

**External Examiner's Report on PhD dissertation by Vit Zdrálek submitted at Charles University, Prague:**

**“Mapping the Individual Musical Experience in Post-Apartheid South Africa: A Bio-Ethnography of Township Dweller Lesiba Samuel Kadiaka”  
(“Mapování individuální hudební zkušenosti v post-apartheidní Jižní Africe. Bio-etnografie obyvatele township Lesiby Samuela Kadiaky”)**

One of the most interesting things about this research topic is how un-planned it was. It was far from haphazard in evolution, it turns out, but this work differs from almost any ethnographic music research conducted so far, in that it was not a neatly defined topic arrived at through careful survey of the literature and discussion in the academy about how to proceed with a particular piece of fieldwork, followed by the conventional limited period of fieldwork (usually 6 months) ‘elsewhere’, applying well-worn ethnographic methods of observation and data recording. In writing such research up, in the academy again, the ‘norm’ is to first present a survey of the literature in order to locate your own contribution to it, then introduce ‘the field’ and then describe the performance culture and the music, and then interpret your findings. There are hundreds of theses in north America that follow this pattern. A range of possible methods and interpretative tools are available to the ethnomusicologist to do other things, to research and present work in other ways, but this rarely happens. So when it does, as here, one rejoices.

Zdrálek comes to tell us about his topic after telling us about himself, locating both his subject, Samuel Kadiaka, and himself carefully but in quite different ways. His own location in the culture of a post-communist Czech Republic - the ‘2nd world’ as Zdrálek calls it, (making someone like me, who grew up in the 1st and spent 40 years in the 3rd, do a slight double-take) - is fascinating, and very well written. This is not easy to achieve: it could so easily have become self-centred, but Zdrálek retains a critical edge that prevents this. Kadiaka is located as Zdrálek first encounters him, and then by a process of flash-backs, as in cinematography, we learn more and more about how Kadiaka and Zdrálek’s relationship developed. The topic, indeed the subject himself, was discovered almost by accident. This approach to the topic of this dissertation goes much further, and is (in my view) far more interesting, than the usual ‘situating yourself as the researcher’ process that conventional music ethnography has, since James Clifford, followed. Zdrálek’s discusses the ‘usual’ ethnographic methods of fieldwork and clearly understands them, and indeed is following a debate well laid out on Barz-Cooley about their advantages and disadvantages. He discusses the literature on the musical aspect of his topic, music in the Zion Christian Church in South Africa, and he interprets his findings using various scholarly approaches that rely particularly on Bourdieu, Ortner, and Rice, and there is a great deal of descriptive writing and performance analysis, too, including musical analysis (rare in ethnomusicology). When one learns how many years were spent on this research and how much time ‘in the field’, one realises why the dissertation offers so much more than the average music ethnography.

Rather than follow the conventional ethnographic route in writing up and including all these ingredients, Zdrálek takes an integrated approach, moving backwards and forwards between exposition and development, so that his writing runs not teleologically or in a straightforward formative or summative way, but like a spiral, with each section building to some extent on what has already been said, but he always moves forwards and develops the ideas presented and reflects on them anew as new data is introduced. The reason for this is that the main intellectual point of the dissertation, and its most important contribution to the ethnographic

debate, is the problematization of biography within the field of ethnomusicology, and the presentation of the subject as Zdrálek encountered him. It is the most self-reflexive piece of music ethnography I have ever read, and admirable for this, and its contribution to the newly emerging field of bio-ethnography is unquestionable.

It is far from easy to have achieved all this, and Zdrálek must be congratulated not only on his research but also on his original approach to writing it up. Because we come to know things and understand them in something like the same way Zdrálek did himself, and thus we come to know Kadiaka as a biographic subject in an oblique but still very rich and ultimately finely grained way. I suspect, indeed, that in the end we know far more about Kadiaka, and about the Zion Christian Church and its music via Zdrálek's approach, than we might otherwise in a more conventional biographic or ethnographic approach, because we really understand the *experience* of all the different subjectivities involved, from the main person being profiled, and the researcher, to the various other players in the research, even to the ZCC Bishop. All of this is managed with great respect and yet not uncritically, which is another very difficult thing to achieve in the writing, and is obviously a reflection on the careful and caring, and highly ethical, way in which the research was conducted. We get the impression at the end that the writing might have just continued, without conclusion, and indeed, there is a real sense of regret in letting go, partly achieved from the sense that the relationship developed here is lifelong, and not merely that of a researcher and a research subject of temporary interest.

I want to point out here, how important this is in the South African context (although it probably applies to other contexts). Too often, in the past, South Africa has been 'The Field' for a succession of researchers, most of them from overseas (especially Europe and north America) and some of them well funded. Even within the country, most South African music research has been conducted by white researchers on black music, and from positions of privilege that are rarely expressed as such, let alone acknowledged to the extent that they are woven into the daily life of the researcher and ultimately into the very fabric of the final document, as they are here. The people who live in the field are usually extremely poor, and highly disadvantaged, and it is therefore very easy to take temporary advantage of them by offering them the interest of academic research. What I admire with Zdrálek's work is how carefully he tries all the time to avoid any sense of exploitation. There is, ultimately an imbalance, yes. Zdrálek lives in Europe, has an academic career ahead of him, has far more prospects of being economically independent than most black South Africans have ever had, or ever will. But he is highly, almost painfully aware of this potential for exploiting 'difference', and articulates it throughout the dissertation, and also theorizes it. There is nothing that one person (nothing that any of us) can do about the continued exploitation of the black majority and their continued economic repression, but in putting an 'ordinary' black South African musician into such prominence, Zdrálek has effectively given voice to a voiceless class as a whole, and this is an absolutely major contribution to the research field on South African music.

I have never seen a dissertation where every parameter of the research is so carefully interrogated and nothing is taken for granted. This is particularly welcome in a field such as ethnomusicology, where there is concern about the conventions of the discipline becoming too rigid, and a there is amongst many (in SEM for example) a constant quest to improve this situation. I am sure that Zdrálek's dissertation will make a welcome contribution to the debate of methods and fieldwork, in this regard.

It also makes a major contribution to our knowledge of the way the Zion Christian Church is structured, recruits and attracts devotees, functions, and uses music not as an add-on, as Zdrálek shows very well, but as an integral part of the way it works. I had not realised just how integrated the repertoire of music in the church is, with its social ways of operating and its religious services, nor had I realised just how many interesting links there are between this repertoire, in all its various facets, and other South African religious or secular repertoires. There has been too little research on this aspect of South African music - the integration of music making and repertoires (because of the way people grow up into music, multi-culturally) and this dissertation really opens up a new way of doing so. There are many ways in which it could be followed up, and a number of stereotypes that it questions. All of this makes this a very strong dissertation, one that is clearly deserving to pass.

Ultimately, the bio-ethnographic non-chronological or non-‘historical’ approach) that Zdrálek carefully constructs and uses, works, because by mid-way in the dissertation we are left feeling very ‘sated’ with information and with Zdrálek’s problematization. It is good information that is well processed but not over-interpreted. It is the sense of ‘aftertaste’ that the writing gives, as well as a sense of fullness, that makes this such a good read. I must compliment Zdrálek on that, because I have supervised and examined many doctoral dissertations and few of them have such *readability*. And this, too, in a second language.

On the issue of language, I now turn to my three main criticisms of this work, which in my view are all minor, not essential, not structural or but cosmetic, even if they do occur frequently, throughout the writing. They are in my view cosmetic because they are not concerned with the research method or the use of theory, or any of the other major aspects of work towards a dissertation. In all these major areas I am satisfied that this thesis is worthy to pass - as it stands - but the writing needs attention.

My first critique is the writing up of the first half of the thesis, to page 161. It is admirable that this dissertation is written in English, because it can now be read by all Africanists, and South Africanists in particular, in the academic world. But there are many places where a better turn of phrase in English would improve the writing. I have detailed these on the dissertation itself, which can be given directly to Zdrálek. He may not accept all my suggestions, which is fine, but he should take note of the recurring omission of the definite article ‘the’, and the wrong placement of adverbs or conjunctions, in particular. In addition, I suggest some judicious editing to cut out unnecessary phrases. It is very common in dissertations that the writing becomes at times ‘over-written’ because the candidate is anxious that her/his point is understood. In English such over-writing takes on a particular connotation - of over-emphasis - and although, as I say, it is all too common, in such a fine dissertation such things should be dealt with before the work ‘goes digital’.

The second point where Zdrálek needs to make a few improvements is in his use of references. It is clear that he has a good knowledge of the most important literature (as far as I can tell), and he makes good use of it, but from time to time he tries to bolster a very specific point with a rather vague reference. An example is on p. 75: “...where reproduced music (loudly) played an important role in encapsulating the bodies inside the car space even audibly” (Schutte 2012). The reference to Schutte needs two things: first, a few words to introduce it and therefore integrate it (“As XX Schutte puts it” is the most common - and I for one prefer to have the first name of an author as well as surname if it’s the first time s/he is mentioned); and second, the exact pages from the text referred to need to be included. This need not be done in every case - sometimes one does just need to refer to a scholar’s work but

not exact pages - but it happens several times that there is a specific detail and a general reference, and this weakens an otherwise very good use of the literature.

The third issue I have is with headings, or rather, the lack of them, and also chapter numbers. The dissertation is long, and dense, and well laid out. The structure is fine, and there is no logical way to alter it because the first half develops the topic and the approach to it in a very specific way, while the second half presents much data and analysis, again in a very specific way that, moreover, follows logically from the first half. But navigating around the thesis - despite the contents page - isn't always easy, and I'm old-fashioned enough to feel helped by more frequent headings and by more and shorter chapters that are, moreover, numbered. I do not like numbering sections within chapters - which some universities follow - because this looks totalitarian to me (it is the kind of thing they do at Pretoria University), but I think both the academic and the general reader, including readers such as Samuel Kadiaka, would prefer shorter sections with headings to them. The headings that *are* there are great, especially the use of quotes from interviews in them.

One final point: the illustrations - photos, CD and DVD - add enormously to the arguments at various points. I personally would prefer to see photos inserted where they are referred to, rather than all collected into an Appendix, and when this dissertation is published I hope that this happens. But this is again a minor point, and one that in no way detracts from my overall very favourable impression of this work, and my gratitude for the contribution it makes to scholarship in the field of South African music.



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