

Tactile Contexts: Towards Reconstructing a Feeling Musicology

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... we may encounter a past horizon in one of three ways:

1. Read or see an original work and realize that it was written from a different outlook than ours.
2. Read a critical reconstruction by a predecessor.
3. Start to reconstruct one's own version of past context.

-Reconstructing Contexts, Robert D. Hume, 72

This paper is an archae-historical exploration of music, affect, and the sensing body. It addresses what I see to be a critical lack in both historical musicology and historical performance-practice oriented scholarship: a contextual reconstruction of 17th-century Western European understandings of touch and tactility—specifically through musical touch between musicians and their instruments, through the prevalence of the metaphorical use of “touch words” in 17th-century music theory, and through the tactility of affect, the critical moment of embodied impact between music and the passions. Thus, with this project, I am building my understanding of the sense of tactility in early modern era as it pertained to music-making, music-teaching, and music-experiencing, with the ultimate goal of creating a detailed, deeply empathetic, and accurate reconstruction of the experiencing body of the 17th-century musician. My text will resonate with quotations from Robert D. Hume’s incredibly enlightening *Reconstructing Contexts*, a text whose academic programme has become a rallying cry for me and which greatly informs my budding writing and research practice. As a young conservatory student with degrees in music performance and linguistics, not yet credentialed in musicology, I hope to be in perhaps the best position over the course of my life to truly explore musicology and historical performance-oriented scholarship with an open mind, to ask questions of the field that perhaps have not yet been asked of it, and to be minimally affected by “Hume’s Paradox: the better trained the historian, the more difficult original thought becomes” (49). My project has thus more or less followed Hume’s course: I

spent a lot of time formulating and reformulating questions, scouring the library and online resources for texts on 17th century music teaching and theory, and—since none yet exists—compiling a bibliography of pertinent texts both from sensory histories and other fields of historical tactility research and from relevant musicological scholarship, narrowly avoiding the rabbit hole of postmodern technological sensory musicology.

The questions I hope to answer in this paper include:

1. What is a sensory history? What can a sensory history offer historical musicology? (What is the gap?)
2. Why touch? How is touch situated in relation to its neighboring musicological knowledges—*affect and the passions*’, embodiment, dance movement, erotics? What can it offer these knowledges?
3. What relevant work has already been done?
4. How will the new knowledge gained in the course of this work be structured? Here, I will briefly describe both the nature of the sources I will be using teaching documents and treatises, primarily for string playing, primarily from 17th century England, and the two modalities of tactility that I was looking for: both use of “touch words” or tactility as a metaphorical or linguistic object, and a more Humeian search for instances and evidence of tactility as a sensory experience.
5. Finally, what new provisional observations can be made about tactility with this framework and in this particular context? What evidence do the documents provide about tactility in both of my two primary fields of inquiry?

I will close with my bibliography as it stands; this is by no means complete, and represents my current levels of knowledge and access to materials.

A scholar needs to start by explaining the current state of understanding, and then tell us what is wrong or inadequate about it. What evidence is left out of account? What is misinterpreted? How can we improve our understanding? (47)

Sensory work is a critical and long-needed addition to the study of affect and the passions. A theory of embodied experience, while enriched by knowledges from fields of study such as affect scholarship and interdisciplinary work such as dance scholarship, must rest firmly on a theory of the body that attempts to understand what the body *was*, how it felt and functioned, and how it understood, experienced, and created the materials of music. This project recalls the small body of recent work of sensory historians of the 17th century in such fields as material history, anthropology, urban studies, and philosophy: it rids itself of speculation, modern assumption, and any appeals to the trans-historical body. As Susan McClary has said, “We cannot appeal to a transhistorical body”; we cannot presume to feel as they felt, or that they felt as we feel. Rather, this project is historicist or “archae-historicist” in Hume’s sense: aggressively evidence-based, mining a wide field of often-overlooked sources of evidence in order to begin to reconstruct a detailed and reliable account the sensual experiences of the time, entering 17th-century territory in an open-minded and optimistic attempt to find the terms in which the original readers felt.

One pitfall I was cautious to avoid was the wide availability and accessibility of information from burgeoning field of sensory musicology. This field has tended to focus on integrating post-modern subjectivity from the recent writings in philosophy and critical theory has tended to focus on a technological and scientific practice, using recent or contemporary conceptions of the body and self to create experimental procedures to measure physiological cues such as pulse and brain activity. As an alternative, I looked to recent research in fields such as anthropology, sociology, cultural and material history, gender and women’s studies, and urban studies for research models more grounded in historicism—or at least in research practices similar to Hume’s conception of historicism¹. Some of these written sensuous histories can offer much to historical

¹ These scholars work and dwell in an astonishing array of specialities and academic departments at universities across the world. For the curious... <http://www.sensorystudies.org/about/>

musicology in terms of historicist methodology and practice, particularly in terms of their integrating understandings from 17th-century sensory theorists and philosophers in creatively articulating and resituating the experience of the body. Some American feminist musicologists have in fact approached this research practice through the now-common study of affect and the passions in the 17th and 18th centuries, most notably Susan McClary, Kate van Orden, Linda Austern, Elizabeth LeGuin, and many others; in just the past twenty years, queer and sensory musicologists—inspired by such thinkers as phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, Brian Massumi, Bruno Latour, and Jean-Luc Nancy—have significantly explored the embodied experience in more recent musics and with a contemporary understanding of and approach to the senses. However, to my knowledge no musicologist has yet attempted to attain and situate a functional knowledge of the 17th century sensory experience: to at least attempt characterize the ways the senses were taxonomized and the effect of these taxonomies on the musician and the listener, the ways the senses presented themselves in both didactic for the 17th-century musician, and the ways they influenced and functioned both understandings and experiences of affect. If affect is indeed an embodied experience, then an understanding of affect must be situated in an understanding of the body.

Archaeo-historicism as I practice it attempts to reconstruct specific contexts that permit the present-day interpreter to make sense of the cultural artifacts of the past and the conditions in which they were produced... A historical reading gives us a baseline from which to work, a starting point. Understanding the intrinsic and contextual meanings yields a vital and exciting sense of difference between the author's perspective and ours; it also supplies a comparative basis on which to appreciate the powers and possibilities of theorized readings. (Hume, 9-10)

Clues to early modern tactility are redolent in their theoretical and instructional literature—the Guidonian Hand links the horizontality and verticality of pitch imagined by the gamut with touch as a mnemonic guide. The Hand indexes pitch with a categorical breakdown of the hand to a lev-

el of detail and tactile precision that is utterly unparalleled in our modern experience of the body, and in our experience of the body's availability as a tactile memory device. Hexachordal shifts signified "hardness" and "softness", a fundamental use of a tactile metaphor that is again lost in modern conceptions of harmonic shifts and transpositions (NB: we speak primarily of "tension" and "release" in dissonance and its resolution, a less blatantly *textural* tactile descriptor). Understanding feeling music as the early moderns felt it means understanding feeling the "hardness" and "sharpness" of accidentals and key signatures that pushed upwards on the hexachord—or later pushed their tonal center upward in cycle of dominants, and feeling the "softness" and "flatness" of accidentals and key signatures that sink downward. It means we can better understand the feeling of Clorinda's feet slipping downwards literally as she loses her footing; and even as late as Handel we can feel the triumphant hardness of the glory of the Christian army in sharp keys and the weakness of the Saracens in flats in Handel's *Rinaldo*.

A context is not a 'fact' but a 'hypothesis'. We construct it; we employ it as a way of representing the past; we use it to interpret texts, authors, and situations. Because contexts as they are available to us are not givens, they need interrogation and challenge.... Some form of verification must be provided—neither a complex nor a mysterious matter. Validation is crucial. (69-70)

In this segment of what is turning out to be a massive program of study, and after Hume's call for "the reconstruction of historical events and viewpoint from primary materials" (10) I delve into a small set of teaching documents and treatises from what has been called "the long 17th century" in England, written and published for home study of music and specifically string playing. I will examine tactility's significance both in the music-theoretical conceptions—pitch, rhythm, solfege, affect—and in its descriptions in the sections on physical application to an instrument. The texts examined in the following are Thomas Morley's *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* (first edition, 1597), John Playford's wildly popular *An Introduction to the Skill of Musick* (which was reprinted in nineteen editions between **16xx and 16xx**), and Thomas Ravenscroft's 1614 *Treatise of Practicall Musicke* and *A Briefe Discourse* from Ross Duffin's

contribution to the series “Music Theory in Britain, 1500-1700: Critical Editions”. These sources—found through Rebecca Herissone’s remarkable book *Music Theory in Seventeenth-Century England*—typify the complete music guides for beginners and home study, as well as provide a focused section on string playing. Further evidence is drawn from Descartes’ *Taxonomy of Passions* and William Turner’s 1732 *Sound Anatomized*, a philosophical essay on music that, while slightly outside my current primary range, explicitly explores many of the central questions of music and the body.

I begin my project with a study of tactility. My reasons are twofold: firstly, sensory taxonomies from the period indicate that, in the Aristotelian fashion, touch was considered the fundamental sense, diffused across the body and relating the most directly to “movement” of the passions, to the physicality of the entire body in movement and especially in dance, and was the gateway to the other senses. Secondly, as a string player examining string teaching documents, my sense of touch as it relates to affect—both my body on the instrument and the critical “point of contact” between bow and string, the region whose tensions and spatial vicissitudes I know so well that it is practically a displaced body part—is most developed. I feel best prepared to examine teaching documents for this description.

Works Cited

This bibliography includes the sources I used to prepare for this project. In retrospect I am astonished at how many sources I could cover in just a single semester. My reading was fairly wide and exhaustive in preparation for this study; though I read selectively from a few of these sources, I found it beneficial to read these sources listed below in their entirety. Expanding this list into an annotated bibliography is one of my upcoming tasks for this project; I would like to credit each of the sources below for making a major contribution to my understanding of the field, even if they have not yet appeared in my writing.

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