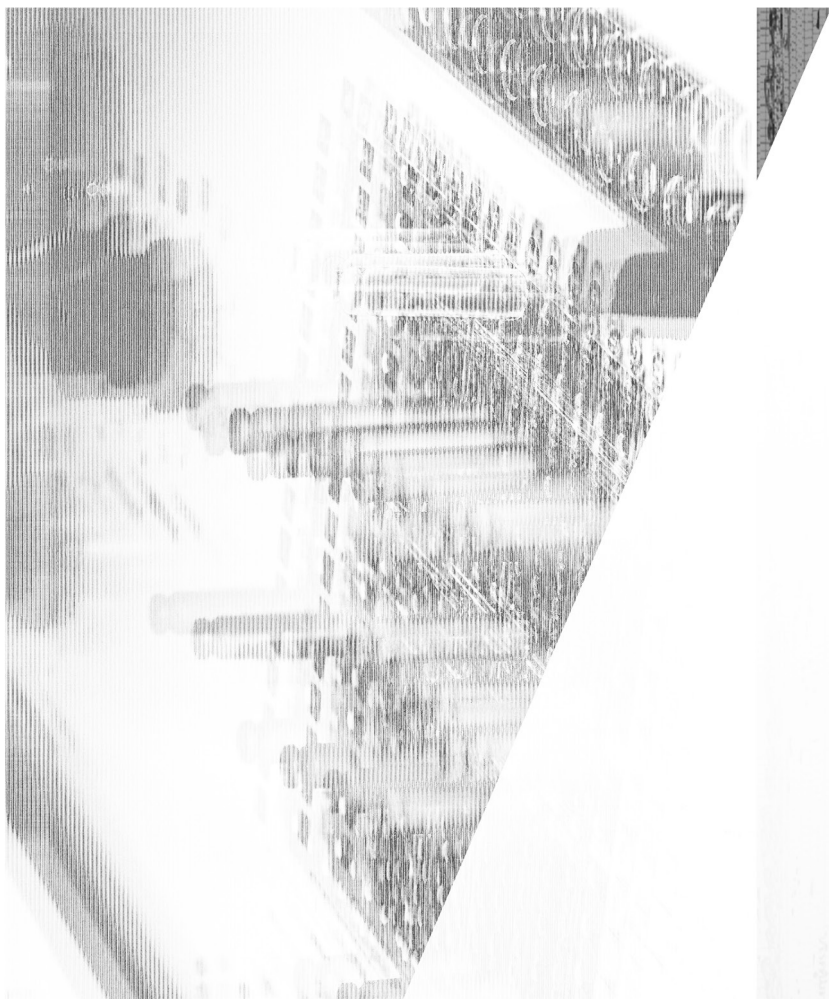


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Book review: Juan Bermúdez, *Musicking TikTok: A Musical Ethnography from a Global Austrian Context*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2025.

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I N S Δ M

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Juan Bermúdez

**MUSICKING TIKTOK:
A MUSICAL ETHNOGRAPHY FROM A GLOCAL
AUSTRIAN CONTEXT**

Bloomsbury Academic, 2025.

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Ethnomusicologist Juan Bermúdez's recent monograph *Musicking TikTok: A Musical Ethnography from a Glocal Austrian Context* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2025) is an attempt at a comprehensive scientific take on the global phenomenon of TikTok from the perspective of musical sciences. Curiously enough from today's perspective – having in mind heaps of research on TikTok that abounds – Bermúdez's research proposal to deal with Musical.ly (TikTok's predecessor) was met with several specific obstacles at its very beginning: from the resistance and rejection from his colleagues and potential mentors, a lack of existing methodological tools and paths, the nature and potential instability of digital platforms and its content in the planned research timeframe, and to his very identity.¹

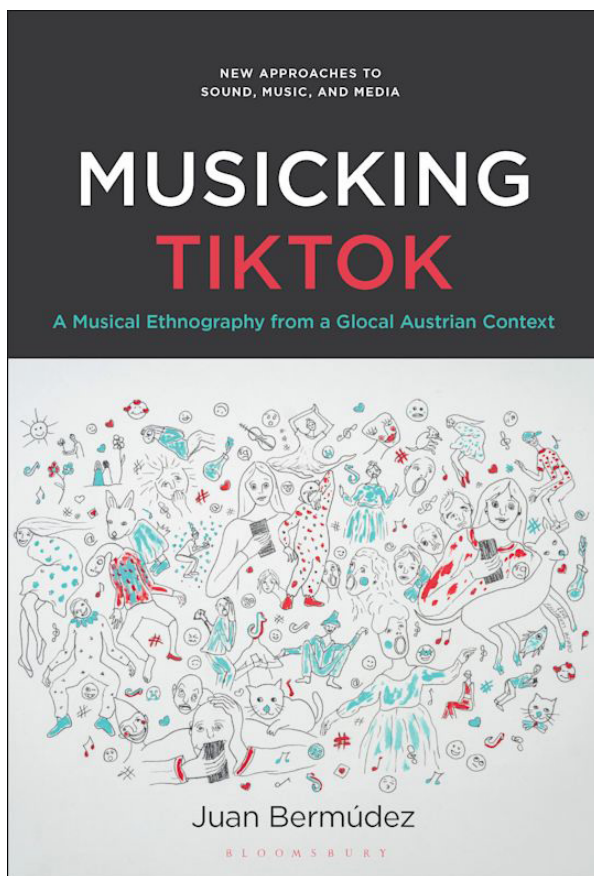
Over the five chapters (preceded by the Introduction and closed with Conclusions), the author unveils the research results, which were also shaped by all the challenges he encountered and strategically addressed. This book is

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a product of Bermúdez's PhD research, conducted at the University of Vienna; even before officially starting his doctoral studies, however, the sentiment that he received from his professional surroundings was that exploring musical practices online cannot be situated in the field of ethnomusicology. As is the case with musicology, his discipline is likewise rooted in quite traditional theoretical and methodological frameworks, which are often too rigid and conservative for topics that go beyond their original postulates (musicology even more so

than ethnomusicology). The issue required a careful reconsideration of some of the ethnomusicological key concepts, such as *musicking*, *field work*, *performance/performer*, *physicality*, *locality*, and more. This specific re-invention of the disciplinary boundaries seems as necessary as ever in the era of the internet and virtuality.

As Bermúdez points out in the Introduction, the doubts over the stability of his research subject (an application that was created for smartphones) were somewhat confirmed on the same day his proposal was finally accepted, since that was the day the company ByteDance acquired Musical.ly. However, the issue was soon after remedied with the rise of TikTok, especially and notably during the Covid-19 pandemic. From this situation arose one of the first confirmations of the validity of his research: "the musicking of Musical.ly did not entirely depend on the application to exist" (p. 7), but continued to be reshaped and reinvented within the new app. Finally, the research process and the fieldwork



that was supposed to be done with TikTok users via interviews, workshops and meetups was shaped by his own position as an immigrant cis-gender male scholar of color, who is in his 30s and explores music practices on an application that, at the time, was primarily intended for teenage girls.

The methodological bases are comprised of qualitative ethnographic research combined with several other approaches: participant observation on Musical.ly/TikTok, analysis of TikTok-related materials, analysis of TikTok videos, numerous informal conversations with different TikTokers, two research stays during the TikTok Opera production in Hamburg, fieldwork during meetups, one hundred semi-structured interviews with TikTokers, and reflections during four roundtable discussions between TikTokers and researchers. The timeframe for all of these was from fall 2017 to summer 2022.

The broad question that initiated the research was “how and why is the musicking on TikTok historically constructed, socially maintained, and individually created and experienced by diverse actors from a glocal context?” (p. 5). The author attempts to answer in the five following chapters that reveal the five main topics of his endeavor: 1) creating a suitable ethnographic research model; 2) different ways in which participation is possible in TikTok musicking and the types of performances on the application; 3) performers of TikTok musicking; 4) musical geography of TikTok from an Austrian context, and 5) performances held within TikTok musicking.

In the first chapter, titled “Ethnographing TikTok”, Bermúdez presents his research model, built on the bases of work of ethnomusicologists and other music scholars that strived to broaden the field, starting from Alan P. Merriam’s (1964) structure of three analytic levels that serve as a basis for ethnomusicological work (*conceptualization about music, behavior in relation to music, and music sound itself*). This is enriched with Timothy Rice’s (1987) and Julio Mendini’s (2016) expansion of Merriam’s model (*historical construction, social maintenance, and individual creation and experience*). The final piece in this puzzle is Christine Hine’s concept of E3 Internet (2015). The E3 Internet is an embedded, embodied and everyday experience. With these in mind, the author introduces *e³thnography*, “research of concepts, behaviours, and sounds that different actors of specific musicking (musicians/dancers, audiences, producers and other actors musicking) historically construct, socially maintain, and individually create and experience in everyday synchronous and asynchronounous multimedia situations”

(p. 19). Musicking on TikTok could thus be viewed as: 1) *multimedia practice* that has no clear location of production or reception, nor does it require physical contact between actors. It builds asynchronous multimedia and multilocal music practices, and rethinks reality and virtuality in a dialectical relation; 2) *individual experience* that possibly encourages transformation of a musical persona (as posed by Philip Auslander in 2006) to TikTok persona; and as 3) *musical geography through practice*, which does not depend on physicality to function.

The second chapter, “Performing TikTok”, brings a detailed overview of TikTok’s interface, the main elements (the profile page, the for-you and following page, the discover page, the live page, the inbox) and modes of functioning, as well as its performative possibilities (recording mode, time, and speed; effects, tags, filters...). Under the performative possibilities, the author addresses distinctive functions that make TikTok particularly interesting for musicians and music fans – duets, stitch, and live function. In the second half on the chapter, Bermúdez categorizes performances on TikTok into lip-sync ones, non-lip-sync ones, challenges and trends. Non-lip-sync performances is the category that is especially prominent on TikTok, and which distinguishes it from Musical.ly.

The chapter “Becoming a TikToker” delves into several strains of encountering and using TikTok in musicking. The transition from Musical.ly and its avid users – Musers – to TikTok was not smooth; many users decided to delete the app or never to install it to begin with. However, the author demonstrates how, with the COVID-19 outbreak in late 2019 and early 2020, the worldwide lockdowns brought millions of users and a new type of social life to TikTok – for musicians with no opportunity to play live, TikTok offered possibilities to reconnect and present their art and skills to a whole new market. To become a TikToker, Bermúdez writes, there is no school you can attend. TikTok users would learn through trial and error processes, learn by doing, and try to find their niche which could be accepted by the broader audience. In this process, TikTok personae would employ what researchers such as Kevin Brown would call *performances of authenticity*. According to Bermúdez, to become a TikToker one would have to employ a musical front (which consists of the “setting” – physical context of the performance, and the “personal front” – physical appearance and behavior of the performer), a personal front (as a “point where the body and voice of the performer meets the intersectional mandates of genre, sexuality, race, age, class,

ability...”, p. 86), and the audience, who may or may not accept and acknowledge the identity of a TikTok persona. What is especially important here is that Bermúdez acknowledges the three aspects of the “settings” that are dependent on the locality of the TikToker – device and infrastructure context (having in mind technological and internet disparities worldwide), performative possibilities of the platform (seeing that users have access to different functions depending on their geographical location and national laws and regulations), and physical context of the performance (private or public space of the performance).

In the fourth chapter, dubbed “Localizing TikTok”, Bermúdez answers the doubts from the very beginning of his journey – what if there is no classic *field* to do the *fieldwork*? He suggests going “beyond the tangible” (p. 101) and poses that:

in a multimedia ethnographic research (E³thnography), “being there” cannot be seen from the point of view of how our physical body is positioned anymore, but from our embodied consciousness that forms part of these practices. Therefore, this embodied consciousness is the one that inhabits our environments, virtual or physical. This also applies to all actors in the musicking of TikTok, not just to us researchers (p. 102).

Having that in mind, he proposes the four basic forms of relations between actors on TikTok: 1) *presence* (conscious participation in a physical and synchronous sense); 2) *co-presence* (conscious participation in multimedia and asynchronous interaction); 3) *emphatic co-presence* (“affective and highly embodied association created after the conscious re-embedding in a synchronous and physical space, of participation and interaction previously experienced as multimedia and asynchronous by the actors in a particular musicking”, p. 103); and 4) *unconscious presence* (actors who are not aware that they are included, or the case of *digital death*). In that way, the author considers performances and actors beyond their tangible bodies and tangible spaces (physical spaces transform into social spaces).

TikTok in relation to other platforms is also examined here. The author emphasizes that the live function TikTok holds does not differ much more than other social media platforms, even when compared to more traditional media such as television. However, the question of virality of sounds and choreographies is touched upon here, although this is not stressed much. Returning to the

three aspects of the “settings” from the previous chapter, Bermúdez analyses performances, algorithms, interactions and meetups, that are all particularly closely related to the local reality of the performer on TikTok.

The final chapter, “TikToking Musics”, deals more closely with the live function, the types of songs and music pieces characteristic of the TikTok platform and its performative functions (primarily, the length of the songs/ excerpts), and duets. Alongside of shortness of songs and pieces, duets – asynchronous and multimedia type of content, with no specific type and place, previous organization or arrangement with the other performer – are one of the key functions of TikTok musicking. Bermúdez also considers several examples of adapting classical music form to TikTok, primarily opera. Opernloft, a theatre and opera house from Hamburg, worked on two contemporary productions of Mozart’s *Die Entführung aus dem Serai* (1782) and Bizet’s *Carmen* (1875), adapted to the shorter timeframe and with the intention of contributing to topics of inclusion and diversity, specifically for TikTok. The author discusses the particularities of the production that needed to be overcome in combining the two worlds and reaching the target audience. On the other hand, *Tiger King 2: The TikTopera*, is a series on TikTok specifically intended for the platform, with the goal of promoting the new season of the popular series *Tiger King*. Finally, Bermúdez introduces several local artists via the debate on TikTok musicals, as well as TikTok songs – songs that are almost exclusively performed on and for this platform.

Musicking TikTok, A Musical Ethnography from a Glocal Austrian Context appears in a timely manner, at a moment when TikTok is a global informational, cultural, educational, and musical force, and while research on the platform is on the rise. Juan Bermúdez’s insights into the very beginnings of the platform and his position as a researcher throughout its rise is substantial and useful for music science and for an overall understanding of the phenomena. For, even though we are talking about a relatively short timeframe of several years, as avid TikTok users we know that the speeding up of the trends and topics discussed is another subject to be explored not only by music scholars, but by many others.

Given the comprehensiveness and the wide range of this research project, what could have been more emphasized is the influence the TikTok revolution with the short-form vertical video in 9:16 format has had on the other social media giants such as Meta (Instagram and Facebook) and YouTube.

However, Bermúdez's research is particularly important given its emphasis on the *glocal* feature; the study is enriched throughout all the chapters with excerpts from his informal conversations and interviews with local TikTokers. As observed, the examples of *TikToking Musics* are also rooted in the Austrian and German contexts. This gives a reader a touch of the local context, while introducing the concept of creating musical geographies through multimedia and asynchronous practice independent of the physical element, unlike any other form of musicking before. Since TikTok is as glocal as it gets – with its local specificities – everyone is participating in one of the world's largest social spaces in history.

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