

Empirical Musicology conference

2-3 April 2008

Institute of Musical Research, Senate House, University of London

Organised by SEMPRES and the Institute of Musical Research, this two-day conference provided an opportunity to explore the breadth of empirical approaches to music four years after the publication of Eric Clarke and Nicholas Cook's (2004) edited volume. The conference drew an international array of speakers presenting papers on a wide range of topics, from sessions on computation and analysis to music in everyday life.

In addition to keynote papers by Eric Clarke and Nicholas Cook, two award papers were given: the first by Helen Daynes, recipient of the Aubrey Hickman Award for the best graduate student paper, and the second by Desmond Sergeant, recipient of a SEMPRES Lifetime Achievement Award. Helen Daynes' *Listeners' Perceptual and Emotional Responses to Tonal and Atonal Music* presented the results of a longitudinal study which recorded self-reported emotional responses from musicians and non-musicians as they became familiar with three pieces of music (a tonal piece by Clementi, an early atonal Schoenberg piece, and an atonal piece by Berio). With increased familiarity the participants demonstrated anticipatory responses to the emotional triggers they had become familiar with, particularly in the tonal Clementi piece. Overall, however, the atonal pieces elicited weaker emotional responses, particularly from the non-musician participants, leading to the conclusion that future research on music and emotion should consider the effects of both familiarity and musical training.

Desmond Sergeant's address the following day continued to explore the link between responses to atonal music and musical expertise, questioning whether there is a cognitive root behind listeners' 'difficulty' with atonal music. Using the probe tone technique with a group of accomplished musicians, Sergeant found that even these experts – who had attained considerable eminence as performers of contemporary classical music – performed modestly in the experiments and had only fragile mental representations of the atonal music they had listened to. Relating this finding to Ockelford's model of zygonic relationships, Sergeant suggested that in atonal music listeners are required to rely on the relationships *within* groups of notes, rather than being able to draw on patterns both *within* groups and *between* them, as is the case in tonal music. Sergeant then addressed the ensuing implications of these results for the composition of contemporary classical music, and prompted some stimulating discussion in his assertion that there is a need for contemporary composers to create music which contains 'some structure that recognises cognitive processes'. Dan Leech-Wilkinson, for example, pointed out the need to elicit data from people who actually enjoy listening to atonal music, and suggested that their enjoyment may stem more from textural and 'sensorial effects' within the music, rather than a comprehensive understanding of the music's structure.

The keynote papers, too, shared a theme: both were concerned with demonstrating the advantages – and possibilities – of using an empirical approach in conjunction with other sub-disciplines of musicology, perhaps out of a concern to stress empirical musicology's potential for engendering collaboration, rather than division, within the wider musicological community. Nicholas Cook's *Bridging the Unbridgeable? Empirical Musicology and Interdisciplinary Performance Studies* used empirical analyses of phrasing in performances of a Chopin Mazurka in tandem with observational analyses of filmed performances by different pianists, demonstrating the possibility of reconciling two conflicting views on the nature of musical performance (performance of a 'work' versus performance of a musician's 'persona'). In conjunction, empirical musicology and cultural musicology can contribute to a wider understanding of how performances generate meaning, by unpicking both 'what performances mean' (cultural musicology) and 'how performances mean' (empirical musicology).

Continuing to explore empirical musicology's disciplinary alliances, Eric Clarke concentrated on the dialectic between critical and empirical musicology. Using examples from existing literature, including the analysis of musical features and the impact of recordings on classical performance style, he demonstrated how empirical and critical approaches used in conjunction can lead to a better understanding of the topics under investigation. The use of the word 'dialectic' (rather than one less implying polarity) was important here however, especially considering critical musicology's occasionally blurred boundaries with what Clarke called 'creative writing', and consequently the potential for empirical findings to confound the 'authoritative' musical readings of critical musicologists.

Overall, a healthy mix of established researchers and postgraduate students presented empirical studies from an impressive range of research areas. There were also some stimulating theoretical papers, notably from Lawrence Zbikowski, who contextualised music and emotion research using physiological and evolutionary explanations of emotion; while Jonathan Owen Clarke explored the connection between listening experiences and the psychoanalytic concept of *jouissance*. Empirical perspectives on the production and reception of recorded music formed an interesting theme across a number of sessions, with Terence Curran's paper providing a rare insight into musicians' perspectives on the recording process, finding that it frequently disrupted performers' senses of control and narrative, instilling a tension between the dual requirements for spontaneity and perfection in the recording studio. Gunter Kreutz, Mark Levy and Mark Sandler reported on their use of data mining techniques for the analysis of emotion words used in 'tags' attached to music by social music website users, while Anneli Beronius Haake provided an insight into the methodological challenges of conducting research into the role of music listening in British offices.

Experiences of live music were not neglected, however, with one parallel session on the first afternoon exploring improvisation and groove, while the other presented empirical investigations of audience experience at live classical and jazz performances. Alisun Russell Pawley's *Singalongability in Popular Music: Reports from the Field* nicely complemented the latter, reporting on ethnographic research which suggested that individuals' propensity to 'sing along' to music in a bar or club was determined by an interaction of social, musical, and environmental factors. In conclusion, the conference ran very smoothly, with plenty of time for conversations to continue in the coffee breaks and wine reception. It was a shame that the poster presentations could not be made more accessible by being displayed in the room where people gathered for refreshments, but nonetheless the IMR and SEMPRES should be congratulated for a stimulating and successful event.

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