Britta Sweers/Cristina Urchueguía

One Object Viewed from Different Perspectives. Ethnomusicology and Historical Musicology in Dialogue

Ethnomusicology and historical musicology intersect in many places, especially in how they approach the music of the Middle Ages. On the one hand, this concerns specific historical events such as the presence of Arabic cultures on the Iberian Peninsula and the corresponding intercultural processes of encounter. On the other hand, this also includes methodological questions, since oral and written processes of transmission can hardly be separated from each other. The following dialogue is based on a conversation held at the end of the two-day symposium "The Medieval Rabab" at the Bern Academy of the Arts.[1] *Here, Britta Sweers, professor of Cultural Anthropology of Music, and Cristina Urchueguía, professor of historical musicology, both from the University of Bern, discuss perspectives for potential productive collaborations between their two disciplines. What differences exist between their approaches, and how do they complement one another? What is the difference between historical ethnomusicology and music history? And how are comparative cultural questions dealt with today?*

Interdisciplinary challenges

BS: We have been discussing the music of the Middle Ages, which is an area where both of our disciplines – ethnomusicology and historical musicology – meet. It became obvious that there are some grey zones between our disciplines. The highly interdisciplinary research that has been presented touches on many areas that are also addressed by other disciplines. Many of these topics that are likewise at the edges of our disciplines require specialist background knowledge. With music iconography, for example, one might think: that's the business of art history, that's not my business, and vice versa. As a result, nobody addresses it. In the case of the analytical catalogue presented by Thilo Hirsch and Marina Haiduk,[2] it had apparently been previously assumed that another discipline was already undertaking this research, resulting in these themes becoming overlooked: these are grey areas.

The theme of this volume is both historical and ethnomusicological. For several decades, these two disciplines have had issues with each other, even though they actually have similar origins. If you go back to Guido Adler's concept of musicology,[3] the idea was initially that it was one discipline with subareas. Even early comparative musicology started from the broad idea

1 See Institute Interpretation 2021; this conversation has been transcribed by Marina Haiduk and slightly reworked by the authors.

2 See Thilo Hirsch/Marina Haiduk's article "Von der Darstellung zum klingenden Objekt", in this volume, pp. 59–89 (Hirsch/Haiduk 2025).

3 Adler 1885.

of wanting to understand human music-making in the widest possible sense. The initial notion was not that the disciplines should become opposites, with ethnomusicology the discipline that studies 'the other', and historical musicology basically focused on male composers, the 'great white men'. Our approach at the Bern University has been one of bringing together both disciplines again and developing an intradisciplinary dialogue, also by sometimes having joint seminars where Cristina and I address similar topics. Then we just fight a little bit in a playful way to demonstrate that there are different approaches and perspectives, but our disciplines are not so different – and it's quite nice to have that kind of collaboration.

CU: We have to celebrate jam sessions like this where we try to point out why this "unwillingness to understand each other" evolved. There are certain conditions concerning the object we are dealing with. One can read it in the very first sentence of Guido Adler's seminal article "Umfang, Methode und Ziel der Musikwissenschaft" ("The scope, method and aim of musicology") from 1885: Musicologists focus on historical music, and to be more precise, on the musical artwork.[4] This is our object. If you begin like that, you could just skip all music before the eighteenth century, because the idea of the musical artwork is an ideological concept that was coined in the nineteenth century. The other thing is that Adler also conveys a kind of value catalogue between the lines that puts complexity at the top and simplicity – I'm not saying primitivity, but simplicity – at the bottom.

Obviously, it's very easy to analyse complex music and very difficult to analyse simple music – music that works with means you cannot count but must look at and describe qualitatively. Historical musicologists prefer complex musical artworks as their object. The great contradiction here is that they also want to speak about the music of the Middle Ages, although it does not fulfil the conditions it needs to be either an artwork or complex because it has completely different goals. Paradoxically, this is a point where we can meet. But ethnomusicology needed to assert its own place as an academic discipline, and did so by establishing a clear dividing line between it and historical musicology.

There was another divide between them that was sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit. Saying that ethnomusicology deals with 'the other', while historical musicology tries to make sense of 'our own' past, means that we are dealing with western, European music: the root of every kind of art music. Everything else would then belong in the realm of the ethnomusicologist. Ethnomusicology approaches the present as if it had no past, while historical musicologists look at the past as if it was not present anymore. This has been a kind of non-spoken way of dealing with the methodologies of historical and ethnomusicology. But if you look closer, it doesn't work at all.

Similarities between historical musicology and ethnomusicology

BS: The big eye-opener, at least for me, was Peter Jeffery's *Re-Envisioning Past Musical Cultures. Ethnomusicology in the Study of Gregorian Chant* in 1992,[5] because until that point an ethnomusicologist was supposed to study the music of 'the other', even though this had never really been true. As Cristina said, it used to be the music of the 'present', even though that was also not true. Because once you've done an interview it's something in the past and you have to work with memories, reconstructions of biographies et cetera, even if you are working on the music of the present. As we could see here, there is a decade-long history of ethnomusicology deal-

4 "Die Musikwissenschaft entstand gleichzeitig mit der Tonkunst." (Ibid., p. 5).
5 Jeffery 1992.

ing with manuscripts from the Arab regions, for instance, though it was somehow always cast aside in how the discipline was represented and perceived on the outside.

I used to be a historical musicologist and then swapped sides because the time in question was dominated by the unspoken rule that we should not engage in context-oriented studies – to come back to our favourite word 'context'. I started to study in 1989, shortly before the Berlin Wall fell, and until that time many aspects were shaped by Cold-War thinking in Germany and everywhere else.[6] If you explicitly studied music in context, this could have been associated with having a communist slant. One might laugh about this now, but at that time, 'proper' historical musicologists did analysis, studied watermarks et cetera. I was being introduced to a hardcore musicology that engaged in this kind of research to the extent that you didn't really look at anything beyond the so-called material-based 'hard facts'. That was when I switched over, even though contextualisation and the sociocultural and sociopolitical aspects ought to have been part of historical musicology too at the time.

CU: There is another premise that was key to historical musicology – 'authenticity'. The paradigm of authenticity has created and shaped a whole set of methodologies that have become a decalogue of how historical musicologists work. We are very keen on authenticity and hate any kind of hybridisation, things that escape the control of the author, or reception processes that can contaminate what we study. Historical musicologists dislike all this because they want someone to be responsible for the creative process. They think about their objects as homogeneous, structurally distinct artifacts.

One topic that is also very important for us is stylistic development – the development from the very simple artwork to the very complex thanks to the genius of an individual agent who knows perfectly well what he is doing, or has a kind of divine inspiration moving him. All these ideas permeate the narratives of historical musicology. For me, the dialogue with ethnomusicology was also eye-opening because it let me recognise where we are actually committing an injustice towards real music history. We are not really focusing on the history of musical practice but only on a very tiny part of it, namely the creation of complex musical artworks. Our object was the history of composition and not the history of what happened, or why, or what contexts allowed the music to emerge.

For instance, my first seminar was about the motet of Notre Dame. We learned about fancy concordances between the different manuscripts. But no questions were ever posed about how this music was used, sung, where, or why the manuscripts lack any kind of evidence of having been used. Nobody asked, "what's this all about?"

This context-oriented way of looking at music is very important if we are to shift our attention from a composing-oriented musicology in which the history of the development of composing music needs individual, authorial agency, to asking questions about what music does with people and what people do with music, regardless of whether we conceptualise it as art music, popular music, or any other kind of music (differentiations that are in themselves problematic too).

'The other' in music histories

BS: However, looking at 'the other' can be useful, especially if you have to write a music history. If you look at books on the history of western or European music in German or English, you usually find a central European history that depicts an evolutionary narrative. There is

6 Shreffler 2003.

something grey at the 'beginning' of the mediaeval period that is depicted as marking a caesura after a period without notated music, thus without 'complex' music. Suddenly, notation appears – Gregorian chant – which becomes more and more complex and therefore marks the beginning of 'art music'. However, at that time – and I think this conference has demonstrated this – music life was thriving at the so-called edges of Europe. For example, in al-Andalus and the Byzantine realm, music was extremely complex. There were music libraries, universities et cetera at a time when people in central Europe were herding sheep. Imagine writing a music history of a Europe that includes these kinds of complex musics and musical contexts within the whole geographical area of the continent! You would also have to include Muslim cultures. That's a tricky political issue, but one that would be important if we are to get a complete image of Europe.

CU: It begins with the term 'mediaeval' itself. The Middle Ages are a period between the fall of the Roman Empire in which we have our cultural roots, and the so-called Renaissance, a period that historiography often characterises primarily through its revival of the culture of Antiquity. In the fourth to sixth centuries, supposedly horrible barbarians destroyed the Roman Empire – then, eventually, in the thirteenth century – depending on whether you were in France, where people were reputedly more intelligent and quicker than others, or in what is Italy nowadays or somewhere else – the knowledge of the past was restored. Charlemagne was the first to prepare the field, then the Renaissance came, and slowly but surely, western music arrived at the point where we are now. This perspective implies that Celts, Jews, Muslims, and all the other cultures present had no implications for music's historical development, but merely constituted anomalies that we can just put aside. We have a similar case in the Renaissance when people craved for the Hellenistic and Roman Classical period while ignoring all other precursors. Changing the perception of the period between the sixth and the fourteenth century, really problematising the term Middle Ages itself, is difficult work. We should reflect on what these kinds of terms do with the content we are speaking about. For this reason, I tend to reject the term 'mediaeval' because it is bound up with expunging different cultures or elements of culture that were constitutive elements of how Europe evolved, but do not suit the master narrative of European cultural history.

Centre and periphery

BS: Addressing the developments that we have been discussing during the conference also means posing questions about the centre and the periphery. As you know, in histories of western European music, the Holy Roman Empire is at the centre. But if we accept that these so-called centres were themselves at the periphery, what does this mean for a European self-perception? This is an open question.

There is a further issue. Including the edges also helps us to get an early global perspective. Of course, globalisation at that time was not what it is nowadays. But we are still dealing with an early form of historical globalisation because Europe at its edges was connected to many early transcontinental global flows through Northern Africa, the Arab peninsula, even to India and beyond.[7] And again, if you look at what had been happening in India at that time, or in the region of what today is Indonesia, you find that music life was thriving and musical interactions were already taking place at a time when Europe was still quite slow, both in the docu-

7 Held et al. 2003.

mented variety of repertoires and in the intensity of its developments. Changing perspectives is very exciting, but not comfortable.

CU: Even the development of Christianity is always seen as something Roman, though it began in the Northern Middle East and Northern Africa. The basis of the Bible is the Jewish Tanach, which is written in Hebrew and Aramaic. Many later texts were written by diaspora Christians in Northern Africa, Ethiopia and Eritrea. The Septuagint was translated into Greek, and in a second development the standard Latin translation called the "Vulgata" became the monopolistic normative basis of Christian theology. But we tend to forget that the origins of Christianity are somewhere else.

Globalisation and nationalism

BS: It seems as if this narrow approach is especially challenging to historical musicology, but at the same time it's also challenging established European ethnomusicological perspectives. If you look at Europe, again from a broader perspective, quite a few countries – especially in eastern Europe – are focused on establishing national histories of folk music. You again have to have a broader picture in mind. Just by looking at the interconnections of travelling musicians or travelling instruments, you can see that this kind of local, political, national concept – one that has been central to many folk-music research approaches for many decades in many countries and regions in Europe – is not really working.

CU: It is right to criticise this nationalistic view, because in the Middle Ages – I call it the Middle Ages, though you've already heard my critique of this term –, rulers did not think of their territories as national entities. The political situation was completely different. Besides military and political power, there was an independent network of places like monasteries that had the competence and knowledge to administer estates, creating a global network of stakeholders and other political powers. For instance, Charlemagne and the Carolingians first assumed power over the vast territories that they ruled as an empire, but subsequently fragmented this entity again through their policies of inheritance. They treated politics like a family business, and the next generation saw brothers fight against each other to conquer their respective territory. The power systems at the time were much more fluid than our idea of nationalism, which is linked to political continuity, to cultural identity and to a common history, but is completely anachronistic if we project it onto the Middle Ages.

Tradition and revival

BS: There might be further aspects, like our understanding of breaking traditions but also of continuity. Our disciplines also meet here. For instance, I've been focussing on how traditional music is being revived and changed in the present day,[8] but this has also helped me to understand what could happen to a tradition, and what is important for a tradition to continue. Change is important if tradition isn't going to turn a culture into something backwards-looking or museum-like. But how much change can you adopt while still remaining recognisable? What does this mean for the reconstruction of history, for example, or for our connection with certain instruments?

8 Sweers 2005.

I think that our experience of the Covid-19 pandemic is a good example in our own time. The pandemic was terrible, but it also provides us with deep insights into how quickly our knowledge of certain cultural practices can disappear. Before Covid-19 we had a thriving music culture, but during the pandemic many musicians lost their job. Now that we are in the process of reviving that culture, we realise that a lot of people have left, or have moved into other jobs. The pandemic might well have been a point of no return for some traditions and infrastructure. So we can still experience this kind of major rupture, even in the twenty-first century. What does this mean with regard to studying historical breaks in tradition?

CU: This question is very complex, because traditions have broken down for many different reasons. Some have eventually been revived, if sometimes randomly. There are also divergent rationales or politics of revival.[9] One of the most successful has been the historically informed music revival that prioritised authenticity and historical plausibility. It has meanwhile been subjected to a thorough critique. Musicians know that it's impossible to reconstruct the past, though this ideal has not really been contested by any other distinct paradigm.

But it would be interesting to see why we want to pursue authenticity, what our motivation is to reconstruct a tradition after its discontinuation, and why certain things are so appealing to us now, whereas others are not. There are traditions that are totally lost and that nobody cares about, like the Singspiel in Germany, for instance, a genre of comic operetta in the eighteenth century. Only two have survived: *Die Zauberflöte* and *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, while thousands of them sleep peacefully in archives and no prince has come to kiss them back to life. But many other traditions are there too, so it's not a question of how a tradition is interrupted or just perishes, but how we make choices among many possible alternatives, and what our approach is to traditions when we reconstruct them.

I mention this because some instruments that we have seen at this conference are reconstructions, reshapings or remakings by someone who played them and died in 2019, and nobody is playing this music anymore. Within just two years, something has turned from being a living dinosaur to something that you want to use to do something new.

Authenticity

BS: Cristina just brought up a key word, which is 'authenticity' – a very tricky word. The concept of authenticity doesn't work if you haven't got the opposite – it's always authenticity against the inauthentic. And authenticity can also have different layers of meaning. For instance, in an ideal situation you might have a complete original Greek vase or sculpture. It's authentic because it was made two or three thousand years ago and the original components are still there – it has a kind of material-based, historical authenticity.[10] But what about music? An authentic musical instrument would be one that was constructed in mediaeval times. But in contrast to Greek vases, it is difficult to preserve wood and other organic material, so such instruments require a complex reconstruction process. And how were they played? There is also a kind of authenticity regarding what is true to me, to my inner self, at the present time. So there are different layers of authenticity; it is not an absolute. This is what we learned from our research: that you really have to be careful with this expression.

To return to the second meaning, Early Music can still be authentic in the sense of being authentic in the twenty-first century. You might have tried your best to reconstruct an instru-

9 E.g. Bithell/Hill 2014.

10 See also Dutton 2003; Claviez et al. 2020.

ment with the best sound possible, but it might not be authentic with regard to what exactly was done in mediaeval times, also because people back then will have perceived things and listened to them differently. The soundscape was completely different. If you look at writings from that time, you see that people experienced emotions, war and so on in a completely different way.[11] For me as an ethnomusicologist, the period we describe as mediaeval is a completely different culture that I need to decipher, much as I would try to understand a culture in South America or elsewhere.

CU: Material authenticity always seems to constitute a sort of uncontested, self-evident, absolute truth, but it is only one part of the equation. The object exists, it is made of atoms, but maybe it has changed and now it is not authentic at all anymore. That's why I propose conceptualising objects as texts, just as you would a written text that you edit using the scholarly instruments of historical criticism. Someone described these different musical instruments as variants of an ideal instrument. This is also a metaphor taken from textual criticism, for here, too, there is a certain historical form with a basic layout, and variants of this ideal circulate that remain the same despite their differences.

Hybridisation and other processes play a role. One should re-functionalise authenticity not as a final goal but as a guiding concept, a tool that you can work with in pursuit of different perspectives on an object – a structural perspective, a textual perspective, a material perspective, a functional perspective. Functional authenticity is something completely different from material authenticity, just to mention one example. It offers you greater possibilities for using those elements of the object that you want to 'edit' for specific reasons in your work.

Intercultural comparisons from a historical perspective

BS: We can add some final points, such as about intercultural comparison between past traditions and present-day music practices. The musicological disciplines really need to address the validity and pitfalls of these approaches. As an ethnomusicologist, I'm a bit cautious if I only have a description, for instance, of vocal performance practices, because the voice is always quite difficult to describe. If you have no physical medium of transmission, then you have to depend on writings and also, a little bit, on your imagination. But what does it mean if, for instance, a manuscript – I think it was related to Welsh mediaeval singing – says that the voice sounded 'bee-like'?[12] Do you really think it is a bee-like sound? You can, of course, look at other cultures to get an idea of what is possible. Listening to Bulgarian voices that can project the sound quite widely might give you an idea of how to use the chest voice. But is it really the same as, for instance, Early Music singing? We don't know, but at least we have a comparison. So I would adopt a very cautious approach. I'm maybe a bit more careful than others who say, "we don't have anything, so let's do it like Bulgarian singers".

CU: We don't have a time machine to see what happened in the past. Even if we could travel back in time, we lack the aesthetic perception of the past. It is naïve to suppose that the job of historians ought to be to reconstruct the past. First, it is impossible, and secondly, our job should not be reconstructing the past but making sense of it. This differentiation goes back to the begin-

11 E.g. Reichow 1984.

12 This approach was chosen by the Welsh band Bragod (Robert Evans, Crwth, and Mary-Anne Roberts, Voice) for their album *Welsh Music and Poetry from the 14th to the 18th Century* (private release 2001). The liner notes of the album, which is also the first recording of the Welsh Crwth, refers to remarks on singing in a bee-like voice in related manuscripts. See also the discussion on the band's website (Bragod n.d.).

ning of academic historiography, the debate between aiming to narrate "what really happened" following Leopold Ranke, and another vision, led by Johann Gustav Droysen, that interrogates the remains of the past in the present.[13] This second approach creates a dialogue between the historians and their sources.

However, I'm not against artistic experiments as long as those engaged in them do not claim that they are recreating historical truth – which some musicians, unfortunately, still do to mesmerise their audience. For me, it was really important to open my mind and my ears and to see that there are different options. There is not just one narrative and one aesthetic in the history of music. There are different ways of seeing it. A plural approach to music history narratives would also include something like what you just said: the possibilities that you have of sound creation and how these have been valued in the past.

BS: That was Peter Jeffery's starting point: You have a written text from mediaeval times, but what does it mean? It means that you have a text. Because we know that in mediaeval times there was a lot of improvisation. We don't know what people really sang, whether it was just monophonic or whether it was already a kind of polyphonic singing that people practised but didn't notate. Our knowledge of oral history and oral transmission is something that complements historical musicology. That's why I learned a lot from Cristina and took advantage of her knowledge of what a source is. It helps me in how I approach a source and look at a written manuscript, also as an ethnomusicologist.

CU: There is written music, but what was the reason for it being written down? Often, especially when notation was only just beginning to be used, it was not meant to be utilised in practice. Written texts fostered control and administrative standardisation and belonged to the arsenal of political power. Looking at the sources also means asking the 'w' questions: why, where, who, what? Sooner or later, we have to ask these very basic questions. Looking at them with four eyes and thinking about them with two brains that work a little bit differently is always very healing and very helpful – just to see how many presuppositions determine how we think, and how we might try and relativise them.

Methodological differences but similar perspectives

BS: Cristina and I have a different training. For instance, I am more focused on qualitative work, interviews, oral history, and awareness of context and sound, whereas Cristina is more experienced in dealing with written sources. We have different ways of analysing things – in my case, it is more a matter of listening and transcribing, while in Cristina's case it means looking at the written musical notes. What some colleagues in historical musicology have forgotten is the sound of music, which is something we are trying to bring back in again. But maybe – just to conclude here in a kind of interim state – maybe our little dialogue has demonstrated that our disciplines are not so different. Even though we might have different focuses and approaches, we are still focused on similar objects with similar perspectives.

CU: We all have to work with sources – in an interview, a living source may lie, and my sources, written many centuries ago, might not be readable, or they could also be biased or just otherwise unreliable. So we all have to be critical and thorough with any kind of source.

13 See e.g. Droysen 1977; Wach 1933.

...except for one issue...

BS: The only thing is that my living sources can defend themselves. I have to ask them for permission, while the dead sources cannot do that, they can't say "no, please don't write about my private life" et cetera, which could also be an ethical issue in historical writing. This is a difference.

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Rabab, Rubeba, Rubāb

Fellbespannte Streichinstrumente im historischen und kulturellen Kontext

herausgegeben von

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