionary stated music as, "The art of combining vocal or instrumental sounds (or both) to produce beauty of form, harmony, and expression of emotion" (as cited in Nercessian, 2007, p. 61), whereas a 2010 online dictionary entry denotes music as an art, a science, a pleasing sound, or printed signs on paper (Dictionary.com, 2010, *'Music'*). It could be said that these dictionaries, rather than correctly identifying music, are merely stating *examples* of what music could be. Further, when looking at this issue from the subjective stance as mentioned earlier, none of these definitions fully encapsulate the entire capacity of music.

Some academics have attempted to broaden these definitions by coupling music in a relationship with physical dimensions. Maconie instigates that music is a "Measure of the passage of time" (1990, p. 66), and Fiske says that, "The construction of perceived music requires a cognitive-temporal space" (2008, p. 26). Here, Fiske raises the point that music could occur in a person's thoughts or imagination. If one was to speak objectively on these statements, the prospect of 'music in a person's head' may not exist under the above definitions, as the imagination could be said to possess no fixed properties of time or space. By now it is quite clear that music is a more diverse subject than most people comprehend. For an indiscriminating overview of music, a clear and diverse definition must be obtained.

Perhaps Jackendoff's view on music holds credibility where he says, "A piece of music is a mentally constructed entity" (as cited in Raffman, 1993, p. 19). Raffman continues this idea with, "It is supposedly *in hearing* a musical work that we acquire ineffable knowledge" (1993, p. 3). The 'ineffable knowledge' described here is perhaps precisely what the above definitions all lack. To clarify, music is an entity that may be described by many methods - through experiences and examples from person to person, its physical attributes, even through its practice - yet there is an element of music that remains ineffable, or indescribable, until this day.

What Makes a Musician

While a precise definition of music remains unknown, a wide range of perspectives of music has been discussed which will pave the way for the investigations that follow. To answer the question of non-real-time musicians, we must attempt to decipher where the line occurs between 'musician' and 'non-musician'. As mentioned earlier, one would expect a simple (yet vague) definition of 'musician' to be, 'Someone who does music'. The dictionary definitions, while agreeing somewhat with this, seem to complicate the matter humorously.

> "1. a person who makes music a profession, esp. as a performer of music.
>
>   2. any person, whether professional or not, skilled in music." (Dictionary.com, 2010, *'Musician'*)

Upon second observation, when cancelling out the conflicting information of these two phrases (i.e. professional versus non-professional, [feasibly] unskilled versus skilled), it becomes, "Any person in music". While this seems to define the obvious, there may be good reason as to why this dictionary has failed to distinguish this term.

There is an immense spectrum of music-related professions in the music industry, not all of them *necessarily* musician roles. Most people probably wouldn't classify a band's accountant as a musician, but disagreements quickly surface when one asks, say, "Is the person who tunes the guitars and plays for a sound check a musician?" Some would argue that this person understands the fundamentals of music – melody, harmony, rhythm etc. and that they are a professional in the music industry, so therefore is a musician. Others would argue that only the performers under smoke and lights could be classified 'musicians'. This is where our definition of music is essential. It was distinguished that while music can be classified to an extent by common characteristics and practises, there is an ineffable element which is common in widely recognised music. Therefore, to be a musician, one must inhabit the capacity to be competent with some characteristic in music, as well as the capacity to fabricate the ineffable component of music in some way. To put this into perspective, here is a quote from the World Wide Web that I shall not reference to avoid embarrassing the person, "I can fart and call it music". According to the above definition, this person *is* entitled to call themselves a 'musician', yet due to a part of music being ineffable, other people are also entitled to disagree according to their personal opinion on that unexplainable element in music.

The Importance of Understanding

To satisfy a non-biased approach to this topic, the third position of perspective is that of the philosophical pragmatist. This is the train of thought that is focused on what is, and what should be known of the topic in the present with clumsy definitions aside. In essence, "What complicates the story... is the question of whether or not musical understanding holds any significance" (Fiske, 2008, p. 11). Here an argument is raised where those who have no formal musical knowledge can be said to have an equal musical awareness as a trained performer, as this 'musical understanding' is (in this instance) considered worthless. Perhaps the most well-known objector to this idea can be found in the writings of Hector Berlioz (1803 – 1869). He writes, "Music is the art of combining sounds so as to touch the emotions of intelligent persons endowed with special, cultivated faculties", and says that those who are not musically informed "were *not meant for music* and therefore music was *not meant for them*" ([Released in] 1994, p. 1). Berlioz's words are clearly dated, as Post-Modern music now revolves around the greater population of a community - or colloquially, 'the masses'- listening to music (Manual & Middleton, 2010). Nevertheless, this argument correlates directly with the question of the non-real-time musician, as it potentially 'levels the playing field' between extreme ends of the current continuum of 'non-musicians' to 'musicians'. The final element that requires clarification in this discussion is the notion of time, before all of these facets can be combined to answer the question at hand.

The Meaning of Time in Music

The concept of time relating to music is an intriguing one. While Moylan describes time as a physical dimension of a waveform (2007, p. 5), Raffman speaks of time as the duration of a psychological process in experiencing music (1993, p. 3). In this sense, time is related to both the performance and perception of music. If this is so, surely the composition of a piece of music must be related to time as well? Perhaps the 'time' of a piece of music begins not when the music starts, but when the musical idea first inhabits the composers head, and ends when the piece is completely forgotten. This advances the concept that 'time' is a single "intrinsically locally asynchronous" (Matsuno, 1998) dimension of physics, meaning that it is only capable of emitting information in a unidirectional and uniform manner. In light of this, the term 'non-real-time' is not a feasible concept, as it would imply that there is more than one present, or instance of now.

In its original context, 'real-time' was used to describe "computer systems that update information at the same rate as they receive data." (Dictionary.com, 2010, *Real Time*). For the purposes of this commentary, the idiom of 'non-real-time' will therefore be used to describe the process of a person in the music industry who creates sound with the aid of computers - and this will be the extent of the term. The definition of time stated above refines the concept of time to a single entity, so the process of this person in creating sounds can be likened to that of a performer, even if the piece is not performed *per se*. Similar to the importance of understanding music, this analysis of time has seen the characteristics of the so called 'real-time' and 'non-real-time' musicians seem fairly comparable to one another. With this and the discussion on music and musicians in mind, the topic of non-real-time music can now be discussed to determine whether those involved can be considered to be 'musicians'.

Non-Real-Time Musicians; or just Non-Musicians?

The investigation has thus far navigated a number of contentious topics concerning the thinking of music, and the debate can now be scaled down to respond to the question at hand. It has been concluded that the term 'non-real-time musician' is most pertinent to those who create sound with the use of computer technology. Examples of sound orientated professions that embrace the use of computers include composing and music publishing, electronic musicians and the performance applications within, and music producers who utilize digital sound processing (Manning, 2010). Rather than analyse these practises individually to attain whether those involved are or aren't musicians, it is most reasonable to answer this question upon their similarities, and their adherence to the guidelines proposed in this article.

The first component is hence if users of computer technology can create music or not. It was concluded that the meaning of music can be expressed through examples, experiences, its physical attributes, and through its practise, but there remains an ineffable component of its definition. This means that so long as the sound produced by means of this computer technology has: the ability to be expressed; the physical attributes (sound pressure waves travelling through a medium) of music (Media College.com, 2010); and the ability to transpire the ineffable quality of music, it can be said

to be music.

Secondly, and most importantly, is the question of if those who use computer technology to create music can be titled as musicians. It was summarized that to be a musician, one must be capable in some aspect of music, as well has have the ability to fabricate the ineffable component in some way. In the same vein, if computer technologists are both able to create or manipulate sound under the heading of 'music', and have this sound impact on its audience ineffably (in the context described), they are entitled to call themselves musicians. Paradoxically, any member of the audience may disagree, and forbid the artist of this title in their own opinion if they were not ineffably affected by the experience. Ultimately, these conflicting opinions are both correct due to the subjective character of music.

One must also recall that the musicians in question do not need to understand what they know about their music, or why they have composed what they have composed, for enjoyment and the right to participate in music is equal for anyone knowledgeable or unknowledgeable on the subject. Further, it is through time that these judgments can be made upon music, as time is perhaps the single constraint upon any person involved in music making. Be it composing through a computer program, or improvising in front of an audience, the *process* of creating music is linked with time, making the terms 'non-real-time' and 'real-time' essentially the same.

A Final Word

It has been confirmed that someone who makes music in 'non-real-time' can indeed be classified as a 'musician', depending on one's personal opinion on the ineffable trait of music. A contrasting array of ways to think about music has been adopted, and the common ground within these has been used to develop explanations of the terms 'music' and 'musician'. In doing this, significant aspects of this matter including the importance of understanding music, and the relationship between time and music have been discussed, and have furthered the depth of investigation on the topic. This has also resulted in a more amicable version of the 'real-time' versus 'non-real-time' jargon, where the process of creating music in relation to time is assessed with performance/non-performance circumstances aside. Overall, the indiscriminating style of this investigation summons some interesting thoughts about music and music thinking, and provides a platform for further inquiry as music continues to evolve through time.

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