

Editorial: “Sharpening Difference”— Academic Writing and AI

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Ever since the American company OpenAI launched its ChatGPT software in November 2022, artificial intelligence has become a ubiquitous topic of discussion, both garnering excited enthusiasm and stoking dystopic fears. As an internet tool able to generate texts that approximate human writing, to participate in real-time conversations, and to self-learn, AI has the potential to effect a profound transformation of the ways we collect, produce, apply, and disseminate knowledge. It has changed the manner in which scholarship is conducted, especially in the fields most closely associated with technology and informatics. But a resource such as ChatGPT also implicates the expressive and aesthetic dimensions of language, hitherto assumed to belong to the domain of animate beings. Vital ethical concerns have thus arisen regarding possible cultural biases in the representation of marginalized bodies of knowledge as well as the potential devaluation of originality and intellectual property. The academic eco-system obviously has not remained untouched by this development, and the members of a discipline such as musicology, including researchers, educators, and editors and reviewers of monographs, journals, and other types of scholarly publications, all confront an unprecedented situation.

The use of AI in carrying out musicological scholarship and producing musicological writings seems already to be widespread. The editorial team of *Acta Musicologica*, responsible for the initial assessment of a large number of submissions from around the globe, would like to share both our recent experiences and our views concerning possible AI-generated content in the articles we receive for consideration.

In the first place, a large increase has occurred in what we, with some chagrin, feel compelled to characterize as “robotic submissions,” that is, those apparently produced, entirely or nearly entirely, through the use of AI software, with little evidence of an actively thinking human mind engaged with the complex questions raised by culturally rich materials and able to evaluate insightfully the pros and cons

of any specific interpretation. For the time being, these texts are easy to identify and distinguish from human-generated work, by means of features such as their utter perfection of spelling and grammar, their highly formulaic language,¹ their absolutism in stating conclusions that are in fact susceptible to further debate, and so forth. Such “scholarship” obviously finds no place in the pages of *Acta Musicologica*, on both intellectual and ethical grounds, as we wholly endorse the idea that the writing of an academic paper should involve the autonomous critical thought of a human individual.² And this is a position we will continue to hold, even if future AI programs attain the ability to compose articles that come across far more convincingly as human-made.

Although *Acta Musicologica*, as the journal of the International Musicological Society, actively welcomes submissions in all languages, in accordance with the society’s value of global inclusiveness, the editorial team recognizes that prospective authors who are native speakers of English still enjoy notable advantages. The continuing dominance of English in the academic world means that these authors can more readily achieve a wider dissemination of their research; furthermore, a skillful stylist in the language, to which a great deal of cultural capital persistently adheres, probably finds it easier to win recognition and esteem on the international stage. For these reasons, we do not discourage the use of AI software as a tool for improving the grammar, syntax, and word choices of a text. We regard such use as a positive dimension of AI that does not contravene the principle of human intellectual creativity. Of course, no technology, including printing, recording, digitization, and so forth, does not embody some mixture of positive and negative aspects, so that *how* the technology is employed, rather than the mere fact of (non)employment, is what requires careful consideration. What unquestionably constitutes a negative facet, for us, is an abandonment of scholarly human intelligence, supplanted by a machine intelligence that takes over the entire research process, from the selection and analysis of data, to the formulation of arguments, to the writing of an article. And even if such wholesale replacement can produce outstanding musicological research in the future (it decidedly does not, at present, based on what we have seen), individual humans self-evidently should not represent such scholarly results as the product of their own (non-computer-assisted) efforts, much less expect to obtain the professional benefits of this work’s publication.

A current difficulty lies in the absence of widely recognized and consistent guidelines in the academic world concerning AI-assisted scholarship and its dissemi-

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- 1 A recent study on ChatGPT notes that over ten percent of the abstracts of scientific articles published in the PubMed database were written with the assistance of the software, with the occurrence of “excess vocabulary” (such as *delves*, *showcasing*, *underscores*, *potential*, *intricate*, *meticulously*, *crucial*, *significant*, *comprehensive*, *notable*, and *insights*) as a clear indicator of such usage. See Kobak et al., “Delving Into ChatGPT Usage,” 2.
 - 2 See Aylsworth and Castro, “Should I Use ChatGPT.”

nation. For the time being, each national or regional community, institution, and individual researcher seems to navigate these choppy waters according to their own ethical and epistemological conceptions. As a result, authors may encounter wildly variant attitudes towards the use of AI in their work, some much more restrictive than others. Nevertheless, we hope that the present editorial represents a modest initial contribution to a dialogue that eventually establishes a clear set of standards within the discipline of musicology. We also encourage the readers of *Acta Musicologica* to share their own views with us.

The articles featured in this issue of the journal serve as fine examples of distinctive individual endeavors of scholarship, in their intensive hermeneutical engagement with primary sources and their careful development of theoretical frameworks that afford innovative analyses of subject matter perhaps already familiar to many readers. Alana Mailes’s discussion of the place of music and musicians in the Peace of Asti, a treaty of 1615 that temporarily halted a war of succession between Spain and the kingdom of Savoy, draws upon original diplomatic papers to demonstrate the multifaceted cultural dimensions of what might seem primarily a political process. Her detailed account of ambassadorial travels and exchanges demonstrates music’s historical role in diplomacy, and illuminates the diverse soundscapes associated with the negotiations, including the singing of nuns in Milanese convents which were “deployed as an instrument of international relations” and performances of works of the Jewish-Italian composer Salamone Rossi for non-Jewish audiences at the ducal court of Mantua.

Taking as his starting point a single cryptic and previously unknown inscription in a celebrated letter by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, whose holograph manuscript could not be examined by scholars until recently, Steven Machtinger proceeds to elaborate a fresh, broad-ranging perspective upon Mozart as *homo esotericus*. Deeply fascinated with mystical strains of thought that encompassed not only Freemasonry but also Gnosticism and the Jewish traditions of Sabbatianism and Kabbalah, the composer thereby reflected a larger tendency of late eighteenth-century Viennese society, as Machtinger reveals through his discussions of Mozart’s relations with his father and his aristocratic patrons, as well as his *Masonic Funeral Music*.

Daniele Carnini’s article advances a historiographical revision of Italian opera history between the “great” Neapolitan tradition of the eighteenth century and the “advent” of Gioacchino Rossini in the early nineteenth century. Problematizing the modern reception of yet another repertoire and period sandwiched between two purported summits of European music and therefore consigned to merely transitional status, Carnini’s investigation, based upon his reading of contemporary periodicals, both inspires new attention towards a hitherto devalued subject matter and questions the concept of transition as a tool of musico-historical analysis.

Finally, Federica Marsico’s exploration of implicit homoerotic significances in two operas by Hans Werner Henze elucidates the communicative strategies of queer

artists, unable to present their themes of sexual otherness directly, because of intolerance and discrimination. Structuring their works so as to engage mainstream audiences uninterested in or unlikely to perceive alterity and at the same time to reach out covertly to listeners or viewers sensitized to the impact of sexual marginalization, these artists construct parallel channels of transmission. Marsico's analysis of this double character of the two Henze operas therefore underscores an ethical dimension of musicological research, and the responsibility of scholars to give voice to those excluded from full freedom of expression.

In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, the surviving materials for six lectures he was to deliver for the Charles Eliot Norton lecture series at Harvard University in 1985, the Italian author Italo Calvino (1923–1985), who died of a stroke shortly before his scheduled departure for the United States, speculated about “the fate of literature and the book.” Calvino expressed confidence in language's capacity to retain its “values, qualities, or peculiarities” in a post-industrial technological era.³ Though writing long before the advent of artificial intelligence in its current form, but having already reflected on the eventual impact of machine-generated texts in his 1967 lecture “Cibernetica e fantasmi” (Cybernetics and ghosts)⁴ and experimented with combinatory procedures in his works, he observed how “speed” had caused a “flattening [of] all communication onto a single, homogeneous surface” and emphasized the importance of literature for “the communication of things that are different simply because they are different, not blunting but even sharpening the difference between them, following the true bent of written language.”⁵

For the editorial team of *Acta Musicologica*, it is paramount to maintain a rigorous peer review process that acknowledges and ensures the unique thinking of each author. Our published articles might then reflect the spirit of Calvino's quest for difference through writing that aspires to the condition of literature. Above all, we undertake intensive and inspired exchanges with all of our authors and discuss in detail the content and style of the texts about to appear in forthcoming issues. And in this active engagement with colleagues, we aim to fulfill our vision of scholarship as fundamentally defined by human autonomy and connectedness, including the sharing of diverse viewpoints on the significance of AI in contemporary research and culture. Submissions that take on this highly challenging subject matter are therefore welcome as prospective publications in the pages of *Acta Musicologica*.

3 Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, 1.

4 First delivered as a lecture for the Associazione Culturale Italiana in Turin and then in other Italian cities, Calvino, “Cibernetica e fantasmi” was later published in the collection *Una pietra sopra*.

5 Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, 45.

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