

Editorial: *Acta Musicologica* and Multilingualism

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Ever since the foundation of the International Musicological Society (IMS) in 1927 and the first publication of *Acta Musicologica* in 1931, fostering multilingualism has been an important issue for both the IMS and its flagship journal. So critical is our commitment to this topic that we addressed it already in our first editorial in 2011.¹ *Acta Musicologica* seeks to fulfill the objective of international networking and cooperation between and among music scholars throughout the world. There is no such thing as a single global musicological discourse, but rather there are plural discourses, which are articulated through various languages, traditions, and regional and sub-disciplinary cultures. We view pluralism as a virtue and are committed to promoting it in the pages of this journal. We further believe that a fundamental component of such pluralism is multilingualism.

The confluence of many languages to form multiple discourses of musical thought has a long and varied history. Language's plurality has, indeed, been fundamental to the *longue durée* of music scholarship from Antiquity to the present. We often recognize the moments of such confluence through the ways in which they generate new ways of thinking about music, sometimes through the systematization of canon, at other times yielding the more radical change signified by paradigm shifts. It is the quality of multilingualism at such moments that new canons and paradigm shifts rarely remain isolated, but rather they exhibit a broadly influential plurality. Multilingualism, we increasingly recognize, is also multi-sited, thus revealing that the ways in which it becomes increasingly short-sighted to speak of a single Renaissance, when there were multiple renaissances throughout the world, or to address modernism as if it was a twentieth-century stage of a single music history in the West. Coupled with pluralism in music scholarship, it follows, multilingualism affords a capacious process of expanding musical thought globally.

Such expansion was very much the case at the initial stages of music history in South Asia. When the first major treatise dedicated to the aesthetics, theory, and practice of music, dance, and theater, the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, began to appear in manuscript versions in the third century CE and in variants thereafter, it bore witness to the interaction of multiple languages, first, to codify meaning in Sanskrit, but soon thereafter to allow multiple paths to understanding the arts in their variety throughout South Asia. The multilingualism of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* opened up multiple paths for

1 Celestini and Bohlman, "Editorial."

musical thought and history, so very essential that they continue to channel South Asian musical practice even in the twenty-first century.

Multilingualism is also critical to the processes of musical exchange and cultural tolerance that fill the contact zones between cultures and religions. The transmission of Greek musical thought through the literary labors of medieval scholars writing in Latin, Arabic, Persian, Hebrew, and Ottoman Turkish represented the crucial role of multilingualism, often affording it the archaeological functions of salvaging culture. Multilingualism itself, in many cases, opened up and then transformed cultural and musical contact zones, notably, for example, in the writings of the twelfth-century Jewish intellectual, Maimonides (Moses ben Maimon), whose writings on music, religion, philosophy, and science moved across the Hebrew, Latin, and Arabic linguistic landscapes of the world of al-Andalus in which he lived.

Maimonides's multilingualism was extraordinary not because of its uniqueness, but rather because it represented the possibilities of unifying musical thought by recognizing the diverse streams that flowed through it. In many ways, he inherited a tradition already fully evident in the thought of Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) a century and a half earlier, or in the writings of Ibn Khaldūn two centuries later. The linguistic contact zone that all three inhabited would be sustained by musical scholars from all sides of the Mediterranean, even to the foundational years of *Vergleichende Musikwissenschaft* in the early twentieth century, when Robert Lachmann and the Egyptian comparative musicologist, Maḥmūd al-Ḥifnī, would translate al-Kindi's writings on music into multiple languages, medieval and modern.

The formation of linguistic contact zones in global music histories were equally as critical to the musicological moments that shaped Western musical thought. At the turn from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, Johann Gottfried Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt made clear that language is not extrinsic to knowledge and thought. On the contrary, knowledge and thought are formed and developed through language. A language is not just a means of communicating thought that is independent of speech. Rather, language influences ways of thinking through its own structure and the social and cultural horizon in which it is used.

Renouncing multilingualism would mean a loss of perspectives, discourses, and traditions. This is particularly apt in the case of the arts and humanities. In the broad spectrum of sub-disciplines in musicology, many different methods come into play. Some sub-disciplines employ natural scientific methods and, thus, for the most part, a more formalized language than that used in the areas of musicological research that work with historical, cultural-theoretical, hermeneutic, and philosophical methods. Here, the object of research is itself linguistically determined, statements about the object are mostly argumentative, and there is, thus, a higher level of dependence on language.²

2 For epistemological aspects of multilingualism see Mittelstraß, Trabant, and Fröhlicher, *Wissenschaftssprache*, 26.

From the beginning of the seventeenth century onward, the gradual shift from the use of Latin to more extensive use of vernacular languages, as undertaken by Francis Bacon, Galileo Galilei, René Descartes, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, among others, accompanied a formidable development in all areas of science, with the effect that vernacular languages were no longer regarded as vulgar languages, but rather became cultural languages. As such, they further became vehicles for the plurality and multiculturalism of the modern world. Under such conditions a relapse to the premodern situation of a *lingua franca*, in our current age English, would necessarily come to mean an impoverished international musicological culture.

Ludwig Wittgenstein compared a language to a city, both of them comprising many different areas, which arose in various eras, which are structured differently, and which have differing functions and different social connotations. If a language loses its status and use as a scientific language, it also loses a particularly innovative, self-reflective, and self-critical component. It would be as if the most culturally productive area of a city, let's say the university campus, were to be eradicated. Nurturing and publishing musicological research in a particular language enables the members of that linguistic community—at least partially—to participate in this discourse. This is the prerequisite for anchoring musicological research in society. Reversion to a monolingual regime would dissolve such anchorage. Just as science was often an elitist discourse for only a few specialists in Europe in the Middle Ages, musicology would become a similarly elitist undertaking, from which a majority of the non-English-speaking population—many of them also potentially interested citizens—would be excluded. The social resonance and impact of musicological publications would thus be radically diminished, with negative consequences for the field's significance in society.

Due to publication practices in the natural sciences and medicine, there has been increasing pressure in recent decades to publish scientific literature in English only, and this has extended to certain areas of the arts and humanities. On one hand, such pressure benefits English-speaking colleagues in an internationally competitive environment in the short term, while on the other, it has a negative impact for them in the mid- to long terms. The main effects are both the degeneration of the English language to a *lingua franca* and the loss of motivation to learn and work with other languages at all. To have Debussy researchers who cannot read French, Verdi researchers who don't understand Italian, or Shostakovich specialists who have no idea about the Russian language would not result in a qualitative advancement for our field. In a position paper from 2009, the British Academy warns that English-speaking scientists may rapidly lose their foreign-language competence due to the current monolingual tendency, "which limits their ability to engage with research topics requiring advanced knowledge of languages other than English."³ In the same

3 The British Academy, "Language Matters."

paper, the British Academy asserts that science advances not only through the discovery of new sources, but also through the development of new ways of thinking, which in turn responds to stimulation from other scientific traditions and ways of thinking, is extremely important. A monolingual musicology would lead to a curtailment of horizons for English-speaking colleagues. Such a shift away from our commitment to a musicology with many rather than few horizons would be antithetical to the historical role that *Acta Musicologica* strives to sustain long into its future.

Reference List

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