

ORGANOLOGY AND THE OTHERS: A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Over the past decade, an unprecedented number of proposals have been put forward advocating for a renovation of the aims, perspectives and methods of organology. In a mostly uncoordinated, but consistent methodological debate, several of them were specifically presented as a break, or at least a marked shift from 'traditional organology', and made clear their intention to propose a different perspective to the study of musical instruments through the adoption of new names: 'new organology' (a term used by a 2001 conference on Japanese instruments, and also by Roda), 'lived organology' (Hoosmanrad), 'general organology' (Stiegler), 'new critical organology' (Sonevytsky), 'cultural organology' (Johnston), 'critical organology' (Dolan), and 'biographical organology' (Hoosmanrad) just to mention a few.¹

Who are the others?

This process of revision resulting in methodological proposals and new branches and the related discussions, paralleled debates that had been happening for much longer in disciplines closely related to organology. Proposals to revise the goal and aims of musicology, for example, had been put forward under the titles 'critical' (Kerman), 'empirical' (Clarke and Cook) and 'relational' (Born).² Anthropology, which relies on a longer history and larger forces, had already started

¹ Tokyo National Research Institute of Cultural Properties, *Japanese Musical Instruments: Toward a New Organology* (Tokyo: Tokyo National Research Institute of Cultural Properties, 2003); P. Allen Roda, "Toward a New Organology: Material Culture and the Study of Musical Instruments," *Material World Blog* (blog), November 21, 2007, <http://www.materialworldblog.com/2007/11/toward-a-new-organology-material-culture-and-the-study-of-musical-instruments/>; Partow Hooshmanrad, "Performing the Belief: Sacred Musical Practice of the Kurdish Ahl-i Haqq of Guran" (University of California, Berkley, 2004), 42; Bernard Stiegler, *La Technique et Le Temps 1* (Paris: Galilée, 1994); Maria Sonevytsky, "The Accordion and Ethnic Whiteness: Toward a New Critical Organology," *The World of Music* 3 (2008): 101–18; Partow Hooshmanrad, "Contemplating the Tanbur of the Kurdish Ahl-i Haqq of Guran: A Biographical Organology," *Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society* 61 (2016): 218–59.

² Kerman deploys the phrase throughout: Joseph Kerman, *Musicology* (London: Fontana Press, 1985); Eric Clarke and Nicholas Cook, eds., *Empirical Musicology: Aims, Methods, Prospects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Georgina Born, "For a Relational Musicology: Music and Interdisciplinarity, Beyond the Practice Turn," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 135, no. 2 (2010): 205–43.

this process in the 19th century with the division between cultural and social anthropology, and continued over the 20th century to produce several more branches and subdisciplines, reflecting an inclination towards conscious self-assessment and refinement that organology only recently acquired. While these discussions repeatedly raised instinctive scepticism from scholars who had identified with the respective fields for a long time, they invariably highlighted an intensified debate on the role and identity of disciplines, on the way disciplinary boundaries impact on the relationship with the object – or subject – of study and on how this affects the position of the discipline’s outputs both in respect to other disciplines and in any attempt to build a transdisciplinary model that can expand beyond its own borders.

This is a sign of maturity that disciplines undergo when they have reached a state of complexity that is sufficient to stimulate criticism, in the best sense of the word, and to trigger a reassessment of their primary goals, research questions and methods: in other words, when their complexity, dynamics and outputs make them ready for a revision, and eventually a shift, or their paradigm.³ Such a desire emerged within organology at least since the last decade of the 20th century, but lacked a permanent platform where methodological debate could be developed consistently, resulting in a number of independent contributions scattered along an extended period: from Sue Carol De Vale’s proposal to ‘organize organology’, through the round table on organology organised by the Historical Brass Society in Paris in 1999, which generated five position papers over the following years, to the panel discussion organised by Ardal Powell in Vermillion (SD) as part of the AMIS/Galpin/CIMCIM joint meeting in 2006, which unfortunately only survives through the memory of those who attended and Powell’s position paper.⁴ Therefore, it now seems time to bring together these perspectives, and those that emerged since then, with the aim of fostering a more regular debate on the identity and purpose of organology and on how it relates to its many ‘others’: other disciplines in a rapidly changing and increasingly competitive academic world; the expansion of perspectives in scholarship, as the number of colleagues and institutions dealing with this field is expanding beyond its traditional Western borders; and the ‘extradisciplinary’

³ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). For a summary of Kuhn’s concept of ‘paradigm’, see Emily Dolan’s contribution to the present volume.

⁴ Sue Carol De Vale, “Organizing Organology,” in *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology*, ed. Sue Carol De Vale, vol. 8: Issues in Organology (Los Angeles: UCLA Ethnomusicology Publications, 1990), 1–34; Renato Meucci, “On Organology: A Position Paper,” *Historic Brass Society Journal* 11 (1999): viii–x; Arnold Myers, “On Organology: A Position Paper,” *Historic Brass Society Journal* 12 (2000): vii–xi; Herbert Heyde, “Methods of Organology and Proportions in Brass Wind Instrument Making,” *Historic Brass Society Journal* 13 (2001): 1–51; Sabine Klaus, “More Thoughts on the Discipline of Organology,” *Historic Brass Society Journal* 14 (2002): 1–10; Jeremy Montagu, “Organology Again: This Time, Ethno-Organology,” *Historic Brass Society Journal* 15 (2003): 1–5; Ardal Powell, “Change Lays Not Her Hand: Organology and the Museum” (35th Annual Meeting AMIS, Galpin Society, CIMCIM Conference, National Music Museum, Vermillion, South Dakota, 2006), https://www.academia.edu/6461804/Change_lays_not_her_hand_Organology_and_the_museum.

world, or in other words the real world outside the academic debate. These dimensions are changing shape irrespectively of our intentions, and the way we interact with them in a proactive or reflective way will make a fundamental difference on what organology will look like in the next future.

Who are we?

This debate is gaining momentum at a time when most of organology's related disciplines have developed similar discussions for years – historical musicology, ethnomusicology, museology, object-based studies in general just to list a few examples – and we might save considerable time and effort, and reduce a gap in methodological discussion that has been often lamented, by taking on board the experiences undertaken there, while focussing on the specificity of our case: organology is one of the earliest theoretical disciplines related to music to be recognised with a name and definition, and to develop its own separate identity, at least since the last quarter of the 19th century. Between then and the 1930s, its potential developed in a number of directions which were eagerly awaited by non-organologists: when Guido Adler published the first discussion of the scope, method and aims of musicology, in 1885, he specifically described 'the history of musical instruments' as one of the four pillars required for the understanding of the music of the past, while Eric von Hornbostel, a psychologist by training, introduced the word 'organology' in English in 1933 as 'the comprehensive study of instruments, including their mental aspect', an endeavour which he identified with the work of Curt Sachs.⁵ At the same time, the increasing interest towards the revival of early music fostered a growing number of (often historically-oriented) technical studies, aimed at refining critical tools for the dating and attribution of instruments, the understanding of their construction materials and techniques, and their relationship with performance contexts and practices.

After the divisions of the Second World War, both the interest in musical instruments and the need to congregate in extra-political contexts were reflected by the formation of three specialised associations: the Galpin Society (1946), the International Committee for Musical Instrument Museums and Collections of the International Council of Museums (1961) and the American Musical Instrument Society (1971). The provision of a permanent seat, dedicated journals and

⁵ Guido Adler, "Umfang, Methode Und Ziel Der Musikwissenschaft," *Vierteljahrsschrift Für Musikwissenschaft* 1 (1885): 10; Eric M. von Hornbostel, "The Ethnology of African Sound Instruments: Comments on 'Geist Und Werden Der Musikinstrumente' by C. Sachs," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 6, no. 2 (1933): 131.

conferences, had the almost immediate outcome of stimulating an extraordinary increase in the quality and consistency of research on musical instruments and of strengthening the identity of this field in its academic and museum-related dimensions. At the same time, it offered the ground for a hyper-specialisation which characterised most disciplines in the second half of the 20th century and whose detrimental effects on the circulation of knowledge have been endlessly discussed over the past four decades.

As Sabine Klaus convincingly argued, the refinements and techniques developed over those years allowed organology to focus on matters that went well beyond the immediate requirements of musicology, to the point of questioning now whether the relationship between the two is still beneficial, or rather hindering the development of our field in richer, livelier and more complex directions.⁶ Organology has developed such a strong identity, vocabulary and even social interaction among its members that it can – and possibly does – operate as an independent discipline. At the same time, this has alienated the interaction with many broader realities that struggle to understand its language and don't see a sufficient impact on their respective interests, lives, needs, to engage with it.

The price of independence

The speed at which specific knowledge in our field has developed over the past decades, the fact that the number of submissions to our journals still exceeds available space and that our conferences are better attended than those of many other disciplines of comparable size, might all be encouraging signs of the fact that organology can develop further as a fully-fledged independent discipline and abandon the half-hearted claim to be a sub-discipline of something else (which begs the recurrent question: of what?). This claim for independence might also be reinforced by the fact that a number of independent music museums opened over the past decade and some of them are proving very successful in terms of visitor numbers and sustainability.

However, a closer look into each of these contexts offers a rather different scenario: although a general map of university teachings in organology does not exist, over the past decade the number of courses dedicated to musical instruments that I am aware of has drastically shrunk, with professorships being closed and dedicated courses – never overabundant – being cut. This applies to all branches of education focussed on musical instruments, except

⁶ Klaus, "More Thoughts on the Discipline of Organology," 1.

performing: courses focussing on research, making and conservation are all disappearing at the same rate. It also applies to the world of museums, which for almost a century and a half have been the main seat of empirical research on musical instruments. Through the work of curators, museums are ideally placed to coordinate the skills of researchers, scientists, conservators and practical musicians and to work as hinges between research and dissemination to society. However, curatorial positions in our field are being closed every year, sometimes replaced by more tightly knitted profiles that focus exclusively on dissemination, but that do not include research in their job descriptions.

At the same time, the general trend in museum displays, particularly those which focus on intangible culture (such as music, dance and theatre among many others), is to abandon object-intensive displays toward more diversified presentations that show a smaller number of objects into a broader cultural context. Current interpretation practices focus less on providing extensive information about their objects, and more on developing intense personal experiences that can relate to the visitors' personal interests and elicit their reaction at an emotional rather than intellectual level.⁷ While this approach is proving successful in attracting larger numbers of more diversified visitors to music museums and making our collections relevant to them, it also leads to increasing number of instruments being moved to storage, which is a cost for museums that is only justified if non-displayed collections are used for research or teaching. But if the role of research, as discussed above, diminishes, then the justification for these costs becomes harder and harder in a context where 'value engineering' has become a driving force.

A natural reaction to this, is to close ranks and assume that organology and musical instrument collections are under attack and need to be defended. To this I object: while there isn't any evidence of particular antipathy towards musical instruments, decision-makers often fail to see why or how these can be relevant when having to compete against fashion and design, local history, or simply the need for operational space, just to refer to a selection of recent examples. This is striking if we compare it with the excitement that seems to have surrounded organology at its origins: musical instruments appear to be the tool that has pervaded the widest range of social contexts and strata for the longest time in the history of humankind. How can they not be interesting?

⁷ Kathleen Wiens, "Popular Music as an Interpretive Device for Creating Meaningful Visitor Experience in Music Museums," *Ethnologies* 37, no. 1 (2015): 133–49; Eric De Visscher, "Museums as Theatre: What about Musical Instruments?" (*Organology and the Others: Cross-disciplinary Methods Applied to the Study of Musical Instruments*, Edinburgh, 2017).

An answer to this question might lay in the way we focus our research and communicate its outcomes and specifically in the way we engage with other fields of research.

How are we perceived?

Based on many discussions with colleagues and friends working in other disciplines, I have often felt over the past twenty years that organology is acknowledged as authoritative repository of technical information about musical instruments, but regarded as unconcerned with the interpretation of these information in relation with the broader context – music, culture, society – which is rather seen as the domain of other disciplines: musicology, anthropology or sociology. Organology, in other words, is perceived as the discipline that focusses on the physical aspects of its sources, leaving to others the eventual correlation of its results with relevant aspects of the human experience. This view has been critically reflected in literature without major variations over the past thirty years: in 1990 Sue De Vale described organology as a discipline '[generally assumed to attend] only or primarily to the classification of instruments'; five years later Henry M. Johnson lamented that it 'mainly examines musical instruments in terms of their physical dimensions'.⁸ If we move the focus to the past ten years the views on the identity of organology have not radically changed, identifying it with the study of 'instrument design, classification, and the use of instruments in 'traditional' settings' (Roda); a discipline still inspired by 'the Berlin School's comparativist project to classify the world's musical instruments according to the physical characteristics of sound production' (Sonevytsky); 'museums, the Hornbostel-Sachs classification system, and perhaps [...] a seemingly outdated class on measuring and documenting physical objects' (Bates); 'the history and classification of instruments and the exploration of their construction' or '[the inventory of] the forms and functions of musical instruments' (Dolan).⁹

Before taking a stand on these criticisms, I'd like to compare them with some definitions that have become part of organology's history: in the first attempt to articulate the scope of the discipline, in 1880, Victor Charles Mahillon suggested that 'l'organologie [...] démontre, par l'analyse des parties constitutives des instruments, les lois physiques

⁸ De Vale, "Organizing Organology," 1; Henry Johnson, "An Ethnomusicology of Musical Instruments," *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* 26, no. 3 (1995): 261.

⁹ Roda, "Toward a New Organology: Material Culture and the Study of Musical Instruments"; Sonevytsky, "The Accordion and Ethnic Whiteness: Toward a New Critical Organology," 103; Eliot Bates, "The Social Life of Musical Instruments," *Ethnomusicology* 56, no. 3 (2012): 365; Emily Dolan, "Introductory Text: Round Table on Critical Organology" (23rd Meeting of the American Musicological Society, Pittsburgh, 2013), <https://sites.sas.upenn.edu/ams2013-criticalorganology/>.

qui régissent dans chacun d'eux la production du son'.¹⁰ Sixty years, later, but not very differently, Nicholas Bessaraboff – himself an engineer by training – maintained that organology should focus on 'the scientific and engineering aspect of musical instruments', separating it from musicology, which should deal with 'the creative, artistic, and scientific aspect of music'.¹¹ Still in 2006, in the opening of the already mentioned round table on the current state of organology, Powell highlighted an existing split between 'material and cultural approaches to the study of musical instruments', or between an 'essentialist' and a 'constructivist' view of musical instruments, inviting to take inspiration from other disciplines to facilitate a shift from one to the other.¹²

While I am sure many organologists don't recognise this as the current identity of our discipline, I wonder if each of us cannot also think on the spot of a few examples where these comments are not too off the mark, if not in the narrow focus on classification and measurement, at least on identifying a perspective that takes the object as goal in itself, with the risk of separating it from its context. I know, for example, that this is a criticism that can be easily moved to some of my own publications which aimed at experimenting methods for the documentation, comparison and attribution of stringed instruments.¹³ As much as each has been the result of a – for me – fascinating process of discovery, intellectual development and often intense collaboration with other disciplines, I am aware that the outputs that were generated are likely to be of interest exclusively to the limited number of organologists who deal with stringed instruments, and probably not all of them. Is it bad organology? I hope not, but while it possibly helped to populate our organological world, I am aware that it relied on an institutional context where the value and interest of musical instruments were taken for granted and this, as discussed above, risks to be a privilege that is rarer and rarer to enjoy.

Even more importantly, many disciplines towards the end of the 20th century have managed to break the shell that they had developed over the previous decades, and have realised that they could have a direct relationship with the actual world that surrounded them and a tangible social impact. In 1993 Philip Bohlman described musicology as a

¹⁰ Victor Charles Mahillon, *Catalogue Descriptif & Analytique Du Musée Instrumental Du Conservatoire Royal de Musique de Bruxelles* (Gand: Anoot-Braekman, 1880), vii.

¹¹ Nicholas Bessaraboff, *Ancient European Musical Instruments* (Boston: Harvard University Press for the Museum of Fine Arts, 1941), xxvi.

¹² Powell, "Change Lays Not Her Hand: Organology and the Museum," 1.

¹³ Gabriele Rossi Rognoni, *Bartolomeo Cristofori: The 1690 Oval Spinet* (Leghorn: Sillabe, 2002); Gabriele Rossi Rognoni, *Galleria Dell'Accademia: The Conservatorio "Luigi Cherubini" Collections, Bowed Stringed Instruments and Bows* (Leghorn: Sillabe, 2009); Gabriele Rossi Rognoni, "The Virginals of Benedetto Floriani (Venice, Fl. 1568-1572) and a Proposal for a New Attribution," *The Galpin Society Journal* 48 (2014): 5–20, 178–83.

discipline in a state of 'moral panic', with a tendency to 'remain oblivious to intellectual ferment' ... 'immunised from the crises affecting other disciplines within and without the academy'.¹⁴ At that point musicology had already undergone its 'critical' revolution, which advocated for a shift of disciplinary focus from its material sources to the subjective experience of music. Bohlman's essay, though, went beyond the concern with what was happening within the discipline, and opened a series of questions that concerned how it interacted with the real world outside it. Music, he argued, 'exists out there', it was essentialised in an apolitical entity when it became the object of musicological study.¹⁵ As a consequence, musicology renounced the possibility of playing an active role in interpreting the real world and human interaction from its own point of view. I am convinced that the same series of considerations could be applied to organology, from the need to reconsider the focus of some of our studies – or simply to motivate their broader relevance more transparently – to the interaction that we might have with the real world 'out there'. This might help to bring organology back on the agenda, and show that, as a discipline, it can have an impact and relevance that rest on musical instruments as complex interpreters of a reality that goes well beyond our primary focus.

Conclusions

As a result of this necessarily sketchy and personal overview, a few considerations emerge that might be worth of further discussion: organology is today a discipline with a strong and recognised identity, and with a number of historical and potential ties with other disciplines and with the real world that could strengthen its possibility to survive. However, this identity can also become a barrier, it is at least partially misrepresented in the critical debate and organologists are not strongly engaged in the methodological discussion that might lead to updating its configuration and relationship with the 'others' both within and outside the academy.

Most of this discussion has developed outside the main organological journals by scholar who do not identify themselves as organologists, but rather as musicologists, ethnomusicologists, sociologists, biologists and philosophers. While this is a positive confirmation of the interdisciplinary interest towards the study of musical instruments, it is surprising that the number of organologists involved in the discussion is not much larger and I take this as a further sign that our discipline is at risk of marginalising itself, by focussing entirely on its objects, and delegating to others the

¹⁴ Philip Bohlmann, "Musicology as a Political Act," *The Journal of Musicology* 11, no. 4 (1993): 414.

¹⁵ Bohlmann, 419.

discussion on its subject and objective. As organologists, we could play a much stronger role in advocating for our field and collaborating in shaping it and helping it to undergo the transformations necessary to be aligned and integrated with the cultural context that surrounds us. For a series of reasons this process suffers of a certain inertia, particularly compared to the rapid changes undertaken elsewhere: some of the causes might be that we are limited in number, we can't rely on a sufficiently pervasive institutional network to foster debate and produce new forces, and our field relies on a multitude of professional profiles – academics, curators, scientists, makers, conservators, musicians and many more – which brings diversity and richness of approaches, but also leads to a high degree of fragmentation within the discipline where almost every organologist has a different idea of what the discipline is. This fragmentation, for example, emerged very clearly in the five position papers published between 1999 and 2003 discussed above, although the five authors all came from a comparable context (academic or curatorial).

Conversely, the proposals that emerged over the past decade for a renovation of organology have been remarkably coherent and consistent: Allen Roda's proposal for a new organology proposed a focus on 'the relationship between humans and instruments' which resonated with those advanced in the 1990s to 'explain society and culture' through musical instruments (De Vale) and to create 'an anthropology of sound-producing objects' (Johnsons).¹⁶ In the following years, Maria Sonevitsky highlighted the need to consider 'the musical instrument as an actor in the making of musical meaning'; Eliot Bates proposed 'the study of the social life of musical instruments'; and Emily Dolan 'the impact and implications of technology' and 'an analysis of instruments' material configurations, social and institutional locations, degrees of freedom, and teleologies'.¹⁷ All these broadly align with trends that have appeared in other and much more influential disciplines, such as Material Culture Studies and Science and Technology Studies. Other authors try to bring the broader debate happening in museology into the specific discussion about music (or musical instrument?) museums, such as the work of Eric De Visscher and Kathleen Wiens, both also advocating, along similar lines, for a more human museum that focusses on the visitor's experience rather than on the object.¹⁸

¹⁶ Roda, "Toward a New Organology: Material Culture and the Study of Musical Instruments"; De Vale, "Organizing Organology," 22; Johnson, "An Ethnomusicology of Musical Instruments," 258.

¹⁷ Sonevitsky, "The Accordion and Ethnic Whiteness: Toward a New Critical Organology," 101; Bates, "The Social Life of Musical Instruments," 364; Dolan, "Introductory Text: Round Table on Critical Organology"; Emily I. Dolan and John Tresch, "Toward a New Organology: Instruments of Music and Science," *Osiris* 28, no. 1 (2013): 278.

¹⁸ De Visscher, "Museums as Theatre: What about Musical Instruments?"; Wiens, "Popular Music as an Interpretive Device for Creating Meaningful Visitor Experience in Music Museums."

This sense of cohesion and consistency, which I don't think organology has had for a long time, is only one of the many outcomes that might derive from a more conscious integration between organology and broader disciplines that are concerned with the interpretation of human culture through objects. The adoption of shared vocabularies and methods will also make our discipline more accessible and encourage readership from those broader worlds: at the moment, neither the standard methodological publications in the field of material culture studies, nor recent methodological discussion on the articulation of musicology include any mention of musical instrument studies.¹⁹ I believe that, if we manage to include musical instruments on these agendas, organology's (and organologists') options for the future might look brighter than they do at the moment.

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¹⁹ Dan Hicks and Mary Beaudry, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Chris Tilley et al, ed., *Handbook of Material Culture* (London: SAGE, 2006).

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