Introduction: TikTok-Music-Cultures

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Abstract: Today, the field of TikTok research is dynamic and exciting, constantly expanding as we strive to uncover the performative world of TikTok. While significant contributions have been made by initiatives like the TikTok Cultures Research Network and scholars such as Crystal Abidin, Trevor Boffone, Bondy Kaye, Jing Zeng, Patrik Wikström, and Juan Bermúdez, there is still much to discover. This special issue is a testament to our ongoing quest for a deeper understanding of TikTok as a glocal phenomenon, particularly from a musicological perspective.

TikTok is a smartphone application aimed at creating and sharing short videos. It is one of the fastest-growing social media applications worldwide, offering an interaction space for different music and video practices. Initially conceived as Musical.ly, this application was officially launched in August 2014 as an educational platform (MOOC); it would soon be geared towards music creation,[1] providing an interaction space for different music and video practices. In 2018, after Musical.ly was acquired by the Chinese company ByteDance and transformed into the application we know today as TikTok,[2] its visibility has transcended borders, becoming a phenomenon that has undoubtedly established itself in the global cultural imaginary. After the pandemic, TikTok has become an inseparable part of contemporary popular culture and operates as a portal into everyday life's social, political and cultural spectrums. The platform attracts the attention of teenagers and people of all ages and has gained interest among the academic community.

Today, the field of TikTok research is dynamic and exciting, constantly expanding as we strive to uncover the performative world of TikTok. While significant contributions have been made by initiatives like the TikTok Cultures Research Network and scholars such as Crystal Abidin,[3] Trevor Boffone,[4]

Bondy Kaye, Jing Zeng, Patrik Wikström,[5] and me,[6] there is still much to discover. This special issue is a testament to our ongoing quest for a deeper understanding of TikTok as a glocal phenomenon, particularly from a musicological perspective.[7]

How TikTokers appropriates the platform for creating musical practices in and through it is vast, diverse, and constantly changing. For that, investigating multimedia musicking, such as TikTok, offers many possibilities and theoretical implications while possessing practical and methodological challenges. To understand 1) how people create and disseminate forms of sonic and visual creativity, 2) how people stage performances and build (artistic) identities and communities, 3) how people engage in the production and circulation of content, and 4) how people experience and perform gender, class and race on and through TikTok, I put together contributions from scholars who are interested in issues about musicking practices on and through TikTok from a variety of analytical perspectives. Generally, this special issue concerns different ways musicking manifests in TikTok in various contexts.

In ***Ethnographing TikTok: Toward an E³thnomusicological Approach to a Multimedia Musicking***, I propose an interdisciplinary musical-ethnographic model, E³thnography, as a practical tool for studying multimedia musicking, like TikTok. This text underscores the pressing need for musicology and ethnomusicology to adapt to digital cultures in terms of values and methods, and it encourages us to recognize musicking as a multimedia practice. This recognition is crucial as it helps us understand how diverse actors contribute to the creation and experience of music, both individually and collectively, in physical and digital contexts.

In ***#tiktokactivism: Music and Sounds in Political Content***, Tessa Balser-Schuhmann and Nicole Kiruka explore the role of music and sounds in activist content on TikTok. Based on two ethnographic studies, Balser-Schuhmann and Kiruka explore the link between musical marks and corporeality in the articulation of political messages and the influence of this dynamic on TikTok's performativity. Adding to this contribution, Emma Schrott discusses in ***Political Performances: TikTok's Sonic Influence on Affective Activist Expression*** the political expression of TikTok in Austria and how the platform encourages civic activism. Through online ethnography and interviews, Schrott's research reveals insights into users' engagement with local politics

and highlights TikTok's role in fostering political mobilization through creative sonic expressions. This study emphasizes TikTok's significance in youth activism and its cultural impact on sound. It advocates for further exploration of TikTok's role in broader social movements.

In *Rap al caudillo: A Gen Z's Queer Subversion of Spanish National Imagery*, Pau Aguilera analyzes how TikTok has become a space for activism and sharing personal stories of resilience in Spain. Based on the case of Samantha Hudson's single "Por España" and the subsequent TikTok trend "Rap al Caudillo," Aguilera shows us how Spaniard LGBTQ+ community members appropriate and resignificate a deep-rooted national imaginary linked with extreme-right militancy, and dance moves from other TikTok challenges in the mainstream, heterosexual spheres of the app, to enhance the powerful lyrics from Hudson's song to reclaim whit this a space within the platform and in Spanish national culture and imagery.

Continuing this journey into the performative world of TikTok, David Merlin explores the Early Music community on TikTok in *Old Clichés or a Transforming Community? Early Music Interpreters on TikTok: Identity and Communication Strategies*. In it, Merlin analyses how Early Music performers are musicking and interacting on and through TikTok. David Merlin highlights that the community of Early Music performers on TikTok, although still very small, is very diverse and uses differentiated communicative strategies. This community, as Merlin shows, is rapidly developing and oriented towards a participatory culture, affirming ethical and social values beyond the strictly musical sphere. Following this analysis, in *"Fly Me to the Moon:" Performing Jazz on TikTok*, Benjamin Burkhart introduces us to the performative world of Jazz in TikTok. Here, Burkhart explores the most popular Jazz styles on the app while analyzing the representativeness of the musicians on the platform. Beyond this, Benjamin Burkhart shows us the influence of the app's affordances and the functioning of TikTok's algorithms on popularising particular styles or certain performers.

As a final point, in *Similarities and Divergences Between Music Production and TikTok in The Memes Era*, Mattia Zanotti uncovers a phenomenon that emerges in TikTok musicking, a common thread that both unifies and distinguishes modern music production and social media: the memes. Zanotti asserts that these seemingly innocuous images or videos are not just viral sensations, but are actively shaping the structure of today's

music production. They have the power to transform the listener's experience, redirecting attention from the song's entirety to a specific segment. Simultaneously, they are evolving into foundational elements in multimedia production tailored for social networks. Zanotti delves into the parallels and disparities between music production and social media content-making. Analyzing how a song is endorsed, advertised, and shared on various platforms can provide valuable insights. Mattia Zanotti invites us to reflect on how users engage with these modalities and how platforms and researchers can effectively analyze them.

Our aim in this special issue is to open the doors to the vast performative world of TikTok. We delve into the existing musicking within this widely-used smartphone application, sparking in readers the potential for musicological research in a world where the physical and digital realms are increasingly intertwined. This is not just an invitation to reflect, but a call to action, to consider the theoretical possibilities and implications, as well as the practical and methodological challenges, that the exploration of this type of phenomenon can bring.

Notes

1. Biz Carson, "How a Failed Education Startup Turned into Musical.ly, the Most Popular App you've Probably Never Heard of," *Business Insider India*, 28 May, 2016.

2. For a detailed analysis of the transformation of Musical.ly into TikTok see: Bondy Kaye, Xu Chen, and Jing Zeng, "The Co-Evolution of Two Chinese Mobile Short Video Apps: Parallel Platformization of Douyin and Tiktok," *Mobile Media & Communication* 9, no. 2 (2021): 229–253; Milovan Savic, "From Musical.ly to TikTok: Social Construction of 2020's Most Downloaded Short-video App," *International Journal of Communication* 15(2021): 1–21; Bondy Kaye, Jing Zeng, and Patrik Wikstrom, *TikTok: Creativity and Culture in Short Video* Digital Media and Society Series(Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022).

3. Crystal Abidin, "Mapping Internet Celebrity on TikTok: Exploring Attention Economies and Visibility Labours," *Cultural Science Journal* 12, no. 1 (2021): 77–103; Crystal Abidin, *TikTok and Youth Cultures* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, forthcoming).

4. Trevor Boffone, *Renegades: Digital Dance Cultures from Dubsmash to TikTok* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Trevor Boffone, ed., *TikTok Cultures in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

5. Kaye, Zeng, and Wikstrom, *TikTok*.

6. Juan Bermúdez, "¿Qué música? Si nadie toca… si nadie sabe…: Reflexionando el

etnografiar de un musicking digital," *Boletín Música* 52–53 (2020): 51–60; Juan Bermúdez, "Virtual Musical.ly(ties): Identities, Performances & Meanings in a Mobile Application. An Ethnomusicological Approach to TikToks Musicking" (Dissertation, University of Vienna, 2022); Juan Bermúdez, "It's All About 'Being There': Rethinking Presence and Co-presence in the Ethnographic Field during and after the Covid-19 Pandemic," *Journal of World Popular Music* 10, no. 1 (2023): 19–35; Juan Bermúdez, *Musicking TikTok: A Musical Ethnography from a Glocal Austrian Context,* New Approaches to Sound, Music, and Media 15 (London: Bloomsbury, 2025).

7. For examples of literature in relation to TikTok and music and dance see among others: Crystal Abidin and Bondy Kaye, "Audio Memes, Earworms, and Templatability: The 'Aural Turn' of Memes on TikTok," in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, eds. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson, and Daniel De Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 58–68; Crystal Abidin and Jin Lee, "K-pop TikTok: TikTok's Expansion into South Korea, TikTok Stage, and Platformed Glocalization," *Media International Austrialia* 188, no. 1 (2023); Bermúdez, "¿Qué música?,"51–60; Bermúdez, "Virtual Musical.ly(ties*)"*; Juan Bermúdez,"Performing Beyond the Platform – Experiencing Musicking On and Through YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram," in *Remediating Sound: Repeatable Culture, YouTube and Music*, eds. Holly Rogers, Joana Freitas and João Francisco Porfírio, New Approaches to Sound, Music, and Media (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 187–202; Bermúdez, *Musicking TikTok*; Boffone, *Renegades*; Trevor Boffone, *TikTok Broadway: Musical Theatre Fandom in the Digital Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024); Bondy Kaye, "Make This Go Viral: Building Musical Careers Through Accidental Virality on Tiktok," *Flow Journal* 27, no. 1 (2020); Bondy Kaye, "Please Duet This: Collaborative Music Making in Lockdown on TikTok," *Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network* 15, no. 1 (2022): 59–77; Bondy Kaye, "#JazzTok: Creativity, Community, and Improvisation on TikTok," *Jazz and Culture* 6, no. 2 (2023); Cande Sánchez-Omos, and Eduardo Viñuela, "The End of the Amateur Music Video Dream (as We Expected It): From YouTube to TikTok," in *Music in the Disruptive Era*, ed. David Hurwitz and Pedro Ordoñez, Music, Science and Technology, vol. 4 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2022), 3–22; Arantxa Vizcaíno-Verdú and Crystal Abidin, "Music Challenge Memes on TikTok: Understanding In-Group Storytelling Videos," *International Journal of Communication* 16 (2022)*:* 883–908; Arantxa Vizcaíno-Verdú and Ignacio Aguaded, "#ThisIsMeChallenge and Music for Empowerment of Marginalized Groups on TikTok," *Media and Communication* 10, no. 1 (2022): 157–172; Arantxa Vizcaíno-Verdú, Patricia De-Casas-Moreno and Simona Tirocchi, "Online Prosumer Convergence: Listening, Creating and Sharing Music On Youtube And Tiktok," *Communication & Society* 36, no. 1 (2023): 151–166.