EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF MUSICOLOGY

ISSN 2504-1916 VOL. 22/1 (2024), 1-14

DOI: 10.5450/EJM22.1.2024.1

Critiquing Oneself Back into Business?
Post-Factual Narcissism in Musicology

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Introduction

Like all other disciplines musicology has been heavily affected by the linguistic turn, the engagement with approaches and methods developed by poststructural and postmodern thinkers primarily in relation to texts that can, however, be applied equally to other cultural artefacts such as music. Joseph Kerman's book *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology*,[2] known outside the US under the title *Musicology*, is often regarded as marking a watershed moment that indicated a turn towards a focus on the cultural context of music (musicology engaging with these issues is very close to cultural studies), away from a main focus on the musical work and the score. In the late 1990s and early 2000s historical musicology experienced an additional "performative turn" that moved the focus even further away from music as a notated score (as well as auctorial intention) to music as a sounding artefact, particularly investigating performers' and listeners' interaction with it; Christopher Small's book *Musicking*[3] is an early example of this movement that was influenced by developments in ethnomusicology and popular music studies. There is, however, a significant number of historical musicologists who are still critical of the cultural studies approach (a number that has arguably become more vocal in recent years). This essay shall investigate what I regard as the two main challenges for historical musicology today: where it might be heading in the age of post-critical musicology and how it should react to the age of post-truth whose perceptual and moral relativism paired with the a priori rejection of expertise represent a fundamental challenge to all academic pursuits – a challenge so serious that it needs to be addressed by musicology as much as by all other humanities,

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2 Joseph Kerman, Contemplating Music: *Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge/MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).
3 Christopher Small, *Musicking. The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

social sciences and sciences. Juxtaposing critical musicology and what many call "the music itself" I will undertake this discussion following the structure of the most dialectical of all musical forms, the sonata form – albeit with the proviso that the resulting synthesis cannot consist of the tonic asserting its primacy at the expense of the dominant; there will have to be a more equitable outcome.

First Theme: Critical Musicology

The leading current epistemological paradigm in historical musicology is without doubt what is usually called "New Musicology" or "Critical Musicology". It is closely associated with the field of cultural studies and also with postmodern thinking. In fact, Derek Scott's essay on "Postmodernism and Music" is a good starting point to outline the hallmarks of critical musicology. The following bullet points are section headings in his text.[4]

- *The so far neglected* socio-cultural context replaces autonomy
  Musical works of art are no longer regarded as autonomous; instead, their social context is as much of interest as their intra-musical components.
- *Collapse of high and low: crossovers and new genres*
  Historical musicology now engages with genres formerly regarded as too low to warrant its interest such a popular music.
- *End of "grand narratives"*
  An example of this would be the end of modernity with its hallmark parameters such as organicism, economy of means, concentration or originality – unconsciously applied parameters that Janet Levy has described as "covert and casual values".[5]
- *Death of the composer as the originating genius – emphasis on reception and subject position – meaning as an effect of discourse*
  This is a move away from the search for a single "correct" meaning (which would be the creator's) towards the view that each perceiving subject creates her/his own meaning, and that individual or shared acceptance of meanings do not represent objective facts but the result of inter-subjective agreements.
- *Recognition that values are time-bound and change – we accept that we live in an age of cultural relativism*
  This is a consequence of the previous point; if there no longer is one 'correct' meaning what we have instead are temporary agreements and ultimately (at least potentially) cultural relativism.

All of this is based on a close engagement with ideas developed in cognate disciplines. Much of it relates to the theories of post-structuralist thinkers whose critical readings of cultural artefacts focus on their role as carriers of social and political meanings. This usually leads to identifying how power structures are reflected in cultural artefacts, and to critiquing those in power for utilising these artefacts

4 Derek B. Scott, "Postmodernism and Music," in *Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Stuart Sim (London: Routledge, 2011), 134–146.
5 Janet M. Levy, "Covert and Casual Values in Recent Writings about Music," *The Journal of Musicology* 5/ 1 (Winter, 1987), 3–27.

for their own purposes. Yet the researchers also have to reflect on their own unconscious biases and paradigms which may lead them to undertake their research in specific ways (see Rob C. Wegman's thoughts on this as discussed in the development section). Jeffers Engelhard describes the resulting mindset as follows.

> 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. 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.[6]

Transition

Critical musicology emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and it has won the battle of the paradigms. However, "winning" in this case means dominating the epistemological discourse in historical musicology, rather than every musicologist subscribing to it fully. There are quite a few researchers who don't, and there are quite a few subdisciplines (such as editing or certain aspects of historical performance practice) where one can avoid it relatively easily. We are also living at a time in which at least in the humanities different paradigms can coexist side by side which is one reason why many authors spend a significant time establishing their respective epistemological position before engaging with their actual topic in their writings.

Despite critical musicology being the leading paradigm, it could be argued that it is essentially over (already in 2011, Fred E. Maus entitled an article "What Was Critical Musicology?"[7]). That is not because it is no longer applied, but rather because it no longer gives new, vital impulses to research that would go significantly beyond its original insights. This situation often marks the moment when a new paradigm arises. However, none appears to be in sight yet.

Second Theme: The Music Itself

Among the main opponents of critical musicology are people who accuse (much of) it of neglecting the "music itself", what may be called the "sounding object" of research (also represented by the score as its written substrate). Good examples of this approach emerged during a public discussion at City University London on 1 July 2016 which is available on YouTube. There Ian Pace, pianist with a focus

6 Jeffers Engelhard, "Has Critical Musicology Aged Well?," *Radical Musicology* 6 (2011), Special Issue: Critical Musicology, (2010–11), paragraph 6, https://www.academia.edu/7188389/Has_Critical_Musicology_Aged_Well, accessed March 1, 2023.
7 Fred E. Maus, "What Was Critical Musicology?," *Radical Musicology* 6 (2010–11), Special Issue: Critical Musicology, http://www.radical-musicology.org.uk/special_critmus/maus.htm, accessed March 1, 2023.

on contemporary music and musicologist, stated: "today I am deeply concerned […] about the potential for subsumation of musicology into other disciplines to such an extent that it loses any distinct identity of its own."[8] He laments research that ignores the relationship between the sounding music and its context, describing this approach as "musicology without ears."[9] Michael Spitzer, a music theorist based in Liverpool, added to this: "In an economy of time scarcity every hour the medievalist or sketch scholar puts into reading Lacan or Bourdieu is an hour less to perfect their specialist craft."[10] When asked for his general advice to students his response was "be a little bit less self-reflexive and just more pragmatic about learning skills, as many skills as possible."[11] These would, of course, be music-specific skills.

Dillon Parmer, a Canadian tenor and musicologist, also critiques critical musicology, albeit specifically from a performer's perspective. Musicological thinking should take performers' experiences more into account – he regards current historical musicology as a discipline being mainly undertaken by and addressing listeners. Going even further, he proclaims that the musicological "white collar" workers have intellectually "enslaved" the musical "blue collar" practitioners (a term incorporating both performers and composers).[12] In addition, he laments the import of many intellectual concepts from other disciplines (in which musicologists are no experts) when so much more could still be done "internally".

Both Pace and Parmer have a point or two. Some publications that would clearly benefit from doing so do indeed omit any engagement with sounding music. An example is Christopher Partridge's study *Mortality and Music: Popular Music and the Awareness of Death* which states in its introduction that when researching pop songs one cannot just look at lyrics but has to take the music into account as well, yet then proceeds to do throughout the book exactly what he had warned against.[13] However, Partridge is not a musicologist but a cultural theorist, so he is to some extent excused, while his book still contains a number of interesting observations.

Likewise, Parmer's critique hits home in some contexts: A lot of musicological thinking is based on the listener's perspective, including even some historic performance practice – an area in which many

8 *Are We All Ethnomusicologists Now?*, Public Debate at City University, London, 1 June 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Az75bk4OV6E&t=1557s, ca. 38:50, accessed March 1, 2023. I selected this debate not just due to its easy accessibility but also because people tend to speak in a more open and unguarded manner than they would when writing – even when knowing that they are being recorded.
9 *Are We All Ethnomusicologists Now?*, ca. 49:31.
10 *Are We All Ethnomusicologists Now?*, ca. 1:04:35.
11 *Are We All Ethnomusicologists Now?*, ca. 1:20:22.
12 Dillon Parmer, "Musicology, Performance, Slavery: Intellectual Despotism and the Politics of Musical Understanding," *Intersections: Canadian Journal of Music* 34/1–2 (July 2015), 59–90.
13 Christopher Partridge, *Mortality and Music: Popular Music and the Awareness of Death* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

practitioners (such as Nikolaus Harnoncourt or John Butt) have made important contributions to scholarship, too. However, I disagree with Parmer's view that no intellectual concepts should be imported from other disciplines; the linguistic turn, deconstruction and discourse analysis have brought us many new approaches and self-reflective insights, and fighting a perceived dominance of researching musical context over researching "music itself" by reversing the emphasis cannot be the solution – this would be a return to a musicology from 40 years ago which had its own deficiencies. This is also the main argument against Spitzer's position: Yes, we need music-specific analytical and technical skills, but we also need to be up to date on general epistemological methods and issues in the humanities. Demanding as it is, students need both in order to produce acceptable research and be employable. Finally, while there may be some musicologists that regard themselves implicitly as above practitioners in some imaginary intellectual ranking, there are certainly also many practitioners who look down on musicologists, regarding them as failed performers who only turned to musicology due to their inability to reach professional performance standards.

Exposition: Closing Theme

Our two themes represent a fundamental musicological dichotomy which has been labelled differently in the literature. Rob C. Wegman speaks of a juxtaposition of an engagement with the material world (the music itself) versus one with the conceptual world (critical musicology).[14] Kevin Korsyn links the "music itself" faction to Orwell's Ministry of Truth (which propagates a single truth/paradigm that no one is "allowed" to deviate from) while contrasting it with the Tower of Babel (in which everyone does whatever they fancy, yet can't communicate well about it with others who pursue activities of a very different kind).[15] Can this antagonism be resolved? In the following development section, I will discuss a few ideas that might serve as "catalysts" facilitating a productive engagement with this question.

Development 1: Rob C. Wegman and Post-Factual Narcissism

Rob C. Wegman who calls himself a "lapsed postmodernist"[16] has made two equally informative and entertaining contributions to our topic. In "Blowing Bubbles in the Postmodern Era" he outlines his path from a follower of this ideology to a sceptic, even though he also describes highly fruitful research that he has undertaken under its guidance. He points out that Fredric Jameson's watchword "always historicise" might result in a rejection of universals, including truth as an objective category as "different communities in history may inhabit the same *material* world, they are also inescapably trapped

14 Rob C. Wegman, "Blowing Bubbles in the Postmodern Era," in *Resonances. Historical Essays on Continuity and Change* (Turnhout/Belgium: Brepols, 2011), 213–227: 227.
15 Kevin Korsyn, *Decentering Music. A Critique of Contemporary Musical Research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
16 Wegman, "Blowing Bubbles," 222.

each in their own, self-enclosed *conceptual* world."[17] Wegman regards truth as the most tragic victim of this development: most of the time propositions can now only be true or false within their respective discourses while many other questions make no sense to them at all.[18] One of them, a central issue bothering Wegman that is left unanswered by postmodern thinking out of necessity, is the following:

> I need [...] to know when I'm in error without a discourse to protect me or hide behind. Otherwise, what is discourse but a conglomeration of interests and investments, and at the root of it all, fears? Without some working definition of truth, what will unbridled proliferation of meaning, unchecked by verification, do for us, except make us indifferent to meaning altogether?[19]

Wegman's second essay engages less with his personal epistemological journey than with the consequences postmodern thinking has had for historical musicology as a whole, concluding that "[i]n recent years, historical musicology has come close to critiquing itself out of business."[20] He traces the roots of postmodern thinking in musicology as far back as Heinrich Besseler in the 1920s who already described a view of "history as the projected fulfilment of modern longings."[21] This view no longer regards the past as an autonomous realm that we can "discover" and describe, but rather one that we "create," and that each generation creates anew, in different ways. Quoting Martin L. Davies, Wegman describes this view as a fundamentally narcissistic one insofar as it means that whichever historical issue we investigate, we will always end up talking about ourselves, our values and our limitations: "The narcissistic self [...] evinces a depressive, deconstructive aggressivity, repudiating the unworthy other [that is, our image of the past] with an intensity matched only by its own internal self-castigation [that is, our self-criticism]".[22] But this type of self-reflection cannot lead to an outcome that will find universal acceptance. "For every image that is exposed as subjective, a new one is theorized as real"[23] – but this new image will, in turn, again be questioned and replaced by another one in a never-ending cycle. There is no internal solution to this; Wegman's suggested solution is essentially to stop bothering too much about the fact that we cannot determine universal truths in our research:

17 Wegman, "Blowing Bubbles," 227.
18 Wegman, "Blowing Bubbles," 225.
19 Wegman, "Blowing Bubbles," 225.
20 Rob C. Wegman, "Historical Musicology: Is It Still Possible?," in *The Cultural Study of Music. A Critical Introduction*, eds. Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, Richard Middleton (Hove: Psychology Press, 2003), 136–145: 142.
21 Wegman, "Historical Musicology: Is It Still Possible?," 136.
22 Wegman, "Historical Musicology: Is It Still Possible?," 142.
23 Wegman, "Historical Musicology: Is It Still Possible?," 143.

> if we cannot accept that we are fallible human beings, that everything we do will always have its problems, then historical musicology will indeed be possible no longer. There is a certain arrogance in depreciating a worthwhile endeavour, in this case historical musicology, merely because we cannot attain perfection in it.[24]

It is interesting, however, that Wegman presents this conclusion in a moralistic language ("fallible", "perfection"), rather than in epistemological terms, thus confirming his position as a "lapsed postmodernist" who is highly concerned about truth as an absolute value that is not restricted to intra-discoursivity.

Development 2: Hermann Danuser and "Variable Contextualisation"

In an essay published in 2010, Hermann Danuser reflects the relationship of text (meaning here both the score and the sounding musical artefact) and context in musicology, mainly critiquing an exclusive focus on context. However, he also argues against the older ideal of mainly textual analysis at the expense of context, instead developing a concept of "variable contextualisation" based on a list of seven "modes" of context which gradually move further and further away from the text itself – from "intratextual context" (the mutual relationship of different sections of a piece of music, for example the exposition and the recapitulation of a sonata form movement) to "context according to the aesthetics of reception" ("rezeptionsästhetischer Kontext"; the way in which an aesthetic event is realised by the recipient). It is not necessary here to look at these modes in detail; what matters is Danuser's argument that a musicology that gives up its "specifics," its discipline-specific methods and skills (the ones referred to above by Michael Spitzer), essentially ceases to exist. He opines that this is by now visible as a result of all art-related disciplines ("Kunstwissenschaften" such as art history and musicology) having turned into cultural studies disciplines ("Kulturwissenschaften").[25] Readings of pieces based on ideological, political or gender-related points of view only make sense for Danuser if they go hand in glove with analytical observations that show how those points of view manifest themselves in the music.[26] His conclusion can be summarised in the following quotation: "As long as 'Musikwissenschaft' does not forget the first part of its compound noun – 'music' – it can open up further, wherever investigating curiosity […] might lead it in the future – including as yet unknown areas beyond today's disciplinary boundaries."[27]

One way to paraphrase Danuser's position would be to state that whichever kind of research project a musicologist pursues, they should make sure that there is something somewhere in it that only a musicologist can do, that is "specific" to musicology. If such a section is absent, if the research could

24 Wegman, "Historical Musicology: Is It Still Possible?," 144.
25 Danuser, "Die Kunst der Kontextualisierung, " 44.
26 Danuser, "Die Kunst der Kontextualisierung," 59.
27 Danuser, "Die Kunst der Kontextualisierung," 63; my translation.

just as well have been undertaken by – depending on the topic – a cultural theorist, a historian, a literary theorist, a theologian, a sociologist or a psychologist (to name but a few possible alternatives), it becomes difficult to explain why musicology should exist as a separate discipline. And, more pragmatically speaking, why should any university then hire a musicologist alongside all the specialists just named? Had a musicologist written Partridge's *Mortality and Music* the way its non-musicological author did, focused on lyrics and almost without recourse to music, it would thus not be an acceptable piece of *musicological* research for Danuser. To put it more positively, I believe that the musicological point of view always has something to add to the overall picture that no historian, cultural theorist, sociologist etc. could contribute, and that we have to highlight this added value because without it the picture remains incomplete.

Development 3: Rita Felski and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion

Rita Felski is a literary theorist whose 2015 book *The Limits of Critique* addresses problems that arise from the dominant position that critical theory has acquired in the way in which virtually all humanities and socials sciences conduct their business in today's world. She acknowledges that these methods have led to great new approaches and insights, yet states that they do so on the basis of what Paul Ricœur has called "hermeneutics of suspicion":

> [t]hese thinkers instantiate a new suspicion of *motives* – of the ubiquity of deception and self-deception. Rather than being conveyed in words, truth lies beneath, behind or to the side of those words, encrypted in what cannot be said, in revelatory stutterings and recalcitrant silences. […] Meaning can be retrieved only after arduous effort; it must be wrested from the text, rather than gleaned from the text.[28]

This approach results in an attitude of fundamental negativity: It is assumed that people – particularly members of the ruling classes – use language (and other cultural artefacts such as music) in order to cement their position in society, and that the main function of researchers is to uncover their hidden strategies and techniques. There is nothing wrong with this approach, yet it has come at the expense of several other aspects of research that would in principle be equally interesting and worthy. They include a "one-sided view of the work of art" which leads to a serious reluctance to investigate things like "aesthetic pleasure, […] moral reflection, perceptual invigoration, ecstatic self-loss, emotional consolation, or heightened sensation"[29] – issues that we all experience, and that are central for anyone's engagement with works of art, but that do not directly contribute to uncovering the hidden motifs that critical theory is after. Closely related to this is an "affective inhibition," or an "overriding concern with

28 Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 31.
29 Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 188.

questioning motives and exposing wrongdoing [which] results in a mind-set – vigilant, vary, mistrustful – that blocks receptivity and inhibits generosity."[30] According to Felski, critical thinking has the potential to make us all meaner and more distrustful as we train ourselves never to take things at face value. This is again related to a third point, the specific picture of society that critical theory presupposes: "the Critique's stance of againstness, […] expressed in a digging-down for hidden truths […] also molds its conception of the social. Power is exposed as the invariant and overriding principle of social meaning [...]."[31] All three aspects apply equally to the poststructural or postmodern approach: both discourse analysis and deconstruction have at their heart the uncovering of power structures that reveal themselves through the structure and use of cultural artefacts, so Felski's critique of critique affects them too.

Retransition

One final point made by Felski is that the critical and reflective approach that both critical theory and poststructuralism advocate is very easily levelled against others but very difficult to apply to oneself. Adhering to it can let scholars appear in a mode of self-righteousness: researchers are encouraged "to impute hidden causes and unconscious motives to the arguments of others, while exempting themselves from the same charge: 'I speak truth to power, while you are a pawn of neoliberal interests!'"[32] This is something we can regularly observe in both academia and the wider society. As pointed out in the introduction, claiming that others are biased while I myself never am amounts to the greatest of all biases.

Recapitulation: First Theme

How does critical musicology appear in the light of the "catalysts" discussed in the development section? First it has to be emphasised again that it has greatly expanded our knowledge, as well as our methodological repertoire. We understand ourselves much better now as socially framed and at the same time intrinsically subjective individuals. We should not and cannot go back to a nostalgically tinted past when everything was purported to be better. Completely rejecting what critical musicology has brought us would be a dangerous case of a "make musicology great again" ideology. Yet it is worth reflecting on the balance that exists today between the focus on context and what Wegman describes as "narcissistic", constructivist[33] self-reflection on the one hand, and the investigation of the sounding artefact on the other. Neglecting the sounding artefact can in many cases lead to results that are much

30 Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 188.
31 Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 189.
32 Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 186.
33 Social constructivists believe that our perception of the world around us is mainly or entirely self-constructed, rather than based on an "objectively existing" reality.

less convincing than they would otherwise be. "Musicology without ears" does occur on occasion, and Spitzer's skills are indeed relevant – not equally for every single piece of musicological research, but as part of the set of tools that we all should be accepting as relevant for our work in general and apply where helpful. Apart from everything else their neglect would, as Danuser points out, be pragmatically self-defeating in a disciplinary context. Due to its emphasis of the "hermeneutics of suspicion" critical musicology also has the potential to exclude and even denigrate other context-oriented approaches as outlined by Felski (for example, Ernst Bloch's view of music as the ideal art to evoke utopian hope almost has to be labelled as naïve or wishful thinking from that point of view).[34] Finally, the epistemological relativism that inevitably comes with a constructivist approach risks creating an open flank that the post-truth mentality (as well as neoliberalism) can exploit: it can lead to a fundamental amorality in which questions like what is true or false, right or wrong don't even make sense any more as there are no recognised inter-subjective categories left which could decide their outcome. If what I believe to be true essentially equals what I like, or what the "filter bubble" I live in prefers, rather than what might be important or helpful in a more general way, or what is based on factual evidence versus what isn't, it is much more likely that research is measured according to relativist standards that made things like the original 'Sokal hoax' and its recent repetitions possible.[35]

Recapitulation: Transition

It is worth acknowledging that at least on social media nowadays academics are just as much as anyone else prone to drop their normal reasoned, objective tone and adopt an aggressive attitude based on gut feeling. The Polzonetti debate may serve as an example here. In February 2016 Pierpaolo Polzonetti contributed a text entitled "Don Giovanni Goes to Prison: Teaching Opera Behind Bars" to the blog of the American Musicological Society. It quickly triggered a highly controversial discussion in the comments section as well as on other blogs.[36] The content of this discussion is of lesser interest here than the language adopted by some of the commentators right under his text: The comments include

34 Wolfgang Marx, "The Spirits of Utopia and of Disenchantment – Ernst Bloch, Hope and Music in the Age of Post-Truth," *Edinburgh German Yearbook* vol. 13: *Music in Politics / Politics in Music*, eds. Siobhán Donovan, Maria Euchner (Camden House, 2022), 169-185.

35 The Sokal hoax is named after Alan Sokal, a physics professor who in 1996 created a fake social science paper that consisted of nonsense framed in complex jargon which was accepted and published by an academic journal. Most recently he and two other writers have repeated this exercise in 2018; see https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/new-sokal-hoax/572212; accessed March 1, 2023.

36 The original post (and with it the comments) is not freely available online; a longer version of Polzonetti's text can be accessed here: Pierpaolo Polzonetti, https://www.academia.edu/31374861/Don_Giovanni_Goes_to_Prison_Teaching_Opera_Behind_Bars, accessed March 1, 2023. One of the first reactions to his blog post is Kendra Leonard, "On Musicology now and Issues of Privilege", https://kendraprestonleonard.hcommons.org/2016/02/17/on-musicology-now-and-issues-of-privilege/, accessed March 1, 2023.

lines such as "Indeed. What a bunch of elitist shits we have on here" or "Either way, you're an elitist pig if you want to deny greater knowledge and understanding to people, just because they happen to be in prison or of a lower social class to yourself." Most readers will regularly (probably daily) witness similar and worse shitstorms on the web or even in their own social media environment – I certainly do, including among fellow academics. It appears that even people highly trained to interact in a reasoned and reasonable way can be easily induced to drop this attitude. This may be the case because the inhibition to behave this way is much lower when interacting online, usually neither knowing nor facing the dialogue partner. Academics are by no means immune from the post-truth virus, particularly the polarisation of the way in which opposing camps engage with each other nowadays.

Recapitulation: Second Theme

It may be argued that the texts discussed in the development section are more critical of critical musicology than of the "the music itself" faction. However, that is because critical musicology itself provided most of the necessary critique of a non-contextual historical musicology that focuses on analysis of musical pieces and styles, sound production and transmission, editing, and the amassing of biographical facts – a critique that is still valid today. The ultimate risk of such an approach is expressed by a line by Stanley Hoffman that Richard Taruskin has quoted several times: "There are universal values, and they happen to be mine."[37] This attitude can lead to the belief that there are absolute values that can never be subject of critical analysis, or that certain music, methods or questions don't belong into the discipline's purview and may even have to be excluded from musicological research (such as when, to bring in my personal "narcissistic" perspective, a potential Doktorvater once said to me with regard to a context-oriented PhD project: "This isn't musicology – I can't supervise that"). A line by Kenneth Levy may be useful at this point: "There are, at bottom, just two tests for the worthiness of a musicological undertaking: (1) that it be concerned with first-class music; and (2) that it be concerned with a first-class problem."[38] There is, of course, the problem of who determines what first-class music is – maybe a better way of putting it is "music being regarded as first-class by the researcher engaging with it." We can perhaps agree that each musicologist has a tendency to either engage with music that s/he considers to be relevant for himself/herself (and then try to convince others of its special quality), or with issues of great relevance that can either be related to "music itself," or might just as often reach beyond it into the area of extra-musical context. In the latter case our engagement with music in general

37 An example of this quotation can be found in Richard Taruskin, "A Beethoven Season?," *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: The University of California Press, 2009), 71–80: 77.

38 Kenneth Levy, "Foreword." In Essays on Music in the Byzantine World, ed. Oliver Strunk (New York: Norton, 1977), ix–xiii: x.

(rather than with specific pieces or styles) could be the topic. How music and musicology relate to a phenomenon such as post-truth belongs into this category as well.

Closing Theme

Ultimately, I think that Kenneth J. Levy is right: both sounding music and problems that I rank as relevant are equally interesting and deserving of musicological research, whether they are closer to intra-musical or contextual questions and methods – there should always be room for both. When I was a first-year student in Hamburg (where it is possible to study historical musicology and systematic musicology as separate undergraduate programmes) my first impression of the difference between these two areas was that historical musicologists appear to be mainly interested in music and only take extra-musical aspects into account where they help them answering music-specific questions, while systematic musicologists are mainly interested in "musicking" people and take "the music itself" into account only where it aids their respective questions. Later I found things to be more complex, of course, but by now I'm wondering again whether my original impression may represent a certain trend, except with the music itself and critical musicology now occupying the two sides of this equation. In the end we need both, of course, to avoid developing a left or right blind eye.

Coda

A new and better balance between the two sides of this equation will be an important part of the answer to the first question raised in the introduction, namely what the future of historical musicology may look like. But it is also one of several possible answers to the second question: Demonstrating how different views, methodologies and approaches can collaborate fruitfully without permanently increasing polarisation and infighting can serve as a model in a world in which the opposite behaviour is becoming more and more prevalent. This is particularly relevant with regard to the research-related values and principles that we most likely all share, regardless of political or other societal orientations: a strengthening of reflectivity over reflexivity, an acknowledgement of complexity alongside a rejection of simplistic and immediate black-and-white judgments, and a focus on the common good overall – all of these need to be re-emphasised if our society is to remain cohesive and survive in good health. These principles are no longer necessarily a given amongst politicians or even university management. We should not and cannot ignore our subjectivity, but we have to be ready to listen to others, seek common truths, and accept that our own emotions don't always point us the right way. As Wegman states, we are fallible human beings, yet within our limitations we have to strive to be as objective as possible (there is a significant difference between that and freely indulging in complete "narcissistic" subjectivity). If we can manage that we may be able to critique ourselves back into business, and also help combatting some of the excesses of the post-truth mentality along the way.

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