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Front cover:  Lucky charm, Cologne, Germany, 1936, plastic, cotton yarn, 6.5cm × 5cm, InvNo. VI 11998
© Museum der Kulturen Basel. Photo: Omar Lemke 2023
Anette Rein

„Klangquellen. Everything is Music!“

Ethnological context treated with musicological terms

*Museum der Weltkulturen*, Frankfurt/M., Germany until September 1, 2024

Due to space limitations, *Museum der Weltkulturen* in Frankfurt/Main only shows temporary exhibitions. The focus of the exhibition is the relationship between environment, sound, people and music. How soundscapes of every place, every culture and every time shape our listening habits and which meanings are attributed to sounds, sound alignments and music are examined in the exhibition by using examples mostly from Southeast Asia and Oceania; however, objects from other areas are also on display, such as the jingle dress from North America and objects from Africa, Asia, South America and Europe.

Exhibitions on tones and sounds are relatively rare. Former exhibitions approached the topic like an encyclopedic instrument study. Vanessa von Gliszczynski, one of the curators, therefore said: Exhibitions on ethnological instruments „only ever say something about a group or culture – but I’m much more interested in how people deal with sound in general and how sound might become something like music at some point. I use the concept of „music“ critical, because „music“ as a term is a very Western concept.” In this exhibition, an unusual change of perspective takes place by placing sounds as exhibits at the center of the presentation for the first time. 170 exhibits are no longer just meant to be viewed, some of them can also be heard.

The focus of the exhibition is to encourage visitors to explore their own „musical“ taste by getting to know different and mostly unfamiliar sounds from their own contexts and those of others. It's primarily about non-Western sound creations supplemented with examples from Europe.

The boundaries between sound and music are consciously dissolved. In all cultures, sounds are associated with different meanings and linked into different sound alignments. The term “music”, which is essentially influenced by European traditions, is also just a form of sound alignment. In many cultures, terms such as “music” or “sound” do not exist, but they are used throughout the exhibition. The curator therefore points out a strange phenomenon: „A good example of the difference between European perception of music and its classification in other cultures is the play of *dúndùns*, drums from Nigeria. ¹ Many listeners from Europe say that this is music because it is played with a musical instrument. The absurd thing is that drumming on the *dúndùns* is not perceived as music, but as language. This is one of the examples that breaks down the concept of music. Not everything we hear as music from our European perspective is also perceived as music elsewhere. Conversely, certain sounds sometimes have great meaning in other cultures, but we would not classify them as music. People here, to put it disrespectfully, only hear it as splashing or gurgling but a culturally important meaning. We want to tell our visitors: open your ears, all sounds are important, regardless of whether they are categorized as music or not."

Yoruba *dúndùns* talking drum ensemble (from Lagbaja.com). A sound example can be heard in the MPIEA room as part of the research project.

Snail shells from New Guinea and Seram, Indonesia. Photo: Wolfgang Günzel, 2022
The audio guide with its 24 sound and video examples, which is included in the entrance fee, is a central element of the exhibition and truly indispensable here. Visitors are invited to an acoustic tour ("Soundwalk"), in which sounds as immaterial exhibits play the decisive role of the presentation. Care was taken not to overload the visitors acoustically: "Of course we couldn't do four audio examples in each room. This was only possible in the first large room with the horizontal slot drum. One has to be very careful to avoid overlapping of the infrared signals that corresponded to the exhibits.

For the exhibition and the accompanying program, the Museum der Weltkulturen worked with numerous local, national and international partners: The Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics presents its study "Music or not?" ("Is that music?") in the exhibition. It examines how sounds are perceived and how differently one interprets sounds as music or not. Unfortunately, the presented results are without details of the research framework and biographical contexts of the interviewees. The result is therefore neither verifiable nor comprehensible. Students from the Institute for Musicology at the Goethe University in Frankfurt/Main curated a room as part of a course and presented their approach to the topic of sound sources, which included, among other things: about stereotypes, colonialism and processes of appropriation. 2 Using the soundscape of weaving from Indonesia, recorded by Alexander Sebastians Hartanto, a Javanese weaving artist, it is conveyed that until some time ago the sounds of weaving in Indonesia were strongly symbolically charged. In eastern Indonesia, for example, they expressed a girl's marriageability. Using the example of the pan flute, a "sound cliché" is questioned. It is made clear that pan flute music should not always be associated with the well-known piece "El Condor Pasa", which is often perceived as muzak. Instead, it emphasizes that panpipes are more versatile and are not played exclusively in South America.

The exhibition was curated by the museum’s musicologist and Southeast Asia curator, Vanessa von Gliszczynski, Matthias Claudius Hofmann (Oceania curator) and the project assistant Jan Philipp Kluck. However, the team did not want to deal with this topic under classic ethnological questions such as “sound and music in ritual” or to concentrate on specific instruments, as was previously the case, but instead wanted to expand the concept of music in the direction of sound.

For the exhibition, the team put together three groups of naturafacts and artefacts whose use is shown as a cultural practice: 1. Objects that are also understood as musical instruments in the societies of origin, 2. Objects from nature that have been made through processing (inserting a hole) so that they can be used to produce sounds (e.g. snails) in communication and 3. everyday items and processes that produce noise like the hitting of bark.

With the exception of four loans from Frankfurt’s Historical Museum (a chewing gum vending machine) or from the “Conserve the Sound” project by the private company CHUN+DERKSEN GbR, all instruments came from the museum collection. In addition, objects were purchased for the exhibition – such as the angklung Orchestra of the workshops; the morin khuur (Mongolia) and three kadedek mouth organs from Borneo as well as the goaßeln (Bavaria). 5 As a gift, the museum received a sasando, a harp-like tube zither native to Rote Island of East...
New exhibitions

Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, from the Indonesian Embassy and a second one from musicians from Rote after their concert at the exhibition in November 2023. The intention was to show objects in the exhibition that can also be tried out in workshops.

An important term in the exhibition concept is “soundscape” 6, a term that was developed in the late 1960s by the sound researcher R. Murray Schafer. In the exhibition, the museum expanded Schafer’s approach by presenting some examples of material culture such as the bark beater tool, which serves as a material sound medium and can be a characteristic part of the soundscape as the local environmental noise.

A main theme of the ethnological exhibition is material culture, but, at the same time, the academic division into material and immaterial culture is problematized with good reason. It’s about the resources that people use to make instruments or everyday objects that, with their sounds, become part of the soundscape. Depending on the material, timbres and musical forms are determined.

Objects from everyday life are consciously changed, either to produce special “sound effects” or, as in the jingle dress dance 7, to reinforce the rhythm. In “Sound References and Onomatopoeia” reference is made to the respective environment with the horse-head violin (morin khuur) and with the sounds of the mythical crocodile (water drums) in the initiation ritual for men.” 8 Using examples of historical soundscapes that CHUN+DERKSEN GbR had collected, the exhibition organizers also show historical European everyday sounds 9 such as rotary dial telephones or mechanical typewriters.

The path to the upper floor leads along the stairwell, under “bullroarers” hanging from the ceiling. They always have a religious or spiritual aspect, because “bullroarers” involve an imitation of the voices of ancestral spirits or gods.

Through the collaboration with the Goethe Institute in Jakarta, it was possible to acquire the already mentioned kadedek mouth organs and present them in the exhibition together with their traditional and contemporary context. Indonesia is the regional focus on the first
New exhibitions

Exhibition view „Klangquellen. Everything is Music!”, Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt/M. Photo: Wolfgang Günzel
New exhibitions

floor, with music from sound minorities made with the kadedek (produced and played by Pak Bunau from Engkurai, West Kalimantan) juxtaposed with that from ethnic majorities such as the Javanese gamelan orchestra and the Sundanese angklung. While the music by Pak Bunau is hardly recognized at the national level and is going extinct with him, playing the gamelan has been declared national music by the Indonesian government. 10

Another theme of the exhibition, the association of background knowledge with environmental sounds, is something we are also familiar with here in Europe: it is about changing behavior in the face of danger. A good example is the car horn.

In the exhibition, a video is shown with the use of the shark rattle. The people of New Ireland understand that there is a certain sound that attracts sharks. To achieve hunting success, they try to imitate this sound using the shark rattle. This connection between sound and knowledge runs through the entire exhibition.

The exhibition also asks how sounds shape “our” auditory perception. In general, the exhibition is not intended as evidence, but as food for thought: “The water drums from New Guinea produce a sound that comes from the immediate environment – namely from the river with its crocodiles. With this sound element, the next generation is shaped during the initiation for future to associate the bubbling of water with the mythical crocodile. This goes back to totemic ideas, because the shark is a kind of totem animal of this group. Therefore, a shark has to appear to the hunter in a dream before he is allowed to catch the shark. We take reference to a crocodile initiation rite in New Guinea, to the ancestors to the “bullroarers” and the large slit drum... In the Indonesian gamelan, it's less about the fact that it's basically set in spiritual time every time it's performed. For me, it's about how this sound is used in nation building. Our focus is what people do with sound.”

Criticism

Due to the focus on the museum’s collection, the scope of the exhibition is narrow and topics such as the human body as a sound source and resonance body as well as aspects of European music history or the intercultural transfer of sounds and musical styles are not treated or visualized. However, there is still no documentation of voices from other cultures relating to the Western concept of „music“, which limits the exhibition to a descriptive approach from a European academic point of view.

Examples of the main thesis “Everything is sound” are the bark beaters from Indonesia and the Pacific region together with the rice pounders alo sore from Indonesia. Both categorized as objects from everyday life. The bark cloth production belongs to men working alone – as can be seen on a photo. They create a sound that can be heard beyond the village boundaries and, through its specific rhythm, conveys information to people familiar with the work process on the stage of production. 14 In contrast to this, the sound of the rice pounders is created by six women standing together in groups pounding the rice, while singing in pairs. The exhibition lacks any analytical gender aspect. Furthermore, the role of
female musicians plays only a subordinate role in the exhibition (except in Indonesian orchestras and in European examples). The hours of the joint rhythmic rice pounding group, while singing in pairs, are not seen as a collective creative activity of women in the flow, but rather as a technical everyday phenomenon.

Even though I discovered through an exhibition visit that my taste in music is not exclusively typically “European”, the experience made me even more curious about how other cultures judge music or sounds from “us”. I recommend the „Soundwalk“ as a special experience to devote yourself to known and unknown sonic languages and thereby gain a deeper understanding of sound diversity and complexity.

The Indonesian community from the Rhine-Main area as well as the Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia are participating in the accompanying program: Gamelan and Angklung workshops will be offered as part of the exhibition and there will be an Indonesian summer festival with lots of music on July 13, 2024.

Notes

1 Dünduns are not shown in the exhibition.
2 The topic of appropriation processes does not play a role in the rest of the exhibition. A poster “Traditional Musical Instruments of Indonesia”, which also shows an “accordion” from South Sumatra, is shown without further comments.
3 For the work of Daniel Chun and Jan Derksen from Essen and Hamburg see https://www.conservethesound.de/
5 cp. Kreuther GaaplÄenaxen at the Schnalztreffen 2023 (3:39) with accordion, not in the exhibition, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZcn___HwmPg (March 20, 2024)
6 The term „soundscape” refers to the entirety of a „sounding environment“ and is used primarily in modern music.
8 Interview with Vanessa v. Gliszczynski, March 6, 2024

https://www.weltkulturenmuseum.de/de/veranstaltungen/ (March 21, 2024)

“The hourglass-shaped water drums are only played in pairs and only during initiation. Behind a fence – hidden from the view of the uninitiated – two men sit at a waterhole or on the river bank and take turns pushing the drums into the water. A gurgling noise is made that announces the arrival of the primordial crocodile and thus the devouring of the initiates by the world creator. The playing of the water drums can continue throughout the night.” (transl. object text in the exhibition)

see Reck 1992, p. 7f. This also explains that in many cultures the production of instruments is accompanied by rituals and playing can also be linked to age, gender and ancestry. Hearing sounds can also be subject to taboos. (transl. by the author)

With the exception of Gerhard Müller-Hornbach’s listening room.

Aragon 1990, p. 33-48

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Museum der Weltkulturen: Mit den Ohren sehen / Seing with your ears. In: Weltkulturen News Klang voll, 9/2024, p. 16-17

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