

Music Documentation in Libraries, Scholarship, and Practice



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Mass Data Analysis in Historic Musicology: Scope and Prospects

Helmut Loos (University of Leipzig)

A music historiography driven by progressive thought, as realized by emphatic musicology far beyond the scope of the much-criticized heroization, has since been realized as being too limited in scope, thus necessitating a shift in focus.

However, a convincing alternative concept has not yet been devised. New research results conform to the notion of historic musicology having broadened its scope. Questions of reception, institutionalization and societal determinators of music have been brought into focus. This broadening of perspective has resulted in an expansion of musicological source material, the key issue here being the handling of large amounts of data that are either being processed or have already been made accessible for further analysis.

A great obstacle in the way of finding a solution, as I have observed, is the widespread aversion of musicologists to quantitative methods, as, for example, displayed by Carl Dahlhaus with his apodictic rejection of all things he dismissed as "mere statistics".

Far from the erroneous assumption that statistics provide the solution for questions of academic research, it must be stated that, when properly implicated, statistics can essentially systemize, organize and expand the body of source material relevant for historic research. However, new source material is a requirement for the continuation of historic disciplines. A basis for such considerations exists in musicology with RISM, a stand-alone system in the field of humanities that, according to my observations, is ideally suited for this purpose. To give an example, the actual degree to which specific composers and their works have been circulated can indeed be accurately determined on the basis of the processed source material.

With more than 800,000 titles, RISM currently documents the worldwide transmission of handwritten and printed music recorded in European notations. The body of data is overwhelming for the individual musicologist; no comparable database exists in the field of historic research. It is thus entirely incomprehensible that this data collection has thus far primarily been used for singular information inquiries. Questions of music distribution can be addressed with the use of the RISM database in a previously unexhausted manner, hence providing material for analysis to

address innovative questions of music history. The fact that there has not been a pre-selection of "important" composers during the data collection phase offers the opportunity of examining questions of music distribution without preconceived aesthetic notions.

The fact that our "noble" art did not escape chauvinistic influences – as has become evident no later than with Richard Wagner – will strike a sour note with unbiased observers attempting to become acquainted with Europe's music history by means of German research literature. The cultural arrogance of the 19th century, which, on occasion, one still finds to be benevolently present, has been exacerbated to a well-nigh colonial notion of supremacy, fueling racist perceptions of evolution as well as dialectic philosophies centered around the notions of 'being' and 'truth'. An objective view of large-scale historical data could provide new impulses for the proponent history of the field and has the potential to soften deep-rooted preconceptions. The RISM database thereto offers a basis that sheds light on music distribution in Europe from a very specific and, initially, somewhat limited perspective.

The RISM titles are not only clear in terms of identification of the respective pieces, but also offer a wealth of additional information including current location and origin (*olim* signatures, unfortunately not used consistently). The latter allows for a provenance analysis of music on a broad scale, which, as a result of statistic enumeration, can be visualized in the form of graphs and topographic charts. Geographic displays following the example of the *Atlas der deutschen Volkskunde* can be further developed to be dynamic and interactive with the use of information technology. The graphic representations of the findings (statistical data and map overview) can be made electronically accessible, providing researchers with an option for data evaluation.

Concrete questions concern the availability of music (printed or handwritten, scores or performance materials) at specific locations and within specific time spans. The query would be structured as such:

1) individual pieces of music, 2) individual composers, 3) specific musical genres.

The results can be classified as a) multi-regional, b) regional and c) local in scope. Questions regarding the center and periphery of musical and cultural presence can be answered quantitatively and verifiably. A further degree of classification will be achieved with the category 4) repertory.

The structure of the music inventory at specific locations can be classified by composer and – to a certain extent – by genre in order to generate a repertory profile: Should the inventory regarding selection and percentile representation of composers at different locations match or show similarities, conclusions regarding cultural context may be drawn beyond the scope of the individual query.

A key function can be assigned to the classification of multi-regional, regional and local scope, as the group of local composers that, by definition, will vary from location to location, cannot be regarded as more relevant if a match exist for the other two categories. The question of cultural regions with a center and a periphery may thus be persuaded via specific multi-regional and regional repertory, which leads to a differentiated result with subcategories.

On the basis of these statistics and their visualization, additional innovative research approaches may be tested. One possible question of interest, which is apparently not ruled out by the statistics, arises from the prospect of completing the effectively fragmented historic data by means of extrapolation

and projection in order to explore the possibilities of certain levels of dispensation of cultural goods in the past. This offers an entirely new interdisciplinary research approach involving musicology, information technology and statistics, the potential possibilities of which stimulate the imagination.

Due to the material that has been collected, the RISM database contains an obvious focus on the time between 1600 and 1800. In the event that the following portion of music history is to be made accessible for similar questions, repertory research will be certain to gain importance. Based on the observation that mass dispersion of sheet music corresponds with local performances, which is backed by sporadic performance notes, the confirmation of concrete performances not only reveals the frequency in which the music was used, but also allows for a second approach to the issue; thus offering a complementary addition to the first approach while simultaneously being indispensable as a means of correction.

However, the time of the 19th and 20th century is characterized by a steep decline of both source material in the RISM database and the significance of sheet music for performances. Hence, concrete concert programs as preserved in program collections, music periodicals and books containing honorary publications must be considered as a type of source material. The development of a comprehensive body of source materials has advanced in the French and the Anglo-American regions; however, it is still underdeveloped in Germany and Eastern Europe. This provides a possible field of research for RISM, the progress of which should be verified with the setup of a database suitable for mass data analysis.