Musicological Brainfood
Tasty Bite-Size Provocations to Refuel Your Thinking
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Mission Statement

“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.
Editorial: A Crazy IMS Idea

For this issue of *IMS Musicological Brainfood*, we asked the members of the IMS Directorium (the Governing Board) to write no more than seven sentences on the following question:

*In your opinion, what word or concept would you like to see removed from music scholarship today?*

Why did we set this challenge? Because this is a great opportunity for a global snapshot of musicology. The IMS Directorium is a wide-ranging group from different parts of the world and with different disciplinary proclivities. A commonly used word in a different location or context may expose all kinds of dubious things that we often fail to see. The idea is not simply about removing a word or concept: the underlying purpose, whether taken seriously or in jest, is to explore how a commonly used term or concept can sometimes limit thought, or send research in dubious directions, or have unintended consequences, or is simply so overused that it abuses the word itself and prevents it from operating as it should.

With only seven sentences available to each writer (in some cases, this rule was slightly bent), the task we set is designed to take risk, pique thought, and create a small synaptic explosion in the reader that will be for the betterment of musicology! Of course, you don’t have to abide by these statements, or take them too seriously, but we hope they will be engaging.

To top off this crazy IMS idea, we listed the contributions alphabetically according to the authors’ countries of residence (as spelled in German).

**TABLATURE**

If I had my way, the word I would expunge from the vocabulary of musicology is “tablature.” Even if I have given half my life to it, most musicologists don’t give a fig about tablatures. All those numbers and letters: you have to be half literate to read it, and maybe an accountant as well—a bit too much to ask of a musicologist. But let’s forget musicology for a moment: all the world’s art historians have now decided that they’re not going to write about sculpture any more. They think it’s as marginalized as tablature. They read somewhere that tablature is for dummies who aren’t smart enough to read real music; dummies like Palestrina and Bach.

John Griffiths
MATERIALITY

The word I would like to see either correctly used or expunged from musicology is “materiality.” From the Latin *materialitas* and first used ca. 1570, the OED definition is “that which constitutes the matter or material of something/the quality of being composed of matter.” Adopting aspects of ideas from philosophy including those of Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, and others, clarity of thinking and expression in musicological scholarship has often been tainted by the uncritical and undefined use of words whose use by each subsequent writer moves further away from any concrete meaning or understanding of the philosophical tradition from which they grew. Materiality is one such word and is often used in tandem with “agency” and “identity,” thus contributing to ongoing confusion. While materiality seems to have entirely different meanings in different disciplines (among them architecture, art history, law, applied linguistics, social sciences, and humanities), it is hardly ever defined by the user. The result is often meaningless—as in the following example: “Materiality inheres in the world’s existence as nourishment and jouissance—and something more” (*The Times Literary Supplement* [2015]). Notwithstanding my problems with a great deal of musicology that uses “my” word incorrectly, it does have a proper place in series such as Music and Material Culture (Routledge, forthcoming) where it is defined and used correctly by contributors including Andrea Lindmayr-Brandl in her forthcoming book (*Early Printed Music and Material Culture in Central and Western Europe*).

NIEDERLÄNDISCHE VOKALPOLYPHONIE

German-speaking pupils, concert-goers, and even students starting research on Renaissance music are still confronted with the term “Niederländische Vokalpolyphonie” or “Kunst der Niederländer” in books, CD booklets, and concert programs. This term seems ineradicable. It dates back to 1826, when the musicologist Raphael Georg Kiesewetter took part in a competition of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences and Arts with a study entitled *Die Verdienste der Niederländer um die Tonkunst* (On the merits of the Dutch in music). He wanted to do the young academy a favor by transferring many famous Renaissance composers from northern France, Flanders, and Burgundy to a fictional country. The study won the competition, was successful, and the model for many subsequent writings that now spoke of “the art of the Dutch.” Who cares that the Netherlands didn’t even exist then, founded first only in 1581, accepted by Europe in 1648, and established officially in 1814/15?
ORGANOLOGICAL INNOVATION

The expression that I would like to see deleted is “organological innovation.” Organology is a discipline, the study of musical instruments. It is in this sense that Praetorius and Pontécoulant used the term “organography.” The first stage is descriptive, which then leads to the reflection, to the history, and to the evolution and theories of these sound objects. Currently, if we refer to the definition of the *Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, organology is the systematic investigation of the history, design, technology, and functions (musical, social, symbolic, etc.) of musical instruments of all times and places. The term may be used in the restrictive sense of scientific and technical study, encompassing “all aspects of sound-production implements, complementing the fields of musicology, ethnography, sociology, acoustics, materials science, conservation, and so on” (The *Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, 4:753–54). So instrument making is not organology. An innovation in instrument making is then an “instrumental innovation.” So, please use “organological innovation” only if you develop a method, theory, or technique useful for the development of organology, the science of instruments!

AN ICONOGRAPHY

I have a second word I dream about being removed from the vocabulary of musicologists: “an iconography” (French: “une iconographie”). It is increasingly used by students to describe a “visual document.” Iconography—that is, musical iconography, iconography of music—is the study of (figurative or non-figurative) subjects representing music in all its forms: instruments, human beings, animals, all sort of creatures, groups making music (singing, dancing, etc.) or listening to music, but also places, notions, symbols, etc. related to music. Collecting, describing, and analyzing such visual documents or images is iconography and eventually—at the step of interpretation—iconology.
IDENTITY
Can we manage without it (for some time, at least)? In a context shaped by the ideological triumph of the term “globalization,” the abstract term “identity” has met with a success commensurate with its historical mandate. Various projects functioned rather like a compensation mechanism for a shared loss of identity. Trickle into the respective domains of specialized disciplines from the cultural public sphere, the term has informed one Quinquennial IMS Congress (Rome, 2012). Insofar as identity can be absolute only as a result of an arbitrary effort—thus exposing its own irreality—it follows that ethnocultural communities, social classes, interest groups, and individuals, complete with their gendered articulations, have in fact stratified, multiple identities. Applied to music, the concept of identity may have had some heuristic value. This potential has been exhausted through a number of projects that were centrifugal with respect to what is specifically musical. Probably it has helped solve, as in an unconscious, collective process, the fictitious question as to whether musicology is a subset of ethnomusicology (or vice-versa), resulting in a satisfactory enough catharsis among self-identified musicologists.

CRITIQUE
(1) I love critique—I am trained to do it really well, and, like breathing, I do it all the time as a musicologist. (2) Critique is vital to unmask hidden ideologies, but it has become complacent and uncritical in its ease and ubiquity. (3) There are two problems with critical thought today. (4) First, as the critical theorist Adorno points out, critique is “cold”; its attitude is no different from the chill of an instrumentalized reason that manipulates the other as an object, and often ends up becoming like the very power structure it critiques. (5) Second, critique has nothing new to say because it is always parasitic on the object it critiques. (6) Critique is a means and not an end, and unless we spend as much time creatively and constructively loving the ends, then critique is merely a parasite that consumes its host, growing fat and indifferent as king over what’s left over. (7) Which is nothing.
HEGEMONY
The word I would like to avoid is “hegemony.” It may be true that throughout history, peace and stability have been achieved through power, and even in the twenty-first century, there is a persistent belief in this. The feud over hegemony also marks the history of modern musicology. Is it possible to achieve a world where all cultures and languages are treated equally? I think yes. In fact, since the end of World War II, the IMS has been working in pursuit of such a world. Musicologists from all over the world have been practicing the task of describing, preserving, and transmitting the value of musics to other regions and future generations. Even today, the discipline of musicology is not free from geopolitical constellations. However, I believe that the supposed stability of fixed power relations should not be brought into our discipline, and that it must constantly be challenged.

FOLKLORE
My word is “folklore” and its derivatives, folk, folkloric, folkish, folksy, etc. It is widely used in Spanish and other Romance languages (folklorico, folklorique, etc.) and even in some countries there is a debate about writing it with a “c” or a “k”... What about “Folkswagen”? When people use it, we never seem to understand clearly what they are talking about. It is possible they are alluding to “traditional” music meaning peasant or non-classical, Amerindian music, or maybe ancient Asian “venerable” music making. But they also may be referring to their food, garments, jokes, tales, or to kitsch or non-kitsch handicrafts. The multiple meanings of any term related to “folk” in different languages defy translation and lead to misunderstandings. In Seoul in 1981 we decided (I was there as a student member of the IFMC) that the “Folk Music Council” will be the International Council of Traditional Music (ICTM), and that from then onward we will speak about “traditional music.” It hasn’t happened and it won’t happen soon, but being cautious about using “folk” might help.
Per Dahl

MUSICAL MEANING

I have chosen “musical meaning” as a concept I find ambiguous. “Musical” refers to an ontological entity to be identified in the musical work. “Meaning” refers to an epistemological entity to be identified in the musical experience. In many musicological discourses I cannot identify the perspective chosen by the author. “Musical” is an element in an operational discourse describing the sounding object, that is, what is identified as musical in one style/culture may not be accepted as musical in another style/culture. “Meaning” is an element in the intentional act by the identifier, that is, what is identified as meaning is a consequence of the subject’s social construction of reality. These two terms tend toward incommensurability and combined as a concept it will be blurry in any intersubjective cultural context.

Andrea Lindmayr-Brandl

SPANNEND

The word that makes me roll my eyes every time I hear it is not a technical term of our field but an inconspicuous word from German everyday language: “spannend,” meaning “thrilling.” It isn’t the word per se that has this effect on me, but rather when it is used in combinations such as “ein spannendes Projekt,” “ein spannendes Thema,” or “eine spannende Idee.” For some years now it seems to be the only word to characterize projects, topics, or ideas, each of them pretending to be terribly thrilling. Our research work, however, is not a thriller in which murders lurk behind every other corner. Although we often become excited by our work, it can also be laborious, exhausting, and sometimes even quite monotonous and boring. I really appreciate enthusiasm about one’s own research, but enthusiasm has to be shown otherwise—in the way we speak about our topics and not by simply adding an exaggerated adverb that wears down when it is overused. In general, I would prefer a more humble attitude and a more serious scholarly discourse, which includes speaking without buzzwords but with an inner conviction that what we do in musicology is worth the work; or: “It’s worth the thrill!”
I am a fiery advocate of inclusion, most probably influenced by my socialization as a working-class immigrant’s kid who decided to study musicology in the late 1980s and immediately realized that not only was “my” music not present at all in the curriculum but a foundational premise at that time was that musicology deals with a canon of musical works that “belong to history in the emphatic sense” and not with the “debris left by the past” (Carl Dahlhaus). Certainly, words and associated concepts may represent irritants for many. However, as long as they do not prove to be completely empty shells or tend toward mere ideology, and as long as they trigger intellectual debates and contribute to a more in-depth, expanded, or revised understanding of musical phenomena and eventually enhance our understanding about cultural and societal matters, words and associated concepts should be protected or tolerated as part of the enduring evolution of thought and language and in order to keep music research as dynamic as possible.

**WESTERN MUSIC**

I want to remove the following concept: “Western music.” (1) The North Pole is in the north, the South Pole is in the south: Where is the west of “Western music”? (2) One answer to this rhetorical question is: “Western music” refers to a canon of German and Austrian music between 1750 and 1920, seasoned with French, Italian, and English spices. (3) The fact that this musical canon is widespread all over the world, is not the result of its inherent universal properties but in part the consequence of colonial imposition and in part a strategy of some countries to be considered “civilized.” (4) When transferred into southern, eastern, and northern countries and cultures, the music was reinterpreted and literally “adopted.” (5) Thus the canon that we call “Western music” became an integral part of all cultures that cherish it; it became southern, western, northern, and eastern music. (6) This canon is only a tiny part of the phenomenon we call music. (7) It’s time to tear down the curtain that separates it from the rest.
IDENTITY

(1) Most readers would accept or even agree with such an utterance as: “Musical activity contributes to shape individual and collective identities at various levels and in various ways.” (2) The Collins English Dictionary states that “the identity of a person or place is the characteristics they have that distinguish them from others”—hence a decisive component of human diversity. (3) The definition, however, excludes the idea of sameness and permanence contained in the etymon (idem → identitas → identity) and also in the use of the word, which tends to discard the fact that individuals and groups perceptibly change in time, while their identity is supposed to remain stable (indeed a changing identity would be problematic). (4) If identity is in consideration, non-characteristic traits are irrelevant, are rejected, and even fought—especially so when they are relevant for different identities: the concept tends to be exclusive and can end up being in fact a challenge for diversity. (5) Self-determination is a hard task in a globalized world and that’s why identities—assumed as unitary wholes, essential, and not negotiable—provide individuals and groups with readymade kits to attenuate the anxiety generated by a challenging situation. (6) Individuals and groups are continuously seeking for recognition on part of others: as far as identity is concerned, it imposes acceptance, while recognition of rights, objectives, or projects asks for negotiation and reciprocal concessions. (7) Going back to the first statement, unless its imaginary writer intended precisely this adamant essential identity, a more fitting term to find should express ideas such as “felt inclusion,” “shared experience,” “feeling of belonging,” or similar, wrongly represented in the sentence by “identity.”
HANDBOOK

Handbooks can be, well, handy; a vade mecum to slip in your pocket to consult when the need arises. There are plenty of good examples of such handbooks in musicology, in several languages, and book series that fulfill a similar function. (Davinia Caddy memorably compared the Cambridge Companion series to a handbag: “A repository for basics, indispensables, credentials and memorabilia, it can be dipped into, pored over or even rummaged through anxiously, when relief or stimulation is needed.”) Yet recently there has been a trend toward handbooks on a mammoth scale, portable only in that they can be consulted online, and affordable only by certain libraries; more like carpetbags for swag. Where once there were edited essay collections, there are now multi-author volumes on fairly specialist topics that, containing much excellent material, acute critical perspectives, and original research, are handbooks only in name. There is a use for the musicological equivalent of the old-fashioned British Haynes manuals, each of which is dedicated to the do-it-yourself understanding of the workings of a specific vehicle (musician/piece/genre). Let’s keep those as our handbooks, and liberate the musicological essay collection—so often containing important contributions to the field—from being oversized, serialized, and easily digitized.

EAST-WEST

The dangers of this binarism certainly outweigh its promise of inclusiveness. They include assumptions that humanity consists of one exceptional culture plus all the rest; and, even worse, that humanity consists of two exceptional cultures plus all the rest, marginalizing North, South, and non-normative directions. (Not that North-South divisions necessarily present us with more palatable and uplifting histories.) Most problematic of all is the blunt assignment of a culture or person (who can readily belong to both, or neither) to only one of the categories, and the resulting triumphalism of a hard division in which there must be exactly one winner and one loser. A favorite remark of mine is that which H. G. Wells wrote to James Joyce, summing up their disagreement over the “unreadable” novel, Finnegans Wake: “The world is wide and there is room for both of us to be wrong.”
INTERVENTION

So many self-important words to choose from, but what is bothering me is “intervention” in the sense that the article or book one is publishing is “performing an intervention” in the field. No: the article or book is, one hopes, making a contribution to the field; it may be adding new knowledge to the field; it might even be helping to change the field. But “performing an intervention” is what The Supremes seem to be doing as they hold up their hands and sing “Stop! In the Name of Love!” You perform an intervention when you get your friend into rehab or help resolve an argument. Even worse is “performative intervention.” Coined by J. L. Austin (How to Do Things with Words, 1962), a “performative” is an utterance in which the words enact the deed, the most famous performative probably being “I now pronounce you married.” Musicologists have performed a meaning-eroding intervention here, and now use “performative” to mean anything related to performance.

A new issue of the IMS’s peer-reviewed journal Acta Musicologica is now available, including articles by Kofi Agawu, Diego Alonso Tomás, Carlo Bianchi, Marianne C. E. Gillion, and Jesús Estevez Monagas.

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- establish new contacts—to share ideas, discuss problems, and further your research;
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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!