

Music Research in the Digital Age: IAML-IMS Plenary Session

Remarks: Maria Edurne Zuazu

I would like to begin with a couple of apologies. First, even though I am “the student” here, my experiences and concerns are different from those of other students who have different research interests, computer literacy skills, or intellectual sensibilities. And second, I am going to approach the discussion backwards, reviewing a couple of commonplace questions that I hope you don’t find too esoteric.

1. Space and documents (time and metadata)

In a digital environment, the archive is no longer a distinct place wherein historical documents are preserved and curated but a temporal entity occupied with dynamic data storage and transfer. (Wolfgang Ernst)

There is more music and more information and, when they are digital, sounds, historical documents, and scholarly literature are physically indistinct; they all are “strings of bits in a digital environment,” to use Lisa Gitelman’s expression.

_ Digital: undoes the hierarchies of paper-based archives.

_ Different tasks and forms of knowledge production.

2. Our research work as humanists: It is neither exclusively academic (it passes through non-academic sites) nor uniquely a human endeavor (algorithms).

2.1 Metadata sorting: (data is not accessed immediately and it is never self-evident) focus on how metadata incorporates already preferred routes that we might not always notice.

Example: The difficulties in finding materials in a database when you think of them in those materials otherwise. I had many problems with the “year in sounds” spoken word commercial LPs produced in the US and the UK from the 1950s to the 1980s. It was a nightmare to locate them within the catalogues of the Library of the Congress and in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts to the point that I gave up. Whereas I was interested in physical format, commodity character, packaging, and, most importantly, their pertaining to what I think is a subgenre, they are “key-worded” otherwise. It was only by going to thrift stores, consulting the database www.Discogs.org, and by finding the blog of a priest from Indiana who collected them that I was able to find some samples in those institutional catalogues. Metadata allows for certain kinds of sorting while hindering the possibility of alternative understandings and uses of those materials.

[Possible example: Difficulties that researchers of the Nazi cinematographic production confront. Those films are very sensitive material in the figurative (content and message) and most literal sense (they are made of nitrocellulose film stock, highly flammable even without oxygen). Yet, those films are accessible on YouTube, where film scholars, historians, and neo-Nazis freely access them (in low quality).]

2.2 Algorithms and interfaces. Intimacies between researching, purchasing, consuming, and online dating platforms. Example of Amazon versus Project Muse.

Recommendation algorithm // Project Muse's biometrics and "similar articles."
There is something wrong in Amazon's algorithm getting my "bibliography" right.

2.3 Data is never raw: unseen human and non-human labor // algorithms and data visualization design. We need to consider why we digitise what we digitise (in terms of cost and in terms of the programs that we might be unwantedly reinscribing) and our participation in the information overload.

3. I think we are in need of:

- 1.** Critical (and technical?) skills to utilise digital technologies while recognizing and being able to deal with their "unseen labor". Just in the same way we have been trained to confront ideological constructs such as the idea of absolute music or the notion of progress when we utilize and write histories of music, we need to detect and consider the prospectus that accompanies data, the algorithms at work, etc.
- 2.** Recognition of forms and formats to channel and express our intellectual work are more attuned to the ways in which we read, research, think, and create. Digital technologies and media environments have rendered some of the principal expressive modalities/means of scholarship—such as a monograph or a dissertation—partially inoperative. Examples of alternate scholarly work platforms: SoundingOut blog (<http://soundstudiesblog.com/>); the website of the research group, Forensic Architecture (<http://www.forensic-architecture.org/>).
- 3.** Regarding the problems that music libraries confront. Examples of Monoskop (<http://monoskop.org/Monoskop>) or UbuWeb (<http://www.ubuweb.com/>), which are curated, not comprehensive, and collaborative multimedia collections with (more or less) clear editorial lines.

4. Conclusion: A crisis with great possibilities.

More people listen to more music, we have more means to understand why and how they do it, what they feel and need, etc. We are now in a position where our work (and us) is out there. // Possibility of a healthier participation in the socio-cultural processes that are contemporary to our practice // Dialogue and collaboration with thinkers, activists, and practitioners whose performances are sentient to our projects. // Of all the difficulties that musicology has faced, this seems to be the most promising one. And yet there has been a morphological change in our social, political, and professional environments that requires us to think the basis of what we do (what is music, what is knowledge), where we do it (the no-place of digital environments), and for whom we are working for (processual, not-given nature of networks).