

Organology and material culture

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Organology and Material Culture

FLORA DENNIS

Many recent and varied writings about “material culture” have one thing in common: the term’s definition and associated methodological approach will depend on the writer’s disciplinary context. For some writers, material culture means things, artefacts, objects. For others, the definition encompasses those objects’ environments, relationships, and role in fostering the circulation of knowledge: “the things with which people interacted, the spaces in which they did so, the social relationships which cluster around their associations . . . and the way knowledge travels around those circuits of connection.” Some go even further to embrace “the large compass of materiality, the ephemeral, the imaginary, the biological and the theoretical; all that which would have been external to the simple definition of an artefact.”²¹ Where does that leave us when we want to think about material culture studies in relation to musical instruments?

This range of meanings reflects the multiple origins of this wayward discipline (if indeed it can be termed a discipline), which lie in the fields of archaeology, social anthropology, and the world of museums in the early twentieth century. In the absence of a written record of historically or geographically distant cultures, scholars used objects as primary sources from which to understand how societies functioned, their behaviors, and beliefs. As the interest in “history from below” gained momentum in the 1960s, historians faced a similar dearth of written sources that spoke of the experiences of non-elites, and also turned to objects, fuelling a set of debates about the consumption of material goods and the origins of consumer society.²² More recently, this interest in consumption has taken on global magnitude, investigating the production, consump-

21. Daniel Miller, *Materiality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005): 4.

22. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Penguin, 1963); F. Braudel, *Civilisation Matérielle et Capitalisme*, 3 vols. (Paris: Armand Colin, 1967); John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); Richard Goldthwaite, *Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy, 1500–1600* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Daniel Roche, *Histoire des choses banales: naissance de la consommation dans les sociétés traditionnelles (XVIIe–XIXe siècles)* (Paris: Fayard, 1997).

tion and distribution of goods in Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East, and tracing the exchange of commodities from pepper, porcelain, and silk to gold, tulips, and cochineal, between these lands and Europe.²³ “History from below” also shifted attention from momentous political events or ceremonial celebrations to the everyday, another arena in which objects were able to play a leading role.²⁴ The potency of everyday objects to reveal aspects of a culture and society has been exploited particularly effectively in living museums, where they are not only displayed in context, but actually have been used.²⁵

Material culture studies seek to understand the meanings that objects possess and once possessed, for those who made them, owned them, gave, stole or borrowed them, used them, broke them, or threw them away.²⁶ This meaning can be attributed in different ways and understood on different levels, but it usually requires a consideration of the relationships between material objects and people. Here, material culture is not viewed as a passive expression of human interests; it is understood actively to shape beliefs, knowledge and behavior: to possess agency.

Much in material culture studies is more than familiar to anyone interested in musical instruments of the past. Here too, we face a dearth of full, explanatory written records, and so the instruments themselves become in many cases the most eloquent sources about the materials and techniques employed to make them, how they worked, how they sounded. Close analysis of instruments—measuring, weighing, handling, taking to pieces, x-raying, using dendrochronology—tells us things that few other sources can match.

23. Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Suraiya Faroqhi, “Moving Goods Around and Ottomanists Too: Surveying Research on the Transfer of Material Goods in the Ottoman Empire,” *Turcica* 32 (2000): 435–66; Arnold J. Bauer, *Goods, Power, History: Latin America’s Material Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Jeremy Prestholt, *Domesticating the World: African Consumerism and the Genealogies of Globalization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

24. Roche, *Histoire des choses banales*.

25. Ann Smart Martin, “Material Things and Cultural Meanings: Notes on the Study of Early American Material Culture,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 53 (1996): 5–12.

26. Jules D. Prown, “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method,” *Wintherthur Portfolio* 17 (1982): 1–19; Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); H. Glassie, *Material Culture* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999); Dan Hicks and Mary Beaudry, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

In the introduction to a recent book, *Writing Material Culture History*, Giorgio Riello and Anne Gerritsen outline three “profound consequences for the writing of history” caused by the discipline’s deeper engagement with material culture: the primacy of the written record (traditionally top of an implicit hierarchy of historical sources) has been destabilized; the boundaries of the discipline have been redrawn, encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration with other fields; the separation between different kinds of historian—academics, curators, those working in heritage, broadcasting, and journalism—has been challenged.²⁷ I will return to these profound consequences at the end of my paper, after outlining how I have found material culture approaches useful in my own work.

A Wider Range of Sources

I studied music as an undergraduate, completed a PhD in historical musicology, worked for six years as an exhibition curator and post-doctoral researcher at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and am now based in a university department of art history, teaching the decorative arts and material culture of early modern Italy, and museum studies. Material culture has transformed my approach to the history of music. Riello and Gerritsen write that material culture has prompted historians to ask new questions, and led them to new themes.²⁸ My current research (the subject of a monograph I am now completing) focuses on amateur music-making in the homes of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy. With only scarce, scattered documentary evidence for what musical enthusiasts played at home, and how, I shifted the focus of my investigations from conventional musicological sources to a wider range of archival, literary, visual and, most importantly, material sources. These have allowed me to trace by other means the rise in amateur activity long assumed for this period, but with little evidence. These sources have enabled me to probe more deeply into the social and cultural meanings of music making in the home, to understand their effects on domestic visual and material culture, and in turn, to see how material objects that we might not usually consider to be “musical” supported, or even actively

27. Giorgio Riello and Anne Gerritsen, eds., *Writing Material Culture History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015): 4.

28. Riello and Gerritsen, *Writing Material Culture History*, 3.

encouraged, musical performances.²⁹ They have allowed me to show that scholars have focused on only a narrow range of musical protagonists, in terms of social status, age and gender. This has enabled me to argue that music's significance and cultural meaning in everyday life must be re-evaluated for this period.

Musical instruments are themselves complex material objects. They represent technological innovations and refinements. Their manufacturing processes demanded considerable technical knowledge and skills, not always available locally (for example, the Bavarian lute-makers who started to establish workshops in early sixteenth-century Italy). Their materials sometimes required access to international trade networks (for ivory, ebony, or exotic hardwoods).³⁰ Instruments were themselves commodities, traded across Europe (such as Venetian lutes recorded entering sixteenth-century London on cargo ships).³¹ They were presented as diplomatic gifts (for example, a harpsichord with mother of pearl decoration sent by the Venetians to the Sultana in Constantinople in 1593), pawned when times were hard, and abandoned in attics long after they ceased to work.³²

One of the richest lines of enquiry for me has been investigating musical instruments within their material environments. These environments obviously influenced the sounds instruments produced: coffered wooden ceilings, polished terrazzo floors, the presence or absence of textile hangings—all created different acoustic effects. But these environments also constituted material landscapes (understood by some as interconnected ecologies), in which instruments enjoyed different relationships with other furniture and furnishings; relationships that

29. Flora Dennis, "Music," in *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Flora Dennis and Marta Ajmar-Wollheim (London: V&A Publications, 2006): 228–43; Flora Dennis, "Scattered Knives and Dismembered Song: Cutlery, Music and the Rituals of Dining," *Renaissance Studies* 24 (2010): 156–84; Flora Dennis, "Resurrecting Forgotten Sound: Fans and Handbells in Early Modern Italy," in *Everyday Objects: Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture and Its Meanings*, ed. Catherine Richardson and Tara Hamling (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2010): 191–209.

30. L. Cervelli, "Brevi note sui liuati tedeschi attivi in Italia del sec. XVI al XVIII," *Analecta Musicologica* 5 (1968): 299–337; R. Bletschacher, *Die Lauten- und Geigenmacher des Füssener Landes* (Hofheim am Taunus: F. Hofmeister, 1978).

31. John M. Ward, "A Dowland Miscellany," *Journal of the Lute Society of America* 10 (1977): 116.

32. Luigi-Francesco Valdrighi, *Nomocheliurgografia* (Modena: Coi tipi della Società tipografica, 1884): 272.

could be physical, visual, practical, or conceptual.³³ Material culture's bridging of disciplinary thresholds encourages us to consider together objects that historically have been studied separately—paintings by art historians, cutlery by metalwork experts, tables by furniture specialists, musical instruments by a range of specialists (musicologists, organologists, makers and conservators, or performers, who need no introduction in this context). Understanding these connections and how they were forged enables us to go some way towards teasing out the meanings of musical instruments as material objects. It also creates what have been termed “assemblages”: new collective identities that “increase their agency by being interwoven with other objects and materials.”³⁴

Instruments in Relation to Other Objects

Whether or not they were in use, musical instruments implicated other kinds of objects on a practical, functional level. Harpsichords and virginals rested on tables, trestles, or chests, while people sat on stools or benches or clustered around tables to play, sing or listen. The 1585 inventory of the Veronese Accademia Filarmonica includes not only the collections of instruments and books used by its members, for which it is still renowned, but a “round walnut table for playing and singing” with eight small stands and, evoking the materiality of the Accademia's public performances, a number of “women's chairs”—sixty-three good, five broken.³⁵ The effects of musical activity on objects in the material landscape were speculated on in contemporary texts. “As for the Pavan and gagliarda,” admonished a humanist-reformer bishop of Loreto in 1549, let these two dances “be as vivacious as they can so that even the very benches, chairs, and vases start to dance.”³⁶

33. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010); Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); also discussed in: Erin Campbell, “Listening to Objects: An Ecological Approach to the Decorative Arts,” *Journal of Art Historiography* 11 (2014): 13.

34. Campbell, “Listening to Objects: An Ecological Approach to the Decorative Arts,” 14; Mimi Hellman, “Object Lessons: French Decorative Art as a Model for Interdisciplinarity,” in *The Interdisciplinary Century: Tensions and Convergences in Eighteenth-Century Art, History and Literature*, ed. Julia V. Douthwaite and Mary Vidal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005): 60–76.

35. Giuseppe Turrini, *L'Accademia Filarmonica di Verona dalla fondazione (maggio 1543) al 1600 e il suo patrimonio musicale antico* (Verona: La tipografia Veronese, 1941): 93.

36. Caroline M. Cunningham, “Ensemble Dances in Early Sixteenth-Century Italy: Relationships with Villotte and Franco-Flemish Dancerics,” *Musica Disciplina* 34 (1980): 159.

Materials, techniques, and vocabularies of ornament were shared between instruments and other kinds of objects. Investigating these connections enables us to speculate about collaboration across workshops specialising in different craft techniques, as well as taste, style, and instruments' roles as investments and status symbols in this period. The same geometric star pattern of inlaid ivory, ebony, walnut and yew that appears on the body of a mid-sixteenth century Max Unverdorben lute in the V&A can be found on the curved lid of a contemporary Italian box in the same collection. The elegant arabesques adorning the Venetian instrument-maker Giovanni Antonio Baffo's harpsichords and virginals also appear on a range of domestic objects made in Venice at the same time—boxes, mirror frames, and decorative shields—whose fashionable decoration echoed the book bindings imported into Italy from the Islamic world. The tooled, gilded, and painted leather case of a sixteenth-century Venetian harpsichord now in the collections of the Castello Sforzesco in Milan would have echoed the leather wall hangings popular in Venice at the time, the effects of their brilliant, shimmering surfaces heightened when seen by candlelight.

The imagery found on instruments and the ways in which it was viewed created parallels with other kinds of objects. Chests produced to commemorate marriages in Italy during this period, known as *cassoni*, often had reclining nude figures painted on their inner lids, intended as erotic imagery to inspire procreation. The naked Venus painted on the inner lid of the case of the Alessandro Trasuntino 1531 harpsichord now in the Royal College of Music echoes not only the iconography of *cassoni*, but also the dynamic and sensual experience of lifting the chest's lid to reveal the hidden imagery within.³⁷ That the presence and location of this nude figure wasn't exceptional to this instrument is suggested by the inclusion of a similarly decorated instrument in a contemporary engraving depicting Venetian festivities.

Musical instruments did not just exist in space, animated by (and themselves animating) relationships with people and other objects. Instruments enjoyed conceptual relationships with other material objects, which allow us to draw broader conclusions about their status within the panoply of contemporary goods and in society. In my research, I found that instruments were owned within a much wider social

37. Flora Dennis, "Unlocking the Gates of Chastity: Music and the Erotic in the Domestic Sphere in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Italy," in *The Erotic Cultures of Early Modern Italy* (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2010): 227–45.

spectrum than had been previously appreciated by the field. But beyond physical ownership, I also discovered that cultural awareness and perceptions of musical instruments changed during this period, influencing how they were represented and where, reflecting changes in their significance and meaning.³⁸ In books of riddles published in the early sixteenth century, church bells and bagpipes are the only “musical instruments” to appear as puzzles, but by the late 1500s lutes, harpsichords, flutes, the *lira da braccio*, and even the *lira*’s bow are featured, alongside beds, brushes, shirts, ladles, and cooking pots.³⁹ On printed paper board games, instruments came to be depicted beside candlesticks, scissors, jugs, and hats: a late sixteenth-century domestic gambling game known as the *biribissi* shows violins, a drum, and a guitar; and an early seventeenth-century game in which dice were thrown to tell fortunes includes a violin, drum, and lute.⁴⁰ Instruments had entered the repertory of typical domestic goods—even if they were not universally owned, they were apparently universally recognized.

In a period in which everyday exposure to musical instruments had increased significantly, they were being represented, conceptualized, and “objectified” in changing ways. Depictions of instruments appeared on objects themselves. Lutes, viols, and wind instruments are shown next to mortars and pestles, inkwells, and shears on the rims of ceramic dishes and the surfaces of drug jars. Such musical imagery was found on knife handles, the lace borders of shirt cuffs, tablecloths, and handkerchiefs, and on printed paper fans. Unexpected encounters with them as forms of visual ornament tell us about how they became objects of representational fascination with symbolic meaning in their own right—not just appearing as attributes in the hands of human agents—as they gained prominence within the material landscape of the home.

To return to Daniel Miller’s broad definition that I quoted at the start of this paper, material culture encompasses “the ephemeral, the imaginary, the biological and the theoretical.” It opens the gates, and gives equal weight, to all forms of historical record. It goes beyond isolated analysis to consider the richness of contexts—social, physical, visual,

38. Something previously addressed in the case of France, but not Italy: Carla Zecher, *Sounding Objects: Musical Instruments, Poetry and Art in Renaissance France* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

39. Anonymous, *Indovinelli, riboboli, passerotti, et farfalloni, c. 16th century*.

40. A. Ghisi, *Il nobile et piacevole gioco, intitolato il passatempo*. (Venice, 1620).

material—tracing the myriad ways in which objects were implicated and entangled within them.

I would like to end by returning to Riello and Gerritsen's points about how they saw material culture studies as transforming the discipline of history. Might they bring similar benefits to organology? Yes. I can see no reason why material culture studies' potential to act as an umbrella, under which to unify diverse specialists with common interests, should not be effective here too. We can look to precedents in the field of textile and dress history. Recent projects funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council and European funding bodies have brought together formally people studying historical textiles and dress from different perspectives, to collaborate in ways that combine the scholarly and the practical to create new understanding.⁴¹ Academics working on textiles and dress from archival sources, curators and conservators looking after historical collections, makers and designers crafting garments today using historical techniques—all met to discuss overarching themes, study surviving objects, and create modern versions of them together.

As the collaborative endeavors that characterized twentieth-century early-music revivals have demonstrated, the potential benefits from combining historical research with practical investigation are even greater for musical instruments. Today's makers, conservators, performers, and scholarly researchers offer highly developed, specialist knowledge and complementary expertise that, together, would allow us to understand fully music's rich material past.

41. For example: "Early Modern Dress and Textiles," Early Modern Dress and Textiles, accessed October 19, 2017, <http://www.earlymoderndressandtextiles.ac.uk/>; "Fashioning the Early Modern," accessed October 19, 2017, <http://www.fashioningtheearlymodern.ac.uk/>.