A DH-Leavened Musicological Toolbox

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A DH-Leavened Musicological Toolbox

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Introduction / The problem

Graduate-level training in music research methodologies tends to ignore digital humanities work and overlook the use of digital tools created in support of new forms of reading. Training instead focuses on source material in the student’s area of interest. This material includes secondary and primary (archival) resources, as well as information resources, such as: monuments of music and critical editions; indexes; bibliographies and thematic catalogs; dictionaries and encyclopedias; digital libraries of scores or editions; and databases of period-specific newspapers or journals. Graduate students taking research methods courses already have a toolbox built from their experiences as musicians and students of music, including the ability to read and interpret music notation, to understand theoretical and analytical concepts in music, as well as a command of music history, including the canon of musical works.

Digital humanities has become a major area of academic endeavor at the “interface of technological development, epistemological change and methodological concerns” [1]. An important characteristic of digital humanities research has been its interdisciplinarity. We argue that graduate training in musicology needs to include coverage of methodologies applied by digital humanists in support of new forms of reading, not only to broaden the canon of research topics in musicology, but also to build common ground with researchers of other disciplines. We propose that librarians are well positioned to provide this expertise and training.

What is a musicological toolbox?

In 1996, Don Michael Randel wrote a chapter entitled “The Canons in the Musicology Toolbox,” which examined “a common set of techniques that every dissertation and scholarly article employs” a type of “musicological interface” or “toolbox” that addresses the issues of theoretical and methodological consistency across the discipline [2]. Fifteen years after Randel’s chapter was published, Zoe Lang reexamined his original concept in a post entitled “Today’s Musicological Toolbox,” in which she asks that we imagine afresh this concept of the musicological toolbox [3]. Her argument was that a customized toolbox of both specialized and general tools would be required for producing a diverse range of musicological scholarship. The training of the musicologist should thus include as many of the specialized and generalist tools as possible, allowing the musicologist to move beyond the boundaries of his or her academic discipline. In the past twenty years, skills once considered general and essential (music notation, reading, writing) have given ground to areas of specialization like popular music and feminist readings. As in other humanistic disciplines, musicologists consider postcolonial and identity theories, together with the more discipline-specific topics of music analysis and Western “art” repertories.

What should be included in a DH musicological toolbox?

If we were to reimagine the “musicological toolbox” yet again, how would we do so from a digital humanities and/or information science perspective? What methodologies and tools should be added to a customizable “musicological toolbox” such that students and faculty become proficient in applying a set of techniques that may increasingly become commonplace to all humanistic disciplines? Are there specific misapprehensions to be wary of when appropriating tools created for other academic fields? Can an incubator approach be tolerated to make room for learning and experimentation, without requiring formal, publishable results? Finally, how does one make room for collaboration in a discipline that is still largely driven by individual scholarly endeavor?

Musicology’s favorite concepts—the composer and “the work itself”—need deconstructing, if not an actual remove of one or more degrees. Digital research methods can help accomplish this move by providing new interpretive frameworks for musicological questions.

Role of librarians

The scope of digital research methods is broad. And the work of training oneself to understand and use any single method in connection with one’s research should not be underestimated. This is where librarians working in digital humanities can be seen as partners to identify suitable digital methods and tools, provide basic training, and connect musicologists to researchers with related interests in other disciplines.

Librarians can help reinterpret music research methods training by:
- Acting as research collaborators
- Co-teaching classes, and co-designing syllabuses
- Leading exploratory digital workshops
- Building digital collections and preserving datasets and text corpora for teaching and research

Figure 1. A high-level concept map of subjects, theories, and methods we associate with a DH musicological toolbox.

Figure 2. Digital research methods may provide an opportunity to reflect consciously on the overlap of knowledge representation with cultural and historical factors.

The selection of tools and methods will depend on the type of question to be investigated, not to mention one’s tolerance of 21st-century “productive unease” [4]. Here are a few broad categories for consideration.

Digital micro-analysis:
- Encoding of musical scores, printed and manuscript annotation and texts
- Creation of multimodal digital editions of musical works
- Digital collation and annotation

Digital macro-analysis:
- Use of web scraping, APIs, SPARQL endpoints
- Data cleanup and manipulation
- Text and data analysis and visualization, including network, geospatial and temporal techniques and tools

References