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Editorial

Is this the end of musicology or can practice help?

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During the Covid years a couple of international conferences were held on the topic of musicology in crisis. ‘Finally’, one might have said. And yet, hardly any critical voice was heard. And crisis, which crisis? Well, none really, except from funding, of course.

At an international musicological conference this summer, the most obvious sign of a crisis was the lack of inspiration and engagement. In the opening address, the organizers welcomed the participants ‘into the family’ and warned against making critical remarks as this would ruin the ‘friendly atmosphere’. In paper after paper, wafer-thin facts were presented and piled one upon each other. The standard formula was to offer a categorization based on data retrieved from an archival study of an unknown composer or an ‘unsung theme’. Then, out of the blue, and without any source to back it up, the papers could conclude with a speculation of what the person(s) in question may have felt or thought. This was simply a strange return to a musicological positivism à la 1950 where facts were accumulated, sugared by anecdotal speculations, but never given any historiographic or philological reflection.

Even a cursory look at contemporary musicology may arouse suspicion of a discipline in crisis, a crisis caused by a loss of identity, focus and relevance. Musicology seems neither fully at home in its own tradition nor in the wide range of ‘new’ academic disciplines into which it has ‘escaped’ (e.g., neuroscience, psychology, culture studies, gender studies, post-colonialism, etc.). Today, the young musical scholar may be confronted with a choice: either to espouse a different academic field or science from which one does research on music, or to batten down the hatches and return to old-school musicological empiricism. But regardless of which ‘shape’ musicology metamorphoses into, one essential feature is apparent. The agent in the research is academia, while the music is relegated to the role of subject – or target – of that agency.

What appears to be missing in musicology is music. In musicology, music is less a topic than a ‘subject’ onto which one heaps facts, methods and theories. A flawed ideal of scientificity may have led many scholars to believe that research is about applying and confirming the

validity of a pre-given method or theory, even when these are developed in academic disciplines that have little or no relation to music. The active part in this disenchanted coupling is always the discipline, the passive is the music – a ‘thing’ upon which research occurs.

Historically, this has been different. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, before the academization of art research, the topic of practice was central to writers who themselves frequently were artists (e.g., Carl Czerny, Antoine Reicha, Hector Berlioz, Georges Kastner). The gradually institutionalization of art research in general, has also created a dissociation between the artist and the academician, both in formation and in interests. It is difficult not to see that some of the verve in the defence of Artistic Research stems from a profound feeling of the irrelevance of current academic art research.

Towards practice

In the last issue of *Music & Practice*, we argued for the necessity of creating a bridge between artistic research and academic research. This bridge is offered by the study of practices. The question now is whether practice studies can challenge and improve the quality and relevance of musicological research in general.

Seeing music through the lenses of art as activity and practice would reveal that it is not something objective, ‘nounified’, natural or given. The matter in music is always humanly organized, sustained and created through acts of knowledge and knowing, imbedded in historical, cultural and societal contexts. For practice studies, this messiness of music is in the matter, yet a matter that can be grasped by seeking its constitutive logic.

Practices are betwixt and between theory and turmoil. The conventional opposition of theory and practice creates a binary thinking that obscures the degree to which practices are systems of knowledge. Interestingly, for Aristotle, ‘praxis’ was included in his broad concept of ‘theoria’. It is the fragile logic in practices that secures its usefulness and adaptability, that procures intelligibility and aesthetic awareness. A simple illustration is the surplus of musical forms present in the compositional practice of the sonata in the period from 1770 to 1900. When the second half of the nineteenth century and (not least) the twentieth century established the theory of the sonata forms – a theoretical abstraction leading to the ubiquitous use of form schemata in musicological analysis – composers had already for decades, without ever needing a schema, or even without necessarily knowing the term ‘musical form’, tout court – developed an intelligible variability of forms that transcends any schema but communicates aesthetically and acknowledges the characteristics of the genre.

Undoubtedly, practice studies may create a turmoil that challenges rigid academic thinking and priorities. In studying artistic practices, we believe that the most important locus and focus of research must be situated in music. The inherent aesthetic qualities of music, which is the prime motivation for cultivating music as an activity and as art, cannot be approached by only doing

research ‘on’ music.

Artistic practices are systems of aesthetic communication, which is why they must be studied where they occur, neither from an aloof generalizing perspective, nor from a solely subjective position. It is in music as shared human sensuous activity that musical communication and ‘truth’ occur. As a system of communication, musical practices allow for, regulate and give sense and purpose to musical acts, to what we do musically. This is where music happens and where research must be situated.

Musicology needs to connect with music as human aesthetic activity, and this is not achieved by trying to find or adopt overarching general theories or methods, far less by uncritically amassing facts. The study of musical practices can be part of the renewal of musicology, but if that is to happen, musicology must rethink from where it takes its directive and let music as an aesthetic activity instruct the discipline.

The problem of professionalization

Today musicology is thoroughly professionalized. The yearly publication of musicological papers is overwhelming, reaching into previously unimagined sub-disciplines – not only reaching into, but also resting there. Musicology is divided into a variety of sub-subjects that create their own biosphere with little or no interference from other. In each sub-discipline there is a well-defined but limited set of theories, methods, terminology and literature that create the premises for what is peer-reviewed as ‘competent’ academic work. In reality, there is no common currency in music research. The lack of communication – or partaking in a broader discourse – is one thing, the lack of relevance for the study of music as an artistic activity is another. But what this seclusion affords is the possibility of well-written academic papers. The means by which a paper can maintain ‘scientific accuracy’ within its field, defines the matter, what is to be peer-reviewed.

A similar relation between means and matter can be traced in modern musical performance. Classical musicians have today a technical proficiency that simply begs admiration. Even a music student on cello at an average music conservatory may have a better technique and intonation than Pablo Casals. If these are the means by which a musician is ‘peer-reviewed’, they also define the matter. The ‘instrumental or technical accuracy’ is the gold standard of professionalism, the ‘interpretative content’ is less so.

What appears to be lacking in both cases, is the ability to separate the means from the matter, which may restrict music to a technology and suppresses its quality as art (cf. distinction between ‘techne’ and ‘praxis’). The missing link is a well-developed concept of practice and, moreover, the willingness to accept that the goal of art is not the mastering of means. If aesthetic communication is important, it must be studied in and between acts, as a system of

knowledge, that is, as practices that can give musical meaning to interpretations, either they are performed or a topic for research. Practices are the matter in which music constitutes itself as art.

In *Music & Practice* we regularly meet two challenges. First, to turn what may appear as personal (or first-hand) experiences into shared or sharable knowledge. Second, to prevent the research simply becoming a demonstration of established academic positions or theories. In both cases, the question of language is problematic, and not only because our authors are not necessarily trained academics, but also because practice studies cannot unconditionally apply the musicological language already developed.

Practice studies cannot be subsumed under already dominant epistemological regimes. And this must be supported in order to evaluate its potential. If the study of practices has a self-explanatory relevance in music and arts, as a field of research it is still in development and definitely not professionalized. Let us turn the latter to our advantage and seek a turmoil of different but competently engaged voices that reengage us with music as aesthetic communication.