

# Conclusion

## Abstract

The conclusion revisits the book's central argument, considers the key concepts used towards the analysis of musical meaningfulness, and addresses a few theoretical and methodological implications for music research beyond the Western Pacific ethnographic context.

*Music Worlding in Palau* tried to draw closer to the much mystified and powerful capacity of music-making to affect us in an ineffable way. I have proposed the notions of meaningfulness and, more generally, atmospheres as frameworks with which to unpack the felt-bodily signifiatory intensity music-making leverages: the 'power of music'. Music-making is not merely a representational technique 'expressing' something extramusical or articulating an identity. Instead, it is a self-referential mode of knowledge forming multilayered connections and ruptures with temporo-spatialities, socialities, affective responsiveness, surrounding sensory orders and discursive configurations, including ideas about nationhood, belonging, community and social problems. This imbrication with lived realities is what enables music-making practices to not only emerge as a world-building technique but also uncover felt-bodily knowledge as a potential resource for action: They enable people to make sense of and transform their surroundings because they put discursive and non-discursive dimensions of taking part in the world in conversation with one another. Meaningfulness, as an analytical concept, allows for an investigation of how this happens. *Music Worlding in Palau's* exploration of the meaningfulness of music in Palau has uncovered affordances Palauan music holds vis-à-vis potential strategies of relating to and making sense of the world that often escape verbal description. Omengeredákl allows for a shared sense of Palauan historicity to resound within the (felt) bodies of the singers. Solidary incorporation ensues. As the singers immerse themselves in this strange yet fully cogent sensation, their sense of belonging with one another and with Palau manifests both (felt-) bodily and emotionally. Simultaneously, this same sensibility articulates

itself as a motion-laden Gestalt in the sonic sensation and particularities of omengeredákl and its structural genre conventions. Musical meaningfulness, in Palau as much as elsewhere, is an atmospheric phenomenon which allows us to analytically draw nearer regarding the seemingly covert, specifically musical ways of comprehending our life-worlds in all their complexity and more general knowledge formations. To explore musical meaningfulness as a world-building practice, then, is to listen and feel out for those bits of the ethnographically specific that are hard to describe in words alone. Pacific Islanders' 'Indigenous times' are not "just smaller sections of larger histories, but dimensions of their own [... They] are entangled with other indigenous and foreign dimensions, but simply folding them into other narratives is to erase much of what is distinctive, and much that we might learn from them" (Salesa 2014, 32). Similarly, Pacific Islander music-making exceeds the analytical categories well-established in the music scholarship of the Global North both ontologically and epistemologically. Analytically attuning to musical meaningfulness, as *Music Worlding in Palau* has tried to do, is an attempt to listen against the grain of a neocolonial intellectual corset which, disguised as a disciplinary standard, accepts some analytical categories as relevant but not others. As "many of the grand narratives struggle to narrate the indigenous Pacific in their accounts of world or global history" (Salesa 2014, 32), it is virtually untenable not to try to sound out approaches alternative to the unapologetically hegemonial, certainly safer ones. There is a lot to learn from Pacific Indigenous knowledge systems and their post-colonial epistemological entanglements, especially vis-à-vis issues of relationality and sustainability. Thinking through music with atmospheres and meaningfulness gives rise to an ecological, and latently ethical, understanding that everyone and everything is connected (Titon and Bock 2017). It is no coincidence that this is an insight deeply resonant with Pacific Islander notions (e.g., Hau'ofa 1993; Yunkaporta 2020; also see Diettrich 2018b).

Writing against a long tradition of music scholarship that conceives of music-making as primarily representational – of an identity, a specific meaning or a *Zeitgeist* – as well as the recent trend to see atmospheres as a mere register of the affective, *Music Worlding in Palau* has tried to single out musical suggestions of motion without losing sight of the constitutive vagueness and, in fact, inherent ambiguity that form the heartbeat of atmospheric musical situations. This has led me to argue that music-making in Palau is primarily a becoming, an incipience of renewal along musical structure, form and texture. As this incipience of renewal actualises across sense modalities in music and dance, it becomes an overwhelming experience,

one that accounts for the power of music and dancing experiences and, in the case of Palau, for the meaningfulness of music and dancing.

Like music-making, atmospheres are always a process, not an effect. The felt body reaches out into the full complexity of its environments and towards other human bodies when experiencing an atmosphere. This happens via the *perpetuum mobile* of the neo-phenomenological vital drive: a constant but not at all regular rhythm of contraction and expansion. This rhythm, the powerhouse of experientiality, is not confined to the realm of the physical body. Quite the contrary, felt bodies interact intimately with the world when experiencing a musical atmosphere. Not only do atmospheres act as a bridge that emphasises the fleetingness of the connection between the body and its environments, they also show how the distinction between attributed meaning and felt experience may well be analytically useful at times but ultimately falls short of grasping the power of lived experience. Lived experience is characterised, among other things, by the inseparability of the experiential intensity and the discursive dimension of feeling in music. The countless meanings contained in suggestions of motion are internally diffuse, numerous and ambivalent. Through musical suggestions of motion, some of them will resonate with the social and cultural configurations they encounter; others will not. In order for felt bodies to react to suggestions of motion, they need to be responsive to them. Whether or not felt bodies are responsive depends on the social and cultural configurations that are inscribed in them and within which they move. This emphasises once more just how deeply intertwined atmosphere and discursivity are in the musical experience. It also underscores that the analytical merit of atmospheres for music studies is not in the general and the theoretical. Atmospheres only become useful vis-à-vis the particular and the ethnographic.

In the case of Palauan *chelitákl rechuódel*, the social and cultural configurations inscribed in the felt bodies that were responsive to the music's suggestions of motion included a set of traditional values, a distinctly Palauan notion of history and how it is constituted, and an equally distinctively Palauan sense of community. The meaningfulness Victoria, Oribech and the other women found in chanting came about in the resonances between the suggestions of motion and the various frames the suggestions of motion encountered. These resonances enable a not necessarily exhaustive but, nonetheless, discursive description of an atmosphere. In the case of *chelitákl rechuódel*, they pointed to a link between musical atmospheres and the concept of *olángch*. The atmospheres of *chelitákl rechuódel* in general and of specific *chelitákl rechuódel* performances in particular have multiple meanings because atmospheres are always internally manifold. To describe

the atmosphere of *chelitákl rechuódel* as one of *olángch* is to single out one of many possibilities. Individually felt experiences of an atmosphere are always already in conversation with several experiential, interpretive and affective frames at the same time. As in collectively felt atmospheres, they are always deeply relational.

Atmospheric effects resonate in felt bodies as meaningfulness. Meaningfulness emerges there in felt bodies, from resonating with, among many things, competing local discourses of musical meaning and the sensation of affect. It, thus, comes about in between experiential, interpretive and affective frames. This emergence yields an effect of both intensity and meaning that goes way beyond the effect these respective frames could possibly yield by themselves. This is what makes musical meaningfulness a true “in-between phenomenon” (cf. Vadén and Torvinen 2014, 3). Neither meaning nor meaningfulness are an either/or phenomenon, one representative and the other not, one material and the other immaterial, or one signifying and the other asignifying. Here, thinking through music with atmospheres can substantially further important earlier work on (a) musical semiotics (e.g., Turino 2014) by reaching beyond Peircean categories of signification (for an account of the analytical relationship between atmospheric theory and semiosis, see Eisenlohr 2018b); (b) entrainment (Clayton, Sager, and Will 2005), which focuses primarily on cognitive processes while incorporation describes a type of corporeal communication that becomes actualised as felt-bodily experience; and (c) music as an affective and aesthetic agent in everyday life (DeNora 2000), to which it adds a more encompassing perspective. Atmospheres point us to how the felt body thinks and the mind feels, how thought affects and how affective experience reasons. This itself has been amply theorised upon in various branches of philosophy, most notably perhaps in Richard Shusterman’s pragmatist somaesthetics (2008). But atmospheres offer a number of novel and concrete analytical tools to music scholarship, as *Music Worlding in Palau: Chanting, Atmospheres, and Meaningfulness* has shown. With this, the notion of atmospheres allows us to draw a little closer, not so much vis-à-vis what music means to whom, but *how* it means so much in a specifically musical way.

What thinking with atmospheres offers to music studies, thus, is a layered account of meaningfulness that cuts across taken-for-granted binaries such as the body (which feels sensations) and mind (which attributes meaning) or affect and discourse. Atmospheres do not primarily account for what music means, nor do they account for the intensity with which someone experiences a musical performance. Instead, they allow for an

exploration of the workings of musical meaning(fulness) that sensitises us to the spectrum of ways in which music means and the varying intensities with which meaning may be experienced as atmospheric. Thinking about atmospheres invites us to look at music-making as cultural knowledge in action, in the sense of Manning and Massumi (2014): as a specifically musical mode of knowing in which musical experience converges with thinking and feeling.

Atmospheres have diagnostic potential. In times of renewed enthusiasm for populist rhetorics and nationalist agendas, which demonstrate a surprising degree of emotive power around the world, it is hard to ignore how atmospheric decision-making is currently shaping the future of our planet. Quite possibly, as we speak, atmospheric demagoguery is the single most powerful force that determines the future of the political landscapes, social justice and global health humankind will have to deal with in the centuries to come. It is no surprise that music and musical performance have always been part and parcel of political campaigning, human rights advocacy and activist agendas in equal measure.

Atmospheres make the weight of the past felt (Slaby 2019). Atmospheric weight, however, is not necessarily a burden. In musical meaningfulness, it merges with imagined pasts, felt presents and dreams of possible futures. Relishing musically in meaningfulness is a strategy to unhinge the seeming linearity of time. Experientially, we are fully in the flow of time, always already ahead of the present moment, yet, deeply caught up with the now. Just as the finite nature of human life adds meaning to our life choices, the ephemerality of the moment adds depth to our experiencing the present. Musical atmospheres infuse this ephemerality with sheer intensity because the spatialities of felt-bodily feeling and hearing are compatible in their surfacelessness and indivisibility (Pfeiffer 2007, 103). This is why the sonic, perhaps more than any other media, is so effortlessly effective in heightening situative intensity. Such is the work of musical meaningfulness. Playing around with, moulding and recomposing meaningfulness, music-making is world-building. And such, then, is the work of music worlding with atmospheres.

There is so much we can know about music-making in Palau and about music-making in general. And there is so much more we can discover felt-bodily, again about both. To know and to comprehend felt-bodily are two related and yet very different things. There is a lot of room for meaningful play in their in-between. North Atlantic musical scholarship has, for a long time, emphasised the former dimension of meaning musically. *Music Worlding in Palau* suggests it is time we take the latter more seriously.

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