What In The World Is Music?

The piano recital is about to begin.

The first piece listed on the program is 4'33" (four minutes, thirty-three seconds) by a composer named John Cage.

The pianist is greeted by warm applause as she steps out onto the stage and bows to the audience. She sits down at the piano, puts a musical score up on the stand, and clicks a button on a stopwatch. Closing her eyes and gracefully placing her hands over the piano keys, she appears poised and ready to play.

But then she doesn’t play anything.

Thirty seconds go by, then a minute. Nothing but silence. She reaches up and turns a page.

Still no music.

Two minutes go by. Another page turn; still, no music. The silence becomes almost overwhelming. Every sound in the concert hall – the muffled coughs, the squeaking seats, the whirring of the air-conditioning system – seems as though it is coming through an amplifier.

Finally, four minutes and thirty-three seconds after sitting down at the piano, the pianist reaches over, turns off the stopwatch, stands up, and bows, never having played a note. Some members of the audience applaud enthusiastically. Others do not seem to know quite what to do.

This is music?

Shift the scene now to a mosque. A passage from the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam, is being recited.
The words flow forth in melodious tones: beautiful, profound, elegantly crafted – in a word, musical. Yet this is categorically not music according to the Muslim people who have gathered at the mosque to pray. In fact, to refer to it as such is not just wrong from an Islamic perspective, but offensive.

Is this music?

A third scene now. A teenage boy sits in his room on a Saturday afternoon listening to his favorite CD, Wrecking Everything, by the thrash metal band Overkill. The music is turned up loud, very loud. The boy's father is downstairs working on his taxes. He is tired and has a headache. After a while, he loses his patience, charges up the stairs, and storms into his son's room.

"Turn that garbage off!" he shouts. "How can you listen to this junk? It's nothing but noise. It's not even music!"

Not for him perhaps, but it certainly is for his son.

Is this music?

A Point of Departure: Five Propositions for Exploring World Music

Determining when you are experiencing "music" and when you are experiencing something else is not always a straightforward matter. One person's music may be another person's noise, prayer recitation, even silence. The question "What is music?" can yield radically different responses even within a single family or tight-knit community. Expand the scope to a global scale and the divergence of views multiplies exponentially.

All of this raises at least two interesting questions:
1. What factors account for people's many and vastly different views of what music is, and what it is not?

2. Given that there is not even general agreement about what music is in the first place, how might we establish a reasonable, common point of departure from which to begin our exploration of music – world music – as the global and extraordinarily diverse phenomenon of humankind that it is?

The five propositions that follow address these questions in both direct and indirect ways. In the process, they collectively provide a point of departure regarding what music is – and what it is not – that underscores the approach of this text as a whole. This approach is based on the idea that it is important to have an open-minded and inclusive perspective on what music is when exploring world music. In keeping with this idea, these five propositions represent perspectives that are widely shared among people interested in the study of music as a worldwide phenomenon. The propositions are by no means definitive or closed to debate, however. They are presented here mainly to establish a common ground for our musical journey, but also will hopefully stimulate you to think about and discuss your own, possibly different, ideas about what music is.

**Proposition 1: The basic property of all music is sound**

Music is made up of sounds. To distinguish music sounds from other kinds of sounds (noise sounds, speech sounds, ambient sounds, etc.), we will use the term **tone** to designate a music sound. A tone, then, *is a sound whose principal identity is a musical identity as defined by people (though not necessarily all people) who make or experience that sound.*

Every tone possesses four basic physical properties: duration (length), frequency (pitch), amplitude (loudness), and timbre (quality of sound, tone color).

Additionally, tones are defined by the musical environments that surround them. Each tone gains musical meaning through its relationships with other tones. It is through these relationships between tones that the building blocks of music – melodies, chords, rhythms, and textures – are formed.
Tones also acquire cultural meanings from the symbolic associations that people attach to them, associations that extend far beyond the domain of music sound itself. A tone with a particular set of physical properties may be used in one instance to summon deities in a religious ritual. But that exact same tone also may appear in a commercial jingle for a fast-food restaurant, where the purpose is to convince people to buy more burgers and fries. How any given tone is understood, then, has at least as much to do with what people make of it as with the physical properties of the sound itself.

Any and all sounds have the potential to be tones, that is, to be music sounds. This includes obvious candidates such as notes that are sung or played on a piano, guitar, or violin, but it also includes the sounds of slamming shutter doors, pig squeals, water rushing in a stream, or anything else. As we shall explore later, the classification of sounds as music sounds (tones) or as nonmusic sounds is principally a product of people's intentions and perceptions regarding sounds. Theoretically, at least, there are no limits, but people do make decisions about what they will and will not accept as a music sound, just as they make decisions about what they will and will not accept in most other areas of life. That is why some people identify the sounds of Qur'anic recitation or of thrash metal as music sounds, while other people categorically do not.

But what about John Cage's 4’33″, a work in which the most basic property of music – that is, that it be based in sound – seems conspicuously absent. Surely here, in what is often referred to as "Cage's silence piece", we have crossed the line of what any reasonable human being might justifiably classify as music. Or have we?

Perhaps not. Actually, there are sounds – many sounds – in every performance of 4’33″. There are the sounds of the performers' footsteps as they walk out onto the stage, of the audience applauding, of the clicking on and off of the stopwatch, of the turning of pages at prescribed time intervals, of the random assortment of coughs, chair squeaks, heating and air-conditioning system hums, and whatever else may emerge during a given performance. It is not an absence of sounds, then, that makes 4’33″'s status as a piece of music controversial. It is, rather, the fact that most people are not accustomed to hearing the types of sounds that occur in a performance of the piece as music that mainly accounts for the controversy it has generated for over a half century since its premiere performance (by the composer) in 1952. Indeed, one of the main "points" of
4'33" is that it creates a framework for music listening that compels people to reorient their hearing, to hear "the music" inherent in a range of sounds and silences whose musical qualities are conventionally ignored or go unnoticed by music listeners.

**Proposition 2: The sounds (and silences) that comprise a musical work are organized in some way**

One marker of difference between music sounds and other types of sounds is that music sounds always emerge within some kind of organizational framework, whereas other sounds may or may not. Music, then, is a form of organized sound. This is plainly evident when we listen to a well-known Western classical music work such as Ludwig van Beethoven's Symphony #9, but the organizational element is no less significant in music that seems, at least to many Western listeners, to defy recognizable principles of organization. This latter category may include music from a foreign culture that is based on unfamiliar organizational schemes, such as the Japanese gagaku music. It also may include music originating in our own culture that intentionally subverts the common and familiar organizational principles that make music recognizable, things like conventional types of melodies, rhythms, and instrumental sounds. Much of John Cage's music fits this description.

**Proposition 3: Sounds are organized into music by people; thus, music is a form of humanly organized sound**

The baseline assertion that helps us begin to distinguish between music sound and a great many other types of organized sound is that music is a human phenomenon: it is a form of "humanly organized sound" (Blacking 1973). There is no doubt that many animals express themselves and even communicate using organized systems of sound that have music-like qualities. It may even be true that some animals (e.g., whales, dolphins) conceptualize certain types of sounds they create in ways that are closely akin to how people conceptualize music. Research suggestive of such possibilities already exists, and it is likely that future research will be even more revealing.
For our present purposes, however, it is proposed that music, understood as such, is essentially a human invention. It is something that people either make, hear, or assign to other kinds of sounds. Birds and whales did not "sing" until human beings saw fit to label their distinctive forms of vocalization with that musical term (which, again, is not necessarily to say that they do not have a well-defined concept of what they are doing when we say they are singing – a good subject for research, speculation, and debate). Moreover, birds and whales do not necessarily "make music" any more than pigs do, but the "songs" of birds and whales seem to have been more amenable to musical interpretation by people than the grunts of pigs (see also Nettl 2006:23).

In short, returning to a point made earlier, any and all sounds have the potential to be employed and heard as musical sounds. However, only when a human being uses a given sound for musical purposes, or perceives or describes that sound in musical terms, does the sound actually enter into the domain of "music." Once again, it is not what a sound is per se, but rather what people make of it, that is the main criterion.

**Proposition 4: Music is a product of human intention and perception**

Expanding on another premise alluded to earlier, there are two basic processes of human cognition involved in determining what is and what is not music: intention and perception. When any sound, series of sounds, or combination of sounds is organized by a person or group of people and presented as “music” – that is with the intention that it be heard as music – our point of departure will be to treat it as music. Similarly, when any person or group of persons perceives a sound, series of sounds or combination of sounds as “music”, our point of departure will be to treat that as music too.

The value of this approach – which I refer to for convenience as the HIP (human intention and perception) approach – is that it (1) privileges inclusiveness over exclusiveness and (2) emphasizes the idea that music is inseparable from the people who make and experience it.

John Cage created 4'33" with the intention of making a piece of music; musicians who perform the work approach it as a piece of music; and at least some members of the audiences who hear it performed are likely to perceive it as
music. Thus, it fits the criteria of "music" in the HIP model. Granted, a performance of 4'33" may be interpreted as many things other than a music performance – for example, as a philosophical statement about music, a commentary on the experience of music listening, or a challenge to conventional expectations of music listeners – but these other points of view only enrich how 4'33" may be understood and appreciated as music.

Islamic Qur’anic recitation can be treated as music because its melodic and rhythmic organization is likely perceived by you (if you are not a Muslim) in musical terms. The undeniably "musical" quality that Qur’anic recitation suggests to Western listeners – and indeed the close similarity of such recitation to forms of organized sound that Muslims themselves do recognize as music makes the question of why it is not considered music by Muslims all the more interesting. The answer is that many Muslims believe music to be essentially a profane art that has no place in religious observance: if it is part of worship, it is not music, regardless of what it sounds like. In this case, religious and cultural principles take priority over ostensibly musical properties of sound. (As we will see later in the course, attitudes in Islamic societies concerning the relationship between worship and music are considerably more varied and complex than the present discussion suggests.)

As for the example of the father dismissing his son's favorite thrash metal CD as being "not even music," the HIP approach favors the idea that this is indeed music. The musicians created it with the intention that it be heard as music, and the teenage boy heard it as music. It thus meets the basic criteria of music status. This does not mean that the father's opinion on the matter should not be part of the discussion, however. Examining why different people in the same situation accept or reject something as music is one of the best paths to understanding the roles and functions of music in human life. In this case, differences in age and generational status between the boy and his father would seem to be decisive factors in explaining their very different views on what is, and what is not, music.

**Proposition 5: The term *music* is inescapably tied to Western culture and its assumptions**
We can now say that music is a category of humanly organized sound that takes its core identity from the musical intentions and perceptions of its makers and listeners. That would be a solid point of departure for our journey were it not for the fact that many of the world's peoples do not even have a word equivalent to music in their languages. Furthermore, even in languages that do possess a term closely akin to music, such as Arabic, the term may not always apply where we would expect it to, as the example of Qur’anic recitation illustrates.

And so we are left with a dilemma: even though every human culture in the world has produced forms of organized sound that we in the West consider music, many of these cultures do not categorize their own "music" as music at all. It seems that our concept of music, however broad and open-minded we try to make it, cannot transcend its Western cultural moorings. We are apparently doomed to a certain measure of ethnocentrism; that is, we cannot help but impose our own culturally grounded perspectives, biases, and assumptions on practices and lifeways that are different from our own.

What options do we have for confronting this dilemma? We can

1. Avoid dealing with these problematic phenomena of sound in musical terms altogether.

2. Impose Western musical concepts on them, in essence "converting" them into music on our terms (for example, treating Qur’anic recitation as music regardless of the Muslim claim that it is not music).

3. Try to find some way to integrate and balance our own perceptions of what we hear as "music" with the indigenous terms and concepts used by other people when describing the same phenomena.

The third of these options is the one that for the most part guides the approach of this course, both in relation to the fundamental question of what is and is not music and in terms of two closely related issues that we address later: how music lives and how music works.