

# Reimagining ways of music-making through materially-based notation

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Contemporary music scholarship has often overlooked the material agency of musical scores, treating them as passive, static objects. My current doctoral research through Aalto University's Department of Art and Media challenges that perspective by introducing the concept of *notational actants* – a framework that explores how musical scores profoundly shape the act of composing and performing through their physical properties and temporal transformations.

Drawing on vital materialism and material culture studies, my research builds upon the work of research fellow and ethnomusicologist **Giovanni Cestino** (2021, 81), who argues that scores are not merely textual artifacts but active participants in musical performance. The concept of notational actants extends beyond traditional artifact studies, embracing philosopher **Gilbert Simondon's** idea of individuation—a process of ontogenetic growth that applies to seemingly inanimate objects.

I have coined the term *notational actant*, expanding on Cestino's concept of the *notational artefact*, thereby pushing the treatment of the score into an even more materially-situated realm. Differing from a conscious agent who exercises intent, a notational actant presents a type of readability through material affordance and its potential for transformation. This approach aligns itself with the constructivism of **Bruno Latour**, the vital materialism of **Jane Bennett**, and the agential realism of **Karen Barad** – all of which emphasize the dynamic, intra-active flux between material entities.

Central to these kinds of notations are two concepts: affordance-as-semiotics and mind-wal-



Figure 1 Various notational actants and finger labyrinths on display at Mustarinda residency's open house, 20.5.2023.

Photo: Jacob Bertilsson.

king. The former concept informs the ongoing, hands-on investigation of whether affordance – the potential interactions suggested by an object's physical properties – can substitute a notational system that is dependent on a deep inculturation. Inspired by interaction design theorists like **James Gibson** and **Don Norman**, affordance-as-semiotics proposes that the inherent qualities of a material and/or object can inherently encourage and constrain potential actions within the processes of composing and performing. This perspective is reminiscent of **Tim Ingold's** notion of *finding the grain*, where craftspeople do not impose form but rather collaborate with a material's intrinsic characteristics (Ingold 2012, 427 & 2009, 92–93).

The latter concept of mind-walking draws upon Ingold's proposal that acts of reading and writing, listening to music, drawing, and painting all employ a kind of terrain, whether physical or mental, imagined or remembered (Ingold 2010, 18). This idea is particularly interesting when looking at the shift in Western traditions in both car-

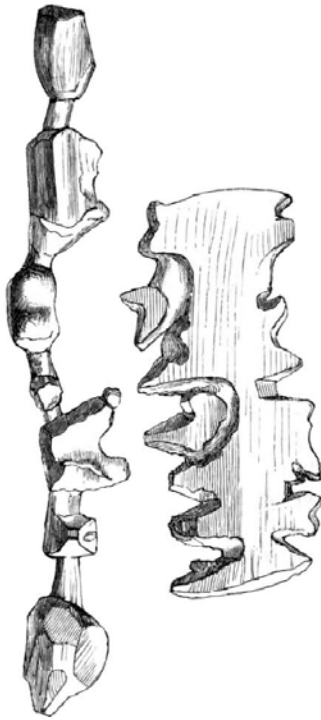


Figure 2: a depiction of an island map (left) and coastal map (right), carved from wood by an Ammassalik Inuit named Kunit and gifted to explorer Gustav Holm in 1885.

tographical and notational approaches: the *map-pae mundi* of medieval Europe were not merely a descriptive, measured representation of distance or location (ibid.) but were instead a template prescribing a way in which places and their aspects were ordered. In this way, they may come closer in nature to the 3-dimensional wooden maps of the Tunumiit peoples of coastal Greenland (see Figure 2) or current deep mapping practices than many of their later European counterparts.

Unsurprisingly, this prescriptive approach can also be found in certain scores from the *ars nova* pieces of medieval France. One such score, entitled *En la maison Dedalus* (see Figure 3) is a particularly strong example of mind-walking, fusing mythological narrative, musical performance, and mapping in a very direct way. The maze created by music and words locks up the main character of the song, the mythological figure Ariadne, who is a prisoner in the house of Daedalus, represented by the red dot (Ellsworth 1984, 13).

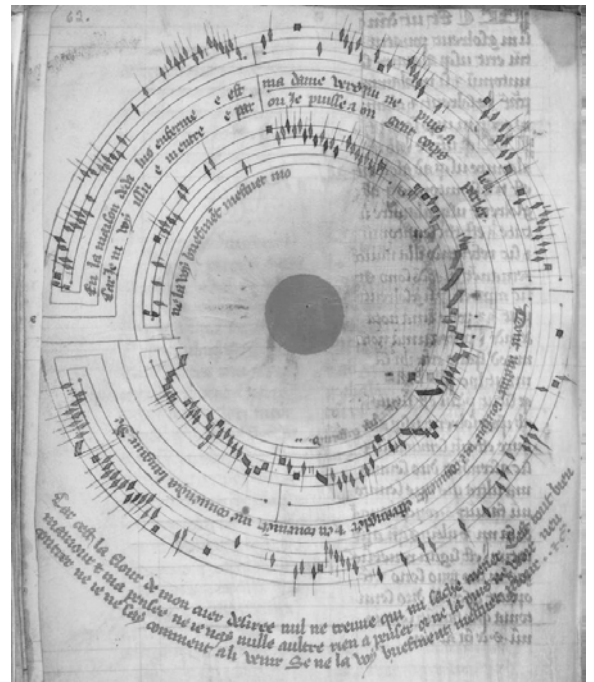


Figure 3: *Canonic Ballade on a Labyrinth, "En la maison Dedalus"* Anon. ca. 1375. Boston (US-BEm 744, fol. 31v).

Combining affordance-as-semiotics and mind-walking, these notational actants have the potential to provide new possibilities in terms of composing and interpreting a musical score through material as well as imaginal terrain.

In addition, the ability to “read” a score through touch points to promising new research carried out in the field of accessibility design. Audiotactile crossover in the brain (Schürmann 2006) and the remarkable haptic sensitivity of the human fingers (Skedung 2013) create radical possibilities for exploring music cognition and creation. Since extremely nuanced haptic and tactile feedback can be processed through our brain’s audio cortex, the cognitive implications of this research could inform many new insights.

Notational actants represent a radical reimagining of musical scores. They are not fixed, unchanging documents, but dynamic, evolving entities that actively participate in musical creation. By foregrounding material agency, temporal transformation, and multi-sensory engagement, this research challenges traditional Western mu-

sical pedagogies and opens new possibilities for compositional and performative practices.

This work continues to probe fundamental questions of materiality, agency, multiple ways of knowing, and the intricate relationships between human and non-human actors in musical performance, as well as the implications this may have on conventional approaches to music making and music education in our current academic landscape.

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