
2020

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This paper was a co-winner of the Philosophy Program's 2019-2020 Paper Prize.

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Recommended Citation

Gilbert, William S. (2020) "A Critique of Nelson Goodman's Aesthetics: Music As Process," *PANDION: The Osprey Journal of Research and Ideas*: Vol. 1: No. 1, Article 6.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/pandion_unf/vol1/iss1/6

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Cover Page Footnote

The advice and mentorship offered by Dr. Sarah Mattice was absolutely critical in not only the essays development but also my development as a student and thinker. Her feedback and generosity with time in meetings is something I am deeply grateful for. Dr. Jean Miller of Virginia Tech is also responsible for highly valuable suggestions for a much needed revision. I am very grateful for her advice. Finally I would like to thank Jason Simpson of the UNF Writing Center. His feedback on initial drafts and helping me distill the meaningful content from the unessential was also very key to how the paper turned out.

A Critique of Nelson Goodman's Aesthetics: Music As Process

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Abstract

This essay seeks to provide a space to argue for music as both a process and memory as a counter to Nelson Goodman who argues for score as the fundamental means of identifying a piece of music. This paper builds off the work done by Dr. So Jeong Park in her piece, 'Sound and Notation: Comparative Study on Musical Ontology' in which she outlines an argument for calling attention to thinking about music as experienced over focusing on Platonic forms. She specifically focuses on the question, "what is music?" rather than "what is a musical score"?² Her question was intended to contrast with Nelson Goodman's view of placing fundamental importance on the score of a musical work rather than any one instance of a musical performance.³

1. Introduction

My paper argues for the importance of the process of music, by bringing into account several types of music from groups such as Korean shaman and Later Confucians as well as American slaves and freedmen as counterexamples to Nelson Goodman's theory. Process here meaning the dynamic series of steps that result in the production of a song. These groups were chosen because they offer an insight into music which does not rely heavily on a notation system that would fit Goodman's account of music.

This paper seeks to strengthen the work done by So Jeong Park by offering more instances of Eastern ontology and by incorporating American examples as well. I also wish to complicate the argument between Park and Goodman by thinking about music through a lens of process rather than purely music as it is the case with Park, or purely score verses performance as it is with Goodman.

1 William S. Gilbert, will.gil.phil@gmail.com.

2 Park 2017: 418.

3 Goodman 1968/1976: 128, 178, 221.

In accordance with Park, my goal is a shift away from the focus of the abstract form, namely the score of music, which may have been the emphasis with the music that Goodman likely had in mind. Score, I will argue, is not the focus for the forms of music of certain marginalized groups or for historical cross-cultural exchanges of music between illiterate musicians. Park discusses the distinctive Chinese musical notation systems and focuses on three particular terms that could all be translated as ‘music’ in English, but in their Chinese context could vary from resonance to the structure of the music in question.⁴ The point of different Chinese terminology for music makes up the bulk of her argument for the need to incorporate Eastern thought into the ongoing discussion around music ontology, which has been historically dominated by Western thinkers.

These terms for music stem from an increasing divide between ancient sage king music from Confucian rites and “innovative” newer folk music. Folk music here being used to describe music listened to and played by laypeople, typically at festivals. This tension would culminate with a new framework for the interpretation of music.⁵ Sound (shēng 聲), tone (yīn 音), and music (yuè 樂) thus form the Chinese understanding of musical works.⁶ None of these terms make reference to score, which begins to cause a rift between Goodman and Eastern process philosophy. Process, for example with Daoists maintains a place of primary focus. This is seen in the Zhuangzi’s Butcher of Ding parable pays attention to the act of cutting the ox, carving the joints with a masterful flow and ease, not the finished product of the carved ox.⁷ These three terms: sound (shēng 聲), tone (yīn 音), and music (yuè 樂) are entangled in a dynamic relationship of being complementary or opposite in theory but inseparable in reality. This is a dramatic step away from the dichotomous relationship Goodman wrote on namely, score (abstract form) and performance. These contexts in which the terms are grounded upon are open to change which, Park sees as key to a solid framework of music that also, of course, changes depending on time and context. Park goes on to argue for the importance of the physical sound of music, that she sees as key to a complete understanding of musical reality. Her argument concludes,

4 Park 2017: 425.

5 Park 2017: 424.

6 Park 2017: 425.

7 Zhuangzi: Ch 8.

As such, musical reality is inseparable and interactive with our musical experience in this framework: musical reality is not defined by abstract structure but mapped into a dynamic combination of shēng and yīn; musical experience is not alienated from the realm of musical reality but is understood as an interactive participant in musical reality.⁸

In this way Park sees the Chinese model as being open to change and more accurate to understanding music experience and reality than Goodman's framework. This is because Chinese process ontology is able to incorporate individual performances and the audience's perception and participation in those performances. Similar thinking to Park is found in the dualistic concept of yin and yang in which opposites are connected on a dipole, thus one cannot exist without the other as Lao Tzu writes in the *Dao De Jing*, "The things of the world bear Yin on their backs and embrace the Yang."⁹

I agree with Park in her point about the usefulness of thinking about music as a process rather than a fixed form with regards to identifying a specific piece, particularly in the case of jazz. Park writes, "Music was esteemed to fit well into the Chinese philosophical framework, that can be called 'process metaphysics'."¹⁰ Jazz musician and saxophone instructor Steve Treseler says about process in jazz, "Instead of copying the final product, process-based learning asks us to consider *how* and *why* musicians make music."¹¹ Process in the Eastern context holds a place of pinnacle importance, specifically with Daoist thinkers around the concepts of the Dao, harmony, and music. In the *Zhuangzi*, one of the central texts of Daoism a passage describes 'perfect music', "I made it describe the harmony of the Yin and Yang, and threw round it the brilliance of the sun and moon. Its notes were now short and now long, now soft and now hard. Their changes, however, were marked by an unbroken unity, though not dominated by a fixed regularity."¹² Park also mentions the Korean notation system of 'Jeongganbo' (정간보) that differs from Staff notation in its emphasis on rhythm rather than the pitch of the notes.¹³

8 Park 2017: 427.

9 Lao Tzu: Ch 42.

10 Park 2017: 424.

11 Treseler 2015.

12 Zhuangzi: Ch 14.

13 Park 2017: 423.

2. Jeongganbo (정간보)

This distinctly Korean notation system, Jeongganbo (정간보) was developed during the 15th century CE under King Sejong, the same King responsible for the creation of the Korean alphabet, Hangeul.¹⁴ This form of score presents an interesting counterpoint to Goodman's thought in that Jeongganbo is a system based more on rhythm rather than the pitch of the tones.¹⁵ The challenge is that with the emphasis on rhythm, pitch is more flexible, so multiple tones could be played for a certain note, changing the sound in the performance. So Jeong Park outlines pitch in Jeongganbo, writing, "Theoretically, each pitch can produce a different scale, such as a basic pentatonic scale (五音, Wǔyīn) comprising of the five notes, gōng (宮), shāng (商), jué (角), zhǐ (徵), and yǔ (羽), corresponding to "do, re, mi, sol, la" in the Western solmization."¹⁶ With this said, two performances playing the same score correctly, can produce slightly different sounding songs. This notation system provides a clear counterexample for Goodman's conception of score being the fundamental means of identifying a piece of music. If Goodman's Platonic system of structure based on score cannot stand up to another notation system, music without score would prove even more problematic for Goodman.

3. Korean Counterexamples

While growing in its influence, Korean philosophy has never shared a similar level of limelight as have China or Japan. In non-ancient times however the most influential Korean thought has been a balancing act between Buddhism and Confucianism, both of which made their way into Korea from China with Shamanism remaining quietly in the background, oppressed by the government.¹⁷

Perhaps the most influential Korean Buddhist is Wonhyo who is particularly well known for his writings on the 'one-mind' or *il-sim* which as An Ok-sun explains, "Il-sim is an inclusive concept explaining all beings and their interconnection in a single system. Il-sim indicates both human subjectivity of mind and the world that it is reflected through."¹⁸

14 Park 2017: 1.

15 Park 2017: 5.

16 Park 2017: 6.

17 Cawley 2019: 2.

18 An Ok-sun 2002: 140.

The first example of non-Platonic based music is that of the Korean Shaman, who combine ritual and music without score. Korean Shamanism is at the very root of Korean history, as Hahn Man-young outlined in their piece, *The Origin of Korean Music*, “Tan’gun, the founder of the nation (2333 BCE), is regarded as a shaman since he performed the ritual ceremony to heaven. Therefore, it is logical to say that the shaman ritual music is the origin of Korean music.”¹⁹ The Korean example plays a key role in my argument because it serves as a resounding counterexample to Goodman. This early shaman music either does not use notation, or when it does, it uses a flexible notation rather than a fixed system, which has problematic implications for Goodman’s theory. By flexibility, one could play a piece correctly according to the score and use different pitches for notes, making it sound different but being entirely according to the score.

For the Korean shaman, music plays a pivotal role in their religious practices, usually in events such as demonic exorcisms. Pál Koudela and Jinil Yoo argue that it is the music of the shamanic rituals that is the most important part of said rituals.²⁰ For example, the Shamanic play Mae-kut, which incorporates music with a performance arts ritual as Man-young describes, “It is performed on the eve of the Lunar New Year for the exorcism of evil spirits from houses and villages. It is also held to pray for happiness and blessing in the coming year.”²¹ The Lunar New Year historically holds high significance with the Korean people, marking the starting point for their calendars for centuries.

The Shamans, who are typically female, engage in rituals other than exorcism, such as particular *kut* (shamanic rituals) that invite the spirits of warrior generals of centuries past to possess the shaman. To do so a shaman typically has a matrilineal connection to the spirit, previous females down the line interacting with this same spirit. The shaman may have a shrine dedicated to this spirit in their home, to aid in the facilitation of a reverent relationship.²² The ritual itself requires various weapons, costumes, and the all important music, which hopefully pleases the general’s spirit and aids in the possession. The music is comprised of rhythmic drum beats overlaid with crashing cymbals and a whining and erratic flute. The shaman then when

19 Man-young 1985: 27.

20 Pál Koudela and Jinil Yoo 2016: 2.

21 Man-young 1985: 21.

22 Video of a shaman in her practice. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRIUy2dyBQA>.

possessed, climbs atop sharp knives called *Chaktu* and divines the future through the waving of a multicolored flag, in addition, they also throw out candy to the spectators. This is but one example but other rituals for shaman include music as well, music without score that is to aid in whatever the ritual calls for. Shamans would also perform music during more festive times such as planting and harvest festivals, both crucial times for an agrarian society. This leads to an additionally important example which complicates the issue of score, memorization.

4. Memorization

Goodman famously writes, the ““most brilliant performance with one wrong note” does not count as an instance of the musical work.”²³ which with the context of the genre seems to not be an adequate definition, at least for non-Classical European music. It would seem odd to make the claim that musicians performing works through memorization, memorizing the sounds of a piece rather than the notation in a score are not performing musical works.

In times of old when there was no notational system and or rampant illiteracy, it was via memorization that songs survived through generations of musicians, be they shaman or village storytellers. Oral traditions have been the key means of communicating histories and beliefs since the most ancient times. Music was often used in accompanying the stories to aid with memorization and to keep the content interesting for the young people listening. During the 2017 Ethnomusicology Forum, Simon Mills and Sung-Hee Park describe modern East Coast Korean shamanism, “Today’s younger ritualists have all graduated from university, received music education in diverse genres and entered the tradition at a later point in life.”²⁴ These ritualists, while being now well educated and quite literate still need to be educated in the oral Shamanic tradition to continue that legacy. As such music remains a central part of Korean shamanism, through both ritual and storytelling, which allows for the cultural histories to survive.

These legacies as oral traditions are process oriented and therefore flexible to change over time. Taking a pragmatic approach to music, one may ask if unplayed and forgotten music exist? I want to argue it does not which is why either score or

23 Goodman 1968/1976: 186.

24 Mills, Park 2017: 78.

with oral traditions, the continued passing down of music through these rituals and shamanic education remains the key to keeping the traditions alive.

5. Function as Process

Korean Later-Confucianism is a practice that also engages in music's ability to communicate with the divine. As opposed to Shamanism which interacts with benevolent spirits and demons through music, later Confucianism uses music when engaging in ancestral worship rituals. These rituals represent the most important practice, with music playing a key role. Music here represents a vital means of communication with one's ancestors. Proper music is known to be pleasing to the ancestors and also has the benefit of being the keystone of a moral education. Proper music here being used to describe music not performed by lay entertainers but ritual or court music that put one in a proper state of mind.²⁵ I argue function is yet more evidence pointing towards process as being fundamental to the understanding of a piece. Function as process answers both 'what a piece is for', and 'what is a piece' that Goodman attempted to answer.

As T. C. Lai and Robert Mok write in their article on *Traditions of Chinese Music*, "While Lao Tzu and Mo Tzu were essentially anti-music in their thinking, Confucius was not. He held a moralistic view on music. He realized that music as a potent force could be made to serve useful ends."²⁶ Those useful ends were the worship of the divine, and the ancestors. Lai and Mok go one step further by making the claim "Music making then, was not for entertainment but for ritualistic purposes."²⁷ This reinforces the concept of functionality in later Confucius music as high music was for either moral refinement or ancestral worship. Lesser folk music was looked at as separate from Confucian music which was usually played at the noble courts or during rituals, while folk music was played by common people during festivals. Some folk music, played in a particular style and according to a score, however, was elevated to the status of high art, music which would also be played in Korean noble courts.²⁸ Shifting to the West there is another group of people whose music relies heavily on memorization with no written score to go off.

25 Lai, Mok. Proper in that through the cultivation via "proper" music one develops the innate goodness humans possess.

26 Lai, Mok.

27 Lai, Mok.

28 Hahn Man-young 1985: 27.

6. Considering American Counterexamples

Beginning the American counterexamples to Goodman is the case of African slaves, brought to the United States. They brought minimal physical relics of Africa but they did bring a deep connection with music and the knowledge passed down largely orally in their cultures as found in ‘call and response’ music also known as field hollers, the root of several genres of American music. Call and response is named after the performance of the music, in which a leader ‘calls’ by singing a particular line which could be in a question form to be followed by an answer sung back from those listening.²⁹ This type of music, sung in fields in the American South had no written scores to reference, and was a participatory and functional music, intended to help those engaging in it be able to get through another hot day of work from sun up to sun down. Questions relating to score or musical works, if the assumed definition of a musical work is stagnant, static, and unchanging, then such thinking on works or scores cannot hope to capture something as fluid and changing as call and response. Field hollers changed daily and adapted to the circumstances of the day, the type of work being done, and the well-being of the group members who made up the participatory audience required for such music.

A direct descendant to the call and response style is found in contemporary music in predominantly Black but also Episcopal and Anglican churches. The song leader leads singing a line, sometimes in question form, which is followed by a response by the congregation. This more contemporary form of music however is more structured in that those participating use hymnals and the content of the songs revolves around Christianity rather than what specific people happen to be feeling or going through during the time of the singing.

The audience, as is not the case with classical European music, helps in shaping the song as active participants and not passive listeners. This style of conducting music with an active audience challenges the score because each performance differs. In the case of call and response; the function, it seems to me is the most fundamental to the music. The function observed here being the healing and restorative nature of music to aid in making the daily struggle of those singing less terrible. This could be considered the earliest modern example of music therapy, depending on one’s definition of modern. As I hope has become clear, Goodman’s music ontology is

²⁹ Keegan 2009.

incomplete without accounting for music based on oral tradition, without score as well as the functionality of certain genres.

Other types of music stemming from call and response follow a similar pattern of being difficult to answer with questions of musical score such as the blues which also came from the South, particularly Mississippi.³⁰ Blues music places quite a heavy emphasis on the experienced emotion, hence even the name refers to a sense of melancholy felt by some musicians who play this form of music. Much of early blues was not written down in notative score; rather, the more popular artist's performances were recorded in a studio to be pressed into vinyl or broadcast live over the radio. This is in due in part to music illiteracy as the result of impoverished schools and some children not attending school to help with family farms. Thus blues' most fundamental aspect is the space for musicians to express their deepest emotions and to improve the morale of those listening.

7. The Issue of Jazz

Concluding the American counterexamples to Goodman's score as being most fundamental, is jazz, and which again, stems from African call and response and originates in the American South. Jazz serves a similar role than the blues in that jazz players are given a space to perform at their peak, allowing for the raw expression of emotion and skill. As Zola Phillip puts it in her essay '*The Social Effects of Jazz*', "Faced with racism, discrimination, and segregation, blacks have always found comfort and a sense of peace in their music."³¹ Some musicians who study and play jazz require improvisation as a necessary condition to be jazz.³² Such a necessity functions in a way that the musicians cannot utilize a score in order to perform a work and that their playing must be spontaneous and in some way original to be qualified as jazz.

Jazz musicians play to push the limits of the song and to challenge their own technical prowess. As evidence I point towards the demanding timing between the players and shifting time signatures required of the musicians as well as the trademark

30 "“Baby Seals Blues”, written and composed by Baby F. Seals, is published. It is the first time the word “blues” is used in print to describe a style of music.” (National Blues Museum).

31 Phillip's '*The Social Effects of Jazz*'.

32 Philip Alperson operates “under the assumption that jazz necessarily involves improvisation” (“A Topography of Improvisation,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, this issue, p. 280).

aspect of jazz providing each musician time to play an accompanied solo as a way to show off their playing. A classic example being Dave Brubeck's "Take Five" which is played in an unorthodox 5/4 time signature and typically features solos from both saxophone and drums.³³ This is to say that I see the function of jazz to be a means of expression for the musician that celebrates skill and genuine expression. Both of which, polite Southern culture and Jim Crow would not allow which raises questions of jazz or music in general as a means of subversion.

Jazz places a demanding challenge towards Goodman in that there can be dozens of versions of the same song. The central melody is in place as a rough guide but variables such as the tempo, instruments used to recreate the song, and the spontaneous solos from the band all add up to create multiple renditions of the same piece. Jazz also created a unique space for multi-racial band members to all play together. This is different than blues which was mostly performed and consumed by Blacks. With group members having differing levels of musical training, 'playing by ear' became an important feature of jazz, relying not on score, but memorization of the songs rhythm and riffing off of the other musicians. As Howard Stone, founder of the Vail Jazz Foundation puts it, "With improvisation at the heart of jazz, written music wasn't relevant. Instead of studying written music, jazz was learned by "ear," also known as "aurally," from the Latin word that refers to the ear or hearing."³⁴

Jazz music then proves a difficult challenge to pin down what exactly a jazz piece is, intuitively the melody is the only consistent feature of a song so that would be the best guide for defining a specific jazz song if the score is irrelevant. This is where thinking about process rather than fixed form is particularly useful because with the case of jazz music and performances the song is some entity being created right in that moment, a spontaneously evolving group of sounds one could call a song. Jazz then presents itself as a thorn in Goodman's side, particularly his famous quote, "Even the most brilliant performance with a single wrong note does not count as a performance of the relevant work."³⁵ This essay seeks merely to limit the scope of what Goodman's model is applicable to, which is not to say the work done by Goodman is for naught, but perhaps that it applies mostly to Classical European music. Dr. Park puts it, "Recent discussions on the ontology of jazz and

33 As featured on the Dave Brubeck Quartet's Time Out album.

34 Howard Stone.

35 Goodman 1968/1976: 128, 178, 221.

the relationship between improvisation and composition require us to broaden the current scope of musical ontology.”³⁶ It may be possible while performing a jazz solo, which is by its nature improvisation, to not be able to play a wrong note at all.

8. Conclusion

My argument has shown that certain genres are at their most fundamental core a process that trumps the score as being the defining basis of a work. Each of these genres I argue hold a unique function for the musician and or audience which quite reasonably could be answers to the question ‘why do you play’. I do not want to make the claim that all music is functional, nor that it should be. I wish to strengthen Park’s argument and offer a challenge to Goodman, through examples from my own research that counter the work started by Goodman. I argue that musical works without scores that live in the performance and memory of those acting out the song, the song can be thought of as a performance art, such as dance. Such art is fleeting in nature, with nothing remaining of it when it is finished but a recording (which is not the thing itself) and it being imprinted in the memory of those who saw it.³⁷ In this way if a work of music does not make a significant difference then it is not real.

One may object that this essay dismisses the importance of a score. Score plays a significant role in many cases with the learning of music and use in professional settings when producing a recorded work. Score is also perhaps the easiest means of identifying an individual work, some might argue process philosophy is unable to do.

These warranted criticisms I hope have been answered throughout the essay. Score is an important means of identification and reproduction of a work. This essay however argues to limit the absolute authority of the score, not dismiss. I also argue that with regards to identification, when one is asked to recall a song they are more likely to think of the sound of the song, e.g. tone or melody, rather than written score.

The sweeping question “what is music for” cannot hope to be answered in one essay however this examines the important aspect of process and functionality music can hold. More work can be done when thinking about music as function, for example the ritual music of other cultures not mentioned in this essay which

36 Park 2017: 423.

37 Tibetan sand paintings can be thought of in a similar way, which are incredibly beautiful works of art while they exist, while they are in the process of being made, but alas are temporary and fleeting.

could have very different reasons for incorporating music into their practice. A final example that needs further development is that of music therapy which seeks to ease pain, aid in sleep, and reduce the effects of dementia.³⁸

³⁸ Tomaino 2009.

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