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Review of music literacy strand of the Oxford Music Analysis Conference (July 2023), Society for Music Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This review provides a summary and discussion of the 'Music Literacy' strand (day 1) of the Society for Music Analysis's OxMAC conference (University of Oxford, July 2023). The review highlights how the ever-expanding range of musics currently studied in higher education calls for an increasingly multifaceted understanding of the term 'music literacy'. This was explored at the conference through presentations focusing on diverse aspects of music literacy, including its relationship with music technology, popular music, music pedagogy, musical hermeneutics and musical traditions grounded in the concepts of vibration and timbre. The review contextualises these presentations by outlining how they relate to wider current debates within music education at a variety of levels as well as the agenda of the Society for Music Analysis.

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The 2023 annual conference of the Society for Music Analysis was hosted by the University of Oxford and the conference organisers specified in their call for papers a particular interest for submissions relating to the subject of 'music literacy' (OxMAC 2023). This tied into the wider aims of the UK-based Society for Music Analysis (SMA) and the organisation's recent efforts to start new conversations about this important issue. The SMA's primary stated goal is 'the advancement of education in music theory and analysis for the public benefit', primarily delivered through the dissemination of scholarly research (SMA n.d., 1). Over the last decade or so, increasing attention has been paid by SMA members to the work of music theorists as pedagogues and especially the concept of 'music literacy' as it pertains to different levels of music education, including primary and secondary school, sixth form colleges, and further and higher education. The Society for Music Analysis's Music Literacy Project was a two-year project (McQueen 2021) launched at the SMA's SotonMAC Conference at the University of Southampton in 2019; the 2023 conference returned to this theme.

The 'music literacy' strand of the SMA's OxMAC conference in July 2023 (OxMAC23) was designed to keep music literacy firmly in focus as an increasingly central part of the Society's research agenda. The first day of OxMAC23 featured presentations that explored the varied ways in which musical literacy can be conceptualised across three different sessions and a keynote (Table 1).

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Table 1. Overview of the ‘Music Literacy’ sessions of OxMAC23.

Session 1: ‘Expanding Music Literacy’	Michael Clarke and Frederic Dufeu: ‘Expanding music literacy to incorporate diverse repertoires using interactive software’ Amanda Bayley and Maria Sappho Donohue: ‘Sounding and listening: bringing aurality/orality into literacy’ Karishmeh Felfeli-Crawford: ‘A Little More Respect?: An Indian Music Scholar Contemplates Popular Music Analysis and Erasure’ Paul Archbold and Lucas Fels: ‘Analysing <i>Pression</i> by Helmut Lachenmann’
Session 2: ‘Current States and New Strategies in Music Higher Education’	Nathaniel Adam: ‘Stop Making Sense’: Teaching Pop-Music Harmony James Olsen: ‘SHIRT RIP!!!’: Knower’s ‘live band sesh’ videos as popular music analysis’
Session 3: ‘Teaching Western Classical Music’	Stefan Eckert: ‘Practical and Experience-Based Music Literacy: Adapting 18th Century Tools for the 21st Century Classroom’ Eric Wen: ‘Now in Technicolour: A New Teaching Model for Sonata Form’
Keynote:	Gurminder Kaur Bhogal: ‘Exploring Embodied Sounds and Timbres through Sikh Music Theory’

Many presentations explored key issues identified in the report, whether in relation to definitions of musical literacy incorporating the use of technology, the appropriate use of musical literacy skills within a popular music context, or how it can usefully be conceptualised within the context of training future educators. The first keynote, given by Gurminder Kaur Bhogal, with the title ‘Exploring Embodied Sounds and Timbres through Sikh Music Theory’, was specifically commissioned to fit within the Music Literacy theme; through a discussion of the way in which tone and timbre have been theorised in the context of Sikh devotional music, the keynote address problematised the definition of musical literacy further by demonstrating the possibility of being ‘literate’ within a musical tradition which does not feature the use of notation.

The day’s papers began with a themed session around the Interactive Research in Music as Sound (IRiMAS) project based at the University of Huddersfield, led by Michael Clarke (University of Huddersfield [n.d.](#)). This project focused on using technology to transform concepts of digital musicology; the session broadly focused on applications of a software that was one of the primary outputs of the IRiMAS project: Tools for Interactive Audio Analysis (TIAALS). This programme presents a flexible tool for students and teachers to analyse and represent sounds and music. In particular, the growing accessibility and dissemination of non-Western musics for broad audience enjoyment means that five-line Western notation tools may be becoming increasingly inappropriate for music analysis within these contexts. Clarke and his research team set out how to develop technologies to analyse visually and interactively more effectively, not using more traditional formats.

Amanda Bayley and Maria Sappho Donohue spoke about their work on moving away from the idea of music analysis being inextricably linked to Western-style notation. Instead, their work emphasised aurality, visual analysis and interactivity as key models for literacy and analysis in music, with a particular focus on improvisation. Bayley and Donohue showed how different models of engagement with improvisation groups facilitated a continuous dialogue for analysis and literacy, with constructive and generative conversations from performers and audiences alike. Karishmeh Felfeli-Crawford presented the use of TIAALS for analysing popular music, a broader field that has often been restricted by conceptions of music literacy and analysis as requiring common-practice-era notation. Felfeli-Crawford’s approach combined ‘classical’ notations with technologies and other innovative work to create synthesis and new directions for analysing popular music that move away from legacies of colonialism.

To conclude the session, Paul Archbold and Lucas Fels demonstrated how TIAALS can be used to analyse aurality and performances as ‘objects’, by comparing and contrasting different interpretations of the same piece (in their case, *Pression* by Lachenmann). The demonstration of technology not only combined different recordings and performers but also allowed for a high degree of interactivity on the part of the ‘viewer’ of the TIAALS interface, showing strong potential for its use in music analysis. Furthermore, it also demonstrated the way in which symbols taken from Western-

style notation (including those for extended techniques) can usefully be incorporated within a form of literacy based on the use of music technology.

What united the four papers was an interest in how Western music concepts of literacy relate to non-Western musics (a concern highlighted in the SMA's music literacy report). There is some potential overlap of concern here, though, in that, just as learning to read Western-music notation requires time, effort and resource, so the TIAALS software requires some considerable experimentation and learning on the part of the user in order to develop fluency. The IRiMAS panel showed that the options for expanding conceptions of music literacy are multi-faceted and easily complemented by the adoption of different technologies.

Sessions later in the day explored related themes. Nathaniel Adam spoke about pedagogy for popular music within the context of song writing. Adam observed that, owing to the wide variation in types of tonal organisation and harmonic strategies across popular music, the use of a hierarchical system revolving around a set of central chords (applied in common practice harmony) is inappropriate. Adam sought in particular to avoid Schenkerian-focused harmony and counterpoint approaches that have previously been applied to popular music, proposing instead a hierarchy focusing on the use of scale and harmonic function across several different genres (see Adam 2011).

James Olsen's talk on YouTube comic videos as a mode of music analysis started from his observation that the meme-based humour of groups like the American band Knower actually assumes a high degree of genre literacy on the part of their viewers, particularly via live captions in their videos that provide humorous commentary and refer to specific musical details. Olsen positioned this commentary as a form of music analysis analogous with more formalised analytical approaches. In this way, he suggested that the captions could be viewed as an accessible form of music analysis which have the potential to foster an 'analytical disposition' in viewers. Olsen linked his discussion to commentators like Carolyn Abbate who was one of the first to critique the movement towards 'hermeneutics' in analysis (Abbate 1989); Olsen ultimately concluded that via the medium of humour, the prevalence of YouTube videos that reflect music literacy may very well demonstrate that the idea of 'hermeneutics' in music analysis spreads far beyond academia.

An afternoon session on 'Teaching Western Classical Music' began with Stefan Eckert's paper focused on the development of practical music literacy in relation to the training of high school music teachers in the USA. Eckert explained that the teaching method he employs in this context was developed in response to the limited music-theoretical knowledge of many students at his institution. Eckert negotiated this challenge through use of the 'octave rule', a mode of practical harmony instruction common in the 18th Century (Sanguinetti 2012). This approach facilitates the instruction of practical keyboard harmony, allowing students to develop a 'feel' for the harmonisation of a given bassline without reference to chord symbols. Eckert drew particular attention to the ways in which an understanding of pre-dominant harmony can be developed using this method. The approach was designed for trainee classroom teachers who had keyboard skills, and thus shows the importance of developing music literacy training appropriate for the context in which is developed.

Eric Wen's lecture recital focused on the understanding of harmony and how it intersects with musical performance. Using the opening movement of Beethoven's piano sonata No. 4 in E Flat Major (op.7), Wen demonstrated the way in which the principle of pre-dominant harmony is present within the large-scale structure of the movement. Wen illustrated this principle using a series of colour-coded Schenkerian-style diagrams, which he relates to a correspondingly colour-coded score. By focusing on the principle of elaboration on a basic tonal scheme, Wen situated this perspective in pre-dominant harmony within wider Schenkerian thinking. Wen was primarily concerned with the diagrams' application to musical performance, while also acknowledging their potential to be utilised more widely as an educational tool.

In keeping with the wide range of perspectives on the roles and definitions of music literacy/theory explored so far, Gurminder Kaur Bhogal's keynote talk explored the ways in which music theory is conceptualised in relation to the spiritual practices of the Sikh religion. Throughout her talk,

Bhogal presented an understanding of music theory that has many fundamental differences from the ways in which music theory is typically understood and disseminated in the Euro-North-American academy. Simultaneously, however, she drew numerous parallels between these two broad approaches, demonstrating the variety of ways in which music and music theory have been conceptualised in relation to spiritual or philosophical ideas throughout history and in different geographical locations, as well as some common ideas relating to the concepts of vibration and timbre.

Central to her discussion was the phenomenon of vibration in music and its relationship with the pursuit of enlightenment within Sikh spirituality. To illustrate the importance of vibration, she referred to the way in which different instruments are conceived primarily in relation to their timbre and the resulting variety of vibrations they create, and the relationship of timbre and vibration to different states of consciousness experienced during the performance of *Kirtan* (Sikh devotional music). Through discussion of the phenomena of 'struck' and 'unstruck' sound, or *ahat naad* and *anahad naad*, respectively, Bhogal referred to the way in which sound in *Kirtan* is experienced differently according to the level of enlightenment experienced by the individual at a given moment. Bhogal presented the experience of hearing such music as a journey from a state of consciousness attuned to the earthly to that of one attuned to the celestial, or from *ahat* to *anahad naad*. Bhogal explained that, within Sikh philosophy, the vibration of different musical timbres is thought to bring about a shift in consciousness, which in turn allows the hearer to experience *anahad naad*. In this way, those who experience *anahad naad* are said to be attuned to a form of sound that is present continuously, the consciousness of which can only be achieved while in an enlightened state. Another crucial facet of the phenomenon of *anahad naad* is the cyclical manner in which it is experienced. While to some extent presenting *ahat* and *anahad naad* as a binary phenomenon, Bhogal also positioned them as existing in a reflexive relationship where each gives rise to the other. She explained that when the journey from *ahat naad* to *anahad naad* is complete, the body itself emanates sound that can be heard by others. The cyclical, non-linear nature of this musical-spiritual experience mirrors the complementary manner in which the physical and the metaphysical are understood to exist within Sikh philosophy.

Bhogal contextualised her discussion of these practices more widely by relating them to ideas associated with some influential thinkers within the traditions of Western Art Music. She suggested that the internal manner in which *anahad naad* is experienced strongly parallels Pythagoras's ability to 'hear the harmony of the spheres' via the 'inner ear', a skill which is also comparable with Gordon's (1975) definition of audiation as referred to in the SMA Music Literacy Project report. Similarly, she drew a parallel between Boethius's conception of the actively produced sound of *musica instrumentalis* and the nature of *ahat naad* (for an overview of Boethius, see Chamberlain 1970). Nevertheless, she also acknowledged that while these ideas share clear similarities with the notions of struck/unstruck sound, the cyclical nature of *anahad naad* renders it more difficult to correlate with the ideas of Ancient Greek thinkers. Similarly, she noted that, unlike Pythagoras' 'harmony of the spheres' the 'sound' of *anahad naad* is of a different nature to that which exists only in the physical plane, as opposed to actively produced sound preserved in the inner ear through memory. Bhogal also contrasted the ways in which Ancient Greek and Sikh philosophers have conceptualised music in relation to morality and ethics respectively. While Plato's understanding of this aspect of music centred on its potential to shape the moral character of an individual (see Walhout 1995), Sikh philosophy emphasises the ethical focus of the musical-spiritual experience by conceptualising it as one that generates a state of bliss conducive to the positive development of the wider community. Here parallels can also be drawn between the role of music literacy within Sikh society and some definitions of music literacy proposed by academics such as Levi (1989) and Shouldice (2014) who emphasise the potential of music literacy to shape an individual's contribution to wider society. Thus, Bhogal positioned Sikh music theory as inextricably linked to the music-devotional practices of Sikh spirituality and the experiences they facilitate. Despite the specific nature of the topic, her discussion also contextualised these practices more widely in relation to the role of music in society as well as the phenomenon of internalised sound. By emphasising the cyclical

nature of the way in which sound is experienced within Sikh philosophy, Bhogal offered an engaging, less-researched angle from which a variety of musical phenomena might be explored.

The day's discussions tapped into long-standing debates and recent publications/discussions, not least the 2022 update on England's National Plan for Music Education (Department for Education 2023), similar to panel discussions held at the RMA Annual Conference at the University of Nottingham in 2023 (RMA 2023). The OxMAC music literacy day illustrated how the landscape of music higher education has changed in recent decades to incorporate the study of music outside of the foci of traditional degrees in music. In so doing, the day highlighted the range of possible ways in which music theory and literacy may be conceptualised as well as a number of possibilities as to how these may be combined. The sessions demonstrated the flexibility of the concept of musical literacy by exploring its application to diverse styles of music, contexts which incorporate the use of technology, and musical traditions in which music literacy is conceived as a primarily aural phenomenon.

Simultaneously, the sessions demonstrated the challenges that have arisen from the incorporation of diverse musical styles and recent technological developments into programmes of study, which have traditionally been narrower in focus. In so doing, they highlighted the concerns of certain music-theoretical skills and modes of understanding which are taken for granted in the study of Western Art Music being applied beyond the contexts for which they were originally designed. Thus, the sessions served as a useful reminder that the ways in which musical literacy and theory are taught should be driven by the characteristics of the music or musical style in question.

Another prominent theme emerging from the sessions was how music literacy (however it is understood) can be developed among students who lack sufficient prior knowledge to engage comfortably with their programmes of study. This was to some extent demonstrated by the sessions' emphasis on the complementarity of different approaches to musical literacy. Numerous suggestions were put forward, such as ways in which music technology might be used to develop musical literacy more widely, or how the partimenti-inspired practical instruction of harmony can develop students' harmonic understanding without reference to chord symbols.

The breadth of material presented in the music literacy strand of the OxMAC Conference demonstrated the commitment of the SMA to ensuring that concepts of music literacies continue to be part of the organisation's outreach and wider research. The enthusiastic engagement by individual members showed the relevancy and even urgency of the themes presented across the day. The ongoing commitment of the SMA was further shown by the announcement during the conference of the First International Summit on Music Literacy, to be hosted at St. Catherine's College, Cambridge in 2024 (OxMAC 2023, 87–88). Discussions of music literacy will most likely stretch into the future, and it is promising that the SMA is already planning events to continue the conversation.

Notes on contributors

Rebekah Donn is currently reading for a PhD in Music Education at Edinburgh Napier University under the supervision of Prof. Zack Moir and Bryden Stillie. In addition to her studies, Rebekah is an associate lecturer on the BA (Hons) music programme at Edinburgh Napier University and is an Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Rebekah is a student representative for the Society for Music Analysis and has also conducted research for the Society.

Daniel Elphick is a researcher on Russian and East-European music, politics and music analysis. Dan is a Fellow of the Centre for Russian Music at Goldsmiths, University of London, a member of the editorial board for DSCH, the Shostakovich Journal, and the Communications Officer for the Royal Musical Association. His first book, *Music Behind the Iron Curtain: Weinberg and his Polish Contemporaries* is available from Cambridge University Press.

Disclosure statement

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

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