

Editing Historical Music in the Age of Digitization

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Abstract

Norwegian Musical Heritage—a program for preserving, editing and publishing historical music from Norway—benefits from digitization programs like that of The National Library of Norway. Digital media, in turn, opens new possibilities in the publication of historical music editions on the Internet. In both cases we see that digital technology draws new attention to the historical documents serving as sources of music edition. Although digitization strips them of their material form, they gain tremendously in virtual visibility. This visibility may contribute to a shift in critical edition, away from a predominant concern for the need to reach a single unequivocal reading, toward a greater interest for the real diversity of the sources. This broadened perspective may moderate the canonizing effect associated with traditional editions and open a more spacious field of interpretation and experience. In this way, more people may take part in the formation of cultural repertoires, in a media situation where such repertoires are no longer provided by traditional institutions, venues and media.

1. Introduction

This paper presents a new initiative for preserving, editing and publishing historical music from Norway, called *Norwegian Musical Heritage*. The aim of the program is to make historical music available for performance and research in Norway and abroad.

I have been engaged by the National Library of Norway to take part in the preparation of a new, complete edition of the Norwegian composer Johan Svendsen's works. The Johan Svendsen Edition is a pilot project in *Norwegian Musical Heritage*.

Johan Svendsen made considerable success on the European music scene from the 1860s to the 1880s, both as a composer and as a conductor, and he was highly esteemed in America, too. In 1883, he accepted the position as musical director of The Royal Theatre in Copenhagen, and his career as a composer petered out, but his activity as a conductor on the international scene continued. Several prestigious institutions, including the Metropolitan opera in New York, tried to recruit him as a resident conductor, but he stayed in Copenhagen the rest of his life.

Svendsen left an impressive corpus of works in the nineteenth-century Romantic tradition—chamber music, symphonies, symphonic poems and concertos, and not to forget his masterful orchestrations of iconic pieces from the international Romantic repertory.

My intention here is to show the influence of digital technologies and digital media on historical music edition. However, I will not only concentrate on the usefulness of digital technology in source studies and editing, but also emphasize the use of digital technology in the presentation of the editions on the Internet. Ultimately, I want to discuss the way digitization and digital media transform the meaning and role of historical music in present day music cultures.

2. Digitizing Programs

One important condition for the Norwegian Musical Heritage initiative is the digitizing program of The National Library of Norway. The library is a central partner in the initiative and holds the major part of the source material relevant for the editing projects.

The *primary sources* of any historical music edition include handwritten and printed scores left by the composer and his publishers. A manuscript in the composer's own hand is naturally an important primary source, but the production of printed scores, too, will normally be supervised by the composer and reflect her or his intentions. In twentieth-century music, even recordings are sometimes valuable primary sources, especially in the absence of scores.

Secondary sources include personal documentation such as correspondence and diaries, as well as documents from the publishers, concert institutions and so on, all of which may provide information about the genesis of the work. Printed matter such as newspaper reviews, articles and books may give supplementary information about the work's reception history, as do sometimes photographs and films.

The National Library of Norway has decided to digitize its entire collection and has come a long way in this enterprise. A major effort has been made in the field of musical manuscripts. Nearly 3,500 musical manuscripts have so far been digitized and published on the library's website, and many more are in the process.

Digitizing programs in libraries and collections across the world make modern music edition infinitely much more efficient than the old trade based on traveling and copying by hand. All kinds of source material used in critical edition are put at the disposal of the editors in digitized form.

Take Svendsen's symphonic poem *Zorahayda*, a piece of nineteenth-century musical orientalism, premiered in Christiania, Norway in October 1874.

3. Historical Music Edition and Canon Formation

In general, digitizing technology and digital media offer great new possibilities for preservation and remediation of historical documents. Yet, in the process, the cultural heritage itself is transformed. Any process of preservation and remediation of documents involves the intervention of new agents and interests. It is a highly selective process. The historical context that determined the meaning of the original documents—their status, accessibility, and use—is replaced by a context in which new interests define their meaning.

Thus, obviously, successful digital preservation of cultural heritage does not just depend on the permanence, authenticity, identity and integrity of the digital documents themselves, it also depends on their recontextualization in a new media situation—on the way they are put to use.

Historical music edition is a case in point. Traditionally, historical music edition has served as an authentication and authorization procedure aimed at preserving musical works from oblivion or from dissolving in an endless series of performances based on unauthorized scores. Although the sources—manuscripts and early prints—are the *sine qua non* of historical edition, it is in the nature of things that they are subordinate to the finished, edited version. The final edition, as soon as it has been completed and published, *replaces* any source. What is then presumably revealed is the work “itself”, considered as a constant and invariable entity buried under the pile of sources. The “work” in this sense is, of course, an illusion.

The establishment of the text of a musical work—it’s “wording”, so to speak—is the central task in editing. The critical apparatus of the edition—in the name of source criticism and sound philological craftsmanship—will describe and discuss any possible reading and leave no details in the source material uncommented. Yet, many conflicts in the sources only find their resolution through an interpretive effort by the editor. Rather than openly discussing this interpretive effort, traditional editions refer to the authority of the underlying mysterious *Urtext*. The overwhelming yet deceptive impression left by multi-volume, monumental collected editions is that the editors have reached the ultimate and indeed only possible reconstruction of the opus.

There are good practical reasons to reduce the number of possible readings and present the performers with an as unequivocal score as possible. However, the quest for the ultimate reading goes far beyond this practical concern and into the metaphysics of the musical work.

By progressively relieving historical works from their sources and gradually uncovering the underlying “work”, historical editions contribute to the establishment of a *musical canon*. This canonizing effect—anticipated in the moment a decision is made to edit the work of a certain composer and not somebody else, and to edit certain works within the corpus of this composer and not others—can be avoided in a new approach to the sources, in the age of digitization and digital media.

In the case of Johan Svendsen, any version of his collected works will have to relate to the question of a Norwegian canon. The Svendsen edition could be the first step in a long awaited reevaluation of the role of music in what is often referred to as the Norwegian Golden Age—the age of Ibsen and Grieg. Svendsen’s position in this context is somewhat ambiguous and his contributions to this heritage not easily subsumed under the usual banners.

The new edition will include music that do not necessarily support the prevailing picture of Svendsen as a representative of National Romanticism, such as his unpublished dances and marches for orchestra, written for the mid-nineteenth-century entertainment scene in Christiania, the celebratory cantatas and marches commissioned for political events in Norway and Denmark.

4. The Return to the sources in Music Edition

Source-based research in general can be an effective means to recontextualize historical art encumbered by ideologies of later times. Although critical edition—the source-based discipline *per se*—is inevitably involved in canon construction, it may also have the power to change our view of history.

In this, it would answer a call in present day scholarship for a new return to the sources and new attention to the materiality of the cultural heritage.

Obviously, the renewed interest for sources and materiality in the humanities finds an ambiguous allied in digital technology. Digitization speeds up the publication and dissemination of historical documents, but in the process they are stripped of their physical and material form, their *historical* form.

The specific nature of traditional materials such as parchment, paper, vinyl, magnetic tape and so on is lost, as is the physical, corporeal quality of specific media such as the book, the map, the record and the musical score. But the notion that remediation does not alter or influence the message, and that the message remains the same no matter which material form it assumes, seems very deep-rooted.

The materiality of the cultural heritage has become the object of renewed interest in critical thought and historical research. If the digital media of the 21st century and their power to transform practices and experiences attract scholarly interest, so do the analogue media of previous centuries. There is a growing awareness that historical documents and artefacts do not only communicate a coded message but also possess a material presence. To read a historical document on the screen may give you the content of its message, but to hold it between your hands is to face the unknown or forgotten.

Book history is one of several new fields of research in which the meaning of materiality is explored. The methods of book history draw on a variety of existing disciplines such as media history, classical bibliography and, indeed, edition philology. Book history explores the physical properties of the text in order to reveal what it says, apart from what is written in it. The binding, paper quality, typography, the illustrations, the price, the subscription list, the number printed—these are all factors that add to the meaning of the book by showing glimpses of its use, distribution, readership and status. In this way, books are made to tell stories about power, politics, economy and technology—and about marginalization and canonization.

The return to the sources seems to be felt more urgently precisely in the age of digitization. What is sought for is the new sensibility in the encounters with the source material in their concrete materiality. In the field of music, the need to return to the sources is even more urgent, since this particular field has been so thoroughly digitized.

Although the massive distribution of digitized documentation on the Internet poses some paradoxes for source-based studies, I choose here to emphasize the positive side. And although even the best scan will not be able to reveal all the secrets of the physical document, the sources sometimes seem to regain some of their mysterious presence in present days digital media.

5. Digitization and New Digital Media in Music Edition

The return to the sources of historical music is increasingly made possible by digitizing programs in the institutions that hold the material. Thanks to digitization and digital media, editors and researchers can make use of digital documentation—especially in the field of secondary sources—that in earlier times would not have come to light, or been obtained only through very time-consuming archival studies.

However, the full power of digitization and digital media lies in their potential to present the products of historical edition to the public in new and innovative ways.

On a basic level, digital web-based editions can make use of multimedia technologies that give the public a deeper insight into all details of the source material, but without renouncing the clear and playable score. Any amount of supplementary information can be made directly accessible in the text itself through pop-ups and hyperlinks. Any number of primary sources can be made available *in extenso*, in digitized form on the website, and be linked to the new edition in many ways. Different versions of the finished score can be presented to performers, and engage them in an interactive use of the edition.

Digital technologies and media offer even more possibilities in the field of secondary sources. Facsimiles of handwritten and printed material—letters, diaries, newspaper articles etc.—as well as digitized photographs, films and other documentation may be able to present a totally new picture of the

works in question, and tell a new story about the genesis and history of the work. The documentation material can be arranged in interactive patterns that do not necessarily support a single interpretive perspective but allow the user to find her own path and pursue her own line of interpretation.

In this way, the historical documents will have fulfilled a quite different purpose than the occasional facsimile reproductions known from traditional editions.

Although historical edition is inevitably a selective process guided by interest, the canonizing effect can be controlled by employing resources that emerge from the digitizing process itself. Digital music edition, presenting the edited work in digital form on the Internet, may feature any number of digitized sources and a wealth of other digital resources that provide documentation for the creation of the work as well as its history of performance, publication and reception. In this way, digital editions give new possibilities for studying the processes of canonization and marginalization themselves.

6. Historical Music in the Digital Public Sphere

The new potential to recontextualize historical documents is the result of a media situation in which information and communication, experiences and entertainment circulate in new ways. New digital media bring about changes of perspective and altered sensibilities, They create a public sphere in which traditional mechanisms for establishing musical repertoires are transformed or replaced. The institutions, venues and media that have traditionally made up the public sphere have not been able to sustain their traditional roles and positions. The conditions for the formation of historical knowledge are changing, and new mechanisms for canonization and marginalization arise.

New digital media have brought about a revolution in production and distribution of music, including historical music of all kinds. The prominent role of music in contemporary media culture—digital dissemination of sound and images and other forms of documentation, including sheet music—represents a new and more unpredictable context for editing historical music. In the time to come, any ambition to present authorized versions of historical works and thus to define a canon, seems to be limited.

Digitization and digital media bring about fragmentation but also democratization. This ambivalent situation involves a particular responsibility for researchers and publishers. As historians, we have an obligation to not just preserve the permanence, authenticity, identity and integrity of the historical documentation that we present, but to open a space for their interpretation.