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« New Musicology. Perspectives critiques »

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The purpose of Filigrane. Musique, esthétique, sciences, société is to provide opportunities for thinking about and renewing musicology. The first issue (entitled Musicologies?) made a number of programmatic proposals. It therefore seemed only natural to publish an issue entirely devoted to the so-called "new musicology".

A range of musicological practices emerged in the 1980s and 1990s (chiefly in English-speaking countries) that were eventually termed the 'new musicology', represented by leading scholars such as Susan McClary, Lawrence Kramer, Rose Rosengard Subotnik, and Nicholas Cook (among others). The key practices of the 'new musicology' eventually became standard foci of musicological research in the Anglo-American world. Yet because the 'other' musicological practices did not disappear, the phrase 'new musicology' has remained. The adjective 'new' and the use of the English phrase remain particularly relevant in continental European musicology, where the 'new musicology' remains a relatively minor area of research.

Because its origins are so diverse, the 'new musicology' is not a homogenous current or trend, deriving instead from a blend of British cultural studies, Americanized Derridean deconstruction, gender studies, and post-colonial studies — to name but a few of the major sources. Neither can the 'new musicology' be defined in terms of a single overarching argument or focus, except for the fact that proponents of the 'new musicology' have tended to agree on the need to re-establish meaning as the core focus of musicological research, as opposed to various currents of the 'old' musicology accused (rightly or wrongly) of formalism. This idea sometimes takes the shape of a subjective involvement of scholars and/or a privileged focus on 'context'(to the detriment of the musical work itself).

What then is the specific contribution of the 'new musicology' to musicological studies in general? While it is impossible to define all of the practices that claim to exemplify the 'new musicology' based on a single set of categories, two broad tendencies appear nevertheless to characterize its key practices. Firstly, the new musicology has helped to re-establish the relevance of issues seldom discussed (if not positively forbidden) in musicological scholarship, including gender and the recognition of popular music. Secondly, an interest in contextual matters has tended at times to dissolve the very concept of art in the more general idea of "culture".

This issue opens with a previously unpublished article by one of the pioneers of the new musicology, Lawrence Kramer. Kramer argues that "there is [...] no such thing as the New Musicology", preferring instead the phrase "critical musicology". By "critical", Kramer implies that the issue is to infuse musicological discourse with meaning: "We should therefore ask the old question differently. Not, why does music move us? But: when music moves us, to what are we moved? What is at stake in what we come to feel? And just who do we become, who do we recognize ourselves as being, when music addresses us? What kind of person feels just these things, in just this way?". Kramer is logically led to the idea of hermeneutics: "As I understand it, the 'new' critical musicology is an interpretive discipline; it finds cultural meanings in musical Works". Kramer goes on to argue that the main obstacle to a critical musicology is the notion of artwork, at least such as it has been inherited from so-called classical music.

Paul Attinello is a 'second-generation' new musicologist tending towards the more radical wing of the field. Attinello's research interests cover topics such as homosexuality and music or AIDS and music. Here he offers a kind of manifesto: returning to the classic distinction between historical musicology and
systematic musicology. Attinello sides in favour of the latter, arguing that the best definition of music involves integrating it in a context of abstraction using the notion of system: "Certainly, music entails a vast archive of concrete data: performances, recordings, places, dates, symbols and associations. But, although much of that data operates within systems that do not seem very abstract?composers' biographies as collections of named and dated events, scores as concrete objects, ritual actions or instruments?many important aspects of musical meanings tend to operate in areas of abstraction, system, relationship".

Next, the young musicologist Frédérick Duhautpas re-examines the relation between contemporary music of the 1950s and 1960s and the issue of expression. Musical modernity has often resorted to formalist discourses, eschewing expression on the grounds that the notion had become suspect: "Developments in recent history?particularly the powerlessness to which the increasingly isolated individual is reduced, to the point of being threatened by a general catastrophe?have imbedded attempts at an immediate expression of subjectivity with vanity, making it seem illusory and inherently ideological", observed Adorno in 'For an informal music' (4). Though manifested differently in tonal music, expressivity remains omnipresent. As Duhautpas shows, expressivity can be seen at work in some of the psychological, political and social implications of contemporary music.

The French translation of "Classical Instrumental Music and Narrative" by Fred Everett Maus provides French-speaking readers with a useful synthesis of the renewal of musicology based on the concept of narrative (the article was originally published in a volume entitled A Companion to Narrative Theory (5)). The focus of Maus's article is classical and romantic instrumental music. After a general discussion, Maus presents three case studies, concluding that the common element shared by all three examples is the subjective involvement of the musicologist and an interest in the poetic quality of the musicological text. The article also includes a personal contribution by Maus?a comparative analysis of the different versions of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony that examines the relation with narrative to reflect on interpretation and performance.

Joyce Shintani, who recently defended a doctoral thesis entitled Gendertronics: Toward a "Feminine Reading" of Emerging Technologies and their Musical Aesthetics, focuses on the notion of "métissage" as part of a broader interest in the issue of the compositional subject. According to Shintani, the 'old' musicology was based on a 'pure' approach to the subject, while the 'new musicology' (to which she subscribes) tends towards métissage by using a blend of post-structuralist thinkers and trends including Derrida, Adorno's Critical Theory and theorists of femininereading such as Hélène Cixous. After a theoretical presentation of the main issues, Shintani provides an analysis of two works by the German composer Gerhard Stäbler, "a composer who has traversed the trajectory from a phallocentric Subject dominating his notes (in his early works) to a pluralistic entity".

This issue also includes contributions by two young musicologists from Quebec. Danick Trottier focuses on Richard Taruskin's work on Stravinsky, which establishes "a break with the key ideas and concepts inherited from modernism and formalism". Though tenuous, the connection with the 'new musicology' is nonetheless real, particularly if the new musicology is construed in terms of its relation with the condition of postmodern knowledge: "At least three interconnecting epistemological concerns are common to Taruskin and so-called postmodern musicology: contextualisation to the point of excess, the construction of identity, and the authority of ideologies". We will add that in view of its violent anti-modern rhetoric, Taruskin's postmodernism represents a form of pre-modernism, a fact that renews the relevance of Adorno's (too easily forgotten) views on Stravinsky (outlined in Philosophy of New Music).

Jonathan Goldman provides an overview of avant-garde American musicology of the 1990s, which has often been deemed to be synonymous with the 'new musicology'. Goldman shows that American musicological research during this era was marked by a change of tone and a return to the notion of context (to the detriment of the work itself) to allow for the emergence of meaning. Goldman compares different analyses of Chopin's Prelude in E minor, highlighting the role of musical analysis in the practices of the 'new musicology'. He concludes that "the new musicologists certainly changed the image of the discipline, so that the distinction between the new musicology and traditional musicology is becoming increasingly blurred, though more among historical musicologists than among music theorists. Fundamentally, the new musicology represents the awakening of musicology to the importance of raising fundamental questions about its own activities: about the musical canon, about its own Eurocentrism, about the why of its activities".

The issue ends with an article by the Greek musicologist Markos Tsetsos, who provides a violent (though
carefully argued) attack on the 'new musicology'. Tsetsos essentially accuses the new musicologists of relativism, populism and obscurantism (among other things), and of renouncing the idea of the autonomy of aesthetics (in favour of ethics). While it is difficult to subscribe to all of the arguments put forth by Tsetsos, his essay does have the merit of initiating the debate. Tsetsos concludes by connecting postmodernism with conservative and authoritarian political views, which seems particularly unfair in view of the campaigns conducted by radical American new musicologists against the war in Iraq, not least through their own work in musicology (6).


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