

Music and Death

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Music and Death: Interdisciplinary Readings and Perspectives

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Contents

List of Figures	vii
About the Authors	ix
About the Editors	xi
Acknowledgements	xiii
Introduction: Exploring Connections Between Music and Death <i>Marie Josephine Bennett and David Gracon</i>	1
Section One – Music and Mourning	
Chapter 1 Funeral Music Between Heaven and Earth <i>Janieke Bruin-Mollenhorst</i>	7
Chapter 2 On the Funeral and Bereavement Rituals Depicted in Folk Songs: ‘The Folk Requiem’ by Adam Strug and Kwadrofonik <i>Marek Jeziński</i>	19
Chapter 3 The Posthumous Nephew: An Auto-Ethnographic Exploration of Belated Mourning and Fresh Divinations <i>Gary Levy</i>	33
Section Two – Underground Scenes, Alternative Music and Transformation	
Chapter 4 You’re Nothing: Punk and Death <i>David Gracon</i>	49
Chapter 5 Healing the Mother Wound: Metal Performance and Grief Management <i>Nachthex</i>	59

Chapter 6 Bienvenue au Canada: The Nonlanguage of Music and Dreams <i>Brendan Dabkowski</i>	71
Section Three – Performing Death	
Chapter 7 The Vision of Death: Time and Temporality <i>Silvia Mendonça</i>	81
Chapter 8 Music and Embodied Movement: Representations of Risk and Death in Contemporary Circus <i>Jennifer Game</i>	93
Chapter 9 Mercury’s Message to Go On with the Show <i>Marie Josephine Bennett</i>	107
Index	119

List of Figures

Fig. 3.1	Claude's new French horn. Vienna apartment. 1957.	34
Fig. 3.2	The current Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst Wien, abbreviated <i>MDW</i> (University of Music and Performing Arts, Vienna), formerly known as the Vienna Academy. Author photo. November 2017.	39
Fig. 3.3	The plot where Claude was originally buried in February 1960. Zentralfriedhof, Vienna. The plot remains his, in perpetuity. Author photo. November 2017.	40
Fig. 3.4	Claude the conductor. Professional portrait. Vienna. 1957.	45
Fig. 7.1	<i>Scena</i> 2007–2009 (2. ^a version) by Tomás Maia e André Maranhã.	85
Fig. 7.2	<i>Scena</i> 2007–2009 (2. ^a version) by Tomás Maia e André Maranhã.	86
Fig. 7.3	<i>Scena</i> 2007–2009 (2. ^a version) by Tomás Maia e André Maranhã.	86
Fig. 7.4	A group of three sounds from the beginning of the piece. This idea occurs throughout the whole piece in various forms of presentation. Different instrument registers are explored, as well as dynamic variations.	89
Fig. 7.5	Variation of the initial cell with different speed, intensity and acceleration.	89
Fig. 7.6	The cell with only two notes, varying the other parameters.	89
Fig. 7.7	A new articulation and a different dynamic in 'Fortissimo'.	89
Fig. 7.8	Insistence of the small cell through repetition and a four note ornamentation.	89

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Introduction

Exploring Connections Between Music and Death

*Marie Josephine Bennett and David Gracon**

Where words fail, music speaks (Hans Christian Andersen)

Music, when soft voices die,
Vibrates in the memory (Percy Bysshe Shelley)

The impetus for producing this collection of essays examining the connections between *Music and Death* originated from an academic conference organised by the UK-based Progressive Connexions network. The conference took place in a hotel in Vienna, Austria, in December 2017. While the infamous Christmas Markets of Vienna were ceremoniously at their height all around us – with snow fluttering beautifully on a majestic city landscape – approximately 20 academics, graduate students and independent scholars from a number of different countries invested in this novel pairing of *Music and Death* while huddled in an intimate conference room, to present, discuss and contemplate the nuances of this unique subject matter. What emerged was a compelling cross-section of interdisciplinary approaches, theoretical lenses, methodologies and personal, non-fiction storytelling. We wanted the spirit of this very special gathering to have a life beyond formal presentations and the majority of the chapters in this collection are a result of this inclusive, and dare we say, spiritual, moving and emotional conference experience.

Building on the themes of the conference, this edited collection explores the various ways by which music cultures and practices imagine, express and provide ways of coping with death, grief and remembrance from a primarily western framework. The works speak to the multifarious and complex ways by which music accompanies and complements aspects of death and dying; whether it is the death of a loved one, family member or a famous celebrity from popular music culture. The texts examine how music is often our companion when attempting to deal with the possibility or incomprehensibility of loss and assists

* The editors of this collection wish to note that they both contributed equally to the completion of this project and jointly shared tasks in a manner that was evenly balanced.

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us in understanding that we will eventually heal, move on, and learn to accept the inevitability of death.

This book is interdisciplinary in scope and no singular field of study is prioritised. We embrace a borderless range of academic disciplines and methods drawing from, but not limited to, cultural studies, media studies, music, ethnomusicology, sociology, anthropology, funeral studies and theology. We are also open to non-academic and personal, non-fiction storytelling, thus blurring the lines between traditional research and more literary modes of expression. We have accumulated a pluralistic range of voices and insights from six different cultural contexts. This includes contributions from Australia, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, the United Kingdom and the United States. As a new contribution to the field (or in this case, interdisciplinary or fluid ‘fields’), the essays in this collection speak to one other, overlap, and ultimately represent death and dying as a complex range of social practices and rituals. While we acknowledge that others have studied aspects of the connections between music and death previously, we make the argument that the formal study of music and death is generally an under-researched topic that is on the margins of academic enquiry. As these discourses and cultural perspectives come together and intersect, we can work to better conceptualise, regularise and ultimately accept death. As we further normalise death, so we can better appreciate and live in the present moment of our lives.

The book is divided into three subsections, each consisting of three chapters.

The first subsection, *Music and Mourning*, investigates music, remembrance and cultural practices in three European countries. In the opening chapter, ‘Funeral Music Between Heaven and Earth’, Janieke Bruin-Mollenhorst (The Netherlands) ethnographically explores the nuances of contemporary funeral ceremonies in the Netherlands. She examines the significance of ‘continued bonds’ or connections with the deceased, as musical selections, such as the popular *Ave Maria*, which is commonly played at funerals, often blur the symbolic lines between institutionalised religion and personalised vernacular culture in the increasingly secular Netherlands. In the second chapter of this section, ‘On the Funeral and Bereavement Rituals Depicted in Folk Songs: “The Folk Requiem” by Adam Strug and Kwadrofonik’, Marek Jeziński (Poland) examines traditional folk music practices at contemporary funeral services in rural Poland that mark the liminal transition of a person moving from life to death. Jeziński addresses the ways in which folk music enables mourners to come to terms with death through a variety of symbolic stages that are accompanied by song. The Requiem’s musical motifs and lyrical themes are based on age-old folk songs originating in Eastern Poland, and that continue to be sung to this day. Lastly, in ‘The Posthumous Nephew: an Auto-ethnographic Exploration of Belated Mourning and Fresh Divinations’, Gary Levy (Australia) poetically documents his field experiences in Vienna while tracing the history and spirit of a late uncle whom he had never met; a former performing musician and conductor in the city.

The second subsection, *Underground Scenes, Alternative Music and Transformation*, is a subcultural examination of music and death in the

communities associated with black metal, punk and alternative Canadian music, with insights from the United Kingdom and the United States. This section begins with David Gracon's (USA) 'You're Nothing: Punk and Death', a non-fiction essay examining how punk and indie music scenes served as a nurturing support system while everything seemed to be dying around him; from his mother's battle with cancer, to the closure of independent record stores and venues, and his declining post-industrial hometown of Buffalo, New York. This is followed by Nachthex's (UK) 'Healing the Mother Wound: Metal Performance and Grief Management', in which the author delves into the depths of the tragedy of her mother's sudden and unexpected death, while exploring how feminist-inspired black metal performance creatively provided liberation from the complex trials of both trauma and grief. The third and final chapter in this section is Brendan Dabkowski's (USA) 'Bienvenue au Canada: The Nonlanguage of Music and Dreams'. This personal essay explores the memories of his late mother through a nostalgic radio-filled Canadian road-trip and a Tragically Hip concert, during which the impending death of the lead singer provided an unexpected moment of clarity and understanding.

The final subsection is *Performing Death*. These essays address music and the performance of death, dying or potential death, with submissions from Portugal, Australia and the United Kingdom. In her essay 'The Vision of Death: Time and Temporality', Silvia Mendonça (Portugal) explores her original composition, *Death Vision (On a January Day)* for solo flute, noting the close links between the composer, musician, and listener in interpreting the piece when the work is performed. She describes her insight and thought processes, elaborating on the vision of death evoked in her piece while also examining the connections between time, vision and death in three filmic texts: *Wings of Desire* (1987) by Wim Wenders, *Scena* (2008) by Tomás Maia and André Maranhã and *Vai-e-vem* (2003) by João César Monteiro. The second chapter in this section, 'Music and Embodied Movement: Representations of Risk and Death in Contemporary Circus', is written by Jennifer Game (Australia). Her essay explores embodiment and the ways in which music and the new circus combine to challenge audience expectations by performing on the margins and thresholds of death through various stunts and challenges. She considers two works to illustrate her arguments, namely Zebastian Hunter's *Empty Bodies* and her own creation, *The Blood Vote*, to demonstrate how both the illusion and reality of death are intensified via the incorporation of opera and electroacoustic music. In the final chapter of the section, 'Mercury's Message to Go On with the Show', Marie Josephine Bennett (UK) discusses the death of iconic Queen frontman Freddie Mercury from an AIDS-related illness. She analyses the music, lyrics and music video of 'The Show Must Go On' via three primary themes: a life cut short, immortality and defiance, arguing that Mercury's music and message ultimately outlive his short life.

We encourage the readers of this volume to seek out and explore the nuanced conceptual and theoretical threads between the chapters, thus providing insight into the complicated relationship between music, death and dying. It is also our intention as editors that this collection acts as a springboard for opening

4 *Marie Josephine Bennett and David Gracon*

the doors to future scholarship, creative writing and conferences, via this unique pairing of music and death.

And while death remains the ultimate mystery – and with complete certainty, we are all destined to this fate – we must learn to find solace in knowing what we can about death, but also to embrace the void of *not knowing*, with music as our guide.

Marie Josephine Bennett and David Gracon