SOUNDING COMPLEXITY

striking a South African chord

Hans Huyssen explains the complexities of music

Few musicians ever have the chance to collaborate with a philosopher. An artist's residency at STIAS afforded me such an opportunity, when I met the complexity philosopher Paul Cilliers in 2009. Our conversations about music and its many relational facets laid the foundation for a PhD study in musical composition from a complexity perspective.

Studies of complexity focus on the relations between components of systems, rather than on the components in isolation. It emphasises the interactions between these components and the systems that arise from such interactions. A system implies a certain quality of the whole that is not present in the individual components, nor predictable from their properties, but only emerges from their organisational relations.

This shift in emphasis is necessitated by the limitations of analytical studies of living beings, societies, languages, cultures and ecosystems. Dissecting a whole can lead to structural insights, but would never reveal the reason for something to be alive and self-maintaining.

Even this very brief introduction to systems thinking stirs up a number of musical implications. All the qualities of a system as a complex phenomenon apply to music. Music is an activity and an experience resulting from the intricate interactions of numerous physical constituents, seen in the coordinated energy applied to musical instruments; as well as the relation between a variety of role players, such as composers, performers, impresarios and listeners.

None of these elements can be taken away. In themselves they cannot guarantee the emergence of music, but as parts of a meaningful constellation they may contribute to something far exceeding their particular propensities.

What is there to be gained from this insight? I believe that findings from complexity studies can help to better understand, practice and teach music. New approaches and viable alternatives to our conventional perceptions and practices become possible.

We may learn from systems theory that the integrity of a complex system rests on its openness. This means that unless it is constantly regenerated from the outside, it stagnates and dies. Similarly, a system's identity is guaranteed by its ability to alter its organisation in response to changing conditions.

Yet, there are deeply ingrained divisions in the musical discipline, which assign the study and practice of different musical aspects to strictly separated areas of specialisation.

With respect to music, conventional wisdom tells us that cultural integrity is

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best safeguarded by closing it to outside influences, that stylistic and musical identity are best conserved by preventing changes and that musical autonomy arises from an artistic elevation beyond any context.

The framework offered by complexity theory can lead to a constructive engagement with important questions such as 'western' art and music in South Africa.

In a country where admitting to differences is difficult because the notion of difference is so often associated with conflict, violence and shame, the complexity approach offers a liberating perspective. In complexity theory, difference and diversity are enabling and enriching qualities. As Cilliers has summed it up: 'Difference is no problem, but the precondition for any interesting behaviour'.

If this assumption is correct, a complexity approach to music might help transform rigidly stagnated ideological positions and help South African musicians to develop strong, expressive, local musical voices. ↵

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