



## Going Global, In Theory

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**Published in:** Vol. 3, No. 1: “Defamiliarizing the West”

**Publication date:** February 11, 2019

“Global” is hot. Witness: [global history of ideas](#), [global history of philosophy](#), [global history of science](#), [global medieval studies](#), [global history of music](#), etc. Laudably, the recent and various global-historical turns have been accompanied by self-critical reflections on the methods and motives of such global expansions. Of course, global-historical perspectives are nothing new to music studies: consider Al-Farabi’s *Kitāb al-mūsīqī al-kabīr* (10th century), François-Joseph Fétis’ *Histoire générale de la musique* (1869–77), or Sourindro Mohun Tagore’s *Universal History of Music: Compiled from Diverse Sources, Together with Various Original Notes on Hindu Music* (1896). While it would neither be desirable nor expedient to rehabilitate such obsolete historical methodologies, it would, as Reinhard Strohm has argued in a recent *Brainfood* provocation,<sup>1</sup> be an equally fatal error to abandon history altogether. At the same time, there is little to be gained by re-tracing the rich body of work produced by our colleagues in the field of ethnomusicology. From the specific perspective of the history of music theory, rather, the global turn brings with it a new set of challenges and opportunities.

Recently, a group of us met in Frankfurt at the [Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics](#) under the auspices of the [Research Group “Histories of Music, Mind, and Body,”](#) to share our ongoing work in the history of music theory. Our aim was to consolidate mounting interest in diversifying the scope of available music-theoretical sources. Some of us presented work in the history of Western theory, while others brought to the table Chinese, Arabo-Persian, and comparative perspectives. Over the course of the meeting, we found ourselves reflecting on an essential similarity of method: our goal of broadening the scope of music-theoretical inquiry required us to distance ourselves from concepts that we had long taken for granted, and interrogate aspects of musical experience long held to be beyond question. The concept of the musical note, techniques of listening, metrical hierarchies, philosophical approaches to attention, the purpose of textbooks, and the nature of musical metaphors: all of these suddenly seemed open to radical redefinition. The study of musical cultures or theories of music that are geographically, chronologically, or otherwise distant from the ones in which we have been trained inevitably produces both obstacles to—and unexpected opportunities for—understanding. The fruitful, if at times challenging, outcomes of such defamiliarization encouraged us to consider the role of distance in delimiting and shaping our research, and to contemplate various possibilities of expanding and diversifying the corpus of historical theoretical-aesthetic texts and materials available for study.

For example, we interrogated the concept of the musical note, a construct so familiar and fundamental to Western musical theory and practice that it seems that it has always just been there. But even fundamental concepts have histories, and in the West that of the note was apparently lost for a time following the dissolution of the Roman Empire. Its ninth-century rediscovery through the musical writings of Boethius and other late-Roman authors laid the foundation for a new, hybrid music theory that creatively adapted the speculative theory of antiquity to the practical goal of disciplining liturgical chant by means of a rational understanding of its pitch content. But the Carolingians’ concept of the note as the “element” of music diverged in important ways, we learned, from that generally accepted by modern scholars.



We also undertook an expedition into the sonic world of medieval Persian music. It was an unsettling, un-notated experience: all that remains is literature, poetry, and manuscript illuminations, whose lavish exuberance brought the absence of sound into stark relief. Instead of getting hung up on the unanswerable question, “What did the music sound like?,” we considered a model of “re-mediated listening,” of attending to sound through different media, not in order to hear long-vanished musical practices, but in order to investigate the role of the auditory in Persian cultural practices. Such listening is not merely the historical artifact of a modern perspective on pre-modern, un-notated musical traditions, but rather a mode of engagement already embedded in medieval Persian poetry and philosophies of listening. These observations can have fruitful analogues in other kinds of writings dealing *with*, rather than *in*, music, and along the way they have the capacity to expand notions of listening, sound, music theory, and musical practice.

We considered as well parallels between Chinese and Greek music-theoretical traditions. For someone familiar with the myth of Pythagoras and the hammers, for example, the story told in the *Lüshi Chunqiu* (吕氏春秋) of how Ling Lun travelled westwards to cut pitch pipes and so discovered the twelve *lü* will certainly ring a bell. Yet pitch pipes are not monochords, nor are the *lü* equivalent to any Greek tuning system, despite the two full centuries of misunderstandings that resulted from Joseph Roussier’s *Essai sur la musique des anciens* (1770). Still, both founding myths gesture towards complex conceptual networks linking mathematically conceived scale systems with matters of aesthetics, politics, and cosmology.

Finally, we raised a glass to the first volume of the *Lexikon Schriften über Musik*, a series edited by Melanie Wald-Fuhrmann and Felix Wörner. In an effort to expand the canon of music-theoretical and aesthetic-critical texts, the *Lexikon* will devote a third volume to writings from across the globe. The editors hope their project will help cultivate awareness of, and accessibility to, the rich heritage of music-theoretical and music-aesthetical texts outside Western cultures, with the goal of helping pave the way for more inclusive, global thinking within the German-speaking musical community and beyond. The *Lexikon* itself will soon be complemented by critical, commented editions and translations of texts. Numerous treatises have already been identified and selected for inclusion in the printed volume, and the editors plan to commission digital versions of many of these in a subsequent stage of the project.

Be it from the “aha!” moment of an unexpected similarity or surprising difference—a moment neither to be naively embraced nor summarily dismissed—such recontextualizations invited us to unsettle well-known certainties and so to revisit, reassess, and reconsider. This is certainly true for scholars focused on “Western” music theory and aesthetics. Perhaps it is for others as well. As Yosihiko Tokumaru reminds us, “every culture can and should be studied from every division of musicology.”<sup>2</sup> Throughout our conversations we found ourselves longing for a future that would better enable interactions and collaborations across linguistic borders. This could include

- support for translations and critical editions;
- new forums and research groups;
- crowd-sourced bibliographies of global or comparative music theories;
- the creation of a global history of theory pedagogies; or
- expanded paradigms of what music theory can entail.

Even as we begin to imagine how these ventures might take shape, we are aware that there are practical



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and intellectual considerations we cannot yet articulate. If broadening the archive of historical musical theory and aesthetics is to be productive, it must entail shifts in scholarly practices and institutional conventions. It will require openness to different conclusions and new, perhaps unexpected results arising from global networks and encounters that decenter the experiences with which many of us, as Western scholars, are more familiar.

We challenge ourselves to work beyond what we have previously assumed to be borders. We encourage our professional societies to consider papers and sessions that sit at the boundaries of disciplines such as history, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology. We aspire therefore to an intellectual openness to new models of scholarship, new methods of collaboration, and new platforms of exchange. Because we cannot anticipate the blind spots and pitfalls of this undertaking, we aim to cultivate a humble exuberance toward materials, both new and familiar. We are acutely aware of how much there is to learn and are eager to begin learning in order to facilitate the enrichment and expansion of our histories of music theory.

What next: If this *Brainfood* provocation has struck a chord with you, consider contributing to a crowd-sourced bibliography of music-theoretical texts. We have posted a [contribution form](#) on the SMT/AMS History of Theory Study/Interest Group's website, and all contributions (visible in real time [here](#)) will be added to the bibliography publicly available on the [History of Music Theory resource page](#). If you would like to feature the contribution form on your own websites or social media, we will gladly provide the code. An initial list of the texts that will be included in the *Lexikon* project can be found [here](#); and we all welcome additional ideas as well as suggestions for collaboration! Please write to us.

## Signed

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## Footnotes

1. Reinhard Strohm, "Tradition, Heritage, History: A View on Language," *Musicological Brainfood* (blog), February 5, 2018, <https://brainfood.musicology.org/contemplating-musicology-from-japanese-perspectives>.
2. Yosihiko Tokumaru, "Contemplating Musicology from Japanese Perspectives," *Musicological Brainfood* (blog), February 5, 2018, <https://brainfood.musicology.org/contemplating-musicology-from-japanese-perspectives>.