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## Music and function: an open question.

Tullia Magrini

The belief that music fulfills a role in human society lies at the very foundation of anthropology of music: when Alan P. Merriam traces the roots of the anthropological approach to music in the literature of the late nineteenth century, he points out that «the emphasis was placed [...] upon the part music plays in culture and its functions in the wider social and cultural organization of man» (Merriam 1964:4).

For a long time, functionality was not considered to be a universal attribute of music. Rather, it was presented in many cases as a special feature of the so-called folk and «primitive» musics, as echoed, for instance, in George Herzog's statement that «folk song is often said to be more functional in its use or application than cultivated poetry or music» (Herzog 1950:1034). Actually, functionality was used, for better or worse, to set up a boundary between folk and «primitive» music on the one side and art music, meant as the expression of art for art's sake, on the other. The assumption that such a boundary exists was supported mainly in musical scholarship by another discipline, that is, aesthetics, which was founded on concepts such the «autonomy» of the artwork. However, as Serravezza points out, it must be acknowledged today that these concepts «represent more an aspiration than a reality» (Serravezza: in press). Furthermore, the distinction between «functional» and «autonomous» musics has become less and less popular in recent times, while the attitude that recognizes the existence of functions in any musical event has begun spreading in scholarly literature. As Bruno Nettl stated recently, «Ethnomusicologists probably agree that people everywhere use music to accomplish something. The old issue, whether music in certain types of cultures was used more for certain kinds of things, has been submerged by a concern for ways of looking at these uses» (Nettl 1983:148).

Scholars, probably under the influence of early functionalists, have traditionally been concerned mainly with the social functions of music, connected to musical life considered as a whole, with its wide range of aspects. They aimed at finding out «the» final role of musical activity in the life of different societies and, in order to reach this goal, they considered every aspect connected to music (words sung, dance movements, context, occasion, gender of the performers, organization of the musical event, and so on). However, to take all these aspects into account at one time was a complex undertaking, and scholars introduced some forms of distinction. One of the major issues in this regard seems to have been the distinction between use and function, which also embodied a hierarchical meaning: the use was often meant as the insider's folk evaluation, the function as the outcome of the scholar's analytical evaluation (Merriam 1964:219-220). Yet, this question also seems to have faded away. As Kaemmer says, «Although use and function are defined as distinct aspects of social behavior, the same behavior can often be interpreted in terms of

both» (Kaemmer 1993:149) according to the different perspectives adopted by the observer or the performer, which may focus on the consequences or results of the human action as well as on the performer's conscious and unconscious purposes and goals. We realize that in considering use and function we are dealing with a whole series of aspects of musical events that involve mere facts as well as complicated matters such as psychology and interpretation.

To cope with the many aspects of a culture's use of music, Nettl suggests a model, the «pyramid model», whose layers represent, first, the many overt uses of music reported by the informants; second, the different scholars' abstractions of these uses (which may include «Merriam's ten functions»); and, eventually near the top, «a statement of single, overriding, major function for any one society» (Nettl 1983:154). Nettl points out that, «The pyramid avoids confronting the difference between the analyst's and the culture's interpretations [...] Uses and functions are presented not as contrasting halves of a dichotomy but, rather, as the opposite ends of a continuum that moves from the absolutely down-to-earth and factual to the most vitally interpretative and thus perhaps unprovable» (1983:157). The pyramid model is very useful to account for the multiplicity of the insiders' and outsiders' evaluations and interpretations of the part played by music in a given society. If we now assume that at least some or all of these evaluations and interpretations are correct, we should acknowledge that the pyramid model leads us toward a further concept, that is, the multifunctionality of music. Multifunctionality seems to be the most useful concept we can resort to in order to deal with the wide range of roles actually or virtually played by music in the life of people, if we employ the term function in its broadest meaning, that is, «to play a part» or «being active», without further distinctions. In suggesting that multifunctionality should be considered as a basic aspect of music, I rely on my own experience as well as on the experience of other scholars. As early as 1957, Freeman already said that many functions may overlap in folksong (Merriam 1964:220); afterwards, Royce stated that, in the field of the anthropology of dance, «a multiplicity of functions tends to be the rule rather than the exception» (1977:83); and more recently Kaemmer wrote that «Many times several types of function are operating at once» (1993:143). To express my view of multifunctionality, I will use the metaphor of the rainbow. A rainbow, as everybody knows, is a bow or arch exhibiting the prismatic colors without any hierarchy. The rainbow is, in my view, a good metaphor for the arch of parallel and different functions belonging to a musical phenomenon, which are symbolized by the different juxtaposed colored stripes of the bow.

I will now illustrate my suggestion by briefly mentioning some examples resulting from my research. As the first example, let us look at a love song. What part does it play in social life? A love song certainly fulfills the function of expressing feelings. Moreover, the love song is often performed as a serenade, which is an action endowed with a communicative function. However, we cannot forget that Merriam also suggests that, «If the lover uses the song to woo his love, the function of such music may be analyzed as the continuity and perpetuation of the biological group» (1964:210). This is a very different perspective. Thinking about the practice of the songs of love and disdain that I studied in Northern

Calabria (Magrini 1986), still more functions may be perceived for a serenade. In this context (and certainly not only in this one) serenades served as a form of public communication when an engagement occurred and therefore allowed the community to exercise its control over the male-female relations within the village. This function is even clearer when considering that even the ending of an engagement was enacted and communicated again by means of a serenade. This time the man did not perform a song of love, but rather a song of disdain, thus allowing the whole community to know that the engagement had ended because of the fiancée's shameful behavior. Social control over male-female relations is thus an important function fulfilled by serenades. Yet still more functions or colors are distinguishable. The practice of singing serenades was a group practice. This is worth noticing, because, although the practice of singing serenades disappeared, the same songs of love and disdain were still sung by male groups with a completely different aim, that of collective entertainment. In this case one may notice that the musical performance acquires a different meaning and stresses the value of collective relationship and interaction in a group of men. The way in which the performance is realized illustrates a rigorously hierarchical model: one of the singers acts as a leader, the others act as subordinate partners. The leader chooses the verbal text to sing and leads the performance; the others take turns repeating his words. In this sense, the performance is altogether redundant, and the meaning of this behavior especially seems to reside in the socialization of the verbal content presented by the leader according to a hierarchical pattern that expresses an important relational pattern within the group (see Magrini 1986, 1989, in press). At the same time, at the strictly musical level, a different relational pattern is enacted, and we can observe an equal, balanced, and co-operative relationship among performers (Magrini in press). The function of enacting and symbolizing relational patterns within the group has outstanding importance in many musical practices. Moreover, in working out a melody and «playing» with it, performers can test their creative skill, within some broad limits. This is the last function I can detect in this practice of serenade: the creative function of «play» (see Magrini in press). All these functions are parallel; have in principle the same importance; and help to determine the multicoloured parts played by this musical practice in a community, and thus the image of the colored stripes that form one rainbow. This is what I mean by the term multifunctionality.

Another example concerns the practice of singing ballads in Northern Italy from the end of the nineteenth century until the 1950s (see Magrini 1995). According to historical sources, during the second half of the nineteenth century, ballads were a repertoire belonging only to women, who performed narrative songs while working together inside or outside the house as a form of entertainment. In the lowlands, the prevailing model was the «multiple family household», that is, a number of related nuclear families living together under the authority of a chief called the «reggitore». In these kinds of communities, joining in singing or listening to ballads during collective work was common, and it appears to be one of the principal means available to women to exhibit their group relationship. In this regard, it should be stressed that a survey of ballad melodies reveals that most of them were conceived for two-part singing and not for solo singing, as was maintained



for a long time. The female group relationship was very important in a society in which men and women were deeply divided and in which women were quite underrated and completely subjected to the authority of males. Therefore, it seems that group ballad singing may have been a very important way of symbolically displaying solidarity and community among women.

Ballads have another well-known function: to tell a story. The narrative function is an essential aspect of ballads and played an outstanding part in the popularity of this repertoire, since narratives are the best means available for people to express and communicate their perception of themselves, others, and external reality. It is well known that narrative is essential in ballads: it emphasizes above all a «skeleton» of events that are connected and configured to describe patterns of behavior related to certain types of occurrences. Referring to the theory of Ricoeur regarding the narrative function (Ricoeur 1981), we can state that these patterns have the essential meaning of helping to perceive reality or some aspects of it by describing what a certain type of man or woman might or would probably or necessarily do in certain situations. I think that the value of patterns assigned to ballad narratives is emphasized by the attitude of the female ballad singers, who stress estrangement toward the events narrated both through verbal choices and singing style. The «impersonality» of the performance style seems connected to the impersonality that belongs to ballad narratives: they point directly to emblematic cases of life and are functional to our need for cognitive strategies to imaginatively grasp reality and cope with it.

I have recently pointed out that Italian ballads are mainly concerned with stories of women and, in particular, with the representation of dangers coming from men in the past peasant world (abduction, rape, murder, betrayal, mistreatment, abandonment, and so on); with the terrible consequences (imprisonment, death) resulting from a conflict with family or authority about questions of love or from breaking the law; and, finally, with the representation of female virtuous behavior. Thus, while ballads offer a means to imaginatively grasp reality, they also reveal a prominent educational function in pointing out these themes and in offering up precise values and patterns of behavior (see Magrini 1995).

This interpretation of the functions of Italian balladry in the past peasant world is confirmed by the way in which they faded away: the deep transformation that affected peasants' work and their way of life in the 1950s (due to growing internal migration toward cities and the mechanization and industrialization of the country), the disintegration of the «multiple families» that lived in farmhouses into scattered nuclear families in which there was no occasion for women to live and to sing together and the deep change in the role and models of social behavior of countrywomen, all made obsolete the kind of reality and worldview depicted in ballad narratives, as well as their educational value. Thus the practice of collective female ballad singing died because had no more function.

Besides detecting again a multifunctional musical practice, we run into a new question, that is, the dynamic character of functions. Functions change to agree with the processes of transformation that take place in societies. They may die away, as in the previous case, or change, as in the following one.

My last brief example refers to the practice of the *Maggio drammatico* in the *Emilian*

Appennines (see Magrini 1992). The Maggio is a genre of musical theater, endowed with a highly syncretistic character, that was traditionally connected by scholars to ancient spring rites. The main function of this seasonal ceremony was seen to be its re-enactment of the struggle between summer and winter. This is also what performers say about the Maggio. Regarding the seasonal aspect of the performance, Kaemmer would probably speak of a function related to environmental adaptation (1993:146).

However, I would point out that it is possible to recognize at least one other basic function of this kind of performance. Considering the different plots worked out in the written texts (named *campioni*) of the different performances, we can acknowledge that basically the drama describes again and again the way in which single heroes enter into an alliance through a complicated series of adventures and form a group that fights and finally defeats a rival group, which embodies evil. Therefore, I have suggested that the Maggio be interpreted as the representation of a sort of myth of foundation of a social group, which symbolizes the community that performs the Maggio. The re-enactment of this myth of foundation emphasizes that the community feels that its inner bond is based on group solidarity against any kind of danger that comes from the outside world. In this context it is clear why in former times every village had its own company, its texts, and its performance practice, so as to represent this myth in its own particular way.

This function weakened in recent times. The mountain villages where the Maggio drammatico was performed during the entire nineteenth century underwent a dramatic depopulation in our century because of migration and decreasing birth rate. Today the Maggio is performed during the summer when the people who have emigrated to the cities come back to the villages for vacation, together with any tourists. Companies formed by people who belong to one village are no longer common, and good performers often play in different companies. For the proud villagers who continue to perform this musical drama, the Maggio has become above all a way of expressing their identity as Appennin people, and this value is clearly stated by the performer who said, «We perform the Maggio not because our fathers did the same, but because it is within ourselves».

Summing up my considerations, I have pointed out that every musical practice, like a drop that reflects the sun's rays, gives rise to a rainbow of parallel functions, symbolized by the parallel and differently colored stripes of the arch. I have stressed that functions are not something given and unchangeable. On the contrary, functions may change when the social context changes: functions are dynamic. They may disappear, like the educational function of ballads. They may grow faint, like the Maggio's function of representing the single communities of the Appennines villages. They may be replaced by new ones, like the function of social control belonging to the Calabrian songs of love and disdain, which disappeared, together with the practice of serenades, while the enactment of a model of interaction within the male group became the dominant function of this musical practice. Thus, the study of the social functions of musical practices can never bring us final results. On the contrary, it should be the study of a process, since functions arise, may become dominant, and may grow faint or disappear in agreement with the transformation of the social environment and the part played by music within it. I think that this is the most

important aspect of this issue today, since the processes of change in societal and in the functions of their musical practices are speeding up everywhere.

Finally, I would like to focus on one further topic. Up until now I considered the functions of music in a traditional perspective, that is, by taking into account the extramusical elements of the musical practices examined. My previous analysis strongly depends on these elements. One example to make my point clear: how do we decide whether a serenade is a love song or a disdain song? In Northern Calabria, for instance, both love and disdain songs are sung in the same melodic type and with the same form of instrumental accompaniment and performance practice: they are indistinguishable at a musical level alone. Therefore, of course, to distinguish love songs from disdain songs we must listen at the words. However, words are something extramusical, like many other elements I have considered until now. Examining most works that deal with the functions of music, we realize that in many cases they deal with extramusical facts and infer from them the functions of music. Under the name of functions of music we sometimes find both functions that depend on extramusical factors and functions that belong to the music itself (like aesthetic enjoyment, physical response, or play).

I would suggest here that it might be useful to operate with this distinction between the overall functions that belong to musical practices, in which both music and extramusical factors play a part, and the specific functions that relate to making music itself. Even if a thorough survey of this issue would be inappropriate here, I will try to convey some examples of what I mean. For instance, an important function of music is to bring about particular ways of conceiving and organizing the body, which are, of course, social facts. I would mention here the players of the *valiha* in Madagascar, whose way of playing the instrument reveals a perfectly symmetrical and ambidexterous use of the body. This is mirrored in the bipartite structure of the instrument itself<sup>1</sup> and is very far from the asymmetrical concept of the body (see Magrini 1988) that is prevailing in many instrumental practices of the European world.

Still another function of music is to set forth a particular non-verbal form of thought. The Sardinian player of *launeddas*<sup>2</sup> employs predefined, small musical entities (the *nodas* or *pikkiadas*) and connects them in groups according to two essential requirements: 1. there should be no repetitions of the *nodas* in a group; and 2. there should be the least possible difference between *nodas* that succeed each other (Bentzon 1969:60). Thus, the *launeddas* players think of their music in terms of a continuous process of minimal variations aimed at the connection of main melodic units, the *nodas*. This way of thinking of music has no correspondence, as far as I know, to any form of verbal thought. Furthermore, again it is a social fact: a different way of thinking and performing music would not be accepted by those who dance to the *launeddas*' music.

1. The same observations concern the *korà*, see Magrini 1988.

2. The *launeddas* is a triple clarinet widespread in Southern Sardinia.



Many authors have written about the communicative function of music, often shifting to the verbal communication accomplished during a musical event. But an important function of making music is to bring about a special, non-verbal type of communication. For instance, when some individuals interact in a musical group performance by singing in turn, the way in which the melody is worked out differently by the single performers may display each performer's search for communicating and emphasizing through musical means his/her individuality within the group and his/her creative skill. This happens, for instance, when the worshippers of Giugliano, a village in Campania, perform for the Madonna dell'Arco (see Magrini in press). The examples might be many, of course, and they point to the communicative function of musical behavior in itself, independent from the words sung and the context.

Finally, I'll mention a well-known function of music. Music breaks up chronological time and gives rise to a new temporal dimension, which is organized according to strictly musical principles. As Imberty says, music writes time (Imberty 1981). What I would like to stress here is that the timespan defined and written by music may be associated with particular types of behavior (for instance, to interact within a group by singing, dancing, performing a drama, celebrating a rite, and so on) to which music offers a proper context and meaning. That is, music marks that timespan within which particular types of behaviors—which would be inappropriate in the absence of music—may be realized. This role of music is functional to the organization of social life and is associated with different kinds of behavior in different societies.

Concerning this, I would like to recall, for instance, that, whereas in the western world a public contest is basically a verbal action, Asen Balikci showed that the Netsilik people north of the Hudson Bay perform contests as song duels in which the contestants can make any kind of accusation against each other in music (1970). Here the function of music is to «contain» the contest, which becomes a form of play or representation of the dispute, and weaken its virtual violence. This is just an example of the way in which music may work, by becoming a context in itself, to influence the meaning of what is said or done during the musical event. This is why delicate matters such as feelings, emotions, protests, and so forth, find in music an ideal context: what is said and done in association with music belongs to another temporal and communicative dimension, happens outside the co-ordinates of common everyday reality, and may always be denied. Thus, we can conclude that the study of the functions of music may be realized both by taking into account the relation between music and its social context, as was traditionally done, but also by studying the part played by music itself as context, that is, as a particular temporal and communicative dimension suitable for carrying out particular aspects of human life.

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