Critical Networks

Paul Watt and Sarah Collins

This article examines the idea of 'Critical Networks' as a way of studying the relational structures that shaped music criticism in the long nineteenth century. We argue that the personal, institutional and international networks that supported the dissemination of critical ideas about music are worthy of study in themselves, as they can yield insights beyond prevailing methodologies that centre on individual cases.

Focusing on the institutional culture of music criticism means looking beyond the work of individual critics and the content or influence of their views, towards the structures that determined the authoritativeness of those views and the impact of these structures in shaping the operation of critical discourse on music at the time. Examining these networks and how they operated around particular periodicals, tracing transnational exchanges of both ideas and critics, and uncovering the various ideological alliances that were forged or contested within critical networks, can not only provide a thicker context for our understanding of historical ideas about music, but it can also challenge current views about the history of our discipline and the kinds of structures that condition our own ideas about music and music history.

While co-editing the *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism in Great Britain and Ireland* (2009) with Marysa Demoor, Laurel Brake found herself reflecting on how the digitization of periodicals and their collation within online databases had opened new opportunities for discerning links between writers and editors, publishers and printers across a range of publications and languages historically. Brake noticed the way in which many of the dictionary entries

> flagged affiliations that did not surface elsewhere in the *DNCJ*, with the result that vistas of affiliation yawned as one read, prompting curiosity about the ghostly dynamic of interlocking structures, referenced but otherwise invisible.[1]

Brake went on to give a couple of examples of the 'unexpected range of connections', by referring briefly to the career of Joseph Bennett, chief music critic on the *Daily Telegraph* from 1870–1906, who had previously worked on the *Sunday Times*, the *Graphic* and the *Pall Mall Gazette* and went on to establish two new journals, *Concordia* and *Lute*. Brake also wrote of other critics – and publishers – who careers and institutional effect were implied to be worth mapping: Flora Shaw, John Murray and *Punch*.

We are all familiar with the particular thrill that attends the discovery of these types of interconnections: the music critic who writes under one particular name, set of initials or pseudonym in one journal but writes under a different guise somewhere else; the German composer whose brother-in-law was friends with a French artist who attended the large soirées of a famed society hostess in London;

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[1] Laurel Brake, '"Time's Turbulence": Mapping Journalism Networks', *Victorian Periodicals Review* 44.2 (2011): 115–27, here 115.

the music publisher who commissioned works more frequently from graduates of the conservatory that he himself had attended. Discerning these kinds of connections and unravelling their implications is now commonplace in the course of developing a broader understanding of musical ideas, lives and works, and has served to ground our view of intellectual and stylistic developments in social and institutional relationships.

Yet what Brake referred to as the 'ghostly dynamic of interlocking structures' might also gesture towards a denser understanding of these interconnections – one that leaves open the possibility of treating networks as objects of study in themselves, in order to subvert the predominant focus on individual cases (i.e. individual lives, or individual works). Rather than taking a text and working 'outward' to the social networks that shaped its creation and its meaning, for example, Brake (drawing from Friedrich Kittler) encourages us to think about networks as structures that precede attributions of meaning and content. For example, in the case of journalism, she highlights the way in which the material form of the periodical press in the nineteenth century might be viewed as being prior to its discourse content, and indeed that the very possibility of something called 'journalism' relies upon the particular 'technic' that happens to be available at a given historical moment.[2] The same might also be said of 'poetry' and 'literature', and perhaps also of certain genres of music. Brake suggests that this kind of materialistic and non-human-centred approach to networks can help us avoid some significant disciplinary blind-spots that can occur in periodical studies. For Brake, then, viewing networks as something more than just interesting interconnections that give meaning to individual cases, but rather as structures which themselves mediate meaning, is a response to a particular problem that she discerns in current research practice.

The recent interest in networks within musicology has sought to broach similar problems, though not without a great deal of contention. In Benjamin Piekut's lucid discussion of 'Actor-Networks in Music History', he points out that the language of networks in music studies is often deployed in a way that provides 'connection without mediation', so that

> ideas apparently move through [networks], but must do so mysteriously, because the inscriptions, institutions, technologies, media, and performances that produce far-flung association disappear entirely from the account.[3]

Piekut describes a response to this tendency that is not dissimilar to Brake's call to focus on mediality, when he encourages us to excavate the underlying mechanisms (institutional, material, regulatory etc.) that enable the interconnections to occur between ideas, people or styles – or, in other words, to view networks as structures comprising both human and non-human actors that mediate cultural production. The controversy comes with the particular view of agency that this view implies, namely its placement of human and non-human actors on a level playing field within the network. For Piekut, summarizing Actor Network Theory, agency is determined not by intention, but by an effect, so that anything that produces an effect, whether consciously or not, can be considered as an actor in historical development. Piekut notes for example how

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[2] Brake, '"Time's Turbulence"', 116.
[3] 'Benjamin Piekut, 'Actor-Networks in Music History: Clarifications and Critiques' *Twentieth Century Music* 11.2 (2014): 191–215, here 192.

[Richard] Taruskin would insist that it was not a matter of historical necessity that an avant-garde developed in the mid-1800s, but rather an active bunch of true believers who put Karl Franz Brendel's Hegelian philosophy of history into practice in their music criticism. And yet, another level of mediation escapes this account; the reader of *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* in Vienna is situated in a network that pulls together a cup of coffee, a café, and a text – Brendel is not there. He acts, of course, but this action is mediated by another actor, the printed copy of NZfM. Though it may specify in greater detail the different roles of the human and non-human, a conventional framing of Brendel as the real actor and the NZfM as a mere tool also risks overlooking the ways that the wider network constrains and enables human action.[4]

As Piekut rightly notes, Richard Taruskin has been a vocal critic of this approach, as emblemized in his oft-quoted comment from the introduction to the *Oxford History of Western Music* to the effect that '*agents can only be people*. Attributions of agency unmediated by human action are, in effect, lies – or at the very least, evasions'.[5]

In relation to our focus on 'networks' in this special issue, it is important to note that the central difference between Piekut's interest in effects – whether produced by humans and non-humans – and Taruskin's interest in causal explanation focusing on human action, relates to the extent to which network structures mediate cultural production, rather than this being a contention about the study of networks *per se*. Indeed, both approaches encourage a view of historical change driven by collections of interrelated actors (variously construed), and Taruskin is only too happy to take into account the effect of the circulation of musical texts, or institutional structures, on the development of musical style – it is just that he views these elements as only important in so far as they shape the way humans act to produce culture. His view is based on the premise that music can be seen as something that is separate from non-musical things, such that we can delineate its existence and map the causes behind its development. In contrast, Piekut (drawing from Georgina Born), notes how music 'requires collaborators in order to touch the world', and that it 'relies on many things that are not music, and therefore we should conceive of it as a set of relations among distinct materials and events'.[6] This view is based on the alternative premise that music only exists as an attribution given to a part of a wider network, rather than existing separately as a stable object upon which humans act. Focusing on networks in this denser sense allows us to stand back from the thing that we are describing (be it a work, a life or an idea), in order to view the conditioning factors underpinning that thing, making it seem less stable, less coherent, and more interdependent, all of which serves a useful analytical function.

In this special issue, contributors were asked to respond to the theme of 'Critical Networks' as way of exploring the diverse potentialities of studying networks specifically in relation to music criticism. Our aim in commissioning the special

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[4]   Piekut, 'Actor-Networks in Music History', 196.

[5]   Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, Vol. 1: *Earliest Notations to the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005): xviii. (Original emphasis). In a more recent comment, Taruskin noted that this sentiment had 'met with more resistance than any other in the Ox', especially from those who took it to mean that music history was a history of individuals. See Richard Taruskin, 'Agents and Causes and Ends, Oh My' *The Journal of Musicology* 31.2 (2014): 272–93, 289.

[6]   Piekut, 'Actor-Networks in Music History', 192.

issue was to further explore what could be yielded by a study of the networks established by music critics, or the networks in which they accidentally, or purposefully, found themselves working. Often, musicological studies in music criticism tend to focus largely on composer reception or the playing out of personal and institutional politics within historical music cultures. Rarely are the social, intellectual, economic and musical networks related to music criticism explored, and we wanted these considerations to play a part in our approach to networks.

The articles in this special issue respond to this absence by looking afresh at existing networks and how they operated around particular periodicals, tracing transnational exchanges and the various ideological alliances that were forged or contested. We have concentrated less on the issue of mediality here, but have collectively placed more emphasis on the ways and reasons texts, readers and sometimes composers interacted. What becomes apparent is that networks are not merely about connections critics make with each other, professionally or socially. They do not have to share a common intellectual bond or social standing to be networked. Moreover, they do not need a physical space in which the network is housed. An office is not required, nor indeed are shared national affiliations. Critics were mobile, as were their ideas, and their mobility extended to genre. Many of the critics studied in this issue were not just critics, or reviewers; not even simply essayists, or men or women of letters, or dilettantes. They wrote across genres and across media: books, articles (in established and lesser-known journals) and biography. Some of it was intellectually inspired and sat alongside the weightier critical literature of the period. Some of it was reflective and personal. And these critics and ideas travelled either in person or via the telegraph or exportation of newspapers and books across the world.

The first article, 'French Music Criticism and Musicology at the turn of the Twentieth Century: New Journals, New Networks', by Michel Duchesneau, takes a wide view of French music criticism at the turn of the century and considers the role of a particular network of music critics in the formation of ideals that became distinctive to French musicology. To these ends, the article plots the mobility of critics between journals – and the conditions under which they were hired – to illustrate how professional and intellectual networks operated, or were contrived, and what this meant for editorial relations between editors, writers, composers and the public. Two journals are put under the spotlight, *La Revue musicale* and *La Revue S.I.M.*, and the way networks were established principally through hiring critics based on their reputations as writers is explored. The article then outlines the ways in which Romain Rolland and Jules Combarieu came to blows on the management of a new journal, *La Revue de d'histoire et de critique musicales* (*A Journal of Music History and Criticism*), and the promise it held for advancing modern musicological scholarship. Underlying the putative efforts of this journal – and the networks that supported it and other journals discussed in the article – are considerations about the role and function of both critic and historian, as well as serious-minded discussions about the role of criticism and the kind of music history and literature that should be out before the French public.

The second article, 'Musical and Literary Networks in the *Weekly Critical Review*, Paris, 1903–1904', by Paul Watt, examines the multifarious ways that networks operated in the 'little magazine' genre. The recruitment policy of this journal was not made entirely clear, though its coterie of writers appear to have been recruited along the same lines as many other periodicals of the day.

But instead of comprising mainly – or only – French writers of music, the journal published the work of English and French literary and musical critics. Whereas the rise of musicology was the underlying impetus for the formation of many of the journals, the motivation for the founding of the *Weekly Critical Review* was a political statement, in that it aspired to be an artistic response to the *entente cordiale*. Its line-up of authors was a miscellany of Catholics, rationalists and Wagnerites, and reference to its mission was rarely justified – or even articulated. But it did represent not one but many networks operating simultaneously, which were underpinned or founded in part by bringing together some of the greatest critics from both sides of the Channel in a bid to celebrate French criticism that was looked upon with envy by the English.

In 'Realism, Idealism and the French Reception of Hanslick', Noel Verzosa takes up the issue of networks, not so much by recounting the associations of individual critics, but by exploring the ways in which ideas about criticism (or aesthetics and historiography) were associated as part of a 'philosophical constellation'. The case in point is Eduard Hanslick's treatise, *On the Musically Beautiful*, and the ways and reasons that many French critics engaged with it, from a respectful distance. The ways in which French critics responded to Hanslick's book and to Hanslick himself show up fundamental differences in intellectual outlook that made any connection to German-language thought fraught with all manner of difficulties, many of them based on differences of emphasis. As the author of this article notes, citing Maurice Emmanuel, while there was great respect for the work of Spitta in Berlin and Hanslick, the Germans 'who love philosophy so much, hardly apply it to music'. And it is this stance that resulted in a deafening silence from critics about Hanslick's treatise. In such a fraught intellectual climate, where intellectual life was so disparate, cosy critical networks that spanned national divides were, to some, neither possible nor desirable.

The fourth article, by Sarah Collins, 'Nationalisms, Modernisms and Masculinities: Strategies of Displacement in Vaughan Williams's Reading of Walt Whitman', uses Ralph Vaughan Williams's reading of the work of Walt Whitman as a lens through which to trace a network of critical concepts across the musical and literary spheres in turn-of-the-century Britain. It argues that particular ideas related to masculinity and nationalism were so closely interrelated within the system of thought embodied in Whitman's writing that these ideas could displace each other according to the reception context, obscuring the extent to which we can discern continuities in habits of thinking across historical periods and artistic mediums. In discerning how the interrelated and systematic nature of these concepts enabled their mutual displacement according to the requirements of the historical moment, the article seeks to challenge the conventional break between the Victorian and early modern sensibilities.

The final article, 'Toward a Post-humanist Organicism', by Holly Watkins, considers how contemporary understandings of the networked characteristics of non-human life – namely as self-propagating, self-regulating and decentralized – can be used to describe systems of musical production and music criticism as well as the internal functioning of musical works and intertextual relationships between works. Construing music as akin to an organic network involves recovering the problematic language of musical organicism from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, while at the same time contesting the understanding of the features of organic life on which it was based. In this article, then, the historical notion of organicism that heightens the distinction between humans and non-humans (or between culture and nature), and the view of the

natural as goal-oriented, teleological, and unified – characteristics which were used to valorize musical autonomy in general, and Austro-German music in particular – is contested.

The articles in this special issue outline a variety of potentialities in the study of networks, yet they share a common insistence on the analytical usefulness of the notion. Examining networks allows us to take distance from our object of study and view the underlying mechanisms that provide the very conditions of possibility for the object in a way that highlights its contingency. It helps us curb the tendency towards considering individual cases over collective systems, and it tempers the attraction towards the monumental at the expense of the marginal. Most importantly, perhaps, examining how networks operate reveals the relational and non-unitary character of cultural phenomena – a point that finds an apt metaphor in Goethe's description of living entities, quoted in the final article of this special issue:

> No living thing is unitary in nature; every such thing is a plurality. Even the organism which appears to us as individual exists as a collection of independent living entities.[7]

Networks replace a unitary conception of *objects* with a plural conception of *relations* – a shift that we believe holds a great deal of promise for future research in nineteenth century music and music criticism.

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[7]   Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Collected Works*, vol. 12 (Scientific Studies), ed. and trans. Douglas Miller (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994): 64, cited in Holly Watkins, 'Musical Organicism in the Age of Systems Theory'.