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Title

Elephants in the Music RoomThe Future of Quirk Historicism

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4w388377>

Journal

Representations, 132(1)

ISSN

0734-6018

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Publication Date

2015-11-01

DOI

10.1525/rep.2015.132.1.61

Peer reviewed



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The Future of Quirk Historicism

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Source: *Representations*, Vol. 132, No. 1 (Fall 2015), pp. 61-78

Published by: [University of California Press](http://www.ucpress.edu)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/rep.2015.132.1.61>

Accessed: 14-03-2016 08:37 UTC

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Elephants in the Music Room: The Future of Quirk Historicism

DESPITE A SUFFIX THAT SUGGESTS kinship with taxonomic enterprises such as zoology or the earliest phases of anthropology, musicology may rank as one of the most permissive of humanistic fields. In journals and at conferences, philological research and source studies rub shoulders with work on the philosophy of music, close readings, reception history, and microhistory. Yet, as in literary studies, one central question has troubled the field for at least a quarter-century: that of the status of the “texts” (musical works, as notated or performed) whose interpretation and explanation traditionally anchored much musicological writing. As both the canon of works that merited this type of attention and the analytical tools used to explicate them were destabilized, scholarly energies turned toward narrating historical accounts of musical environments. In the wake of this suspicion of close reading, many musicologists became collectors of curiosities, assembling and scrutinizing disparate objects, events, and documents in order to understand how past communities of listeners and practitioners used music, why they created and cared about the kinds of music they did.

Before this collecting impulse took hold, history often meant “context.” Musical works could be enriched, but at the same time shown to be functional and contingent, by accounts that placed them in ready-made historical frames supplied by the locations in which art was produced or by big-picture histories—the French Revolution, the Third Reich, the Napoleonic Wars.¹ And like most such cross-disciplinary borrowings, the imported concepts were sometimes flattened out, as if they had passed through the brain’s “abstract thought” region, as imagined in the Pixar movie *Inside Out*. As the kinds of history practiced by music historians have become more fine-grained and more material, there is a temptation to look down on earlier approaches as schematic or simplistic; but it is worth remembering that those contextual

ABSTRACT In this introduction to the forum *Quirk Historicism*, the editors describe the recent tendency of music scholars, in the wake of New Historicism, to avail themselves of objets trouvés and historical micronarratives for interpretation. REPRESENTATIONS 132. Fall 2015 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 61–78. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: 10.1525/rep.2015.132.3.61.

dyads (“music and . . .”) were welcome and necessary excuses to talk about music—even instrumental music, symphonies and the like—in relation to categories such as gender, race, and nation, whose admission into musicological thought was long overdue.

Once musicologists began to take notice of New Historicism, any such tidy or schematic versions of history quickly fell by the wayside. New Historicism’s trademark deployment of the anecdote upended the apparent clarity and coherence of context and blurred the distinction between texts and contexts, dispersing both into more complex discursive constellations.² The kinds of historical material potentially available to the music scholar thus became nearly endless, the relevance of any particular detail depending mainly on the ingenuity and persuasive gifts of the writer. Such a *précis* could, with a few adjustments, apply to almost any humanistic discipline in the 1990s and 2000s. But in musicology, the *objets trouvés* and historical micronarratives that once obediently fell into contextual patterns or acted as isolated anecdotes have staged a kind of mutiny, multiplying in the service of a narrative logic that overwhelms and even supplants any larger critical goals. It is this tendency that we are calling quirk historicism.

In 1798, a pair of Ceylonese elephants recently arrived at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris were treated to a concert—or, really, an experiment to measure natural responses to music on these animals, whose capacities for sentiment were believed to be close to those of humans. An orchestra and chorus from the Conservatoire de Musique performed various types of music for the elephants, who had been given the names Hanz and Marguerite, while a naturalist recorded their reactions. Selections by Gluck, Rousseau, Monsigny, Haydn, and Rameau elicited rhythmic trunk movements matched to the prevailing mood of each piece. The liveliest response was provoked by the revolutionary song “*Ça ira*,” at which the beasts began to behave amorously—an exciting development, since elephants were thought never to mate in captivity.

Hanz and Marguerite made their *entrée* into musicology in the mid 1990s, when the cultural historian James Johnson mentioned the concert in his account of the rise of silent listening in the nineteenth century. For Johnson the episode illustrated a key phase in post-revolutionary thought about music, a successful test of the conviction that music could civilize and regulate behavior, in humans and in elephants, if only both listeners and music were natural, pure, uncorrupted by monarchic oppression.³ Around the same time, the musicologist Jeffrey Kallberg mobilized the elephants, in trademarked New Historicist style, as an opening anecdote in his study of “convergences of music and sex around 1800.” Kallberg luxuriated in details from the original account, noting especially the creatures’ sensitivity

to key. When “Ça ira” was played in D major they began mating behaviors, but the same song in the key of F was no more interesting to them than a movement of a Haydn symphony (which, presumably, failed to excite them—or was seen to fail—because of its supposed abstraction). Kallberg reads the elephant anecdote as symptomatic of a broad tendency in eighteenth-century France to depict erotic encounters within a frame that combined voyeurism and musical performance.⁴ In the latest appearance of Hanz and Marguerite in the musicological literature, John Deathridge breezes through the story, juxtaposing the elephants with a tall tale of a musical spider that supposedly served as muse to the young Beethoven, all with the goal of placing the “universalism” of Friedrich Schiller’s “An die Freude” and its famous setting in Beethoven’s Ninth in relation to emerging notions of community that would, however inclusive and utopian, exclude certain temperaments and life forms.⁵

We can see in this microhistory of musicological microhistories something of the iterative tendency of the historical quirk, adapting as it does to disparate discursive contexts. In this the quirk has much in common with the low-intensity aesthetic attractions of the “interesting.” As Sianne Ngai has shown, the interesting thing produces not wonder or contemplative silence but chat: the quirky historical detail, in all its titillating strangeness and open-endedness, is almost endlessly productive of discourse.⁶ Indeed, the story of the pair of amorous musicological elephants could easily continue, slotting into narratives of colonial discovery, scientific experimentation, or posthumanism. This promiscuity may be exacerbated by the way further details offer themselves up, extending the narrative and broadening its implications, almost without effort. Whereas Johnson and Kallberg were working with documents called up in libraries, one can now discover with a few clicks before breakfast that Hanz and Marguerite made their way to Europe from Ceylon via a Dutch trading company, that they were moved to Paris with great difficulty after French conquest of the Low Countries in 1795, and that Hanz’s body was eventually dissected by Georges Cuvier in 1802.⁷

The ease with which the musicological reach of this pair of elephants can be extended until they can almost seem essential to understanding any musical phenomenon of the revolutionary period may obscure the profoundly ethical origins of quirk historicism. Although the romance of the historical oddity is mainly a phenomenon of the last decade, the roots of quirk historicism lie much further back, in a cluster of related methodological developments of the 1990s. In his quest to understand the influence of Marsilio Ficino’s theories of music and magic, Gary Tomlinson ran up against the challenge of writing about belief systems that now seem bizarre or irrational.⁸ Inspired by recent debates in anthropology, Tomlinson rejected the

“hegemonic” stances of historians who “silence the voices of the occult past almost before dialogue with them can begin.”⁹ Calling for a new “historiography of others,” Tomlinson urged musicologists to approach the musicians and listeners of the past as full-fledged subjects and equals whose tastes and beliefs should be taken at face value, rather than selectively sampled to correspond to the interests of scholars. While one might happily suspend disbelief long enough to learn about the powers of music as experienced by the tarantella-dancers and cosmologists who feature in Tomlinson’s book, the scholar of Russian music Richard Taruskin tartly cautioned that not all historical subjects so deserve “our solicitude.” Taruskin conjured alternative historiographies in which the “other” could be Pol Pot rather than Ficino, or the practice of ethnic cleansing instead of astrological song.¹⁰ As for musical works themselves, any lingering hopes that close encounters with them might yield up historical understanding were dashed by Carolyn Abbate, who used a performance by Laurie Anderson shortly after 9/11 to show just how impossible it was for listeners or scholars to gauge accurately what artists of a past moment had meant to communicate, or what their original listeners had understood.¹¹

It may say something about the atmosphere of the time that Taruskin, who had devoted so many sharp words to countering Tomlinson, came to articulate a credo that could easily coexist with Tomlinson’s own, beginning his *Oxford History of Western Music* with the indelible declaration that “the historian’s trick is to shift the question from ‘What does it mean?’ to ‘What has it meant?’”¹² And while the *Oxford History* accords a prominent place to musical close readings, others in pursuit of *what music has meant* have found that the tastes and concerns of past listeners frequently push individual musical works and the critical modes for addressing them to the margins, or off the page altogether. The ethical imperative to engage in a kind of historical ethnography, to provide a faithful account of the musical practices and social relations of past audiences, has meant that the musicologist’s own investment in music as aesthetic experience has been demoted: what matters now are the aesthetic tastes of those past others, which rarely overlap much with our own and are often incompatible with conceiving music in terms of works at all.¹³

Even as the historian’s aesthetic preferences seem to be erased from the picture, though, the temptation arises to approach the quirky details of the past as themselves aesthetically pleasing, as objects for contemplation that proffer some of the pleasure of otherness and exoticism that caused the anthropologists of the 1980s to mistrust the ethnographic gaze.¹⁴ To put this another way, the quirk pushes in equal and opposite directions: it produces the sort of estrangement that underscores the irretrievable otherness of the past and allows us to approach the experience of others, but at

the same time that estrangement provides an aesthetic stimulation that threatens to override the ethical dictates of ethnography.¹⁵ Once musicologists accepted Tomlinson's abstemious counsel to "interrogate our love for the music we study," who could have predicted that so much love would be redirected toward aroused elephants and ducks that poop?¹⁶

The duck, of course, is the automaton designed in 1738 by French inventor Jacques de Vaucanson, which has oddly claimed as much attention among music scholars as have his musical automata. Vaucanson's world-famous mechanical flute player, demonstrated before the Académie des Sciences in the months before the duck waddled onto the scene, remained a talking point in natural philosophy and music theory throughout the eighteenth century.¹⁷ To recap what any conscientious reader of *Representations* will already know, Vaucanson's duck boasted a memorable party trick: once it had gobbled up handfuls of corn, "the Matter digested in the Stomach is conducted by Pipes, quite to the Anus, where there is a Sphincter that lets it out."¹⁸ The duck has been mobilized as a correlative for the young Mozart, who was himself paraded through the courts of Europe as a piano-playing and improvising curiosity.¹⁹ Period audiences were at once spooked and fascinated by such displays, which fed into contemporary debates about the roles of inspiration and mechanism. And once Mozart and a mechanical duck are placed on a continuum, precepts of musical genius and originality begin to crumble, and some of the music we love most begins to reveal its dependence on mechanism, formula, and pattern.²⁰

Mechanism can do all sorts of things for music, it turns out. Besides putting the music of Bach or Mozart in contact with the thought and everyday experience of the period, automata and the reams of commentary they inspired can also provide a framework for theorizing the physical discipline of the performer, or the role of the virtuoso in the eighteenth-century imagination.²¹ The sheen of the mechanical can also elevate music, bleaching it of embarrassing sentimentality. One beneficiary has been Giacomo Puccini, whose turn to Swiss music boxes for melodies used in *Turandot* and *Madama Butterfly* has been variously greeted as proof of his commitment to realism and accurate local color, of his modernist credentials, and of his common cause with the machine-loving futurists.²² Once the music box is construed as an early recording device, and one whose distinctive cadences composers often found themselves emulating, far more musical repertoire becomes available (and interesting) to talk about, interpretable as anticipating the age of mechanical reproduction.²³

It is hardly any wonder, perhaps, that the story of Puccini and his music boxes ultimately regaled readers of the *New York Times*, given the continuities between quirk historicist style and the narrative strategies of arts journalism and trade publishing.²⁴ Like the click bait strewn across so much of our

phenomenal landscape nowadays, the quirky historical object is attention grabbing, yet it frequently links us to places we have been before. A compromise between incompatible disciplinary impulses and aptitudes, quirk historicism is uncomfortably, even impossibly, bifurcated in its aims: on the one hand, to provide a plausible historical ethnography of others; on the other, to re-authorize attention to works and styles that many people still know and love. By rubbing shoulders with unusual objects, musical works come to seem “historical,” and by sharing the stage with these works, historical objects come to share something of their aesthetic appeal.²⁵

The music boxes, mechanical ducks, and the like may give the impression of being somehow neutral and inert, independent of (and often aggressively countering) conventional aesthetic attachments and elite values. As in thing theory, pioneered in literary studies by Bill Brown, this material focus seems to proceed from the Heideggerian notion of the thing as fundamentally elusive—the thing “withdraws itself from thought most stubbornly,” said Heidegger.²⁶ Historians of every stripe have long accepted that there is no such thing as “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*,” yet the stubborn materiality of these objects, documents, and eccentric personalities seems to inspire trust, to obscure the fact that the quirk—no less than the artworks that many in musicology have learned to approach with caution—is apt to ventriloquize our own affective sympathies.²⁷

It is probably clear by now how much sheer pleasure can be had from researching and writing in the quirk historicist vein. There is the initial thrill of encountering the unexpected thing, the fluidity with which it is possible to add new links to the chain, and the quick payoff: each detail is so new and surprising as to seem to transmute instantly into historical gold. All of this fun had to be stopped, so in November of 2014 we convened a daylong symposium on “Quirk Historicism” at Berkeley in which we aimed to face up to our own temptations and invited colleagues to do the same. Speakers were invited to reflect in whatever ways they saw fit on a short paper by the symposium organizers and a small packet of readings.²⁸

The position paper, in a bit more than a thousand words, took some first steps toward naming and describing this trend in writing about music and went on to formulate some questions for participants. One contribution of the position paper was to call attention to the interdependence between historicism and aestheticism that we have outlined in the first section of this introduction. But that initial formulation of the problematics of quirk historicism also raised questions about evidence and advocacy, asking rhetorically at one point: “If we were to be more open about how we select our historical and aesthetic evidence, what would we say? . . . How should scholars justify their new patterns of advocacy? Indeed, what makes scholars interested

in, invested in, or affectively involved with things to begin with?” Speakers at the November conference seemed hesitant to take this on—perhaps because they were simply more focused on other matters, or perhaps they were put off by the brash tone in which the position paper insisted that “for a scholar to talk about anything at all is always performatively a form of advocacy, however buried or nuanced.”

Well-trodden paths in the humanities show us how to situate our work as resistant to master narratives inherited from previous generations, but we are far less accustomed to naming our reasons for engaging in one kind of work rather than another. This, at least, might be one explanation for the fact that so much conversation at the symposium focused on the power of the canon and its relation to the quirk. Because in New Historicist writing the anecdote usually prompted new insights into canonical works, it might seem that quirks will run rampant once the arena of musical practices is opened up, or that any misgivings about the quirk are really a disguised call to reinstate the canon. But even if it is easy to feel nostalgic for what now appears to be the clear purpose of the New Historicist project, cycling back to that state of mind is obviously neither possible nor desirable. The new broader parameters for what counts as “music” have energized musicological writing enormously, allowing it to consider a much larger population of makers, listeners, and consumers of music and to think hard about taste formation across styles, informed by real information about what audiences and critics heard and valued. These increasingly material realms of inquiry require larger “data sets,” and the ease of accumulating that information with digitization and search has transformed our research methods, especially for the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. So when we name and interrogate the phenomenon of quirk historicism, it is certainly not with any dream of returning to past certainties, but instead about developing an epistemology suited to this landscape. New frameworks may or may not encompass a return to writing about works of music in detail, and any future close readings would certainly be propelled by new techniques and new questions.

One methodology has recently gained considerable traction among music scholars, as if in answer to this epistemological vacuum. Though quirk historicism and actor-network theory (ANT) arose in very different contexts, each with a distinct disciplinary lineage, the two recently have appeared a bit like long-lost siblings, joyously united.²⁹ The method of ANT not only relies on dispersal into networks without centers but also excels at describing and arranging scattered historical data in ways that seem purposeful rather than whimsical or chronically distracted. Starting out from the copiously mediated gatherings of people, ideas, and objects that together produce the social, the very premise of ANT would seem to involve a more radical dispersal of the

artwork than anything portended by New Historicism: every discrete thing is an assemblage, every process a vast collaboration. Indeed, the kind of networks traced by ANT potentially undercut the premises of historicism, insofar as they emphasize the relationships between past and present that bring scholars into contact with artworks to begin with.³⁰

Yet the methods of ANT sometimes seem to be a potent means to an end that has not yet been articulated in full. Bruno Latour's arguments against implicit conceptions of society as a static arena full of people and things, rather than constituted by the dynamic relationships among them, have been energizing, as have his impatience with "critique," his suspicion of hidden structures, and his liberal conviction that everything lies in plain view. (As in the late philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, generally dismissed by Latour, ANT arduously "leaves everything as it is.")³¹ But especially in the absence of a critical project, the reasons why these nearly autotelic networks ought to monopolize the attention of a musicologist can sometimes seem blurry. Scholarship that concerned itself mainly with relating musical works to historical contexts was never in any doubt about its object of knowledge. The main event was indisputably the artwork, the focus that "context" or the curious anecdote was supposed to explain or situate, the reason for the scholar's historical detours. A musical history inspired by Latour, on the contrary, is captivated by the vibrancy of the *entire* social world: no single set of social attachments necessarily comes to the fore, and the additive logic of the resulting accounts sometimes seems to reject any goal other than the examination of the chain of social actions and connections.³²

Benjamin Piekut's contribution to this forum thematizes this potential pitfall of ANT by narrating a quest for an object that is almost comically absent. In this snippet from a larger account of the collaborative improvisational practices of the 1970s band Henry Cow, Piekut teasingly focuses on something ontologically elusive: an improvised composition, a performance event, a set of instructions for a performance that was labeled by some of the band members as "Pigeons" but has since been largely forgotten or disavowed. The reification of this "work" by the process of scholarly research itself is a running joke in the essay—but also its unavoidable goal. And when Piekut seeks to explain what motivated his quixotic pigeon quest, he poses some crucial questions about the future of scholarly investment itself. In the absence of an overt project of institutional advocacy or critique, the scholar's commitment to a balanced and descriptive localism risks overwhelming even the hierarchies and emphases that his historical actors considered important: the eager pursuit of the new networky reality pushes other considerations to the margins.

Emily Dolan interrogates musicological infatuations with science and technology studies (STS) more directly, and proposes a connection between

the intricate networks traced by ANT and musicological habits of aesthetic advocacy extending back to one of the discipline's founding fathers, Guido Adler. Musicological studies inspired by Latour may disperse the artwork into tangled relational networks, transforming yet another blunt "matter of fact" into a complex "matter of concern," but in doing so, Dolan claims, they conceive the social itself as a nexus of quasi-aesthetic attachments. Moreover, Latour's controversial conception of agency—not a uniquely human potential to act in the world, but a capacity measurable only in the changes wrought by things—not only invests the object world with unprecedented power to shape and generate ideas but also provides new theoretical impetus to the long-standing intuition that art has the power to change us.³³ Dolan thus understands the recent turn to ambitious art projects among STS luminaries—including Latour's own collaborative climate-change theater project, *Gaia Global Circus*—as the expression of an anxious desire to reinvent the Schillerian wheel and restart the project of aesthetic education. The "rediscovery" of aesthetics by STS is, Dolan proposes, an opportunity for musicologists, who, even while radically expanding the range of material objects and relational practices that they study, might yet remain advocates, exploiting a rich disciplinary language of sensitive aesthetic appreciation.

The theater historian Aoife Monks subtly theorizes the quirk in relation to the symbiotic relationship between the scholar and the artworks or historical moments she studies. Contrasting the optical illusion of a translucent ghost created for the 1862 performance of Charles Dickens's *The Haunted Man* with the holograms that stood in for Irish dancer Michael Flatley at recent performances of his *Lord of the Dance* extravaganza, Monks declares the first a quirk, but not the second. Whereas "Pepper's ghost" effortlessly sets in motion a train of scholarly connections—from the world of nineteenth-century glass production to the new urban culture of window shopping—the exuberant self-evidence of the Flatley holograms seems to foreclose such urgent discursive activity. Only with passing time, Monks suggests, could the holograms acquire the distant and unreachable quality that goads the scholar into action, busily weaving the sociohistorical networks that might account for their strangeness. Thus, though quirk historicist writing often gives the impression of "going native," diving deep into the *mentalité* of the place or period, Monks notes a parallel between the quirk's demand for explication and the characteristically modernist move by which the pleasure and value of the artwork reside in formal innovation and estrangement. The quirk—a modernist art object by proxy—performs an analogous distancing through its tangential and problematizing relation to standard historical narratives.

James Davies would agree. He begins with an apparently nonnegotiable matter of fact: the collection of rocks amassed and labeled by Ludwig von

Köchel in the mid-nineteenth century, which Davies sees as an only slightly more concrete correlative of Köchel's more famous achievement, the "Köchel" catalog that numbers all of Mozart's works in chronological order. Both taxonomies are equally inert and impenetrable, each indulging the modernist fantasy of an object world divested of human purposes and desires. Yet this, Davies argues, is the surprisingly cold premise of quirk historicism. Only once musical works have been assimilated to a landscape of readymade objects can they be subject to the interpretive spins of performers and scholars: the estranging "period" performances, thickly textured histories, and fresh political angles that zhooosh up these essentially lifeless rocks. Quirk historicism thus colludes with a political outlook that Davies dubs "soft modernism," a project sinisterly akin to branding: the musicologist gazes upon an expansive array of potential objects before mobilizing each one as "canonical," "quirky," "feminist," "marginal," "abstract," "post-colonial," and so forth, in the process neutralizing what were formerly robust and resistant identity categories. As an amulet against these patterns of neo-liberal consumption, Davies wields Ntsikana's Rock in the Eastern Cape region of South Africa. When struck in the right way, this rock sounded forth hymn tunes, and, in a moment of grace, even bestowed upon the illiterate Xhosa divine Ntsikana Gaba the ability to notate them for posterity. Because it is produced as an object by political, spiritual, and aesthetic concerns—real human investments that blend fact and value, history and myth—Ntsikana's Rock lacks the taxonomic purity of Köchel's collection. And for this reason it might teach the musicologist to reenchant even the most rock-like specimens—by listening to the tangle of human stories that have made them, rather than the sound bites issuing from the ultra-liberal "Parliament of Things."

The network of individually branded things, each clamoring for our attention, is a permanent reality on our web browsers nowadays, of course. And while quirk historicism predates the widespread availability of digital resources, Benjamin Walton reminds us how digitization and keyword searching have made it easier to locate and proliferate quirky evidence, and how the combinations of terms we search can produce results that mirror our own obsessions or enact a kind of unsavory wish fulfillment. Walton's central example is an 1837 press report that figured prominently in one of his recent conference papers. This item from a British-Indian military journal tells of Hindus and Muslims mixing in the audience at the Italian opera in Calcutta, with one local even taking voice lessons from one of the touring singers. That Walton turned up this zinger of an anecdote on Google Books a few hours before delivering the paper is only one reason to approach it with suspicion; we should also be wary of the way this vignette delivers precisely the kind of historical information that we value most highly. The

example makes it hard to overlook the exoticizing strain that colors so many historical investigations, and by no means only those that concern Asia or equatorial climes. Keyword searching, Walton argues, produces a kind of double distancing or estrangement that is occluded by the nonhierarchical appearance of the web itself. The apposite vignette or quotation is divorced from its source text (which need not even be read in full), and the source is similarly severed from a context of dissemination or print culture that might illuminate what Peter Mandler has termed its “throw.” Especially as search algorithms bring us repeatedly to places we have visited before, the thrillingly expanded choices of the early digital era may produce little real expansion in the choices being made—and so reveal something about our true priorities as music historians.

For Ellen Lockhart, historicism itself may be part of the problem, and she offers one possible solution, through a reanimated species of formalism that posits relationships across genres and periods. Lockhart notes that quirk historicist thinking tends to foreclose scholarly debate: when each scholar comes equipped with her own bundle of quirks, nothing can be directly challenged or corrected. Lockhart’s response is a long-range comparison of things that, without being placed in relation to one another, may appear merely quirky: the curious animated female statues that populated musical theater in the eighteenth century and an extended dance episode from Busby Berkeley’s 1934 movie *Dames*. Quickly touching on possible historicist accounts that would draw on Taylorism, assembly lines, fascist photography, mechanical reproduction, or advertising culture, Lockhart concludes that none quite get at the particularity of the central dance sequence in *Dames*, which thematizes notions of animation and beauty rooted in Enlightenment aesthetics.

Inevitably, our summaries of the essays in this forum have been partial and imperfect. More so than usual, perhaps, given that so much of the force and payoff of writing about quirk historicism is in the details. Still, one tendency is shared by all of these contributions: once enjoined to question the value and function of quirks, the authors slip easily into the language of discomfort and self-flagellation. As Walton’s piece drives home, quirk historicism can be colored with regret or shame, by a worry that the turn away from art appreciation, hermeneutics, and close reading may not have produced anything methodologically more coherent or ethically more defensible.

Shame is about nothing if not discipline, and in this instance it hints at an ambivalent relationship to traditional disciplinary certainties and aptitudes. If quirk historicism cannot live up to the high ethical standards of historical ethnography, providing only a history-flavored outlet for sensuous investments with nowhere else to go, then why not come clean about the whole

guilty business of aesthetic advocacy in musicology? Why not return to explicating and openly loving the artworks and musical practices that lured most musicologists into their line of work to begin with? Or, at the other extreme, why not seek absolution by purging musicology of its aestheticizing past and of specialized disciplinary knowledge altogether? In the new post-disciplinary world, social relations will be everybody's subject.³⁴ Music scholars should take up the task of fatefully weaving their own corner of the vast network of the social, like so many Norns. Yet during the symposium it was clear that the nonmusicologists in attendance opposed such disciplinary abnegation and would have preferred that we exploit the hard-won techniques and expertise of our discipline to illuminate beloved musical objects, rather than to critique them into thin air.

Objections to these agendas for change, though, are easier to generate than convincing alternatives. Since the fields of both literary studies and history seem to be equally in doubt about what their own objects of study should be, assurances that musicologists should “just” write about music offer cold comfort. As for the options at the other end of the scale—an omnivorous interdisciplinarity or a thoroughgoing relational studies—the dizzying purview of such work evokes eerie parallels with the all-seeing eye of Google, sharing its tendency to transform lived experience, varied documentary evidence, and scattered cultural debris into so much self-evident data. Intellectual frameworks whose success is measured partly in “data richness,” while frequently exhilarating in reach and detail, also have a way of eliding the specifically musical ways of knowing and feeling that do not always survive network-oriented descriptions of musical values, practices, and institutions. Yet placing musical objects once again at the center of musicological discourse is hardly a solution. A “new formalism” adapted for music would probably look more like retrenchment than renewal, mainly because the features that count in formalist descriptions still tend to be those highlighted and refined in certain high-status repertoires.³⁵ Huge catalogs of music that have been both popular and influential slip through the cracks, their formal outlines too regular, too repetitive, or too generic to engage the formalist vocabulary.

Judging by the desires articulated in the essays that follow, the first step in any course correction after quirk historicism should be to write openly about what moves us musically, rather than displacing our musical attractions onto nearby objects. The explicit ethical commitment to the past that launched quirk historicism might be supplemented and strengthened by a new ethics of aesthetic experience. Equipped with relational models of society, musicologists might pursue not only the fact of social relations but the precise nature of the musical transactions and human investments that help to secure them—not merely noting (with decreasing surprise) music's

multiple and contingent social ontologies, but striving to capture the texture of people's musical experiences and interests. The ubiquitous but under-theorized realm of the musically conventional and quotidian would inevitably feature more prominently in such an enterprise. One important step would be to listen closely and analytically to musical strategies and aesthetic principles too unassuming and too ordinary to qualify as either overarching formal schemes or distinctive styles: the elements that become transmissible units of musical experience, the patterns of small-scale repetition and deviation that stimulate excitement and surprise across works and genres, the complex and ever-changing relationship between musical mimesis and environmental sound, the expressive functions of the workaday gestures that repeat with only minimal variation across many works. Perhaps we would discover on this level of musical experience the kinds of attachments that weave music most tightly into social networks—the mild aesthetic experiences that Ngai has argued can tell us the most about the history of taste, and the pervasive “weak ties” that sociologists have suggested do most of the work in maintaining social networks.³⁶

In this lower-temperature environment, the quirk need not perish or be normalized into mere data. The oblique perspective on history the quirk has enabled, as well as its frequently subversive power, are unquestionably worth saving, and the ethical and political imperatives from which quirk historicism emerged should only gather force in any new disciplinary turns. But this might be the moment to direct attention toward forms of political relevance that are more distinctively musicological, to go beyond and behind readings of the “political meanings” or “social significance” of artworks or advocacy for musical practices that speak from the under-represented margins. The carefully directed quirk object might help to show how musical experiences change the ways people think and act, and how music produces distinctive kinds of association that are the conditions of political thought and action.

We began this introduction with a critique of the quirk's mobility; or perhaps it was more of a lament that the ethical and political impulses that inspired this strain of historicism had been lost in a manic collecting of historical curiosities that—like the elephants in the Jardin des Plantes—could underwrite an almost infinite array of arguments. The collateral damage from that proliferation of details included the dispersal of our discourse into a sea of scattered and isolated quirks, leaving no basis for dialogue and disagreement about shared information and methods. In the preceding pages we hope to have provided some first gestures towards a methodology for this variety of historical writing and some indications of where the quirk might next direct its formidable energy and appeal. The quirk bears a unique kind of historical knowledge, and if it were theorized (or moralized) out of

existence, we would be among the first to miss it. Then again, if the quirk is all there is, and if our writing begins to resemble cabinets of carefully curated and arranged curiosities, something important is lost. If these curiosities and all they represent can be connected to new hearings of music, animated by the same passion and enthusiasm that has been devoted to the quirk, we will have a powerful model of scholarship indeed, one with the potential to address both the political realities and the auditory experiences of the past.

Notes

1. A handful of examples just from the study of Mozart—one of the most “contextualized” composers in the canon: Volkmar Braunbehrens, *Mozart in Vienna*, trans. Timothy Bell (London, 1990); Paolo Gallarati, “Mozart and Eighteenth-Century Comedy,” in Mary Hunter and James Webster, eds., *Opera Buffa in Mozart’s Vienna* (Cambridge, 1997), 98–111; H. C. Robbins Landon, *Mozart and the Masons* (New York, 1982); Nicholas Till, *Mozart and the Enlightenment* (New York, 1993); Neal Zaslaw, *Mozart’s Symphonies: Context, Performance Practice, Reception* (Oxford, 1989).
2. One should note, however, that arguments against the text-context binary and its implications had long been elaborated within literary theory by writers such as Valentine Cunningham; see, for example, his *British Writers of the Thirties* (New York, 1988).
3. James Johnson, *Listening in Paris* (Berkeley, 1994), 129–30. The experiment was reported by the librarian of Paris’s Museum of Natural History, Georges Toscan, in the *Decade philosophique*, and republished the following year in a collection of Toscan’s articles for the paper, as “De la musique et son pouvoir sur les animaux,” in *L’Ami de la nature ou Choix d’Observations sur divers objets de la nature et de l’art; suivi d’un catalogue de tous les animaux qui se trouvent actuellement dans la ménagerie* (Paris, 1799–1800). Reviewing *Listening in Paris*, Mark Everist recommended buying the book “purely for Johnson’s description of this event”; “Listening in Paris: A Cultural History,” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 121, no. 2 (1996): 261.
4. Jeffrey Kallberg, “Peeping at Pachyderms: Convergences of Sex and Music in France around 1800,” in Roberta Montemorra Marvin and Hilary Poriss, eds., *Fashions and Legacies of Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera* (Cambridge, 2010), 133; first presented as “Voyeurism and Voice: Convergences of Sex and Music in France around 1800” at the conference “Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera,” SUNY Stony Brook, September 14–17, 1995.
5. John Deathridge, “Elements of Disorder: Appealing *Beethoven vs. Rossini*,” in Nicholas Mathew and Benjamin Walton, eds., *The Invention of Beethoven and Rossini* (Cambridge, 2013), 312. Hanz and Marguerite also featured in Michael McClellan, “If We Could Talk With the Animals: Elephants and Musical Performance during the French Revolution,” in Sue-Ellen Case, Philip Brett, and Susan Leigh Foster, eds., *Cruising the Performative: Interventions into the Representation of Ethnicity, Nationality, and Sexuality* (Bloomington, 1995), 237–48.
6. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA, 2012), 15, 110–15.

7. Buffon ranked elephants near the top of the animal kingdom, closest to humans; see Louise E. Robbins, *Elephant Slaves and Pampered Parrots: Exotic Animals in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Baltimore, 2002), 225–26. Hanz’s taxidermied corpse is displayed in the Muséum d’Histoire naturelle in Bourges; see the detailed account of Hanz’s life at the museum’s website: <http://www.museum-bourges.net/museum-les-collections-85.html>. Another important context for this experiment was the debate about testing theories of emotion and instinct on living things, as opposed to dead ones, by dissection after death; Toscan refers to this in the opening pages of his “De la musique et son pouvoir sur les animaux.”
8. Gary Tomlinson had already been pushing for the embrace of anthropological methods, beginning with his 1984 article “The Web of Culture,” *Nineteenth-Century Music* 7, no. 3 (1984): 350–62. Tomlinson’s call there for a musicology that acknowledged that “musical art works are the codifications or inscribed reflections of human creative actions, and hence should be understood through a similar interpretation of cultural context” succeeded so completely as to render itself obsolete. On the other hand, the sketch he offers of the pathways that a thick description of a sixteenth-century madrigal might take reads like a prediction of quirk historicism, especially in its vision of unbounded proliferation and parataxis: “And this would lead us along new strands of the web to new connections, all of them likewise altering our assumptions and deepening the meaning of poem and madrigal alike” (356–57).
9. Gary Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic* (Chicago, 1993), 9.
10. Richard Taruskin, “Others: A Mythology and a Demurrer (By Way of Preface),” in *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton, 1997), xxviii.
11. “Even if some spectator were told by a musicologist of the future what the historical reading of the sound should be, would he or she find that knowing no longer means what it did in 2002?”; Carolyn Abbate, “Music—Drastic or Gnostic?,” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 534.
12. Richard Taruskin, *Oxford History of Western Music* (Oxford, 2004), 1: xxv.
13. Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan have noted a similar move in writing about Victorian literature: “Seeing 1980s historicism as over-invested in figures, metaphorical readings, semiotics, and language’s construction of the world, they seek the pre-professional nineteenth century in Hyde Park, in the Grassmarket, and in Covent Garden, or on shipboard, in the bookstalls of Calcutta, and in the watchboxes of the Australian outback. Among the casual, occasional socializing of these places, they find the *unmetaphorical* past of figures (the book, calico curtains, the theater) and the referential links forged by not-yet-literary genres like the novel”; “Interpretation, 1980 and 1880,” in “The Ends of History,” special issue, *Victorian Studies* 55, no. 4 (2013): 619–20.
14. A mistrust evident in, for example, James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Authority,” *Representations* 2 (1983): 118–46; Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other* (New York, 1983); Bernard McGrane, *Beyond Anthropology: Society and the Other* (New York, 1989); and Nicholas Thomas, “Against Ethnography,” *Cultural Anthropology* 6, no. 3 (1991): 306–22.
15. The continuing attraction of the quirk—even given the high-minded ethnographic frameworks at our disposal—recalls something of the aesthetics buried in the early history of anthropology. In the thought of late eighteenth-century pioneers such as Johann Gottfried Herder, anthropological and aesthetic impulses were always entwined, even mutually implicated: cultures and historical

- ages were worthy of study to the extent that they presented themselves to the aestheticizing gaze of the antiquarian or colonist. See Philip V. Bohlman, "Johann Gottfried Herder and the Global Moment of World-Music History," in Philip V. Bohlman, ed., *Cambridge History of World Music* (Cambridge, 2014), 255–76.
16. Gary Tomlinson, "Musical Pasts and Postmodern Musicologies: A Response to Lawrence Kramer," *Current Musicology* 53 (1993): 24.
 17. The duck belonged to a famous trio of mechanical wonders constructed and demonstrated in the late 1730s, also including a pair of pastoral androids: a shepherd that played the transverse flute and a tambourine player. Both of these were subjects of debate among musicians late into the century. See, for instance, Johann Joachim Quantz on mechanical flute players in *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen* (1752; reprint, Kassel, 1953); trans. Edward R. Reilly as *On Playing the Flute* (New York, 1985), 131.
 18. [Jacques] de Vaucanson, *Le mécanisme du fluteur automate* (1738; reprint, Buren, Netherlands, 1979), 19. See also Daniel Cottom, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Digestion," *Representations* 66 (1999): 52–74; Jessica Riskin, "The Defecating Duck, or, the Ambiguous Origins of Artificial Life," *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 4 (2003): 599–633; and her "Eighteenth-Century Wetware," *Representations* 83 (2003): 97–125.
 19. Annette Richards, "Automatic Genius: Mozart and the Mechanical Sublime," *Music & Letters* 80, no. 3 (1999): 366–89. Other invocations of the duck in music and sound studies include David Yearsley, "Bach the Machine," in *Bach and the Meanings of Counterpoint* (Cambridge, 2002), 174–79, and Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: The Cultural Origins of Sound Production* (Durham, NC, 2003), 73 and 80–81.
 20. The conventional formulas that enabled the melodic inspirations of Mozart and others have been studied by Leonard Ratner, *Classic Music* (New York, 1980); Wye J. Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart* (Chicago, 1983); and Robert O. Gjerdingen, *Music in the Galant Style: Being an Essay on Various Schemata Characteristic of Eighteenth-Century Music for Courtly Chambers, Chapels, and Theaters, Including Tasteful Passages of Music Drawn from Most Excellent Chapel Masters in the Employ of Noble and Noteworthy Personages, Said Music All Collected for the Reader's Delectation on the World Wide Web* (New York, 2007).
 21. See especially Elisabeth Le Guin, *Boccherini's Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* (Berkeley, 2005), 147–50; 147–48 for Vaucanson (though this time without his duck).
 22. Giacomo Puccini drew on material from two Swiss music boxes, one owned by the Baron Edoardo Fassini-Camossi, who had served in the Italian embassy in Peking, and another recently discovered in a New Jersey museum by W. Anthony Sheppard. The Fassini music box was first mentioned in Giuseppe Adami, *Il romanzo della vita di Giacomo Puccini* (1944); and has been discussed in William Ashbrook and Harold Powers, *Turandot: The End of the Great Tradition* (Princeton, 1991); Alexandra Wilson, "Modernism and the Machine Woman in Puccini's *Turandot*," *Music and Letters* 86, no. 3 (2005): 432–51; and Arman Schwartz, "Mechanism and Tradition in Puccini's *Turandot*," *Opera Quarterly* 25, no. 1–2 (2009): 28–50.
 23. The classic demonstration of the influence of a mechanical sensibility on music composed for live performers is Carolyn Abbate, "Outside Ravel's Tomb," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 52, no. 3 (1999): 465–530.
 24. W. Anthony Sheppard, "Music Box as Muse to Puccini's 'Butterfly,'" *New York Times*, 15 June 2012. Among "quirk historicist" trade publications, see books

- such as Mark Kurlansky, *Salt: A World History* (New York, 2002) and *Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World* (New York, 1997); Dan Koeppel, *Banana: The Fate of the Fruit that Changed the World* (New York, 2008); David Edmunds and John Eidinow, *Wittgenstein's Poker: The Story of a Ten-Minute Argument Between Two Great Philosophers* (London, 2001).
25. This strategy has also been employed to good effect recently by tenor (and holder of a doctorate in history from Oxford) Ian Bostridge, whose book *Schubert's Winter Journey: Anatomy of an Obsession* (New York, 2015) contains a facsimile of a report on parhelia submitted to the Royal Society in 1735, the observation that tears shed in emotion "contain twenty to twenty-five percent more protein" (87) than those shed while chopping onions, and a brief material history of charcoal production, among many other historical details. As Bostridge explains early on, "All these historical cross-currents may seem tenuous and beside the point; but they remind us that [Schubert's song cycle] *Winterreise* is a historical artefact, made in history and transmitted through and by it" (72).
 26. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter (New York, 1971), 31. Bill Brown writes, "However much I shared the new historicist 'desire to make contact with the "real,'" I wanted the end result to read like a grittier, materialist phenomenology of everyday life, a result that might somehow arrest language's wish, as described by Michel Serres, that the 'whole world . . . derive from language';" *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago, 2003), 3. Among the most recent "Heideggerian" literary thing histories is Jonathan Lamb, *The Things Things Say* (Princeton, 2011).
 27. Lamb writes: "It has been suggested recently that this [Heidegger's] distinction between objects and things is only apparent, a paradox of portability or an illusion of commodity fetishism that allows objects for a while to masquerade as lonely literal things, until such a time as they re-enter the system of communication as figures, characters, and signs"; *ibid.*, xi. The objects of quirk historicism would certainly suggest as much.
 28. The excerpts in the packet were as follows: Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago, 2000), 12–17; Joel Fineman, "The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction," in H. Aram Veese, ed., *The New Historicism* (New York, 1989), 60–64; Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," reprinted in Bill Brown, ed. *Things* (Chicago, 2004), 168–73; and Simon Schaffer, "Understanding (through) Things," lecture delivered at Cambridge University, Center for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences, Sciences, and Humanities, 8 March 2013, *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9BAZO9AWCwk>.
 29. Published work in historical musicology that directly draws on Latour or ANT methods is still fairly sparse, but there has been a noticeable swell in the number of conference presentations and in-progress dissertations that piece together "networks," with or without explicitly invoking ANT. While we were drafting this introduction, the following query was posted on the e-mail list of the American Musicological Society: "I am wondering if anyone has thought of making/taken the time to construct a network of musical friends, as recorded into documented descriptions (such as a title page that says 'dedicated to Mr. X by his friend Y'). It seems like this would be a very interesting resource, and one easier to construct with computer programs than on paper. Are there any such? what would be the best program to build something like this?"
 30. Rita Felski's observation that historicism's desire to "speak with the dead" is really just another form of cultural relativism, diagnosing texts as "cultural

- symptoms of their own moment,” might easily be applied to musicology; “Context Stinks,” *New Literary History* 42, no. 4 (Autumn 2011): 575.
31. Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam,” 169; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1958), para. 124. In Latour’s playfully trenchant terms, all scholarship that has treated artworks and artistic practices as symptomatic of or continuous with a “social context” has obscured how these things truly operate in the world: “Every sculpture, painting, haute cuisine dish, techno rave, and novel has been explained to nothingness by the social factors ‘hidden behind’ them”; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford, 2005), 236.
 32. Latour acknowledges that any chain of social relations must be written into being or reanimated by imaginative prose, and he more than once cites the novel as the model for the social science writing he wants to see—as if the social world itself were the product of artistic creativity or an object of aesthetic appreciation; see, for example, *Reassembling the Social*, 54–55.
 33. *Ibid.*, 63–86. See also Edwin Michael Sayes, “Actor-Network Theory and Methodology: Just What Does It Mean to Say that Nonhumans Have Agency?,” *Social Studies of Science* 44, no. 1 (2014): 1–16. Felski briefly explores how we might think about the James Bond novels as social actors, how they “attracted co-actors and helped make things happen” (“Context Stinks,” 587), and, writing about music, Benjamin Piekut welcomes the art object cautiously back into the fold: “‘The Music Itself’ returns, but with a difference. Its power is distinct but inseparable from other agencies, because it arrives in a tangle”; “Actor-Networks in Music History: Clarifications and Critiques,” *Twentieth-Century Music* 11, no. 2 (2014): 213.
 34. For a sampling of arguments in favor of such an approach, see Georgina Born, “For a Relational Musicology: Music and Interdisciplinarity, Beyond the Practice Turn,” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 135, no. 2 (2010): 205–43; and the colloquy convened by Tamara Levitz, “Musicology Beyond Borders,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 65, no. 3 (2012): 821–55.
 35. For a concise and clear-eyed account of new formalism in literary studies, see Marjorie Levinson, “What Is New Formalism?,” *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 122, no. 2 (2007): 558–69.
 36. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, esp. 20–21; Mark S. Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties,” *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (1973): 1360–80.