

## Has Critical Musicology Aged Well?

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The act of naming—whether it is a child, a substance in the material world, an abstract idea like democracy or fundamentalism, or a metadiscourse like critical musicology—is an exercise of power.<sup>1</sup> As a conceit of language, naming is the power to establish the real, to produce difference and individuality, to know and control through the objectifying capacities of language, and to place within a broader economy of signs and meanings. In naming emergent or established forms of discourse, a given noun can transform singular voices into a movement, retrospectively or prospectively investing what might be disparate agendas and interests with a degree of ideological and temporal coherence. To get a sense of this, one only needs to listen to modern political rhetoric of all sorts, read religious texts that continually strive to denominate the divine in human terms, or glance at the programme of a large academic conference with its many linguistic territorialisations of (sub)disciplinary terrain, for instance. 1

The term critical musicology is (or was) one of these names. In reading through the volumes in Ashgate's series Contemporary Thinkers on Critical Musicology, one sees how it has been deployed and monumentalised to describe the fruitful engagement of at least two generations of music scholars in the late 1980s and early 1990s with many of the essential texts in the humanities and social sciences. More than two decades on, the excitement with which these scholars read and wrestle with Adorno, Bakhtin, Barthes, Butler, Derrida, Foucault, Freud, Gadamer, Geertz, Habermas, Hebdige, Lacan, Marx, Ricoeur, Said, Williams, Žižek and many others is at times infectious and at other times charming, since these are now figures hardly in need of introduction and explication. Nevertheless, this body of work, named as a contentious movement that shifted disciplinary paradigms and institutional structures as neoliberal globalisation succeeded Cold War ideology, provided emphatic answers to questions concerning the sustainability of the postwar modernist project that tended to alienate musicology from the humanities and social sciences through its positivist and formalist commitments.<sup>2</sup> 2

But now, from my professional vantage point (I am an ethnomusicologist) and generational perspective (I was born in 1975), the name critical musicology seems either tautological (a good thing, since this suggests deep 3

disciplinary transformations) or overdone in its historical specificity, disciplinary posturing and methodological anxieties. (When did a certain way of working become critical, and who narrated that break from the past? What kinds of scholarship and scholars are not critical, and how do we relate to their work? How does one navigate the critical and the musical within regnant disciplinary norms and an interdisciplinary academy?) To get at the curiosity of this moment in light of the established commitments of musicology at the time, it is worth noting the relative belatedness of music scholars' cultural turn and deployment of critical theory. This had everything to do with the specific struggles and pleasures of dealing with musical sound in critical terms and with the powerful emotional and intellectual allure of the musical object as fetishised work. It also owes much to the entrenched institutional structures and disciplinary practices that privileged certain analytic and discursive strategies and modes of performance and listening, naturalising their attendant systems of value and notions of what music is and should be.<sup>3</sup>

So what was critical about critical musicology? What assumptions did it make about critique and the production of knowledge? How has its coherence as a polarising discursive register and disciplinary movement diffused as many of its claims have become mainstream, unremarkable, or have been superseded by subsequent interdisciplinary engagements? In other words, has critical musicology aged well? To address these questions, I parse the critical in critical musicology two ways, both of which are immanent in the texts I consider. The first is a conventional notion of critique—a rigorous interpretive project grounded in a hermeneutics of suspicion, a wide-ranging interrogation of the social relations and cultural ideologies entailed in musical texts, discourses and performances, and a persistent, reflexive questioning of the epistemological bases of doing music scholarship. In these volumes, what was critical about critical musicology was its eagerness to rethink the relationship of listening subjects, the senses and performance to musical structure, ontology and analysis ;<sup>4</sup> its insistence that musical practice and discourse are effective in culture and historical change, not merely reflective, and that musical categories are also social categories ;<sup>5</sup> its emphatic turn toward race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and other identity concerns in the exploration of musical texts and practices ;<sup>6</sup> its awareness of and engagement with radical difference in historiography ;<sup>7</sup> and its embrace of ideas from popular music studies, ethnomusicology and the work of scholars not trained in musicology .<sup>8</sup>

The second way critical musicology was critical relates to the sense of advocacy and moral urgency encountered in each of these texts—something I think has aged particularly well and taken deep root in many branches of music scholarship. My feeling is that, at least in the US academy, the moment when music scholars could take for granted the musical repertory and milieu that grounds their disciplinary practices and teaching was passing

as critical musicology was emerging. The music part of critical musicology was no longer assumed to be the Western classical canon (and some of its canonical others); what was meant by music continually needed to be defined and the underlying values and ideologies of that definition addressed through explicit critique. On the one hand, this was a natural response to the critical discourses with which these scholars were engaging. In writing about the political economy of style or the idea of the autonomous musical work, for instance, one cannot avoid critical reflection on the kinds of music one does and does not discuss, the social meanings of those musics, and, by extension, the bases and limits of critique per se. On the other hand, this was an aspect of the broader social, cultural and technological changes of a new phase of globalisation—the accelerated circulation of sounds and images through digital media, the transformed meanings of place, identity and citizenship, the violence wrought by new forms of war and terror, and the tenacity of difference in the making of modernities, just to name a few. It became critical to deal head-on with the new ways music was performed and consumed, the new ways music studies fit into the academy, and the new people music scholars encountered in classrooms and addressed in their work.

This happened through scholars' acute sense of purpose in terms of advocacy and moral urgency—a move that emphatically distanced critical musicology from positivism and formalism. No longer could music scholarship ground itself on the modernist illusion of disinterest<sup>9</sup> and the nostalgic premise that the Western classical canon 'is our music, still capable of speaking to us in an elevated language of transhistorical immediacy and importance'.<sup>10</sup> The reflexive turn toward advocacy and moral urgency meant that scholars' social identities and political commitments were recognised as being central to the kind of knowledge they produced and that the practice of musicology was recognised as being deeply implicated in broader social concerns.<sup>11</sup> Critical musicology had a responsibility to respond and advocate for particular musics and methods because the act of critique, in whatever form, might better secure the openness of a public sphere.<sup>12</sup> In fundamental ways, then, critical musicology imagined itself as politically progressive, particularly in its formative ideal of liberal critique. 6

While much of the combative, effusive, self-congratulatory rhetoric and exclusive disciplinary posturing that characterised some critical musicology (and drove many away from its substantive contributions) has died out, much of what critical musicology promised in terms of disciplinary transformation has come to pass, and not only within musicology but across much music scholarship (these two currents are, of course, connected). I see advocacy and moral urgency becoming more and more of a concern among musicologists, with recent work on violence<sup>13</sup> and disability<sup>14</sup> marking new articulations of what is now a longstanding musicological 7

concern with the body, subjectivity and social ideology in relation to disciplinary practice. That all branches of music scholarship are now involved in the critical conversation that was preemptively and incompletely claimed by critical musicology is evident in much of the critique of music studies that has followed. Important volumes on disciplinary boundaries and traditions,<sup>15</sup> representation and appropriation in Western musics,<sup>16</sup> the racial imagination,<sup>17</sup> and modes of analysis and listening<sup>18</sup> have developed much of what critical musicology was talking about and, farther removed from struggles for (sub)disciplinary and institutional prestige, have broadened the spirit and scope of the discourse.

Meanwhile, the reflexive turn in critical musicology that compelled many scholars to rethink the naturalness of the Western classical canon as their object of study, including the social identities and cultural formations it presumably entails, or to rethink the relationship of popular music studies to musicology, has been amplified through several different channels. Western classical music in its globalised forms has become a rich field of ethnographic study in its own right,<sup>19</sup> turning the tables on anxieties like those expressed by Hepokoski. Popular music studies, now well established institutionally, seems far less concerned with breaking into musicological circles in codified ways<sup>20</sup> than with articulating a disciplinary understanding of the popular in light of its ubiquity within music scholarship and beyond. Forays into the popular by musicologists (and others) no longer attract the attention sought during the emergence of critical musicology as the boundaries of the popular have come to be recognised as not so hard and fast.

The belatedness of critical musicology in its cultural turn and deployment of critical theory is echoed by the lag between musicological scholarship and the ways people make, listen to, talk about and write about music outside the academy. I think the work of artists like Christopher O'Riley, who moves seamlessly between the standard piano repertoire and covers of Radiohead, Nick Drake and Nirvana, or the milieu of performance venues like (Le) Poisson Rouge in New York City, whose bookings emphasise the connections across (and paradoxes of) musical genres, appeal deeply to the sensibility of critical musicology. In terms of responding to these musical and cultural shifts with critical musicology's sense of advocacy and moral urgency, however, it is the writing and blogging of people like Alex Ross, who is interested in the common modernity of Karlheinz Stockhausen, Sonic Youth, Björk, Arvo Pärt, Radiohead, Olivier Messiaen, Sufjan Stevens and Osvaldo Golijov, that is especially well suited.<sup>21</sup> As an exceptional journalist, Ross is able to make quick, deep sense of these musical and cultural phenomena in sophisticated, critical language. But perhaps more telling is the fact that he is writing outside the academy and beyond the constraints and disciplinary norms of professional musicological scholarship. The extent to which work like this realises critical musicology's project of advocacy and

moral urgency, then, is a provocation for music scholars to hasten the pace of disciplinary transformation.

So what are the futures of the enduring issues critical musicology helped articulate? Fortunately, it is now a given that music scholars should be engaged in broader critical debates in the humanities and social sciences. (That this was not the case twenty-plus years ago and bears stating now is still curious to comprehend.) One effect of this has been to gradually erode some of the ideological and institutional boundaries between disciplines, since there is more in common to talk about in substantive ways. One can see this happening, for instance, in the diverse kinds of work being published in journals like *Radical Musicology*, *Twentieth-Century Music* or the *Journal of Musicological Research* or in the hybrid language of job postings directed toward candidates whose work overlaps with musicology, ethnomusicology, popular music studies and analysis. In the US, what this amounts to is the de-centering of a musicology exclusively oriented around the Western classical canon within the academy. Ironically or not, this is very much in keeping with critical musicology's sense of advocacy and moral urgency. 10

What is still inchoate, but vital, in music scholarship is a form of critical discourse emerging from musical practice and experience in its social, cultural and historical specificity rather than the inevitably belated, incomplete translation of critical theory from the humanities and social sciences. Part of what impedes this kind of critique—and impedes the potential for music scholarship to produce more critical theory that translates into other fields—is the persistent impasse between conceptions of music as an objectified text to be analyzed and as social action and cultural process. In ethnomusicology, for instance, I see this deriving from two interrelated phenomena: the burgeoning currency of sound studies and its reframing of music as a privileged sonic form and the invaluable contributions of scholars not trained or working in music departments. Together, these forces are propelling ethnomusicology, however slowly, toward a more integral and sound form of critique, although my sense is that this simultaneously opens up new divides between ethnomusicology and other branches of music scholarship. 11

My final observation is an obvious one to make: Even in its broadest possible conception, critical musicology was rooted in the English-language academy where its effects have been most consequential. A logical extension of critical musicology's cultural turn, engagement with critical theory and reflexivity would be to see this kind of music scholarship in more explicit cultural terms and far removed from an Enlightenment notion of critique as universal reason. From this position, the fact that there are other musicologies with alternative notions of what critique is and what is critical about doing musicology becomes ever more significant. Engaging these 12

traditions of music scholarship and seeking out spaces for collaboration and exchange across different musicologies becomes imperative. To speak from experience, this is especially important in the absence of familiar modes of critique, which is when one critically confronts what is at stake in that familiarity.

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<sup>1</sup> J.L Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press); Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994 [1966]).

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Katherine Bergeron and Philip V. Bohlman (eds.) *Disciplining Music: Musicology and Its Canons* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Cook, *Music, Performance, Meaning: Selected Essays* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007); James Hepokoski, *Music, Structure, Thought: Selected Essays* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate 2009); Lawrence Kramer, *Critical Musicology and the Responsibility of Response: Selected Essays* (Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Simon Frith, *Taking Popular Music Seriously: Selected Essays.*( Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007); Richard Leppert, *Sound Judgment: Selected Essays* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007); Susan McClary, *Reading Music: Selected Essays* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007); Richard Middleton, *Musical Belongings: Selected Essays* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Frith, *Popular Music*; Leppert, *Sound Judgment*; McClary, *Reading Music*; Middleton, *Musical Belongings*.

<sup>7</sup> Gary Tomlinson, *Music and Historical Critique: Selected Essays* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Frith, *Popular Music*; Leppert, *Sound Judgement*; Middleton, *Musical Belongings*; Tomlinson, *Historical Critique*.

<sup>9</sup> James Hepokoski, *Music, Structure, Thought*; Middleton, *Musical Belongings*

<sup>10</sup> Hepokoski, *Music, Structure, Thought*, xi.

<sup>11</sup> Leppert, *Sound Judgement*; McClary, *Reading Music*; Middleton, *Musical Belongings*; Tomlinson, *Historical Critique*; see also Philip V.Bohlman, 'Musicology as a Political Act', *The Journal of Musicology*

Vol. 11, No. 4 (Autumn, 1993), 411-436.

<sup>12</sup> Tomlinson, *Historical Critique*, xv.

<sup>13</sup> Suzanne Cusick, . 'Music as torture/Music as weapon', *Revista Transcultural de Música/ Transcultural Music Review* 10 (1996) [http://www.sibetrans.com/trans/trans10/cusick\\_eng.htm](http://www.sibetrans.com/trans/trans10/cusick_eng.htm); 'Musicology, Torture, Repair', *Radical Musicology* 3 (2008) <http://www.radical-musicology.org.uk/2008/Cusick.htm>; "'You are in a place that is out of the world. . .': Music in the Detention Camps of the 'Global War on Terror'", *Journal of the Society for American Music* Vol. 2, No 1 (1998b), 1-26.

<sup>14</sup> Neil Lerner and Joseph Straus, *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Joseph Straus, 'Normalizing the Abnormal: Disability in Music and Music Theory', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* Vol. 59, No. 1 (4) (2006), 113-184.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton (eds.), *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (eds.), *Rethinking Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Henry Stobart, *The New (Ethno)musicologies* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh (eds.), *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

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<sup>17</sup> Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman (eds.), *Music and the Racial Imagination* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Dell'Antonio (ed.), *Beyond Structural Listening?: Postmodern Modes of Hearing*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004; Michael Tenzer, *Analytical Studies in World Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Henry Kingsbury, *Music, Talent & Performance A Conservatory Cultural System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Bruno Nettl, *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); Kay Shelemay, 'Toward an Ethnomusicology of the Early Music Movement: Thoughts on Bridging Disciplines and Musical Worlds', *Ethnomusicology* Vol. 45, No. 1 (Winter, 2001), 1-29; Timothy Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism: Western Music and the World*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Gregory Weinstein, "A Window into a Performance": Global Ideologies of Classical Music Recording in Post-Industrial London', Paper presented at the 54<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology, Mexico City, Mexico, 2009; Suzanne Wint, 'Western Art Music in Uganda: A Music of the Other?', Paper presented at the 53<sup>rd</sup> Annual Meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology, Middletown, CT, 2008; Mari Yoshihara, *Musicians from a Different Shore: Asians and Asian Americans in Classical Music* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Brian Harker, 'Louis Armstrong, Eccentric Dance, and the Evolution of Jazz on the Eve of Swing', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* Vol. 61, No. 1 (4) (2008), 67-121; Peter Manuel, 'From Scarlatti to "Guantanamera": Dual Tonicity in Spanish and Latin American Musics', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* Vol. 55, No. 2 (8) (2002), 311-336; Don Michael Randel, 'Crossing over with Rubén Blades', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* Vol. 44, No. 2 (7) (1991), 301-323.

<sup>21</sup> Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* ( New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 542.