



Re-scaling emotional approaches to music: Basque band Lisabö and the soundscapes of urban alienation

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ABSTRACT

Building on recent studies that have linked music, emotion and geography, this article looks at the musical production of the Basque post-punk band 'Lisabö' across its four albums: *Ezlekuak* (Bidehuts, 2007), *Izkiriaturik aurkitu ditudan gurak* (Metak, 2005), *Ezarian* (Esan Ozenki, 2000) and the EP *Egan Bat Nonahi* (Acuarela, 2002). Melding musical (cultural/textual) studies with a range of geographical and urban theory, this analysis takes on both the sonic immediacy and the lyrical content of the band's music in an attempt to re-scale emotional approaches to space and place to an urban level. Ultimately, this reading of Lisabö's emotional soundscapes highlights the role (and omission) of emotion in the production of urban places and simultaneously suggests that our emotional connections with music might form the basis for an embodied musical criticism engaged with space and place at the level of the urban.

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As has been noted by an increasing number of theorists writing across traditional disciplinary boundaries, emotions are not merely a surface disturbance of human experience but are instead an essential, if oft-ignored, aspect of our thought and cultural production. Over the past decade, geographers, in particular, have worked to "tap into the emotional content of human affairs" (Wood and Smith, 2004: 533) and to see the relevance of emotions to spatial understandings and practices (Anderson and Smith, 2001; Ettlinger, 2004; Tolia-Kelly, 2006; Wood and Smith, 2004). This 'emotional turn' has often proved to be a way of recalibrating the dualistic Cartesian schism between thinking and feeling. As Davidson and Milligan (2004) argue, "there is little we can *think apart* from feeling" (p. 523, original emphasis; see also Bondi, 2002, 7).² At the same time, a parallel shift in disciplinary orientation has highlighted the significance of music to issues of space and place, often intersecting with this focus on emotional geographies and highlighting musical experience as both individual and community practice. It is in this vein, for example, that Ben Anderson (2005) has looked at the experience of music in domestic everyday life, Connell and Gibson (2004) at the more global phenomenon of

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³ There is a dualistic quality also in the dissonance between use of the terms 'emotion' and 'affect,' as can be seen in the literature. See Anderson and Harrison (2006); McCormack (2003, 2006), Thien (2005), Tolia-Kelly (2006).

'world music,' Revill (2005) at 'folk music,' and Morton (2005) at Irish traditional music. As Anderson et al. (2005, 640) suggest in their editorial introduction to a special issue of *Social and Cultural Geography*, scholars have moved beyond "music or sound as textual objects" toward musical practice and performance as a way of legitimizing "the multiplicity of ways in which musics are experienced, produced, reproduced and consumed, and to foreground the relationships between the physical presence of sound and the flow of sensory impressions." Broadening the approach to music in this way has, in effect, appropriately challenged another dualistic posture that risks conceptualizing the sonorous and the musical merely as an immaterial representation of a more fundamental, tangible and material world.

Such a dualistic posture has been similarly rejected by recent work at the intersection of sound and cognition that has pointed out the intimate connection that exists between music, emotion and the brain. As popular neuroscience authors Levitin (2006: 251–52) and Sacks (2007: x) agree, music may have evolutionary importance. As both authors underscore, there is an interesting and direct link between emotion, sound and motor activity, owing to the fact that not all of the connections between the inner ear and the brain run to the auditory cortex—some run directly to the cerebellum. Levitin writes: "The cerebellum is central to something about emotion—startle, fear, rage, calm, gregariousness [and is] now implicated in auditory processing" (p. 187). In this context, the opportunity thus presents itself to approach the connection between emotion and music not merely as a surface disturbance of

human experience but rather as a fundamental relation impacting both thought and action.

Not surprisingly, this recent biological and neurological argument for the importance of sound resonates with a growing body of geographical scholarship that has already been engaging sound at a deeper level. The theorists who have most directly synthesized emotions, music and geography are perhaps Smith (1997, 2000, 2001, 2005) and Wood et al. (2007), who have argued that “sound is as important as sight for the project of geography” (p. 502). Smith (2005: 90) turns the ocularcentric nature of knowledge production on its ear when she provocatively asks, “What would happen to the way we think, to the things we know, to the relationships we enter, to our experience of time and space, if we fully took on board the idea that the world is for hearing rather than beholding, for listening to, rather than for looking at?” Smith’s (2005: 111) question points to the opportunity presented in musical performance to reconcile both dualistic categories and divergent scales of experience. She writes that “it is through their capacity to tie the personal to the political, the aesthetic to the material, the emotional to the social, the individual body to the collective enterprise that performers make their place in the world”. Actualizing just this sort of reconciliation, the literature on music and geography has grappled just as much with theoretical and philosophical issues as it has with concrete expressions of place and identity, exploring the dialectical relationship that exists between sonorous realities and material practices. One notable contribution in this area is an essay by Nichola Wood, which clearly explores the connection between emotion and a sense of place as galvanized through musical experiences. Wood (2002: 58) highlights the “complexities of belonging to a national community” through a look at the British tradition of summer promenade classical concerts known as The Last Night of the Proms. Whereas both emotion and music have been traditionally ignored in geographical scholarship, she argues, tuning in to listening practices can allow us to discern subjectivity formations in the process of being composed.

Interest in such subjectivity formations has very often reverberated through the scales of the individual, the community, the region, and of course the national (Anderson, 2005; Davidson and Milligan, 2004; Hudson, 2006; Wood, 2002), but has less frequently been directed toward the urban. Appropriately, here I engage in a re-scaling of our approach to music, emotion and geography through a sustained look at (or rather a ‘listening to’) the musical production of the contemporary Basque band Lisabö. Their four albums, *Ezlekuak* (Bidehuts, Lisabö, 2007), *Izkiriaturik aurkitu ditudan gurak* (Metak, Lisabö, 2005), *Ezarian* (Esan Ozenki, Lisabö, 2000) and the EP *Egan Bat Nonahi* (Acuarela, Lisabö, 2002), are best engaged at the scale of the urban, as an expression of, and a reaction to, an urbanized consciousness. I want to show how the band’s variegated emotional soundscapes function as a complementary soundtrack to theoretical approaches to urban alienation. This re-scaling, specifically entailing a shift from the national to the urban, is not a negation of previous work, but an acknowledgement of the multiple and socially negotiated scales of experience (Marston, 2000).

At the same time that this paper attempts to re-scale musical scholarship and suggest the relevance of an urban-centered approach, it is also an attempt to return to the notion of music as a cultural product—not in the traditional sense denounced by Wood (2002: 59) as a way of ignoring music’s connection to space and place—but here as a way of supporting a recalibrated understanding of the connection between music, emotion and place. It is important to assert that recorded musical ‘texts’ and the connections formed with them by listeners, are no less emotional than performances. McClary and Walser (1990) cogently report on what

they term the “staggering” (p. 283) problems of reconciling music as a cultural artifact with social organization, noting also that “music is an especially resistant medium to write or speak about” (p. 278; see also Wood et al., 2007: 885). As Frith’s (1988: 105–06, 120–21; 1996a: 158–82) work suggests, part of the challenge of writing about music involves displacing the hegemonic position long enjoyed by lyrics in discussions of musical signification and compensating for the fact that scholars have more frequently taken to analyzing the structural and formal qualities of a piece of music rather than tackling the “the qualities of immediacy, emotion, sweat [which are] suspect terms in both the library and the classroom” (Frith, 1996b, quoted in Smith, 2005: 108). And yet it should be noted that Frith’s position clearly does not advocate abandoning lyrical content or the analysis of formal qualities altogether. Given the difficulty of writing about the elusive qualities of sound, lyrics—especially when complemented by a substantial attempt to address non-lyrical aspects—provide one pathway into the meaning of music, a direction pursued by Frith himself.

The following sections of this essay seek to work from a middle ground, grappling simultaneously with Lisabö’s music as a cultural product and as a point of entry into urbanized consciousness. This effort thus simultaneously treats Lisabö’s albums as cultural products and also as theoretical (musical) texts in their own right, blending a close-reading of the band’s musical texts with a nod to larger urban questions. In tune with broadly accepted tenets of literary/cultural studies, this blended and somewhat unconventional approach succumbs neither to the intentional fallacy that seeks to reveal the ‘essential’ meaning lurking behind a cultural product nor to the facile distinction between the form of a given work and its content. Instead, this essay underscores the band’s recorded musical production as a whole and frames it as a complex musical representation, and also a contestation, of urban alienation. This focus on the richness of recorded music itself should be seen as a complement to penetrating analyses of live music performances and national musical communities by Anderson et al. (2005) and others.

The first section, “Immediacy,” loosely approaches the relevance of music to identity formation, stepping back from the tendency of reading music too closely in relation to identity politics and simultaneously (if paradoxically) contextualizing Lisabö within a Basque tradition. Stepping back from the need to see music in terms of national identity, the second section, “Distance,” explores how the musical and lyrical content of the band’s albums intersect with the work by a number of theorists on urban alienation and so-called ‘non-places’. The third section, “Aural intimacy,” emphasizes the notion that criticism on music and place need not eschew the very emotional enjoyment of music it so often sublimates beneath a theoretical veneer of analytical objectivity. Instead, as my reading of Henri Lefebvre’s ‘rhythmanalysis’ suggests—drawing also upon the work of Henri Bergson, one of Lefebvre’s unacknowledged influences (Fraser 2008)—there is reason to acknowledge that the listener, in fact, comes to coincide with the sounds she/he hears. Hearing Lisabö’s music—and, from Lefebvre’s perspective, sound more generally—returns us to the realm of temporality, making contradiction and conflict audible, encouraging emotional connections with place and calling into question the visual logic that drives the capitalist production of urban space.

1. Immediacy: within and beyond Basqueness

Lisabö was founded in 1998 in Irun, a town in the province of Gipuzkoa, in the Basque Autonomous Community in Northern Spain. The founding members were Ivan (drums), Imanol (guitar and vocals), Karlos (base and vocals) and Javi (guitar and vocals). While the band’s make-up has changed over time to include other

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