What is it like to be a musicologist?

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Dagstuhl Seminar Multimodal Music Processing
Musicology

- what do I understand by musicology?
  - academic study of music
  - include music theory (unlike US)
  - exclude musicianship (unlike UK)

- why is musicology important for music processing?
  - domain knowledge
  - ground truth
  - technology users

- musicologists are also confusing
  - going on forever about details
  - talk about musical meaning

- burning question: what is it musicologists do?
  - for this you need to know the history of the discipline (a little)
What happened?

- ‘positivist’ musicology marginalised
- new/critical/cultural musicology since c. 1985

recommended reading:
- £7.99 -> £4.59
Guido Adler’s view of musicology

- Umfang, Methode und Ziel der Musikwissenschaft (1885)
  - most influential musicological article ever?
  - musicology as tonal science (‘Tonwissenschaft’)
  - establishes facts, derives laws

- scope
  - music as an art form (‘Tonkunst’)
  - study of musical works

- method
  - historical musicology: notation types, musical forms, historical laws, musical instruments
  - systematic musicology: music theory, aesthetics, pedagogy; (comparative) musicology
  - auxiliary disciplines

- aim
  - discovery of truth and advancement of the beautiful
‘Positivist’ musicology

- How did this view arise?
  - Answer:

- Musicology was constructed around Beethoven’s 5th Symphony
  - Absolute, instrumental music
  - Genius but unintelligible, in need of explanation (starting from E.T.A. Hoffmann 1810)
  - Authority of the composer
  - Independent of society, for all times
  - How did music reach this ultimate state

- Work concept
  - Unique work of art, intrinsic beauty
  - Exemplified by score, scholarly editions
  - Accessible for everyone through concerts
  - Hierarchical economic model: production-distribution -consumption
Situation until 1985

- new developments
  - lots of new music theory (Schoenberg, Schenker, Forte...)
  - comparative musicology -> ethnomusicology
  - anthropology and music sociology
  - music psychology, music cognition
  - computational approaches

- model
  - historical musicology in the centre
  - ‘minor’ subdisciplines around it

- practice
  - gradual fragmentation of the discipline
  - pop music treated as a pathological phenomenon
Crisis

Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating music: Challenges to musicology* (1985)
- defining moment in musicology
- *importance of subjectivity, criticism, value judgements*

starting-point of wave of critical approaches
- music and meaning
- cultural and political context of music (ethnomusicology)
- music and identity
- popular music studies
- music and difference
- gender issues

‘positivist musicology’ discredited
- shown to be the product of a repressive culture
- loaded with implicit value judgements
Patricide

- remember Adler’s aim:
  - discovery of truth and advancement of the beautiful
- Susan McClary’s interpretation of Beethoven’s 9th (7:30-8:50)
  - context of sonata form
  - development -> recapitulation
  - stereotyped discourse about themes, tonality

The point of recapitulation in the first movement of the Ninth is one of the most horrifying moments in music, as the carefully prepared cadence is frustrated, damming up energy which finally explodes in the throttling murderous rage of a rapist incapable of attaining release. (McClary 1987)
Victims

- music as autonomous art
  - specific to Western culture
    - often inseparable from ritual, singing, theatre
  - not even true for most Western music
    - primacy of text (early and religious music)
    - music as consumption good
- musical behaviour, distinction of *musics*

- work concept
  - adaptability of music (vs. timelessness)
  - process aspect: performance, improvisation (vs. object)
  - contextual determination (vs. authorial intention)
    - occasion, function, patronage, time

- musical works (and musical data) no longer focus of musicological attention
‘New’ musicology

- a.k.a. critical musicology, cultural musicology
- now dominant musicological approach
  - culture, context, gender, identity...

- important
  - generating interesting and controversial ideas
  - rhetorical persuasion
- less important
  - argumentation, plausibility
  - ‘incremental’ research
Subjectivity issue

  - aim: understanding musical subjectivity in history
  - subjectivity: disposition to engage in specific social and historical practices
  - first and foremost about musical meaning
- potential meaning resides in musical structure (Cook 2001)
  - allows for many different actualised meanings
  - within certain range
Example of critical musicology: mediation

- based on Antoine Hennion (2003)
- music is *mediated* through performance
  - moment when all the musical ‘potential’ becomes irreversibly fixed
- mediation happens in many different ways
  - record, stage, internet
- case: passage from rock to rap
  - rock stage idols lose credibility
  - rap happens where you hang out
  - function of recording
    - not recreation of performance
    - cheap medium of distribution
- mechanism of escaping from the big stage and media to being seized back by them
User manual for musicologists

- they often belong to a subdiscipline and tend to be hostile to other tribes
  - find out where they stand
- not much interest in objective analysis, large-scale data processing
  - don’t use the M-word: ‘the music itself’
- they want it all: 99% success rate is just not good enough
- interest in context, performance, culture, media, internet and popular musics
- do not assume they mean the same things with these words as you
  - learn to speak their language
- invest in trust
  - if they trust you, they will try to be cooperative
- remember, you don’t bring the truth, you just belong to a tribe with a different value system
Relating music processing and musicology

- placing music in context is hallmark of present-day musicology
- study of context strongly suggests data-rich approaches
- MIR / music processing can provide (ingredients for) these
- some examples:
  - rich editions of music (integrating multiple representations)
  - meaningful music retrieval (Wiering 2009b)
  - contextualising music through quantitative stylistics

- musicology so far has been data-poor
  - data-richness may be next paradigm
- see also ‘new empiricism’ proposed by David Huron (1999)
  - postmodernism and empiricism two sides of the same coin
- need for a sound basis for argumentation
  - not widely acknowledged yet
References