

Pirates, Humpty Dumpty and a Brazilian Bishop: The Myth of Musicology

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St. Augustine tells the story of a pirate captured by Alexander the Great. "How dare you molest the sea?" asked Alexander. "How dare you molest the whole world?" the pirate replied. "Because I do it with a little ship only, I am called a thief; you, doing it with a great navy, are called an emperor."¹

When I first read this dialogue from classical antiquity it somehow seemed to apply as a metaphor more closely to the discipline of musicology than I wanted to admit: more closely to my own research and, definitely, to my teaching style. The books I had read on my "ascent" up the mountain of musicological learning presented composers as the "great" versus the "second-rate" and, the "development" of styles, genres, forms as a Darwinian "survival of the fittest" since what came before was not as good as what developed (especially in terms of an early composer's style versus his late style). It seemed that the "facts" were not to be questioned either in terms of interpretation nor selection of material. Could the discipline of musicology in its assertions about musical values be personified as an emperor? Or was it/he really a pirate, a thief? Both? Or neither?

Struggling with how I should interpret the ever-burgeoning number of tomes in musicology, how I should interpret my own research and how was I going to reconcile my final decisions with the ever-expanding

"schools of thought" in the musicological world was one problem. The second problem was even more critical and far-reaching in its consequences: how was I to impart to my students these important issues and questions in my everyday undergraduate teaching. My solution, albeit far from all encompassing, was to create a fourth-year level course, "Methodology and Research in Musicology," aimed at the student who has completed three years of undergraduate music history "era" courses as well as possibly some of the special topics courses. I first offered this course in the winter of 1995, again in 1998 and for a third time this past winter. While I have made slight modifications in the reading list, I have found that the presentation and discussion of the material itself is what changes each time I teach the course. Depending on each student's level of critical thinking coupled with the dynamic of the class as a whole, the course has taken some interesting and unique turns every time it has been offered.

The "research" part of the course is fairly standard, so it will briefly be explained first. A list of approximately 100 reference books is compiled (books which represent the various areas of the reference section) and handed out

¹Noam Chomsky, *Pirates & Emperors: International Terrorism in the Real World* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1987), p. 9.

to the students in the first class. Each student chooses six books (depending on how many students are in the class, more or less books will be assigned to each student) and over the course of the 12-week term students take a turn presenting one of their books. Usually five presentations are done each week during the hour-long session. The following is the list of questions I give the students to help them formulate their discussion of the reference work:

Guidelines for Research Seminars

1) Sources of Information:

- a) Pruett, James W., and Thomas P. Slavens. *Research Guide to Musicology*. Chicago: American Library Association, 1985.
- b) Marco, Guy. *Information on Music: A Handbook of Reference Sources in European Languages*. 3 vols. Littleton, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1975.
- c) Duckles, Vincent. *Music Reference and Research Materials*. New York: Free Press, 1974.
- d) Charles, Sydney. *A Handbook of Music and Music Literature in Sets and Series*. New York: Free Press, 1972.
- e) book reviews in *The Music Index* and *RILM*

For Seminar Presentation:

- 2) Time limit: 10 minutes (your information needs to be organized, clear and concise)
- 3) Information should include:

- a) facts of publication: publisher, date of publication and edition
- b) according to the Preface, what is the purpose or goal of this book
- c) general description of contents of book (opera, pop music), time period covered
- d) how this material is organized (alphabetically, chronologically, etc.)
- e) what types of details are included
- f) is there a table of contents, index, appendix, tables, figures, musical examples, bibliography, etc.
- g) comments by reviewers, Marco or Duckles
- h) how up-to-date is this material
- i) is this book “user friendly” or do you have any suggestions for improvements

Overall, the students do a very good presentation on their chosen books. Surprisingly, this hour does not suffer from tedium since many other concepts and ideas are discussed: e.g., what exactly is a *Festschrift*? The two most common remarks are: “I wish I would have known about this book last year” and, “Cool, there is so much information in the reference area.” Alas, it ultimately proves the dictum that a library is only as useful as the ability of the user to access the information. In 1995 and 1998 I devoted one hour to students demonstrating their “favourite” Web site. In 2001 I decided to eliminate the Web site demonstration since

sites are constantly changing, and the exponential number of them simply made an hour-long session all but useless in dealing with this complex issue. There was a brief discussion about the fact that sites are not usually refereed and the information contained in them needs to be closely scrutinized and preferably corroborated by a print source.

It is the other two hours per week of the course which I will now discuss in some detail, namely the “methodology in musicology” part of the course title. With a 12-week semester, this leaves only 24 hours to cover approximately 250 years of musicology as a discipline. Obviously, because of the time restraint I have limited my earliest references to Hawkins and Burney, but if I had more time it would be desirable to start with the writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans. It would also be tempting just to present the material in a strict chronological order from the eighteenth century to the present, but, as will be seen below, I have chosen a slightly different approach for pedagogical reasons.

The course in general is similar to a graduate seminar, i.e., a discussion group with six to eight students. This class size appears to be ideal since it is large enough to allow diversity of opinion. There are also enough people to keep the discussion going without forcing students to speak, while at the same time small enough to allow everyone to voice an opinion. Obviously, the dynamics of the class will be different every time the course is offered. The most challenging aspect is devising questions beforehand to lead and stimulate the discussion, as well as improvising questions to try and illuminate all meanings and aspects of the assigned texts (*and*, at the same time, attempting to be totally

neutral in my approach to all subject matter and issues!). In contrast to the other music history courses which I teach in lecture style, this approach is much more demanding, especially in terms of the indeterminate nature of the progress of the students’ deliberation. On the other hand, this makes the course one of the most interesting and inspiring to teach.

In addition to the weekly group discussions, the students also do an essay (15-20 pages) which analyzes a topic’s primary and secondary literature in relation to various musicological methodologies. At the end of the course, there is a take-home exam which includes new readings for discussion in the context of the readings which were done in class.

The first session (a two-hour class), **Introduction**, presents three short handouts (one-two pages) which the students read and we immediately discuss:

- 1) *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 18 Sept. 1994, “Coming to terms with the death of certainty” : a book review of *Telling the Truth About History* by Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob (New York: Norton, 1994).
- 2) Grout, Donald Jay. “Western Concepts of Music History.” In *International Musicological Society, Report of the Twelfth Congress, Berkeley*, 272-74. Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1981.
- 3) *The Baltimore Sun*, 27 Oct. 1996, a short article by Glenn McNatt, “Musicology Can Enlarge a Subjective Experience,” discussing the 1996 AMS conference held in that city and whether music literature can or should influence one’s appreciation of a piece of music

The *Guardian* book review usually garners the most discussion since it focuses on “what” is history, “the possibility of objective knowledge of any kind”, and the fact “that all knowledge springs from an interaction between the object investigated and the culturally-shaped investigator”. I end the session with a quotation from *Alice in Wonderland*: “When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less.” “The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.” “The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master - that’s all.”

The next session (week 2), **Overview - Part 1**, attempts to summarize the discipline of musicology:

- 1) Pruett and Slavens: *Research Guide to Musicology*: chapter 1, pp. 3-15, “The Field of Music Scholarship”.
- 2) Allen, Warren Dwight. *Philosophies of Music History: A Study of General Histories of Music 1600-1960*. New York: Dover, 1962.

Basic definitions of systematic and historical musicology are discussed as well as some of the main figures in the development, especially in the twentieth century, of the discipline. These two sources begin to lay the groundwork for students to realize that there are various sub-disciplines in the study of music and to begin considering for themselves how they think the discipline should be subdivided.

It is now time (week 3) to start addressing the historical aspect of musicology as a discipline and how it was formed:

Early 20th century - to WW II:

- 1) Pratt, W.S. “On behalf of musicology.” *Musical Quarterly* I (1915): 1-16.
- 2) Dent, E. J. “Music and Musical Research.” *Acta Musicologica* 3 (1931): 5-8.
- 3) Potter, Pamela. “Musicology Under Hitler: New Sources in Context.” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 49 (1996): 70-113.

If the reader is looking for an article harkening back to a “simpler” time in academia, Pratt’s article will take you there. He passionately argues for the first entire page on what word should be used: “Perhaps the first question is, Do we really need the *word* ‘musicology’?” Before I misrepresent this article, one should note that it is a good analysis of previous attempts at music historiography, considers how “scientific” the study of music should be, and then presents his own categories for the sub-disciplines. His final sentence truly places the article as a historical document for 1915: “It may even be that sometime there will be in the faculties of certain large institutions a professorship of “musicology,” whose function shall be to unfold the broad outlines of the science and to demonstrate not only its intellectual dignity among other sciences, but its practical utility on a large scale to hosts of musicians and music-lovers.” In contrast to the “innocent” statements about musicology by Pratt and Dent, the Potter article is bone-chilling in its documentation of the role which musicologists played in the rise and support of power during the Nazi

regime. The exploitation of music and culture to maximize the idea of German supremacy, as well as examples of individuals who used this to advance their musical careers, is a sad chapter in the history of the discipline, but one which students need to be aware. My reference to pirates and emperors from the first class has now become more than just a metaphor.

Week 4 is divided into two sections:

Overview - Part 2

- 1) *New Grove*, 1980 edition, s.v. "Musicology": pp. 836-46 only.
- 2) Pruett and Slavens: *Research Guide to Musicology*: chapter 2, pp. 16-45, "The Ways and Means of Musicology."

Ca. WW II - 1937-47

- 1) Dent, E.J. "The Historical Approach to Music." *Musical Quarterly* 23 (1937): 1-17.
- 2) Lang, P.H. "Musical Scholarship at the crossroads." *Musical Quarterly* 31 (1945): 371-80.
- 3) Lowinsky, E. "Music History and its relation to the History of Ideas." *The Music Journal* 4 (1946); reprinted in *Music in the Culture of the Renaissance and Other Essays*: Edward Lowinsky, vol. 1: 3-5.
- 4) Lang, P.H. Editorial : "On Musicology." *Musical Quarterly* 33 (1947): 557-64.
- 5) *AMS Newsletter*, Feb. 1985, pp. 9-10: "Observations of a Corresponding Member" by Jens Peter Larsen and, "Reflections of an

Honorary Member and Early Officer" by Paul Henry Lang.

The "Overview - Part 2" completes the examination of the sub-disciplines and the history of musicology. The *Groves* article is almost too dense to be useful and I find that I spend a significant amount of time explaining various concepts mentioned in passing.

In the second class-hour the decade of 1937-47 is reviewed using four articles written at the time plus the 1985 *AMS Newsletter* celebrating its 50th anniversary. Each of these articles is extremely valuable and thought-provoking, dealing again with possible ideologies for the study of music, arguing for and against the present-day theories of music, and presenting a vision of the future of music scholarship. Students start to notice that the tone of the writing styles is more strident, and that the authors are beginning to become more aggressive and personal in the condemnation of ideas dissimilar from their own.

At this point in the course, the students with their broad general knowledge of musicology, have a point of comparison to consider the earlier centuries. Week 5, **Historical - In the Beginning....the 18th Century**, discusses the two most famous histories:

- 1) Burney, Charles. *A General History of Music from the Earliest Ages to the Present*. New York: Dover, 1957. (Just read enough of book to be able to discuss its contents and style.)
- 2) Hawkins, Sir John (1719-89). *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music* with a new introduction by Charles Cudworth. New York: Dover, 1963.

