Mission Statement

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The mission of the International Musicological Society

• is to connect every musicologist to the world community of musicology
• by embracing the study of music in all its diversity
• and advancing musicological research across the globe
• in a spirit of cooperation and collaboration.
In the last issue of *IMS Musicological Brainfood* we discussed the idea of a global musicology. But how should this be done in practice? The question of “Babel” looms large. Our vice president, Andrea Lindmayr-Brandl, has some provocative thoughts for us to consider.

**English as a Universal Academic Language: The Dream of Babel Come True?**

Andrea Lindmayr-Brandl

What blessed times they were when all people still understood each other, “and the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech” (Genesis 11:1). The Biblical story of the Tower of Babel is one about the hubris of man who, in pursuit of absolute knowledge, erected a tower that would make him reach the heavens and resemble God. But God descended upon the earth to thwart man’s aspirations by confounding his language. It was the birth of a multilingual society which put humankind back into place, or so the tale goes. Where would we stand today, one might wonder, if we could still communicate freely across all linguistic barriers?

But such speculations are futile, for history took a different course. Needless to say, we speak myriad different languages today. And this linguistic diversity is testimony to a wealth of cultural and creative expression, each language being vessel for a distinct literary, artistic, and musical tradition—and to the various academic traditions dedicated to their study. The importance of language as a means of communication is particularly evident in the fields of language and literature, as these are disciplines in which language is the sole means of communication, being mode and object of study at one and the same time. But is multilingualism necessarily a by-product of multidisciplinarity?

As an Austrian musicologist, my mother tongue is German—and more precisely, Austrian, which is a dialect of German. Those who are well-acquainted with the German language immediately spot the difference in the speech melody, as Austrians are said to speak much softer and more “musically,” aside from significant variations in the lexicon. Hence, differentiating ourselves from our national neighbors is important to us, both in terms of cultural and professional identity. However, when it comes to scholarly writing, Austrian musicologists find themselves in the same boat with their German colleagues—stranded on a Germanophone island in the midst of a vast sea of anglophone research.

Whereas generations of German-speaking musicologists took it for granted to publish in their mother tongue, this situation has changed dramatically in the past years. In the sciences, English has long been established as standard language of academia, but this new *lingua franca* has recently also found its way into the arts and humanities. The field of musicology is no exception: If a scholar today wants to gain international resonance, he or she must write and present in English—there seems to be no way around this fact.

The reasons for this development—which one may or may not endorse—are historical, eco-
onomic, and political, and form part of a larger globalizing trend I cannot engage with more deeply in this context. It suffices to say that the latter is paralleled by a long academic history in which certain educational systems proved to be more successful than others; it is not a mere co-incidence that anglophone institutions occupy the top positions in all university rankings. Moreover, English is today the third most spoken language in the world (after Chinese and Spanish). It is taught in most schools as a second or third language, as well as being omnipresent in the digital universe. German’s hegemony as a second language—wherever this was the case—is long broken.

The resulting globalization of the academic world can be sensed daily. Musicology has accordingly been transformed from a national into a global field. What does this mean for our everyday academic lives? On the one hand, it entails an enormous expansion of our horizon, as conversations can be held across continents and there seems to be no new trend we cannot be a part of. Those who formerly were members of a small and locally circumscribed discipline suddenly feel part of a vast international community of experts in which language barriers are no longer obstacles for global interconnection. Might we have finally reached pre-Babel conditions of linguistic unison? And might English be the corner stone of a new tower, the once-lost-but-now-found common tongue that will allow us to join forces in our earthly pursuit of knowledge and understanding?

At second glance, things certainly appear more complex, since for us—the non-native speakers—this dream comes at a high price. Writing in English, we depend on help to produce texts of a high linguistic standard. We lose the ease and immediacy of our expression, which often constitutes our personal style of writing. And those who rely on a particularly ambitious language to express musical complexities find themselves fighting a losing battle.

What can be said against any of this? Despite my own love for linguistic elegance, I must point out that at the end of the day, academic writing serves a different purpose than creative writing. The balance between form and content is simply not the same. And even if how one says things impacts on what is being said, it must remain the primary concern of academia to circulate ideas in the most effective and democratic manner. Writing an excellent musicological text is after all an “art of the idea” before it is an “art of language.”

We might further remind those colleagues mourning the loss of their expressive acuity that even literary texts can be translated into other languages without major cutbacks in linguistic intricacy—granted one finds a good translator. It is certainly also worthwhile to be on good terms with English native-speaking colleagues. And those who cannot resort to qualified family members (like a daughter studying abroad who helped translate this text, and a partner with excellent English) will need to consult professional translators. In this respect, university administrations should provide increased financial and professional assistance. Today, support and funds for translation remain very limited despite the fact that publishing internationally has become of utmost importance.

Native speakers of English undoubtedly have a major head start in this situation. But is there much point in lamenting this fact? Over decades German-speaking musicologists were leading the field and all others had to bend to their (linguistic) rules of the game. This has always been the case for the Czech Republic, Denmark, Hungary, or the Netherlands—to name but a few countries bordering on the German-speaking world. Scholars of these nationalities have always been pressured to publish in a language other than their own if they wanted their academic reception to reach beyond the confines of their national borders. Do we—the German-speakers—hence only reject a linguistic hegemony once it is no longer our own?

The alternative option would of course be to retain all established European languages—English, German, French, and Italian—in the major academic traditions. But this appears to be a chimera, for who amongst us has such a high command of all these languages that one can fully comprehend even the most challenging academic texts? We are merely deceiving ourselves if we advocate for a quadrilingual academic world. What is more, we cannot disregard the fact that Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, and
Chinese have by now also become global languages. Who could still claim mastery in light of this linguistic proliferation?

It therefore seems much more reasonable and efficient to me to focus on English as a shared vessel of communication and to improve one’s own foreign language skills. Likewise, technological developments in the digital world give rise to some hope: some English-language online journals already provide the option to publish a text both in the original language and in translation. In the distant future it is conceivable that a translation program will be able to provide a text in any language at an acceptable linguistic standard.

But until technology can do our work, there is not much point in resisting a trend that seems unstoppable. We simply cannot afford turning our field into a German-speaking bubble which is both insulated against input from the outside, and unable to share any of its findings with academics in other fields or countries. It seems to me much more prudent to confront our students from the start with anglophone literature, habituate them to writing English abstracts of their research papers, and promote study abroad initiatives at English-speaking universities.

We can moreover be reassured that the triumph of the English language in academia will not entail the linguistic demise of our own mother tongue. Enough opportunities will remain to speak German at regional events and even produce German texts for publication with a very specific target audience. What is more, it certainly would not be necessary to speak English at a gathering with colleagues at which all participants understand German. And when referring, for example, to a Schubert Lied, I would advocate for retaining the original title. *Gretchen am Spinnrade* after all sounds a lot better than *Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel*.

Personally, I have made it my lifelong challenge to improve my linguistic competences in several foreign languages, and first and foremost in English. I have not stopped learning new vocabulary and idioms, and I benefit from each and every proof-reading of my English texts. On another note, I am pleased to be able to read demanding English literature in its original language—as foreign languages always open doors to other worlds and modes of thought. Finally, working in English helps me progress professionally: for what drives me as an academic is a limitless curiosity and the desire to exchange insights with my colleagues. This is why I want to understand everything and be understood by everyone. Let us make Babel not a project of hubris but one of inclusion and collaboration: and build a horizontal, not a vertical tower!

In gratitude to Flora L. Brandl

Andrea Lindmayr-Brandl received her PhD in 1988 with a dissertation on Ockeghem at the University of Salzburg. She completed her habilitation on Schubert in 2001 and was appointed associate professor the same year. After holding the Austrian Chair Professorship at Stanford University (2006/7) and a guest professorship at the University of Vienna, she was appointed full professor at the University of Salzburg in 2010. Her field of research comprises studies in Renaissance music, manuscript and early print studies, editorial work, early music historiography, as well as Schubert and his time. She directs several research projects and is an active member of many academic institutions and organizations.
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office@musicology.org

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*Musicological Brainfood* is a fresh intermittent IMS dish—an "amuse-bouche"—that may delight or possibly perturb you. These pithy, informal paragraphs are cooked up by leading musicologists to advance, refresh, or reinvigorate different aspects of our field; and they are anything but bland. Remember, these are "provocations" with flavors designed to prod, needle, and pinch your brain. They are not meant to be representative, and they are surely not official or definitive. Enjoy!