Musical Materials and Cultural Spaces

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Broadly defined, then, materiality relates not only to the significance of physical forms, but also the social materiality (or ‘sociology’) of texts: that is, the social and cultural practices of manuscript and print and the contexts in which they were produced, circulated and consumed.1

It is easy to forget that readers not only owned books, but that they also often engaged with texts, sometimes carelessly or opportunistically, but sometimes quite closely ... it is an opportune time to extend the currently popular models of book use and to renew attention to the ‘textuality’ of reading.2

There are many good reasons for considering music books to be exemplary of particular preoccupations and problems in recent history of the early modern book. In terms of ‘textuality’, their pages are sites of inscription or impress of signs that struggle to encode stable representations of an inherently unstable discourse, notoriously ill-suited to entextualisation — embodied; mobile; spatially, temporally and timbrally contingent; massively over-determined; and doggedly resistant to capture and authorial control. While nearly all music books contain instances of word text in some form or other (title pages, prefatory matter, tables of contents and other rubrics, and sometimes, of course, song lyrics), most (although by no means all, as one of the essays here demonstrates) are nevertheless differentiated from all other kinds of early modern books by the presence of musical notation, which constantly reminds the reader of the inherent provisionality of music’s textual authority. A particular quirk of English is that, unlike in many other languages, one word — ‘music’ — has to serve to signify not only the theoretical and aurally-perceptible manifestations encompassed by the Classical concept of musica, but also its representational materialisation as notation, conveyed on scores, screens and other readable surfaces — what most literate practising musicians often casually call ‘the music’. Indeed, the persistent problem of this ‘quantum’ identity of music — both/either process and/or thing — that has at different times engaged most corners of contemporary musicology, is perhaps enacted most visibly at the surface of the musical page, where one manifestation of music apparently becomes the other in what seems to be little more than a graphical sleight of hand. As it
happens, the relationship between written and spoken word text could be considered an analogous case, but this has as yet, surprisingly perhaps, not been much more than of tangential interest to most historians of early modern reading.³

Music books also draw exaggerated attention to their own ‘materiality’ on account of the ways in which they address the highly specialised needs of their potential readers at almost every level of physical form. These range from matters of overall size, shape, format and page layout (huge choirbooks, sets of handy part-books, table-books laid out to facilitate intimate ensemble performance, etc.), and structure (arrangements for simultaneous multiple readership such as coordinated page-turns; contents of miscellanies ordered according to their performing forces; multiple song strophes set out under or opposite the tune; etc.), to the complex visual intensity of the musical page itself, that often combines a bewildering multiplicity of scripts (or typefaces), graphics and spacing: staves, notes, dots, ties, clefs, time signatures, tablatures, spaced-out word-underlay, and so on. Likewise, the presentation of music books everywhere betrays the performative contingency of their contents, ranging from the more obvious, such as listing the required performance forces and the inclusion of individual voice and instrument names on title pages and in headings, or the provision of alternative pieces for different liturgical circumstances, to a whole variety of ‘non-verbal’ directive or advisory meta-data, signifying such things as rests, repeats, cues, and shorthand signs for instrument-specific mechanical actions and bodily gestures.⁴ These are all classic examples of D. F. McKenzie’s notion that ‘the material forms of books, the non-verbal elements of the … notations within them … have an expressive function in conveying meaning’.⁵

Meanwhile, the act of reading musical notation (and, in the case of songs, its associated words) ‘back’ into sound is, by comparison with most other literary texts, almost always physiologically quite spectacularly dynamic and also usually to some degree both collaborative and communal, and thus potentially generative of particular sociabilities.⁶ As such, it admirably fulfils Roger Chartier’s dictum that ‘Reading is not uniquely an abstract operation of the intellect: it brings the body into play, it is inscribed in a space and a relationship with oneself and with others’.⁷ Further, probably the majority of readers of early modern music books (no less than users of modern ‘music’) were performers (often referred to today precisely as ‘interpreters’), and are thus paradigmatically ‘active readers’: typically wilfully autonomous and, in many cases necessarily disrespectful, even subversive, of both the ordering of a book’s contents and of its musical notation’s real or implied textual stabilities. For example, in order for a significant proportion of Renaissance musical texts to
function correctly as ‘music’ actually requires them to be creatively modified, embellished, ‘personalized’, and even partially re-composed by their readers in the moment of each performance act. Accordingly, the producers of music books meant to be used directly for making performances — or at least to refer to possible performances — tended to be acutely attuned to the implications of the needs of their putative users, providing precise information only where it is necessary and leaving the reader-performer to supply everything else necessary to ‘realising’ the text in sound. Such lacunae are, naturally, historically highly contingent, and what might have been obvious to the contemporary reader to ‘add’, may well now remain unknowable, or at least subject to speculation and experiment. Studying the ways in which written musical materials represent, negotiate and mediate the relationship between the conceptual form of music as entextualised by its composers or transcribers on one hand, and its sounding manifestations by single or collectives of reading musicians on the other, is one of the fundamental concerns of much historical musicology, whether ‘analytical’, ‘critical’, ‘cultural historical’, or ‘performance practical’.

But early modern books containing music (in whatever form) are no more simply repositories where ciphers for temporarily-arrested performance acts are warehoused as they await re-animation by performers (historical or ‘historically-informed’), than they are compendia of culturally-neutral records of composers’ ‘works’ awaiting editing, analysis and criticism — a privileged function that at one time defined the scholarly field of early music as it once did in literary studies. Written music, no less than word text, is subject to the entire range of exigencies of its functional status as a representation of highly complex and culturally-contingent bodily gestures, thoughts and ideas, and open to almost endless reinterpretation through processes of transmission, reading and reception. In fact, notation itself can be thought of not simply as an inhabitant of the Order of Books, but (originally, at least) something of an illegitimate imposter inside it. The very earliest Western musical notation in the ninth century was in the form of pen-stroke annotations (neumes) scrawled above the words in service books, jotted articulation marks to aid recall of memorised elocution gestures during the act of reading aloud — singers’ graffiti. Musical textuality’s somewhat humble — even dubious — origins as paratext, hints at the potential advantages of recognising the commonalities between musical materials and their readers, and those of other sorts of books, with the resulting possibilities for the mutual enrichment of historiographical approaches between musical, literary, historical, and other disciplines.

For all their highly specialised attributes, then, it should now be clear that music books are nevertheless fully embroiled in the full complexity of book culture, and thus subject to the
entire range of materialities that constitute the ‘new bibliographical’ dimension and its discourses. Music books are in many ways just like other kinds of books, and not just in their outward form: like any other written or printed texts, they are material products of, and participants in, particular geographical, social, political and intellectual structures; and as such, they are thus potent sources for the investigation of many kinds of ‘cultural spaces’.

Notwithstanding the highly specialised preoccupations of musicologists’ traditional studies of the contents of medieval and early modern music books, such as the transcription, analysis, taxonomy and performance practices of the musical works they contain, developments elsewhere in the humanities — in the arenas of ‘scribal and print culture’, ‘history of reading’, ‘materiality’, and ‘socio-bibliography’ in its widest sense — have directly informed a wide variety of studies of early modern music. Indeed, music historians have for a good while now been engaged with their own versions of the questions asked by literary and cultural historians about the ‘social materiality’ of books (both manuscript and printed texts): questions of authorship, commissioning, design, manufacture, publication, distribution and dissemination, ownership, readership, and other aspects of book use — about both manuscript and printed texts. In some cases, these parallels have extended to far wider investigations of the role of musical materials and their uses in early modern society and its ideologies (both religious and secular) at large, even if this rarely extends beyond fairly circumscribed questions about music and musical culture (important exceptions to this relative insularity have been made in the fields of liturgy, theatre, and patronage, each of which features among the articles in this volume).

Codicology and bibliography have long been foundational disciplines in the study of early music. It is probably fair to say that until as recently as the start of the 1980s, the scholarly study of music from the period roughly pre-1600 was primarily focussed on source studies — transcription, editing and associated taxonomical activities — as the unavoidable prerequisite for discussing ‘the music itself’. If, at an earlier point in the ‘coming of age’ of early modern music studies from the later 1960s onwards, the production either of a critical edition (or better still, a scholarly facsimile edition, complete with transcription and critical apparatus) of a major late-medieval polyphonic music manuscript or the collected works of a named composer, constituted the test of eligibility for the upper echelons of the discipline, this at least meant that the next generation of musicologists — including those who apparently took up the challenge to ‘move on from positivism and take the critical turn’, ironically thrown down in 1985 by Joseph Kerman (himself a leading William Byrd scholar) — tended to have had a thorough grounding in source studies and music bibliography.
has undoubtedly been important to both the direction, and perhaps also the credibility, of early modernists’ contributions to the so-called ‘new musicology’ in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. It is one of the strengths of much recent cultural-historical work on Renaissance music that however diverse in terms of subject matter and approach, it has consistently paid attention to the materiality of musical sources, as well as to the textuality of their contents.

Beginning in the late 1960s, but not gathering its full momentum until perhaps the early 1980s onwards, there have been major advances in knowledge of European early music printing and publishing which have complemented the continuing intense attention paid to the relatively smaller corpus of surviving manuscript sources of Renaissance music. Understanding the ways in which the processes and conditions of print publishing and consumption has the potential both to complicate and open up the study of musical works — no less than literary and other kinds of texts — naturally stimulated the consideration of them as fully enmeshed in the wider cultural and social contexts in which they were situated. A series of monumental studies of major individual European Renaissance music publishers has appeared during the past forty years or so, providing systematic descriptive bibliographical surveys of very nearly every extant printed musical edition, and usually including comprehensive coverage of the artistic and commercial strategies that defined the development of the industry in different places in Europe, from its beginnings at the end of the fifteenth century. These catalogues, with their attendant critical commentaries and contextualising essays, have provided scholars with unprecedented quantities and quality of data about early modern musical materials, and they have undoubtedly played a significant role in the remarkable outpouring of studies investigating a whole range of different aspects of the impact of music printing — and, incidentally, a re-evaluation of the continuing importance of scribal publication, too — on the wider musical culture of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

The work arising out of this attention to printed book culture has, in turn, helped to elucidate an extraordinary range of topics in music history, including questions of authorship and agency; structures of genre development; patronage and cultural politics; the music profession and its role in political, religious and secular institutions; performance practices; education and musical literacy; production, distribution, consumption and collecting; and much else besides. The title of the landmark collection of essays edited by Kate Van Orden and published in 2000 — *Music and the Cultures of Print* — made an unequivocal statement both of pedigree and of the aspiration of this arm of musicology to full membership within the ambit of the *histoire du livre* movement, a claim wholeheartedly
endorsed in its Afterword, which was written by Roger Chartier: he even went as far as to offer a candid \textit{mea culpa} both for his own failure up until then, and that of the new bibliography in general, to take sufficient note of the work of musicologists in the field of print culture.\textsuperscript{19} The collection includes a series of impressive case studies of aspects of music-publishing by a number of leading music historians, several of them dealing with early modern topics and exemplifying the range of scholarship and intellectual energy that music bibliography was stimulating around the turn of the twenty-first century, and which included attention to questions of printing, authorship and reception.\textsuperscript{20}

But it would give a seriously distorted impression to suggest that either ‘hard’ bibliography or its ‘softer’ manifestations in the new history of the book have been either the only or even the predominant discourses in early music history in recent decades. Quite naturally, it is the close critical reading, structural analysis and interpretation of both the musical and verbal texts of extant compositions that remains pre-eminent, although the impact of the new historicism on the ways in which musicologists both undertake and situate their readings, and particularly the notion that ‘every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices’, has been as profound as elsewhere in the humanities.\textsuperscript{21} There are two particular aspects of text-based readings in contemporary early music studies worth drawing attention to — particularly as they are germane to a number of the essays which follow. First is the often intense focus on the words, as well as the notes, of Renaissance vocal music, not only at the analytical and critical level that pays attention to the implications and effectiveness (or otherwise) of composers’ handling of word-music relationships, but also in the ultimate inseparability of the two in elucidating structures of meaning, both in terms of \textit{contemporary-historical} theory and modern perception. Thus quite a few musicologists have become adept in questions of literary semantics, poetics, rhetoric and genre, as well as Renaissance literary preoccupations with the portrayal of character, narrative and expression, particularly, but by no means exclusively, with respect to the new styles of music theatre that were later to become ‘opera’ and its cognate forms. At its best, this kind of musicology is every bit as sophisticated and penetrating as equivalent work in literary studies.

Second is the developing importance of the dimension of performance in any consideration of musical materials, and particularly what academic musicology has until recently perhaps unintentionally, but nevertheless mistakenly, under-valued (or at least marginalised) as being about rather mundane mechanical issues of ‘performance practice’. The burgeoning of the early music performance movement over the past 40 years and its re-animation of almost unimaginable amounts of Renaissance music mostly hitherto unknown,
has undoubtedly been both a stimulus to and, to a certain extent, a result of the conjunction of scholarly and practical engagements with early music, with both kinds of activities having more and more often been embodied by the same people. Indeed, the world of early modern performance has enjoyed a remarkably productive symbiosis with musicology, while academic interest has undoubtedly been stimulated over recent decades by the practical experiences of performing musicians. And although there is still an enormous way yet to go towards establishing a robust hermeneutics of performance to match the analytical and ‘readerly’ approach to Renaissance music’s often highly specialised textuality (for example, instrumental music, which has no words), one encouraging sign is the increasing number of highly skilled and informed musicians who are both able and encouraged to bring their performing experience to bear at the highest levels of academic critical musicology.22

For evidence of the sheer energy going into, and the astounding quality of intellectual and practical value coming out of each of these two kinds of textual research, one need look no further than the massive engagement with the texts and the ‘social materiality’ of Claudio Monteverdi’s music over the past thirty or so years.23 What I believe is detectable in some of the most interesting recent work on early modern musical materials is an increasingly sophisticated synthesis between close readings of texts and the field of book history — encompassing both the materiality of music and attention to readers and reading (where this includes performers of musical texts) — which is perhaps an unexpected but symptomatic example of the kind of reconciliation between ‘books’ and ‘texts’ recently proposed by Jennifer Richards and Fred Schurink in the context of the history of reading (encapsulated in the short extract cited at the head of this Introduction).24 The following articles provide a variety of manifestations of precisely this.

Each of the six essays in this issue takes as its focus a discrete music book (or in one case, a group of closely-related private lute books) as its principal source, and their authors adopt a wide range of approaches to interrogating their chosen materials, encompassing between them many of the interacting ‘material’ and ‘textual’ readings outlined above. All of the authors, however, are interested in the same phenomenon: how musical texts and the material forms which bear them are both products and producers of particular communities of readers and listeners, however socially, culturally or intellectually constituted. These communities and the ‘cultural spaces’ they and their musical materials once occupied, whether physically or virtually constructed, range in scale from a highly circumscribed circles of perhaps a
handful of participants — an amateur lute-player and her or his professional teachers (Elizabeth Kenny) or the junior members of a female monastic house (Laurie Stras) — to a constituency of co-readers or listeners potentially incorporating vast swathes of the congregations of Henrician Catholicism (Magnus Williamson).

Less easy to delineate is the potential community of users that can be associated with editions of volumes of quite sophisticated art songs whose words and music were in principle made available through commercial print publication to any reasonably well-skilled musician prepared to pay for a copy. In different ways, this ambiguity underlies studies of two of perhaps the best-known volumes of late Renaissance secular vocal music — John Dowland’s *First Booke of Songes or Ayres* and Claudio Monteverdi’s *Fourth Book of Madrigals*, by Kirsten Gibson and Tim Carter, respectively. Gibson’s study attends as much to the ‘materialities’ of the book itself (preliminaries, dedication and overall structure), as to the ‘textualities’ of individual songs it contains, whereas Carter’s is one of his signature virtuoso close readings of the text and musical setting of just one song against the highly specific and intellectual circumstances in which Monteverdi’s madrigals were conceived, and the exclusive academic (and polemical) environment in which they circulated, both as texts and as performances, before their print publication. In both cases the authors dissect out and display whole layers of sub-textual allusions and aspects of structuring that are not explicable — nor necessarily substantive — on purely practical grounds, lying either at the level of surface presentation or embedded in the complex of signifiers within the realm of the ‘literary’ itself.

Meanwhile, Yael Sela-Teichler has taken one of the most famous of all Elizabethan music manuscripts, a luxuriously-produced presentation volume containing in many cases the only extant texts of the solo keyboard works by England’s most famous composer of the age, William Byrd. This book serves as the focus for her ambitious triangulation of both close-shot and wide-angled readings of its physical, musical, social, and ideological materialities; these readings in turn are used to model a set of bold propositions about the various kinds of agency that this self-consciously monumental collection of musical-textual artefacts could theoretically have abetted in a progressive post-Reformation cultural politics.

Almost entirely serendipitously, three of the six essays deal with manuscript and three with printed music books, which nicely reinforces the importance of the continuation of manuscript as a very important medium for the transmission of music, even in the era of relatively ‘cheap print’: in fact several of these essays highlight the particularly prevalent ‘mixed media’ of early modern music material dissemination and use. Probably the most
obvious of these is the case of liturgical books such as the Wolfgang Hopyl *Sarum Antiphoner* that is the subject of Magnus Williamson’s essay, that were particularly designed to emulate the ‘high levels of visual enrichment’ of the manuscript equivalents that they were designed to replace as the latter wore out. **However, similar processes are discernible in**, for example, **the design of type for the printing of musical notation, particularly lute tablature, which very carefully mimics the gestural feel of the hand-written graphics of lute manuscripts (the Dowland Song Books are particularly elegant examples):** these graphics play an important role in communicating the especially close physical link between the scribal and the lute-playing hand. As Elizabeth Kenny so convincingly argues, a modern reader, even one unfamiliar with the sign system itself, ‘can nonetheless “read” these tablatures not so much as musical texts, as examples of a manuscript culture which bears the traces of the playing bodies that produced them, much in the way that archaeologists can make inferences about physical and cultural habits of individuals and groups from material traces of their actions’.

If there is a general feature of early modern music books which these six essays might be said to highlight it is perhaps a paradoxical one: the sheer diversity of book cultures that they inhabit, both in terms of their formats, structures and modes of transmission of musical discourse, and in the range of social and cultural spaces of which they are both the products and the evidential base. Indeed, just as structuralising tendencies of earlier work in the *histoire de livre* has gradually given way to more nuanced attention to individual readers and their particular experiences of books and texts, so generalisations about musical materials and their ‘users’ are likely to be increasingly complemented by consideration of the needs and experiences of particular groups of readers, performers and listeners. And just as the definition of what constitutes ‘a music book’ can be very broad (for example, the two manuscript collections of convent *veglie*, recently discovered in the Biblioteca Estense and here described and investigated for the first time by Laurie Stras are certainly books to be used for making music even though they contain no musical notation), so, too, is the variety of possible cultural spaces and potential ‘writings and readings’ which early modern musical materials are able both to evidence and further engender.

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4 A particularly graphic example of the latter phenomenon — lute tablature, which directs the reader with symbols as to where to place her fingers on the instrument’s fret-board, which string to strike, and when — is the subject of Elizabeth Kenny’s essay, below.


6 The closest analogous genre (albeit a distant relation) to music in this respect that might appear to invite collaborative reading aloud is the published play text, although contemporary evidence for this in practice is negligible; see, for example, R. Chartier, Publishing Drama in


20 Van Orden (ed.), *Music and the Cultures of Print*; key essays are cited in the preceding notes, viz., Carter, ‘Printing the “New Music”; Haar, ‘Orlando di Lasso, Composer and Print Entrepreneur’; Feldman, ‘Authors and Anonymous’; Van Orden ‘Cheap Print and Street Song’.


22 Four of the seven contributors to this volume are professional performers.

23 For a collection of seventeen examples of the some of the most significant work in English on Monteverdi published in the past 40 years, arising out of close readings of his surviving works, and engaging with issues of Music, Text and Representation; Theory and Genre; Criticism, Analysis and History; and Performance, together with a critical survey of the field of Monteverdi studies considered against the wider scholarly landscape, see R. Wistreich (ed.) *Monteverdi* (Ashford, Ashgate, 2011).

24 See note 2.