Musical taste, morals, and discomforts[a]

Gosto musical, moral e incômodos

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ABSTRACT
Music is a form of action and thought in the world. Participating in a musical experience is interacting with ideas, values, and belongings that sometimes are far away from our preferences, but are sometimes closer. Musical taste is an important axis of debates about everyday music experiences. Based on research on musical discomforts, I propose a reflection on taste based on rejecting tastes, rather than on sharing them. A survey was done with about 70 persons from different social classes, ages, and places who were asked to talk about situations in which music had bothered them. When someone defines a piece of music as annoying, the issue revolves around complex elaborations about morals, deepening interpretations about ethical and behavioral codes that depart from sound judgment and expand into broader judgments about individuals and values recognized in the then called annoying music.
Keywords Music, musical taste, moral, annoyance

RESUMO
A música é uma forma de ação e pensamento no mundo. Participar de uma experiência musical é interagir com ideias, valores e pertencimentos que por vezes se afastam de nossas predileções, outras vezes se aproximam. O gosto musical é um eixo importante de debates sobre as experiências musicais cotidianas. A partir de uma pesquisa sobre incômodos musicais, proponho aqui uma reflexão sobre o gosto não a partir de movimentos de adesão, mas de rechaço. Foram realizadas mais de 70 entrevistas com indivíduos de distintas faixas etárias, classes sociais e regiões do planeta, nas quais indagamos sobre situações em que a música agiu como elemento de incômodo. Ao classificar uma música como incômoda ou desagradável, as pessoas elaboram códigos morais, aprofundando interpretações sobre ética e comportamentos que partem do julgamento sonoro e se ampliam em um julgamento mais amplo sobre os indivíduos e os valores reconhecidos nas músicas.
Palavras-chave: Música, gosto musical, moral, incômodo

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EBATES ABOUT MUSICAL taste in Communication studies have functioned as a kind of background for discussions about the circulation of music through mass media and "post-massive media" (Lemos, 2007). Whether with an emphasis on processes and strategies for classifying the musical universe (Janotti Jr., 2020; Pereira de Sá, 2021), on recommendation systems (Pereira de Sá, 2009; DeMarchi, 2016; Rabelo Luccas, 2022), on groups of fans and anti-fans (Amaral, 2014; Pereira de Sá & Cunha, 2017) or on the social hierarchies crossed by music consumption (Trotta & Roxo, 2014; Herschmann, 2005; Soares, 2021), the movements of affective adherence to certain genres, styles and musical scenes are constantly activated as constitutive axes of the musical experience.

I propose here to think about musical taste in the opposite direction. Not just as an element that aggregates sensibilities (such as "fans" or "haters"), but as a guiding context for movements of rejection of certain musical experiences that work as potential nuisance. This reflection on taste stems from a six-year survey on annoying music, in which around 70 people were interviewed and invited to describe situations in which music worked in their lives as an element of disturbance, anguish, or anger. The interviews were carried out in Rio de Janeiro and Edinburgh (Scotland), during a stay as a visiting researcher. The results of this research were published in the book *Annoying Music in Everyday Life* (Trotta, 2020) and awakened intriguing nuances about the role of musical taste in musical experiences classified as uncomfortable.

When invited to talk about annoying music, people cannot escape from describing their personal tastes. Taste is the starting point for most conversations about being affected or irritated by music in everyday life. As Simon Frith states, "part of the pleasure of popular culture is talking about it; part of its meaning is this talk; talk which is run through value judgement" (1996, p. 8). As such, the interviews done for this book started with general questions about music preferences, answered with abstract references to music genres. Sentences such as "I like jazz" or "I don't like pop" were the most frequent entrance to the domain of value judgement. This was not a surprise. In our daily lives, arguments about music are always framed by generic umbrella genre classifications, that function as a key organization of the music universe. Thirty-two-year-old Nahya is from India and works as producer in an environmental NGO in Edinburgh, Scotland. She provides a very detailed description of this process, highlighting her uses of each music in her life:

> *Nayha* - I think I've got a quite eclectic taste in music. Most often, when I'm working, I need to listen to music to concentrate but I cannot listen to music with lyrics.

So, often I will listen to Techno music, like Chicago, electronic music. Something about the beat really helps me to focus. When I walk in places, depending on my mood, I'll listen to folk music sometimes. When I'm feeling a little bit down, and I want to be cheered up then I will listen to funk and soul, but if I'm feeling tense, unhappy in that mood, then it will be Joan Baez.

Q - Is there any music you don't like?

Nayha - I guess… really pop music! Generics, one of the run-of-the-mill girl band, boy band pop irritates me a bit, especially when the lyrics are very much obviously rhyming, or contradict, don't make much sense. And Jazz music! But I get less frustrated by that when I'm not trying to understand it and I can just kind of think about the feeling. I think the problem is, for example, in Edinburgh you go to somewhere like the jazz bar and you are trying to dance along to some music and just when you feel you got to, the rhythm completely changes. I don't know but maybe culturally there's a little vagueness in jazz, either you get it or you don't. Sometimes you feel like an outsider with jazz.

Nayha's report resounds several examples presented in Tia DeNora's *Music in Everyday Life* (2000). Music works for her as a tool that she activates to modulate her mood and emotions. What is interesting is how she is aware of a whole intimate system that links feelings and sounds. For her, music is something that works similar to medicine, taken according to some perceived symptoms to improve her health. This, of course, is in cases where she controls the sound. If not, negative adjectives are attached to music genres felt by her as uncomfortable music experiences, like 'nonsense pop music' or 'undanceable jazz', somehow detached from her expectations and desires. Washburne and Derko, in the very beginning of their edited volume about "bad music" define it as music that is "somehow unwanted", "forced upon us in all kinds of possible and impossible situations" (2004, p. 1). "Bad" is a value judgement that irrupts as a result of very complicated taste and adequacy interpretations, helping the listener to define a "positioning gesture" about the music s/he listens to (Washburne & Derko, 2004, p. 2). In other words, "taste is not a stable and inner experience of the subject", but it is the result of "*affective relations*, be it with others who share same preferences or with works or artists that *affect* us" (Janotti Jr. and Pereira de Sá, 2018, p. 10).

What is important to highlight is that value judgments play a key role in the definition of pleasure and displeasure associated with music experience. Hardly will one talk about annoying music without considering personal

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tastes together with a very particular evaluation of adequacy. I would like to argue here that this judgement deals with complex thoughts about life in society, identities, individual emotions and values, as well as with shared social codes considered to be 'good' or 'positive'. Therefore, aesthetic judgements are inseparable from moral judgements, defined as a set of accepted rules that one is inclined to follow as a result of both some social constraints and individual desires tied to a usually contradictory interpretation of "right--and-wrong" definitions.

MORAL ISSUES

Stating that music taste is entangled with moral judgement doesn't mean one can assume a direct relation between them. Instead, this entanglement is experienced in multiple ways, according to multiple sets of conditions and contexts in which the music is heard and experienced. As pointed out by the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984), taste is not detached from social belongings, education and family background. Even considering that our taste is much more unstable than Bourdieusian interpretation suggests and that it usually incorporates elements that seem to be "dissonant" with the expected taste of our group belonging (Lahire 2007), its construction is closely connected to our life experiences, shared values and culture.

Hence, taste in music has to do with knowledge, memories and belongings, activating an important role in the acts of recognition and interpretation. Moreover, taste is dynamic and changeable. As such, it needs to be performed, reinforced, talked about and socially exhibited. The performance is materialized in acts such as listening to recordings, attending to shows and concerts, buying products from your preferred artists, and discussing the value of songs, albums, shows, and so on (Hennion 2001). The shaping and reshaping of our tastes are elaborated daily not only towards music repertoires we like but also, and mostly, against songs, artists and sounds we reject.

Defining a music experience as annoying is the final movement of a corporal and intellectual activity of interpreting ideas about the music heard, which is, in turn, socialized in taste performances that are done to express and elaborate on these interpretations. Final? Perhaps not. The definition of annoyance in music is part of a continuous process of interpretations and judgments about music, developed individually and socially, bodily and mentally. Obviously, this interpretation is not only aesthetically or socially constructed, but also is framed through moral and ethical beliefs and, consequently, is strongly affected

by them. The moral realm is the realm of social rules and conventions, a pivotal set of thoughts over which our daily life is experienced. It is a moving terrain constantly challenged and reshaped according to several changing conditions and contexts throughout our lives. Music has an important role in sharing moral thoughts and defying them.

For instance, a song that states "let's kill the cop" or something similar is judged according to ideas about life and death, murder, violence and power. This judgement is also mixed with shared ideas about the coercive police power, its oppressing attitude and its role as a repressive force of the state. At first, most people would agree that killing anyone is wrong, but this wrongness can be shifted according to social conditions; which is the contradictory activity of moral judgment. Furthermore, music may have a dramatizing function, staging an act that is acknowledged to be obviously wrong as a means of exposing it, criticizing it and preventing it. "Let's kill the cop" is a sentence that may refer to a resistance position, or even to an act that should be put aside. This dramatizing effect depends on other elements of the music experience – which, as we all know, cannot be restricted to the lyrics – involving the arrangement, the music genre, the voicing, the broader position and behaviour of the artist, the social and physical place where it is played and several other aspects that are part of the semiosis of music experience and can frame it in one direction or another. Depending on all these variable elements, singing a chorus that stimulates the killing of a cop may also be understood as a joke, a humorous text which whose interpretation can lead to the extreme opposite side, resulting in a sentence that highlights that it is wrong to kill any person. All these possible ideas are, then, the raw material to be interpreted and ethically judged as people experience the music playing, making up part of the resulting feeling of pleasure or rejection of this semiosis.

In short, the interpretation of the meaning of a song results from an evaluation of the matching or mismatching between the moral expectancies of the listener and what s/he interprets as being the moral message of the song. Yet this process is cognitive and rational, is has a strong emotional and corporal component, and usually, it is not verbalized. As such, although the majority of the people interviewed were very confident to point out music genres and artists they like very much or strongly dislike, most of them were unable to elaborate verbally *why* they like or don't like certain kind of music. When they do, most of them pointed to moral issues to justify their dislike, though this elaboration was often fragmentary, brief and undeveloped. Mike is an exception, and he did elaborate a detailed interpretation about the reasons why he doesn't like pop music.

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The first thing [I dislike] is pop music that kids listen to. They may or may not be aware of the context of the music, but it is generally about sex. And these kids of 7, 8, 9 years old, they are listening to something for the beat, perhaps. They did not think about [the lyrics]: girl goes into a guy, guy goes into a girl, but it's something that is too basic, and it's not appropriate. I could be too conservative, but it just seems not necessary. The point is the groove, but when they do become aware of the lyrics, eventually, a message is being sent. The girls singing those kinds of things, you know? That's frustrating. I find that sending that message to kids of that age is inadequate. And the more music they listen to, as they get older, as teenagers, they are going into this rap, hip hop, R&B: it's too sensual. It sends the wrong message about relationship. When you have a child in your home, you want him to grow up respecting each other not to see each other as sexual objects. And it is repeated, played over and over and over.

His description is illuminating. The aesthetic disapproval about pop music is due to his moral judgement. Although he mentioned the repetition as an (aesthetic) element of his rejection of pop, the main problem for him is the way the music deals with sexuality. His concern about the "message" being sent to kids through the music is pointed towards the lyrics. Of course, it is important to be aware that the sexual message is not only in the lyrics. Sex in pop songs is a constituent element of the genre, highlighted in verses and chorus but emphatically reinforced in the corporal movements of singers, in the intonation of the singing, in choreographies, clothes (or their absence) and in the very experience of pop music concerts, where interpersonal relations are highly mediated through sexual appeal, dancing, gazing and seducing. However, it is undeniable that the verbal component of pop songs operates as a kind of guide to narratives, stories and moral aspects of music experience. Popular songs are usually songs about love, seduction and sex. The desire to be close to a beloved one and the regrets for a split are the most common themes found in the lyrics of such songs. Of course, this is not exclusive to the popular music market. The whole commercial world is informed and processed according to love-and-sex metaphors and suggestions. Sex sells. From cars to cosmetics, from soaps to songs, the sex appeal in advertisements seems to be unavoidable. Moral concerns and restrictions towards sexuality are, hence, the most important part of public debate as it represents a key aspect of the social life, ranging from personal desires to socially accepted rules, widely spread in cultural narratives about love, marriage and family. Music is an artefact that is activated by social groups and individuals to perform, think and elaborate on ideas about sex and love. Ideas about what is wrong and right about sex and love.

If this is true for almost all commercial music, it is undoubtedly more intense in the mainstream pop realm, where it assumes a guiding role, framing the moral interpretation of aesthetic experience. It is precisely this guiding role that perturbs Mike as he associates the pair listening/singing to pop with being inadequate to young children. Even though he assumes that kids may not understand what exactly is meant by the lyrics they sing, he is worried about the way the ideas are kept circulating in children's mind, structuring their behaviour and even their future relations.

The problem of the lyrics is also pointed by Luane, 17-year-old student from Rio de Janeiro. Despite being a teenager, and thus generally expected to like pop and danceable music genres, Luane is concerned about the contents and the message spread by the lyrics. In her words:

> But I am also concerned with the lyrics. You can't listen to the beat and put the lyrics aside. And certain lyrics are impossible, you just can't follow them. Funk lyrics are very repetitive. Nowadays, teenagers are drawn to successful hitmakers. Like an MC who gets all the girls and so on, extravagance. Children, too, because that's trendy. Mass culture listen to funk, *pagode*. In the old days, people listened to MPB a lot. I like MPB very much. Legião Urbana. Legião's lyrics are very present-day; back then, homosexuality was being discussed by the first time. Before, there was too much repression of everything and people wanted to speak, expose themselves, and people felt repressed. Today, people repress themselves.

It is very interesting the way she defines music connected with moral structures of society across time. She identifies in the lyrics by some artists and songs of the past elements of desired social debate, which is compared with today's lyrics that she can't listen to. Her example of the Brazilian rock group Legião Urbana is symptomatic. It was a very successful group in the 1980s, led by gay singer Renato Russo, who was also the composer of many songs launched by the group. His songs addressed same-sex love in narratives and stories that, in Luane's perception, helped people to accept homosexuality in a time it was strongly repressed. Seventeen-year-old Luane was born after the Renato Russo's death (1960-1996) but listening to his songs allows her to interpret moral aspects of society in previous decades, and even to observe the relevance of past ideas in present-day society. All this is directed by her to the lyrics. She reinforces it as she describes her preferences in music towards genres that presumably have more complex lyrics (aesthetic criteria), with messages that help challenging moral prejudices. By doing so, she organizes the musical universe comparing genres according to her taste.

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The mentioned "MPB" she mentioned refers to the term "Música Popular Brasileira" (which means "Brazilian popular music" in Portuguese) defined as a category in the Brazilian music market in which songwriters of high prestige are usually located, artists such as Chico Buarque, Caetano Veloso and Tom Jobim, who developed a complex set of procedures in their compositions and, therefore, are acknowledged by cultural critics as "good". "MPB" and classic Brazilian rock are genres Luane associates with a mythical past of Brazilian popular music history, when, according to her, people used to listen to "better" music. In her interpretations, today's lyrics are led by fashion, by the repetition of direct sexual messages that circulate around "boys taking girls" and "ostentation". In her thoughts, mass culture is responsible for these repeated messages to teenagers and children, but she did not develop, like Mike, the possible moral miseducation related to the shared fashionable taste. What is worth noting is that both of them are overconcerned with the lyrics, dismissing other elements of the music experience. This is not unusual. People are often very attentive to the lyrics in their talks about music and their value judgement. Lyrics are the guide. An even more radical emphasis in the lyrics is provided by Messias, who makes a distinction between gospel music and electronic beat.

> I like gospel music, I only listen to gospel music. My wife is not so keen on gospel. She says the preachers yell. What I really love is His word. I also love romantic songs. Lyrics say a lot. They make you go back to the past and become a more romantic man, something that doesn't exist today. Romance makes the man better. Women believe in love. I like old *brega*, I like Fábio Jr., Roberto, Jr. Roberto, Chitãozinho and Xororó, Leandro and Leonardo. I play the guitar because of romanticism. Electronic music is noisier than melodies. I can't stand it. Only here, when they play it in the square. They always do it on the weekends, I can't stand it anymore. It is a very unbearable noise, it has no lyrics at all. It's like funk and the music from Bahia, but these are easier to understand. Contrarily, electronic music is more noise than music itself. In my point of view, that is not music. It is music, but I think it's not. It annoys me in this sense.

Messias is 43 years old and work as doorman and driver in Rio de Janeiro. His taste is totally framed by the lyrics as he, being an evangelical, is worried about the "message", the "word" of God. Interestingly, in his way of thinking, the lyrics are the element that something as "music", in opposition to "noise". Being able to "understand" is the path he admits using for his highly personal definition of what is or is not "music". When referring to

electronic music, Messias mixes the lyrics with the sound, rejecting it as "non-music". Even though he admits his classification as not consensual, he seeks in the definition of "music" a path to elaborate aesthetically and morally on the value of his unpleasant experience. Again, this distinction about what is "music" is part of a broader process of judging the value of the sonic experience, which, in his case, is strongly dependent of the message sent by the lyrics. The power of romantic lyrics is, hence, a moral power, that makes people better in their existence.

Both Mike, Luane and Messias all point to the role of music in spreading and framing ideas about life. Our subjective experience with music is framed within social rules and constraints that shape our way of thinking and our behaviour. It is activated through memories and thoughts that splits what is considered right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable, good or bad. Once music is "a form of thought and action in the world" (Blacking 1995), the experience with music is not passive, but rather an activity through which people elaborate on lifestyles and behaviours. Music experience may be challenging as it defies settled ideas constructed through our life, which may be disturbing and uncomfortable. Mike's concerns about sexual education of kids are the result of a mismatch between moral behaviours and discourses that he considers as adequate to children and the set of ideas he finds in pop music. Similarly, Luane's interpretation that some lyrics from the 1980s were "better" than nowadays songs results from her particular perception that MPB and classic rock songs were able to elaborate on social prejudices towards the construction of an egalitarian world. Messias also frames his taste and values around the religious aspect, searching in the lyrics, for an adequate message according to the writings of the Bible. Sexual, humanistic or religious values are put forward by them as elements of the aesthetic and ethic judgment of songs, shaping the way they listen to the music. Inadequate behaviours described in the lyrics are, then, considered to be offensive and disturbing, in a movement that ends up classifying unwanted music as annoying.

Moreover, regardless of the overtly accepted idea that music experience must be taken as a whole, encompassing the sound, the dance, the context, the resonance, the sociability and so on, their moral complaints about unwanted music are directed towards the lyrics. The problem of the lyrics can be taken in two overlapping dimensions. First, it is addressed towards specific songs that may be considered offensive and disturbing. In these cases, it is the experience that provides the situation for people to judge the music through the interpretation of the verbal message. Of course, this can only happen when the auditor is able to understand the language used in the song.

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If not, the disturbing aspect of the experience may be hidden or only suggested in visual and sounded fragments. The second dimension I'd like to address in depth is that the moral problems that come mostly through the lyrics that are considered to be a defining feature of certain music genres. In this case, it is not the experience itself that produces the repulsion to challenging lyrics, but an accumulated knowledge about a set of songs and artists. This process is far more complex because it activates a set of preconceived ideas about right or wrong together with the homogenization of a vast repertoire into a pejorative classification. Again, genres are taken as a kind of reservoir of "bad lyrics", becoming target of rejections and prejudices.

MUSIC GENRES AND HIERARCHIES

The music universe is separated into units of classification that help listeners and fans to identify and select their tastes and preferences. The most effective term to assign these separations is the idea of "genre", a biological metaphor borrowed to the cultural realm by other artistic languages such literature, visual arts and cinema, and transported to music classification both as a market share strategy and as a social divide (Negus 1999). It is not my objective here to develop a broad theory of music genres (which has already been done by several brilliant works) but to highlight that this separation works as a shortcut to verbalizing music rejections and segregating people. As Fabian Holt argues, "genre is a fundamental structuring force in musical life" (Holt, 2007, p. 2), and "discourse plays a major role in genre making" (Holt, 2007, p. 3). In his approach, the author suggests not searching for definitions of genres, but an understanding of them (Holt, 2007, p. 8), which is done in his book through ethnographic work. Similarly, my point here is not to define what people mean when they mention a genre as annoying, but to explore the very fact that people use genre classification to talk about likes and dislikes. Genres provide sets of ideas, expectations and moods that are recognized as desirable and pleasurable for some people and as boring or irritating for others. As such, the music nuisance is associated with people's discourse on music genres. Despite the largely accepted agreement in cultural studies that genre classifications are usually blurred, the narratives of most interviewees pointed to a division of the music universe into blocks of music practises defined through genre names. Moreover, some narratives about these blocks suggest that people use genre classification to understand, map and to bother other people. The case reported by Isabel is interesting.

> I hate *sertanejo* music. This has something to do with when I was a teenager and my dad liked *sertanejo* while I wanted to be totally different. Teasing your father, all that teenager thing, and my dad said we didn't know how to pick good music. Because, for my dad, rock music is the pits, all the more when it is foreign. We listened to rock music, and to protest. I mocked the music he liked. I think that was the reason why, and also because our friends thought *sertanejo* sucked and one wants to belong to the tribe. We bashed it and this is something that has been engraved in me. Right, I am not open. I can't like *sertanejo* because, where I grew up, cool people don't like it.

The opposition between rock and *sertanejo*[1] (Brazilian country music) is described as a distinction between her generation and her father's, as well as a tool for being part of her friends' group. For Isabel, labelling *sertanejo* as the kind of music her father liked produces a double process of attaching a set of ideas and behaviours to him and his lifestyle and putting her away from him. Value judgments in music are acts that help people to establish a place in the world and a source of self-recognition (Frith, 1996. p. 72). Her identity as a young girl both as an individual and as part of a group would be filled partially by her proximity to rock music and distance from *sertanejo*. Interestingly, after more than two decades, 42-year-old Isabel still feels blocked from *sertanejo* and associates this dislike with her teenage time. Of course, we cannot deny that music genres carry ideas and stereotypes that may explain in part her rejection of the style. After living in several cities in the country, Isabel moved to Rio de Janeiro and reported being well adapted in the most famous and cosmopolitan city of Brazil. In this sense, her set of shared codes and values are nowadays far away from the idea of a wealthy countryside described in *sertanejo* lyrics. Hence, her refusal about the genre is due to a more complex process than simply the memories of a teenage girl trying to irritate her father. Genre classification is also a cultural classification, which works as a shortcut to (un)shared sounds, ideas and codes.

But there is another layer in genre division within the music market. Classifying means producing hierarchy. The low evaluation Isabel applies to *sertanejo* is not a personal decision constructed exclusively through her background experience and current cultural affiliations. In Brazil, despite its leading role in the music market, *sertanejo* is acknowledged by powerful intellectual social strata of urban population as bad quality music. This is due mostly to its commercial element, being merged with global pop music in several ways. For some critics, *sertanejo* is a worse version of authentic

[1] The world *sertanejo* refers to a very successful music genre in Brazil that resulted from a merge between rural country music from the first half of twentieth century with pop styles inspired largely by Nashville American country groups. It is the mainstream pop music genre in Brazil since the 1980s, in a long-term hegemony in the country's charts. Not surprisingly, most arguments about "pop music" in Brazil are redirected to *sertanejo* with very similar connotations – artificiality, market-driven sound, repetition, and so on.

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country music – labelled as "*caipira*" – which have abandoned its rural heritage to embrace the global pop market (Alonso, 2015, p. 23). In doing so, the artists classified as *sertanejo* have lost their authenticity and, hence, their aesthetic and moral value. Not surprisingly, *sertanejo*, as well as "pop", was among the most cited genres associated with annoying music.

Expanding the case of *sertanejo* to a wider music universe, it is possible to state that hierarchies in the cultural field are not constructed in a desert. Instead, the struggles to affirm the cultural (hence, social, aesthetic, and moral) value of music genres operate within the limits of social stratification and the relative that power social groups have in it. Intellectuals, journalists, critics, conservatories, music schools, skilled musicians and recognized artists are more likely to have their taste and value criteria accepted and shared than minor artists, low-educated audience or unskilled amateur musicians (Araújo 2002). Therefore, the criteria applied to judge a piece of music as "good", despite being possibly contested, has a few general rules overtly accepted. Without denying the huge universe of conflicts that involves the aesthetic judgement of every music genre separately and wholly, the force of the narrative that positions classical music as well as jazz, *bossa nova*, and classic rock – just to mention a few – in a high-value hierarchy within the music genres is highly consensual. Similarly, the disqualification of genres such as rap, hip hop, and "pop" is widely shared worldwide. Not surprisingly, "pop music" was mentioned in several interviews, both in Brazil (with local fusion between pop and other local genres, like *funk* and *sertanejo* itself) and in Scotland. The description of Alec goes in this direction:

> Pop. There are many things that I don't like in pop. It is related to consumerism. I feel that pop music is meant either for teenagers or extremely consumerist people and I am neither of those. I understand teenagers liking pop but when it is an adult liking pop I find a bit disturbing. I definitely think it is age-oriented. It seems to be done in order to make money exclusively.

The artificiality Alec finds in pop music is a key issue in cultural judgement about annoying music. Part of alleged nuisance caused by unwanted music is described as related to its lack of authenticity. Beyond the context, the disturbing element in music is usually associated with a low value attributed to consumerist behaviour or adolescent fashion. "Pop" is an umbrella term that joins several of these disqualifications. According to Thiago Soares, debates about pop music are usually organized on two axes:

the idea of "pop culture" and what he calls the "aesthetic of entertainment" (Soares, 2015, p. 22). Ideas of superficiality, leisure, and joy constitute the shared semantic of pop, together with the culture industry agency in formatting, producing and distributing its products. In pop music, the artistic element circulates as a commodity, and for some people, in doing so, it loses its value, bringing the economic engine to the foreground. Fabian Holt reports being reluctant to define pop music as a genre "in the strict sense", yet he assumes it works as a category that refers to mainstream production of several genres and, sometimes, it may function as a genre in its capacity for complex and moving labelling activity (Holt, 2007, pp. 17-18). For the purpose of our discussion, the attachment of the category in a genre classification is not very important, once we agree it works as a term that defines a general value distinction and is associated with ideas and behaviour that can be judged as positive or negative. Jason Lee Oakes argues that "the boundaries of pop music are absurdly far-reaching, extending to include from Cole Porter to the Carpenters to Christina Aguilera" (Oakes, 2004, p. 54). And all these artists and songs are touched with a kind of "madness" (idem). What I am trying to develop here is that this set of ideas that supports the classification of pop as something bad is a moral judgement that results from a broader understanding about life in society, which, by its turn, is interpreted by the listener as part of the aesthetic evaluation of the music experience. This moral framing dismisses both the lack of authenticity and the commodification heard in pop music. While interpreting the struggle between jazz and rock in specialized magazines, Matt Brennan observes that, despite their alleged differences, both genres shared a "common underlying ideology" of being "authentic musical cultures contrasted against mass-produced, manufactured commercial 'pop', actively turning a blind eye to their own obvious participation in music as a form of commercial production" (Brennan, 2017, p. 14). The point is that people judge music sometimes considering a kind of continuum that links two opposite realms: the authentic and the commercial. Although it is a controversial criterion to evaluate music, the two-poles system frequently appears in talks that try to elaborate on value. Authenticity is usually associated with positive ethics in daily life, being the artistic expression of genuine people or individuals, and therefore, highly valued. Inversely, commerciality is acknowledged as a cold, materialistic and artistically irrelevant taste of individualistic individuals, associated with evil capitalism, with selfishness and social carelessness. Every music practice nowadays is located in an

D intermediate space between the two poles and part of the judgement is to evaluate to what extent authenticity plays an important role in the aesthetic experience. Of course, not everyone shares this opposition in that way and, besides, even if we agree with the logic of the two-poles classification of quality (which I personally am not sure about), it is not possible to verify precisely where an artist or music genre is situated. What I would like to highlight is that the "accusation" of commercialism is a frequent argument to disqualify a music genre, involved with clear moral depreciation of those who like and listen to it.

When Alec dismisses "pop" for its consumerism and exclusive money-making aim, he is using his taste to interpret how people relate to each other and how they behave in the world. This process gets clearer when he admits taste for pop being understandable for younger people but not for elder ones. For him, it is part of teenage sociability and helps youngsters to identify themselves in the world and to be accepted in their social groups, in a movement very similar to the one Isabel reported about the construction of her teenage taste towards rock. As Thiago Soares states in his fascinating book about the uses of pop music in Cuba, "the idea of being part of a global, cosmopolitan and hegemonic world strongly feeds the construction of pop imaginary. Hence, generation appears as a key to understand the particular forms of values that emerge in specific contexts" (Soares, 2017, p. 122). The author discusses the case of "Martí", a young Cuban travesty who adopted anglophone pop music as a means to construct his sexual identity as well as his generational belonging. Through the performative practise of being fan of Lady Gaga and Madonna, Martí challenged the masculine military stereotype of the Cuban revolution, emphasizing his attachment to newer generations, aspiring for changes on the island without necessarily being politically against the goals of the revolution (Soares, 2018: 120-124). The case reported by Soares reinforces the importance of pop music as a device in teenagers' identity construction through consumption. However, it is precisely this strong connection between youngsters and pop culture that nurture its disqualification. As Alec pointed out in his quote, it is accepted that young people use the pop as such, but it is expected that, as they grow older, their taste changes towards possibly more elaborated or complex music practises. In the same movement, teenage and pop are undervalued in the hierarchical system of social and aesthetic classification, which means that growing up should be a path towards putting pop at a distance.

The issue of age as related to music appears again in the interview given by 36-year-old Nelson. He has an administrative job at a public health

foundation in Rio de Janeiro and reports listening to music every day. In his interview, he describes an intense disagreement with his wife about music. After mentioning several times during the interview that he hates funk, especially the pop-funk performed by mainstream Brazilian artist Anitta, he explains his musical taste. In his words:

> I don't like funk at all, especially the *proibidão*. In my time, funk had rap in it, a rap montage. Today you don't get montage. It is always the same pornography thing, which is highly accentuated in funk. I consider it extremely distasteful, I can't, I don't enjoy it, I don't like it. Obviously, it is played in parties and you're a bit cheerful, happy and sometimes you even dance. The rhythm is very nice, I even think the beat is nice. But it is impossible. You see this new generation contaminated by funk, Anitta. She is horrible, but is a success. That's sad! For someone used to listening to Elton John, Beatles, Bee Gees, and not to mention Guns And Roses, Aerosmith, Bon Jovi (...) My wife loves Anitta. I feel as though I have married a teenager. Today I am used to it, I don't care so much anymore. But it took me a while, because it is shit. And it is bad because she is part funk, and everyone keeps dancing, tilting their butts, I find that weird. Actually, it is democratic. She listens to funk, Anitta, on Multishow channel, when she is watching to that horrible show of hers. And she doesn't like rock. So she only hears it when I listen to rock with earplugs. She doesn't use earplugs. Really. Tolerance, right? Marriage. She can't stand it, she says it is very bad. I can't stand it.

Nelson mixes several arguments that appeared in other interviews. First, the moral issue. The main reason for his strong rejection of funk is the high sexuality of it. Although he declares ambiguously that he himself can dance at a party if it is played, assuming that "the rhythm is cool", he refuses the "pornographic" lyrics and the strange shaking butts on the dance floor. The slight contradiction between himself dancing the cool rhythm and the strangeness of the others' dance can be surpassed in his discourse, once he is worried about the lyrics. Again, the verbal interpretation of the music is the most important report element in lowering the value of a whole genre.

Second, the genre classification is done by Nelson via representative artists who are defined as "good", compared with Anitta, who is assigned the worst adjectives. He declared to liking "rock", and in the list he provides of supposedly "good" artists, several styles of pop and rock are represented, going from The Beatles to Aerosmith and to the Bee Gees. Nelson seems to operate a value hierarchy very common in some identity groups in Brazil in which some Brazilian music genres are opposed to Anglophone rock-like music.

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His preference for Anglo-American rock and pop highlights a filiation to a set of ideas related to cosmopolitanism, modernity and technology. As Regev puts it, pop-rock music developed a set of sonic techniques derived from the electric manipulation of timbres and tones provided by electric and electronic instruments and devices (2013, pp. 166-168). Hence, after a long-term process of "pop-rockification", the atmosphere of pop-rock music became the sound of modernity, an "aesthetic cosmopolitanism" (Regev, 2013, p. 30). Although Regev doesn't classify pop-rock as a genre, but as a "cultural convention", Nelson seems to apply to the term "rock" a broader idea that can encompass Anglo-American pop-rock artists and groups, using this classification to put them away from the music performed by Anitta. This way of thinking allows him to split "good" (Anglophone pop-rock) and "bad" (Brazilian funk-pop) music.

The third aspect of Nelson's narrative resounds the age-related issue. Nelson thinks it is unacceptable that his wife (presumably in her thirties like him) likes Anitta. Anitta and the pop-funk she represented should only be directed towards teenagers and her taste for it would be a sign of immaturity or underdevelopment in terms of music and, perhaps, in other realms. It is possible to speculate – although it is important to highlight that it is speculation – that part of his distaste of pop-funk artists such Anitta has to do with this domestic disagreement, and possibly this musical conflict is surrounded by others in their partnership. Music is an element of intense home conflicts, sometimes highly disturbing ones (Trotta, 2020). The personal dimension of music taste is taken as a significant feature in the evaluation of the relationship itself, which in his case, seems to be rather disturbing for him. As Frith argues, "the point is not that we want friends and lovers like us; but we do need to know that conversation, argument, is possible" (Frith, 1996, p. 5). It is unclear if Nelson feels unable to have this taste conversation with his wife, once he disqualifies her taste as adolescent and denies any respect to the artist she admires. The issue of personal relations is entangled with negotiations of taste, which leads us to another layer in these classifications, sliding from the genres to the people who produce and like them.

[2] It is important to highlight that the music Brazilian people refer to as "funk" is not the 1970s African North American style known as "funk" but a variety of hip hop, notably the Miami bass style, reprocessed in Rio de Janeiro during the 1980s to become a different genre with the same name (Palombini, 2010, p. 99). Hence, the term "funk" used here is always referring to the Brazilian genre.

THE CASE OF 'FUNK'

If genres provide a categorization of the musical universe that helps people to define likes and dislikes, some of them are more likely to be mentioned in association with "annoying music". In interviews done in Brazil, funk[2] was often cited as agent of disturbance or irritation. I cannot say that this was a total surprise, since it is widely known that funk is usually taken in Brazilian

popular music as an (almost) uncontested example of "bad music". According to musicologist Carlos Palombini, one of the most important funk researchers in Brazil, funk is "among the most cited genres in lists of musical abominations" (Palombini, 2014, p. 320).

Brazilian funk was created in subaltern parties in the suburbs and *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro in the late 1970s, where North American soul music was played (Oliveira 2017). In a creative process of mixing and editing mostly inspired by the sound of Miami bass, young DJs elaborated remixes that changed the sound of these parties, renaming the music as "funk" and the parties themselves as *bailes funk*. Pereira de Sá (2009) points to funk in Rio as the first original electronic music created in Brazil, in the late 1980s. The parties (*bailes*) were attended by black poor youngsters and became very popular in the last decade of the 20th century. Nevertheless, since then, funk has been portrayed by media coverage since the 1990s as a music practice associated with "gangs or criminal organizations, imputations of anonymous sexual intercourse in parties, alienation, bad taste, and sexist dances, slang, and lyrics" (Freire Filho and Herschmann, 2011, p. 225). At the same time, this negative media coverage raised curiosity in other social groups, in a paradoxical movement of demonization of funk, which came together with an unintentional glamorization of the genre (Herschmann, 2005). What is interesting in this process is that, despite being acknowledged as creative and good danceable music by attendants of the *bailes*, funk has been facing a strong prejudice, being entangled with ideas about poverty, blackness, violence and explicit sexuality. Similar to the definition of social hierarchies regarding *cumbia villera* in Argentina discussed by Pablo Vila and Pablo Semán, funk is largely acknowledged as "music made by poor people and aesthetically poor" (Semán and Vila, 2011, p. 13). The entanglement between a social prejudice with aesthetic disqualification is the ground of several complaints and disagreements that surrounds funk music and the *bailes*. Moreover, attached to the strong racial prejudice that is part of daily life in Brazil, we could add that funk is recognized as "black music, made by black people". The racialization of social segregations (Alabarces and Silba, 2018) mixing class and racial prejudices is the starting point for most depreciation of funk as music and as social movement. The significant "black" taken as a background of funk (bad) evaluation reinforces the long-time depreciation of blackness as a heritage that comes from the slavery time and is still unfortunately very present in Brazil nowadays.

The high number of interviewees who cited funk as an example while talking about "annoying music" is a symptom of this disadvantaged position

of the genre in Brazilian shared music imagination. However, the background prejudices that feed this imaginary is not addressed in the foreground of these talks. Instead, the argument is usually directed to ethics portraited by the lyrics, or to the dance, or at the (high) loudness funk is usually played. 68-year-old phsycologist Ernani, who lives in Rio de Janeiro, mixes funk with other Brazilian genres to describe his discomfort with "today's" music.

> There was going to be the Feast of Saint John celebration in the square. But, when we got there, it was playing electronic *forró*, *pagode*, and funk. I wanted to listen to one thing and there was another, an offensive, outrageous context. Funk, for instance, and *pagode*, I consider outrageous. Both disseminate despicable human values in my opinion. In the old days, the mainstream media (40 years ago) tried to bring quality musical and cultural productions to the great masses. Humanistic values. Nowadays the mainstream media takes advantage of pretty low-quality stuff which are already successful, like *pagode*, funk, etc. and promotes that. This deeply annoys me.

The way he associates the music with several ideas about human values, mass media and violence is rather complex. The expectancy of finding specific music in a traditional popular celebration at a public space was frustrated by genres he associates with "low level" music. Although he did not develop what would be these "awful human values", the judgement is clearly constructed over his personal ethics references. In this sense, funk is an example of this aggressive and low-quality music that media promotes. Using funk as an example of music that somehow hurts the diffuse "humanistic values" is a common development of the conversation about irritating and annoying music. Sometimes, it is described more directly as a music genre that has strong and undesirable sexism. Messias, the evangelic quoted previously, is very explicit in describing this discomfort.

> Funk is 99% offensive toward women. This makes you dislike funk more because it doesn't respect women. Funk from the favelas communities is 90% very degrading for women. And they attend the balls and even like it. For me, women attending these balls have no value at all. They follow the rhythm and the drinking. To like something that degrades you. That's complicated!

The way he gets upset with the "demoralization" of women is slightly contradictory with his own judgment about the women that go and enjoy funk.

He sees no value in them, yet he regrets the lyrics that are putting them down. The issue here is not only the low quality of the funk music in itself, but a moral judgement about the lifestyle that is perceived as being praised by the lyrics. The stigmatization operates in a double process that homogenizes the whole genre and its audience and incorporates the prejudice that associates funk with inadequate behaviour, criminals and violence.

Funk is so widely spread in the Brazilian music market that there are several styles of funk, defined not only according to sound differences but also to the lyrics. A style known as *proibidão* (forbidden funk), for instance, presents the most aggressive and sexist lyrics. Not rarely, the narratives performed in its lyrics are descriptions of violence enacted by drug dealers in their confrontations with the police, speaking overtly about killings and fightings. Palombini and Facina define *proibidão* as "that part of funk music in which the thematic deals with life in the inferior strata of illicit substance commerce, or to the *life in the crime*" (2017, p. 349). As such, a whole explicit vocabulary of violence is applied in a rough way, emphasizing the violent lifestyle of those poor people surrounded by and involved with drug traffic and the police murdering "operations". The moral limits are intentionally surpassed in these lyrics, which, to a great extent, collaborates to feed the stigmatization of funk as criminals' music, lower, confrontational, dangerous. Even though these lyrics do not correspond to the totality of funk, *proibidão* is always mentioned as an example of bad quality and unbearable music experience. Some people unify all funk styles as simple variations of *proibidão*, in a simplification of the genre diversity. Notwithstanding, there are people who mentioned funk in a more nuanced way, trying to balance their distaste with and identifying differences in artists, songs, and through time. Marise is one of these interviewees who tries to separate funk in moments, where older songs were more enjoyable than present-time examples.

> I like, and even enjoy funk from the beginning of the nineties, like Claudinho and Buchecha. If it is being played at a party I will dance because I like it. But nowadays funk is very offensive, mainly treating women as something unreal, as objects to be used in a pleasant way… When there are no swear words, every song sounds implicitly offensive, about using women, women have twerked, have been already used. It is very primitive in the negative sense of the word "primitive", which is a setback. It is a cultural setback because funk didn't begin like that. Today it has a pejorative trend especially in the matter of sex and the female position in the relationship.

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Three things are worth mentioning in her talk. First, the issue of violence. Although she seems to be aware that different styles of funk have different approaches and forms, she only recognizes songs from the past as those she could dance to and have pleasure in. It is as if older funk was not aggressive and time passing has made all artists and songs violent. Time changes our tastes and evaluations about songs, artists and genres. At the same time, past repertoires can function as a kind of archive of memories that filled our life history, our feelings and shared moments. It is easier to find interesting or enjoyable a song that has been part of a distant time, even though it could have been rather disturbing at that time. Possibly, the selective narrative Marise develop about old-time funk is an example of this distance time provides.

The second issue is related to gender. In fact, most funk lyrics are constructed on a kind of role separation between genders that puts girls and women as objects to be caught and seduced. This is a quite common masculine narrative about sex, which is conceived like a kind of hunt, where sexual intercourse with women is an achievement more than a pleasurable experience. Therefore, funk lyrics (as many mainstream pop songs) describe women frequently as an inanimate object, ready to be taken by a virile male. Marise, obviously, refuses this imaginary and rejects current funk songs. Sexism in music is a complex issue, that is usually interpreted superficially. The surface of the immediate meaning of the lyrics is often the material people use to condemn songs that have accordingly trespassed an ethic limit. While it is obvious that some lyrics really apply ideas and descriptions that are unacceptably offensive and violent against women, it is necessary to deepener the analysis incorporating the sound, the dance and the music experience as a whole in order to get a more complex picture of the way people deal with sexist lyrics. This is beyond the limits of this book. What I would like to highlight here is that people do feel offended by lyrics and when they do so, they reject the song, the artist and eventually the genre as a whole, many times reinforcing prejudices and segregations.

The last thing I would like to point out in her talk is the issue of primitivism. Sexism and violence are understood by her as elements of non-civilized code of behaviour, defined negatively as primitive, and retrograde. The issue of civilization as an adequate lifestyle opposed to animalistic acts that ought to be controlled both individually and socially is a permanent concern in daily life, araising often in music experiences. It could be said here that Marise is making a direct association between the whole package the funk brings to the surface – entangling racial, social, generational and moral issues –

and the primitivism, in another layer of prejudice against funk and its fans. Although I think this would not be totally wrong, it would be preferable to interpret her feelings towards funk as an elaboration that merges moral and ethical concerns with embodied attraction and repulsion to funk as pleasurable dance music. Funk has become a symbol of bad evaluation, as well as a hub of prejudices. In this sense, a very interesting analysis on Facebook comments about the genre is provided by Pereira de Sá and Cunha (2017, p. 162), who found that arguments against funk could be grouped into four thematic axes: "(1) racial prejudice; (2) socio-territorial prejudice; (3) aesthetic critique and despise for funk as a cultural manifestation; and (4) popularization of funk as a 'threat' to the country's progress". In their research, they highlight how people attack funk as a way to dismiss the social group it represents, mixing social and racial prejudice with aesthetic disqualification.

What is important to our debate about annoying music is how people use musical taste to build social borders and to lower other people. Nelson's complaints about Anitta, in a sense, put together both the set of commercial stereotypes of the artificiality of pop music and the poorness of funk as bad quality music produced by "lower people". As Julio Mendívil (2016, p. 37) puts it, "if music transmits effectively group or cultural values, ranting against a type of music, ridiculing it or aesthetically disavowing is a very productive way of belittling those who produce it and those who listen to it". In other words, music taste struggles between individuals or social groups are ways of dealing with broader disagreements, conflicts, and disengagements. When music annoys, something does not work well in interhuman interaction.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Based on questions arising from conversations about "annoying music", it became clear that the dimension of taste is configured as a guiding axis of the musical experience. Likes and dislikes are ways of socially performing one's individuality, evaluating the pertinence of the music one listens to, morally judging the lyrics and listeners of certain songs, and recognizing oneself as an integral or dissonant part of certain ideas and social groups. People use music to share thoughts and values, ideas and actions. But also to elaborate on such thoughts and codes of conduct. Liking a song is much more than emotionally identifying with that set of sounds and sung words, it is interacting with a complex entanglement of ideas, thoughts and moralities inscribed in such codes, critically elaborating a positive judgment about them. And disliking is also all this with an inverted sign.

It is also important to highlight that liking or not liking are not exclusive and rigid poles that result from a consistent, coherent and finalized evaluation. They are elements of a process that often take surprising positions, that dissolve, are relativized and change over time. This "time" can be measured in years and decades of life, but also in the short duration of a recording performed in a certain context. Recovering the curious description of Nelson, who seems to be on the verge of separating from his wife for not being able to accept her liking for the singer Anitta but who at the same time considers the funk rhythm "cool to dance to", the elaborations of musical taste can assume contradictory contours and be subject to many relativizations. In these clashes, we process ideas and transform our lives. Talking about musical taste is talking about ways of thinking, reinforcing, tensioning, problematizing and modifying ideas about life. **M**

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