

MUSICAL & ANIMALS INSTRUMENTS

FROM MATERIAL TO THE SYMBOL

There are close cultural links between animals and musical instruments. Parts of animals, bones, teeth, horn, hair, skin, and gut have inspired humans to build instruments. Whether the first verifiable wind instruments made of gryphon vulture bones and mammoth teeth (Geissenklösterle, Hohle Fels and Vogelherd caves) were attributed a magical power to elicit living sounds from the dead animal again, eludes our knowledge. The construction of the instruments from the Aurignacian shows great care and—in the case of the instrument made of mammoth tooth—a striking craftsmanship. The famous statuette of the lion man from the Hohlenstein-Stadel in the Lone Valley, also carved from mammoth tooth, dates from the same place and period. As a mixed creature it reflects a world full of dangers, which humans wanted to banish and master. The strength of the animal is combined with the upright posture typical of man as a sign of consciousness.

ZOOMORPHISM is the term for the design of objects in animal form or with animal parts. It can be found in all areas of art, but in the construction of instruments sound adds a significant dimension to this practice. Since prehistoric times, many instruments, especially those used in rituals, have been made in the shape of animals, deities, and monsters whose voices or powers are to be evoked by the sound of the instrument.

The sounds of animals have inspired the idea that they are musical. According to Democritus, humans learned singing from swans and nightingales by imitation. Aristotle divides animals into mute and vocal, the latter into musical and non-musical. And in the *mirabilia* of the natural histories we often read of domesticated and trained animals imitating voices and instruments, moving to or attracted by music, and—as in the Orpheus myth—soothed by song accompanied by strings. There are numerous images of animals playing instruments. On the one hand they reflect ritual practices, on the other they serve parodic or satirical purposes and thus seem to reveal something about the effect of the music or the cultural status of the musician.

Since the Enlightenment, animal materials and forms have been relegated and abstracted in Western instrument making because they were perceived as primitive or increasingly alien to culture. Apparently, there was a growing disgust for the residue of (positive or negative) magic they radiated. Despite this **DISENCHANTMENT**, traces of musical animal magic have survived into the modern era. In Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, the grand piano that dominates the salon of a modern Viennese suburban villa is characterized as a demonic dachshund that devours the souls of the protagonist couple playing on the instrument with excessive physical and mental exertion. In pop culture and commercials, animal musicians are ubiquitous. So it is not surprising that, since the 1970s, a U.S. manufacturer of batteries symbolized the inexhaustible power of its products by an army of drumming rabbits. And even in the sampling of electronic music, whose digital instruments are conceivably far removed from the animal beginnings of instrument making, the vocal magic of birds, cats, horses, wolves and lions can sometimes be heard. Here the ghosts seem to come back.

Since the cultural relationships between animals and musical instruments are manifold, their interpretation requires an interdisciplinary approach. The graphic (which does not claim completeness) may illustrate which disciplines may be involved in different reference frameworks. A small exhibition, of course, can only show some examples from this spectrum.

THE MODERN ORPHEUS
(FOR DOMESTICATED ANIMALS):
EASY OR HARD LISTENING?

Trade mark of *His Master's Voice*
(1928)—What happens when the
bell disappears? Does the dog
also disappear then?



BRONZE BELL from Assur, 8th c. BC.
Berlin, VAM, Inv.-Nr. VA 2517
Casting: Martin von Wagner Museum

Several lion demons holding daggers, a fish-man from antediluvian times with purifying powers, and finally the patron god Lulal surround the body of the bell. The upper part of the bell is decorated with turtles and salamanders, animals of Ea, the god of purifying waters. The mallet is shaped as a snake, symbolizing Nirach, the guardian of the underworld. The sound of the magic bell wards off evil forces.

THE IMAGINARY WORLD OF ANIMALS AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

The idea of the animal making music belongs to the larger field of the “imaginary of animals” (Dufourcq 2022). Its symbolic meaning must be inferred in the respective cultural context. Is the depicted animal a deity or a parody? Are animals attributes of deities or is their depiction a metaphor for human behavior? Are there iconographic traditions of such animal representation, how far do they reach chronologically, to which transformations and reinterpretations have they been subjected? What value do such analogies, transfers and interpretations still have for us today?

The more the differences between human and nonhuman animals, culture and nature, the real and the imaginary are emphasized, the more oppressive cultural structures seem to dominate. One branch of Human Animal Studies, therefore, argues for a disclosure of these structures in order to redefine our traditional knowledge about animals and to arrive at new practices and ethical concerns about our relationship to animals. The ethical question arises especially in a time that was called the **ANTHROPOCENE** some 20 years ago. This means a period in which humans, more than in any previous epoch, are globally changing the face of the earth, destroying the ecological balance, promoting accelerated species extinction, and consuming animals as mass commodities under the cruelest conditions. If one realizes that animals possess a consciousness and can suffer, the call for a strengthening of animal rights in a modern „zoopolis“ (Wolch 1998, Donaldson/Kymlicka 2011) and a recognition of the animal as a legal person gains plausibility. Questions of animal ethics have been addressed in antiquity. In particular, Plutarch (c. 45–125) dealt with intellectual qualities of nonhuman animals in his *Moralia*, conceiving of them as beings that have interests and desires, which is why they should be treated with respect by their human counterparts.



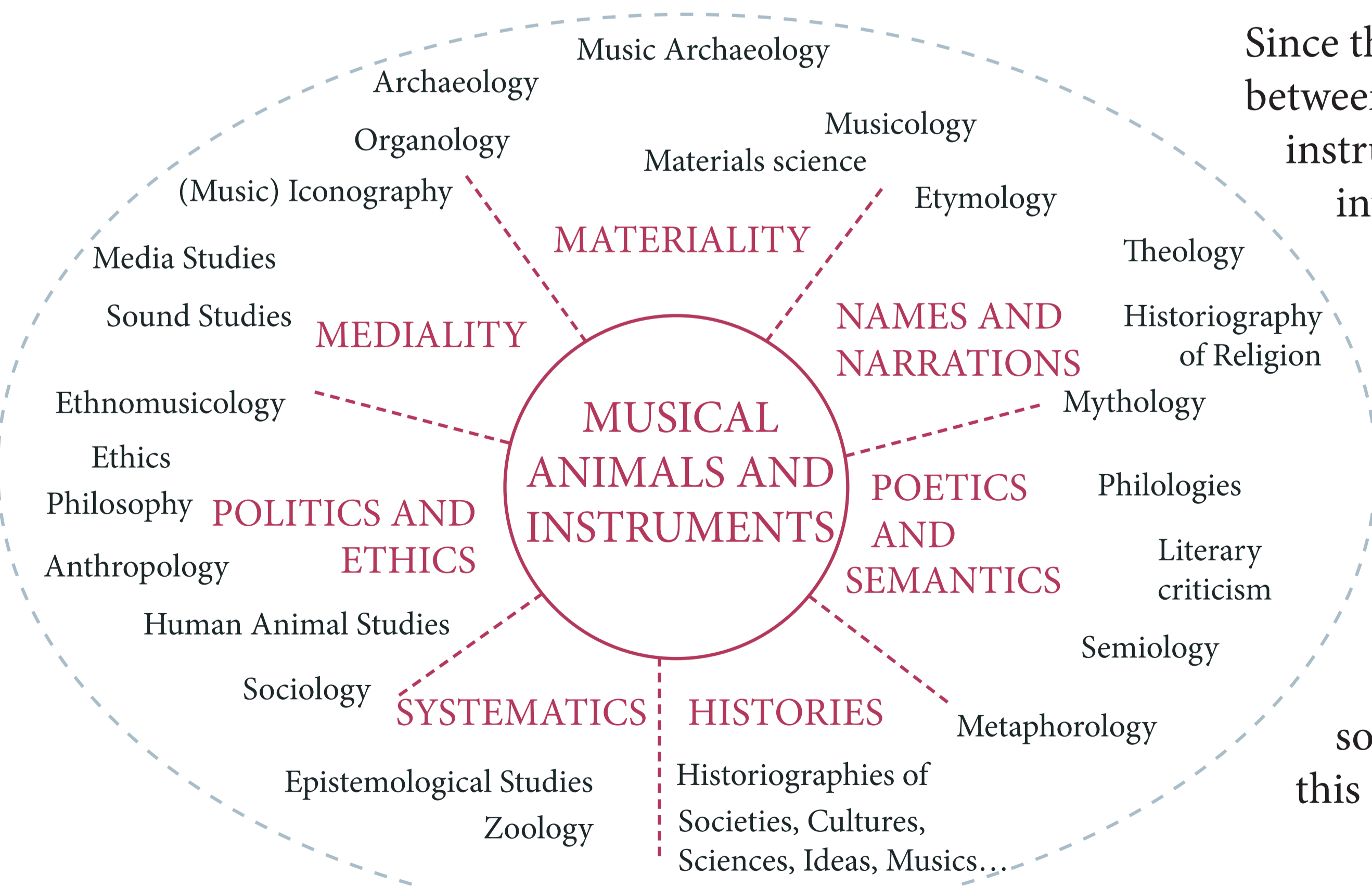
AFRICAN ELEPHANT
WITH BELL:
APOTROPAIC SIGN
OR ACOUSTIC WEAPON?
IN ANY CASE, EVIDENCE
OF INTERCULTURAL
EXCHANGE.
Roman sarcophagus,
2. c. AD.
Martin von Wagner Museum,
Inv. H 5969
(Photo: P. Neckermann)



PEACOCKS: *Dotarás*, Northeast India, 20th c.
SMM De 166/De 346



Still from Duracell's 1979 advertising



Follow this link to find
REFERENCES and
AUTHORS of the texts.

Für eine DEUTSCHE AUDIO-
KOMMENTIERUNG folge
diesem Zeichen:

