Musicology, §I: The nature of musicology

1. Definitions.
The term ‘musicology’ has been defined in many different ways. As a method, it is a form of scholarship characterized by the procedures of research. A simple definition in these terms would be ‘the scholarly study of music’. Traditionally, musicology has borrowed from ‘art history for its historiographic paradigms and literary studies for its paleographic and philological principles’ (Treitler, 1995). A committee of the American Musicological Society (AMS) in 1955 also defined musicology as ‘a field of knowledge having as its object the investigation of the art of music as a physical, psychological, aesthetic, and cultural phenomenon’ (JAMS, viii, p.153). The last of these four attributes gives the definition considerable breadth, although music, and music as an ‘art’, remains at the centre of the investigation.

A third view, which neither of these definitions fully implies, is based on the belief that the advanced study of music should be centred not just on music but also on musicians acting within a social and cultural environment. This shift from music as a product (which tends to imply fixity) to music as a process involving composer, performer and consumer (i.e. listeners) has involved new methods, some of them borrowed from the social sciences, particularly anthropology, ethnology, linguistics, sociology and more recently politics, gender studies and cultural theory. This type of inquiry is also associated with ethnomusicology. Harrison (1963) and other ethnomusicologists have suggested that ‘It is the function of all musicology to be in fact ethnomusicology; that is, to take its range of research to include material that is termed “sociological”’ (see also Ethnomusicology).

2. Origins: musicology as a science.
Until the second half of the 19th century, the study of music was regarded not as an independent discipline but as that part of general knowledge which gave theoretical
handling to specifically musical questions. It was Chrysander who in 1863 contended that musicology should be treated as a science in its own right, on a level equal to that of other scientific disciplines. The quantitative methods of natural science were brought to bear on music as a physical phenomenon by the ancient Greeks: the Pythagoreans studied number as the prime condition of musical sound, and numerical relationships as the underlying laws of harmony in music, mankind, and the spheres. This study continued throughout the Middle Ages as part of *ars musica*, itself part of the Quadrivium along with arithmetic, geometry and astronomy. Much later, in the 18th century, during the years spanned by the careers of Joseph Sauveur (1653–1716), Leonhard Euler (1707–83) and Ernst Chladni (1756–1827), attention was given to studies in acoustics and the physics of sound. These three men, significantly, were scientists by training: Sauveur and Euler mathematicians, Chladni a physicist. Similarly, in the 19th century many musical scholars were influenced by Hermann von Helmholtz (1821–94), an anatomist and physiologist, and Friedrich Carl Stumpf (1848–1936), both of whom worked on the psychology of hearing and sought to give tangible explanations to many aesthetic matters that had been considered intangible. Their work played an important part in a general trend towards determinism – a belief that all musical phenomena and experiences have attributable causes.

It was during this period that the German term ‘Musikwissenschaft’ came into use. Like the Latin term ‘scientia’, ‘Wissenschaft’ means ‘knowledge’, but also can be applied with equal relevance to the body of knowledge encompassing natural and cultural phenomena. ‘Musikwissenschaft’ appeared as early as 1827, in the title of a work by the German educationist Johann Bernhard Logier, and became established in the early 1860s; its acceptance was reflected in the title of the journal *Vierteljahrsschrift für Musikwissenschaft*, founded in 1885 and that of ‘Musikforschung’ in the name of the Gesellschaft für Musikforschung instituted by Commer and Eitner in 1868. The phrase ‘musikalische Wissenschaft’ had been in use since the 18th century and ‘Tonwissenschaft’ since the second half of the 18th century. Beginning in 1885, ‘Musikologie’ referred in Germany to a subdivision of ‘Musikwissenschaft’ roughly equivalent to ‘ethnomusicology’ (see §4 below), whereas in France, ‘musicologie’ was synonymous with the German ‘Musikwissenschaft’.
When musicologists speak of scientific method in their research, what they usually mean is the methods of the social sciences, philology or philosophy. Musicology shares with them a common respect for the use of critical standards in the treatment of evidence, the employment of objective criteria in the evaluation of sources, the creation of a coherent account involving explanation and the sharing of one's research findings with a community of informed specialists. Such principles of investigation are of fairly recent origin, born during the Enlightenment. At the end of the 17th century, the philosophical innovations of Descartes made an important impact on European thought and the methods of empiricism replaced an uncritical reliance on the authority of the Church or myth. The Benedictine scholars of the Congregation of St Maur in Paris, led by Jean Mabillon (1632–1707) and Bernard de Montfaucon (1655–1741), established the principles of Latin and Greek palaeography and diplomatic. It was an age of rationalism and scepticism, personified most vividly in the figure of Voltaire and in the work of the philosophes which culminated in the great French Encyclopédie. From this period dates the establishment of some of the major learned societies and academies of science and letters, notably those in Britain and France: the Royal Society (1662, but dating informally back to 1645), the Académie Française (1635) and the Académie des Inscriptions (1663). Musicology, insofar as it reflects the cultural aims of 17th- and 18th-century society, is a manifestation of western European thought of the past 250 years and a phenomenon of the modern world. Its geographical origins have been responsible for the shape the discipline took in much of the 20th century and also accounts for some of the criticism to which it has been subjected.


The effort to determine the scope of musicology has prompted much discussion, with the result that certain areas have come to represent the core of the discipline while others remain in auxiliary positions. Since the early 19th century, historical studies have occupied the centre ground. However, each age has brought its own scale of values to bear, and this has led to a constantly changing disposition of emphasis. For example, a typical 18th-century framework designed to contain the whole of musical learning was fashioned by Nicolas Etienne Framery in 1770. Framery's ‘Tableau de la musique et des branches’ is a hierarchical scheme encompassing the entire discipline of music, which
is subdivided at first level into three branches: acoustic, practical and historical. Acoustics is then subdivided three times, and represents the quantitative sciences and metaphysics; musical history is similarly subdivided to include the study of music and musicians, native and foreign, of the past and the present. Musical practice is broken down into two parallel divisions, ‘composition’ and ‘execution’, which in turn yield further divisions, sacred and secular, vocal and instrumental, native and foreign, and then institutions and musical genres. A place is also provided within musical practice for certain major interdisciplinary areas: music and poetry, music and dance, music and theatrical setting, music and elocution, the construction of instruments, music theory and instruction. Framery's design is a thoroughly rationalistic one, comprehensive, symmetrical and essentially static.

A few years later the Göttingen music historian Johann Nikolaus Forkel (1749–1818) brought out his map of musical knowledge in a pamphlet entitled Über die Theorie der Musik, insofern sie Liebhabern und Kennern notwendig und nützlich ist (1777). The scheme was revised and presented in an expanded form in his Allgemeine Geschichte der Musik (i, 1788). Forkel offered a fivefold approach to musical knowledge embracing the physics of sound, the mathematics of sound, musical grammar, musical rhetoric and music criticism. If history is not represented here it is because Forkel took it for granted. Implicit in his scheme is a concept of growth or progressive change in which the attainment of musical powers parallels the mastery of the language arts. Forkel's historical bias is best displayed in the organization of his Allgemeine Litteratur der Musik (1792), a bibliography of writings on music from antiquity to Forkel's own time. This work is divided into two main sections, one devoted to the literature of music history, the other to the literature of theory and practice.

François-Joseph Fétis's Histoire de la musique (1869–76) presented another model of musical knowledge in going beyond the limits of Western art music. In a five-volume study that included European folk music and non-European music (especially that of China and India), it laid the foundations for ‘comparative musicology’, the origins of ethnomusicology. Two subsequent publications called Histoire de la musique, the two volumes (1913–23) written by Jules Combarieu, the first Frenchman to write a doctoral dissertation on music (1894), and the four volumes (1909–24) which won Henri Woollett
the music book of the year award in Paris in 1910, also include non-Western music (especially Hindu music) as well as the history of European music starting with the Greeks.

4. Historical and systematic musicology.

It was Guido Adler who, in a paper printed in the first issue of the Vierteljahrsschrift für Musikwissenschaft (1885) – ‘Umfang, Methode und Ziel der Musikwissenschaft’ – codified the division between the historical and the systematic realms of music study and tabulated their substance and method. The main outline, as repeated with slight modifications in Adler's Methode der Musikgeschichte (1919, p.7), was as follows:

MUSICOLOGY I. The historical field (the history of music arranged by epochs, peoples, empires, countries, provinces, towns, schools, individual artists): A. Musical palaeography (semiography) (notations). B. Basic historical categories (groupings of musical forms). C. Laws: (1) as embodied in the compositions of each epoch; (2) as conceived and taught by the theorists; (3) as they appear in the practice of the arts. D. Musical instruments.

II. The systematic field (tabulation of the chief laws applicable to the various branches of music): A. Investigation and justification of these laws in: (1) harmony (tonal); (2) rhythm (temporal); (3) melody (correlation of tonal and temporal). B. Aesthetics and psychology of music: comparison and evaluation in relation to the perceived subjects, with a complex of questions related to the foregoing. C. Music education: the teaching of (1) music in general; (2) harmony; (3) counterpoint; (4) composition; (5) orchestration; (6) vocal and instrumental performance. D. Musicology (investigation and comparative study in ethnography and folklore).

The ‘Musicology’ of II.D is the subdivision ‘Musikologie’ rather than ‘Musikwissenschaft’, which circumscribes the entire field.

In his tabulation Adler listed the auxiliary sciences of musicology. These are, for the historical field: general history, palaeography, chronology, diplomatic (i.e. the form of manuscript documents), bibliography (i.e. the form of printed books), library and archive science, literary history and languages; liturgical history; history of mime and dance; biography, statistics of associations, institutions and performances; and, for the
systematic field: acoustics and mathematics, physiology (aural sensations), psychology (aural perception, judgment, feeling), logic (musical thought), grammar, metrics and poetics, education, aesthetics etc. More recent methodologists, notably Hans-Heinz Dräger (1955), have refined and modified Adler's scheme, adding for example recording techniques, without changing its essential polarity. Dräger, however, introduced into his scheme the categories of music sociology and interdisciplinary subjects, though leaving the main weight heavily on the two original categories. In spite of the apparent equilibrium of the two sections of Adler's outline, history carries the greater weight, as it did in Adler's career as a musicologist.

Systematic musicology is not a mere extension of musicology but a complete reorientation of the discipline to fundamental questions which are non-historical in nature. These include aesthetics and research into the nature and properties of music as an acoustical, physiological, psychological and cognitive phenomenon. A systematic approach can also be given to all of Adler's historical areas, such as, for example, a semiological approach to musical notations and typological classifications of musical forms.

5. New trends.

In the last two decades of the 20th century, there was an explosion in the field of musicology as scholars, sought to give voice to a broader range of concerns. Some have interrogated the fundamental assumptions of historical musicology. Like their colleagues in history, they have questioned the focus on history as the product of great men, great works, great traditions or great innovations. This has led to the study of music as a social force and to histories of musics previously excluded by scholars, many of whom have tended to concentrate on the art music of social élites. Dahlhaus (1977) proposed that musicology should encompass not just stylistic history, ‘a history whose subject matter is art and not biography or social contingencies’, but also structural history, reception history and cultural history. Others, critical of traditional science and traditional historiography, have gone further, questioning the possibility of scientific objectivity and exploring the extent to which subjective elements inform any historical discourse. Some
have even questioned the idea that history implies causality, preferring to define it by the mutability in anything that changes over time.

Another important trend has been in the focus on musicology as a form of criticism, or what Kerman (1985) has called ‘the study of music as aesthetic experience’. In this, musicology resembles the humanistic disciplines, especially literature, and may borrow from literary or cultural theory and new fields such as gender studies. This interest has provoked debate over whether music has its own meaning, independent of the context in which it is created, performed and heard, or whether it is inevitably socially embedded and cannot be fully understood outside these contexts, whether its meaning results from a certain kind of intentionality mutually understood by the creator and perceiver, and whether it is principally an attribute of the mind, a product of cognitive responses to sound and/or bodily ones. Underlying the manner in which these questions are explored are certain fundamental issues – assumptions about the nature of knowledge, the source of that knowledge, and how scholars should relate to the inquiry. From these differences come the enormous range of subjects and methodologies that musicology has come to comprehend.

Some, working out of the humanist tradition, continue to believe that truth is something coherent and intentional: the goal is to unveil it. They may use close analytical and critical readings of scores to reinforce or question conventional truths or, like historians embracing the theory of mentalités or Zeitgeist, to suggest specific relationships of music to the other arts and society. Those influenced by structuralist anthropologists, semioticians and/or sociologists understand truth as a product of a system of signs and music, like any language, as a ‘play of signifiers’. In Claude Lévi-Strauss's words, ‘knowledge can be objective and subjective at the same time’ and ‘history is never history, but history-for. It is partial in the sense of being biased when it claims not to be, for … one must choose, select, give up … it consists entirely in its method’. Scholars embracing this perspective understand meaning as a product of interpretation. In their studies of music, they seek to understand what its structure or narrative may represent. Some, sympathetic to Marxist ideas or Theodor Adorno, believe that music is a dialectical discourse that both reveals and conceals its relationship to language and society.
Musicologists following poststructuralist thinking tend to agree with Michel Foucault that ‘truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power’. Sensing a crisis of authority, patriarchy, identity and ethics, they question the validity of the so-called master narratives, stories that we have come to regard as central to our understanding of Western music and musical progress – for example, the function of tonality and the importance of the narrative curve in music. Using deconstructive methods, they seek to unveil the operations of power in music, especially those related to articulations of gender, race and class, or point out how music helps to construct social identities and social spaces.

Postmodernist notions have begun to inspire questions about the validity of global, universalizing perspectives and to shift attention to the truths embedded in the local, everyday, variable and contingent aspects of music and music-making. Scholars engaged in this work see truth as always relative and subjectivity as multi-layered, contradictory and performative, as influenced by the body as well as the mind and sometimes spiritual concerns. They seek to break down hierarchies and show the multiple meanings that any music can have. They are often concerned with the physical impact of sound on the listener and with music as evoking a process, not just a presence that refers to an absence (i.e. what is represented). Sometimes the goal of their inquiry is not so much to increase knowledge of music as to restructure experience of it.

Postmodernists also tend to concentrate more on the role of the performer and listener in determining the meaning of a musical work. They analyse what is specific to individual performances, including Roland Barthes' ‘grain of the voice’, rather than the structure of written scores. They seek to understand musical expression independent from the structure, and some, music that is not written down. For postmodern scholars, the musical experience is essentially cooperative, collaborative and contingent. Listeners bring or attach meanings to music regardless of composers' intentions, often as part of a dialectics of desire that helps shape how they define what is outside themselves. The listening process is an activity that in turn shapes the personal, social and cultural identity of the listener. The desire to explore the experience of music and to understand what underlies the meanings people ascribe to it has motivated an interest in applying psychoanalytic methodologies to the study of music.
These different approaches to knowledge are reflected in different relationships to the scholarly process. A scholar can play the role of a transcendent observer, applying rigorous reason and research to a chosen study and remaining unimplicated in the results of what is learnt. This relationship involves a strict separation of the observer from the observed and a trust of the ‘other’, be it the composer or the work, and a sense that the facts provided are what is needed. Or a scholar can be self-critical, acknowledging the power of language and the interdependence of language and meaning in musicological work. This may lead the scholar to ask not only theoretical questions but also political and ethical ones which may in turn shed light on some aspect of the larger world as reflected in music. Alternatively, a scholar can focus on personal insight, considering one's personal experience of music as a source of knowledge. Taking personal relevance or one's own perspective as the point of departure makes it clear that the scholar plays an important role in producing musical meaning. At the same time, such a perspective may have limitations as to the general relevance of the insights produced.

A number of important new subfields within musicology have arisen as a result of these different perspectives. Some, such as Kerman, Taruskin and Dreyfus, have used them to criticize the historical performance movement, throwing into question the notion of an ‘authoritative’ or ‘authentic’ performance of early music. Others, following the lead of McClary and Brett, have used them to explore how gender and sexuality may influence the creation and reception of music. More and more musicologists are crossing borders and reconsidering the boundaries of their research, not only that which has separated classical and popular music, written and oral traditions, but also historical musicology from other disciplines including ethnomusicology and music theory.

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