

GMTH Proceedings 2008  
herausgegeben von | edited by  
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# Musiktheorie als interdisziplinäres Fach Music Theory and Interdisciplinarity

herausgegeben von | edited by  
Christian Utz

8. Kongress der | 8th Congress of the  
Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie  
Graz 2008

Band 4 der Schriftenreihe | Volume 4 of the Series

*musik.theorien der gegenwart*

herausgegeben von | edited by  
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Druckfassung | printed edition: Pfau-Verlag, Saarbrücken 2010  
(ISBN 978-3-89727-448-8)



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## Editor's Preface

The 8th congress of the Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie (GMTH) took place in October 2008 at the University for Music and Dramatic Arts Graz (KUG) in collaboration with the Austrian Society for Musicology (ÖGMW) on the topic »Music Theory and Interdisciplinarity« (October 9–12, 2008). The conference programme covered a total of 66 presentations, three panel discussions, several concerts and numerous special events; it was attended by 170 registered participants and turned out to be KUG's largest scholarly event in the year 2008. The collected contributions to the six thematic sections of the conference, presented here two years after the event as volume 4 of the KUG book series *musik.theorien der gegenwart* [contemporary music theories], exemplify the open and interactive concept of music theory supported by the editors of this series who conceive of music theory as a multi-faceted scholarly discipline at the intersection of theory/practice, art/science and history/system. Notably, this volume also connects to topics of earlier GMTH-conferences, the reports of which have already been published (*Music Theory between History and System* [Musiktheorie zwischen Historie und Systematik], 1st Congress, 2001; *Music Theory at Its Borders: New and Old Music* [Musiktheorie an ihren Grenzen: Neue und Alte Musik], 3rd Congress 2003; *Music Theory in Context* [Musiktheorie im Kontext], 5th Congress 2005). The six chapters of the current volume follow the Graz conference's six thematic sections and explore commonalities with music history, music aesthetics, musical performance, compositional practice in twentieth- and twenty-first-century music, ethnomusicology and systematic musicology. A total of 45 contributions (28 in German, 17 in English) and the documentation of a panel discussion (a comprehensive English summary appears at the beginning of all contributions) form a vital music-theoretical discourse, informed by contemporaneous issues of research in a broad number of fields. An international collection of authors, including internationally leading scholars as well as many researchers in the early stages of their careers have contributed to the book – providing a unique overview of music theory today.

While the first three volumes of the present book series also explored interdisciplinary fields (*Music and Globalisation*, vol. 1, 2007; *Music as an Art of Perception* [on Helmut Lachenmann's music], vol. 2, 2008; *Passages: Theories of Transition in Music and Other Art Forms*, vol. 3, 2009), this volume is the most extensive and thematically broadest, with many connections to the preceding volumes as well. Chapter V: *Music as »System« vs. Music as »Culture« – Music Theory and Ethnomusicology* ties in to the discussion of the effects of cultural globalisation on musical contexts discussed in volume 1, and chapter IV: *On the Relationship between Conception and Realisation in the Compositional Process*, which also includes a highly readable panel discussion on *Thinking and Listening in Contemporary Music*, focusses on the tension between structuralist and neo-sensualist aesthetics in contemporary music that was a key topic in the discussion of Helmut Lachenmann's music in volume 2.

After Clemens Kühn's opening article calling for both a broad concept of music theory and a distinct profile for the discipline, the following six chapters span a

historical range from Gregorian chant and late medieval music (chapter III, Stefan Engels; chapter I, Angelika Moths) to the most recent tendencies of experimental composition and sound art (e.g., chapter IV, Marion Saxer); methodologies used range from mathematically substantiated theories such as neuronal auto-correlation (chapter VI, Martin Ebeling) to explorations of the interdependency of music theory and music aesthetics informed by philosophy and the history of ideas (e.g., chapter II, Berthold Höckner).

During the last ten to 20 years, music theory in both German-speaking and Anglo-American regions underwent major shifts that have led to increasingly refined forms of differentiation and diversification. In this process, dominating themes such as an »applied theory« oriented towards craftsmanship in German-speaking countries and a mathematically oriented natural science approach to musical structure in Anglo-American music theory have been contested, criticised and expanded by multiple new methods and perspectives. It is worth noting that (music) universities in German-speaking countries have yet to establish the institutional preconditions for a truly independent music theory research as is found in the United States and the United Kingdom. Nonetheless, current music theory covers such an exceptionally broad spectrum of fields and topics, both in research and teaching, that it often seems idle to discuss whether a method or topic may be allocated to the field of music theory or not. This situation necessitates a more systematic discussion of common research fields and interdisciplinarity, as attempted in this volume.

The origins of the current situation in the German-speaking countries can be identified clearly. Since the foundation of the Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie, a new and self-confident generation has defined itself during the annual GMTH-conferences and in the GMTH-journal. In the course of these years, old and seemingly unshakable judgements, prejudices and reservations were shattered and eventually rendered obsolete. It is reminiscent of how the intensified discussion in Anglo-American music theory and the enhanced role of scholarly and source-oriented methods resulted in an enormous increase of scholarly publications. New fields of research, such as socio-cultural and cognitive psychological issues, that had seldom been in the spotlight before, opened up and now were addressed during GMTH-conferences. Music theory also started to explore fields commonly claimed by musicology – triggering heated debates, especially on institutional level.

The necessity of exploring common research fields between music theory and music-related neighbour disciplines may be demonstrated by looking closer at three fields of research covered by the present volume:

— The rediscovery of the historical dimension of music theory, initiated by the writings of Carl Dahlhaus and the (fragmentary) book series *Geschichte der Musiktheorie* arguably has been the most far-reaching development in the past 20 to 30 years. It is taken up in chapter I: *Limits and Potentials in the Reception of Historical Music Theory*. The way, in which the history of music theory is read today, however, has changed significantly since Dahlhaus. The enthusiastic study of historical models of composition with the aim of understanding compositional processes against the background of their own times and the discussion of related technical and aesthetical topics might be labelled a new paradigm. The essays in this chapter most notably extend this approach to the 19th and 20th centuries, vividly illustrating its potential to

question and destabilize universalist theoretical models, established interpretations and historiographic stereotypes.

— The universalist claim common in theories of the 19th and early 20th century appears almost absurd when the cultural context of music is reconsidered. But globalisation has not only made us aware of the regional and cultural conditionality of music theories, it also enables new interconnectedness and synergies which are discussed in chapter V. The application of music analytical methods that were primarily developed in the context of Western music may contribute, despite a long-lasting prejudice against them, valuable insights to the study of non-Western music. At the same time, Western researchers have often not sufficiently acknowledged the existence of other music theories beside Western theory. These non-Western theories not least can provide necessary paths to understanding culturally hybrid contemporaneous genres.

— Finally the expanding field at the intersection of music theory, music psychology and cognitive sciences, enhancing a re-definition of »Systematic Musicology«, has increasingly supported the awareness that a theory of music cannot ignore the listening experience and its individual, psychological, physiological and cultural preconditions. The relevance of this notion is demonstrated by the fact that it informs not only the essays of chapter VI: *Music Theory and Systematic Musicology: Convergence / Divergence*, but numerous other texts in this volume.

It requires little discussion that musical practice – performance and composition – is an issue of music theory as chapters III: *Composition – Analysis – Performance: Music Theory and Musical Practice* and IV reflect, or that music aesthetics and music theory describe a complex reciprocity as recounted in the essays of chapter II: *Music Theory and Music Aesthetics – on the Disciplinary Organisation of Knowledge*. But here, also, new developments and challenges await further investigation, for example when confronting the insistent, provocative question of the value certain analyses might actually have for musical practice, or when facing the fact that the most influential »theories of music« in the 20th century undeniably have been formulated by composers – and not by »professional« music theorists. Will this trend continue into the 21st century?

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I would like to cordially thank Dieter Kleinrath for his invaluable assistance and support during all phases of this vast editorial project. Without his tireless and highly competent involvement this volume would have never appeared within only two years of the Graz conference. My sincere thanks also go to Andreas Dorschel and Clemens Gadenstätter, co-chairs of the conference, who made essential contributions to the conception of the attractive and rich conference programme. Elisabeth Kappel und Geoffrey Hudson worked as correctors during the end of the editorial process and their accuracy and competency were indispensable, considering the substantial amount of text to be read and edited: many thanks to them, also. I finally would like to thank the three institutions that were involved in the planning and organisation of the conference, KUG, GMTH and ÖGMW, for trusting the conference chairs and for the smooth collaboration during preparations and procedure of

the conference events. Not least special thanks go to the authors for the productive dialogues that have developed out of the editorial revisions of the texts and especially for the timely submission of the contributions which helped us to publish this report with only a relatively short delay.

Christian Utz, Vienna, August 2010

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Utz, Christian. 2010. "Editor's Preface." In *Musiktheorie als interdisziplinäres Fach. 8. Kongress der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie Graz 2008* (GMTH Proceedings 2008), edited by Christian Utz. Saarbrücken: Pfau, 13–16. <https://doi.org/10.31751/p.57>

eingereicht / submitted: 10/09/2010

angenommen / accepted: 10/09/2010

veröffentlicht (Druckausgabe) / first published (printed edition): 01/10/2010

veröffentlicht (Onlineausgabe) / first published (online edition): 07/03/2022

zuletzt geändert / last updated: 12/09/2010