

Current Musicology's *Project on Musicological Method*: Some Comments

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In June of 1967 Michael Griffel asked me if I would look at *Current Musicology's* questionnaire on musicological method [Number 5/1967; Number 6/1968] and comment on some of the issues raised by the replies. I'm sometimes rather skeptical about the value of questionnaires. (Far too much of the time of British academics has been spent recently in completing them, and footling questions invite ridiculous answers. Still, the whole procedure is presumably very character-forming; no doubt it has been useful in frustrating our selfish desires to concentrate overmuch on such mischievous or downright antisocial activities as teaching or research or administration or trying to become learned or keeping up with the scholarly Joneses.)

Current Musicology's questionnaire, I confess, took me a little while to penetrate. "Methodology," for instance, is one of those gadfly words that hatched out not long ago. It buzzes, most distractingly, in and out of sundry academic reports, syllabuses, and curricula at the present time. I spend much energy in trying to swat it. I've been searching for a context in which "method" would not do just as well. Besides, this word saves 45% typing-time, which could be used for filling in yet more forms. . . .

The boundary between "science" and "humanities," too, is an entirely fortuitous one, unknown a few decades ago. The more blurring of this adventitious division we can do, the better it will be for the future of mankind. *All* serious students—old or young—are scientists, in that they study what is known. *All* serious students are involved in the humanities, in that they are human beings. "Nothing human do I deem alien to me." The further we advance into such fields as physics or biology or communications, the more evident it becomes that we are faced over and over again with problems of probability theory, ethics, orderliness, parsimony, morals, money, and logic entirely akin to those that occupied the attention of Aristotle, Confucius, or the Buddha, quite some time ago. The problems have certainly become far more urgent; but their essential nature, which is bound to the mystery of humanity itself, has not changed.

To my taste, then, all questionnaires are far too "either-or," and *Current Musicology's* is no exception. The most magical and alluring hours of the 24 are those at dawn and dusk, not high noon or deep midnight. The most fruitful areas for all human endeavor are the becoming and the dissolving, not the is or the is-not. All questionnaires, too, get very soggy and limp unless you ruthlessly kick out the abstract nouns and the passive verbs. The same goes for other prose. Underline for yourself the abstracts and passives in "What

attention is given to the methods employed in determining the performance practice for a specific work or group of works?" (*Current Musicology*, 5: 8).

In reading and re-reading the answers, I have found myself perplexed by certain gaps or slants that seem to recur many times. It is, perhaps, best if my report, for what it's worth, deals with these one by one, in no particular order.

Actualities. Universities have many jobs to do, but by no means the least of them has always been to teach people something about the problems of the societies and cultures of their own time. A University worthy of the name—and we can all think of many that are not—is in a perpetual state of “becoming.” It stands at the leading edge of the future. It locates areas of change; it surveys what has been; it helps young men and women to transmute themselves into adult and responsible members of society. It constantly passes the past under review; it continually re-defines the present; it must always play a vital part in determining possible futures, since these will to a certain extent depend upon the acts and thoughts of its graduates. These ideas are commonplace enough in, say, the natural sciences or linguistics. In music studies one has the feeling that they are scarcely touched on at all. If musicology is to deserve its place in the academic sun, it must grow out of a study of today's problems as well as those of yesterday, for music is about people, and people do not really change very much. The roles and functions of music in the societies and schools of our time; music as muzak or drug of addiction or placebo or panacea; the interlocking and interdependent problems of the composer, the performer, and the audience, or of the professional and the amateur; music in societies whose assumptions differ from our own, just as the assumptions of a medieval Christian society differed from those of Islam or Genghis Khan: these are some of our problems, as scholar-musicians. If we do not turn our attention to them, whoever else will? It seems to me that any attempt to come to terms with a professional composer like, say, Dufay will be superficial, naive, and misleading unless we know something of the problems confronting Lou Harrison or Gian Carlo Menotti, Richard Rodney Bennett or Sir William Walton. Nearly all the courses I have been reading about begin with the distant dead. Why are we so afraid of starting at the other end, with the near-at-hand and the living?

Taboo-subjects. There are a lot of these. One notes a few outstanding ones, with many misgivings. Music education, for instance, in which—for someone like myself—some of the most exciting and original work is at this time being done in the United States. Music criticism: does not this begin with writing reviews of composing methods, scores, performances, books, television spectaculars, of our own time? This is what all the great music critics of the past did: Mattheson, Morley, Shaw, Schumann, Hanslick, Berlioz. To read the average city paper in America is one of the most depressing things one can do, if it is music criticism one is after. Criticism of actualities of this kind will teach self-reliance, modesty, self-criticism, judgment; it will sharpen the edges of words and increase the cutting-power of ideas; it will unerringly locate areas of ignorance and infallibly isolate the built-in warps that weaken

most value judgments. It may even help to foster taste and discrimination, for these are plants of very slow growth.

Professionalism. There seems little or no contact between musicology, as it is taught in American universities, and professional music, as it is heard in concert or community hall, or opera house, or television studio, or radio program. Painting and sculpture are lonely arts, done in solitude. Music is a social phenomenon—always has been, always (with luck) will be—in which performer, composer, and listener intersect and interact in the here-and-now of a live performance. (Our addiction to the dead has virtually excluded that shy bird, the composer, from his natural roosting places, the concert hall, the opera house, the school, and the orchestra. It is good to know of the project the Ford Foundation has thought it right to set in motion to amend this situation, at least for schools.) “Performance practice” as a study will be meaningless and pernicious unless the would-be scholar is constantly and forcibly reminded of some elementary articles in the creed of every professional musician. For instance: “Whatever else I do, I must *not* bore my audience”; “I must make it new”; “My performance will of course take account of my mood, my instrument, the composer’s wishes, my audience’s reaction, my platform colleagues, my acoustical surroundings”; “I am not a pianola roll, programmed only to my teacher’s views of how to interpret”; “Our conductor today is either a knave or a zealot; since I don’t yet know which, and since my job is to serve the composer and my platform colleagues, I shall not feel obliged to look at him at all; ignoring him will be restful for me and will not make an atom of difference to the performance.” And so on.

Style. Have we any notion of what this means? All too often investigations of style are self-fulfilling prophecies, immensely gratifying to one’s self-esteem, but utterly useless to the advancement of scholarship. A really luminous investigation of, say, Bach’s style will depend on sorting authentic works from bogus ones. Such considerations are elementary among art historians; unless one begins with them, all one’s stylistic criteria will be contaminated and circular. As an experienced professional performer who also tries to be something of a scholar, I have yet to prove to my own satisfaction that any of the following keyboard works ascribed to Johann Sebastian Bach were in fact unquestionably composed by him: the six English suites, the chromatic fantasy and fugue, the triple concerto in A minor, all the other concertos for one to four keyboards, the organ toccata and fugue in D minor. If I am right, then something is very wrong. (If I am wrong, then will someone please *prove* the point to me, very soon?) Many replies to the questionnaire stress that musicology, like so much else, makes most of its advances through observation, analysis, hypothesis, and the back-and-forth thrusts of discussion. Are we firm enough in the way we teach these essential techniques of How To Rape Your Subject? Do we pay enough attention to the touchstone of anonymity? I cannot believe so.

Gong-words. Like taboo-subjects, there are lots of these. I mean terms like

“renaissance,” “classical,” “baroque,” “sonata form”: their reverberations are so strong and so diverse that they instantly blanket every discussion and deafen each debater. Best if we renounce our addiction to them as soon as we can get unhooked, for I cannot believe it to be good for us. (Next week will do.) Our conception of the relationship between style and chronology, too, is far too thin-textured and shapeless. Many professional musicians of my own acquaintance pride themselves on their simultaneous mastery of a number of different composing or performing techniques. After all, every craftsman enjoys acquiring and demonstrating his craft. It is equally likely that Dunstable prided himself on being able, at the drop of a benefice or the request of a duke, to write a simple Magnificat, a complex Mass cycle, an architectonic isorhythmic motet (complete with his own carefully composed alliterative verse to go with it), a fauxbourdon hymn, or a “top-twenty” song. If this was in fact the case—and I have no reason to believe otherwise—then most of our discussions of chronology based on style criteria (or of style based on shallow analyses of source criteria, as for instance with Bach’s *Brandenburgs* or Handel’s *Op. 6 concerti grossi*) will turn out to be otiose. Our conclusions are likely to be unbecomingly grotesque in consequence.

Notation. The case for concentrating on the period 1400–1600 is a very strong one. There is even a certain case for traversing this period backwards, so that one may proceed from the known to the unknown and may see for oneself how ambiguities and uncertainties arose. Printing had as decisive an effect on notation’s transformation as disc and videotape are having on music’s deformation today. It is never possible to generalize about manuscripts, since each of them is by its nature a unique human artifact. But music prints, whether from plates or movable type or the lithographic stone, are a different matter. The student musicologist, to my mind, ought *always* to begin with a thorough study of printed musical documents. There is much to be said for this start being made with the printed musical documents of the present day, for they are immediately available, at small cost; we pay a heavy price as scholars if we spend our entire time with microfilm or photographic copy. In this way the student will learn how to shape his own calculus of error and to formulate his own algebra of doubt. With these tools, and fortified by comparing them with the work of such outstanding scholars as McKerrow, Fredson Bowers, or Charlton Hinman, he will then be equipped to try to crack the safe of a single musical manuscript.

Knit Your Own Baroque. We do this very well nowadays, to judge from the majority of gramophone records I hear. It bears little resemblance to what earlier times heard and did. Synthetic instruments (e.g., so very many 20th-century harpsichords) are used to pull early music every which way. Artificial and mannered styles of performance, fashionable only at the French court between, say, 1710 and 1715 when royalty was present, are rammed into Purcell’s odes or Bach’s cantatas or Handel’s oratorios with all the hamfisted skill of a backwoods veterinary surgeon injecting an old cow suffering from the staggers. The cow may yet live, despite the vet. An analysis of changes in

beat-groups' performance practice during the last five years will focus one's prudence. Like the prospect of being hanged, it may even concentrate one's mind wonderfully. . . .

Aesthetics. Music seems more resistant to the formulation and application of aesthetic theories than any other art. A pity, then, that so little is taught to English-speaking music students about the work of French-speaking commentators of the past fifty years, in particular of some of the men and women now living and working in Paris and Brussels: Pierre Schaeffer, Wangermée, Souris, Collaer, Bridgman, Boulez, and the brilliant aestheticians of the Sorbonne. The Anglo-Saxon world, it seems to me, is all too apt to become excessively Anglo or Saxon (or both) when confronted with the French world. Better if we came to terms with it, for it's been there a long time. England has more than once been described as a French colony that turned out rather odd. To be classed as a great composer it is not *essential* to have been German-speaking, difficult, and dead, though this is evidently a great help. . . .

Here, then, set down pell-mell, are some of the thoughts and considerations that have come to my mind in reading these very instructive reports on musicological method in American graduate schools. I am only too aware of how disheveled and unoriginal they may turn out to be, but I hope that they will make some contribution to the discussion. It seems clear to me that the debate might, with advantage, be very searching. It must also begin very soon.