‘Music, History, Materiality: Where We Are Coming From’

Materialising Musical Instruments Conference
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In parallel perhaps with the extraordinary reconfiguration of the ways that performers now approach what is loosely called ‘early music’, the study of the history of European music of the early modern era (which, for our present purposes, covers the period between around 1500 and 1750) has – particularly over the last 50 years or so – also undergone a series of what can only be described as tectonic shifts. These shifts have hugely broadened the field of what once constituted the relatively circumscribed field of historical musicology, and the impact of the upheavals, occasional fierce eruptions, the exposure of new strata lying beneath and fault-lines cutting across the apparently calm surface of standard narratives, has been both disruptive and exciting. They include:

- First, a gradual re-ordering of the hierarchy that privileges works – and in particular, critical style analysis of notated sources – over sounds and musical practices, which in turn are understood as phenomena just as fully anchored within their particular societal, ideological, spatial, and temporal contexts as written musical scores – what might be described as music history’s ‘sonic-cultural turn’.

- Next, engagement with the musics of a greatly expanded range of individuals, classes, and populations beyond the confines of the Christian church and upper echelons of male society, that for so long have populated the authorised version of European music history, turning attention onto the musical experiences of vast swathes of others, hitherto almost entirely overlooked – women, the poor, members of religious and ethnic minorities, and of course, all whose music was never subjected to being written down.

- Thirdly, recognition of the need to investigate the evidence of musical practices through deep engagement with other cognate disciplines, particularly historical studies (political, religious, institutional, archaeological, etc.), but also philosophy, literature, art, architecture, science and technology, economics, ethnography, and so on.

And particularly critical for our project, alignment with – or at least, parallel tracking of – two key developments in recent decades elsewhere in the humanities in approaches to the history of the early modern era:

- First, the so-called ‘material cultural turn’ – understood both in its more focused sense of ‘object-based’ history, but also its wider aspiration of understanding the broader materiality of human practices and the social fabric of the past.
- Second, in what was an era of suddenly accelerated global exploration, conquest and often violent subjugation of Indigenous people and the expropriation of natural resources, a decentring of both the unitary, teleological, and triumphalist model of a Christian Europe based development, in favour of an alternative decolonising global history, capable of accounting both for the economic and social gains, and also the human and environmental costs of the continent’s cultural values and infrastructure.

These two currents in historiography still occupy a relatively small but growing space within early modern music scholarship, although they are now at the forefront of some of the most innovative and exciting work in the field. Both are crucial to the underlying research agenda of the RCM's new Wolfson Centre in Music and Material Culture; but for this afternoon's session, our focus is on the first of them.

As a preliminary to our current project, 'Materialising Musical Instruments', we have been surveying how the broad discipline of 'material culture studies' is expanding, evolving, and defining itself across many fields of the humanities, and considering what the role of music currently is in this movement, and what it could be. Interestingly, at present, once you get beyond the confines of musicological scholarship, the place of music and sound in current material culture debate ranges from the marginalised to the invisible. But what of material culture's place in musicology?

Where the 'material culture turn' has been most influential in the history of music, it has had significant impacts. For example, paying close attention to the physical properties of the actual manuscripts and prints that contain the music notation so long the primary focus of study; or to the structural design and acoustical behaviour of spaces in which music was made and heard. However, we think that the broader sense of 'materiality' that I outlined before has the potential to take a much more central position in the historiography of music of the early modern era.

Our definition of this wider concept of 'musical materiality' begins with the idea that every material fragment of the historical record that has any musical connection – tools and artefacts (which includes musical instruments, but also other domestic and industrial objects), physical documents of all kinds (including not only archival records and other written descriptions, but also images and, of course, music notation), surviving, or remains of urban and rural architecture, and so on – bears traces of once-lived actions, sounds, and confrontations between real people interacting in diverse social groupings and physical environments.

Considered in such a way, such musical-material fragments from the past naturally invite re-imaginings and reanimations as a means of rendering them readable today by the senses as well as the intellect. One obvious way this has worked is the recreation of recovered musical soundscapes for present-day audiences. However, for early music performers, the impetus to reanimation of music of the past, however 'historically informed,' is always bounded by the exigencies of contemporary aesthetics and the need to 'realise' the fragments and restore them to life with the goal of 'making familiar'. Historians, on the contrary, often have to work hard against the impetus to this kind of reconstructionism in their approach to decoding evidence, needing first to 'make strange' – to embrace the lacunae and fragmentary nature of the evidence – rather than trying to fill the gaps in order simply to present seamless and polished narratives, a temptation that, as the historian Carlo Ginzburg notes, should be resisted 'for reasons … of a cognitive, ethical and aesthetical order'.

It seems to us that in order to develop a historiography for music of the early modern era that can account for its 'full materiality' *despite* the fragmentary evidence, that reaches beyond both the relentless and ultimately reductive analysis of written musical works and styles, *and* the idea that the ultimate goal is their reanimation in ways – again, however 'historically informed' – that are accessible to modern ears, we need to develop kinds of

methodology more akin to archaeology or historical anthropology than to what shapes much of current historical musicology.

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Meanwhile, organology – the study of musical instruments – long confined to a sequestered backroom of musicology is, as many in this room will know, also in the early stages of what could be its own transformation. So far, this has taken the form of rumblings happening inside its own tiny scholarly community and barely detectable outside, rather than the kind of tectonic shifts I earlier suggested have been happening in music history as whole. But by taking an expanded material cultural approach that understands historical musical instruments as being simultaneously highly specialised manufactured objects that can produce sounds *and* deeply entangled within several far wider cultural structures, we want to propel them into the fray of contemporary music historiography of the early modern era, and more specifically, to demonstrate the potential of our approach in developing access to the wider materiality of the archaeological musical record more generally.

One of the ways in which we aim to give substance to such a development in organology, is to investigate musical instruments both in terms of their physicality (how and with what materials they were made; where those materials came from and how they reached the workshops of Venice, Antwerp or Paris where they were manufactured), but also their functional operation in the wider worlds in which they existed: musical, social, ideological, technical, commercial. For example, scientific and technological investigation can reveal a great deal about the constituent raw materials that make up the components of instruments, in turn pointing to questions about where those materials came from, how they were extracted, processed and traded, and the economic and ideological drivers of each stage. Similarly, archival, printed, and pictorial documentary evidence may yield information, whether specific or allusive, about the personalities, transactions, networks, even responses and experiences that inhere in musical instruments, and their roles and passages through spaces, events and over time.

Increasingly, as this pilot project has developed, we have found that for almost every aspect of the 1593 Venetian virginal in the Royal College's collection (which is our case-study instrument) ranging from the minutiae of tool-marks or opaqueness of glass, anomalies of case-construction or style of decorative painting, not to mention the 'afterlife' of the instrument and its transitions from an assortment of raw materials gathered from around the world, to a finished musical instrument in Venice, to its present life standing in a London museum space, we have begun to sense that as often as not, it is the object itself that 'reveals' its story to us (if we attend carefully enough) as much as the historian 'realising' its story through exegesis. It points us towards asking wider questions, for example, about geography and commerce, workshop organisation and guild politics, the designs and technologies of other cognate manufactured objects, and the social dimensions as well as the musical uses and emotional and social aura of luxurious keyboard instruments in the late sixteenth century. It also drives us to reconsider its present-day status and agency as an object subjected to interactions with musicians, viewing and listening audiences – and cultural historians.

Thus, for our ongoing project we have brought together a community of scholars and practitioners who bring diverse skills in art history, instrument making, conservation,

curatorship, Venetian material culture, economic and global history, sound studies, life-writing, and of course, musical performance, who are each bringing their attention to bear on our chosen instrument and observing and listening out for what it tells about itself; and in turn, ultimately, reflecting back to us where we are coming from – and where we might go – as we re-think the ways in which we do music history.

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