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Mid-Term Activity Report

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Grant Mid-Term Activity Report

The Music, Digitisation, Mediation (MusDig) research programme involves a group of six researchers who are mapping and analysing the far-reaching transformations to music and musical practices afforded by digitisation and digital media. The researchers are: Prof. Georgina Born (Principal Investigator), Dr. Aditi Deo, Dr. Andrew Eisenberg and Patrick Valiquet (all University of Oxford), Dr. Geoff Baker (Royal Holloway, University of London) and Dr. Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier (University of Victoria, Canada). MusDig is attempting to found a new interdisciplinary field of digital music studies. As such, it addresses these changes across the spectrum of practices – creative practices, production, circulation and consumption; and it does so with reference to a range of popular, folk and art musics in the developing and developed world. The empirical element of the programme entailed six ethnographic studies of about one year's duration, most of them multi-sited, guided by ten research themes that cross between the ethnographies. The fieldwork has been followed by interdisciplinary analysis of our fieldwork data (2012-13). MusDig is now at its half-way point, and since comparative analysis of fieldwork data is very demanding of time, our findings are at an initial and emerging stage.

The six ethnographic studies are as follows: 1) (Baker) the production of an evolving popular music genre, digital cumbia, in Buenos-Aires, Argentina, in relation to other cumbia genres, as well as its circulation in Latin America and the USA; 2) (Eisenberg) the emergence of a new digital technology-based recording industry in Nairobi, Kenya in the wake of the digital revolution and the liberalization of the Kenyan media, with particular attention to the role of copyright reform and an increase in patronage from NGOs and other transnational actors; 3) (Deo) research on a series of North Indian initiatives, each with distinctive philosophy, digital materiality and institutional form, for the digital recording and archiving of folk musics, and a supplementary study of the 'grey economy' in digital music; 4) (Boudreault-Fournier) a comparative study of the digitally-mediated consumption of popular musics in contrasting urban environments in Montreal (a context of digital media plenty) and two Cuban cities (a context of digital media scarcity), as well as further study of the 'grey economy' in digital music; 5) (Valiquet) the evolving aesthetics and novel materialities of a range of digital art music genres supported by universities, festivals and artist-run centres in Montreal in relation to the cultural policy context, as well as changing digital musical literacies and trainings; and 6) (Born) the evolving institutional and policy conditions as well as variant aesthetics and ideologies of university-based digital art musics and sound art in the UK, as they relate to the circuit of conferences, festivals and other institutions sustaining the national and transnational circulation of these musics.

The MusDig programme provides insight into a wave of institutional and industry changes catalysed by digital materialities. These include: a) evolving intellectual and cultural property regimes in relation to digitised music: from struggles over the implementation of a national copyright framework (Kenya), to the difficulty of enforcing copyright controls when long-standing IP institutions are unresponsive to digital conditions (Argentina) or when the historical norm has been mass unauthorised copying and circulation of music (Cuba, India); b) the restructuring of the music industry: from the emergence of a lively entrepreneurial digital music scene in Kenya, a country abandoned by the multinational music industry in the 1980s in which telecom companies are becoming dominant commercial intermediaries, as well as the growth of online and mobile-based digital content businesses; to the imperilled state of Argentina's nascent digital music economy, where unauthorised downloading is rife and the multinationals operate a parallel economy in which profits are exported; and c) the implementation of creative industries policies via governmental, international NGO and charity support for digital music initiatives in developed (UK, Montreal) and developing countries (Argentina, India, Kenya), in which music is seen as a key arena for promoting economic growth and social transformation.

Yet musicians' livelihoods – whether art musicians in Montreal and the UK, popular musicians in Argentina and Kenya, or folk musicians in India – are precarious and often depend on cross-subsidies from other activities. This situation can be embraced – by avowedly amateur musicians, music consumers engaged in making music (or 'prosumption'), musicians content not to make much money from their practices, and those committed ideologically to music's free circulation (online or offline); yet it is also resisted by entrepreneurs and musicians struggling to make a living in digital conditions.

The MusDig programme also highlights novel creative practices and musical subjectivities, as well as new modes of circulation and consumption. In relation to subjectivities, we detail the changing entailments of copyright as musicians are enjoined to become rights-owning subjects (India, Kenya),

caused to become ambivalent about authorship claims (UK), and/or engage in modes of collaborative creativity that overflow authorial norms (Cuba, Montreal, UK). Creative practices in many genres are transformed as evolving forms of hardware and software encourage novel authorial subjectivities and new divisions of musical labour. In Kenya, new subjectivities in the recording studio are fostered by use of digital music technologies as well as copyright reform; central here is the ‘creative producer’, a figure who engages with the digital audio workstation while combining the former roles of recording engineer, composer, arranger and executive producer. While in Montreal, new modes of collective production inspired by Free and Open Source movements have emerged. Digital technologies also augur changing musical literacies, affecting skill acquisition in formal and informal music trainings. Research into music technology and composition trainings in Montreal and the UK maps how evolving practices animate a reconfiguration of the canons of music history, theory and aural literacy, while also re-imagining the future of music: here, musical present, past and future are being re-made together.

Consumption is a fertile comparative theme. In Canada, Cuba, India and Kenya, ubiquitous portable media devices such as cell phones and memory sticks encourage non-monetized music circulation among consumers, bolstering informal music economies albeit in markedly different ways between Montreal, where the internet is a primary means of consumption, regions with limited internet access (Cuba), and regions where the internet is accessed mainly via cell phones (India, Kenya). Everywhere, we see movement between individuated and socialized modes of music consumption, through sharing, bartering and other types of online and offline, monetised and non-monetised exchange. Research on digital music archiving in India highlights an array of local mediations of ‘digital heritage’ in which traditional musics are integrated into everyday technological practices via their documentation and circulation. Everywhere, formal and informal music economies are imbricated, the boundary between them evolving in distinctive ways: in India the proliferation of grey economies elicits attempts by the mainstream industry to monetize digital music through new forms of licensing for retailers and value-added services to consumers; in Kenya it is the formal economy that has been most powerfully transformed, with the entry of mobile telecom and technology firms as major intermediaries; while in Argentina experiments in internet-based distribution have foundered, though a formerly unauthorized major national online service is negotiating with copyright bodies to enter the formal economy.

Aesthetically, two striking trends are: a) the production of novel musical hybrids that seek to project various post-sectarian (Kenya) or pluralist (India), nationalist and/or post-nationalist (Argentina, Montreal) imperatives and sentiments; and b) the emergence, along with digitally-inflected aesthetics, of ‘post-digital’ aesthetics characterised variously by the return of vinyl, the use of analogue media, acoustic or vernacular sounds, or electronic and digital hacking practices. Aesthetic and generic change, in both digital popular musics and digital art musics, is driven by the encompassment or supersession of earlier practices and technologies, as well as sounds. In digital art musics, for example, genres that were dominant in recent decades, notably academic electroacoustic music, are being eclipsed by a proliferation of new aesthetic currents. While turn of the millennium neo-avant-garde digital aesthetics such as glitch and microsound centred on laptop performance and software synthesis, recent years have seen a broad shift towards increasingly hybrid acoustic-digital or analogue-digital assemblages. What counts as the aesthetic in digital art musics can itself be refigured as materials, practices and technologies are taken to be constitutive of the musical object. At the same time, institutionalised divisions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ digital musics continue to be sustained by differences in technological practices, cultures and infrastructures. In particular, university music technology programmes retain a focus on digital idioms such as multichannel sound spatialisation, immersive audiovisual installations and telematic performance – genres that are inaccessible to non-academic musicians because of their dependence on high investment in technological infrastructures.

MusDig researchers have continued to engage with the musical communities at the heart of our research, during and after fieldwork, for example through ‘local’ benefit-sharing events and workshops in which we are feeding back analyses to and exchanging ideas with musicians and intermediaries.