



The Accessibility of Music

Participation, Reception, and Contact

JOCHEN EISENTRAUT

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Questions of musical accessibility are relevant to most musical contexts but what does this term mean? How do we make contact with music and how do we decide what music to listen to? In *The Accessibility of Music*, Jochen Eisentraut argues that musical judgements are often based upon implicit attitudes to accessibility, which need to be identified and exposed. Surveying a range of disciplines, including sociology, psychology, aesthetics and cultural theory, Eisentraut investigates how and why music becomes accessible and the impact of accessibility on musical and social hierarchies. The book is structured around three major case studies: punk vs. progressive rock, Vaughan Williams and his ideas on art and folk music, and Brazilian samba, both *in situ* and in a global context. These are used to reveal aspects of musical accessibility at work and serve as a springboard for discussions that challenge accepted ideas of musical value and meaning.

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For my parents, Waltraud and Rolf

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Introduction

Each of us has certain musical preferences. There is music we enjoy, music we value and, conversely, music we disparage, avoid and even hate. For many of us there is music which takes up much of our time, which engages us deeply and even defines us in terms of our personality and identity. I am interested in how and why we come to interact with music in such profound ways. I would like to begin with an analogy. Let us imagine a cowboy choosing riding horses from a wild herd. First, he has to catch a horse. Once he has lassoed it, he will try to corral it and get it used to his presence. The cowboy will have the opportunity to appraise the horse and to gain an impression of its temperament. If it is the wrong size or shape, or does not please his expert eye, he will probably simply release it, or perhaps send it to the pet food factory. If he thinks it would make a good riding horse, and it lets him approach, he will attempt to break it in.

In a similar way, we first have to 'catch' our music before anything else can happen. We have to hear it, be that at a concert, in the street, on the radio or via a computer. This is one type of accessibility. Can you afford the ticket to the opera? Is the music available to you in some form? Are you even aware of its existence? Then comes the process of engagement which is to do with such matters as aesthetic judgement and tolerance. What does the cowboy think of the horse? How do they react to each other? In musical terms, this would involve our predispositions and interests, our personality and prior experience. If music pleases or interests us, there will usually be many reasons in our experience and personality. It may be similar to music we already know and enjoy, or we may be particularly keen to experience something new. These issues are complex and we shall explore them at length, but to continue with the cowboy analogy, if this second type of accessibility has been passed, so to speak, the third test is whether horse and rider can actually work together as a team. Will the horse allow the cowboy to mount up, and if so, will he have the ability and perseverance to stay on, or try again, until the horse is broken in? In other words, if we are keen enough on some musical genre, will we be able to become part of it in some way? This could mean learning to perform it, or otherwise becoming involved in it in some active, probably social, way. We could summarise

the process as: catch the horse, make friends, ride it. Or, for music: can you hear it? connect with it? make it?

This, in very simplified form, represents the kinds of accessibility this book is concerned with. The term itself occurs widely in everyday usage, referring to one of these three types of access: the physical, the personal and the participatory. Although I will be offering an expanded taxonomical definition system in [Chapter 1](#), I would contend that usually when the word ‘accessibility’ is used in relation to music, the meaning is clear from the context, and for that reason I shall not always specify which ‘type’ (or Level as I will later call them) of accessibility is being evoked. In any case, it will be demonstrated at length that these different kinds of accessibility are not always easy to separate. First of all, they are of course continuous. If you cannot catch the horse, you will not befriend it, and if you cannot do that, you are unlikely to ride it. Similarly with music; if you do not get to hear it, how will you form a relationship with it, let alone participate? But the connections are more than linear. The decision of what music to try is already influenced by existing preferences, and active involvement with a genre will change our musical experience profoundly, affecting what else we hear and like. Thus, even though we can identify different aspects of musical accessibility, they cannot be entirely separated from each other.

There are three fundamental reasons for embarking on this project. First, as I have said, music and accessibility are frequently mentioned in the same breath and it will be useful to have an in-depth study in order to clarify, theorise and problematise some of the attendant issues. Second, constantly expanding globalisation and mediafication are bringing us into potential contact with more and more music. This means we are having to make more choices about which music we take and leave, and these choices inevitably involve accessibility. Third, there are important specialist discourses in music which, while not always being couched in terms of accessibility, are ultimately about just that, or, at least, they can be analysed from that viewpoint. Frequently such debates are heavily loaded with value judgements and hierarchical implications. It is my intention to expose the accessibility-related ideological motivations involved in some of these areas.

An obvious example from Western ‘art music’ is the debate around musical modernism. When, in the early decades of the twentieth century, composers such as Stravinsky and Schoenberg abandoned many of the musical ingredients that the European concert audience was used to, such as tonal melodies, recognisable metres that ran the length of a movement or a piece, and triadic harmony, there was much resistance from concert-goers, critics, musicians and even other composers. Immediately what we might

call an ‘accessibility gap’ began to open up. Those who were not enamoured of the new sounds, let us call them ‘conservatives’, felt that modernist composition was ugly, shocking and repulsive. They did not understand it, or the need for it. Furthermore, many were convinced that it lacked some of the essential qualities of music, and could therefore not be considered as such. The champions of the new music, however, felt that an essential quality of true art was that it should be new and adventurous, always trying to break new ground. They saw themselves, with no lack of confidence, as the latest in a line of great composers, all of whom, they claimed, had broken rules, and been widely misunderstood in their time. (I will demonstrate that the latter claim, while being frequently repeated, has been at least partly bogus.) But while modernist composers were losing the ‘classical’ audience, they were gaining mystique and kudos. This strange and complicated music they wrote became the secret handshake of the cognoscenti, the select few who were cultured, educated, intelligent and fashionable enough to understand what most people did not. And while the new music lost the battle for the concert hall on the whole, it conquered the academy, where it held sway, defended by its barbed wire of discords, for well over half a century. The accessibility gap turned into a gulf. Modernists competed with each other to produce ever more obscure compositions, calculated to alienate the non-specialist, of which John Cage’s frequently cited but rarely performed *4’33”* (of silence, of course) stands as a kind of emblematic pinnacle.

The ‘we will be part of the canon’ and the ‘new art is always misunderstood’ defences of modernism were frequently accompanied by a third, closely related one, which claimed that eventually the ordinary people would catch up and learn to appreciate the brilliance of the composers working in inaccessible styles. The modernists, or *avant-garde*, were cutting through the jungle where most people feared to tread, until the way had been made safe and they could follow at a distance. This view posits a kind of never-ending revolution of stylistic tropes which take a time to be accepted, by which time the creative genius has moved on to yet newer and more challenging terrain. It presents one of a range of possible ways in which artistic styles may develop and I examine a number of relevant theories in [Chapter 4](#). However, the modernists seem to have painted themselves into a corner. The ‘accessibility catch-up’ does not really appear to have materialised. The great figures of the twentieth century that join the canon in many people’s eyes turn out to be Miles Davis and Bob Marley, rather than Stockhausen and Birtwistle. The music that for a long time was regarded as beyond the pale by the modernist

academic compositional establishment, because of its modality, tonality, simplicity, rhythm, one might say its accessibility, has even made its way back into the universities and conservatoires, in the form of popular music and of neo-romantic, minimal or postmodern music that students and professional composers will insist on writing so many years after its tonal material was supposed to have been tired and depleted of creative possibilities.

This narrative can be recounted in different ways and from different vantage points, but I think that to look at it in terms of accessibility is instructive. Accessibility seems to be central to many of the divisions and exclusions. While the conservative audience felt modern music to be inaccessible and condemned it on that basis, the modernists used that very inaccessibility as proof of their stature. Their tone rows were the credentials of their canonic status. They undoubtedly looked down on those who did not understand or accept their music and, backed by their theorists, dismissed music which did not follow the path of the avant-garde as banal, boring, predictable, old-fashioned, mechanical or simple. Such anti-accessible epithets were freely used against neo-tonal concert music and popular music (including jazz). Most people, they would say, just want what they know and like, in fact Adorno (1997a: 14–15) claimed that for many knowing and liking are practically interchangeable, such is their love of predictability.

By now one might be forgiven for thinking that I am embarking on an entirely partisan anti-modernist polemic. However, it is not my purpose to attack an aesthetic which is on the defensive in any case. Rather, the objective is to examine the assumptions and arguments around accessibility, as they have been deployed by both modernists and conservatives, and others in other contexts, and to interrogate and dissect them. For instance, I will consider the argument about whether there are essential musical features, or, more to the point, features which tend to make music accessible, or whether this is purely a matter of what the listener knows and expects. The debate over the necessity of continual progress or revolution in art (music) will also be examined, as will the possible processes involved and how they concern accessibility. Addressing such questions will involve recourse to a number of disciplines beyond musicology including aesthetics, psychology and sociology.

If there is to be a preconceived stance in my argument, it is to approach music as an inclusive, interconnected field, and to refuse to allow parts of it to be ruled out on the basis of implied or perceived accessibility or inaccessibility. Whereas this in itself is not new, representing a postmodern,

non-judgemental and relativistic view, the actual musical world is full of boundaries and exclusions. Indeed, we might argue that one of the functions of music in our personal and social lives is to differentiate us from others, to constitute identities, in-groups and out-groups. Furthermore, a musical field where no value judgements are allowed is potentially flat, featureless and uninteresting. However, since musical critiques often revolve around accessibility, it would be useful to approach them with a heightened sensitivity to accessibility issues.

While the tonal/atonal, conservative/modernist question has been central to concert life, composition in the music academy and questions about the general direction of Western art music, it is by no means the only musical area where accessibility in some form represents a vital issue. Another is the area of 'community music'. Thousands of community choirs, drumming groups, bands and orchestras exist with the express purpose of giving amateurs, often completely unskilled and untutored musically, the opportunity to participate in music making. Here, typically, taking part and enjoyment are seen as ends in themselves and more important than the quality of performance. Underlying such activities are perceptions of the social and personal benefits of participatory music in the eyes of both providers and participants, which range from simple enjoyment to individual and social transformation. It is highly probable that community music, in the sense of people in a family, village or tribe making music together, is where music has prehistoric roots. This represents a scenario of idyllic total accessibility: human beings singing, playing and dancing to music that they have grown up with, which is part of their culture and sung in their language, where participation does not necessarily require specialist training or education. Much has been written in ethnomusicological studies about the sense of community, identity and group cohesion engendered and reinforced by music making in similar, or simulated, contexts. Perhaps it is this which people who live in more individualised, fragmented societies are trying to hold on to, or recreate, by joining drumming circles or community choirs. The fact that often the music chosen for such groups comes from cultures which are not their own seems at first puzzling, since that would appear to make that music less likely to be accessible. This aspect is investigated in the study of samba in Wales in this book, of which more later in this introduction. For now it is worth remarking that it may be notions of 'lost' community which are being reclaimed with music which, if not appropriated, is borrowed, or adopted and adapted from places where community music is, or is considered to be, more spontaneous.

Adoption can also work in the other direction, as the very successful and widely publicised El Sistema project in Venezuela demonstrates.¹ Here Western orchestral music is brought and taught to young people in poor neighbourhoods. It is made accessible to them with the aim of helping them to ameliorate their social situation and future prospects. This context is clearly very different from one of a community choir in the UK. The ages, class profiles, reasons for participating, motivation of the project leaders; all are liable to be at extreme variance between such projects and can only be fully delineated by in-depth ethnographic study. One obvious difference is that in something like the community choir situation there is often an 'all comers' attitude, with even audience members being encouraged to participate, whereas this is not possible in the same way with Western orchestral music, because it requires specialist instruments and some prior playing and note-reading skills. One can say, however, that many kinds of community music tend to incorporate an element of social engineering, or the hope that bringing a certain type of musical participation to a group of people will be beneficial to them in various extramusical ways.

We might look at the two areas considered so far, modernism and community music, as completely separate contexts where musical accessibility matters. It is part of the methodology of this book to explore a number of areas which are of interest from an accessibility point of view but, in keeping with my intention to treat music as a unified field, I am also determined to make connections between them. So, avant-gardism and community music could be juxtaposed as two areas with a contrasting accessibility agenda. Modernist music makes driving forward the development of musical language the priority. If people find it unintelligible, it is because the composer is ahead of his time and they need to catch up. Community music tries to bring music to people, lowering the bar in terms of repertoire and expectations, helping with tuition, patience and encouragement. It attempts to reach and benefit a greater number of participants, whereas modernist music is primarily concerned with ideas of artistic value, innovation, and the status of the composer. The potential killer blow against community music in such a dialectic is the argument that it cannot be considered as art because it lacks qualities such as originality, excellence and, perhaps, the power to make us think. Is accessibility

¹ Participation of those outside the West in Western classical music goes well beyond this of course. One need only think of the great enthusiasm for learning piano in China where it is estimated that over thirty million children are playing the instrument. See Petroc Trelawny (2008) *BBC News* 'China's love affair with the piano'. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/7436434.stm.

therefore a marker of non-art, of low-grade musical trash? This is the upshot of much of the discourse in defence of difficult and unpopular artistic expressions. We can see that the stakes around accessibility are high indeed. They involve, amongst others, such concerns as social cohesion and inclusion, whether there are essential musical qualities, and what constitutes musical value.

When looking at music in terms of accessibility-related oppositions, there are many possible boundaries we can draw apart from the ones considered so far. Another would be between art music and vernacular music. The section of this book based around Vaughan Williams deals with various aspects and versions of this. The English composer provides an excellent starting point for such discussions for a number of reasons. He consciously chose to forego modernist iconoclasm in the early twentieth century but was still determined to work towards his own musical language, the accessibility of which mattered greatly to him. He believed that this was not only to do with the structural scope of the musical material, but also with the cultural relevance of that material to the audience. That is why he decided to place English folk melodies at the heart of his project of creating a new, accessible English art music. Such a context serves as a perfect springboard for an exploration of accessibility issues around art music, modernism, folk music and national identity. What is more, Vaughan Williams reflected on and wrote about these questions in a very open and engaging way, which helps us unravel his own particular ideas and motivations.

In doing so, we inevitably uncover how he was bounded by the assumptions of his social and historical situation, locating the English soul in an idyllic rural past, rather than a hard industrial present. Therefore, in the chapter which follows the exposition of Vaughan Williams' situation and his views on art music, folk music and accessibility, these matters are transferred into the realm of a more open theoretical discourse. Definitions of art from aesthetics and cultural theory are presented and evaluated in terms of how these relate to particular notions of accessibility. I then look at the question (which is central to Vaughan Williams' argument) of the relation between art music and vernacular music in the wider sense. He thought that such a connection was essential to the vigour, relevance, quality and accessibility of art music. It can be argued that serious music has become marginalised in contemporary society. If this is indeed the case, and many writers, academics, music professionals and journalists, think that it is, can Vaughan Williams' ideas on the subject be of any help? If one accepts the premise that contemporary serious music is in dire need of revitalising and needs to reconnect with a wider cultural base, then a

renewed engagement with the music of ordinary people is surely an avenue worth exploring. A number of questions arise in this connection. *Which* vernacular should and can art music engage with? This is arguably where Vaughan Williams failed, in that the 'folk-song' he employed was no longer relevant to the majority of the English population when he was composing, and has become even less so since. Today the obvious candidate for a widely understood vernacular would have to be popular music (although we could argue about exactly what kind of popular music). However, one of the striking features of twentieth-century Western musical development has been the sundering of popular and art music styles in terms of forms, instruments, musical materials, influences, etc. In the classical and romantic periods in central Europe, there was much common ground between the music of peasants and tradesmen and that of the upper class. Both used tonal melodies and harmony, and similar rhythmic structures. As a result, there was an easy interchange of material and ideas. What divided the two were the large differences in wealth and lifestyle between the social classes. In the last century, the gulf between high and low has become more a question of musical tropes. So the question is whether such an engagement, between contemporary art music and popular music, is still possible, or if the musical worlds represented by 'classical' and 'pop' in the broadest sense are now too disparate to significantly relate to each other. Crucially, could a connection with popular music 'inject' a certain measure of accessibility into art music and restore to it some of the wider cultural currency and impact that it has lost? If Western art music matters, and I think it does, and if it should be more than an anachronism or a curiosity, then these questions are surely of pressing importance.

Accessibility is not only invoked or implied within Western art music, or when it is compared with its 'others' such as pop, rock or folk. It also figures in other intra-genre discourses. One such is the juxtaposition between progressive rock and punk rock examined in [Chapter 3](#). For many years after the advent of punk, a narrative was frequently repeated about the development of progressive rock into an overextended, esoteric and irrelevant kind of music – a rotten fruit, which was swept away by the vigorous down-to-earth and to-the-point form of punk. This is an important moment in the history of English popular music and I look more closely at the two subgenres concerned, particularly in the light of accessibility theory. This proves to be a rich and contradictory field, with the abrasive and aggressive elements of punk requiring close analysis, since they may be perceived as hostile, but form an integral part of what has been portrayed as the more accessible style. In the first of the two chapters devoted to this area,

the question of what is accessible in 'prog' and punk is explored, particularly in the light of notions of authenticity and value in rock aesthetics.

In the chapter which follows, I take up a particular aspect of the prog-to-punk narrative: its diachronicity. There is a clear style break in this trajectory, a development which leads in the direction of extended forms, technical sophistication (in terms of both playing and recording) and surreal lyrics, all of which are praised and appreciated by fans and the music press alike, only to be suddenly ostracised by a fashion sea change which in pop culture terms was nothing short of a revolution. The style elements of punk (brevity, simplicity, offensive lyrics) were in part defined in direct opposition to those of progressive rock. It is this shift in taste, in what is seen as interesting, valuable and 'cool', that is of particular interest. It clearly points to the fact that what we like, what we choose and what we deem accessible, changes over time for us as individuals and as cultures. There are several theoretical approaches to this which are explained with reference to the example in question. My own analysis leads me to contrast two very different aspects of style development which might eventually lead to a drastic reversal. One is the tendency for a style to 'grow', through the desire of musicians to improve and develop it, to compete with each other, and keep the audience interested. Thus guitar solos might well become relatively louder, longer and more involved in a style which features guitar solos. The other tendency is for the meanings of the music to become more widely understood in a population, but also to become more diffuse. Thus the music of the hippy movement originally stood for the counterculture, for love-not-war and for a break with the post-war moral consensus. By the time it had branched into progressive rock and other offshoots such as glam rock and heavy metal, it had lost its power to ethically and aesthetically represent a movement with any felt precision. Meanwhile its tropes were widely accepted and could be used in a wide range of contexts. Thus there is in this case, and perhaps in others, a contrary motion of musical structures and lyrical content, which become less intelligible because of their elaboration, while the overall genre becomes more familiar. This can lead to boredom and a kind of nausea, as already understood tropes are pushed to excess, hastening the moment where the exact opposite is a welcome surprise and relief, a refreshing renewal for those who are ready to jettison the old style. The new style will then not only provide a contrast but also have the power to embody a cultural moment, making it instantly accessible and meaningful to those who are part of that moment.

Brazilian musical culture provides a background that contrasts with the case studies already mentioned and enables us to explore a number of

dimensions of musical accessibility from a significantly different cultural perspective. Brazil has a rich group of interrelated musical styles and identities, which at various times have carried major influence beyond its borders. Although now recognised as a 'newly industrialised country', Brazil, and particularly Bahia, represents values and traditions which are very different to those encountered in the other case studies. It is not English speaking and has a mix of cultural roots in which the Latin and African elements predominate. There is therefore the possibility of finding fundamentally different attitudes to musical accessibility to those around which the other case studies revolve. Indeed, I discovered accessibility and inclusiveness were 'built into' many musical institutions, genres and events in the Brazilian city of Salvador da Bahia. Whereas I studied a wide range of performance situations and other aspects of Brazilian music, observing the behaviour of performers and audience, noticing particularly how easily the line between them becomes blurred, it was in *Carnaval* that there were remarkable instances of accessibility at all levels. Here the performance moves around the city, available to many thousands free of charge. The audience typically dance and sing along with the music, but they also have the option of dressing in the costume of a *Carnaval* group, belonging to it, moving along the street with it. With longer-term engagement, people of any social situation or background can join a *Carnaval* group as an official dancer or musician. Such accessibility is not merely taken for granted as part of the culture, but explicitly debated and addressed.

In my study of Brazilian samba in diaspora in Wales, I found that the way a samba percussion group functions lends itself particularly well to inclusivity. This is clearly an instance of the kind of community group referred to earlier. The music is often performed out of doors at festivals or in shopping streets. When performed with enthusiasm and good rhythmic feel, it has the effect of making at least some of the audience or passers-by enjoy the sound and want to dance. Anyone who enquires further about the music will typically be told that they are welcome to join the band. Rehearsals are geared towards enabling novice participants to build basic playing skills and general musical confidence. Because it lends itself to such accessibility, samba percussion has become one of the most widespread 'community music' forms in the UK. It is an example of an activity which uses music from cultures other than that of the majority of participants, which raises interesting questions about the inter-accessibility of musical cultures, and the case study which looks at diasporic samba focuses particularly on this. The idea that musical meaning is socially constructed and depends on literacy in the culture where the music has its origins has long been

predominant in ethnomusicology. Yet we live in a world where cross-cultural adoptions and identifications are commonplace. I am particularly interested in how this kind of accessibility functions. If, as has often been implied, 'alien' adopters of music construe entirely new meanings, the question remains as to what attracts them to it in the first place. What is the connection with the 'home' culture of such music and what, if anything, can the musical structure and practice communicate directly? The answers to these questions are of course largely specific to the situation examined. The research was carried out using ethnographic methods including interviews, questionnaires, participant observation and video recording with subsequent evaluation. In this way, the subject is illuminated in specific detail; however, it is hoped that some of the findings will be of wider relevance.

The choice of case studies

The case studies in this book are chosen to reveal, and engender discussion about, different aspects of musical accessibility. They represent what I have found to be particularly interesting examples because accessibility plays an important role in them in a variety of ways. Thus, the Vaughan Williams study helps us examine issues of art and vernacular music in relation to accessibility, whereas the prog/punk case leads us to explore accessibility and style change. Clearly the studies also touch on a number of other relevant phenomena (class and identity in both of those just mentioned for instance) and I have tried to address these in each case, even where they overlap between the studies, because this provides a broader investigation. However, while I have tried to present a thorough exploration and theorisation of musical accessibility, there can be no question of it being exhaustive. I hope to have discovered some key rivers and mountains, but I am not claiming to have mapped the entire continent. Many more areas remain to be surveyed and traversed. Likewise the choice of musical phenomena for the case studies. Accessibility concerns apply to a myriad of situations and examples right across the musical spectrum and there can be no question of having chosen all, or the 'right' ones, or even the best ones. Nor would it be possible to choose examples which neatly correspond to some methodological construct (such as the Levels of accessibility I propose in [Chapter 1](#)), because if a topic is considered in any depth, the issues it raises will not be discrete, but will overlap and intertwine. This is because in considering musical accessibility we are looking at interactions between

human beings and music (often via some medium) and as such they involve an intricate interplay of musical structures, cultural constructs and psychology. On this interaction, theoretical precepts and ideas from a host of disciplines can be brought to bear. Therefore the approach used here, with case studies from the real world, can be rich and fascinating, but it cannot be tidy. (Some of the concepts dealt with may of course be approached in an experimental way, manipulating one variable while attempting to hold all others constant. I refer to a number of studies which have used such a methodology in the text, but mine is not itself an experimental study.)

The case studies have been chosen in order to provide good instances for observing accessibility being contested in particular musical contexts. They also enable me to focus on different dimensions of accessibility. Furthermore, the case studies constitute examples from a broad range of musical situations. One (Vaughan Williams) is centred on art music (even though it does discuss its relation with vernacular music – we can see how they overlap) and is essentially based on the recorded thoughts of the composer. The prog/punk study is set in the world of popular music, more specifically, rock. While these are located in different historical periods and look at different kinds of evidence, they are both situated in England. Therefore it is useful for the third study to look to music from and in a different part of the world, and to use a different methodology. In this way, certain commonalities in attitudes towards musical accessibility due to the English context can be avoided.

The methodology used in the Brazilian study, including the part concerning diasporic samba, is also intended to contrast with that of the other two case studies. To some extent they all follow the kind of procedure commonly found in research on the kind of music concerned: a textual and historical analysis for art music, an emphasis on lyrics and media reaction in the popular music study, and ethnomusicological procedures in the case of music from a culture outside the Euro-American mainstream (even though Brazil is well-connected globally). One is more likely to find research on Brazilian popular music in ethnomusicology publications than in popular music or musicology ones. But the real motivation for including a variety of methodologies in this book is twofold. First, it is an integral part of the interdisciplinary approach employed. Interdisciplinary in this case means using techniques and ideas not just from outside the study of music, but also from across that field which I am determined to treat as a unity. Since bringing accessibility questions to the surface has implications for a number of areas in music research, these implications are usefully exposed and discussed by employing a range of research methods. Second, this

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