

**CHALLENGES, TRENDS AND INTERDISCIPLINARY
PERSPECTIVES IN MUSICOLOGY:
AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANCESCO FINOCCHIARO**

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SUMMARY. The interview with Francesco Finocchiaro offers a critical examination of contemporary musicology, addressing its evolving paradigms, methodological developments, and interdisciplinary intersections. In light of the rapid turnover of theoretical frameworks and the influence of dominant academic institutions, this discussion provides an analytical perspective on the forces shaping musicological inquiry today. Finocchiaro questions the balance between textual and contextual approaches, the potential risks of detaching the discipline from its core subject, and the systemic pressures associated with scholarly productivity. His research on silent film music serves as a compelling case study in interdisciplinary scholarship, illustrating the intersections between historical musicology, media studies, and cultural analysis. In addition, his reflections on public musicology underscore the necessity of bridging academic research with wider audiences, fostering broader engagement beyond institutional boundaries. Through these perspectives, the interview emphasizes the importance of mentorship, critical engagement, and adaptive methodologies in sustaining a rigorous and reflective approach to musicological scholarship.

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Research is inherently dynamic, continuously expanding its frontiers and redefining its conceptual and methodological boundaries. Musicology, as a discipline, remains in constant negotiation with its epistemological

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frameworks, reflecting the evolving nature of scholarly discourse. This fluidity raises several critical questions: what are the prevailing directions in contemporary musicological inquiry? Who determines these trajectories? How should scholars engage with a field that has been extensively examined while still identifying novel research perspectives? What is the interplay between creativity and methodological rigor in scholarly inquiry? Furthermore, how should emerging researchers navigate the increasing pressures of scholarly productivity within a competitive academic landscape? In light of these concerns, we conducted an interview with Francesco Finocchiaro, a distinguished scholar whose expertise in contemporary music and silent film music provides a nuanced perspective on these issues. His reflections illuminate the broader mechanisms that shape the development of musicology, offering insights into the forces that influence research paradigms, methodological transformations, and interpretative frameworks. At the same time, he articulates a compelling argument for balance—advocating for intellectual freedom alongside methodological rigor, fostering an environment where creativity and scientific precision can coexist, and emphasizing the critical role of mentorship in shaping the intellectual development of researchers.

Francesco Finocchiaro holds academic positions at the Rossini Conservatory in Pesaro, the University of Innsbruck, and the University of Padua. His research affiliations include prestigious institutions such as the Universities of Bologna, Innsbruck, Milan, Vienna, and NYU Steinhardt. His extensive body of work has significantly contributed to the discourse on silent film music, metaphorology, and the intersections of music and media, positioning him as a leading figure in these fields.

With a publication record exceeding 60 works in three languages and over 100 international presentations, Professor Finocchiaro has made substantial scholarly contributions, including *Musical Modernism and German Cinema* (2017), *Dietro un velo di organza* (2020), and the FMJ Archive, a pioneering digital repository of critical sources on German silent cinema. His most recent research explores the complex relationships between music, media, and cultural politics, engaging with both historical depth and contemporary relevance. Beyond his research, he remains an active participant in the academic community, serving as a peer reviewer for leading international journals and co-directing editorial initiatives.

1. Musicology Today: Concepts and Debates

Cristina Pascu — *I would like to start with a fundamental, essential question. What are the current research directions in the field of musicology? How have these evolved in recent years?*

Francesco Finocchiaro: Recent musicological research tends to be structured around a few watchwords: global musicology, post- or decolonisation, topic theory, interculturality, intermediality, adaptation theory, media archaeology. (For the sake of truth, I have contributed to some of these fields myself: *mea culpa*.) We can ask ourselves what they have in common. They are all traces of what can be called a Copernican revolution in historical musicology: the shift from a view of musicology as the history of the musical work of art to a broader view of musicology as the history of musical culture (or better musical cultures). And with it, a shift from a musicological research that was flattened on the text, on the notated page, to a vision more sensitive to historical contexts, performative and receptive practices, the role of the listener, the identity of musicians, composers etc. What may be disappointing, however, is their ephemerality: musicological studies have been experiencing a sort of sinusoidal waves for several decades. New trends come into vogue, forcing the redefinition of a whole series of concepts, renaming categories and replacing the previous ones: and so on, in new waves, each lasting no more than 4 to 6 years, in a veritable *cupio dissolvi*. A periodic paradigm shift that leads to the replacement of labels and keywords to produce – not to be underestimated – new sets of conferences and publications.

— *What are the driving forces behind dominant research trends in musicology? How do they emerge, gain legitimacy, and shape scholarly discourse on a global scale?*

These waves have a certain direction: they come from more or less the same source and spread out towards the rest of the world. It is no coincidence that we have defined them all in English: they are not translations, but the original terms used in the international debate. In fact, they are all of North American origin. They have been introduced in recent years by the American intellectual elites, first in the general humanities and cultural studies, then in musicology. Not without forms of subordination and quite epigonal application.

After all, this subordination is reflected in our conversation: an Italian among Romanians could have spoken Latin. And if I spoke Italian, you would understand me very well. (After all, the great Italianist Eta Boeriu was professor of this institution for several decades.) Instead, we are speaking English, which is not the mother tongue of any of us, but it is the mother of our thoughts, as Karl Kraus pointed out: “Language is the mother of thought”, and no one can be so naive as to think that language is an exterior clothing of thoughts, but it generates them from the moment of their inception.

— *What are the risks of these approaches?*

This Copernican revolution has sometimes led to an opposite excess: a typical phenomenon of social, political and even cultural processes is that one excess is overthrown by the opposite one. Historical musicology has suffered in recent years from the disappearance of the text, or rather the ability to confront it. The recommendation made by Carl Dahlhaus more than forty years ago still seems to be pertinent: a culturological approach to music should not become an alibi for a non-literate musicology, that is, one that is unable to read a musical text. This is a phenomenon that we are already witnessing in some fields, for example in my latest field of specialisation, film music.

In the interest of a historical musicology understood as *historia civilis*, as Franco Alberto Gallo put it, i.e. the historiographical study of the musical heritage as a cultural inheritance, it would be necessary instead not to banally replace texts with contexts, but rather to reconcile a textual and a contextual approach, to pursue for example philological research and the study of performance techniques on an equal footing, to complement the immanent analysis of musical documents with the historical reconstruction of performative and receptive practices.

— *What trends do you see emerging in musicology, especially regarding interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches?*

On the one hand, interdisciplinarity has been intrinsic to musicology since its inception. Musicology was founded on the positivist model of the natural sciences. This happened during a crucial period of institutionalisation of academic disciplines at the end of the 19th century. Musicology has always relied on disciplinary influences: the positivist approach led it to consider an artefact in itself as its proper object of study; from art history it derived the concept of the history of style; from literary studies it borrowed the methods of palaeography and philology.

In recent years, large areas of historical musicology with an interdisciplinary vocation have emerged, and film music is undoubtedly one of them, probably the most important. Personally, I am also very interested, for example, in studies of the intersection between music and politics.

— *What does interdisciplinarity imply at the methodological level?*

Among the watchwords of contemporary musicology that we alluded to above, interdisciplinarity is the most common, but perhaps also the most misunderstood. Talking about interdisciplinarity is seductive, but vague: one speaks about crossing borders and spaces between different territories, but the risk is to create confusion: to outline a no man's land. Indeed, if it is clear that an object of study can be common to several disciplines, it is less obvious to understand what it means to study it with an interdisciplinary method.

The objects of study are not interdisciplinary per se, but multidisciplinary, because they do not occupy a no-man's-land between disciplines, but are shared by several disciplines and therefore by several communities of scholars, each of whom approaches them certainly not without a method, but with specific skills, a technical vocabulary and a methodology of its own: *iuxta propria principia*.

We are saying that genuine interdisciplinarity should be translated into a plurality of methods, a multi-specialism, which is the exact opposite of a certain rhetoric of interdisciplinarity, and which is best represented by the metaphor not of a no-man's-land, but of a bridge built between different disciplinary territories that nevertheless remain firm in their foundations. A plurality of methods is a multi-specialism that, in my view, can only be achieved through teamwork.

2. Finding and Defining a Research Field

— *Can you give us a concrete example? How can a young researcher today identify their field of study in musicology? Are there specific strategies for discovering a unique niche?*

I do not believe that there are strategies, and I personally do not know them. I remember that, according to Siegfried Kracauer, the historian is a time traveler. He or she leaves his or her own time and visits another. In line with this image, I would advise the researcher to approach his or her journey through time as if he or she were going on holiday: go where you are more inspired, where you feel attracted, and if you find something interesting, stay there, keep close to that place, and try to find out more. Out of metaphor, there is no other strategy than reading, listening to music, talking to other scholars, attending courses, believing in the cultural mediation of lecturers, speakers, authors and mentors. If you want to get good at historical musicology, get close to someone who already is.

— *If a topic has already been explored, is there still value in revisiting it? What advice would you give to researchers who fear their chosen topic might be “overdone”?*

In my view, there is no real reason for this fear. Research in the humanities is qualitative, not quantitative. We are not topographers who have to map a territory and who have to go to unexplored lands to do so. The humanities aim to deepen historical awareness, and this is unlimited. Karl Popper said that research has no end because it proceeds through hypothesis and progressive falsification. Research knows no truths, only temporary explanations that wait to be refuted by more convincing ones. For methodological reasons inherent in the nature of modern scientific research, this fear cannot exist. Moreover, it is dangerous. The other side of this irrational fear is indeed, as one often hears young researchers and PhD students say, that someone might “steal their topic”. I have to say that there is no more naive fear than thinking “this is my subject, I hope nobody writes on this topic, etc.”, or even forbidding colleagues to write on what they think are “their topic”. It must be made clear that science is free, that subjects and fields of study do not belong to anyone, and that the use of possessive adjectives should not be tolerated. Those who think this way are only denouncing their own inadequacy in scientific research.

3. Research Methodology and Creativity

— *How much creativity is necessary in research? To what extent should creativity complement scientific rigor in musicological studies?*

I believe that research is a highly creative field, a creativity that is expressed first and foremost in methodology, in borrowing categories from other disciplines, in building bridges, in opening up genuine interdisciplinary intersections. Creativity lies in the ability to look at a field of study with different eyes each time. And then it translates into the most creative act of all, which is writing. The authorial art of structuring a text, even a non-fictional one, requires not only narrative skills, but perhaps even dramaturgical strategies.

— *When faced with a creative block, what strategies would you recommend to “unlock” oneself and move forward? Are there specific methods you’ve found helpful?*

This is not an easy answer to give, but it depends on the cause. Non-fiction writing is essentially argumentative writing, so if the block is due to argumentation problems, one needs to rethink the logical process and the link between analysis and conclusions. If it is just a narrative block, it is usually enough to let the text rest for a while and then read it again after a few weeks. This usually helps to identify any breaks in the narrative flow.

4. Overcoming Challenges and Research Impasses

— *What advice would you give to researchers who experience blockages or difficulties in their research process? How can they overcome these challenges and regain their momentum?*

Once again, we must distinguish between difficulties, obstacles that may arise in the course of research for argumentative reasons, and obstacles of a personal nature. The former ones are actually the easiest to resolve because they are natural and inherent to scientific research: scientific research progresses by means of successive adjustments. In very rare cases, a research project ends with the achievement of all its objectives, and precisely those objectives that were set at the planning stage, because this would mean that the researchers had proceeded blindly, without taking into account the material results they had encountered along the research path. It is always a good idea for a research project to have both short-term and long-term objectives: analyzing a problem, a difficulty, breaking it down into parts, into segments, into steps to be tackled one by one, is the right strategy to overcome blockages and obstacles of any kind and not to be paralyzed by the enormity of the problems.

On the other hand, difficulties of a personal nature are not to be underestimated and are becoming increasingly common. Blockages or paralysis, even for long periods, can be due to insecurity, fear, feelings of inadequacy resulting from the constant confrontation and extreme competition in which research is carried out today. On the one hand, there is a level of ambition that is often excessive and disproportionate to the actual abilities of researchers who, until proven otherwise, are at the beginning of their careers. On the other hand, there is a sense of competition, a real agonism, which is taken to the extreme in academic environments, where the evaluation is based on mere arithmetic calculations of the number of publications produced, the number of conference papers and other criteria that are not qualitative but purely quantitative. The motto “publish or perish” is the sentence of despair.

— *What do you think about?*

It is not surprising that, in predisposed individuals, this mixture can be fatal, leading to real psychological disorders such as anxiety, panic attacks and, in the most severe cases, paranoid forms such as the impostor syndrome, typical of those who are convinced that they are not up to their role and are going to be discovered, or the false victimization syndrome, typical of those who believe that they are being persecuted by their colleagues or supervisors and who believe that every gesture they see is a sign of ongoing persecution. It is therefore not uncommon for even the correction of a thesis by a supervisor, or the rejection of an abstract for a conference, to be experienced paranoically as moments of bullying, discrimination or worse. It is therefore increasingly common for the selection of research staff to be accompanied by an interview with a psychologist who is able to identify hidden forms of personality disorder that can emerge in stressful situations and have a destructive effect on the person and all those who have to deal with him or her. In order to avoid all this, our watchwords should be: humility rather than ambition, gradualness rather than precociousness, slowness rather than haste, rigour rather than the speed imposed by the desire to meet the next deadline.

5. Personal Research Journey

— *How did you personally choose your research topics throughout your career? Were there certain themes or questions that consistently guided your interests?*

I would be tempted to answer: by chance, as Columbus discovered America and as most discoveries are made. On the surface this may seem to be a matter of luck, but in fact it is another of the characteristics of scientific research, along with its nature of provisional certainty. Scientific research proceeds by gradual adjustments, moving from initial hypotheses to others by means of successive corrections. I was interested and attracted by the music of the early 20th century and wondered what logic governed post-tonal music in the period of the immediate abandonment of the tonal system. I began to search for the principles of formal structuring in early 20th century music. I found the first traces of thinking about these questions in the writings of Arnold Schönberg. Then I discovered that these writings were only part of a vast body of thought and a whole theory of form that was largely unknown and relegated to texts that had never been published. This was the origin of the bilingual Italian-German edition of Schönberg's treatise *The Musical Idea*.

Thus, it started with an interest in the music of the early 20th century, which gradually expanded to other genres, other composers in other countries, and so on.

— *Looking back, what are some of the most influential factors that shaped your research focus and trajectory?*

I would undoubtedly say the encounter with other scholars and mentors, which also means the encounter with books. In a word, through dialogue, collaboration with colleagues and scholars. I have benefited enormously from being a member of study groups and associations, one of which, Athena musica, I was a founding member and president-elect.

In scientific research, no one grows alone; we must avoid solipsistic closures.

6. Researching Silent Film Music

— *Was there a particular aspect of silent film music that first captivated you? What initially sparked your interest in researching this era?*

Having studied musical modernism and the music of the early 20th century, it was natural to extend my studies to the film collaborations of composers such as Paul Hindemith, Kurt Weill, Richard Strauss, Hanns Eisler, who not only collaborated with the film industry, but also embraced cinema as an aesthetic phenomenon. This was the subject of my first monograph, as part of a research project at the University of Vienna, but I soon realized the limitations of this approach, which was still imbued with an idea of art music and cultivated composers. I realized that film collaborations by composers from the field of art music and the composition of original scores with an opus character represented only a very small part of the reality of musical accompaniment for film projections. Thanks to the dialogue with other scholars and experts, I became aware that there was a large corpus of photoplay music, theoretical writings and an extensive and articulate critical discussion going on in film and music journals. All these primary and secondary sources were largely unknown, inaccessible and waiting to be brought to light. I approached this topic in a second, larger research project that resulted in a digital database and a new monograph on the historical aesthetics of silent film music. More importantly, I saw in this topic all the hallmarks of a new epistemological paradigm for historical musicology. Consider the phenomenon of music localization, i.e. the practice of composing multiple scores for the same film. Silent film music raises questions about the

very notion of composition, of a work with aesthetic unity, of philology in the sense of reconstructing a reliable historical document. The field itself is a challenge to the traditional assumptions of historical musicology.

7. The Role of Public Musicology

— *How crucial is it to bring musicological research into the public sphere? What strategies can help academic research reach a wider audience?*

Public musicology is an important part of my professional activity, mainly in the form of public lectures in theatres and at festivals, but also radio interviews and collaborations with magazines and the general press. I think it is a fundamental task. And that it benefits everyone involved. First of all, it has an important social function, especially in the context of lifelong learning. Research must open up cultural heritage to inclusive participation and promote processes of learning and re-learning about cultural heritage. This means, on the one hand, the ability to address a wide audience and to develop ad hoc projects, for example by integrating digital technologies, that open up cultural heritage to people who might never access it through traditional channels such as a visit to a museum, a concert or a conference. On the other hand, addressing the so-called general public has a clarifying function for the researcher, it is a useful exercise to come out of the *turris eburnea* of the academy, to communicate with an audience of non-specialists who are not familiar with the technical jargon: it is an extraordinary exercise in clarifying language and cleaning up terminology.

— *How important is musicology?*

Of all the disciplines, we are the most fortunate because we have a potential that other disciplines do not have: music is performed, it can be heard. A concert is the most important part of public musicology. But everything we perform was not born here, here today, it has a history, what the musicologist can do is to tell the prequel of this story, so to speak, like a film or a play of which the concert shows us the last act, but to understand it you need to know the previous acts, and the musicologist can tell that. How? Not so much by giving biographical details – that introduction in the form of a lecture that no one really listens to - but by explaining how it is made, giving elements that educate people to listen to music.

— *In the context of silent film music, how can public engagement enhance understanding and appreciation of this area? Are there ways to bridge the gap between academic research and public interest?*

Here things are more complicated. For many years, film festivals have focused on the restoration of silent films with some kind of musical accompaniment. Here, however, the state of the sources should call for extreme caution, what not always happen. This caution applies first and foremost to the state of preservation of the films: even an interested public is not fully aware of what film archives really do in terms of so-called reconstructions. There is a huge contradiction between the state of the sources and the public's expectations. Indeed, the presentation of silent films at film festivals or on DVD is mainly aimed at complete films or films that appear to be complete. The magic word "reconstruction" is ideal to attract public attention. However, due to the actual state of the sources, reconstructions can only be seen as new constructions, as post-creations. They often produce something that has never been shown in this form and has never been seen by a historical audience.

8. Advice on Public Musicology and Silent Film Research

— *What advice would you give to researchers interested in pursuing public-facing projects in musicology? How can they ensure their work resonates with audiences outside academia?*

This is an aspect that has long been neglected: in the past, it was thought that it was enough to give a lecture at the end of a research project in order to speak of public dissemination. Today, we know that specific professionals are needed. And we need to think about their presence from the very beginning, from the conception phase of a research project.

The design of a research project is inextricably linked to the planning of communication strategies: aspects that were once relegated to commercial marketing, and therefore viewed with suspicion, can now, within certain limits, be included in the public dissemination strategies of scientific research: let's think of the creation of a logo, a dedicated website, the appropriate use of social media, interviews with the press, the production of posters, initiatives aimed at the public. All this, I repeat, is not just an empty promotional strategy, but a useful moment of self-reflection: an exercise in clarifying language, in controlling the methods and objectives of scientific research. The imperative of all didactics also applies to the researcher: One does not really know something if he (or she) cannot communicate it to someone else, even in the

simplest terms. And in order to communicate it properly, one must first reflect on how learning processes work: that is to say that communication requires highly specialized metacognitive skills. Let's consider this simple evidence: the most effective teachers and educators are not necessarily the most learned, but the best communicators.

Indeed, musicology, like music itself, cannot live in a vacuum - it thrives when it is shared, challenged and celebrated beyond the academy. Engaging with the public is not merely promotional; it serves as an exercise in clarity and self-reflection. Public dissemination is as important as research itself.

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