jur: What is musicology?

Brown: In its largest definition it means any kind of scholarly investigation of music. Generally, it is used to mean historical musicology. The pieces, the people, the instruments, the kinds of concerts, etc.

jur: So what does that mean in practical terms?

Brown: Well, we take evidence, which can be pieces of music or historical data and draw conclusions. We also run experiments, although not as controlled as one would do in a lab. We also have hypotheses and we test them. The problem is that the data can be hard to get.

jur: How did you come to this field?

Brown: Well this is sort of an unusual story. I actually decided I wanted to be a musicologist when I was 14 years old. Most people don’t even know what it is at that age. But I was in social studies class in high school and when we went around and talked about what our parents do, one of the kid’s father was a musicologist. Everybody said, “What’s that?” After he explained what it was I said, “Well that’s for me!” I am interested in music, history, different cultures, art, dance, theatre and all these other activities that intersect with music. That’s what I decided to do and I haven’t wavered since I was 14.

jur: How long have you been teaching at the University of Rochester and what sort of courses do you teach?

Brown: This is my third year. We have a department of 6 full time faculty here. Two history/musicology, two theory, and two conductors. I am one of the history people and we divide the material into two sections. [I cover] from ancient Greece to the middle of the 18th century and my colleague [takes it] from there to the present. That’s one way we divide it, but I do venture outside that territory. I am thinking of offering a Mozart course that would obviously go past the mid 18th century. I am doing an opera course at the moment that is taking me into the 20th century. So it depends on the repertoire.

jur: What do you focus on within musicology?

Brown: What I work on is opera in Italy in the 17th century. More specifically, [I concentrate on] Venetian operas for the fifty years in the middle of the century.

jur: What are some of the methodologies you use and some of the problems you encounter?

Brown: Say you want to study a period of music history. You would generally start by going to the library and checking out some CDs and musical scores so you can follow along with what you are listening to. The trouble is that the 17th century hasn’t been studied that well. So there are very few recordings, and even fewer musical editions. That means we need to avail ourselves [of] primary sources. Another problem is that our recordings and editions often tell us more about what we [as modern people] want, what our traditions of musical performance and understanding are, rather than that of the people of the historical period that you are looking at.

So if I want to study how opera was composed, performed, and understood by audiences in this period, we have a certain problem. One, we have no audio traditions and no recordings from this period. We also don’t have instruments since it was a vocal music. So what we have to look at it are written documents, the text of the operas. The words that are sung are usually written down in a book called a libretto. And the music was never printed in this period. It was always written out by hand in a manuscript, of which very few survived.

Another problem is that in any century, particularly in the 17th century, operas were never performed the same way twice. Ofentimes directors will make cuts [and give new] arias to different characters. One thing that I think makes this an interesting period to study is how fluid the text of the opera was; the directors were always making changes to adapt it to a particular cost, budget, or a particular audience. They would make cuts and changes, write new music, borrow music from other operas, and
create a cut and paste thing. So every time it was produced in a new city, there would be a new cast and director and so the process would happen all over again. So [after] fifty years, the opera is going to look different from the way the composer wrote it. But that fluidity is what interests me.

[An ever-present question in musicology] is how do we reconstruct that process from the documents that we have, which are few. And they are mostly neat copies that were made years later that cover up all the machinations that went on backstage. It’s similar to the way a student might write a term paper. One would give the paper to their teacher, then the teacher would give it back with corrections and suggestions. It was this type of feedback system that composers had with their performers and audiences. And imagine doing this without the use of a typewriter or computer. Everything was written out by hand, and the paper was really expensive. So this paper would be full of corrections and additions, it would be a real mess. This is what would be interesting to study, but most of these things are lost. What we have is a neat copy that a scribe wrote out years later, a person who would have no familiarity with the music at all but was just copying. Then those copies are put into libraries and people regard them as the way the operas were originally written.

jur: So what sort of skills would someone need to do this type of work?

Brown: Definitely language skills. Italian, but archaic, poetic Italian. I’m not so good at conversing with [modern] shopkeepers. Also, music theory to be able to know what the document is telling you and be able to see errors, basically to be able to make musical sense of the document.

You have to have detective skills. To me this is the most interesting thing about the kind of research I do. You have to be able to say, “Hmmm, something doesn’t sound right here…” Then you develop various ways of attacking the problem.

It’s similar to working on a legal case in many ways.

jur: Why do you feel this type of research is important?

Brown: What started me off is that the music is beautiful. When I heard it in graduate school, I said why is there a whole century’s worth of pieces that are languishing, that people aren’t listening to. There is much more interest in it, in the past few decades, but there is still a lot of un-mined territory out there.

But it also tells about the culture of other times: what they were doing, thinking, and what sounds were in their ears.

We tend to think that a composer has control over his/her artwork. But what does it mean if these other people are making changes to it and introducing other composer’s music into it? What did people of the time think of this process?

jur: How do undergraduates get involved in this?

Brown: The University of Rochester’s undergraduate music major program is one of the best programs in the country for preparing students for graduate work in musicology and theory. Well in my course, Ancient Greeks to Bach, I try to introduce musicology to the students. I present it to them by showing them some evidence from the past and this is what some scholars have thought about it, what do you think about it? I try to give them some intellectual puzzles and have them think look at it in different ways.

I also have the students do some of their own type of primary research, for example I took them to Saint Ann’s church and had them listen to real time music in a religious context. I also take them to Sibley library and have them look at primary documents from the middle ages and the renaissance.

jur: So what is in your CD player now?

Brown: Stuff for teaching class today! But for fun, different things for different activities. Anything from renaissance to the blues. An eclectic taste.

jur: Dr. Brown, thank you for your time.

Brown: You’re welcome.

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**a.** Aurograph manuscript of Francesco Cavalli’s opera *L’Oristeo* showing revisions. **b.** Liberetto of Francesco Pallaicino’s opera *Vespasiano* (1678).