1 Introduction

Shared listenings may initially seem a familiar practice as one imagines a typical social situation with friends, together experiencing the power of music. In this Element, we are interested in what happens to the listening experience when shared understanding cannot be taken for granted. How can musicians learn to listen for the unexpected in transcultural encounters? We propose that intercultural musicianship and transcultural musical understanding may be built on the grounds of such shared listening, which stretches beyond what Judith Becker (2010) discusses as a habitus of listening.

This publication takes us on a journey through an array of illuminating experiences and even discoveries made within the context of The Six Tones, an ensemble, which was formed to explore intercultural collaboration between musicians from Vietnam and Sweden. The group was established in 2006 when the Vietnamese dàn tranh1 player Nguyễn Thanh Thủy (coauthor of this Element) and dàn bầu2 player Ngô Trà My were guest teachers in the traditional music programs at the Malmö Academy of Music.3 There, they first met Swedish guitarist Stefan Östersjö and composer and improviser Henrik Frisk (who were PhD students at the same institution). Through experimental workshops, encounters between traditional Vietnamese and contemporary Western music were created.4 A fundamental building block in the creation of the group was the idea of mutual learning, based on the ideal of creating space for equal contribution to all levels of decision-making as well as artistic initiative. It was obvious at the outset that this would entail negotiating musical meaning across

1 The dàn tranh is a plucked zither from Vietnam, similar to the Chinese guzheng, the Japanese koto, the Korean kayagum, and the Mongolian yatga. It has a long sound box with steel strings, movable bridges, and tuning pegs positioned on the top.
2 The dàn bầu is a Vietnamese monochord. Its basic playing technique relies on harmonics, the pitch of which is modulated by shifting the basic pitch of the string. It is an instrument that perfectly embodies the fundamental building blocks of traditional Vietnamese music and allows the performer a wide range of ornamental figurations and vibrati.
3 Their work in the Malmö Academy of Music was funded through a long-term exchange program by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), running between 2000 and 2010. As leading performers on the traditional music scenes and teachers in the Vietnam National Academy of Music, Nguyễn Thanh Thủy and Ngô Trà My were invited for repeated residency periods often three to four months at a time. In a book chapter (2014) Nguyễn Thanh Thủy reflects on her experience of teaching traditional music to Swedish students. The SIDA project also became the source of funding for the continued work of the group until 2009, when they embarked on their first artistic research project, titled (re)thinking Improvisation.
4 The four of us worked for two days, eventually producing material for two works, one for ten-string guitar and electronics, and a quartet titled “The Six Tones,” which we premiered in a concert in Hà Nội in October of the same year. In a rooftop restaurant, celebrating that concert with a majestic view over Hoàn Kiếm lake in the old town in Hà Nội, we decided to establish our ensemble as a long-term project and to call it The Six Tones. Our group’s name came from the piece we had just premiered, which in turn referred to how the six tones of the Vietnamese language also form a foundation for Vietnamese music, by guiding the shape of melodic lines.
different musical systems, a fact that challenged conventional listening and also launched many creative processes. Consider, for instance, the difference between conventional Western tonality and the modal system of Vietnamese music, where fundamental musical expressions such as those defining cheerful or sad are related not to the organization of pitch and harmony but rather for the most part to the type of ornamentation characterizing the expression of each mode (Lê, 2003).

Already in the first working sessions, Nguyễn Thanh Thủy and Ngô Trà My had embarked on a journey toward mastering sound worlds of experimental music and of developing novel techniques to make these speak through traditional Vietnamese instruments, as expressed in a Skype conversation in summer 2008 between Östersjö and Nguyễn:

Thủy: I seem to be very aware of what is perceived as “Vietnamese” in my playing. I believe I was myself quite constantly aware of this difference when we worked.

Stefan: It seems to me that the perception of this difference is also projected from outside, your identity as a performer when playing to a Western audience appears to be built on the expectations from the audience on this “otherness.”

Thủy: That is different today. I think I am not as concerned with the expectations on my being Vietnamese when I play to an audience outside of Vietnam. In fact, instead I seem to more often reflect on how my playing is changing; now it seems to be less and less shaped by my background in traditional music. (Östersjö & Nguyễn, 2013, p. 190)

Meanwhile, Östersjö had started to develop techniques for emulating the sound of the đàn tranh and the đàn bầu on his own instruments, which in turn enabled adaptations of traditional Vietnamese music for hybrid settings within the group. A process of mutual learning had begun.

Our intention with this publication is to seek an understanding of how such intercultural learning unfolds and eventually transforms the embodied knowledge of a musician. Intercultural music-making is challenging, not the least to the listening habits of participating musicians. By engaging in intercultural collaboration we have all come to see how our listening is both embodied and socioculturally situated. At the same time we have come to see our listening as a gate to approaching the Other, and this Element seeks to describe some of the methods that have shaped such shared listenings.

In a video essay, titled The (re)Turn, Nguyễn Thanh Thủy interviewed Stefan Östersjö about approaches to intercultural collaboration in The Six Tones (Nguyễn, 2022), which forms part of an exposition in the VIS journal. This video essay may serve as an introduction to the artistic methods of the group: www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1513023/1513024.
While referring to The Six Tones as a case, a holistic aim of this Element is to develop an understanding of how music research can be grounded in listening. The Six Tones have been part of a series of artistic research projects, the first, (re)thinking Improvisation, starting in 2009. In 2012 the group embarked on a second project, Music in Movement, which explored how gesture could be a means for analytical approaches to music performance. This entailed specific attention to gendered gestures (Nguyễn, 2019) and their culturally situated nature and also artistic explorations of the potential for creating music wherein performed gesture served as compositional material (Östersjö, 2016). Through this series of projects – of which Musical Transformations (2018–22), funded by the Swedish Marcus and Amalia Wallenberg Foundation, is central to the present publication – we have sought to develop methods for intersubjective knowledge formation in music through the use of “stimulated recall.” As an analytical practice in music research, we find this method central since it uses sonic materials as data, and the analysis can be carried out through listening. However, a particular focus in designing methods for the study of intercultural collaboration – when the listening is not immediately shared – is the negotiation of an intersubjective understanding across cultural barriers. We note that the field of ethnomusicology increasingly advocates for performance as an approach “for research outcomes that are sited in original performative knowledge, explored, produced and delivered through performance itself” (McKerrell, 2022, pp. 10–11). We agree, yet also recognize enormous potential for this to occur through a productive fusion with artistic research developed through the use of “stimulated recall,” as encapsulated in the shared listenings demonstrated throughout this publication.

In the remainder of Section 1, we will set the stage by exploring the notion of decolonized listening, followed by discussion of musical subjectivities as a performance quality, and their extension to second- and third-person perspectives, and of issues for technologies in the mediation of musical sound and image. In Section 2 we describe the background of knowledge and previous studies in which our work is situated, including the latest theories and research findings concerning musical memory and cognition, the evolution of audiovisual technologies in research generally and music research in particular, and both how and why video-based stimulated recall methods came to be applied in

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6 Artistic research was implemented in most European countries in the early 2000s. The term is less common in the UK, where practice-as-research is a rather synonymous approach (Nelson, 2022). However, the term has also gained currency in the UK, as can be seen in recent publications such as Blain and Minors (2020). However, in most countries, there is a prehistory of gradual development of formats for artistic research in conservatories, dating back to the 1970s. In Finland, doctoral degrees were awarded in academies of fine and performing arts already in the late 1980s. For further reading see Biggs and Karlsson (2011) and Östersjö, Stefan. (2019).
innovative ways throughout our project. Section 3 chronicles how specific musical insights and discoveries were made through the coding and re-coding of interactions through the ensemble’s shared listenings approach to stimulated recall methods. Section 4 depicts how, through the Musical Transformations project, the ensemble’s approach was applied within a project in Vietnam in cooperation with traditional music performers. The publication ends with Section 5, in which we synthesize the main concepts and offer a summary discussion of our findings and the implications of a shared listenings approach for intercultural ensemble development in other settings, particularly higher education institutions. Note that the structure of this Element is intentionally concise, which inevitably entails a number of delimitations. There will be very few opportunities here to offer any analysis of the characteristics of Vietnamese music culture, contemporary experimental Western art music, sociohistorical contexts, or ethnomusicological theory, but rather our focus is deliberately practical: how transcultural music projects can be more equitably pursued and meaningfully studied through decolonized approaches to intercultural collaboration.

Decolonizing Listening

In November 2019, music theorist Philip Ewell delivered a keynote presentation at the Society for Music Theory (SMT), which described the “whiteness” of music theory through Fegin’s concept of “the white racial frame” (2009). Ewell argued that Fegin’s “frame” illuminates the structural framework through which music theory, like other academic fields, has continued to “privilege the compositional and theoretical work of whites over non-whites” (Ewell, 2021, n.p.). Drawing also on Sara Ahmed’s critique of the discourse of diversity (2012), Ewell pointed to how change cannot be merely a matter of cosmetic changes with reference to inclusion. Ewell, an African American scholar, has also drawn attention to the role of the white racial frame as a structural source for inequity in various publications, and it seems increasingly clear that music theory may be entering a new paradigm through reflection on these concerns. In essence, the present-day search within academic institutions for decolonizing principles for

7 In a recent paper, Ewell develops the same argument that one of the foundation stones of musicology, Schenkerian analysis, is based on a framework built on outspoken racism (Ewell, 2020). Ewell observes how the hierarchical structure of Schenkerian analysis, which builds on the assumption that the background layer, the ursatz, must govern the middle ground and foreground. He further argues that there is an immediate relation between the foundations of Schenkerian music theory and his explicit racism, implying “that blacks are inferior because only the white German genius, with superior Menschenhumus, is capable of producing the background that Schenker speaks of” (Ewell, 2020, n.p.). Ewell’s keynote presentation sparked an agitated response from music theorists and, in particular, Schenker analysis scholars. Clearly, the
curriculum renewal rests on an unprecedented willingness to “question the epistemological authority assigned uniquely to the Western university as the privileged site of knowledge production” (Bhambra, Gebrial, & Nişancioğlu, 2018, p. 3). This entails a systematic exposure of the “material, intellectual and symbolic colonialism that abounds in the university system” (Saini & Begum, 2020, p. 218). Hence, the aim of decolonization points beyond the strife for diversity, toward a fundamental reconsideration, and a widening of the foundations of knowledge within academia. This also implies that in music research, not only do theory and methods need to be decolonized but also the very foundations of our embodied practices, including our listening. In his recent book, Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies (Indigenous Americas) (2020), Dylan Robinson also addressed the problem of racism in musical listening. One way he accomplished this was by quoting one of the most celebrated sound artists and composers, R. Murray Schafer, who laid the ground for the world soundscape project and who famously theorized listening as a vehicle for an ecological understanding of the relation between human and environment. Robinson opened his book on the ethical foundations of intercultural communication with how Schafer found that the “eskimos are such an astonishingly unmusical race that the composer really has to wring his material to make it musically presentable” (Schafer 1961, cited in Robinson, 2020, p. 8). It is indeed an astonishing statement, compressing into a few words a multitude of prejudices that have been integral to much intercultural music practice, in which composers have appropriated indigenous music for their own purposes and, as Ewell would describe it, listened to their music through a white racial frame. Indeed, our listening “is guided by positional identity as an intersection of perceptual habit, ability and bias” (Robinson 2020, p. 45), and Schafer’s statement is expressive of how a listening habitus (Becker, 2010) can deprive us of the ability to truly listen to a musical Other (Östersjö, 2020). Robinson (2020) observes how Schafer’s “words sonify compositional violence” (p. 8) and, to the contrary, proposes a decolonized “critical listening positionality,” which would “prompt questions regarding how we might become better attuned to the particular filters of race, class, gender and ability that actively select and frame the moment of contact between listening body and listened-to sound” (p. 11). The challenge of decolonization concerns art worlds and science worlds alike, but the extent to which it entails the performative transformation of embodied practices is perhaps most clearly seen within the arts. How can we bend our ears...
to listen beyond the “white racial frame” described by Ewell? How can we approach musical Others through an approach to listening that evades the compositional violence of colonialism?

Some of the earliest calls for decolonization of research methods are from 1999 in the seminal writings of Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) who, among other things, pointed to how the systems of knowledge that developed with the Enlightenment and continued through modernity:

[N]ot only informed the field of study referred to by Said as “Orientalism” but other disciplines of knowledge and “regimes of truth.” It is through these disciplines that the Indigenous world has been represented to the West and it is through these disciplines that Indigenous peoples often research for the fragments of ourselves which were taken, catalogued, studied and stored. (Smith, 2012, p. 67)

Decolonization has recently become a topic across many academic fields (Connell, 2018; Mbembe, 2016). The global movement to “decolonize” universities and academic subjects is rooted in legitimate concerns associated with the inadequacies of a Eurocentric orientation (Hebert, 2023), which is caused by an incomplete scientific project traceable to colonial antecedents (Richardson, 2018). Anthropologists and other scholars associated with the decolonizing movement have aimed to bring recognition to the historical bases for academic disciplines that were “founded in relation to dominant imperial and white supremacist logics” and they have “put forward a platform of decolonial anthropological practice, pedagogy, and public engagement” (Thomas, 2018, p. 393). Anthropology has especially seen painful introspection on the field’s colonial history (Allen & Jobson, 2016), and during efforts to “decolonize” the anthropology curriculum at the University of Cambridge, the staff acknowledged “the ‘uncomfortable’ relationship between anthropologists as intellectual producers at the ‘cutting edge’ of the canon, and the discipline’s rife colonial residues” (Mogstad & Tse, 2018).

As the first academic field to emphasize cross-cultural research, anthropology has often deeply influenced ethnomusicology in terms of both theories and methods, about which Liz Mackinlay has questioned: “What kind of discipline is ethnomusicology with/out decolonizing talk, and further, is talk alone enough to decolonize?” (2015, p. 8). Ethnomusicology – the global study of music in human life – now evidently seeks to identify effective ways of improving its diversity and openness as a field. In their “Open Letter from SEM Past Presidents on Racism” (SEM 2020), ten former presidents of the Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM) recently acknowledged that “[d]eep-seated white supremacy and colonialism shape SEM, and SEM is a site in which these
systems of power are produced and reproduced. This situation demands a strong and proactive response.” This public admission came even while some noted with caution that such discussions can become hypercritical and even risk “degenerating into unhelpful binaries of Culture Wars-led identity politics” (Tan, 2021, p. 5; see also Moosavi, 2020).

Earlier publications have asserted that “[d]ecolonizing methodologies, as an approach, is especially relevant to ethnomusicologists from indigenous backgrounds with an interest in studying the history of their own people’s music” (Hebert & McCollum 2014, p. 134). Still, although there are “unique advantages to indigenous scholarship that emphasizes a decidedly introspective orientation” (Hebert & McCollum, 2014, p. 12), we suggest here that a decolonized approach can be relevant to all musicians and music scholars. Chávez and Skelchy (2019) argue that “the impulse to theorize in ethnomusicology has contributed to the abstraction of decolonization from practical applications” (p. 116), and as a more concrete way of decolonizing ethnomusicology, they support “collaboration between ethnomusicologists, composers, and musicologists, which can take the form of publications, musical compositions, or live performance. The benefit of these collaborations could be furthering a dialogue about decolonization in music departments that addresses ways of listening, composing, and thinking about music studies” (p. 138). It is in such a way that decolonial approaches may be especially relevant to intercultural music ensembles.

In the field of live performance there are also ongoing discussions concerning colonialism and how it is a part of a power structure that defines boundaries between categories of music. In a recent article, musician and scholar George Lewis (2021) concludes that “I feel that we already know what colonialism sounds like. We hear it at all too many contemporary music festivals around the world” (para. 2). Lewis further argues, however, that “the composers and improvisers are not the ones producing the sounds of colonialism” (para. 2), but it is rather the politics of cultural institutions and curators that enforce a colonial structure. This is an experience that is shared by The Six Tones and perhaps related to the liberating change of the group’s identity toward becoming active on the experimental music scene in Vietnam rather than only as a player on the European scene, a point we will come back to in Section 3. Deliberate efforts to escape a scene that had long been shaped by colonial attitudes paved the way for developing new understandings of our shared musical work.

When the ensemble engages with traditional Vietnamese culture, it is from the perspective of intercultural collaboration, and thereby it could be argued that the group seeks to understand and explore the artistic potentiality in transculturation. Transculturation, seen as “a long-term, polyphonic, and multi-sited
social process and complex dynamic” (Koch, 2021), can be, in a sense, the opposite of decolonization. However, even if transculturation denotes processes of hybridization, and decolonization may be understood as the acknowledgment of systems of thought – as well as practices other than those of colonial and Eurocentric origin – we have also seen how they come together in the intercultural and collaborative practice of the group. Related is the more general ambition of musical change of the Eurocentric new music milieu in the West. Returning to Lewis, there is a corresponding need to invent a new, incarnative “we” that understands contemporary music not as a globalized, pan-European, white sonic diaspora, but more like the blues, practiced by the widest variety of people in many variations around the world. If this new “we” can embrace “our” future, even with all its turbulence, if we can place ourselves conceptually in the situation of a creole, we can reaffirm our common humanity in the pursuit of new music decolonization. (Lewis, 2021)

Listening and Subjectivity

To better understand the ways in which musical expression is communicated between performing musicians in real time, it is also necessary to understand the processes and attributes that shape these expressions. Since 2006, The Six Tones has been trying to unravel how some of those processes interact and are influenced by the cultural contexts that the respective members bring to the group. From the very beginning the ensemble consciously tried to understand both the intra- and extra-musical aspects of our communications by studying our own interactions in the group, as well as those with other musicians. This is by no means easy to do even with a good method at hand, and it is a practice that raises social and political questions that are as important as they are complex.

Musical practice in group performance is a communicative interaction between at least three modalities: communicating individuality, adapting to the current context, and relating to the musical and cultural practice of each of the participating musicians. Though this model is a crude reduction of something as volatile and difficult to grasp as musical interaction and performance, it nonetheless serves the purpose of conceptualizing some of the necessary conditions for inter-cultural musical practice. The primary purpose here is to show how and why The Six Tones has worked with the methods described in this publication and why a decolonized perspective has been necessary.

Similar to gender, “musical identity is performed – we inscribe upon ourselves an emergent musical subjectivity through acts of performance and...
perception” (Stover, 2016, n.p.). This may also be referred to as the musician’s individual voice (Cumming, 2000; Gorton & Östersjö, 2019). As proposed by Gorton and Östersjö – expanding Cone’s (1974) and Cumming’s (2000) conceptions of voice in musical performance by combining a perspective drawn from embodied cognition with Bourdieu’s sociological concept of habitus – “interactions between performers and their instruments are combined with other interactions in the formation of a performer’s ‘voice’: with composers, with musical scores, and with the contextual practices within which the performer operates” (2019, p. 44). However, theories of embodiment must be understood through Fanon’s critique of Merlau-Ponty’s notion “that there is a normative pre-personal corporeal schema that all humans share and it is this corporeal schema as a biological given that cannot be fundamentally altered by society, culture and language” (Mahendran, 2007, p. 198). Hence, subjectivity as an emergent quality in musical performance can only be fully understood through an analysis of the sociocultural context in which it is situated. If the subjectivity of a musician constitutes one modality, the sociocultural context can be divided in two further modalities, situation and tradition. The situation entails the current context for the playing, including the acoustics of the room, any listeners present, and also what kind of performative activity this is, for example, if it is a rehearsal, a concert, or a situation not covered by these two. The tradition, finally, is a musical and cultural context that partakes in shaping the habitus of each participating musician.

The subjective stance of each musician is continuously negotiated and shaped by the context and the musical framework of all other participating musicians. In most classical music ensembles, a musical and cultural tradition is tacitly shared by all musicians and contributes to the encapsulation of the interpretative framework. For instance, in a string quartet playing common-practice European art music from the Romantic era, a shared knowledge between the four musicians shapes the communication across these modalities. This knowledge is an essential part of the performance tradition connected to the style of music being performed.

Intercultural collaboration immediately problematizes the dynamic of these relations. In the case of The Six Tones, we did not initially possess such a common cultural context, nor did we even have a shared knowledge of the musical traditions of all members in the group. Not even for relatively basic concepts, such as improvisation, was a common understanding shared across the group. Hence, it was necessary to approach rehearsals and performances taking these facts into account. An additional factor we had to systematically confront and negotiate was that in a number of different ways – social privilege, academic standing, cultural insider status, linguistic competence,
economic resources, and so on – power relations in the group were not equally distributed.

It is not possible to immediately embody and understand any culture different from one’s own, and a search for listening beyond the “white racial frame” is a challenge that demands both time and effort. While there are indeed moments in which musicians learn almost instantaneously from one another, as a general rule it may take weeks, months, or even many years to fully embody performance techniques and musical styles, as will be demonstrated in Section 3. For The Six Tones, the realization that mutual learning was not a feasible method for intercultural collaboration led to the joint finding of a different way of conceptualizing their work. Here, Glissant’s notion of the right to opacity, and the related concept of coexistence, became a different model. As the group began to explore this approach, the need for new forms of listening became apparent. What this research seeks to explore is how the process of decolonizing the listening practices of the group has been aided by the method of stimulated recall.

Learning through all three of the modalities mentioned already is common practice for most competent musicians, whether or not one consciously reflects upon it. Interdisciplinary and intercultural collaborations, however, may be far more complex. As mentioned earlier, the challenges tend to not be evenly distributed across the members of the ensemble, and each challenge comes with a complex history and traditions. Deliberately questioning the frame and decolonizing our practice clearly engender sometimes uncomfortable destabilization in the group dynamic, but this is an often necessary step toward an altered musical practice.

The disruptive effect that new knowledge can have on performance practice may eventually pave the way for new possibilities, new expressions, and yet new modes of listening. The goal of such decolonized systems of musical thinking is not to create a new standard or singular scheme of inter-operations but rather to point to a multiplicity of possibilities. As Foucault indicates, using phrasing that inadvertently applies well to music,

it is by no means a matter of determining the system of thought of a particular epoch, or something like its “world-view.” Rather, it is a matter of identifying the different ensembles that are each bearers of a quite particular type of knowledge; that connect behaviors, rules of conduct, laws, habits, or prescriptions; that thus form configurations both stable and capable of transformation. Is also a matter of defining relations of conflict, proximity or exchange. Systems of thought are forms in which, during a given period of time, the knowledges individualize, achieve an equilibrium, and enter into communication. (Foucault 1997, p. 9)