

MATTERING THE MATERIALITY AND PLURALISM OF MUSICAL CREATIVITIES USING A POSTHUMAN NEW MATERIALIST LENS

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Summary

Much of historical and contemporary musical creativity research is influenced by a Cartesian ontology of opposition. This reinforces the classic function of human exceptionalism, the separation of knowledge, tools and bodies in disciplinary bounded spaces such as music. Yet there is a plurality of musical creativities that exemplify material differences in co-authoring sustainable relationships where sounding bodies (human and nonhuman) are extended through a multiplicity of authorial practices, where instruments and technologies augment bodies often embedded within electronic and digital networks, in keeping with our posthumanist age. My aim here is to stay interested in the plurality of musical creativities research using a posthumanist new materialist theoretical lens. I challenge humanist perspectives that foreground human exceptionalism and privilege solely human capacities to create and produce knowledge. I argue against humanist systems of thought that assume that matter is inherently inert and passive. I consider how the intra-action of human and nonhuman distributed agencies, and the material objects and posthuman bodies are situated within specific spaces and environments manifest a multiplicity of musical creativities and relations to musical objects in performance, compositional, improvisational, digital, collaborative, and transdisciplinary creativities.

Keywords: musical creativities, plurality, material pluralism, posthumanism, new materialism

Introduction

Materials matter. Bodies matter. Multi-species coexistence matters. Critical and creative alliances between the arts and sciences¹ matter (Stengers, 2018²). When we examine closely the complex entanglements of research and theory (episteme) and practical knowledge (techne), both in arts and sciences real-world contexts and literatures,

¹ The word 'science' is pluralised as 'sciences' to refer to different, distinct fields of scientific study (like the biological sciences, physical sciences and social sciences) rather than the general, abstract, concept of all scientific endeavours. The choice between singular and plural is as significant for sciences as it is for arts, literacies, knowledges, mathematics, senses, cultures and creativities.

² Stengers originally trained as a chemist and has been a key thinker in the inter- and transdisciplinary field of science and technology studies. Her ecology of practices shares an unbifurcated understanding of nature with many Indigenous, First Nations and non-Western cosmologies.

we see the need to escape from binaries into continuums. We see the connections made between the human in its relation to the nonhuman things, including bodies and objects, and the intertwining of nature and culture, as the productive forces that intra-action in the invention and creation of music. Composer Francisco Lopez (2019) provides a great example of this human-nonhuman intra-action as it plays out in a sound environment as being:

Not only the consequence of all its sound-producing components, but also of all its
Sound-transmitting and sound-modifying elements. The birdsong we hear in the forest
Is as much a consequence of the bird as of the trees or the forest floor. If we are really listening
The topography, the degree of humidity of the air or the type of materials in the topsoil
Are as essential and definitory as the sound-producing animals that inhabit a certain space.

Whether our fieldwork begins in an urban music setting, a concert hall or opera house, a classroom in a music conservatoire, whether researching the proliferation of a 'thousand ecologies' from the musics of early years (Young, 2023) through to studies of senior citizens' music participation (Fung and Lehmborg, 2016), bodies of both objects (nonhuman such as instruments and technologies) and beings (including human, non-human and more-than-human³ bodies) reside within them. While nonhuman things refer to entities that are not human, such as animals, plants, or objects, the term more-than-human emphasizes the agency these entities have in producing and transforming our worlds and experiences, thus challenging the idea of human exceptionalism and becoming more-than-human (Braidotti, 2019). More-than-human sounds materialise. Music materialises as the materiality of bodies (and bodily relations between humans, nonhumans and more-than-humans). Music materialises as the material intra-actions between listeners and performers, particularly the latter with their instruments as extensions of their body; an agency distributed across the human and nonhuman (Wilson, 2021).

The situatedness of matter and sound, and what constitutes the posthuman body – the product of human and nonhuman intra-action – is experienced as sound materialising. So, what does this mean for music creativity research?

Indeed, music has an important and some argue unique function in establishing what we understand by materiality.⁴ Music materialises. Music education research fore-

³ Drawing on the more-than-human theory (Barad, 2003; Braidotti, 2019) invites us to engage affective, embodied and multisensory ways of understanding shared, distributed and relational creativities between human and more-than-human agents in more-than-human worlds where multi-species locate in diverse environments.

⁴ Materiality within a Western, Cartesian ontology has been defined as a passive background to the higher order of human interaction (St. Pierre, 2021). This is because, as Jane Bennett argues, the becoming of nonhuman matter often 'proceeds at a speed or a level below the threshold of human discernment' (2010: 58). Instead, she argues that matter is vibrant in the sense that it co-configures human subjectivity. In doing so, matter is always part of assemblages which, in new materialist theory, are the nexus for agency. Accordingly, 'when an I act, it does not exercise

grounds the objects which engage, face or extend the body. It also embeds a discussion of what musical materials tell us about compositional, improvisational, performative and listening actualisations of spatiality and temporality in music and the historical-material conditions in which materials are encountered with/in music. Materials matter. How material objects and bodies are situated within specific spaces where humans, nonhumans and more-than-humans are entangled⁵ (and intra-act) matters.

Braidotti (2019) describes posthuman subjectivities as involving 'a materialist process ontology based on immanence and becoming' (53–54). Thinking of ontology as processual has significant implications for how we understand what posthuman enquiry is (see Figure 1). Reimagining social enquiry generally and musical creativities research, specifically, as a relational assemblage asks what 'capacities for action, feeling and desire [are] produced in bodies or groups of bodies by affective flows' (Fox & Alldred, 2017: 145). Within such a 'flat' ontology, human elements (such as the researcher) are not superior to nonhuman elements (such as for example pen and paper). This shifts the focus away from solely human capacities to produce knowledge. Within posthumanist and new materialist inquiry, the complex dynamics of relational assemblages are mapped from within rather than reduced to easily digestible chunks of information from the outside (Fox & Alldred, 2017).

This paper contributes to musical creativities research by considering how music materialises creativity. In doing so, it explores the potentials for alternative encounters with Bennett's concept of 'thing-power', Baradian concepts of 'making with' and the focus on the material world, which includes human and nonhuman bodies, but unlike conventional, humanist systems of thought that assume that matter is inherently inert and passive. Here we find that new materialisms assign agency to the human and nonhuman, the animate and inanimate, and shift the focus away from the human as central to social inquiry. What matters? Instead of assigning the human a foundational role in experience and meaning, matter is also seen as fundamental. This involves a shift from identifying with bounded images of self, to cut across dualisms, away from constructionist approaches to research and a Cartesian ontology of oppositions (St. Pierre, 2021) to instead embrace the chaotic quality of education (Sakr, 2020). In what follows, we thus discuss the importance of shifting the focus to posthuman bodies, musical materialisms, and posthumanising musical creativities.

exclusively human powers, but includes those of its food, micro-organisms, minerals, artefacts, sounds, bio- and other technologies, and so on' (Bennett, 2018: 448). Thus, in this article, we employ a new materialist notion of materiality that acknowledges the active role that nonhuman matter plays in shaping and understanding our multiple worlds.

⁵ Being entangled is to have no innate, independent existence. Instead, in new materialist theory, subjectivity arises through and as part of intra-actions (as opposed to interactions). There is no distinction between 'creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future' (Barad; 2007: ix). In this way, the properties of human and nonhuman bodies depend on their entanglement with each other.

Posthuman Bodies, Materiality of Music and the Plurality of Musical Creativities

Rosi Braidotti (2013) suggests that to become posthuman is to transform 'one's sensorial and perceptual co-ordinates, in order to acknowledge the collective nature and outward-bound direction of what we still call the self' (p. 193). She emphasises an 'assemblage within a common life-space that the subject never masters nor possesses but merely inhabits, crosses, always in a community, a pack, a group, or a cluster' (p.193). Braidotti urges us to move beyond the dialect of possession, of ownership and control in order to overcome 'the classical function of music as the incarnation of the most sublime transcendent ideals of the humanist European subject' (2011: 107).

In terms of music education research, this means that the phenomena we choose to focus on in our research are relational; their existence is always dependent on connection. Even when we focus on human experiences of music, they are entangled with a variety of (human and) nonhuman elements. To assume that the human experience of authoring music (whether by listening, composing, performing, improvising, producing etc) is a predominantly cognitive process would be to adopt a Cartesian ontology that enforces possession, ownership and control. Thus, exploring acoustic worlds with post-humanist and new materialist approaches recognises entanglement as the basis for thinking about musical creativities, in human and nonhuman bodies (Braidotti, 2011). Thereby, a posthumanist understanding of nonhuman agents and environments as active and agential is fundamental to the plurality of musical creativities.

This all helps to clarify the central claim made in this paper: that changing notions and contested practices of materiality are one central but as yet underemphasised concern manifested and explored in musical creativities research.

Reimagining and recognising the plurality of musical creativities requires us to re-think narratives of 'power over' materials, context and processes, especially where digital and technological applications reduce complexities between humans, materials and environments. We need to challenge the separation of knowledge, tools and bodies in 'disciplinary bounded', 'copyrighted' and 'patented' spaces such as 'music'. We need to co-author sustainable relationships whereby the future of music education is not given but 'in-the-making' (Haraway, 2016). We sound bodies. The body is extended through performance practices. Instruments and technologies augment bodies (Wilson, 2021: 21). Sometimes bodies are embedded within electronic and digital networks, in keeping with our posthumanist age. The body is placed in relation to objects or as another object and located among sounding matters within the context of a wider environment. In posthumanist terms, the boundaries of bodies are constantly renegotiated in processes of intra-action (Barad, 2014; Braidotti, 2002). Bodies of objects (nonhuman such as instruments and technologies) and beings (both human and more-than-human) reside within them. Sound materialises. Music materialises as the materiality of bodies including animals, plants, or objects as human, nonhuman and more-than-human entities co-producing and transforming our worlds and experiences. Bennett (2010: 17 and 21) considers this co-authoring as 'vital materialism' which she understands as an 'agency of

assemblages' at work in the world in which agency is taken as 'a confederation of human and nonhuman'. The situatedness of matter and sound, and what constitutes the posthuman body – the product of human and nonhuman intra-action – is experienced as sound materialising. So, what does this mean for music education research? Indeed, music has an important and some argue unique function in establishing what we understand by materiality.⁶ Music is a material practice. Music enacts the relationship between and embodiment of matter and sound. Music can be differently understood as a material(ist) practice. Music materialises. Musical materialisms are enacted differently as a 'style' or 'genre' and enables critical play and reorientations vis-à-vis historical and social conditions. This chapter is a call for more material modes of sociocultural analysis and interpretation of musical creativities.

While music education research foregrounds the objects which engage, face or extend the body it does less to embed a discussion of what musical materials tell us about compositional, improvisational, performative and listening actualisations of spatiality and temporality in music and the historical-material conditions in which materials are encountered with/in music. Materials matter. How material objects and bodies are situated within specific spaces where humans, nonhumans and more-than-humans are entangled⁷ matters.

Braidotti (2019) describes posthuman subjectivities as involving 'a materialist process ontology based on immanence and becoming' (53–54). Thinking of ontology as processual has significant implications for how we understand the relationality of creativities (see Figure 1). Reimagining musical creativities as relational assemblages multiple in character we come to see a heuristic for navigating the dialectics of how human and nonhuman elements (such as for example pen and paper) come together. This shifts the focus away from limiting musical creativities as solely human capacities. Within post-humanist and new materialist inquiry, the complex dynamics of relational assemblages sees the entanglement of human and nonhuman elements as part of this assemblage.

⁶ Materiality within a Western, Cartesian ontology has been defined as a passive background to the higher order of human interaction (St. Pierre, 2021). This is because, as Jane Bennett argues, the becoming of nonhuman matter often 'proceeds at a speed or a level below the threshold of human discernment' (2010: 58). Instead, she argues that matter is vibrant in the sense that it co-configures human subjectivity. In doing so, matter is always part of assemblages which, in new materialist theory, are the nexus for agency. Accordingly, 'when an I act, it does not exercise exclusively human powers, but includes those of its food, micro-organisms, minerals, artefacts, sounds, bio- and other technologies, and so on' (Bennett, 2018: 448). Thus, in this article, we employ a new materialist notion of materiality that acknowledges the active role that nonhuman matter plays in shaping and understanding our multiple worlds.

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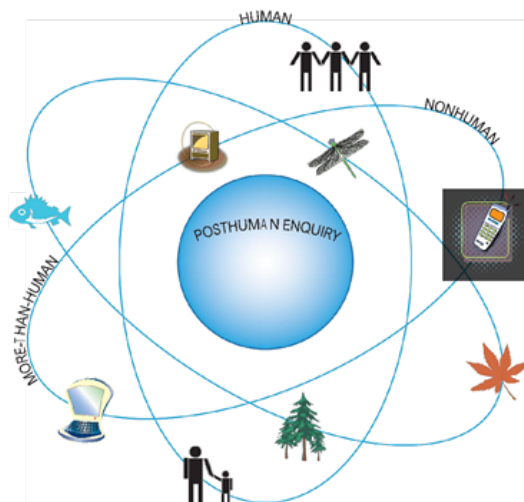


Figure 1. Re-seeing musical creativities as relational assemblages in posthuman enquiry.

Why Plurality Matters

Musical creativities matter. When we pluralise musical creativities we make explicit the distinctions between ways of authoring with/in/through music. Creativities manifest as a material-discursive mechanism with the capacity to structure, influence or govern the perceptions of diverse material conditions and forms of authoring and production, as critical impulses enacted within and between the specificities of materials. These practices of materiality are central but as yet underemphasised in music creativities research.

The plurality of musical creativities matters and it is complex. This complexity is reflected in the myriad of musical practices that support and shepherd vital entities implicated in the co-constitution and becoming of our every world and contemporary cultural scenes where producing new music and new musical creativities are authored plurally. Just as Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences⁸ (1983) contributed to a broader understanding of human intelligence, moving beyond the traditional notion of a single 'general intelligence', nearly 30 years ago, as with musicians, sound artists, digital and non-digital producers working in and across professional practices in the creative and music industries, new creativities are authored plurally (Randles & Burnard 2023). Whether as improvisational creativities (Atton et al., 2023), compositional and collaborative compositional creativities (Wendzich & Andrews, 2023), intercultural creativity in conservatory education (Humberston & Sandiford, 2023), metamusical creativ-

⁸ Howard Gardner identified eight distinct intelligences suggesting that people excel in different areas and learn in various ways. This shifted the paradigm and ushered in an era of personalized learning with a last impact about teaching in multiple ways, for many access points. See: *Frames of Mind: The theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Basic Books, 1983.

ity (McCartan, 2023) and listening creativities (Riunsema, 2023), might pluralizing musical creativities help us to understand, adapt and teach in ways which align with contemporary material practices?

What constitutes the materiality of musical creativities, how they are manifest, produced, consumed, applied, engaged with, in the context of posthuman theory, particularly when directed through a technologically mediated society, is becoming increasingly complex. New musical creativities can trigger new compositional and performance practices, as illustrated later with contemporary composers Bjork and Liza Lim feature of bodies, objects and materials' plasticity and agency, argued as being not solely the possession of the composer (and/or performer, listener or producer).

Pluralism refers to the diversity, co-existence and acknowledgement of multiple perspectives, and/or values within a society, system or philosophy. Pluralism opens-up new ways of thinking about what musical creativities are, how they are generated, and why the many digital and nondigital things that mediate our personal and professional lives matter. By embracing plurality in conception, practice and assessment of musical creativities we better recognize how to confront bias, question assumptions, widen access, achieve diversity and inclusion of multiple creativities and avoid outmoded conceptions of the practice of making with music in the real world (Randles and Burnard, 2023).

Genres mix, re-mix, transform, re-form and re-configure in an intricate dance of creativity. These types of transversal creativities cut across conventional boundaries of discipline, practice and ontology. Primarily responding to Felix Guattari's (2015), transversal creativities highlight forms which cannot be encompassed by discrete subjective acts, but instead emerge from differential intensities and recursive temporal folds. For example, one cannot often tell where performance creativity, improvisation creativity and compositional creativity begin or end as manifest in contemporary real world musical creativities (Burnard, 2012). Indeed, the entanglement of all of these different forms of authoring and modalities (i.e. creativities) can seem inseparable when digital and immersive technological creativities act as a catalyst for encompassing an innovative and often experimental set of practices. We can be singular no longer. It does not make sense to be. Naming which creativity we are educating for in what music education setting by whom is an imperative if music educators – no matter which sector they work in – is an imperative if we are to navigate and connect the lines between music education, music industries and societal change.

So how does music materialise through distributed agencies involving both the human and nonhuman and more-than-human the animate and inanimate?

An Exemplification in Two Composers' Work

What follows is a brief summary/snapshot of the types of creativities manifest in the work of Australian contemporary composer Lisa Lim whose musical creativities feature collaborative, transcultural and multispecies co-authorings and Icelandic artist

composer performer Bjork a self-described ‘hyperanalytical artist sonic needleworker’. For a more developed analysis see Burnard (2026). The featured imagery suggests the interconnectivity of sonic materialism and materiality of sound itself as these manifest in and around compositional, collaborative, transcultural and multispecies creativities (see Figure 2).

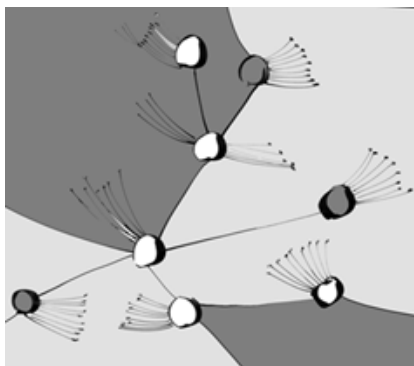


Figure 2. A rhizomatic image of the interconnectedness of different forms of authoring that manifest in Bjork's creativities.

Liza Lim's interest in materials and the mattering of musical objects is seen in her *Invisibility for solo cello* (2009) where the performer uses a 'prepared' bow. The hair of the bow is wrapped around the stick, creating an uneven surface. She plays with materiality and matters how the listener-observer becomes attentive to its distinctly material qualities. The body is sound. The body is placed in relation to objects or as another object and located among sounding matters reconfiguring the boundaries of posthuman bodies. She worked for Sheng and Ensemble titled *How Forests Think* in 2016. It is based on the book of the same name by anthropologist Eduardo Kohn. In another of her works for solo cello *An Ocean Beyond Earth* (2016) she features interrelated objects in performance. The title's inspiration is extra-planetary in origin. The piece requires a specific distributed relationship between objects in the performance space. The performer bows the cello normally but also uses lengths of thread passed around the strings to activate them. There is a violin positioned some distance away, with connected threads that run from this across the cello strings so that both can be sounded through a single action. The cello and violin are material objects that are played by the materiality of the body and threads. Her latest composition *Multispecies Knots of Ethical Time* for 15 musicians, gestural performer and video were instruments of the river. Sound materializes through intra-action with a river and between material and performer and performer and instrument, extended through instruments and technologies that augment bodies. Materials matter. Bodies matter. Instruments and environments also matter and require us to re-think the ontologies of difference that underscore the pluralizing of creativities (Figure 3).

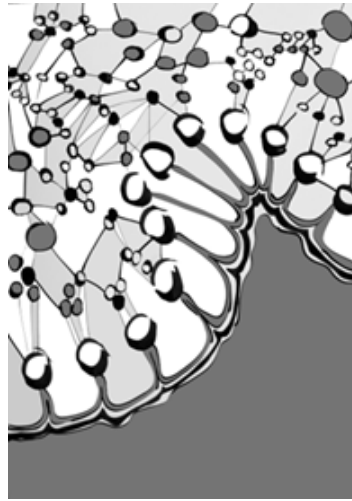


Figure 3. A rhizomatic image of the interconnectedness of different forms of authoring that manifest in Liza Lim's creativities.

Bjork's interest in creativities features vibrant transdisciplinary mattering of science and arts meetings in her molecular costume, the foregrounding of transdisciplinary creativity in meetings of nature-culture-arts-sciences; her design creativity exemplified both in her staging, invention of a harp-waistband object, including pianos and flutes as objects and the relationship between the performer and the object (in the form of intra-action) as the coauthored 'thing' that itself captures attention; and her nature-infused-whimsical masks which become musical objects with compositional agency where materials and environments, nature and bodies (both human and nonhuman) meet; the materiality of metal, plastic, acrylics, and materiality of the body; bodies are conceived and performed in multiple; a multiplicity of performance utterances; the body is extended through performance creativities and instruments augment bodies; 'digital' outputs working across virtual reality foregrounding immersive performances which explore the body's relationship with technology; bodies 'touched' by the material and embodied processes of collaborative and digital creativities. She reconceptualizes transdisciplinary creativity as that which seeks to decouple the specific language of a discipline for opening up to pioneering the digital and hyper-reality as a digitalized visual artist. See 'Body Memory' from the album *Cornucopia* which features Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI) – a specific technology or application of computer graphics for creating moving images. Download Bjork's *Biophilia App* is an interdisciplinary exploration of the universe and its physical forces – particularly those where music, nature and technology meet. The album is inspired by these relationships between musical structures and natural phenomena, from the autonomic to the cosmic.

Whether as a learner or player/performer, music educator/member of a professional ensemble, reflect on how and when you have co-authored new and diverse creativities within the wider communities that feature across your musical paths. Figure 4 provides

an overview of chapters that feature material differences between diverse creativities in *The Routledge Companion to Creativities in Music Education* (Randles & Burnard, 2023).

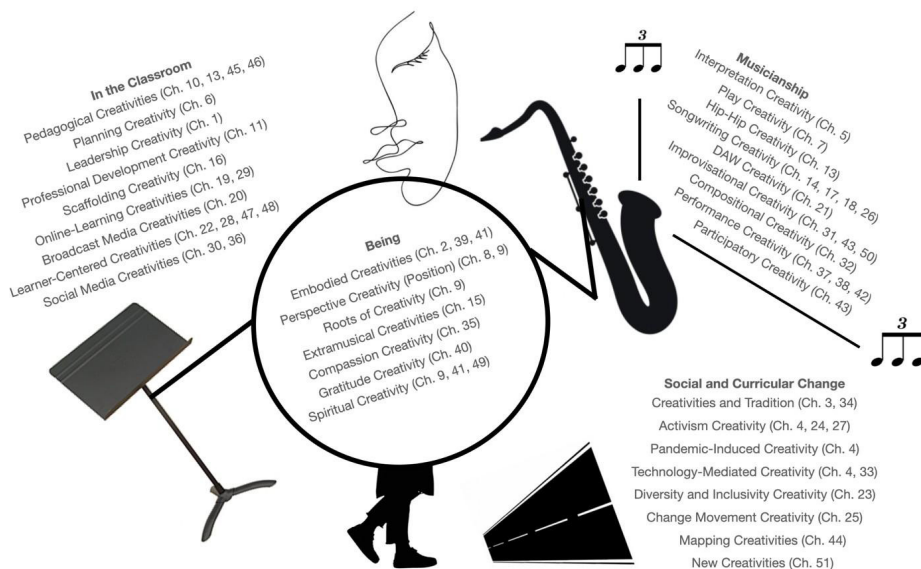


Figure 4. Summary of chapters featuring a plurality of diverse musical creativities as featured in *The Routledge Companion to Creativities in Music Education* (Randles & Burnard, 2023).

In this volume, contributing authors invite readers to challenge feeling ‘stuck’ in our practice. These challenges include shifting and blurring divisions between subject areas. These challenges also require us as music educators to actively engage all pupils in blended face-to-face and online learning. These challenges make visible the widening gaps of inequality. These challenges make imperative the necessity of rethinking the and amplifying materialist thinking and the materiality of musical creativities and how we teach for diverse creativities in music education. These are imperatives that pervade all contemporary music educational discourse. These are the imperatives which fuel the unique opportunities arising from sculpting new creativities in music education. These new materialist imperatives need to be put to work (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012).

Further Posthuman and New Materialist Points of Departure

Many things matter in this piece. As musicians, educators, researchers, leaders, policy makers researching a posthuman world, we should heed Donna Haraway’s (2016: 12) advice:

It matters what we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.

It matters how musical creativities inhabit physical ‘spaces’ where ‘time’ and ‘matter’ are intra-actively produced. It matters that we directly challenge, as performed throughout this paper, the conventional, normative ‘academic’ research practices that claim there is a unified definition of ‘what musical creativity is’. It matters that we ‘actively disrupt the normative conventions of academic practice and the standardisation of learning and knowledge’ (Haraway, 2016: 83). It matters that making with music and sound involves ongoing dynamic entanglements of bodies, minds, matters and environments where ‘making with’ ‘things/objects’, ‘bodies’ and ‘beings’ enters into a complexity of ongoing and ‘dependency relations’ between humans, nonhumans and more-than-humans.

Inspired by Roussel and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles (2023: 167), who said ‘rather than concluding with a closing, we linger with an opening’, we offer possible points of departure for posthumanising musical creativities:

- (1) We need to pay ‘slow attention’ (Stewart, 2017) to the manifestation of embodied creating, where ‘things’ matter and ‘matter’ matters, we need to find ways of being attentive to creating spaces to trouble existing methodologically ‘fixed’ forms and come to see the actualisation of a multiplicity of creativities as relational entanglements of bodies and beings, matter and the material body.
- (2) We need to pay ‘slow attention’ (ibid.) to examples of diverse musical creativities that are contextualised and localised to places, cultures and contexts, recognising that music, like sciences, are about different people in different places. These material differences enable socio-political action and transformation through intercultural and transnational collaborations and solidarities by asking “what if,” “what else,” “who else,” and “how to” capture the mess and mire of the present moment’ (Burnard and Stahl, 2024: 57) while holding on to something familiar.
- (3) While there may be some people who feel sceptical about posthumanism and new materialism, we need to ask: How can we put new theories to work for changing relations and removing hierarchies between different musics, music practices and musical creativities? How do we learn to attune to unlearning, getting lost, being decentred and relinquishing control? How do we learn to pay ‘slow attention’ to nonhuman and more-than-human actors (Stewart, 2017) in a materially embedded and embodied world?

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ЗНАЧЕЊЕ МАТЕРИЈАЛНОСТИ И ПЛУРАЛИЗМА МУЗИЧКИХ КРЕАТИВНОСТИ ПОСМАТРАЊЕ КРОЗ ПОСТХУМАНИСТИЧКУ ПЕРСПЕКТИВУ НОВОГ МАТЕРИЈАЛИЗМА

Већина историјских и савремених истраживања музичке креативности заснива се на картезијанској онтологији опозиције. Такав приступ додатно учвршћује класичну функцију хуманистичке изузетности, односно раздвајање знања, алата и тела у дисциплинарно ограниченим просторима као што је музика. Ипак, постоји плуралност музичких креативности која осветљава материјалне разлике у коауторским односима одрживости, где звучна тела – како људска, тако и нељудска – бивају проширена кроз мноштво ауторских пракси. У тим процесима, инструменти и технологије надограђују тела која су често уткана у електронске и дигиталне мреже, у складу са постхуманистичким духом нашег доба. Циљ овог рада је да се задржи интересовање за плуралност истраживања музичке креативности кроз теоријску призму постхуманистичког новог материјализма. Оспоравам хуманистичке перспективе које истичу људску изузетност и дају предност искључиво људским способностима за стварање и производњу знања. Супротстављам се хуманистичким системима мишљења који полазе од претпоставке да је материја по својој природи инертна и пасивна. Разматрам како интеракција људских и нељудских дистрибуираних агенса, материјалних објеката и постхуманих тела, смештених у специфичне просторе и окружења, манифестује мноштво музичких креативности и односа према музичким објектима у контекстима извођења, композиције, импровизације, дигиталне продукције, колаборативних и трансдисциплинарних пракси.

Кључне речи: музичке креативности, плуралност, материјални плурализам, постхуманизам, нови материјализам