

Whose Musicology? Response to critique of musicology in Denmark

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Something's rotten in the state of musicology: musicology students who don't know Vivaldi's work! Students who don't read music! Musicologists who don't do musicology! Over the last year or so, musicology in Denmark has been subject to harsh critique launched by German professor in musicology, Linda Koldau from the Department of Aesthetics and Communication, Musicology, at Aarhus University.

Koldau's critique has received lengthy attention in Danish news media in 2011 and 2012, for example in the newspapers *Politiken*, *Information*, and *Weekendavisen*, and on blogs on the Internet. Even after announcing her resignation that will happen at the end of 2012, Koldau has continued to publish her critique, which in my view seriously calls for reactions from musicologists who have another view on the matter. This viewpoint should be seen as one such reaction.

Musicology isn't that appealing to the average news media consumer, I guess, but Koldau's critique of musicology has been blended with scandalous accusations, serious cooperation- and communication issues with her colleagues, alongside a critique of the university's board of directors, whom she accused of violating her freedom of speech.¹ Then even musicology becomes a subject sexy enough for journalistic storytelling. Koldau played the victim and the media took the bait.

Koldau has taken full advantage of her freedom of speech in public media – any discussion about violation in that connection is nonsense; rather, the problems might just as well be related to her unwillingness on to engage in face-to-face dialogue about music and musicology with her colleagues at the Aarhus department. This is the clear impression one gets from reading a comment from one of her colleagues.² By reference to incompatibilities between the department's idea of musicology and her own, Koldau was released from her duty to participate in staff meetings. On top of the freedom of speech issue, Koldau accused her colleagues for bullying her. These accusations have been dismissed by the university itself, and the

1 See for example Danish PEN, 21 Feb. 2012: <http://danskpen.dk/2012/02/21/videnskabsministeren-ma-sikre-musikprofessors-ytringsfrihed/>.

2 Steen Kaargaard Nielsen's comment, 22 Feb. 2012, appears at the Danish PEN site as the second comment on the same reference as the above, further down the page.

Ombudsman dismissed the case with reference to the agreement achieved between Koldau and the university.³ Also musicology students at Aarhus University have reacted to Koldau's critique, which in their view is 'insubstantial' and based on a 'misunderstanding'.⁴

KOLDAU'S DIAGNOSIS

On the blog *Forskningsfrihed?* (*Freedom of Research?*), Koldau has lately re-published her critique under the title 'The Discipline of Musicology and Its Special Issues' (the original Danish title is 'Faget musikvidenskab og dets særlige problematik', 22 April 2012).⁵ In summarizing parts of the critique previously published in newspapers in June 2011, Koldau presents a rather one-sided and undifferentiated diagnosis of the state of musicology.

Koldau claims that it is internationally accepted that musicology is to be divided into three distinct categories: historical musicology, which is musicology proper; systematic musicology; and ethnomusicology. According to Koldau, this division was part of the very foundation of musicology in the nineteenth century, and nothing will ever change that. In Aarhus, accordingly, musicology is not historical but of the systematic kind, dominated by popular music culture, sound culture, and culture theory – implying that popular music studies are only rarely dealing with historical contextualization. I feel the need to emphasize that I know quite a few colleagues in Aarhus, who are dealing with music history and historiography in relation to many different kinds of music and musical culture.

One of Koldau's primary claims is that not a single scholar from outside the borders of Denmark will identify musicology in Denmark as musicology. According to Koldau, Danish students have no knowledge of the great musical masterpieces (that is, from the canon of West European art music) and they do not read music. Moreover, research and teaching at Danish departments *is not* musicology proper – it is sociology and culture theory and so on and so forth. Of course, this is a fight over definitions. What is musicology? I would maintain that not a single scholar in Denmark is able to identify with Koldau's version of Danish musicology. If there is any possible conclusion to be made here it is that *nobody* seems to be able to identify with the musicology that Koldau talks about, other than herself. This makes me wonder: either Koldau doesn't have a clue about what is going on or she is right, and we are all a bunch of great pretenders believing in our ignorance to be doing musicology while we in fact are doing something entirely different.

3 See the remark of the Ombudsman at: www.ombudsmanden.dk/find/nyheder/alle/koldau-sag/.

4 Published in *Politiken*, 21 Feb. 2012, see: <http://politiken.dk/debat/ECE1546506/studerende-koldaus-kritik-beror-paa-en-misforstaelse/>.

5 See Koldau's diagnosis here: <http://professorvaelde.blogspot.dk/2012/04/faget-musikvidenskab-og-dets-srlige.html>.

METHODOLOGICAL PLURALISM

In her diagnosis, Koldau feels compelled to enlighten her readers by describing ethnomusicology – which isn't taught at Aarhus – as the study of 'other [non-European] cultures and European folk music'.⁶ Somebody, please pinch my arm! Is this for real? This is light years from the international standards that Koldau herself is claiming and calling for. Today, ethnomusicology is no longer defined by its subject, rather by its methodology and level of scholarly reflection: it is an interdisciplinary approach to all kinds of music in the world. Of primary interest to ethnomusicologists are music and musical practices in their social, historical, political, cultural, and many other settings. Focus could for example be on the relation between individual and group identity, issues of music and otherness, power relations and the right to define one's life and to perform one's music. Mostly, ethnomusicological projects are influenced by anthropology and thus involve fieldwork, but otherwise they tend to overlap with a wide range of other musicological disciplines, be it popular music studies, historical and theoretical studies, etc. Hence ethnomusicology could be seen as an inclusive category consisting of multiple approaches to a plurality of music and contexts, and not of a single theoretical and methodological matrix.

In my own research on the Greek-Orthodox musical tradition, historiography and ethnography are merged.⁷ Tradition implies that the participants in the social group in question – in my study a group of monks – relate to their past. As a scholar, I need to take this past (however it is defined) into consideration too. The separation of music studies into diachronic and synchronic is pure theory and it collapses in practice. Even the most 'traditional' societies cannot be denied a place in history. Now, is my research musicology, ethnomusicology, historical ethnomusicology, or musical anthropology? Who cares, really?

What I call for is a musicology which is pluralistic, interdisciplinary and inclusive in terms of methodology and theoretical orientation that in fruitful ways may open up the subject matters in radical new ways and push boundaries for musical thinking and knowledge. Accordingly, I see the ossified distinctions between musicology and its so-called sub-disciplines as an unnecessary limitation to scholarly work.

If we look at musicology departments in Denmark, musicology in its total could be characterized by heterogeneity, methodological pluralism, and otherwise a very wide range of approaches to various kinds of music. And everybody does not necessarily (have to) agree on everything. To follow this logic, there is also room for Koldau's way of doing musicology. Koldau advocates for the classical education, which has been under challenge for some time by now. This need not be a problem, as I see it; classical virtues might easily find ways into the curricula if they are

6 'Musiketnologi beskæftiger sig med musik i andre [dvs. ikke vestlige] kulturer, men også med europæisk folkemusik' (my transl.); follow the link to Koldau's full analysis: <http://professorvaelde.blogspot.dk/2012/04/faget-musikvidenskab-og-dets-srlige.html>.

7 Tore Tværnø Lind, *The Past Is Always Present: The Revival of the Byzantine Musical Tradition at Mount Athos* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2012).

not already there. But there is a problem: Koldau's version of musicology (note: version and not vision) is normative: everybody must follow her head to ensure international standard. This is where Koldau's ideas of how to run a university seem to predate 1968, a bygone age when professors still had sovereign power.

NUANCED UNDERSTANDING

Media publicity is important. Many musicologists are frequently present in the media: on national radio broadcasts, in newspapers, on Internet debates, and on television. It remains important, I believe, that scholars challenge existing and dominating ideas about music and qualify debates and discussions with research based knowledge. Perhaps scholars in Denmark ought to be better to communicate their research to a wider public, and create a more nuanced, and a more positive understanding of what music research today is about and why it is important – whether that be in newspaper articles, participation in public debates, presentations in unorthodox contexts, or the production of new tutorial books.

I welcome critique of musicology: critique is tantamount to inspiring us to think music in new ways. Yet, critique must be based on a genuine interest in what musicology in Denmark actually consists of. The arrogance in Koldau's critique is almost entertaining – had it not been for the total lack of curiosity for the work of her colleagues in Denmark writ large. As Koldau's attack is devoid of genuine commitment to musicology as it unfolds (in many different ways) at Danish universities, and as she seems unwilling even to imagine the possibility of other ways of doing musicology than *her* way, I wonder: exactly who did Koldau expect to take her critique seriously?