

## “Performing Bodies”: Introduction

Samuel Horlor and Laura Leante

The recognition of music as an embodied phenomenon has a long history across musicology, with ethnomusicology one of the areas in which it has been most thoroughly explored as a theme. Interest in the role of the body in music making can be traced back to an article by Erich von Hornbostel from 1928, in which the pioneering comparative musicologist looked at African drummers, pointing out the importance of their preparatory gestures. That paper is probably best remembered for a commentary published by John Blacking in 1955, one which marked Blacking’s first steps in a life-long academic engagement with the body, as part of his broader concern with the human being as naturally musical (Blacking 1973, 1977; Reily 2006). This focus was then developed by John Baily in his studies of musicians’ movement patterns (1977, 1985).

Through the years, ethnomusicologists’ attention towards the body has continued, benefiting from and drawing on growing research on embodiment in other disciplines – from theories of embodied cognition to gesture studies (e.g. Merleau-Ponty 1962; Lakoff and Johnson 1980; McNeill 1992).

The present issue brings the focus back to ethnomusicological work, by looking at the “performing body” through a selection of case studies. It engages with several aspects of music’s embodied dimensions through the lessons we have learned since interest first emerged and with the theoretical, technological, and analytical tools at our disposal in the twenty-first century. In doing so, it also contextualises research on the musical body within recent and current academic debate, including on the transnational circulation of music, migration, and decolonisation (Solomon 2012; Stokes 2020; Reyes 2022). This collection aims to take stock of the state of ethnomusicological research on the body in performance and to stimulate debate from a range of diverse, but – as we hope will be clear to the reader – complementary perspectives and research methods.

The volume opens with a thorough overview, by Thomas Solomon, of recent approaches to the study of music and the body. Moving across consideration of embodied cognition, phenomenology, affect, gesture, and entrainment, among other aspects, the discussion converges towards the suggestion that ethnomusicologists, thanks to their emphasis on ethnographic experience and attention to the multisensorial nature of music-making, are ideally placed to study the “performing body.”

Solomon’s contribution provides scaffolding to the subsequent articles, which look at six distinct cases. These studies – which span different geographic areas and music traditions – share a grounding in an extensive engagement with fieldwork; at the same time, they present different theoretical approaches and research methodologies, as well as narrative strategies.

Lorenzo Chiarofonte discusses dance and possession in Burma/Myanmar, in particular the *nat pwe* ceremonies in which spirits (*nat*) are invoked for their auspices and protection. The analysis of sound and movement is the means through which the author investigates the affects and effects of possession, conceived here as an “exchange of bodies” between the *nat* and the medium. Methodologically, Chiarofonte draws on observations and analysis of various materials collected in the field, especially ethnographic footage.

In depth use of audiovisual materials is also at the core of the next article, which studies the performance of the Japanese *shōga*, an oral mnemonic system used in the transmission of musical knowledge and often practised without an instrument. Advancing previous work, which has been limited to the study of its vocal execution, Sayumi Kamata analyses *shōga* from the perspective of bodily movement; to do this, she matches qualitative methods with quantitative ones, bringing together ethnography, transcription, and extraction of beat onsets and of movement data from videos.

Marking a turn in theoretical approach and writing style, Charissa Granger discusses dance in large steelband ensemble performances in Trinidad and Tobago, bringing the performing body within the purview of current debate on decolonisation. Adopting a personal narrative, Granger focuses on dance as a practice to transgress coloniality and sees the performer’s socio-political body as a tool to understand and express a decolonial aesthetic. The shared experience of dance generates joy, evoking emancipation and freedom.

The dancing body is also at the centre of the studies in the following two articles, which deal with issues relating to the transnational circulation of music. The first looks at the bodies of Afghan refugees at social dance events in Austria through the lens of intersectionality. Bringing together consideration of theoretical approaches, reflection on the interdependency of anti-Muslim discrimination and gender policies, and ethnography, Marko Kölbl shows how body movements function as powerful signifiers of race/otherness, and of gender/sexuality.

A more empirical approach characterises the work on the translocal practice of tango argentino across Europe conducted by Kendra Stepputat, who devised an experiment to investigate the embodied knowledge required by dancers to comment on “tango danceability.” The research combined qualitative and quantitative data to access bodily knowledge through musical cues (harmonic structures emerging as a particularly interesting one) and to help forge a better understanding of perceived danceability.

This special issue concludes with a contribution by John Baily, taking the Afghan *rubab* and the *dutar* as case studies to present and discuss the human/musical instrument interface and how it relates to the structures of the music performed. This article offers a counterpart to the first paper and thus creates a frame for the whole volume; it complements the breadth of Solomon’s initial overview with an in-depth look at the diachronic development of an individual’s research trajectory, one that started from a collaboration with Blacking and has then extended across the author’s entire career.

The contributions included in this special issue of the European Journal of Musicology were originally presented at the XXXV meeting of the European Seminar in Ethnomusicology, which was held at Durham University, UK, in September 2019.<sup>1</sup> John Baily’s chapter was originally published in a collection edited by Suzel Reily for Ashgate’s SOAS Musicological Series (Baily 2006) and is reprinted here in a slightly amended version. We are grateful to Suzel Reily, the series’ editors who have supported this initiative – Rachel Harris, Angela Impey, and Richard Williams – and the publisher for their permission and support in reprinting this paper. Finally, we would like to thank Britta Sweers and the editorial team of the European Journal of Musicology for supporting us through this journey.

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1 The event was chaired by Laura Leante and Martin Clayton, who also joined the programme committee together with Ana Hofman and Rytis Ambrazevičius.

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