

Double Jeopardy: The Interdisciplinary Study of Music and Meaning

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Ansa Lønstrup (Aarhus University) concludes last year's Viewpoint with the following remarks regarding the situation for musicology and for musicologists within the Danish context (my translation from the Danish original):

The current complexity and breadth within the area of musical research is so great that we obviously can move and orient ourselves towards many directions. There is, as a matter of fact, a great need for us within many different professional contexts and in relation to a multitude of areas of investigation. The difficulty with which we may be confronted is that of both maintaining our uniqueness and professional research identity, while at the same time participating in professionally variegated and 'impure' non-musical contexts of cooperation. For many, many years musicology has energetically emphasized that music and musicology are something unique with regard to their epistemology, funding requirements, educational-political aspects and pedagogy/didactics. There have been very good reasons for this emphasis. Now is perhaps the time to throw ourselves into the major task of *communicating* our competencies, a task which is mandated when musicologists work together with other research traditions, with professions with different means of defining themselves and within other areas of discourse. This has already happened in, for example, the aforementioned research networks and surely other places as well.¹

I could not ask for a more gratifying place from which to grab the baton and continue to run the Viewpoint-marathon in *Danish Yearbook of Musicology*. There are several reasons for this. To start with, I am director of one of 'the aforementioned research networks' and have been so since its inception September 1, 2001, namely the Network for Cross-Disciplinary Studies of Music and Meaning, whose acronym *NTSMB* stems from its Danish title *Netværk for Tværvideenskabelige Studier af Musik og Betydning*. This network was awarded a two-year start-up grant by SHF (Danish Research Council for the Humanities) (2001-3) and lives on as an association with a dues-paying membership. In addition, since December 2003, I have been Editor-in-Chief of *JMM: The Journal of Music and Meaning* (www.musicandmeaning.net), an online academic journal which seeks to explore and develop the potential of the Internet as a means for multimedia presentation of research work within music-and-

¹ Translated from Ansa Lønstrup, 'Strategier i musikforskningen?' (Strategies in musicological research), *Danish Yearbook of Musicology*, 31 (2003), 15.

meaning studies while establishing and maintaining standards of academic rigor which are associated with research and scholarship as these are traditionally published within print media. JMM is currently surviving on funding which had been budgeted from our NTSMB-grant and which SHF kindly has allowed us to use in this fashion. Thirdly, I am not a musicologist, I am an Associate Professor of Philosophy in the Institute of Philosophy, Education and the Study of Religion at the University of Southern Denmark at Odense.

IMPURITY AND INTERDISCIPLINARITY

As the above paragraph makes abundantly clear, I am a card-carrying representative of all that is ‘impure’ within a context of musical research, at least when purity is evaluated from the standpoint of traditional musicology. A banal, but incredibly central point here is: Music is not only interesting from the point of view of musicologists. It can often provide examples which challenge received conceptions within a discipline, such as many philosophical theories of meaning with their traditionally blatant bias toward verbal language and the mechanisms of reference, or it can provide raw material for analysis which challenges the capabilities of current technical devices, which – after having gone through developments which meet these challenges – often can open up areas of study which were as good as inconceivable previously; more on this latter point later. My own fascination with the study of music and meaning had its genesis in an area of relevance to the former, in reflections regarding the manner in which one might try to gain insights into the way mechanisms utilizing counterfactual attribution of properties within poetic, metaphoric language could be transplanted to the realm of the musical, with a notion of counterfactual hearing of sonic material as a resulting suggestion for an attempt at a ‘definition’ of music. While grappling with these issues in the 80s and 90s, I had the advantage of a wealth of contacts within University of Helsinki Professor of Musicology Eero Tarasti’s sweeping network known as ICMS (International Congress on Musical Signification) as well as the pleasure of being one of the founders and board members of an SHF-sponsored network entitled *Netværk for Metafor, Kultur og Kognition* (1995-1997), Danish for ‘Network for Metaphor, Culture and Cognition’. I also had the good fortune to be employed within the NOS-H (Nordic Research Council for the Humanities)-sponsored project entitled ‘Interpretation, Literature and Identity – Approaches to the Methodology of Interpretation’ from 1996 to 1998.

I mention these autobiographic items to underscore the positive roll which academic networking played in my own career from an early stage. It is not an exaggeration to say that I and many others who circulated in these groups would never have been able to assemble the competencies and advisory talent to complete our research spanning music, philosophy, semiotics, aesthetics, literature and other fields without access to such a multitude of talented researchers who were willing to ‘think outside the box’. The Finnish presence in all of this was crucial; already in the 80s leading Finnish academics – such as Tarasti, Veikko Rantala (University of Tampere),

Arto Haapala (University of Helsinki) and others – were interested in looking beyond the confines of the research traditions in which they worked and – importantly – were willing to do the work necessary to obtain the requisite competencies from other disciplines.

This paean to the glories of networking notwithstanding, it is not a mystery to me why there are elements in the musicological community who harbor abiding suspicions with regard to interdisciplinarity. This is understandable: it is clear that musicology is an academic discipline in which enormous amounts of time and effort need to be devoted to upholding and developing complex, time-consuming and educationally dense areas of scholarly endeavor such as musical analysis, performance practice and historical studies involving diverse epochs and languages. Many sub-disciplines within these areas require not only education of a standard academic nature and the text reading and production skills which this requires, but the acquisition and maintenance of a variety of artisan-style skills as well: Most musicologists are also musicians or singers or composers, and this ‘or’ often is of the inclusive kind. Competence in these areas requires many years of study in demanding, often apprentice-like circumstances.

Most disciplines, or at least selected subdisciplines, however, will be able to protest in a similar fashion. Take my own. Philosophers with specializations within cutting-edge mathematics or physics, those who need to maintain and acquire philological and linguistic expertise, or those who work in traditions where meticulous historical scholarship within a stated corpus is required for achieving the research results mandated by the context of investigation may all well find that the chosen areas of study are so absorbing, time-consuming and calling for artisan-like skills, that there may not be enough surplus time, energy or promises of professional rewards to engage in interdisciplinary outreach.

It is therefore no wonder that many musicologists look upon academics who come from other areas such as, say, philosophy, semiotics, computer science or literature – and who do not also have advanced degrees in musicology – as being, at best, dilettantes, or, at worst, utterly lacking in the insights and skills required to study musical artifacts in a respectable, scholarly and well-qualified fashion. To the extent that certain areas of inquiry involve the sort of skills and training mentioned in the foregoing, this diagnosis is, in the main, a correct one. The recurrent claim of the present contribution is, however this: Many of the questions which music poses for a panoply of contemporary academic disciplines require just as much discipline-specific training as is the case with musicology. For example, new technologies for sound synthesis, manipulation and information retrieval expand exponentially each year, and new insights into human cognition not only allow the recasting of traditional questions, but pose challenging new ones as well. The only way in which any sort of fruitful studies can be carried out within these domains is for researchers and practitioners from a wealth of academic and performance areas to cooperate and contribute insights and knowledge springing from in-depth knowledge of their perspective fields.

Some paragraphs ago, I promised to return to the areas of inquiry which have opened up thanks to the explosive development within technologies for music digitalization within the framework of information technology. One of the eye-openers for which I can thank NTSMB has been a glimpse into the world of music information retrieval (MIR), a field the contours of which first began to become clearly drawn at the turn of the millennium. These insights have largely been due to the fruitful cooperation which has taken place among various members of the MOSART network (Music Orchestration Systems in Algorithmic Research and Technology), which was funded by the EU from 2000 to 2003 and whose chief coordinator was Jens Arnspang of Aalborg University Esbjerg. A short and sweet means of describing MIR is to say that it concerns itself with just about every aspect of the way in which the tools of IT can provide the tools for answering queries about music. Now that enormous databases of digitalized recordings of musical performances are available, traditional questions from aesthetics become relevant in new ways. For example, the much debated issue of whether or not people consistently ascribe emotion and/or descriptive content to pieces of music takes on a practical dimension: Can emotional content in music be correlated with formal properties of a piece which can be sought for with the help of search algorithms? As I discovered at the ISMIR2004 (International Society for Music Information Retrieval) in Barcelona in October last year, library science and musicology are uniting with renewed force in the context of MIR. An excellent conference – CMMR2004 (Computer Music Modelling and Retrieval) – dealing with the interfacing of IT and music research was held in Esbjerg at Aalborg University Esbjerg in May 2004.

THE QUEST FOR A RESEARCH MILIEU HERE AT HOME

There is a lot of talent within the area of music research – broadly defined so as also to include interdisciplinary work – in Denmark which, if not cultivated, soon will either migrate to other professions or simply wither away. There are also many international figures within music research who are interested in coming to Denmark, at least for the time being. An example: In February of 2004, I spearheaded an application for a Center of Excellence under the auspices of The Danish National Research Foundation. The suggested name for the center was ‘Research Center for Music, Modelling and Meaning’. The application contained very detailed plans for a center which would address eight project areas: (1) linguistic representation of sound, (2) sound, music and bodily gesture, (3) recognition and interpretation of form in sonic contexts, (4) issues in composing, (5) the creation of meaning in interactive sonic contexts, (6) the role of sound in creating a meaningful environment for human agents, (7) perception of sonic and visual phenomena, and (8) practice-based research: problems and perspectives. Each of these project areas was described and a team of researchers including senior and visiting fellows from both the IT/technical side of the table and the core humanities side of the table was specified for each project area.

The proposed center involved a large group of internationally well-known researchers from Denmark and abroad who represented competence in musicology, semiotics, philosophy, biology, literary theory, music information retrieval, and computer modelling of music, to name but a few of the disciplines covered. The plan included 14 senior research fellows, 20 visiting fellows and provided for 16 three-year Ph.D. fellowships as well as five one-year postdoctoral fellowships. There was a good mix of Danish and foreign talent represented. Among the senior research fellows were representatives from university, conservatory and performance milieu, and two of the candidates were foreign nationals working abroad who were willing to move to Denmark for three-year stints as senior research fellows. Several of the others were foreign nationals currently living and working in Denmark and thus integrated within the Danish research community. Among the Visiting Fellows were researchers from Italy, Belgium, England, Scotland, Poland, USA, France and Finland, all of whom were willing to come to Denmark on a regular basis – usually once per semester during a five-year period for at least a week at a time to participate in workshops and conferences. While preparing the application we canvassed the field of potential Ph.D. candidates for affiliation with such a center, and found 15 who were interested and who would be able to submit applications for top-notch projects. Twelve of these were Danes. A canvass of potential applicants for the post-doc posts turned up three well-qualified candidates – one Dane and two foreign nationals, all of whom were ready-to-go, should the money have been in place.

It is relevant to note that the massive national and international interest which this application represented was not for a center in either Copenhagen or Aarhus, but – Esbjerg. Everyone involved was perfectly happy to gather together in this town on the west coast of Denmark to pursue this research.

Where did this all end? As the Danish saying goes: ‘Death requires a cause.’ 193 applications were submitted to the Danish National Research Foundation for such Centers of Excellence. As it turned out, twelve were funded initially, and now four more are being added. An inspection of the homepage of The Danish National Research Foundation (www.dg.dk) reveals that only one of these sixteen has any relationship to humanistic research, a center for the study of language change in real time, with Denmark 1900-2000 as a case in point.

... AND WHILE WE ARE WAITING FOR MONEY

As was previously made clear, NTSMB (www.ntsmb.dk) is now an association of dues-paying members. Its membership is around 70 as of this writing. Since we keep our dues low, the work of running NTSMB is a matter of volunteerism on the part of an eleven-member executive board where the professional rank of a given member can be anything from that of masters’ student to full-time tenured university associate professor. Even when we were funded, very little work was compensated, and when it was, it was largely a matter of paying student aides. The bulk of the money went to financing four national conferences, one international one, starting JMM (JMM’s

technical maintenance and design is the only regularly remunerated function in the NTSMB-sphere), and funding an international book project for which certain editorial tasks such as indexing will be remunerated. Since the end of our start-up grant, we have held three national meetings and have plans afoot to continue with two national meetings a year, as we have since our inception.

Although I hasten to underscore that – in today’s humanistic research environment – we are more than aware that a start-up grant of 600,000 DKK (c. 80,000 EUR in 2001), where 500,000 DKK (c. 67,000 EUR in 2001) is the actual amount available after administrative overhead is removed, is something for which one must be extremely grateful, nevertheless it should be clear to anyone reading this that this amount is not very much in comparison with what has been accomplished within NTSMB for the last three and a half years.

One of the reasons that an organization such as NTSMB can get along on a shoestring budget is that we have learned to use what we have. A certain level of activity is fairly readily supportable within the infrastructure which already is in place in Danish institutions of higher learning and in the Danish scheme of things in general. Academics from virtually all over the rest of the world would find the situation in which all five major universities are on the same train line within hours of each other, as they are in Denmark, and from which public transportation to branch campuses and conservatories is – for the most part – convenient, as it is in Denmark, to be an distant dream. For all the frustrations involved in maintaining and updating the technical equipment in Danish institutions of higher learning, the situation does seem to be improving, and, compared with, say the Sorbonne, at which I gave a talk during the 8th meeting of the ICMS in October 2004 and where there was only one venue in which digital projection combined with connection to the Internet was available, and the venue in which Charles Rosen gave his talk was *sans* piano, things in Denmark have, indeed, come a long way.

So, we are surviving. As was indicated in my summary of the Center of Excellence-application experience, however, it is disquieting and disheartening to reflect that time passes quickly, and if we do not develop the interdisciplinary research community which now exists and whose members are at various points in their careers, several years’ worth of talent will either choose other fields of endeavor or, in the worst case scenario, never be developed at all. A subcommittee of the NTSMB’s executive board is charged with fundraising and we will go at this task aggressively in the months to come. We can, as was indicated earlier, work with what we have in an organization like NTSMB for a period of time. We can only hope, however, that our ‘little engine that could’ will ultimately inspire a response that rewards these kinds of efforts, rather than the cynical conclusion that if researchers in the humanities just muster their reserves, they can puff along on an uphill grade without any injection of new sources of energy and as a consequence don’t need or deserve anything better.