Musicology in the Garden

In his 1885 essay “Scope, Method, and Aim of Musicology,” which inaugurated the journal Vierteljahrsschrift für Musikwissenschaft, Guido Adler set out a bold vision for the discipline of musicology. Casting the musicologist as a kind of hybrid gardener and historical preservationist, he wrote:

The artist builds his temple in the grove, in the grove where fragrance is newly revived, time and again, from freely growing flowers. The theoretician of art tills the earth; he educates the disciples to his life’s task and accompanies the inspired creator as a lifelong companion. Should the scholar of art observe that matters are not turning out in the best interests of art, then he directs it onto the proper course. If the building is already erected, then the historian of art protects and defends it and repairs the damaged portions.

One of his loveliest tasks... is to keep fresh the living flower garden of the earthly kingdom by arousing and furthering the necessary interest.

Tending the flowers and patching up the artist’s temple: musicology was not just the study of musical works—a view that some present-day scholars might assume Adler held—it was the loving protection and cultivation of musical culture. Furthermore, Adler imagined the role of the musicologist as not only the guardian of music’s past but also the nurturer of its future. Today, such apparently uncritical love is untenable, except perhaps in the sanctuary of the undergraduate classroom. Musicologists who deal with canonical subjects are in the business of historicizing music, unmasking its ideological underpinnings, pushing it back into a thickly textured context, examining its material and technological enabling conditions, and recovering musical practices that have been overshadowed or marginalized. Rather than adoring music in its verdant temple, we frequently deploy historical methods to cut art down to size.

One recent trend seeks to achieve this by collapsing “music” back into the bodies, instruments, and machines that produce it. From the disciplinary point of view, this can be liberating: material objects, unlike musical works,
do not drag two centuries of musicological literature behind them. Moreover, at its best, these material histories of music prompt new perspectives on the construction of music history. In my own work on the history of instruments, for example, I routinely encounter unusual technologies that lurk on the margins of mainstream musical culture. These technologies are durable enough to have left a trace—or a body—but have not had the equally durable social existence that might have normalized them; as such, they appear to mediate between the solid stuff of history and those ephemeral things erased by time. They consequently call attention to the complex processes of normalization that have been at work—processes that our own historical methods risk ignoring or even reenacting.

The very thing that has been liberating about musicology’s material turn is one of the primary motivations for this colloquy: often, the turn to music’s materiality risks being antidialogical; it has sometimes involved unearthing oddities and curious objects—the ideal fodder for sparkling conference papers—without prompting or even allowing for further critical discussion. But even this broadly New Historicist preoccupation with quirks is itself becoming passé. More recently, musicologists have begun to embrace not just a wider range of material things but also concomitant theoretical apparatuses: thing theory, actor-network theory, object-oriented ontologies; Heidegger lurks in the background while thinkers like Graham Harman, Jane Bennett, and Timothy Morton are cropping up on graduate syllabuses. This is not unique to musicology: the materialist rallying cry echoes through a number of disciplines, even while (or maybe because) “materiality” as a concept remains vague and contested. The interdisciplinarity apparently catalyzed by material things is perhaps also part of their appeal. Objects can function as conduits for ideas to pass between disciplines. I would argue, for example, that musical instruments currently act as what Susan Leigh Star and James Griesemer canonically theorized as “boundary objects.” These days, instruments do different things in different disciplines—musicology, science and technology studies (STS), media studies, organology—and in doing so, allow for a rapprochement between disparate forms of inquiry.

Among the thinkers currently on the rise in musicology—and in the humanities more generally—is Bruno Latour. Of course, he has long been a towering thinker in STS and anthropology, where Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts (1979) is a classic. But Latour’s sphere has radically expanded: in September 2014 he was the keynote speaker at the “Seeing/Sounding/Sensing” conference at MIT organized by art historian Caroline Jones and anthropologist Stefan Helmreich. Close to eight hundred people had to be turned away from his keynote lecture. Latour seems to function as a welcome point of orientation for art historians lost in the thick forests of materiality. His Reassembling the Social (2005) is emboldening:
things are no longer passive objects of fascination, but “actants” having important effects in their specific configurations. Latour’s call for things to strike back at drably exceptionalist humans, his articulation of actor-network theory, and his insistence that the “social” is not a domain, but rather something that must be actively constructed and performed—all of this is useful to the scholar struggling through thickets of stuff, entangled in almost unthinkably complex ways.

For the historian of science, musicology’s new fascination with Latour must surely be baffling: Latour’s work has focused, in precise and sometimes parochial ways, on arguments specific to STS. He advocated, in *We Have Never Been Modern*, for the agency and autonomy of nature as a counterbalance to the weight placed on the social and its formative powers in the work of Simon Schaffer and Steven Shapin; Latour recoiled at deconstructive critiques of the objectivity of scientific knowledge when they were deployed to devalue scientific consensus about global warming. Given that music scholars are not, by and large, confronting questions about the co-construction of nature and society that have fueled his work, one might ask what precisely we are doing when we invoke Latour. Why do we need him? Once we remove Latour’s arguments from their native disciplinary environment and apply his methodologies more generally, we end up with projects that look less characteristically Latourian and more like any other well-researched history.

I raise these doubts not to discourage or deplore musicology’s engagement with Latour’s insightful work. A fellow contributor to this colloquy, Ben Piekut, has drawn on Latour with care and sensitivity, and to evidently productive ends. Rather, I am interested in what this Latourian turn says about the discipline of musicology. In “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam,” in which Latour contemplates bringing “the sword of criticism to criticism itself,” he exhorts scholars to move away from the spurious objectivity of “facts” and closer to what he calls “matters of concern.” Such a move entails contemplating objects as complex, interesting, and active assemblages. I would argue that to approach things in all their diffuse richness, all their subtle blending of object and subject, and to attend to the “mediating, assembling, [and] gathering” accordingly done by things, amounts to what has traditionally been conceived as aesthetic attention. That is, this detailed attention resembles the kind of analyses that musicologists—and historians of the arts more generally—have traditionally brought to their objects of study.

Part of the allure of Latour, then, may be that his methods suit our discipline’s existing tendencies and proficiencies. In many ways, musicologists are the last people who need to be told that “things” are powerful assemblages or that the agency of nonhumans must be considered. The very foundation of the discipline of musicology is the study of quasi-objects—musical
works—that wield a certain power. The turn to Latour—and other materially
directed theories such as object-oriented ontology (OOO)—is not a radical
departure for our field. Rather, Latour gives us permission to carry on doing
the kind of cultural histories we have been doing all along—though of course
an omnivorous thinginess now consumes a wider range of objects than had
previously come under musicology’s purview. To be clear, I am not arguing
that old musicology produced anything like Latourian sociology, and I rec-
ognize that the techniques employed in thinking about “things” vary greatly
from those used by traditional musical analysis. But it seems to me that
Latour has offered us one path back to Adler’s garden, whereby we can recast
the loving adoration of musical culture as a new kind of worthy intellectual
engagement.

These days, the latent aesthetics of Latour are not particularly latent.
Consider one of his recent projects, Gaia Global Circus, a series of stage
pieces created in collaboration with playwright Pierre Daubigny. The pro-
ject seeks to make global climate change emotionally vivid. The official
description states: “Although we are confronted with global warming and
the prospect of mankind’s end, we feel almost nothing. Gaia Global Circus
takes place in the gap between the significance of such stakes and the
limited repertoire of concepts and feelings with which we attempt to
approach them today.”

In many ways, this project is the normative answer
to Latour’s earlier call to see matters of fact as matters of concern; concern
is here cast as emotional investment. The goal is to make people sensitive
to Gaia—the earth—in the same way that they are sensitive to smaller-scale
experiences of their daily lives.

Latour’s project also partakes in an intellectual trend that turns to art as
one of the salvations of the planet. Historian of science Lorraine Daston, for
example, has called for artistic projects that establish sensible connections
with events happening on a scale outside of usual human perception. Last
year, historians of science Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway published The
Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future, a sci-fi—or rather “climate
fiction”—novel imagining a climate-change ravaged world in the year 2393. The
novelist Benjamin Kunkel used an article in the New Yorker (“Inventing
Climate Change Literature”) to call for such a literature and to ask why it
hasn’t fully come into its own as a genre (“It poses as tremendous problems
for imaginative literature as it does for electoral politics”). Kunkel has made
his own forays into this field: in late 2014 his play Buzz, “a fast-paced story of
love and art in a time of global warming,” was performed in Brooklyn. In
a time of global warming, art is useful, we are told; it makes changes on an
unimaginable global scale sensible to us. These pleas for artworks to sensitize
and educate humanity into thoughtful action are echoed in arguments cur-
cently fashionable in higher education, which reconfigure STEM (science,
technology, engineering, math) education as STEAM education—that is, by inserting the arts (good design, creative innovation) into the study of science and technology. These arguments appear to suggest that STEAM education can cultivate human minds that are more receptive, original, and sensitive.

All this is hardly new, of course. In many respects, it heralds an improbable return to the concerns that shaped Friedrich Schiller’s 1795 *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*—a treatise that responded to the global threat of his own time: the French Revolution and the subsequent chaos of the Terror. For Schiller, only through beauty could mankind become truly free; only art could mediate between the distant and bloodless injunctions of duty and the immediate realm of human feeling. How strange that the very methodologies that some musicologists have adopted to help broaden their horizons and to systematize their newly plural, materialist forms of knowledge should themselves be transforming into such orthodox arguments in favor of the world-changing power of artworks.

We may seem to have traveled some distance from those marginal details so beloved by the quirk historicist—yet I would claim that musicology’s dalliances with the methods of STS, and the recent recourse of some STS scholars to aesthetics, reveals much about the central problematics of quirk historicism as well as possible paths forward. As I indicated at the start of this essay, on the surface, the materialist preoccupations of recent music history seem to serve the purposes of demystification—turning our attention away from the enchanting musical works blossoming in the Adlerian garden and toward all the things that have made them possible: the invisible laborers, their tools, their techniques.

But even though the quirky historical object appears to prune the artwork down to size, it is also an object of aesthetic attraction in its own right; indeed, this is what we mean by calling it quirky. Invoked in the midst of our discussions of artistic practice, the quirky historical detail will always share something of art’s appeal. One might consider this move as somehow deceptive: an aesthetics smuggled in under the guise of history—or perhaps a sort of displacement whereby historical objects become the proxy of the art objects that it is no longer fashionable to valorize. But one could also understand the impulses that have produced quirk historicism as generous, if naively so: quirk historicism implies that it is not only art that lends itself to aesthetic modes of appreciation; our aesthetic investments are directed far beyond the frame of the artwork. If this is the case, then the fallacies of quirk historicism at least suggest that our discipline has intuitively reached the position achieved more arduously by social historians of science such as Latour and Daston: material histories need not downgrade art, reducing it to the level of all other debris, divested of special human interest; rather, they have the potential to transform everything around us into art. There are
more things flourishing in the garden than meets the eye, if only one cares to look.

If this is indeed so, then there is every reason to think that scholars of music have the conceptual resources for describing and accounting for this newly visibly terrain. In the future, musicologists might be able to look more keenly inward, to our own discipline and its strengths, and more ambitiously outward, to the new conversations musicology might initiate. The increasingly central role of aesthetics in other disciplines should not only make us more comfortable with its foundational role in studies of music history, it should encourage us to think about our discipline’s particular tools and what they continue to offer. Indeed, aesthetics’ new prominence suggests that musicologists might place their concerns at the center of much larger discussions with confidence. This would be to continue in the directions forged by Gary Tomlinson’s most recent book, A Million Years of Music, which boldly positions musicking as an activity crucial to human evolution, and by Roger Moseley, who has explored the ways in which music “constitutes a set of cognitive, technological, and social resources for playing in and with the world.”15 These are projects that grew, in different ways, from questions that, in earlier incarnations, were directed to locally musicological concerns. This is to say that, whatever directions musicologists might take, we still have a lesson to learn from Adler: he was unabashed about the musicologist’s role as advocate: his vision for musical preservation and cultivation was explicitly celebratory. In directing sustained, careful, close attention to any corner of musical culture, we too are advocates. Some of our cultivars may well be unrecognizable to Adler, but gardeners we remain.

Notes


7. Ibid., 248. Sianne Ngai calls on Latour’s notion of the “matter of concern” to draw attention to the foundational role of aesthetic interest in any close engagement with the world; see *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 2012.


13. The Rhode Island School of Design, for example, touts a STEM to STEAM initiative that makes bold claims for the power of art and design (which are, in their words, “poised to transform our economy in the 21st century just as science and technology did in the last century,” STEAM, http://stemtosteam.org.
