

# Thinking About Music and Tradition in Cyprus

In his late essay “Thinking about Religion through Wittgenstein,” Talal Asad writes:

When a practiced pianist plays, thoughtfully and with feeling, a piece of music she has mastered without having to read the score, one can say that signs have dissolved into her hands. To say that is not to imply that the activity is meaningless but that it is the result of practice that has eventuated in an ability to act in a particular way.<sup>1</sup>

What does it mean to play music thoughtfully and with feeling? How can signs possibly dissolve in one’s hands, like ice melting on warm palms? How can music-making be at once meaningless, as fleeting as summer showers, and yet overflowing with meaning, like a teacup in the rain? What sort of practices, what sort of relationships, do we need to act with thought and feeling?

In response to questions like these, Charles Hirschkind writes of what his interlocutor Cristina Cruces Roldán called a *fondo sonoro*, or “sonorous foundation”:

The improvisational space the *fondo* affords to the skilled musician (or listener) — the connections it makes possible — is simultaneously an articulation of sounds and of time forged not with the resources of narrative but by rhythm, timbre, scale, and tone. . . . [The *fondo sonoro*] creates the ground for a passionate relation to the past that allows it to be thought and lived otherwise.<sup>2</sup>

In what ground does this otherwise grow? What grounds our relationship with music and the past?

The twentieth century brought many to despair of finding any ground available to till, any field to sow, any place to stand. Stanley Cavell has them (us?) in mind when he writes:

I know some who have taken Wittgenstein, early or late, as the last word of philosophy, and who have thereupon left the field of philosophy, perhaps in favor of a field. And it seems to me a certain motivation to philosophy — by no means the least ancient nor the least honorable motivation — leaves one subjected in one’s work to doubts about whether one is in the right place, whether there is a workable field in this place at all, doubts about the character of one’s talents, or conviction, or interest, or about one’s taste, or lack of it, for arguments that forever seem on the wrong ground. —What follows may be thought of as the record of one

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<sup>1</sup> Asad, “Thinking about Religion through Wittgenstein,” 404.

<sup>2</sup> Hirschkind, *The Feeling of History*, 103–4.

who stayed.<sup>3</sup>

What sort of ground might allow not just for work, but for play? For making music, joyous music, full of both thought and feeling?

To begin to articulate a response to these questions, I want to think for a moment through the “key” rather than the belabored “ground” or “foundation.” I begin with my own experience playing clarinet in a “traditional music” ensemble in Cyprus. I turn to Hirschkind and Asad to highlight the stakes of this music-making, especially in terms of our relationships to things past and present through what Asad will come to call “traditions.” I then elaborate what I consider to be some of the openings and foreclosures involved in these grammars within which we operate, by turning to Ludwig Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell and thus returning to the scene of making music.

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To begin, I want to play for a moment with a term that Hirschkind mentions in passing before elaborating on the *fondo sonoro*. Hirschkind writes:

It is striking that almost every important contributor to the tradition of Andalucismo from the late nineteenth century forward has found in flamenco a key to thinking about the unity and continuity of contemporary Spain with its medieval Muslim and Jewish past — or rather, less a key to *thinking about* than *passionately encountering* the past.<sup>4</sup>

What kind of key might this be, a key that unlocks both thought and feeling? Let me list some possible scenes in which I can imagine us encountering keys. First: a key might be a legend, a Rosetta stone that allows us to decipher the previously untranslatable by allowing us to assign meaning to symbols. Here in Andalusia, as in the Hellenistic Egypt in which the Rosetta stone was created, previously unknown pasts of syncretism and coexistence are unlocked via the miracle of common language (or music). Which finds us already in a second scene,

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<sup>3</sup> Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, xvii.

<sup>4</sup> Hirschkind, *The Feeling of History*, 102. Italics in original.

perhaps the most obvious and ordinary, where a key is just that piece of metal I feel for in my pocket, arriving home in the cold and dark one evening, that lets me unlock the door to my apartment and settle into its warm, safe comfort.

This sense of the key brings me to a range of musical scenes in which I feel the key to be at home. When I play a Schubert impromptu one afternoon, my window open to the breeze and the sounds of music wafting over the street outside, I touch the keys with my hands, hearing in my head the voice of my teacher long ago telling me to drop my wrists and relax my fingers so as to elicit the sweet, round, warm sound a practiced pianist can produce when playing thoughtfully and with feeling (that is when “one can say” with Talal Asad “that signs have dissolved into her hands”<sup>5</sup>). Similarly, it is practice that enables me to touch the right combination of keys to make a smooth, firm, round sound come out of my clarinet, tired nights of practice that gave me dimples, signs of an embouchure that can keep my lips in place as the reed vibrates in the mouthpiece and the sound stays steady, firm, in tune — all the more vital when playing with others. (I have several times had the disconcerting experience of playing out of key, when I played the sheet music in front of me on my clarinet in A, not realizing I had to switch to my clarinet in B-flat as instructed by a small note scribbled in the score — playing out of key, that is, until the conductor stopped the whole orchestra for us to giggle and switch hurriedly to the right instrument.)

Musical keys of all sorts are profoundly unreliable. An instrument may be something you *use*: a hammer ready for us to grasp to nail in the last board on our dwelling, a guitar placed in my hand to play a song we all know with friends. Yet it sometimes feels like the demands my clarinet places on me defy any simple description of me as its “user” — the care it takes to prevent cracks in the wood of the clarinet’s body as the humidity and temperature change, its incessant calls for repair. I had a similar sense of incredulity as a student trying to

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<sup>5</sup> Asad, “Thinking about Religion through Wittgenstein,” 404.

make sense of the keys through which our music is made, read, and heard. So now: in which of these scenes (of which we could conjure many more) might one best locate the “key” with which we do not so much “think about” as “passionately encounter” the past — the key, that is, to a feeling of history that is also the groundless ground that Stanley Cavell called a “thin net over the abyss”<sup>6</sup>?

I want to take us to a scene where the “key” is bound up with that most key of concepts in “Oriental” musical traditions, the “mode.”<sup>7</sup> It is hot, as it always is in Cyprus in July. But the village in which we set our scene, Kato Drys, is on a hill about 500 meters high, from which one can see the sea as a blue smudge on the horizon when the humidity is not too great and one can feel the cooling breeze from the Mediterranean when one is in luck. I’ve just had supper with the other members of the musical ensemble with whom I’ve been rehearsing under the shade of a great terebinth tree by a church at the outskirts of the village. For days, we’ve sat under this terebinth, instruments at hand, sometimes with an iced coffee or figs picked from somebody’s tree, too. Once, we went inside the chapel, but the echoes were too great and the stuffy air insufferable, so the music we made stayed mostly outside the church.<sup>8</sup> Now, after supper, I worry that the left-over beans and chicken will stick to my teeth when I go to play my clarinet on stage in a few minutes. But this is the least of my worries, to

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<sup>6</sup> “We begin to feel, or ought to, terrified that maybe language (and understanding, and knowledge) rests upon very shaky foundations — a thin net over an abyss. (No doubt that is part of the reason philosophers offer absolute ‘explanations’ for it.)” Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 178–179.

<sup>7</sup> The word “mode” comes from Latin *modus*, meaning “measure,” “standard,” “means,” or “way.” The English “mode” roughly corresponds with Turkish *makam* and Arabic *maqam* (see below, footnote 10). The musicians I played with used the word μακάμ (*makam*) in Greek, but ήχος (*echos*) is the ecclesiastical, “Byzantine” equivalent, and Latin *modus* itself translates Greek τρόπος, which has also come down to English as “trope.” For this etymology see the *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “mode.”

<sup>8</sup> In the Greek ecclesiastical tradition, a frequently used adjective for “secular” ideas, education, or music, is θύραθεν, literally “from outside the door,” or else just εξωτερική, “outside.” As Maria Mavroudi writes: “the Greek, Syriac and Armenian terms used in order to distinguish between the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ since Late Antiquity closely correspond to those later employed in Arabic for the same purpose. What modernity labels as ‘secular’ is, in these ancient languages, designated as ‘from the outside’ – a term that echoes a distinction between what is properly ‘ours’ as followers of a monotheistic world-view (whether Christianity or Islam) and what is ‘outside’ or ‘foreign’ to it.” Mavroudi, “The Modern Historiography of Byzantine and Islamic Philosophy,” 293.

be honest. The past few days were hard. Playing clarinet, I don't feel at home in *makam* music.

If the musical traditions based on *makam* — for lack of a better term to grasp the many practices and teachings across the lands stretching from the Maghreb washed by the Atlantic in the West to the lands beyond the Oxus in the East, from the shores of Muscat on the Arabian Sea in the south to Crimea on the Sea of Azov in the North — if these musics share anything, it is that they are not equal-tempered.<sup>9</sup> (But then again, neither was Western classical music before Bach.) The *makam* are “modes,” or ways to make available pitches for composition and improvisation.<sup>10</sup> The lines between these are of course blurred, but not abandoned; there are many courtly genres of compositions with famous composers from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in Ottoman lands, just as there is great skill in interspersing *taksim*, or improvisations, around and throughout these set pieces.<sup>11</sup> The voice is the great instrument for *makam*: it is the voice of the muezzin whose call to prayer teaches whole villages the musical grammar of a *makam*, perhaps later to be imitated by a shepherd fiddling with his *pithkiavli* (like a flute); and it is voices and only voices (and only male ones, with rare exceptions), that resound in the great domes of Orthodox churches throughout the lands of the former Ottoman Empire, voices whose *echoi* according to which Byzantine music are written are precisely equivalent to Ottoman *makam*, developed as they were side-by-side in eighteenth-century Istanbul.<sup>12</sup> The voice is expressive and infinitely varied and finely shaded. It is the practiced voice that can best express a *makam*, with its precise ordering of pitch relationships that are

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<sup>9</sup> For helpful background, see Chabrier, “Maḳām.”

<sup>10</sup> Harold Powers usefully notes: “It is essential to distinguish between ‘mode’ as a concept in the history and theory of European music and ‘mode’ as a modern musicological concept applied to non-Western music, though the latter naturally grew out of the former. ... If one thinks of scale and tune as representing the poles of a continuum of melodic predetermination, then most of the area between can be designated one way or another as being in the domain of mode. ... It is not clear, however, here or elsewhere, whether ‘mode’ in such a broad sense is an ontological or merely an epistemological object, an inherent musical property or a scientific paradigm.” See Harold Powers, s.v. “Mode”: §I, 3 and §V, 1, in *Grove Music Online*.

<sup>11</sup> See Feldman, *Music of the Ottoman Court*.

<sup>12</sup> See Erol, *Greek Orthodox Music in Ottoman Istanbul.*, esp. pp. 61 ff.

so inadequately captured by Western classical musics and their offspring. Next to the voice stand great unfretted instruments, most famously the beautiful *oud* and the long-necked *lafta* (both related to their bastard offspring, the *bouzouki*, a fretted instrument created at the beginning of the twentieth century and famously characteristic of twentieth-century music of Greece). In our musical group performing that evening in Kato Drys, most of us were playing the *oud* and *lafta*, with two also using their voices.

Which brings us to the instruments that stick out: my clarinet and the *kanun*. The clarinet is uncomfortable in *makam* musics. It must play out of key, since it was crafted by French and German instrument-makers to “better” play primarily Western classical music and secondarily music for bands. It was via such military bands that the clarinet arrived in Istanbul in 1826,<sup>13</sup> when Giuseppe Donizetti *Pasha* (the brother of the famous opera composer), brought Western classical music to the Sultan’s court, signaling the end of secular courtly patronage of Turkish art music.<sup>14</sup> Yet the clarinet (unlike other Western wind instruments) was absorbed and learned by musicians in the Balkans, Anatolia, and Epirus, so that by the 1930s it was deemed a “folk” instrument. But not in Cyprus; the clarinet arrived on the island, so it seems, only after the beginning of municipal and police orchestras under the British after 1878 at the earliest, most likely only after 1910.<sup>15</sup> Which accounts for some of my discomfort.

But a poor workman always blames his tools. The clarinet is not entirely unsuited to *makam*; in these many folk traditions, musicians learned to bend notes by adjusting their embouchure, using alternate fingerings, and changing to softer reeds.<sup>16</sup> That week was my

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<sup>13</sup> On the history of the clarinet in particular see Kragulj, “The Turkish Clarinet,” 2–5.

<sup>14</sup> An end that is narrated along the pattern of the “decline” of the Ottoman Empire from the nineteenth century onwards: “We may take the sleeping Ottoman sultan as an apt image for the abdication of the traditional role of musical patron on the part of the secular authorities in Turkey, a somnolence which became increasingly sound from the second half of the 19th until well into the 20th century.” Feldman, *Music of the Ottoman Court*, 16.

<sup>15</sup> See Hasikou, “The Emergence of European Music.” The Limassol Philharmonic Orchestra (in which I played clarinet myself) had its first concert in 1909. The first pianos were imported to the island in 1904; *ibid.*, 113–4.

<sup>16</sup> As well-documented by a practicing clarinetist in Kragulj, “The Turkish Clarinet.”

first real attempt to play my clarinet in the setting of *makam* music. (I had done my best to sing in Traditional and Byzantine Music classes years earlier, but never with much devotion or care.) Yet my greatest problem was not even that it was hard to accurately find the pitch, the right fraction of a tone. (There are nine *commata* in a whole tone, and precise rules for figuring out what pitch one ought to play to be “in tune.”) Much more basic than that: the clarinet commonly played today is in B-flat. The group relied on sheet music as a guide, which was of course written in concert pitch, in C. In other words, it was easy to find myself playing in the wrong key. I thought I could transpose decently at sight, after years of playing in pits for musicals where I had to cover flute or oboe parts written originally in C. But add to that the fact that I was learning to speak a whole new musical language and that I had to at some point try to improvise and play well alongside the group; not to mention the heat, the wind, and the incessant cicadas singing their own tune in the terebinth tree; all to say — it was hard to play well, or conversely, it was easy to play out of key. If Talal Asad tells us that when a practiced musician plays, the “signs dissolve into [their] hands,” it is perhaps best to admit that in my unpracticed hands, the music did not make much meaning, let alone one “that it is the result of practice that has eventuated in an ability to act in a particular way.”<sup>17</sup> My budding romanticism for this music of astonishing thought and feeling was, in short, nipped by my lack of practice.

The humidity was high that night. So high, in fact, that the start of the concert was delayed by a good ten to fifteen minutes while the *kanun* player used her tuning key to adjust the strings. And that great instrument, essentially a harp played horizontally, like a piano without keys, has three strings for every pitch, and thus takes *ages* to tune. But to no avail; it seemed the humidity kept knocking the *kanun* out of key. It was only after the concert that we found out that the *kanun* player’s tuner had been set to 444 Hertz rather than the standard 440

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<sup>17</sup> Asad, “Thinking about Religion through Wittgenstein,” 404.

to which the rest of us tuned.<sup>18</sup> How funny that playing out of key came down not to a question of *makam* or of humidity but rather to that most Western classical of problems, of precisely what frequency our A should be.

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One could speak of this as a problem of how to perform history. We could say with Hirschkind that this ordinary sort of problem, playing out of key, reveals how ensembles like that I was in play “a fusion of the principles of European Early Music movement and a living oral tradition on the other.”<sup>19</sup> Such an explanation is a helpful response to my feeling throughout the week that I had come to learn traditional Cypriot music and found myself instead immersed in a particularly abstruse version of Historically Informed Performance. Most of my previous musical education had been firmly within the Western classical tradition, even though most of my teachers were in and from Cyprus. I joined this week-long workshop to get a sense of a “different” tradition of music, one I presumed to be oral yet I soon learned was extremely literate. Thus, more and more during the week, I felt like I was back playing Bach: both baroque and *makam* musics are traditions I am not at home with, but not unfamiliar with, either, traditions I have been taught to play and hear through experiences of great thought and feeling.

Hirschkind is optimistic about the encounter of these traditions. He writes that “a musical project founded on historicist assumptions emphasizing the discontinuity of a past practice from its contemporary heir (i.e., the European Early Music movement) is potentially rerouted by a tradition whose criteria of continuity and historical fidelity leave scope for processes of transformation and accretion (i.e., the Moroccan Andalusí musical tradition),” one whose “new amalgamation ... is, of course, also enabled by and responsive to the market

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<sup>18</sup> On the history of 440 Hz see Gribenski, *Tuning the World*.

<sup>19</sup> Hirschkind, *The Feeling of History*, 121.



for world music,” but is nonetheless able to “map out a territory not simply of an Arab living in Europe but of an Arabic Europe, one whose historical possibility has been shaped by Andalucismo.”<sup>20</sup> For Hirschkind, this “new territory” finds its ground in a “sensory-emotional opening” afforded by the “sonic palette” of flamenco that allows Andalucistas “the possibility to feel and think across the *fondo sonoro* linking al-Andalus with Andalusia and the Middle East with Europe, a space of historical reflection unsustainable within the dominant epistemological frames that constitute modern Spain as an integral part of a broader European civilization.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, musical Andalucismo opens up a space beyond the rationalist secular genres of history and philology on the one hand and Romantic fiction, Orientalist fantasy, or nostalgic longing on the other — “none of which constitute a responsible ethical and political orientation to the present.”<sup>22</sup> Musical Andalucismo gestures towards a different “feeling of history,” an orientation to the past that enables us to rethink the boundaries of Europe in the present.

How adequately does the *fondo sonoro* respond to the feeling of playing music in the ensemble I was in in Cyprus? Certainly, Hirschkind’s descriptions appropriately highlight the sense of coexistence palpable in music that belongs at once in the Ottoman court with the *pashas*, the minaret with the muezzin, the church with the chanter, and the field with the peasant. These scenes indicate, too, deeper coexistence in this music between historical fidelity and artistic creativity, between rational systematicity and expressive spontaneity, between thought and feeling. And these descriptions partly account for the place of this music in Cyprus, today. I have friends who are quite partisan leftists and right-wingers; staunch church-goers and outspoken atheists; foreign-educated, English-speaking (like myself) and Greek-educated, Greek-speaking Cypriots; all of whom have studied in ensembles like the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 121–22.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 103–4.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 104.

one I played in to train their voices to perform the *makam*, to learn how to place their fingers on the fretboard of the *oud* to play “in tune,” to think and feel the keys you must play in and from to successfully perform a *taksim*, a great skill. We come together across these differences in villages like Kato Drys, though more often in the capital of Cyprus, Nicosia, to spend time together, to form friendships that are the expression of a longing not simply for identification with the authority of a past or present, though we feel that too, nor communities shaped solely by the commercial circuits of commodified music, whether “pop,” “world,” or “indie,” though that too. We come together rather in what Talal Asad calls “a desire for being transformed through friendship, through belonging to others who belong to you, as they themselves are also changed by that mutuality.”<sup>23</sup> Through this friendship, Asad tells us, what we learn “is not a doctrine (rules) but a mode of being, not a thread one can pick up or drop whenever one feels like it but a capacity for experiencing another in a way that can’t be renounced.”<sup>24</sup>

These friends of mine are better aware than I am of how “traditional,” “Ottoman,” and “Byzantine” music are caught up in the histories of folklore and nation, folk and elite, tradition and art, that are so very alive in Cyprus today.<sup>25</sup> Some of us feel alienated from tradition, and search for a way to “make it new” as a result, or else borrow from the grammar of this Modernist break with the past to make possible something like “Historically Informed Performance.” Others find solace in nostalgia for these pasts, whether through Romantic rubrics of national feeling or often self-assured recuperation of previously sidelined pasts that might provide alternatives to political impasses.

I have felt all of these; I have thought about the music we make in all of these ways.

In response, I find my own solace in Talal Asad’s words on tradition:

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<sup>23</sup> Asad, “Thinking About Tradition, Religion, and Politics in Egypt Today,” 212–13.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>25</sup> For a useful assessment of some of these dynamics, see Hatay and Papadakis, “The Cultures of Partition and the Partition of Cultures.”

The familiar claim that tradition is a model of the past in the present tends not only to separate the past unthinkingly from the present; it also renders tradition as a representation of time sited in a circumscribed reality (the present). However, whenever people quarrel about whether or not they can continue to live essentially as they do now because the world is (or is no longer) the way it is claimed to be, we have a more complicated relationship between tradition, time, and place. Tradition may turn out to be not so much a model of the past that is inseparable from its interpretation in the present as a set of practices that presuppose today as a part of unfinished time.<sup>26</sup>

In other words, I am sympathetic to the *fondo sonoro*. I feel acutely the stakes of our relation to the past and the indispensability of grounds for responsible political and ethical action, even as I attend to the dangerous opportunistic deployment of histories in the registers of both passionate feeling and dispassionate scientism. And I too find joy and hope in music for its making available of a different “feeling of history.” Yet I worry about the *register* and *direction* of this theoretical movement. What senses of ground do we operate with when invoking feelings and foundations? In what way does the passionate relation built on these grounds indeed offer an alternative, a way for the past to be “thought and lived otherwise”? What kind of turns (Greek *tropes*, Latin *modes*) and returns are present in this movement?

I want to return to these questions in a moment. But first, I want to register that Hirschkind’s explanation is most astute in identifying the claims to historical continuity and discontinuity that underwrite the aesthetic sensibilities I identified above — sensibilities that, indeed, animate not just music but historiography, education, commemorations, and so many other aspects of public life.<sup>27</sup> As in all these cases, there are points I would want to dispute in Hirschkind’s account on a factual basis. The claim that “Spain’s musical traditions are genealogically linked to Middle Eastern poetic and musical forms” is not indisputable (and Hirschkind makes clear that he is “not interested in a historical defense of the claim”).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Asad, “Thinking About Tradition, Religion, and Politics in Egypt Today,” 213.

<sup>27</sup> As is well-documented in the case of Cyprus by Bryant and Papadakis, *Cyprus and the Politics of Memory*.

<sup>28</sup> Hirschkind, *The Feeling of History*, 104n7.

To put it more positively, the precise nature of the concurrent, interweaving development of “Arabic,” “Turkish,” and “Byzantine” musical traditions, resting on the *makam* idea, germinating from the common ground of Late Antiquity, is still to be explored and synthesized in detail. That is a task for another time, a task that requires significant linguistic competencies and may well involve genuine discoveries of hitherto unknown connections or developments based on manuscripts that have so far been little studied. This task also requires as a necessary premise the porosity of Middle East and Europe, or rather a nuanced appreciation of how Europe (initially as Christendom, possibly Latin, possibly more ecumenical) and the Islamic world (the *ummah*) emerge, symmetrically but not at all distinctly, from the ancient Hellenistic and later Roman *oikoumene*. Such an investigation may likely thus undermine any claim that musical Andalucismo or *makam* musics were, in their origin and development, non-European; after all, the Greek tradition of music and mathematics was not European to begin with, but was inherited by both Greek and Arab (and others, like Syriac, Persian, Georgian, and Armenian) cultures contemporaneously. But these questions are best left for another day.

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Hirschkind writes gracefully across three registers: the different ways of being we find in the face of the other, our ethnographic interlocutor; the profound skepticism and antifoundationalism provoked in our reading of twentieth-century philosophy; and the indispensability of solid ground on which we can stand when taking urgently needed political action in the present. Hirschkind writes that the Andalucistas’ “musical wanderings trace the cartography of a Europe deeply entwined with Arabo-Islamic aesthetics and constitutively bound to the other side of the Mediterranean.”<sup>29</sup> In so doing, “such a practice of learning, sociability, and performance reshapes the way dimensions of the past articulate with the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 119.

present and future, offering for some a palpable vision of a different Spain or Europe than that being presently consolidated around an anti-immigrant political platform.”<sup>30</sup> The hope that music affords is, almost literally, heartfelt. Yet I want to question the ways in which the *fondo sonoro* provides an alternative ground, one that opens up the possibility of a different orientation to the past and hence to “Europe” in the present via a yearning for groundless ground, an anti-foundationalist foundationalism that captures both the thought and the feeling that goes into playing music of great skill like flamenco and like *makam*.<sup>31</sup>

Hirschkind’s primary philosophical interlocutor throughout his work is Ludwig Wittgenstein. At the end of the chapter on music from which I have been citing, Hirschkind quotes Wittgenstein to make the point that “as a meaningful but nonreferential practice, music helps attune us to the embodied, ‘tonal’ aspects of a given form of life, to life’s noncoincidence with reason and language, a perspective shared both by Wittgenstein and the Romantics.”<sup>32</sup> Wittgenstein thus allows Hirschkind to redirect questions about “musical meaning” to “the meaning of music within our lives.”<sup>33</sup> Anthropology, and by extension ethnomusicology, traditionally did this through the concept of “context,” insisting that a specific practice like music-making be situated within “culture” through the method of, e.g., “thick description.”<sup>34</sup> Yet this intervention rests on a latent scientism — expressed, for instance, through positivism in philosophy, logicism in mathematics, and realism in literature.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Stokes, in his response to Hirschkind, also picks up on “sonorous foundations” for its ethnomusicological significance, although he faults Hirschkind for not fully attending to the *craft* of music — to which Hirschkind responds that the “musical sensibilities” he is working with do not belong to the “masters of music,” their makers, but are shared amongst listeners and musicians and other figurations of publics and audiences. Stokes also worries that the attention to the *feeling* of music leads to “a kind of romantic hermeneutics that will always, ultimately, sequester music” (657); to which I would say that it is precisely between the rationalistic Enlightenment Scylla and the sensual Romantic Charybdis that we must chart our course. Which is also to note that the line of thinking advanced in this paper, and outlined by Hirschkind, could be written in a different key as a genealogy of the contested reception of Kant (as Hussein Fancy makes clear in his own response to Hirschkind). See the responses collected in Iqbal et al., “Book Forum on Charles Hirschkind, *The Feeling of History*.”

<sup>32</sup> Hirschkind, *The Feeling of History*, 126.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Borrowing, in its classic formulation, from Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.; for ethnomusicology, see in particular Brinner, “A Musical Time Capsule from Java.”

The antifoundationalist (or modernist) impulse, which reached its height in interwar Europe, reacted against this reductionist wave by insisting that at the bottom there was — nothing, neither meaning nor metaphysics. Wittgenstein opens his *Philosophical Investigations* by taking Augustine to task for inaugurating an entire tradition of meaning-making that rests on ostension; Heidegger went even further back in time to insist that metaphysics since Plato has “forgotten the question of Being.”<sup>35</sup> Beyond skepticism, these philosophers both insist that we attend to the ordinary scenes of language and of life, that we ought to (as Wittgenstein says) “bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (*Philosophical Investigations*, §116).<sup>36</sup> These thinkers pulled the rug out from under the philosophy of mathematics, of language, and of being, and by extension concepts like “culture” that rely on the possibility of a *ground* from which to apprehend or grasp (*Begreifen*, cognate with *Begriff*, concept) the world in which we find ourselves. As the allusion to Heidegger ought to make clear, the political stakes of (anti)foundationalism are profound and not at all clear-cut. It is no accident that the greatest theorist of groundless ground, in his terms the “anarchical *arché*,” was Emmanuel Levinas, the great Jewish student of Heidegger’s who dedicated his masterwork *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* “to the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man”; nor is it an accident, I think, that Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* was only published after the end of the Second World War, which this Viennese Jew by birth had spent in the English countryside.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

<sup>36</sup> Stanley Cavell writes: “Heidegger’s consciousness that our deepest task, as philosophers and as men, is one of getting back to a sense of words and world from which we are now away, is an intimate point of similarity with Wittgenstein.” Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, xxxiv. See also Mulhall, “Realism, Modernism and the Realistic Spirit.”

<sup>37</sup> On Wittgenstein’s wartime activities see Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. The other great theorist that I must mention, another German Jew who studied under Heidegger and whose thought was so deeply shaped by his Nazi turn and the destruction of the world in which she had been born, is of course Hannah Arendt. On these questions see in particular Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*.

Hirschkind deploys the concept of ground in his description of Andalusian music, writing that the connections musical Andalucismo forges are “simultaneously musical and historical,” involving “a cultivated feel for the way the Iberian past and present hold together much as a musician has a feel for the way different musical styles intersect to form a *common ground*, one laden with emergent musical possibility.”<sup>38</sup> Hirschkind’s “common ground” follows Wittgenstein in refusing ostension wholesale, locating a sort of meaning (though “nonreferential”) rather in the “substrate of sonic correspondences and aesthetic affinities” that “operate at the sensory level” — for instance, via the “background of potentialities” that underlie the “space of improvisation” named by the *fondo sonoro*.<sup>39</sup> The possibility of the *fondo sonoro* aligns with the lived experience of musical Andalucismo as a different way of listening, making music, coexisting (it is after all closely intertwined with *convivencia*), and hence a different way of being. At the same time, I want to suggest that reckoning with these different forms of life, in Cyprus as in Andalusia, requires that we also reckon with a much broader search for a groundless ground by thinking through the great wave of twentieth-century antifoundationalism that yet remembers well how indispensable a ground is for responsible ethical and political action.

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We find ourselves asking again, in a different key, what it means to act with thought and feeling — whether musically or politically. One way into these questions might be to look again at “practice.” At first, it might seem like we encounter “practice” in scenes quite different from each other. But they bear deep similarities, after all: children are forced to practice piano and to practice making the sign of the cross in church — both ways of enforcing discipline, of shaping habit, of learning to follow rules. In other words, practice is a

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<sup>38</sup> Hirschkind, *The Feeling of History*, 103. My italics.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

central way of inculcating a form of life. Of course, this is the anthropological move: locating the meaning of practices in a culture, whether understood as a system of symbols or through ever more elaborate marriages of discourse and practice engineered to capture what Paja Faudree calls an “integrated expressive system” or “total semiotic field,” thus giving us a ground to apprehend the unity of music and language, body and mind, feeling and thought.<sup>40</sup> One might think there is something of value in “unmasking” the origin of practices by locating them in specific configurations of these fields. In Foucault’s terms, following Nietzsche, this would be a genealogy.

I am not here interested in arguing *against* genealogy per se. But it should be clear by now that I do not pursue explanation of this sort for my material (as would be implied in, for instance, a delineation of the discourse of nationalism in Cyprus, or a discussion of the political economy of the recording and world music industries, or “uncovering” links to uncomfortable pasts). My aversion is in part because I think, at least in certain versions, genealogy is a way to deflect from what Cora Diamond called “the mind’s not being able to encompass something which it encounters.”<sup>41</sup> I do not want to say that music, or the past, is “really there” in a way that genealogy is incapable of tackling. But both the experiences I have described in Cyprus, and my relationship with music more generally, and my reading of philosophy have convinced me that there is something to what Diamond calls

the experiences in which we take something in reality to be resistant to our thinking it, or possibly to be painful in its inexplicability, difficult in that way, or perhaps awesome and astonishing in its inexplicability. ... What is expressed there is the sense of a difficulty that pushes us beyond what we can think. To attempt to think it is to feel one’s thinking come unhinged. Our concepts, our ordinary life with our concepts, pass by this difficulty as if it were not there; the difficulty, if we try to see it, shoulders us out of life, is deadly chilling.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Faudree, “Music, Language, and Texts.”

<sup>41</sup> “It is capable of making one go mad to try, to bring together in thought what cannot be thought.” Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” 2.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.



What is most frightening about these experiences of the “difficulty of reality” is that “the things we take so may simply not, to others, present the kind of difficulty — of being hard or impossible or agonizing to get one’s mind round.”<sup>43</sup> Such is, at least my, experience with music; and I can only hope that it is yours, too.

More generally, the difficulty of reality, and the probability that an instance of it is not recognized by all, is the nub of skepticism (that is, the impossibility of knowledge) to which Stanley Cavell returned time and time again. Cavell was especially interested in trying to explain how Wittgenstein was *not* a skeptic. We might recognize the “difficulty of reality” in the hardness of the soil that Wittgenstein famously hits when explanation, or digging for foundations philosophical or otherwise, comes to an end:

If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: “This is simply what I do.” (*Philosophical Investigations*, §217)

What sort of end is this? Cavell helpfully lays out our options as interpreters:

the standing controversy about this passage turns on whether it is to be taken as Wittgenstein’s confession that he has no non-skeptical solution to the possibility of the privacy of language; or whether it is perhaps an indication that a pragmatist account of ‘what I do’ is Wittgenstein’s non-skeptical explanation of our sharing of language; or — let’s hope — in some further way.<sup>44</sup>

A skeptical interpretation of Wittgenstein would have to say that in some cases there is nothing more to say, that the lack of explanation ultimately means that a gulf might remain between you and I. If we choose not to follow that route, recognizing the dangers of a hard sense of “privacy” and “interiority” (not coincidentally the vocabulary of liberalism), then it seems we are back to pragmatism, where everything, even truth claims, are based ultimately on “what I do.”

But Cavell wants to take us elsewhere, some third way. To follow Cavell’s thought here is to bring us back to music. After all, Cavell’s mother was a talented pianist, and he

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 14.

studied music at Berkeley, then composition at Juilliard, before switching to philosophy at UCLA.<sup>45</sup> Thus, Cavell poignantly says:

the question of philosophy was posed for me ... within the aftermath of my crisis in having left the study of music, as if philosophy occurs for me as some form of compensation for, or perhaps continuation of, the life of music.<sup>46</sup>

Such philosophy as music, and music as philosophy, has animated this paper, too.

To close, I want to quote a remarkable, if long, passage from the book in which this quotation occurs, Cavell's *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises*, the record of lectures given in Jerusalem.<sup>47</sup> Here, Cavell writes about his own frustration at playing out of key, namely through his strongly felt lack of perfect pitch and the relationship of this to meaning-making and skepticism:

My mother had something called perfect pitch, as did one of her brothers. That I did not was a source of anguished perplexity to me, one of the reasons I would eventually give myself for withdrawing from music, particularly after I found that the only role I conceived for myself in music was as a composer. Yet I felt there must be something that I was meant to do that required an equivalent of the enigmatic faculty of perfect pitch. Being good at following and producing Austinian [for which we may substitute "Wittgensteinian"] examples will strike me as some attestation of this prophecy.

My parents took each other's talents seriously, more seriously than they took anyone else's that they knew; this element of romance lasted through their lifetimes. But they could never see reason in their despair of harmony, and their contrasts grew frighteningly polarized between his continuing rages ... and her periodic silences ...; between his contempt for the world and self-contempt for his failures in it, and her disdain for the world and for its ineffectual praises of her local successes in it; between the inexpressiveness of his wild love of the eloquence he would never have, and the glad unsayability of her knowledge of the utter expressiveness of music. The devastation of spirit in their quarrels, and their mutual destruction of interest in the world, are measures for me of arguments that must not be won,

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<sup>45</sup> It is worth noting that Wittgenstein, too, grew up in an intensely musical environment; Brahms and Mahler frequented the Wittgenstein household in Vienna, and Ludwig's brother Paul was a great pianist and the dedicatee of Ravel's Piano Concerto for the Left Hand (because he had lost his right arm in the First World War). See Monk, *The Duty of Genius*, especially pp. 6–10.

<sup>46</sup> Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, II.

<sup>47</sup> It is in Jerusalem, Cavell writes, that he "feel[s] enabled for the first time to tell in public certain fragments of mine, which is in a sense part of a story about why I am *not* here, secure in the knowledge that here it is known that you do not get to a life until you get to its pain as well as to its joys. And because here you know that the worst is known, and for that reason you know that one's specific pain, small or large, still pain, need not go unsaid and unaccompanied. No place more sternly warns that in seeking for the representativeness in your life you have to watch at the same time for your limitedness, commemorating what is beyond you. One is neither to claim uniqueness for oneself nor to deny it to others. (Perhaps this is something Emmanuel Levinas means in attributing infiniteness to the other, interpreting a passage in Descartes' Third Meditation that, on my interpretation, concerns the fate of the other in finiteness.)" Ibid., 12.

and hence — so I think — of my conception of philosophy as the achievement of the unpolemical, of the refusal to take sides in metaphysical positions, of my quest to show that those are not useful sides but needless constructions. Spending the bulk of my days alone, from the age of seven until the year before I went away to college, I from time to time thought that in their periods of locked speechlessness with each other, and with me, they were mad; and I wondered this about myself, in my absorption of their opposite griefs, becoming both their accused and accuser, and as unintelligible to myself as if I had not learned speech.

A comparable isolation, and absence of voice, cloaks the teacher and the student to whom the teacher of the *Investigations* is inclined to say, yet refrains from saying, “This is simply what I do.” [This is somehow crucial: when our spade is turned, we (formed in the “self-image of a teacher”) are only *inclined* to say “this is simply what I do.”] It is such an experience that more recently has led me to sense the child in the quotation from Augustine’s *Confessions* that opens Wittgenstein’s *Investigations* — hence the child that recurs throughout the *Investigations* — as invisible to the elders among whom it moves, attempting to divine speech for itself, and as in a position of isolation and unintelligibility so complete as to reveal childhood as such to be a state akin to madness.<sup>48</sup>

Is it the “achievement of the unpolemical” we are after, a refusal to insist on either ground or groundlessness? Or does that skeptical response only achieve isolation, unintelligibility to oneself? Who is mad here? I, for one, want to teach the child to make music, joyful music, in friendship, full of thought and of feeling.

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In this paper, I have tried to grapple with the way in which we play music thoughtfully and with feeling. I followed the “key” as a way through a scene from my own experience playing music in Cyprus. I then sought to think through this experience, alongside Talal Asad and Charles Hirschkind, staying with the troubled relations of tradition and politics, feeling and history, Orientalism and Europe, scientism and Romanticism. Last, I have tried to indicate ways in which these discussions also work in a different register, of groundless grounds, of difficult skepticism, of philosophical hopes shattered by the course of the twentieth century. My own hope is not to have offered any great alternative or grand riposte, but rather to have stayed with the ordinary experience of music in tradition as a way

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 21–22.

of grasping the extraordinary that lies in making music full of thought and feeling — and in thinking, and feeling, in ways deeply musical.

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