Seminar Series
Topics in the Aesthetics of Music and Sound

Thursday, April 3, 2014
3:15-5 p.m. in U73

Systematic Musicology Meets Historical Musicology: Quantitative Support for Historical Changes in Rhythmic Variability of European Art Music

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Abstract: Among music historians it is a long-held belief that the prosody of composers' native languages is reflected in the rhythmic and melodic properties of their music. During the last decade, researchers have finally provided quantitative support for a relationship between durational variability in language and music. This was achieved by applying the normalised Pairwise Variability Index (nPVI) to speech alongside musical scores. Such studies capitalise on the fact that syllable-timed languages like Italian and French have low linguistic nPVI while stress-timed languages like German have higher linguistic nPVI. Extending this approach to analyses of historical developments, a recent paper reported linearly increasing nPVI in Austro-German, but not in Italian music. This finding was ascribed to waning Italian influence and increasing German influence on the musical style of Austro-German music composed in the years following the Baroque Era. Critically, this was a post-hoc hypothesis, and since we cannot perform controlled experiments on historical data, replication with more sensitive methods and new repertoire is strongly required.

This project replicates, refines and extends previous studies by including French composers, who represent another Central-European country with considerable linguistic and cultural influence often associated with a particularly strong national identity. We hypothesise both an initial increase and a subsequent decrease in nPVI, based on documented increasing German influence on French music after the Baroque, and reported decreasing nPVI in French vocal music composed 1840-1900. To enable us to detect these predicted non-linear trends, more sophisticated analytical strategies are adopted, namely polynomial modelling.

Clearly, when juxtaposed with systematic musicology, this work provides quantitative support for key accounts from historical musicology concerning an Italian-dominated Baroque (1600-1750) followed by a Classical Era (1750-1820) with Austro-German centres of gravity (e.g. Mannheim, Vienna), and a Romantic Era (1820-1900) with greater focus on independent national identities.

All are welcome – also via Skype 🌱

The Aesthetics of Music and Sound

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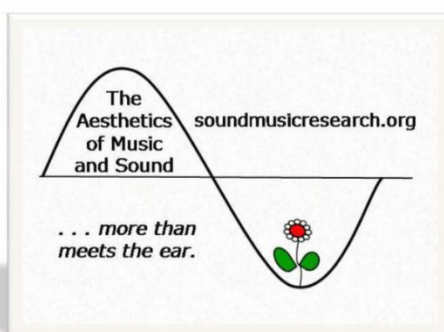
- Cross-Disciplinary Interplay between the Humanities, Technology and Musical Practice
- Backdrop for the SDU-IKV Research Program

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