

International Conference for Students of Systematic Musicology 2008 Conference Report and Introduction to Volume 10

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The *First International Conference of Students of Systematic Musicology* was held at the University of Graz on 14th and 15th November 2008, and was designed as a platform for students from the various subdisciplines of systematic musicology to gain exposure to their colleagues' research (as well as presenting their own) in a friendly and supportive environment. Never before had such a student conference on systematic musicology taken place, and the University of Graz assumed an appropriate place for such an endeavour when the research history of the music department is considered alongside the research interests of Professor Richard Parncutt, who co-directed the conference. *British Postgraduate Musicology* is committed to upholding student-led initiatives, and, having learned in co-director Manuela Marin's opening speech that the general ideas of student conferences in Austria were relatively rare, it was particularly gratifying to be a part of such a rigorously organised conference from the off. The conference was designed to expose future scholars to the conference procedures early in their careers, and provided the attendees with a valuable intellectual and social programme that would grant them an opportunity to meet with colleagues with similar research interests. The organisers ostensibly received numerous high-quality responses to the international call for papers, which were all subjected to a double-blind, peer-review procedure before their acceptance (this is just one example of the rigorous review and evaluation procedures that were so exemplarily deployed throughout). It seemed quite natural, therefore, that *BPM* could demonstrate our support to such a positive venture that so overtly contributed to the postgraduate community, by publishing a selection of articles that were submitted for the proceedings of the conference in this special issue.

It was also my personal pleasure, having taken over the editorship of *BPM* in early 2008, to be invited by the conference organisers as a representative of *BPM* to present a special lecture that outlined the organisational, editorial, marketing, financial and developmental practices of student-led initiatives, with the ultimate objective of equipping fellow postgraduates to return to their respective institutions able to instigate comparable endeavours. But, despite some (admittedly relatively superficial!) research as to exactly what "Systematic Musicology" entailed, I departed London to the University of Graz in November of last year, still in relative ignorance as to a clearly defined concept of exactly what systematic musicology entailed: in all honesty, all I could really be sure of was that I, most definitely, was an "*un-systematic* musicologist"!

I was delighted, therefore, when, upon my arrival, Parncutt addressed this issue in his welcoming speech: "systematic musicologists tend to ask more general questions about music such as what distinguishes music from sound,

how instruments work, what motivates people to make music ... and so on". Definition at my fingertips, the conference opened with a keynote lecture delivered by Gerhard Widmer from Johannes Kepler University (Linz, Austria) entitled: *In Search of the Horowitz Factor': Large-Scale Computational Investigations into Expressive Piano Performance*. Widmer's paper presented a broad overview of his research that used, ostensibly, the latest in modern technology to analyse classical piano recordings from the greatest of performers. The data is collected and used to identify the prevalent similarities and differences in performance style that is use to examine the ambiguous occurrence of performative expression. It was very encouraging – and especially interesting to note – that Widmer was not in fact affiliated to a music department at all, but represented both the Department of Computational Perception at Johannes Kepler (the same departmental affiliation as other keynote speaker Werner Goebel), and the Austrian Research Institute for Artificial Intelligence. The final keynote lecture, addressed to a full audience by Silke Borgstedt, again centred upon the collection of data, as well as its computational analysis. Borgstedt's investigations examine and evaluate the sociological constituents that influence the various attitudes upheld in contemporary youth culture. Although it was disappointing that only a small amount of her presentation was devoted to music, and its interrelation with other expressive phenomena (e.g. fashion, media, etc.), yet again Borgstedt demonstrated the auspicious fusion of disciplines that kept occurring under the umbrella of SysMus 08. As the conference proceeded, so, too, did the *mélange* of issues addressed: from voices in harpsichord performance, Tori Amos' sexualised virtuosity, preserved music cognition in dementia, to Lutosławski's psychological compositional process.

Indeed, the diversity of subjects, methodologies and approaches briefly alluded to above seemed to me to cover a broader range than implied by Parncutt's original explanation of systematic musicology. So, was I any clearer to achieving my definition of this elusive term? The main feature that distinguished the subject matters from any other conference, I concluded at the end of my time in Graz, was the prevalence of papers that were centred upon empirical and data-orientated research. According to his article 'Systematic Musicology and the History and Future of Western Musical Scholarship',¹ Parncutt – although endorsing these as characteristic of Scientific Systematic Musicology – rejects this as definitive, drawing attention the diversity in the discipline that SysMus 08 imparted: "[Systematic Musicology] involves empirical psychology and sociology, acoustics, physiology, neurosciences, cognitive sciences, computing and technology...philosophical aesthetics, theoretical sociology, semiotics, hermeneutics, music criticism, and cultural and gender studies".

This miscellany in a definition – although representing the very obvious interdisciplinary strengths of SysMus 08 – could surely just as easily be applied to the musicological traditions that I was more familiar with than reserved solely for systematic practice? Perhaps I was more of a "systematic musicologist" than I originally thought? Or was it possible that the very same questions were being asked in systematic musicology as in "un-systematic musicology" but with the emphasis somewhat displaced?² If this was the case, then this tangibility between these approaches illuminates a very evident danger in the categorisation of musicology that does not necessarily render the practice limitlessly productive. It would seem to me that, in order to

ensure sound scholarly practice, the methodologies used in both systematic and historical musicology should be applied in both areas to gather rounded answers to very similar questions. By overtly labelling areas of musicology “Historical”, “Cultural”, “Scientific” and “Systematic”, these areas are signified as separate disciplines, and thus potentially ostracised from the various other musicological traditions. To my mind, a collaborative approach that encompasses all these independent sub disciplines would undoubtedly ensure the most accomplished research.

Adler’s original concept of systematic musicology saturated the conference at Graz resonating, yet again, with the opening speeches: ‘Musicology has changed enormously since then,’ inaugurated Parncutt, ‘but the basic meaning of SysMus has not’. In the same speech, Parncutt also drew attention to the fact that Systematic Musicology had never ‘caught on in a big way outside the German speaking world, many areas of SysMus are still not regarded as “real” musicology.’ But one only has to glance at the list of contributing attendees to note that the vast majority of these students were from outside the German-speaking world (indeed, the official conference language – despite it being held in Austria – was English!). This highlights not only the development of international diversity, coherency and openness in musicology, but also the possible change in attitude amongst contemporary research students that perhaps Parncutt and his contemporaries have overlooked. After all, Adler’s original *Musikwissenschaft* that marked the advent of musicology was completed in 1885, and – far from invoking a sense of liberation within the discipline – seems to us now to have merely elevated an intense institutionalisation (or even territorialisation!) of the subcategories of our discipline. It is also worth considering the significant change that has taken place concerning the methodologies employed to undertake systematic musicological research (take, for example, the technology used in Widmer and Mirosław Majchrzak’s investigative research), so too the philosophical approach that shapes any research significantly evolves over time. Indeed, the very idea that development has remained static from within a research discipline since 1885, to me, commands an immediate re-evaluation.

You can imagine my relief, therefore, when the other “systematic” musicology students in my allocated discussion group that closed the conference reinforced the ideas of a humble “un-systematic” musicologist. Amongst the other research students in my group, I witnessed an acute awareness of the potential hazards of this categorisation – or systematic *problematization* – brought about by the identity of the conference, and the reality that Adler’s writing still remain on its pedestal almost a century and a quarter after its completion. All were unanimous that interdisciplinarity amongst the different musicological research areas would be most advantageous to any of our individual research efforts. The group of students with whom I was convening wanted to take this further still, by removing the label “musicology” entirely and studying it under the more generic categorisation of “cultural studies”. (The rationale for such a movement was to thrust the concept of musicological interdisciplinarity onto a macrocosmic platform, and extending the concept of musicology itself beyond the realms that tradition dictates.)

Of course, this level of disciplinary collaboration would precipitate numerous other complications that are not overly beneficial to delve into now, but it is a universally accepted truth (and, naturally, common practice) that

any musicological study is hugely enhanced by contextual investigation into the backdrop of any research, whether this is in politics, philosophy, computer science or literature. It certainly was a refreshing attitude to hear these thoughts amongst our own contemporaries, and one can only hope these aspirations can determine – or, at the very least, shape – the impending future of musicological research.

Aside from the level of excellence found in many of the papers at SysMus08, the most encouraging thing to extract from this conference was this new approach that is actually being realised so early in the participants' careers, marking a point of departure for systematic musicology amongst this latest generation. Despite systematic musicology having been labelled from 'on high' a sister discipline of other musicological practices, a quick flick through the abstracts of the presentations conveyed the diversity of scholarship that was presented. This special issue of *British Postgraduate Musicology* publishes what we believe to be the five most outstanding papers from those that were submitted for the proceedings of SysMus 08, and the variation in methodological approach and subject matter showcased here aptly reflects the many diverse areas of music research that comprised the conference, the discipline of Systematic Musicology, as well as mirroring the wider musicological postgraduate climate.

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¹ Richard Parncutt, *Systematic Musicology and the History and Future of Western Musical Scholarship*, *Journal of Interdisciplinary Music Studies*, 1, 2007, pp. 1-32.

² Historical musicology puts its emphasis on works, composers, traditions and genre whereas in systematic musicology the prominence is placed on more general questions about music, which are answered by data analysis. However, it is still crucial to the systematic musicologist to consider the factors mentioned that are relegated to the background and, likewise, it is entirely necessary for historical musicologists to observe empirical findings.