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SHAPING THE PRESENT THROUGH THE FUTURE. Musicology, Ethnomusicology and Contemporaneity

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Editors

Bojana Radovanović, Miloš Bralović, Maja Radivojević,
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DEBUNKING “POTENTIALLY MONOLITHIC PERCEPTIONS OF MUSICOLOGY”: THE ROLE OF MUSICOLOGY IN METAL MUSIC STUDIES¹

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ABSTRACT: It can be said that the academic scrutinization of metal music began with two substantial studies – *Heavy Metal. The Music and its Culture* (1991) by sociologist Deena Weinstein and *Running with the Devil. Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (1993) by musicologist Robert Walser. During the following couple of decades, academic and metal communities witnessed some sporadic – but essential – contributions to the field (Purcell’s *Death Metal Music: The Passion and Politics of a Subculture* (2003) and Kahn-Harris’s *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (2007), to name a few).

A series of several events that occurred near the end of the first decade of the 21st century, and especially during the 2010s, are crucial in the institutionalization of metal music studies. The foundation of the International Society for Metal Music Studies (ISMMS) in 2013 is probably the most important one, mainly because it announced the emergence of the new scientific paradigm. Following the first global conference on metal held in Salzburg in 2008, starting from 2013 the ISMMS began organizing regular international and inter/multi-disciplinary conferences biannually. Finally, the foundation of ISMMS’ specialized scientific journal, *Metal Music Studies* (Intellect Press, 2015), signified the beginning of the so-called autonomy that metal scholars strived for. As Will Straw noticed in his keynote speech at the ISMMS conference in Nantes (2019), this autonomy was particularly important concerning popular music studies. Metal scholars, coming from various disciplines (sociology, musicology, aesthetics, cultural studies, history, psychology, etc.), created their “intellectual hub” and started building a unique resource for the field.

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With musicology playing a vital role in the field, this paper aims to examine the musicological input to metal music studies, with special attention given to studies published after the foundation of the ISMMS and its journal. This overview will encompass reoccurring topics, contemporary methodologies, and the interdisciplinary liaisons established in the research process.

KEYWORDS: musicology, metal music studies, metal musicology, interdisciplinarity.

For a musicologist who has had a conscious realization of the interdisciplinary nature of their discipline, it can sometimes be burdensome to define their place “under the sun”, especially when confronted with already inter/trans-disciplinary scientific areas such as different platforms such as sound, voice, disability, metal, etc. studies. These areas of scholarship, which are defined by their primary subject and their complexity and attractiveness to a scientific inquiry, gather scholars from diverse disciplines, all of which are contributing with their own sets of competencies and knowledge, distinctive methodologies, and unique conclusions. From the position of a musicologist whose education is founded in numerous disciplines, including historiography, music theory, music aesthetics, and philosophy, the unique and homogeneous stance of what is “my place” in these *studies* is hardly achievable. However, as much as this position imposes an ‘identity crisis’ of a kind, it can likewise be freeing and stimulating. Given the laborious changes in discourse and enrichment of interdisciplinary dialogues in musicology during the last several decades, it is useful to see how the discipline opens and contributes to the emerging research area.

This chapter will focus on the relationship between one famously traditional discipline such as musicology, and the relatively new academic paradigm, metal music studies, which welcomes insight from diverse disciplinary fields such as sociology, history, ethnomusicology, musicology, psychology, philosophy, cultural studies, natural sciences, etc. As a cultural phenomenon with its social, musical, sonic, verbal and visual codes and dimensions, metal music warrants the attention from all of these disciplines, and in this text I will look into some of the key musicological contributions to the heterogeneous field which emerged during the past few decades. It is worth noting that this chapter will focus primarily on the publications in English, with an acknowledgement of the flourishing scientific scenes contributing to metal music studies in other languages such as Spanish, French, and German.² I will

² Growing by the minute, the most comprehensive metal music studies bibliography database is designed and maintained by ISMMS, and diligently kept up-to-date by Amaranta Sagar García and Brian Arnold Hickam. See: <https://metalstudies.org/biblio/> [accessed 21.

also offer an answer to the questions “What is the role of musicology in the study of metal music?” and “What can musicology offer to this field?” This type of discussion is inevitably a continuation of the debate on the status, role, and – it may be argued – limits of musicology in the broader scope of popular music studies. It will, as such, hopefully, give a valuable insight into the particular, exciting, and growing field of metal music studies and popular music studies in general.

The organization of this chapter is mostly tailored with a chronological perspective in mind, although the theme itself could also be looked into based on the interests, divergent disciplinary networks, and methodological foundations of the research work in question. However, even with the chronological overview, we can see the gradual leaning into the different topics and interdisciplinary liaisons.

As I have pointed out in the abstract, the research of metal music in academia started during the 1980s and was ‘crowned’ with two invaluable studies: *Heavy Metal. A Cultural Sociology/Heavy Metal. The Music and its Culture* (1991/2000) by sociologist Deena Weinstein and *Running with the Devil. Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (1993/2014) by musicologist Robert Walser. Their relevance is underlined in virtually all subsequent research endeavors in the field. However, although the sporadic and pivotal academic works appeared towards the end of the 20th century and during the first decade of the new millennia, the scholarly field started forming nearing the 2010s with the idea of academically exploring metal music from a variety of relevant disciplines. One of the inaugural events was the first Heavy Fundametalisms conference in Salzburg in October 2008.³ Since then, the proliferation of metal studies is evident, to which the foundation of the International Society for Metal Music Studies (ISMMS) in 2013, and its specialized scientific journal, *Metal Music Studies* (Intellect Press, 2015), speak volumes. With sociologist Karl Spracklen as the Journal’s first editor, as well as the disciplinary diverse Editorial Team, and in accordance with ISMMS’ stances, *Metal Music Studies* strived from its beginnings to encompass interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspectives, including the one (or, better yet, the ones) from musicology.⁴

In their Editorial Foreword to the issue of *Metal Music Studies* from 2019, dedicated to the theme of Musicology and Metal, musicologists Lewis Kennedy and Selim Yavuz quote some interesting observations coming from

5. 2021].

3 See: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2008/oct/29/research-music>, [accessed 30. 8. 2020].

4 Current convocation of *Metal Music Studies* Journal’s Editorial Boards can be seen on the following link: <https://www.intellectbooks.com/metal-music-studies>, [accessed 21. 5. 2021].

musicologist Sheila Whitley and sociologist Keith Kahn-Harris dating back to 2010 and 2011, respectively. In essence, these prominent authors lamented the lack of musicological insight into metal studies, which would consider the *sound of music itself*. As Kahn-Harris noted, “[...] without some widely accepted vocabulary for identifying the constituent musical features of metal, there is a danger that metal studies will be founded on a tacit assumption that ‘we all know’ what metal sounds like” (Kahn-Harris 2011: 252). The place for musicological competencies is, according to these scholars, located in the area that overlaps with music theory, formalism, sound studies, and the like.

Even though the musicological input in metal studies has significantly expanded over the last decade, it is worth questioning what these remarks refer to when it comes to research subjects, a variety of approaches and methodologies, and the results. By mapping the critical points of musicological thought, we will see its crucial features regarding the study of metal *music as music* and metal music sound. So, this paper will give a short insight into the nature of musicological contributions to metal studies during the last several decades, with particular attention given to the *Metal Music Studies Journal*.

PIONEERING STEPS IN “METAL MUSICOLOGY”

As a “leading voice in what was then known as the ‘new musicology’” (Berger 2014: x) and one of the first examples of musicological inquiry into metal, Walser’s *Running with the Devil* definitely sets the base of academic analysis in the field of musicology.⁵ Walser’s explorations of heavy metal sound concerning society and the context in which it is produced and consumed, establish a strong bond of distinctive musical elements – such as timbre (guitar distortion, as well as vocal timbre), high volume, preferred modes, harmonic and rhythmic features, and the prominence of the guitar solo – with their effect on its societal surroundings, and vice versa. The debate of power, gender, and madness, or, in other words, Walser’s take on the history of the heavy metal genre, musicological analysis of popular music, issues of appropriation of “classical” virtuosity models by metal guitarists, gender, and horror and mysticism in postmodern times, all rest on the assumption of the primarily social nature of music. Likewise, other than being a thorough analysis of heavy metal music at the time, Harris M. Berger pointed out that this piece of work was also “a form of cultural intervention” (Berger 2014: xii)

5 The second edition of the book contains a new Foreword written by Harris M. Berger, and an Afterword by the author. Here Walser adds a short addendum about drums to otherwise rather “guitar-centric” study (Walser 2014: 173).

during the confrontation of heavy metal, rap, and other popular musicians with the PMRC committee (lead by Tipper Gore) in the US Congress.⁶

Although some metal scholars that often come from different disciplines are easy to say that Walser's study is (out)dated and a product of its time, it is essential to mitigate this stance with a view from musicology – an otherwise traditional and historically rigid discipline. This is especially true for *peripheral musicologies* that, unlike the one with the Anglo-Saxon provenance which championed musicological investigation of popular music, still to this day have difficulty grasping such an idea. Academic works such as Walser's can be a powerful remedy in such a context, and a pointer for musicology of popular, and, especially, metal music.

METAL MUSICOLOGY AND THE NEW MILLENIA

During the first decade of the 21st century, the awakening field of academic studies of metal witnessed some sporadic – but essential – contributions to the field. One can notice that studies such as Natalie Purcell's *Death Metal Music: The Passion and Politics of a Subculture* (2003) and Kahn-Harris's *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (2007) focus on the subgenres of metal that came from the genre branching throughout the 1980s and 1990s and their subcultural features and dynamics, utilizing methodologies and perspectives of sociology, politics, cultural studies and ethnology.

As for musicologists in this nascent scientific area, there are but a few large-scale metal music investigations. Harris Berger's ethnomusicological study, *Metal, Rock, and Jazz*, published in 1999, should be mentioned here as an example of research across the scene boundaries. This work gives valuable insight into geographically close and co-existing scenes, their practices of music-making, performing, and distribution, as well as their understanding and relationship to the questions of aesthetics, musical sound, (their own and audience's) body. In a similar vein, continuing Walser's (and therefore Susan McClary's) school of thought, two authors published monographs on Metallica and Led Zeppelin. By combining musicology and ethnographical methodology in her book *In the Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the Power of Rock Music* (2001), Susan Fast explored issues such as ritual, gender, body, difference, and representation. However, it is debatable whether this particular study should be included in the "metal studies bibliography,"

⁶ Parental Music Resource Center (PMRC) was formed in 1985 with an intention to provide better control of violent, sexual, and drug-related themes and images in popular music releases. After the Senate hearing in 1985, PMRC managed to get record companies to include "Parental Guidance" labels where deemed necessary.

especially considering the research on Led Zeppelin that came after, claiming that this band stylistically and musically belongs in the hard rock genre. Meanwhile, in his book *Damage Incorporated: Metallica and the Production of Musical Identity* (2006), Glenn T. Pillsbury employs interdisciplinary methodology, enriching musicological insight into the forming of musical identity with the study of media, music industry, race, and gender questions.

As an example of more traditional and formalistic strains of musicology, Esa Lilja's book *Theory and Analysis of Classic Heavy Metal Harmony* (2009) should be highlighted. Here, the author explores melodic and harmonic features of heavy metal of the "so-called classic era" by employing various types and methods of music analysis. There are three hypotheses upon which this research was carried out: "1) acoustic characteristics play a significant role for chord constructing in heavy metal, 2) heavy metal has strong ties and similarities with other Western musical styles, and," therefore, "3) theories and analytical methods of Western art music may be applied to heavy metal" (Lilja 2009: 9). Given that the analytical tools that the author uses are the same ones utilized in Western "classical" or church music, we can acknowledge the author's stance that heavy metal music is a "product of cultural fusion" and as such is "neither isolated nor self-sufficient with respect to its harmonic language" (Lilja 2009: 210). These conclusions are brought upon the analysis of melodic and harmonic aspects of heavy metal in regards to other cultural products such as blues, rock, western church music, and "pseudo-oriental" modality.

In his book *Black Sabbath and the Rise of Heavy Metal Music* (2010), Andrew L. Cope works on analyzing "the syntactical design of heavy metal" in its social context while working on the precise and, as he writes, "clear musical and aesthetic dichotomy" between Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin, which represent early heavy metal and hard rock, respectively (Cope 2010: 4). By focusing on the sonic and social traits of this particular period, Cope also worked as a historian, studying the scene's development and growth during the late 1960s and 1970s, as well as the external (meaning: other genres such as blues and rock and roll) influences on this process.

THE 2010S AND METAL MUSIC STUDIES JOURNAL

As said, a series of several events that occurred near the end of the first decade of the 21st century, and especially during the 2010s, are crucial in the institutional basis of metal music studies. The foundation of the International Society for Metal Music Studies (ISMMS) in 2013 is probably the most important, mainly because it announced the emergence of the new scientific paradigm. Having in mind that the first global conference on metal was held

in Salzburg in 2008, starting from 2013 the ISMMS began organizing regular international and inter/multi-disciplinary conferences biannually. Finally, the foundation of ISMMS' specialized scientific journal, *Metal Music Studies* (Intellect Press, 2015), signified the beginning of the so-called autonomy that metal scholars strived for. This autonomy was particularly important concerning popular music studies, as Will Straw noticed in his keynote speech at the ISMMS conference in Nantes (2019).⁷

The publication pool on metal became vast – there have been more books, collected publications, dissertations, chapters, articles, and other types of texts than ever before. Even though the contributions from different disciplines still exceed musicologists' in extent and numbers, the growth of musicological knowledge on metal is indisputable. For instance, editors of the collection *Global Metal Music and Culture: Current Direction of Metal Studies* (2016) dedicated the first part of their publication to “Metal Musicology”. The authors contributing to this part examined the song structure of famous heavy metal bands such as Black Sabbath and Judas Priest, and their influence of further development of the genre (Elflein 2016), critically scrutinized the neo-classical aesthetics of heavy metal music in the 1980s (Heritage 2016), and explored the phenomenon of distortion in the light of contemporary metal sound and composition (Mynett 2016). Given that musicologists contributed to the other parts of this collection as well (such as Smialek 2016), seemingly without a clear foundation in music theory and formal analysis, we may notice that the editors apparently deemed those chapters ‘not musicological enough’, thus pointing out to what metal musicology is *supposed to be*.

Going further, Eric Smialek's dissertation *Genre and Expression in Extreme Metal Music ca. 1990–2015* (2016) should be highlighted as “the first book-length musicological study of extreme metal,” which uses “an interdisciplinary mixture of literary genre theory, semiotics, music theory and analysis, acoustics, and linguistics” to scrutinize musical, verbal and visual systems of meaning in extreme metal (Smialek 2016b: vii). Smialek's work deals with extreme metal both through the critical examination of genre taxonomies, observing inner logic and value assignment, as well as the inconsistencies in (sub)genre divisions and its relations to abject Other, as well as through close analysis of music, melodic, temporal, structural, and stylistic features of individual songs by Cannibal Corpse, Demilich, and Spawn of Possession, and exploring the extreme vocals in metal.

With the establishment of the *MMS Journal*, in particular, metal scholars, coming from various disciplines (sociology, musicology, aesthetics, cultural studies, history, psychology, etc.), created their “intellectual hub” and started

⁷ See the program and details on conference here: <https://www.francemetalstudies.org/>, [accessed 21. 5. 2021].

building a unique resource for the field. The current, as well as the previous structure of the Editorial Board and Editorial Advisory Board, reflect this very idea of disciplinary diversity.⁸ There were several musicological papers published in the Journal in the first years, which deal with the emergence and formation of the metal scenes (Konpke 2015; Zaddach 2016; Herbst 2019), narrative structures of extreme metal (St-Laurent 2016), analysis of guitar solos (Slaven and Krout 2016), historical development, sound aesthetics and production techniques of the distorted electric guitar (Herbst 2017a), metal composition and music theory (Marrington 2017; Kazdan 2017), effects of guitar distortion (Herbst 2017b; Herbst 2018), sonic transgression and abjection (Hillier 2018; Steinken 2019), and more.

The third issue of the fifth volume of the *MMS Journal* is dedicated to the theme of “Metal and Musicology” in its entirety, with six articles derived from the same-name conference held at the University of Hull in March 2016. Having in mind the “less traditional” definition of musicology which deems this (inter)discipline “[...] best understood simply as positioning sonic phenomena as primary when examining metal music culture” (Kennedy and Yavuz 2019: 295), the papers in this issue explore and apply methodologies of performance and production in genre determination (Mynett 2019), vocal science and vocal pedagogy (Ribaldini 2019), compositional approach to metal (Gamble 2019), “traditional” analytical approach to harmony and form in music (Lilja 2019), phononarratology (St-Laurent 2019), and sound and paratextual analysis (Coggins 2019). That said, despite being small in volume, this journal issue shows a striking diversity of musicological approaches and hints toward the contemporary and future flourishing and heterogeneity of inter- and transdisciplinary research of metal, which is rooted in musicology.

Furthermore, nearing the end of 2020, we are witnessing musicologists delving into the issues of (sub)genre musical traits (Hoffman 2020), exploring individual albums as cornerstones of extreme metal subgenres (Hagen 2020), the formation of trans-national scenes and its rootedness in extreme narratives, religion, and mythology (Piotrovska 2020), treatment of the Holocaust in the music of famous metal bands (Kopanski 2020), private listening in public city spaces as another form of alienation within black metal fandom (Stevens 2020), and many more, which were not encompassed in this condensed overview.

8 See: <http://www.intellectbooks.com/metal-music-studies>.

CLOSING REMARKS

To reiterate a common-knowledge phrase, as a fundamentally interdisciplinary field, musicology in its core embraces different and coactive fields of study – history and music analysis come to mind first. While studying metal music and popular music in general, musicology can benefit from employing the methods of her ‘sister discipline’ ethnomusicology such as fieldwork – as we have seen in Robert Walser’s monograph and many consecutive studies. The variety and number of these collaborative disciplines grow by the minute, especially bearing in mind the technological development with regards to musical performance, recording, and dissemination of music, communication in general, and the nature of the musicological work as such. Together with countless new possibilities that musicians, producers, and fans are encountering, musicologists (like other scientists in the 21st century) are very comfortable with working on computers, enjoying access to virtual libraries and archives all over the world, and, lately, suffer from overwhelm and over-consumption of valuable and not so valuable information.

It had come a time when, contrary to what Khan-Harris and other metal scholars were said to have experienced throughout the 1990s, explorers of metal can access an incredible amount of previously and currently executed research and recorded music. This also indicates that we are (or we should be) aware of the abundance of musicological endeavors; metal musicology today, as we have briefly seen in this paper, deals with sound, instruments, technology, music compositions and analysis, as well as with the history of metal music, music scene formation, social implications of the music, audience and listening, gender, racial and class issues, and workings of the music industry. “Potentially monolithic perceptions of musicology”, as Kennedy and Yavuz remarked (Kennedy and Yavuz 2019: 295), are debunked and disproven by the work of contemporary metal musicologists (and contemporary musicologists in general), and I, for one, am happy and excited to see what the future holds for the field.

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БОЈАНА РАДОВАНОВИЋ
 РАСКРИЦКАВАЊЕ „ПОТЕНЦИЈАЛНО МОНОЛИТНОГ ПОГЛЕДА НА
 МУЗИКОЛОГИЈУ“:
 УЛОГА МУЗИКОЛОГИЈЕ У СТУДИЈАМА МЕТАЛ МУЗИКЕ
 (РЕЗИМЕ)

Имајући у виду да је интересовање за проучавање метал музике званично отпочело у англоамеричком контексту деведесетих година прошлог века појавом две студије утемељивачког карактера – *Heavy Metal. The Music and its Culture* (1991) социолошкиње Дине Вајнстин и *Running with the Devil. Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (1993) музиколога Роберта Волсера – циљ овог текста био је да се испита улога музикологије у области студија метал музике.

Показано је да је, током три деценије све разгранатијег научног дискурса о овом музичком феномену, упис музикологије био важан не само као први корак, већ и као константан и неизоставан део говора и написа о металу. Почевши од Волсерове студије, која је *par excellence* продукт ’свог доба’ и нове музикологије, музиколошки доприноси овом пољу били су резултат интердисциплинарне базе дисциплине, те су тако резултати тих истраживања обухватала историографску, формалистичку, музичко-теоријску, естетичку, филозофску, етномузиколошку, етнографску раван.

На институционализацију студија метал музике утицало је неколико догађаја који су се одвили крајем прве деценије 21. века, а нарочито током 2010-их. Због успостављања нове научне парадигме и платформе, пре свега треба поменути оснивање Међународног друштва за проучавање метал музике (ISMMS) 2013. године, а потом и установљивање редовних међународних и интер/транс/мултидисциплинарних научних скупова широм света. Својеврсна аутономија ове области, нарочито у односу на студије популарне музике,

заокружена је успостављањем научног часописа *Metal Music Studies* (Intellect Press, 2015). Тако је, у односу на претходни период, где је научно истраживање метал музике остајало у запећку шире слике и спорадично се пробијало у први план, успостављена платформа на којој ће се убрзо развити дисциплинарни односи.

Иако су неки од гласноговорника студија метал музике инсистирали на оснаживању музиколошког 'гласа' пре свега ради компетентног говора о звуку, музичким структурама и хармонско-мелодијским аспектима метал музике, овај текст је увидом у кратку али садржајну историју музиколошких написа показао да се, услед основних интердисциплинарних поставки музикологије, допринос музиколога не може свести 'само' на музичко-теоријски рад. Штавише, он предвиђа још богатију продукцију која долази из сфере музикологије, а која ће бити инспирисана и испровцирана новим технологијама, инструментима и извођаштвом, савременим друштвом и публиком, начинима стварања, постпродукције и рецепције музике.

КЉУЧНЕ РЕЧИ: музикологија, студије метал музике, музикологија метала, интердисциплинарност.

SHAPING THE PRESENT THROUGH THE FUTURE
Musicology, Ethnomusicology and Contemporaneity

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