

## Why American Music Research?

Theater director, writer, and educator Robert Brustein has recently argued in the pages of the *New Republic* that we in America are in the midst of an “ongoing war on the arts.” Attacks from the left, right, and center have been stimulated, he contends, by fearful political agendas, misdirected egalitarian impulses, and the willingness to elevate mediocrities into places that should be reserved for quality products.<sup>1</sup> While not agreeing entirely with Brustein’s arguments, I am in sympathy with his sense of alarm, because clearly we are in a period when the validity and even the use of humanistic research—our writing about the arts—is also frequently called into question as so much word-spinning. Paying professors in public universities to wrestle with the role of music undoubtedly strikes some taxpayers as just another example of wasteful government spending. When, as Brustein points out, the bases of a common American culture are in dispute, and the advocates of multiculturalism and traditional curricula are both placed on the defensive, the founding of a new American studies center, such as the American Music Research Center (AMRC), might suggest an action of naive idealism, administrative heads muddled with impossibly comprehensive goals, or even sinister hegemonic agenda. Why American music research? Why at this place and time?

The object of research in the humanities, as I see it, is both exploratory and synthetic. The goal is to understand in as many ways as possible the past that has made us, and that we ourselves are always remaking, including our artistic past, specifically in this instance our musical past, and to convey our discoveries to students within and outside of academe. This is not an important goal only because I personally enjoy a variety of musics, but because the making of music is such a central and necessary experience in the life of practically every cultural group on the planet. Music is not a universal language, but it contains in its many manifestations a variety of mutually understandable elements. Paradoxically music is probably closer to being a universally shared language—a language of emotions at least—than any single spoken language could ever be. Therefore it is neither glib nor fatuous to describe musical research as having world-encompassing implications.

American society, however, more than most (and I do not single out any subcultural group as exceptional here) seems to operate under the assumption that music is at best frosting on the cake of life—pleasant, interesting in a limited sort of way, a welcome distraction from reality perhaps, but, in the final analysis, dispensable. It is one thing to say that music is worthy of study, another to claim it as a necessity, and we rarely make the claim.

The American view of music's peripheral status is not universal, but before we go abroad let us look at the state of our self-knowledge. It is true enough that the language of music writing—our society places much value on learning through literacy—is arcane and known to only a few. It is also true that the skills associated with the production of music are believed to be difficult to attain. The discipline of music in the academy is, for the most part, devoted to the display of musical sound aggregates, not to understanding the impact of those sounds on whoever happens to hear them. And yet music surrounds us all, and most people want to be involved with music. Music is not a minority pastime.

A common theme of my general students' (not music majors) autobiographies, which I often ask them to write at the beginning of a term, is their early failure in, premature suspension of, or frustration in relating to formal musical activities. Sentences like, "I wish I'd kept up my piano lessons like my mother wanted," or "I quit playing the clarinet after high school because I knew I'd never be really good" occur more often than can be chalked up to apple polishing. The relationship that most American college students have with music is vexed and misunderstood. Yet music pervades their lives, from dorm rooms to dentist offices. And they have strong feelings about it. Music is powerful for them, and my students are not atypical Americans.

As Susan McClary and other feminist music writers have pointed out, the metaphors that we use to describe music's impact have incorporated for generations the most vivid verbal tools at our disposal, the language of sexual power and control.<sup>2</sup> With the purest of intentions we talk about music taking hold of us, filling us up, possessing us, and we model this language for our students. Even our allegedly objective analytical vocabulary is chockablock with "feminine endings" and "dominant chords." Heinrich Schenker spoke of single tones as possessed by the "inherent urge to procreate infinite generations of overtones."<sup>3</sup>

These words and their associations would never have achieved currency were they not implicated in a widely shared experience of the music—at least by the men who wrote the analyses. If, as Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese have held, "history . . . is primarily the story of who rides whom and how," then perhaps music history, sexual history, and political history are less separate than those in the positivist musicological establishment suspect.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps music is not, after all, merely tangential to the circle of life and its meaning.

Indeed, anthropologist-musician Henry Kingsbury has suggested that, within our conservatory system of classical music teaching, musicality itself has an ineffable god-like quality.<sup>5</sup> The gods of genuine music must be approached with awe. Their word is final. If student musicians err in performance, tempos and phrasings can be corrected, embouchures and bow strokes can be improved with practice. But if applied teachers finally deem those students themselves as "unmusical," they are unworthy of the gods, their days in

music school are numbered. No wonder most music students are intimidated by what they recognize as the icons of high culture, of classical music in the grand (usually European white male) tradition, and yet remain so attracted by the overt (and often parodic) sexuality of much uncanonized popular music. No wonder so many music professors see themselves as defenders of the faith.

As a pie slice within a public university library, surrounded by a conservatory (as the University of Colorado College of Music is in all but name), what can the American Music Research Center be? How can it most effectively respond to the perplexities of American music and musical life? The answer is impressive if we loose our imaginations.

At the moment the AMRC is introducing students to an array of American music materials in print and on tape. Our collections are being used in concerts celebrating the great Broadway songwriters, the colorful tunesmiths of the Colonial era, and world-renowned wind band musicians from John Philip Sousa's time to ours. Certainly we should continue to showcase our collections in classes and live concerts. But the time is ripe for new initiatives as well.

The AMRC holdings constitute one of the largest repositories of American music between Berkeley and Chicago. It is one of a handful of centers with materials diverse enough to illustrate on-site multicultural sources for future music history curricula. Geographically the AMRC is a natural meeting place for the study of American Indian, Latino, Afro-American, Euro-American, and Asian traditions. It is the scholarly site best equipped to tell the story of Colorado's music and to make a contribution to the retelling of the musical tales of the American West in general. At the moment it is an archive in which many traditional topics—psalmody, early American musical theater, and popular and cultivated music of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—are being explored anew. The American Music Research Center could be a catalyst in the process of bringing the insights of anthropology and psychobiology to enrich the theoretical matrix of music studies, as well as apply to American music practices and repertoires the new approaches in gender-sensitive criticism, audience reception theory, and poststructural analysis. All things are not possible, but many are, and many are appropriate.

I began this essay suggesting that the need for humanistic research and writing has been frequently questioned lately. As a conclusion, I can think of no better response than to quote part of a recent commencement speech, made by Toni Morrison at the University of Michigan. Morrison's work as thinker and artist-writer is a beacon for our generation. Her wish for the graduates to whom she was speaking is mine for the students, fellows, and the community at large who will be using the American Music Research Center for years to come.

While it may be true that the future, your future, is in your hands, the past is also in your hands. Concentrating heavily on changing and managing the future, we don't realize that the past is changeable as well. Of all the

adages, the ones about refusing to cry over spilt milk, that life goes on, let the dead past bury its dead—these sayings encourage us to dismiss what has happened, to get on with it and not worry about yesterday or last year or last century. I disagree. History has a flexible side. Of course it can be repeated disastrously, or be reformed in new guises, but it can also be critiqued. It can be analyzed. And artists can reinvent it so that it yields new information about itself about the present as well as the future. And each time we critique and examine it, it can deliver other information and insight that in fact changes what we know about it. That is the heart of much of the education you have already had here. That is the urgent enterprise these days, when blood and rage bubble together in the streets. My point is, you are not bound by the future, and, more importantly, you are not bound by the past. The past can be more liberating than the future if you are willing to identify its evasions, its distortions, its lies, and unleash its secrets and its truths. So I want to wish you not only the brightest of futures but also the best of pasts.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

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1. Robert Brustein, "On Theater: The War on the Arts," *The New Republic* (September 7 & 14, 1992), p. 35.
2. Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991). McClary's notes and citations are extensive.
3. Quoted in McClary, p. 12.
4. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, "The Political Crisis of Social History: A Marxian Perspective," *Journal of Social History* 10 (1976), p. 219.
5. Henry Kingsbury, *Music, Talent, and Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1988), pp. 116-123.
6. Quoted in *Michigan Today* (June, 1992), p. 5.