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Musicology Articles

What is Musicology?

The RMA exists 'for the investigation and discussion of subjects connected with the art, science, and history of music' - that is, to support *musicology*. In the following article, Nicholas Cook answers the question - *What is musicology?*

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What is musicology?

By Professor Nicholas Cook

You don't need to know about music to enjoy it. And it is tempting to conclude from that that you don't need to know about music to understand it, either. (After all, if you have enjoyment, who needs understanding?) In which case, you might ask, what possible reason can there be for adding the -ology to music?

As a musicologist, you might expect me to try and persuade you of the value of understanding music as against merely enjoying it. And certainly I would argue that if you know about music (know how it is put together, know about its historical context) then this will enhance your enjoyment of it - not in the sense of replacing that original pleasure in the sound, but of adding further layers or dimensions of meaning to it. But it's the first sentence, the idea that you don't need to know about music to enjoy it, that I would really want to question. Of course, if you mean formal, book knowledge, then it's



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true; in that sense you don't need to know about music in order to play or compose it, either. But it is obvious that anyone who plays or composes music actually knows a great deal, even if it's not book knowledge. And in the same way you know a great deal about music and use this knowledge every time you listen to it - only you may have well have acquired this knowledge without knowing you were acquiring it, in just the same way you learnt your native language without knowing it. Think of some kind of music you really dislike. Is it that you understand the music and really dislike it? Or is it that you don't have that same unconscious knowledge of it that you do of your favourite music, don't in that sense understand it, and for that reason don't like it? Even if your answer to that last question was 'no', isn't there some music of which it would be true?

Musicology (etymologically 'music-word' or 'words about music') is all about the knowledge that underlies the enjoyment of music. When you study the music of other times and places, you need to reconstruct the knowledge that its original composers, performers, or listeners had: how it was made, what kind of social structures supported it, what it meant. In that sense, all music implies its own musicology, for there is no music that does not entail knowledge; that is what Guido Adler (who drew up the first systematic guidelines for musicology in turn-of-the-century Vienna) meant when he wrote that 'all peoples who who can be said to have a musical art also have a musical science'. But the way in which this musical science has developed owes as much to the institutions that have supported it as to music itself. For these institutions (conservatories and, particularly,

universities) are part of the knowledge industry, devoted to both maintaining and developing the knowledge base on which society depends. And as we know it today, musicology goes back only as far as the incorporation of music into institutions of learning.

Music and the knowledge industry

In Britain, music education and research is split between conservatories and universities, but in practice the split isn't as big as it looks. Conservatories have been teaching practical music for a long time, but over the last decade or so they have been increasing the academic component of their courses. And university degree programmes (most of which go back to the great educational expansion of the 1960s) incorporate a large amount of practical music; if they didn't, then few of them would recruit students.

But the picture in the rest of the world is very different. In continental Europe there is far more of a gap between conservatories and universities, with no practical performance in the latter. In America, most practical music education goes on within universities but, paradoxically, there often seem to be higher walls between their practical and academic divisions than between British universities and conservatories. And the walls don't stop there. In Britain university music departments usually just advertise for lectureships and professorships in 'Music', sometimes (but not always) stipulating what particular area they want. In America, by contrast, you see advertisements for musicologists, theorists, or ethnomusicologists (as well as for composers and performance teachers, of course). Each of these represents not just a

different specialism but a different career path, with its own professional society and journals.

Whereas in Britain any academic who writes about music is a musicologist, in America the term specifically means music historians: people who write about the music of the past. Some music historians focus on the music itself (more on that term later), and here the work of the musicologist spills over into that of the editor, whose concern is to establish a reliable text and render it accessible to today's musicians. Others emphasize the relationship between the music of the past and its original social or cultural context, either so as to gain a deeper understanding of the music or in order to use music as a resource for reconstructing broader social or cultural histories. (At this point the music historians in music departments merge into the rarer music historians in history departments.) In terms of sheer numbers music historians are the largest group within musicology. Or, as you would put it in America, musicologists are the largest group within musical academia, and consequently the American Musicological Society is the dominant professional society.

In fact both of the other specialisms to which I referred became fully separate from musicology just at the point that they split off from the American Musicological Society and formed their own associations. First, in 1955, was the founding of the Society for Ethnomusicology, bringing together scholars of music other than the Western 'art' tradition. (That formulation, incidentally, tells you where I come from; ethnomusicology sees itself as the study of all music.) And then, in 1977, came the setting

up of the Society for Music Theory, giving a disciplinary identity to those who aim to understand music in its own terms, rather than in terms of the society within which it originated or within which it is received. Here, incidentally, there is another transatlantic distinction to be made, for in Britain they would be called analysts rather than theorists, reflecting what we like to see as a characteristically British emphasis on the practical application of theory.

A changing discipline

All these subdivisions are problematic and becoming more so, resulting in a certain smugness among British musicologists, who can more easily cross the barriers between them than their American counterparts. To see why, it is useful to consider the influential critique of the discipline contained in Joseph Kerman's 1985 book *Musicology*. (That was the British title; it would have meant the wrong thing in America, however, where it came out under the title *Contemplating Music*.)

Kerman trod carefully around ethnomusicology, in which he had little expertise, though he noted that ethnomusicology's aim of studying music in society was shared by many of those working in the Western 'art' tradition. But he launched a full frontal attack on music history (coming from Berkeley, he called it musicology) and theory, accusing them both of 'positivism'. By this he meant that each had degenerated into a more or less mindless accumulation of data and facts. But the point of data and facts, he said, was to support better interpretations, an enhanced personal understanding of both music and its social context. And accordingly he called for a 'critical' approach that would bring contextual

and analytical approaches together in the interpretation of specific traditions or repertoires.

There were some deeply entrenched reasons for the problems that Kerman diagnosed. Today's musicology builds on traditions established primarily in Germany and Austria during the first part of the century; like the nuclear industry, the accelerated development of post-war musicology was largely the result of a German-speaking diaspora. And in formulating their new discipline, musicological pioneers like Adler modelled it on the most prestigious disciplines of their day, and in particular classical philology: the study of ancient texts, which often had to be reconstructed from a variety of fragmentary and contradictory sources. It was the methods of philology that gave rise to the critical edition or Urtext, the pinnacle of turn-of-the-century musicology. And the methods by which musicologists sought to understand the music were equally modelled on those appropriate to literary texts. Music, in short, came to be viewed as a kind of literature. What became lost in the process was the sense of music being a performance art. It would probably be fair to say that the paradigm shift that occurred in Shakespeare studies around thirty years ago, whereby the plays came to be seen as the traces of performance events rather than as literary texts, has yet to hit musicology with full force.

The positivism that Kerman noted resulted, then, from the application of an inappropriately constrained interpretive framework. Musicologists laboured at getting the texts right; theorists explained why one note must (or must not) follow another. It was the leap from text to

performance, from visual to trace to lived experience, that was too infrequently made. And if musicology has still to take on board the full ramifications of music's status as a performance art, the developments that followed the publication of Kerman's book represented a concerted effort to escape the limitations of the text. The very idea that music could be studied 'in its own terms' was interrogated. Music was read instead for its ideological content, with gender representation being at the head of the field; the 'New' musicology, as this new approach was called, gained its greatest notoriety from the work of Susan McClary, who linked the way in which Beethoven's music drives forward from climax to climax to specifically male forms of experience. Music, she claimed, naturalized these forms of experience, made them seem just 'the way things are'; in this way (and in many others) it served a male hegemonic agenda. And by insisting that they were concerned only with 'the music itself', musicologists helped to perpetuate the ideological concealment on which the status quo depends. What McClary advocated instead was a musicology that showed how music was never 'just' music, but always served somebody's ends at the expense of somebody else's.

Putting the music back in musicology

In itself, the equation of Beethoven's music and sex may sound silly (though McClary's argument was in fact a good deal more sophisticated than her detractors claimed). But what was crucial was the way in which, through the work of McClary and others, the traditional agenda of musicology was broadened.

The 'New' musicologists did not merely claim that music could be read for sexual or ideological meanings. They claimed that music had always embodied such meanings, and that in failing to confront them traditional musicology had marginalized both music and the study of it. And paradoxically, the best demonstration that the charge was true was the very scale of the opposition which the work of the 'New' musicologists encountered from their more traditionally minded colleagues. Those who reacted against it did so because deeply-felt values were involved, values of which they might otherwise have been unconscious. And in this way they demonstrated the 'New' musicologists' point: music touches on ideological beliefs, on people's sense or cultural identity, even on their sense of who they are. That, surely, is why music matters.

A term like 'New' musicology is guaranteed a short shelf life and this particular one is probably past its sell-by date. Not because the musicological community has rejected the message of the 'New' musicology: rather because its broadened agenda has been absorbed into the musicological mainstream. And in a way this represented just the disciplinary reorientation in the direction of criticism that Kerman had called for. At the same time, it wasn't quite what Kerman had in mind. As I said, he was looking for an informed, critical engagement with the music itself. In problematizing the very idea of 'the music itself' the 'New' musicologists at times came close to changing the subject, no longer talking about the music but rather through the music and about gender, cultural identity, or ideology. But their work, and that of all

musicologists influenced by their approach, is critical in another sense, one that is closer to that of critical theory. It involves constantly asking whose agenda music serves, even whose agenda particular approaches to the music serve. It involves questioning your own role as the interpreter or guardian of musical tradition. It involves learning more about music, to be sure, but in the full knowledge that in so doing you are learning more about society and about yourself. Understood this way, musicology is not just critical but self-critical.

Where will musicology go next? Predictions are always risky and usually wrong. And they risk distortion; just as histories of music tend to over-emphasize innovation at the expense of the many musicians who work within established styles, so it is easy to envisage a musicology that consists (so to speak) of nothing but leading edges. In reality there will always be basic musicological work to be done: discovery and interpretation of new sources, new research on period performance styles, new historical insights into the relationship between music and society. The reason why there is always work to be done is not just that we discover new documents, new facts, but that we are constantly seeing old facts in new ways, reconstructing our image of the past. Because sound recordings have only been in existence for a hundred years, there is an extraordinary fragility at the heart of musicology: written documents are mute, and it is only through interpretation that we can make them resonate once more. What we hear as the music of the past is, in this sense, a reflection of our present-day understanding of it. Apart from that understanding, there is no music of the past.

But as well as basic musicological work there will always be leading edges, too, so where will they be? Any answer must be personal, and perhaps embarrassingly so. I see the exploitation of that hundred years of recorded repertory as one of the growth areas for musicology; our sound archives are full of primary texts that still lie at the margin rather than the centre of musicology. (Putting them at the centre of musicology also means putting performers there, alongside composers; maybe the idea of a 'history of music' that proves on inspection to be nothing but a 'history of composition' will one day seem ludicrously out of kilter with the role of music in our society, and the ways in which we enjoy and value it.) And we have to develop musicologies of sound rather than of written texts if we are to build bridges between the study of 'art' music and the other repertories which today surround it: jazz, rock, pop, world, and the rest. Maybe the multimedia revolution, linking words, images, and sounds into a single text, will help in this (will the very idea of a book on music seem ludicrous one day?). To me, however, the most pressing task follows on from what I said about the 'New' musicology: the reconciliation of today's broadened agenda with the traditional discipline's practices of close textual reading. In other words we need to find ways of talking about music and about its social or ideological meaning at the same time, without changing the subject. We need to satisfy our urge to talk about 'the music itself' (and the urge to talk about music is a bit like the urge to gossip, or to tell a secret), while still being aware of all the cultural baggage that comes with the idea of 'the music itself'. We need, in short, to put the music back in

musicology.

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