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INTRODUCTION

Musical Materialisms (Plural)

Matthew Sergeant, Isabella van Elferen and
Samuel Wilson

A distinct if diverse musical research area has begun to emerge in recent years. While there is enough common ground to define it as a research field, its objects and themes are not yet delineated, its methodologies are divergent and multi-disciplinary, and its key players dispersed over many areas. These developments and their critical discursive exchanges contribute to the emergence—and contestation—of materialist approaches to music. This area in music research currently takes the shape of an intellectual and creative meeting point, an interest shared by music and sound researchers of differing backgrounds. One can trace in contemporary musical materialisms various genealogies arising from theoretical traditions—prominently including Marxian, Deleuzian, Spinozan, and feminist and queer theoretical perspectives—as well as from contributors working within historical musicology, compositional and performance practice-research, popular music studies, ethnomusicology, and beyond.

A lens of contemporary musical materialisms allows an existent body of scholarship to be conjoined as a constellation. Existent studies emphasise mutualised socio-material mediations in music-making. Georgina Born, for example, suggests that the social is materialised through music, that contingencies of relations act through various planes of activity, encompassing musical experiences, practices, and their affordances through specific institutional conditions (Born 2011). Similarly, Eric Clarke explores entanglements of the material world and practices of listening, forging an ‘ecological approach to the perception of musical meaning’ (2005). Along a parallel, Eliot Bates considers the ‘social life’ of musical instruments and the effecting of social relations as ‘mobilized around material objects and the thing-power they possess’ (Bates 2012, 388).¹ Others explore music and material’s mutual mediation from a historical perspective—notably, for example, Emily Dolan’s historicising of instrumentation and timbral practices, as well as Dolan and John Tresch’s work on musical instruments and scientific instruments, as ‘actors or tools with variable ranges of activity’, that bind technological, social and even ethical practices (Dolan 2013; Tresch and Dolan 2013, 281). Bodies’ and embodied subjecthood’s relation to instruments and other—technological, sonic—objects are

also established as another strain of materialist dialogue and deliberation (Le Guin 2006; Wilson 2017; cf. Watkins and Esse 2015).

Current practices in contemporary composition also demonstrate a new kind of interest in the material domain—Matthew Shlomowitz identifies forms of musical materialism as one of the ‘two dominant themes [in contemporary music] of the last decade’ (2017). Such practices comprise an equally broad constellation, drawn together by the materialist lenses offered here. One might consider, for example, the divergent explorations of objects and objecthood that emerge from the recent work of, for example, Rie Nakajima, James Saunders, and Hanna Hartmann in this regard. Likewise, practices are increasingly engaging with the materiality and physicality of the performing body, seen in the work of the so-called American ‘choreographic school’ (Lorenzon 2016) demonstrated by recent pieces by Aaron Cassidy and Timothy McCormack. The propensity for non-human things to act as quasi-agents in music-making is also drawing renewed attention, conjoining the buried tape loops exhibited by Alexandra Spence, the ecological field recordings of David Dunn, and notions of sonic contingency interrogated by Scott McLaughlin—as well as Matthew Sergeant’s own work in this domain.

There are, of course, many other striking and influential studies to which this short introduction cannot give due credit, but what is remarkable, even in this partial account of extant musical materialisms, is that material concerns run through a body of music scholarship that needn’t necessarily always fly a flag identifying its own ‘materialism’. More crucially, this emerging body of work demonstrates a plurality regarding precisely what constitutes music’s relation to materiality and, indeed, what comprises ‘the material’ per se.

This last concern has created significant debate both in critical theory and where the musical bleeds into the sonic—that is, in relation to the rise of sound studies, and related discussions around sound’s ontology (e.g. Barrett 2016; Cox 2011; O’Callaghan 2010; Pasnau 2000). This is spurred in large part by the appearance of self-proclaimed ‘new materialist’ discourses (alongside their Speculative Realist and Object-Oriented Philosopher cousins, who are related but have different intellectual parentage) that excitedly announce a turn to a non-correlational ‘materialism of matter’ (Meillassoux 2008, 38). This object- or matter-orientated focus arises in contradistinction to what these theorists consider ‘older’ materialisms—from Marxism, to poststructuralist feminisms, to studies of material culture—which are asserted to linger on contextual concerns around culture, representation, and signification.

This promise to conceive of ‘matter itself’ has been criticised strongly by cultural theorists and philosophers. Nikki Sullivan, for instance, argues among other things that new materialists’ choice of *what* matter ‘matters’ is telling (Sullivan 2012, 300); comparing traditional and recent approaches to materialism, Paul Rekret suggests that the urge to attune oneself to the material generally omits the social mediation of any such attunement (Rekret 2016); and Jordana Rosenberg contends in particularly critical notes that contemporary assertions of an ontology of ‘matter itself’ (untouched by and inaccessible to the human) constitute a primitivism masquerading as an avant-garde methodology (Rosenberg 2014). The possibility (or not) of thinking *sound itself* echoes this debate in the sonic sphere. Brian Kane has argued that while the

labels ‘sound studies’ and ‘auditory culture’, have in some practical settings been used interchangeably, they can symbolise different priorities; the former can constitute ‘purely’ ontological interests that obscure sound (and sonic materiality’s) relation to the cultural, something emphasised in the latter phrase, ‘auditory culture’ (Kane 2015, 3). Michael Bull has similarly noted that ‘sound studies’ and ‘auditory culture’ can suggest different methodological commitments, concerns, and intellectual traditions, with the former (at least in its early days, he notes), relying on a certain set of ‘assumptions about the nature of listening and sound that had deep [if unacknowledged] implications for the study of sound as a social practice’ (Bull 2020, 83). As with musicology’s long-established critical discussions around idealist and Romantic notions of *music itself*, the ‘itselfness’ of ‘matter itself’ and ‘sound itself’ continues to be a point of discussion where one finds materialist appeals to notions including contingency, relationality, dialectics, idealism, and mediation.

The ongoing dialogue between materialist approaches and the study of music has given rise to lively debates: around music’s mediation by and of bodies, perception, non-human entities, and of sonic matter; about its embeddedness within cultural practices, yet its (apparent) exceeding of these—that is, through promising agency and affectivity beyond the human. It is in the context of such debates that this Special Issue of *Contemporary Music Review* appears. Indeed, while the excitation of the new materialists vis-à-vis their (allegedly) novel methods towards materiality has been variously criticised (for instance as reproducing the dynamics of a white, patriarchal neoliberalism [James 2019, 87–125]), it should be said that ‘new materialism’ does not have a monopoly on this specific affect, and excitation—or, more generally, the libidinal investment that energises researchers’ practices of theorising and experimenting with music and matter—needn’t necessarily dull criticality (the passions *contra* reason). And to expand on the sketch presented above, of the kinds of contributions being made, one can note that music’s materiality is explored from as many different angles as there are researchers: musicologists are exploring the embodiment of historical music cultures, composers are re-considering issues surrounding the materiality of sound-making and sound-capture, cultural historians are researching the material objects of music-making, philosophers and psychologists are engaging with the materiality of musical experience.

During the RMA Music and Philosophy conference in 2017, a physical meeting point turned into an intellectual one by chance, when a session on ‘Musical Materialisms’ contained two papers with very similar materialist interests. Realising that they were not the only researchers with this interest, the two presenters, music philosopher Isabella van Elferen and critical theorist Samuel Wilson, decided there was scope for a broadly defined research network on ‘musical materialism,’ and invited the composer and theorist Matthew Sergeant to set this up with them.

The first network meeting, held in December 2017 at the Guildhall School of Music, yielded international participants and a range of possible research topics from WWI music memorabilia to British-Asian musical Diasporas, from musical time to musical voice, from the vinyl revival to algorithmically determined musical

consumption. The open discussions during that meeting centred on finding a number of methodologies to address such divergent forms of musical materiality. Transdisciplinarity and intersectionality seemed key: as musical materiality—and, importantly, music's seeming capacity to elude materiality—takes so many shapes and forms, researching these themes requires a meaningful combination of music history and cultural studies, experiment and composition, acousmatics and musical analysis, human and non-human agency, ontology and phenomenology, politics and aesthetics. The field, which that meeting gave the umbrella name 'Musical Materialisms' (the necessity for the plural form is obvious and was unanimously agreed), is not just emerging but vibrating with potential, and it invites the broad community of music and sound research to a joint creative and intellectual effort.

The second meeting of the Musical Materialisms network took place in Visconti Studio at Kingston University London in February 2019. This international meeting took the shape of paper and practice research presentations and focused on shared themes identified in the first meeting: time and matter, touch, notation, medial materialisms, material practices, and the philosophy of sound and music. The articles in this Special Issue of *Contemporary Music Review* are each expanded versions of papers read during that event.

In 'The Cyborg Queen: Lip-Syncing and Posthumanism in ShayShay's *Mutual Core*', Jacob Mallinson Bird uses an examination of London-based drag artist Shay-Shay's performance work 'Mutual Core' to explore technological mediation in the performing queer body. Bird considers ShayShay's performing body as an assemblage of human and non-human actors, presenting the work in critical dialogue with the vibrant materialism of Jane Bennett (2010). Drawing on Baudrillard (1994), Bird presents this assemblage not as mutually co-operative but instead highlights the mutual polemics embedded within it, proposing a material discourse between the body and its online simulacra. Situating his work within wider notions of the cyborg (Haraway 1991) and broader conceptualisations of posthumanism (Braidotti 2013), Bird develops a particular notion of the skin within these terms. Bird explores the discursive material boundaries of the queer body and expands the ideas of Claudia Castañeda (2001) to derive a notion of the 'material-semiotic skin'. Here, the skin is repositioned as an entangled site of meaning, breakages, and sutures that serve as an interstice between material and signification. In doing so, Bird's work presents technology as a form of colonisation of the body, engaging with the performative potential of iPads and iPhones as aesthetic means by which this may be accessed. As such, Bird's examination of drag performance serves as a means to access materialism's current entwinements with the self, technology, and the other.

Liza Lim's article develops critical observations about materiality and compositional practices during a present historical moment characterised by ecocidal tendencies. In evoking the term Anthropocene—the geological epoch under which natural systems cannot be understood apart from the human—Lim also embeds this moment within a deeper planetary history. An ethical dimension emerges out of this: while Lim suggests that it may 'seem frivolous to speak of aesthetics in relation

to anthropogenic crisis', with reference to Timothy Morton's ('dark') ecology (Morton 2013; see also Morton 2007), she argues that artistic practices and aesthetics can also remind us of absence and loss. Just as the Anthropocene blurs clean, long-held divisions between nature and culture, the human and the non-human, Lim's ecological compositional approach explores sonic, harmonic, and temporal assemblages that blur materials that are conventionally held discretely. In this way, she demonstrates how one can borrow ecological thinking as a tool for compositional commentary on ecological crises. This practice echoes those contemporary materialist theories which emphasise a critique of the Enlightenment view of matter as expounded by Descartes, under which 'material objects are identifiably discrete'. (Coole and Frost 2010, 7) And as such her contribution to the special issue underlines both the contemporary urgency and the new situation of musical materials.

Focusing on the work of Iris Garrelfs and Marlo Eggplant, Lauren Redhead theorises the dialectics of the 'voice outside of the body'. She argues that this conceptualisation accounts not only for the voice's production by the body, but its exceeding of bodies: those of the performer emanating it and the listener encountering it. This is to consider the unfolding of its relationships through spaces, technologies, and strategies of listening. Outside of the body—unmoored from the body—the voice is thematised by Redhead in its mobile and active capacities. It traces Deleuzian-Guattarian 'lines of flight'. And, resonating with this notion of movement, Redhead suggests it also might be productively understood through Nicholas Bourriaud's (2009) concept of the altermodern archipelago, an unfixated space–time in which the cultural landscape is under a process of constant reconfiguration. This recalls Tim Rutherford-Johnson's recent suggestion that some contemporary musical practices develop what Bourriaud elsewhere calls a 'radicant aesthetics' defined by a condition of 'rootlessness, or of being in motion' (Rutherford-Johnson 2017, 95). Furthermore, borrowing from Karen Barad's (2003) quantum-theory-inspired materialist philosophy, Redhead argues that the voice's framing and 'observation' through performance spaces, technologies, and listening strategies is that which constitutes the voice in the first place. Here, the voice's very being emerges beyond the body that asserts it.

In his article '(Re-)Assembling Notations in the Performance of Early Music', Floris Schuiling questions the often-heard notion that historical performance practice reflects the idealist concept of *Werktreue* (Cook 2013; Taruskin 1995). In diametrical opposition to such dismissals of 'authentic' performance, Schuiling develops the idea that engaging with historical scores could be read, instead, as a 'subversion' of the dreaded work-concept. To support this thesis he explores the relationship between musical scores and musical knowledge that is implied in the concept of *Werktreue*. Using Actor-Network Theory and vital materialism (Latour 2005; Bennett 2010), Schuiling argues that historical performance practice is an engagement with the materials of music—from the score to instruments and performers—which has an indeterminable outcome. Diverging sharply from the alleged sovereignty of the musical work to which performers are subservient as mere reproducers of a historical 'original,' Schuiling's approach offers a view of musical agency as an emergent,

reciprocal, and profoundly material quality. Historically informed performance practice, he argues, must be seen as experimental and creative rather than submissive and static: its key lies in the unpredictable material interactions that shape ‘performance,’ not in the nebulous realms of an idealised ‘authenticity.’

‘Forms of Matter and Matters of Form: Contingency and Emergence of Musical Material’ from composer and theorist Luc Döbereiner interrogates contemporary discourses between materialism and idealism in music and sonic art to review ontological questions regarding the materiality of sound and music in the hands of a sound-artist/composer. Döbereiner’s work surveys the contemporary state of such debate as manifest via consideration of what he presents as an axis of neo-conceptualist (e.g. Barrett 2016 and/or Kim-Cohen 2009) and new realist (e.g. Cox 2009) tendencies. Rather than resolve artistic engagement with sound and sound-making into either of these two camps, Döbereiner argues for positioning our understanding in a third space of morphogenesis, defined by the author as the material formation of form. The position articulated here is resistant to being subsumed into existent wider contemporary conceptualisations of the material world, presenting critical engagement with both the ‘one matter-energy’ of Jane Bennett (2010, 122) and the flat ontology of ‘OOO’ as proposed by Graham Harman (2007). In doing so, Döbereiner posits a material perspective on sonic aesthetics that resists both a material ‘monism’ and semiotic-cum-relativist positions, using such insight to offer new insight into both transdisciplinary and the so-called ‘postconceptual condition’ as posited by Peter Osborne (2013).

Iain Campbell’s article ‘Sound’s Matter: “Deleuzian Sound Studies” and the Problems of Sonic Materialism’ evaluates the theoretical and practical grounds of recent debates around Christoph Cox’s realist project of a ‘sonic materialism’ by returning to Gilles Deleuze. Cox’s position has been subject to substantial critique. As, among others, Annie Goh, Marie Thompson and Brian Kane have argued, Cox’s material ontology obfuscates or even ignores the cultural, social, technological, and political constitution of sound and listening (Goh 2017; Thompson 2017; Kane 2015; Wilson 2018). Campbell argues that a close engagement with Deleuze’s work challenges many of the precepts of Cox’s sonic materialism, and suggests a rethinking of materialism in the context of music. In a remarkably nuanced exploration of aspects of Deleuzian theory neglected by Cox, his article interrogates the epistemological problems inherent to sonic ontology. He argues that Cox’s realist ontology can be challenged via Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘onto-ethology’, a transversal position which allows for multivalent connections between materiality and immateriality, the finite and the infinite without reverting to ontology/metaphysics binarisms. Campbell illustrates the relevance of this onto-ethology for our understanding of musical materiality in readings of compositions by John Cage and Pauline Oliveros. He concludes that Deleuze’s materialism is practical, not—as Cox’s sonic ontology seems to suggest—doctrinal, and that a musical materialism based on Deleuze demands methodological pluralism.

As network convenors, our knowledge of Musical Materialisms is only as great as the network's hive mind is large. Our working definition of musical materialism, for now, would have to be marked by plurality and diversity; our working methodology, as noted above, is transdisciplinary and intersectional. How materialisms—in their various manifestations—might best aid our understanding of music is a matter of continued debate. There are undeniably material elements both in sound physics and musical practice: composing materials, instruments, embodiment, notation, technology, material culture, vibration. But in music, there are also elements that appear to escape the traditional boundaries of the im/materiality dichotomy: music's non-human agency (Sergeant 2020); its implication of ontology, perception, aesthetics, immersion, vitality (Van Elferen 2020); its functioning as a theatre of relations navigating a wider world and oneself within this (Wilson 2020). The study of musical materialisms requires a re-theorisation of materialism, a need catalysed by the emergence of new materialist theories over the last decade.

The field is still emerging, and new themes and methodologies will grow organically with it. Yet while this special issue does pose new and original thought, it does not constitute a simple clearing of the past theoretical ground and the placing of something fully formed upon this; it is more akin to a snapshot of a dynamic musicological and theoretical environment that is in motion, one that is—in places—tidily pruned and cultivated, but which elsewhere embraces the messiness of surprises and new possibilities that might at any moment sprout in wild emergence.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on Contributors

Isabella van Elferen publishes on music philosophy, film and TV music, video game music, Gothic theory and subcultures, and baroque sacred music. She is the editor for *The Soundtrack* and *Gothic and Horror Media Cultures*, member of the advisory board of *Horror Studies* and *Aeternum*, and was guest editor for *Journal for the Fantastic in the Arts* (2013), *Horror Studies* (2016) and *Contemporary Music Review* (2017 and 2020). Born and educated in the Netherlands, Isabella is Professor of Music and School Director of Research at Kingston University London, where she co-founded the Visconti Studio in collaboration with music producer Tony Visconti.

Matthew Sergeant is a composer and musicologist whose work explores ideas surrounding materiality, of bodies, of objects and objecthood, of relationships between human and non-human things. Matthew's music has been commissioned and/or performed by internationally acclaimed ensembles including, the London Symphony Orchestra (UK), BCMG (UK), Divertimento Ensemble (Italy), ELISION Ensemble (Australia), ensemble 10/10 (UK), and the Nieuw Ensemble (Netherlands) as well numerous ongoing creative partnerships with emerging and established soloists. Matthew's work has featured at major international festivals, including Festival Musica (France), hcmf// (UK) Sirga Festival (Spain) and Sydney International Festival (Australia). His musicological work has been published in leading scholarly journals as well as edited collections. Matthew is currently a reader in music at Bath Spa University.

Samuel Wilson's research focuses on music in the context of the changing intellectual and material conditions of late modernity and is published in journals such as *Music and Letters*, the *International*

Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media, and the *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*. He also edited *Music—Psychoanalysis—Musicology* (Routledge, 2018). He undertakes this independent research in addition to teaching aesthetics at Guildhall School of Music and Drama and critical interdisciplinary studies at London Contemporary Dance School. He is currently finalising a monograph on musical material in contemporary concert music, *New Music and the Crises of Materiality: Sounding Bodies and Objects in Late Modernity* (Routledge, forthcoming).

Note

- [1] The term *thing-power* Bates borrows from Jane Bennett's vital materialist project, to indicate 'the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle' (Bennett cited in Bates 2012, 373; originally from Bennett 2010, 6).

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