

Viewpoint

Why Musicology? And How? – Or: The Future of Musicology

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Music saturates human life in Western countries in a way that was unthinkable, say, 50 years ago. Music is everywhere in all possible situations. Listening to music is one of the biggest leisure interests and many people also play music. Against this background it is remarkable that musicology seems to be such an unimportant discipline on the margins of the humanities. How come? I want to address this problem and present some ideas about how it should or could be instead. This is written from a Swedish perspective, but most of the problems I discuss are common to musicologists and scholars within the humanities more or less anywhere.

THE CRISIS OF THE HUMANITIES

In the last year there has been an intense debate in Sweden about the role and meaning of the humanities, principally in the daily paper *Dagens Nyheter* but in other forums as well.¹ This question has been debated many times before, not least in the end of the 1970s in the research project *The neglected humanities (Humaniora på undantag)*.² The igniting spark at the beginning of 2005 was a government bill about future research policies where the role of the humanities appeared weaker than ever. On top of this was a report from The Times Higher Education Index showing that when it comes to the humanities no Swedish university ranked among the 50 best universities in the world.

In the debate a number of problems within the Swedish humanities were pointed out. The humanities have much smaller grants than medicine or the natural sciences, which leads to both poorer teaching and research and a too heavy workload wearing out the staff. Scholars are claimed to suffer from a weak self-esteem and confidence, they are much too bound by stiff traditions and original and innovative research is rare. The research is provincial and deals too much with narrow Swedish matters and scholars have too few international contacts. Scholars are seldom heard in the

1 *Dagens Nyheter*, 9 Feb., 26 Mar., 18 July, 10, 11, 12, 20, 21, 25 and 26 Oct., 8, 9, 11, 16, 21, 25 and 30 Nov., 2 and 3 Dec. 2005, and the journals *Glänta*, 2005/1–2, and *Tvärsnitt*, 2005/4.

2 Sven-Erik Liedman, 'Humanistiska forskningstraditioner i Sverige. Kritiska och historiska perspektiv', in Tomas Forser (ed.), *Humaniora på undantag: Humanistiska forskningstraditioner i Sverige* (Stockholm, 1978), 9–79.

public debate. The traditional dissertation in the form of a monograph is a rigid and antiquated form. Swedish scholars ought to write much more in English and adjust to the form used in medicine or the natural sciences: thus no large monographs but short articles. The Swedish secondary schools, which were reorganized in the early 1990s, are also claimed to provide deficient basic skills and knowledge for university studies.

No doubt some of these claims are true while others can be debated and questioned. Undoubtedly it is true that the humanities live with low allowances and its place in the public debate is often obscure.

Another important problem which has been pointed out is that Swedish studies within the humanities deal too little with contemporary problems and issues. In the following presentation I will specially address this issue.

So if there are problems with Swedish humanities in general the problems of Swedish musicology must be seen in relations to these. There have been critical voices raised about musicology in later years but practically no public debate. Musicology, by the way, is only mentioned once, in passing, in the mentioned debate in *Dagens Nyheter*.

So let us now deal with the specific musicological problems, continuing in the footsteps of Henrik Karlsson, Ansa Lønstrup, and myself in earlier critical articles.³

THE STUDENTS OF MUSICOLOGY

A majority of those who start to study musicology at ground level in the early twenty-first century have little experience of classical music. Many have never heard a whole symphony or opera or do not know who Mozart was. They are not familiar with the traditional canon of art music, composers, or their works. The literature on music history is seen by many students as boring and antiquated, dealing with music they do not know, in a way that is foreign to them.

On the other hand, the majority of present-day students have experiences of many different types of music, albeit with the basis in contemporary 'popular music' forms. They are often curious about music they know little about and readily discuss

3 Henrik Karlsson, 'Musikvetenskaplig förmedling', in Thomas Holme Hansen (ed.), *13th Nordic Musicological Congress Aarhus 2000. Papers and Abstracts* (Aarhus, 2002), 111–19; Ansa Lønstrup, 'Strategier i musikforskningen?', *Danish Yearbook of Musicology*, 31 (2003), 9–15; Lars Lilliestam, 'Vad gör vi med musikvetenskapen?', *STM Online*, 8 (2005) (www.musik.uu.se/ssm/stmonline/vol_8/index.html). See also studies with critical perspectives like Olle Edström, 'Fr-a-g-me-n-ts – a discussion on the position of critical ethnomusicology in contemporary musicology', *Svensk tidskrift för musikforskning*, 79/1 (1997), 9–68; Olle Edström, *En annan berättelse om den västerländska musikhistorien och det estetiska projektet* (Göteborg, 2002); and Tobias Pettersson, 'De bildade männens Beethoven: Musikhistorisk kunskap och social formering i Sverige mellan 1850 och 1940', (Diss.; Göteborg universitet, 2004); and on English ground, among others, Nicholas Cook, *Music, imagination, culture* (Oxford, 1990); Nicholas Cook, *Music – a very short introduction* (Cambridge, 1998); articles in Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (eds.), *Rethinking Music* (Oxford and New York, 1999); and Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton (eds.), *The cultural study of music. A critical introduction* (New York and London, 2003).

matters of musical taste and meaning. Many have their stylistic abode in exclusive forms of rock music, heavy metal, world music, or improvised music, and often have a deep knowledge within these fields. Quite a few are also interested in older forms of rock, blues, country, gospel, or folk music.

Many students have limited knowledge of reading music and of traditional music theory but may well be skilled ear players. The divide between those with a wavering basic knowledge in music theory and those with a solid knowledge are growing. Many of the ways of analysing music that musicologists have been trained in appear less relevant and hard to understand if you lack a basic understanding of traditional music theory.

Taken together this means that there seems to be a growing divergence in experience and interest between, on the one hand, young students and, on the other hand, teachers, and senior scholars. The young to a large extent pose other questions and have different interests.

The future musicologists are trained now. If musicology is going to survive as a university discipline a reorientation is necessary both in the practice of teaching and in the contents of the curriculum, which must be adjusted both to changing qualifications and interests among students and to the problems of the music culture of today and tomorrow.

RESEARCH

As a musicologist you often get questions both from the general public and from students that are difficult to answer because there is no or very little research. I have often met colleagues from other disciplines who have been surprised by the fact that musicologists seem to deal so little with present day music and problems. We live in a time with extremely rapid and radical changes in media technology and use, as well as in musical socialization and the ways people use music in their everyday lives – but do musicologists really notice this? Questions generated by these changes seem to be tackled more often by others than musicologists, such as sociologists, media researchers, economists, scholars in cultural studies, etc.⁴

It is a cornerstone in humanities that it is the researcher's privilege to formulate his or her own research problem. Consequently, the typical humanistic research project is a solo project governed more by personal interests than by thoughts of relevance or the social good. Overriding agendas are mostly missing.⁵ It is less common that scholars work in projects with many people involved or projects which have been commissioned by some receiver. Humanistic researchers are simply not

4 See, however, Ruth Finnegan, *The hidden musicians. Music-making in an English town* (Cambridge, 1989); Odd Are Berkaak and Even Ruud, *Den påbegynte virkelighet: Studier i samtidskultur* (Oslo, 1992); Tia DeNora, *Music in everyday life* (Cambridge, 2000); Michael Bull, *Sounding out the city. Personal stereos and the management of everyday life* (Oxford, 2000); and Clayton, Herbert, and Middleton (eds.), *The cultural study of music*, as examples of studies dealing with such problems.

5 Karlsson, 'Musikvetenskaplig förmedling', and Lønstrup, 'Strategier i musikkforskningen?'

used to think in terms of ‘societal good’ or relevance. I am convinced, however, that we have to! It is a minimum demand that the scholar asks what relevance or usefulness his or her research has and who is interested in it (except the scholar himself!) etc.

SUGGESTIONS

It is my conviction that musicology, like any other discipline, must have contemporary problems as its starting point. In my opinion, the focus of modern musicology must primarily be on those musical forms and genres that the majority use and listen to. We have to have a keen eye for changes in musical behaviour and habits. What is to be considered as ‘contemporary problems’ and as immediate and pressing questions must be continuously discussed. So let me present some suggestions for a musicology of the future.

1. *All kinds of music can and have to be investigated!* Classical or art music does not have a unique position. An important field of study is how different ‘music worlds’ or genres relate to each other, and how people move between them and combine tastes for different types of music and musical activities.⁶

2. *Inspiration for this approach to the study of music can favourably be taken from ethnomusicology.* The ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl once defined ethnomusicology as ‘what musicology ought to be but hasn’t become.’⁷ Music is part of the totality of human life and must be studied in context. Alan P. Merriam claimed that to get a comprehensive picture of the music of a foreign culture you must consider conceptualization about music, behaviour in relation to music, and music sound itself.⁸ It goes without saying that we ought to have the same perspective on music in our own culture!

To study the conceptualization of music means to investigate people’s ideas of music and how they describe, think and speak of music, and how they categorize, designate, and evaluate music. What from time to time has been seen as ‘low’ and ‘high’ music is a particularly interesting field.

To study the behaviour in relation to music means to focus on what you do in connection with music, and when, where, how, and why people use different kinds of music as well as what effect the music has.

Studying music sound is to investigate musical structures and how they are performed, and also how use, behaviour, and conceptualization about music cohere with different musical structures.

Music analysis is not a means in itself. It is a tool for describing and understanding how human beings communicate in non-verbal sounds (though often in combination with lyrics, i.e. semantic sounds). Music analysis is a study of how people express themselves in musical sounds, how musical styles, genres and conventions (‘languages’,

6 Finnegan, *The hidden musicians*.

7 Bruno Nettl, *The study of ethnomusicology. Twenty-nine issues and concepts* (Chicago and London, 1983), 3.

8 Alan P. Merriam, *The anthropology of music* (Evanston, 1964), 32.

‘grammars’, ‘dialects’) are constructed and applied in different situations as well as how they change over time. It is just as important to investigate how music and musical ‘languages’ change, as it is to examine verbal language and its changes.

Music should thus be understood not only as objects, something that sounds, or musical ‘works’, but also as an activity, as something people do. The terms ‘musicking’ and ‘to music’, once coined by Christopher Small,⁹ comes to mind.

3. The study of music must *start from today’s perspective* at the same time as it has to have a historical perspective. Historical music, let us say Mozart, is used and valued and performed today, here and now, in other ways than when it was created. How did the music sound, and how has it been used, evaluated, and described in the past – and in the present day? How did the Western canon of musical works and composers originate, develop, and how has it been applied in different situations?

4. There are still enormous *gaps of ignorance within musicology* when it comes to many of the most popular and widespread musical expressions. We need profound and nuanced studies about everyday-music (from children’s songs to psalms) and popular genres: ‘svensktoppen’ and ‘danskoppen’ (Swedish and Danish main stream popular music), dance music, the innumerable subgenres within ‘rock’ and ‘pop’, techno, disco, schlager, film music, computer game music The project about Danish rock history is a commendable initiative – as well as the international conference *The local, the global and the regional* that was held in Copenhagen in October 2005.

If we do not understand commonplace musical forms and their use and attraction we do not have good enough tools to understand more exclusive forms of music either.

The obvious focus and aim of the humanities must be to get a versatile picture of human behaviour which is as complete and accurate as possible. To do this you cannot on any ground exclude any kind of human behaviour and activity, for instance musical styles and expressions, as less interesting, not possible to study, or not worthy of investigation. No musical sound or use is too ‘trite’ not to be studied.

5. When it comes to analysing music the problem is not only *which* music is analysed but also, and perhaps more important, *how* it is analysed. In my opinion many of musicology’s established models for music analysis can be questioned. Who really listens to music in the ways musicologists assume that they do?

Many analytical models presuppose a specific structural listening and ways to apprehend and experience music that only a small portion of the music’s audience and users apply and understand. There is a big difference between what might be called an analytical, structural or perhaps musicological approach or listening mode, and an everyday listening based primarily on uses like pleasure and enjoyment, relaxation, mood control, and dance.

As researchers we ought to start with the simple question: how do people really listen to and perceive music? What do different individuals apprehend of musical structures? What do lyrics mean to different people? What do you listen for in different genres? It might be worth a try to ground music theoretical thinking and con-

9 Christopher Small, *Musicking. The meanings of performing and listening* (Hannover, 1998).

cepts in the musical forms that the students of today are more familiar with than the traditional approach originally based on European art music. Another way could be to approach music theory through the modern computer programs for music making.

Even Ruud, professor of musicology in Oslo, has criticized musicology for being one of the most technical disciplines of the humanities whose analyses often get 'impenetrable for outsiders. The result is that musicology becomes isolated as a humanistic discipline, living its quiet life in a positivistic enclave'.¹⁰ Many analyses of music are written only for those with a solid knowledge of music theory and appear as gibberish for those who lack this knowledge. There certainly lies a challenge, not only for musicologists but for scholars in general, to present their analyses to a larger audience in understandable and popular ways.

Another problem is that traditional concepts of music theory in many cases are insufficient when analysing modern 'popular music' for instance. They may work well for those parameters in music that can be notated, but when it comes to the analysis and description of sound, rhythmic nuances, and inflections – parameters that are infinitely important in many forms of contemporary music – the tools of music analysis are rather unsophisticated. Developing new tools of music analysis is urgent.

6. There is a growing insight that many problems demand *interdisciplinary treatment*, and that neither the humanities alone, nor any other disciplinary field alone, can deliver thorough answers. In many cases it is necessary with teamwork and collaborations in projects between, for example, musicologists, psychologists, medical scientists, sociologists, economists, etc.

As a musicologist I have sometimes felt slightly estranged in relation to the ways advocates for other disciplines look at and study music, both when it comes to musical practice and concepts of music. Many more meetings are required between researchers from different disciplines to bring about deeper and better questions and approaches, solutions, and answers.

7. As a Swedish musicologist it must be my task to *investigate Swedish music* and Swedish musical culture. Who would do it otherwise? This also means that my research naturally should be presented in Swedish. My findings must, however, also be related to the musicological world at large. It is of utmost importance that good Swedish studies are translated into English or substantially summarized.

It has been claimed that Swedish dissertations ought to be written in English, but in many cases it will be strange and strained to read about Swedish music or lyrics, or any Swedish cultural matters, in a foreign language – not to mention what you lose in precision, depth, and nuance when you do not write in your first language.

This brings up yet another problem: the Anglicization of Swedish (or Danish) research. It is very easy to keep good contact with English-speaking scholars and their works, but contacts with musicology and other disciplines in non English-speaking areas ought to be much more frequent.

¹⁰ Berkaak and Ruud, *Den påbegynte virkelighet*, 209. Many other scholars have also discussed this problem, among them Cook, *Music, imagination, culture*.

8. On the other hand you cannot take for granted *what is to be considered as Swedish music in modern multi-cultural society*. Neither the Western canon of art music nor the history of Western ‘popular music’ is self-evidently relevant for people with non-Western backgrounds. How do we as musicologists deal with this? How can we involve differing cultural traditions in our teaching and research? Of course the problem is similar in other disciplines of the humanities, like, history, literature, and art.

9. *What do people do with music? And what does music do with people?* To my mind these are the most interesting and urgent questions. Music is an instrument that human beings use for different purposes. Music is an ideological tool, a means for orientation and an expression of values. A study of changes in musical sound and of people’s use and conceptualization of music can reveal a lot about social, cultural, and ideological conditions and changes. This approach has been called ethnomusicology on your home ground, doorstep musicology, the cultural study of music, or cultural musicology.

We urgently need deeper knowledge not only about characteristics of musical styles and genres but also about themes such as listening, dancing, how music is created, the collection of music, reading about music, music and identity (‘the soundtrack of my life’), great experiences of music, being a fan, local music histories, music and work, ceremonies, music, religion and the philosophy of life, music and the brain, the relation between music and health, music therapy, soundscapes, musical socialization and pedagogy, the relation between music and class, gender, and ethnicity, music festivals, live music, music production, music technology, changing musical patterns and behaviour The kind of musicology that mainly deals with ‘traditional’ music history, biographies of composers, and ‘traditional’ theoretical analyses of their works is less urgent in the present situation.

When I began to study musicology with Jan Ling in the early 1970s it soon became evident that you could gain immensely interesting insights to human behaviour by studying music. This is still a personal guiding star.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is my strong conviction that changes of the kind I have suggested are necessary if musicology should be a living, modern, and relevant discipline. We work on the taxpayer’s commission and money. It is our duty to deliver relevant, useful, and current knowledge about music and new and inventive perspectives on what it means to be a human being in present day society.

It is also the road we have to travel if we want to live up to the songs of praise about the usefulness of the humanities and the visions of what humanities ought to be that were expressed in the Swedish debate in 2005, as: ‘a place where society scrutinizes itself and becomes aware of itself’, a forum for ‘critical reflection’ or ‘critical examination from a historical perspective’, ‘a corrective and a stimulant to other sciences’, a tool for strengthening democracy.¹¹

11 The quotes are from contributions in the debate in *Dagens Nyheter* 2005 by Sara Danius, Lisbeth Larsson and Ebba Witt-Brattström.

Sven-Erik Liedman, professor of the history of ideas at Göteborg University, claimed almost thirty years ago that the usefulness of the humanities basically is ‘ideological’ by which he meant ‘all means to influence peoples’ concepts about the world, society, and themselves with research and research findings’¹²

Naturally this is valid for musicology as well. How these visions should be implemented is a most pressing issue that we as scholars and musicologists must address if the discipline is to survive.

¹² Liedman, ‘Humanistiska forskningstraditioner i Sverige’, 10. See also Sven-Erik Liedman, ‘Den nya röda dagen och humanistens sotdöd’, *Glänta*, 2005/1–2, 92–96.