

Participatory enaction of music: Key points towards radicalizing the notion of embodiment in music

Juan Loaiza 1

Cognition -sense-making- is an affective-laden activity that takes place across 'brain, body, and environment' [1], [2], [3]. Strong naturalistic –yet non reductive- claims about the continuity between life and cognition distinguish Enactivism from other theories and implementations of the notion of embodiment [4]. Enactivism, in 'Varela style', rejects the received view of the body as contingent and the social environment as contextual, a view still held by 'mentalists' conceptualizations of embodiment. Enactivism, on the contrary, sees the body as continuously constitutive of sense-making processes [2], [3], [4], [5] and social interaction as the domain where 'higher cognitive processes' –such as linguistic use- take place [6].

The presentation will explore the idea that an enactive notion of music embodiment needs to be qualified by the introduction of a more precise –naturalized- definition of (social) Participation. This definition requires repositioning the level of analysis within the social encounter. Enactivism offers a refined account of participatory sense-making that does not reduce cognitive processes to the aggregate of pre-given individual agents; moreover, it offers an understanding of interactions as autonomous and generative in their own terms [6], [7], [8]. Thus, starting from a social level of analysis, Musicking (a term coined by Small 1998 [9]) is rethought as a class of enactive participation vis-à-vis other participatory genres such as Languageing.

The presentation will expand the discussion with some contrasting points:

“Biographical” vs. “snapshot”: Critique to narrow time scales. The snapshot-like, laboratory approach to understand musical activity makes it easier to assume the individual experience as paradigmatic. In contrast to this, an ecologically valid approach brings to the foreground an agent's history of social relationships and patterns of participation.

Enactive organisms vs. “epistemic minds”: Critique to mentalist and skull-bound explanations of cognition. Accounts of musical experience often portray the individual finding herself as if left in the middle of an opaque environment that has to be disentangled via mental epistemic moves. Enactivist approaches, in contrast, dis-localize cognition emphasizing the co-constitution of active autonomous organisms and its medium via sense-making.

Complex and adaptive vs. “tidy” ordered systems: Critique to linear approaches to musical interaction. Theorizations and practices often rely on tight modeling and prediction; these however lack the flexibility to address social dynamics. Interactions may be better understood within its own emergent normativity and relative autonomy.

The presentation will bring to the table Enactive notions that stretch beyond the sensorimotor approach to music cognition, namely: agency, autonomy, emergence, identity, sense-making.

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