Material Cultures of Music Notation brings together a collection of essays that explore a fundamental question in the current landscape of musicology: how can writing and reading music be understood as concrete, material practices in a wider cultural context? Drawing on interdisciplinary approaches from musicology, media studies, performance studies, and more, the chapters in this volume offer a wide array of new perspectives that foreground the materiality of music notation. From digital scores to the transmission of manuscripts in the Middle Ages, the volume deliberately disrupts boundaries of discipline, historical period, genre, and tradition, by approaching notation’s materiality through four key interrelated themes: knowledge, the body, social relations, and technology. Together, the chapters capture vital new work in an essential emerging area of scholarship.

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Music and Material Culture provides a new platform for methodological innovations in research on the relationship between music and its objects. In a sense, musicology has always dealt with material culture; the study of manuscripts, print sources, instruments, and other physical media associated with the production and reception of music is central to its understanding. Recent scholarship within the humanities has increasingly shifted its focus onto the objects themselves and there is now a particular need for musicology to be part of this broader ‘material turn’. A growing reliance on digital and online media as sources for the creation and consumption of music is changing the way we experience music by increasingly divorcing it from tangible matter. This is rejuvenating discussions of our relationship with music’s objects and the importance of such objects both as a means of understanding past cultures and negotiating current needs and social practices. Broadly interdisciplinary in nature, this series seeks to examine critically the materiality of music and its artefacts as an explicit part of culture rather than simply an accepted means of music-making. Proposals are welcomed on the material culture of music from any period and genre, particularly on topics within the fields of cultural theory, source studies, organology, ritual, anthropology, collecting, archiving, media archaeology, new media, and aesthetics.

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Music is scores, harpsichords, and stadiums; music is *kora* players, laptop composers, and jazz club patrons; music is a communication from the ancestors, or a message from a (more often than not) dead composer, as if it were privately transmitted to a listener’s deepest, most subjective self. Each of these alternatives is equally unsatisfying, and one obvious reason is that music cuts across these categories and involves multiple interactions between the material and the immaterial, the objective and the subjective. In short, music is all of the above.

Notation has played a key role in music history, the narrative dimension of the bundle of approaches that gradually congealed into the modern discipline of musicology or (as many nowadays prefer to call it) music studies. Throughout its existence the most basic cultural work undertaken by music history has been communal self-fashioning: as the ideas first of ‘Europe’ and later of ‘the West’ developed, music served as a powerful means for defining an ‘Us’ generally figured as elite, white, and male in opposition to a ‘Them’ figured as non-elite, non-white, and non-male. At the core of the colonialist ideology within which both music history and modernity developed was a neo-Darwinian world view: different races were placed at different stages of human cultural evolution, and history became a grand narrative of progress that measured everything against the presumed perfection of modern Western civilisation. And notation was central to this worldview.

In music, as more generally, writing was taken to be a key criterion of cultural advancement: not only were literate societies considered more advanced than non-literate ones, but there were degrees of literacy. You can see this in the way the late nineteenth-century monk and musicologist Dom André Mocquereau saw neumes. For him, the lack of precision in their specification of intervals was a sign of imperfection, an indication of the many steps that would have to be taken before notation could arrive at ‘the perfect expression of a musical scale of sounds’ (quoted in Rankin 2011, 115)—and the task of music history was to chart those steps, to tell the story of how we became Us. A hundred years later, you can see it in the music editor Kurt Stone’s international project to draw together previous notational advances into a comprehensive, unified system that would take its place among the institutions of the post-1945 world order; in one of the chapters that follow, Giulia Accornero underlines the Hegelian framing of Stone’s approach when she draws a comparison between his *Index of New Musical Notation* and Francis Fukuyama’s ‘end of history’. But the most recent and perhaps most monumental invocation of notation as the key distinction between a musical Them and Us is Richard Taruskin’s *Oxford History of Western Music* (Taruskin 2005), which styled itself as a history of literate music, and in so doing—in Susan McClary’s (2006, 412) words—set to one side ‘the fact that the music that has mattered most to Western people since the early 1900s has been that produced
or deeply influenced by African Americans’. Her review article was entitled ‘The world according to Taruskin’, but it might as well have been called ‘Just who is Us?’

At the same time, the traditional historical treatment of musical notation has been oddly uneven. Notation in its material form has long been a major focus of music-historical research, but first and foremost in relation to premodern, and in particular medieval, music. This is because there was a period during which the history of music—at least the music that gets into the history books—was in an unusually literal sense a history of its notation. In essence the notational developments in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Europe, whose social dimension David Maw explores in his chapter, made it possible to write, and hence think, rhythms that couldn’t previously be written: that in turn enabled the creation of intricate music conceived not in real time but through prolonged consideration and design, so aligning it with poetry and the other prestigious arts of fourteenth-century courtly society. The notational changes that defined the *ars nova* represented not so much a thinking outside the box as a wholesale rethinking of the box itself. But thereafter notation never quite recovers its centrality in the history books. It fades gradually, and by the time you get to the generation of composers born in 1685 it seems that notation is no longer a major topic in its own right. It figures rather as a resource, a semiotic technology working behind the scenes that occasionally, like all technology, requires a bit of attention in order that it can continue to do more or less the same job, sometimes with a few enhancements. It is as if, having achieved the perfection that Mocquereau celebrated, notation became transparent, a neutral vehicle for music now understood in the spiritually elevated terms of the ‘purely musical’. Only in the avant-garde and experimental traditions after 1945 did it move closer to stage centre, but by that time the stage was rapidly shrinking.

The ‘New’ musicology of the 1980s–90s toppled the old idea of the ‘purely musical’, along with the autonomous and transcendent musical work. But in retrospect the ‘New’ musicology’s aesthetic ideology critique didn’t go deep enough. For one thing, while the idea of performativity entered musicology in relation to rhetoric, discourse, and the construction of meaning, ‘New’ musicological ideology critique didn’t really engage the act of musical performance as a significant dimension of the construction of meaning—at least not until 2004, when Carolyn Abbate belatedly engaged with the work of interdisciplinary performance theorists such as Peggy Phelan (Abbate 2004). In other words, the ‘New’ musicology did not seriously trouble old ideas of performance as in essence a transparent and neutral representation of the score, or indeed of the score as in essence a transparent and neutral representation of ‘the music itself’. The scare quotes that became obligatory had the effect of quarantining the idea, and I am not sure that ‘New’ musicologists ever properly rethought it. Moreover, the hierarchy of entailment between score, performance, and ‘music itself’, each linked to the next through fixed relationships of transparency and neutrality, carried an echo of the colonial hierarchy of race upon which music history had been built, betraying some of the same deeply seated patterns of thought. At all events, the net result was that, at the turn of the present century, neither notations nor their sonic realisation figured significantly in the discipline’s otherwise reformed and enlarged agenda. They were taken for granted.

How did this deficit in the ‘New’ musicology emerge as a site for new thinking? I suspect many musicologists of my generation had a growing sense that something was wrong with the way they had learned to think but had trouble putting their finger on it. That, at any rate, was my experience. Accornero quotes György Ligeti on the desirability of maximising the congruity between notational code and sonic experience, and that precisely locates the conceptual frame with which I approached my doctoral research in the late 1970s. My aim
was to develop analytical approaches that would more faithfully—more transparently—reflect sonic experience than the often dogmatic and inflexible approaches on offer at the time. The value of such an aim seemed self-evident, and I saw it as in some way democratic, attempting to separate the experience of music from the elitist, intellectualising clutter that had accumulated around it, and so doing justice to the perceptions of ordinary people—such as people who didn’t have PhDs in musicology. But looking back on it I can see that all this was based on a taken-for-granted assumption that the job of musical scores is in some literal, one-to-one sense to represent musical structures—an idea that Floris Schuiling (2019, 431) has recently deconstructed: ‘[P]erhaps we can seek the answer to the question of notation’s musicality not in its representation of musical structures’, he writes, ‘but in its mediation of the social and creative agency of musicians’. Nobody was talking that way in the late 1970s.

The idea of a code that is maximally congruent with experienced reality is at best problematic. It encourages you to think of notation not as a form of communication, something that like all semiosis is inherently social and relational, but rather as a form of specification: it is an inherently dehumanising way of thinking about music that culminates in the idea—frequently encountered during the last century—that electroacoustic music will solve the problem by eliminating the performer, who is figured as a source of undesirable noise (Accornero’s word). Indeed this whole way of thinking epitomises a general tendency of twentieth-century modernism to create abstract models of concrete reality, and then to treat the model as if it were a privileged form of reality, deriving the concrete from the abstract rather than the other way round. That is what Christopher Hasty (2012, 14) was referring to when he accused analysts of serial music of ‘an illicit substitution of the partiality of abstraction for the whole of the concrete’—which in practical terms meant focussing on musical structure and ignoring everything else. I certainly hadn’t figured all that out by the time I was halfway through my doctoral funding, but I did realise I was getting nowhere, and so I turned my project upside down. The research question now became why it was that cultural representations of music—particularly but not just in the Western tradition—diverged so much from how people experienced it and what significance these patterns of divergence might have in the operation of musical cultures.

I finished my thesis (Cook 1989), though my sense that something was wrong continued; by the 1990s I was writing notes to myself about music as a congeries of autonomous agents, without having any very clear sense of what I meant by it. Already in my thesis, however, I was seeing notations in a different light: as one of the major dimensions through which imagining, thinking, or thinking about music is differently conditioned in different cultures of music production and reception—different notation cultures, to borrow Schuiling’s (2019) felicitous term. I was no longer approaching notations and the analytical representations based on them in terms of what they lacked, which is how Mocquereau approached neumes. Instead I was seeing them in terms of what they afforded, the added value they created—in other words the particular, culturally specific ways in which they lead you to imagine, conceive, or hear sound as music. And seen that way, notations are much closer to the centre of musical change than appears from the history books, and what is important is not just the way they are but the way they are used: the generally virtuous (but occasionally vicious) circle of notation and notation-based analytical representation privileges certain modes of making or experiencing sound, which in turn feed back into the conditioning of notations, and so on.1 Seen this way, notations are anything but transparent or neutral: they are agents in processes of musical change. But if we are to see them this way, then we need to expand the concept of notation beyond its narrow, history-book meaning.
There are a number of aspects to this. No longer seen as symbolic condensations of musical works—or as specification of abstract structure—notations are not just a form of communication: they are material artefacts that have been created, and have to be understood, in specific contexts of use. Again, neumes provide an obvious example. Mocquereau approached them from within the framework of notational modernism, the key premise of which is that you design music by operating on its representation (remember what I said about deriving the reality from the model): that is the context within which he saw them as primitive and inadequate. By contrast, today’s chant scholars, such as Leo Treitler (1974; 1982) and Susan Rankin (Rankin 2011; 2018), situate them within the context of a long-standing culture of memory that by the tenth century was proving inadequate to growing ecclesiastical demands for the liturgically correct delivery of chant. Neumes were not seen as offering an alternative to oral tradition: rather they were supplements, extending memory in the sense of Andy Clark’s (2008) extended mind thesis. In her chapter Lara Pearson points out that notation fulfils a similar role in Carnatic music, and the same might be said of many musical cultures both within and beyond the historical West.

But it goes further than that. So far I have assumed that notations are visible scripts, markings on vellum or paper or computer displays. But when notations are thought of as agents of musical change or difference, they become enmeshed with other musical categories. Returning for a moment to my doctoral project, the ways in which notations afford particular ways of imagining or conceptualising music are closely paralleled by the affordances of the instruments that equally define cultures of music; in some borderline cases notation and instrument become inseparable (music boxes, player pianos). But the larger point is that, to cite the most obvious example, staff notation and keyboard instruments are built on a common premise: that just as matter is made up of atoms, so music is made up of notes. It’s so familiar—so obvious—as to sound a bit stupid when put like that, but no such premise is inherent in neumes (where a single sign references a complete sonic gesture, a single entity corresponding to what in staff notation would be a series of independent decision points). Nor is it built into the physiology of the voice. Even the oboe does not correlate as closely with staff notation as the piano, because it affords the sounding of a continuous, inflected stream of sound rather than the keyboard’s series of hits, with each hit corresponding to a dot on the page. In short, staff notation and keyboard instruments are both optimised for a common mediation of sound, or—borrowing a word equally from philosophy and information technology—a common ontology. They are interlocking parts of the same notation culture, a culture in which notation spreads out from the materiality of musical text into technologies of sound production, patterns of embodied engagement with instruments, social relationships, and practices of listening.

This resonates with Pearson’s account of teaching and learning practices in Carnatic music, where notation, instrumental performance, vocalisation, and physical gesture work together, interlocking with one another through their shared ontology. But Pearson adds a twist to the idea when she writes that ‘notation … acts as a nexus for an array of musical, bodily, affective, and social connections’. She is talking about how a scrap of handwritten notation from one’s teacher can summon up the memories that maintain teacher-pupil lineages in Carnatic music, but her formulation makes equal sense when applied much more broadly. A nexus is a central node in a network of connectivity, and the role of a notation is to coordinate relationships within a wider ecology of musicking. The idea of music being a networked system of interacting nodes has gained considerable traction in recent years, whether in the form of Benjamin Brinner’s (1995) network model of performance interaction, Bruno Latour’s (2005) networks of human and nonhuman
agents, or Manuel DeLanda’s (2019) heterogeneous assemblages: it’s a way of seeing anything from the kind of art worlds described by Howard Becker (2008), in which the box office manager takes her rightful place alongside the composer, to collective jazz improvisation.

For Keith Sawyer (2003), each improviser is a node—Sawyer doesn’t distinguish the functions of different ensemble members—and the shared representation that unfolds in real time as a performance proceeds exists only in the players’ heads. By contrast, in scored music (say a classical string quartet) the notation pre-exists the performance and functions as a common reference point for musicians who are at the same time responding to one another through the media of sound and sight: the notation is acting not just as a node but as a nexus for an array of musical, bodily, affective, and social connections. And Schuiling makes the point still more expansively: notation, he says, ‘mobilizes and renders compatible various musicians, instruments, playing techniques, acoustic measurements and music theories ranging from the speculative to the empirical. Scores work not because of their representation of sounding music, but because they construct relations that allow music to sound’ (Schuiling 2019, 435).

You don’t of course need to think of music in terms of network theory in order to recognise the constitutive role of notation, understood in this broad sense, in the formation of cultures of music. But seeing notations this way emphasises the extent to which they do not so much specify a musical product as participate in dynamic interaction with the other dimensions of a given musical ecology. That is what, in his chapter, Joseph Kaminski is getting at when he describes notation as ‘more than a visual representation of sound’, adding that it is rather ‘an emic equivalent to sound: it mediates culture as musicians read and share it to make sound’. In 2011 Georgina Born defined music as ‘an extraordinarily diffuse kind of cultural object: an aggregation of sonic, social, corporeal, discursive, visual, technological mediations—a musical assemblage’ (Born 2011, 377). All these things collectively are the music—all of the above with a vengeance—and each of them references, or can stand in for, the others. To put it another way, there are entailments between the different dimensions of music’s being, and that is why a conception of notation that liberates it from the fixed hierarchies of traditional musicological thinking can yield so many insights into the varied dimensions of music’s multiple ontology. It is also why developing these insights draws on so many distinct, if related, disciplinary areas: in their Introduction, the editors refer to media studies, performance studies, material culture, art history, science and technology studies, and sensory studies.

This book, then, offers a series of rich and diverse perspectives, encompassing—and this is not a complete list—notations as artefacts of material culture that prompt religious meditation independently of their capacity for sonic realisation, or that reveal the varied dynamics of early modern socialities; notations as systems of codification and aids to listening whose significance intersects with Cold War politics; notations as codes that circulate via anything from paper napkins to WeChat messages and contribute to the construction of shared diasporic identity; notation as a dimension of avant-garde performance practice in which instruments and scores reverse their roles; notation as reconstructed in terms of American Sign Language in such a way as to facilitate border crossing between the experiences of hearing and Deaf people; notation as a technology for erasing human imprecision only to reconstitute it as rigorously precise irregularity. Such original and compelling insights are what you may expect when you see notations as fundamental constituents of cultural change and difference in music.
Note

1 The vicious circle I have in mind is the highly intellectualised avant-garde culture of the 1960s and 1970s, one brand of which—integral serialism—Daniel Leech-Wilkinson has described as a naked culture of ‘peer-group esteem’ (Leech-Wilkinson 2010, 52).

Bibliography


1

Introduction

Notation and/as material culture

Floris Schuiling and Emily Payne

Notation has long occupied a major position in music scholarship. Indeed, for many years it constituted the essential object of study, not only representing musical styles and practices but more broadly defining what music is. Guido Adler, writing his foundational programme for the study of music in 1885, stated that the history of music 'looks at artistic creations as such, [...] without special consideration given to the life and effect of individual artists who have participated in [their] steady development' (Mugglestone and Adler 1981, 7; emphasis added). Thus, he not only defined the existence of music in terms of separate, independently existing objects rather than as a practice or performing art, but also suggested that these objects could be understood—indeed, were better understood—without any consideration of the social and cultural life in which they were created and performed. The idea that music scholarship studies musical works as represented by notation and not the practices and processes of musical production, performance, dissemination, and reception remained a foundational assumption of musicology for a long time. Nearly a century after Adler, Carl Dahlhaus expressed more or less the same idea more succinctly: 'The concept “work”, and not “event”, is the cornerstone of music history' (Dahlhaus 1983, 4).

Since the end of the twentieth century, musicology has increasingly moved away from this work-centred perspective towards an understanding of music as a social and cultural practice. Arguments for this shift have proceeded largely from a critique of the centrality of the score in traditional music scholarship (see, among many others, Cook 2013; Goehr 2007 [1992]). However, while few scholars still consider notation to be an objective representation of music per se, this invites the question of how to conceptualise the role of musical writing, representation, and visualisation in the cultural practice of music. Both the traditional work concept and a performance-orientated music scholarship seem to locate notation outside of both music and culture. After the critique of the work concept, the ways in which writing and reading music are themselves an integral and important part of ‘musicking’ behaviour must be reconsidered (Schuiling 2019). The iconoclasm of the New Musicology thus necessitates an investigation into how notations construct—or compose—musical cultures.

Critiques of the centrality of the score in music scholarship questioned the reification or objectification implied by a work-centred musicology on the premise that music is better understood as a process than as a tangible object. However, scholars in the field of material culture studies have suggested ways of thinking about objects that do not set them apart from social and cultural processes. One might view objectification as itself a process in which questions of epistemology, cultural identity, and social values are negotiated.
(Miller 2005). Alternatively, one might consider objects as ‘actors’ that participate in our social and cultural practices (Gell 1998; Latour 2005). Yet another view would question the opposition between processes and tangible objects, arguing that knowledge, creativity, and the social are formed in the development of a ‘co-responsiveness’ between material processes of becoming (Ingold 2011). The term ‘material culture’ comes from anthropology and archaeology, where, in the course of the twentieth century, its study developed from the collection and taxonomy of objects from the past and from non-western cultures to the ‘investigation of the relationship between people and things irrespective of time and space’ (Miller and Tilley 1996, 5). The idea that there exists a reciprocal relationship between people and things has, in different ways, been a fundamental tenet of various other twentieth-century strands of scholarship, including media studies, science and technology studies, cybernetics, and ecological theories of perception—to name just a few. Over the last two decades, this perspective has been influential across the humanities and social sciences with scholars drawing on these and other fields in a movement variously labelled ‘thing theory’ (Brown 2004), ‘new materialism’ (Coole and Frost 2010; Dolphijn and Van der Tuin 2012), or, more generally, the ‘material turn’.

Reflecting this broader trend in the humanities and social sciences, a rapidly growing number of music scholars have turned their attention to the role of material objects and technologies in the construction and transmission of (musical) knowledge, culture, and creativity. In particular, there has been a renewed interest in organology, a field that until recently played a relatively minor role in these conversations. Its significance has been somewhat greater in ethnomusicology, where perhaps the earliest beginnings of a twenty-first-century organological revival can be identified. Scholars such as Veronica Doubleday (1999), Regula Qureshi (2000), and Kevin Dawe (2012 [2003]) have shown how politics, power, and identity are configured in the interplay between instruments, bodies, repertoire, and performance. More recently, the work of Eliot Bates (2012) has been influential in its focus on the active role of instruments in such processes. In the last decade, musicological reconsiderations of musical instruments have emphasised their role in politics and identity less than in the construction of musical ontologies and epistemologies (although see Ahrendt 2018; Irving 2009). In different ways, Emily Dolan (Dolan 2012; Tresch and Dolan 2013) and Roger Moseley (2016) have revealed musical instruments’ entanglements with the emergence of modern science and technology, opening up a field of inquiry into the materialist foundations of western art music. From a music-theoretical perspective, Alexander Rehding (2016a; 2016b) and Jonathan de Souza (2017) consider instruments as materialisations of knowledge and cognition, illustrating how musicians quite literally ‘think with’ their instruments, and that composition is not just an abstract arrangement of tones, but a practical intervention into this embodied relationship.

Compared to organology, the study of notation has been more central to music scholarship. Yet, it has similarly been regarded by some as exemplifying a stuffy positivism, concerned with technicalities rather than the things that ‘really matter’ about music. In his book that is viewed by some as having kindled the New Musicology in the 1980s, Joseph Kerman asserts that the seminar on notation in mid-century musicological curricula ‘focused not on music but on rather low-level problem-solving’, and that dropping this seminar from the core curriculum was a ‘first step in the liberation of musicology’ from its positivist paradigm (Kerman 1985, 46). However, as the chapters in this volume demonstrate, a total rejection of the study of notation excludes a wide range of interesting work on the reciprocity between notation and its social contexts, on its relations to musicians’ bodies and to other musical technologies, as well as work that develops a multifaceted understanding
of notation’s representation of musical structure. The materialist approach found in recent music studies, we argue, provides a way to attend to these aspects of notation without returning to the positivism of traditional music scholarship.

Yet, it should be noted that the materiality of notation is by no means a wholly new area of study. Although some scholars have argued that the recent surge in organological research constitutes a ‘new organology’ (Roda 2007; Tresch and Dolan 2013), Moseley suggests that ‘organology’s attentiveness to specific instantiations of musical culture and its concomitant suspicion of generalisations derived from sweeping narratives can be seen to have anticipated the recent material and informational turns of the (post)humanities at large’ (Moseley 2016, 90). Similarly, the attention to empirical detail in the study of notation has meant that historians of notation have always had to attend to the materiality of their subject matter. They have long been aware that the idea of a musical ‘work’ is far from absolute, insofar as scores construct the music as much as they represent it. In other words, to approach notation as a form of material culture is not a matter of breaking radically new ground but rather to recognise and attend to an aspect of notation that has long been inherent to its study. The work of Leo Treitler (1974; 1982) in particular marked a crucial shift in considering early music notations in the context of already existing practices of performance, memorisation, and transmission, as material artefacts embedded in these practices, rather than as the first steps from an ‘oral’ to a ‘literate’ culture. Whether it is through the study of notation as visual culture (Haar 1995), codicological studies of early music manuscripts (Alden 2010; Deeming and Leach, 2015; Dillon 2002; Leach 2011), or the study of music printing and the music publishing industry (Christensen 1999; Davies 2006; Loughridge 2016; Orden 2000, 2015), the materiality of notation has been both an implicit and explicit concern in historical musicology.

The same can be said, perhaps even more assuredly, about ethnomusicological studies of notation. Discussions of notation in ethnomusicology almost exclusively concern the practice of transcription, underlining the foundational distinction between oral and literate culture as well as the colonialist legacies of the field. Although this work has enabled essential reflections on the politics of notation, its relations to performance, instruments, and recording media, and its role (both positive and negative) in the construction of scholarly knowledge (Ellingson 1992a; England et al. 1964; Jairazbhoy 1977; Seeger 1958; Stanyek 2014), its aim has usually been the representation of musical structures or practice, rather than to consider the use of notation itself as the subject of ethnomusicological research. Nevertheless, there has been a minor tradition of ethnomusicological work on non-western notation, championed particularly by Mantle Hood, who saw it as a way for the western scholar to ‘kick the habit of his addiction to the Western staff’ (Hood 1971, 93). Much of this research has been concerned with Asian music (Kaufmann 1967) and it frequently includes discussions of notation in studies of musical instruments, underlining the connection between notations and instruments discussed above (e.g. Becker 1980; Berger 1969; Gulik 1940; Kaufmann 1975; Malm 1959; Wade 1976). Such studies offer important insights ranging from basic considerations of notation and performance practice to the philosophical and cosmological significance of the relation between body and instrument, as well as issues of transnational exchange and the power dynamics of colonialism. The wide variety of relations between text and performance has frequently led to reflections on the distinction between orality and literacy and its impact on the methodologies of music scholarship (Ellingson 1992b; Tokumaru and Yamaguti 1986). Since ethnomusicology has loosened its primary focus on non-western music, some scholars have embedded questions of notation in broader considerations of musical technology. Kiri Miller, for instance, after
working on the notation of Sacred Harp repertoire (Miller 2004; 2008) has frequently included insightful discussions of notation and visualisation in her work on video game music (Miller 2012; 2017).

This volume builds on such precursors and brings them into conversation with a broad range of inter- and sub-disciplinary debates. Organised into four parts, the contributions presented here approach notation as something beyond a vessel of musical ‘content’: as an object of knowledge construction, bodily and social interaction, and technological mediation. As such, it encourages an interdisciplinary approach to a topic that has been at the centre of musicology’s disciplinary identity by engaging with work from disciplines including media studies, performance studies, gender studies, material culture, art history, sensory studies, and science and technology studies. Below, we briefly discuss the significance of these four themes—epistemology, the body, social relations, and technology—in relation to notation and introduce the chapters in each respective section.

Part I: Epistemologies of notation

This section posits a fundamental question: music notation has traditionally been the object of music-analytical study, but how does notation itself mediate or construct forms of knowledge? What Kerman referred to as the ‘positivist paradigm’ of twentieth-century musicology saw notation as a (potentially) neutral vessel of pre-given musical content, so that the transcription from one notation system to another becomes a process of ‘low-level problem-solving’ as it need not consider how the notation constructs what it represents. The chapters presented here provide detailed accounts of the relations between notation and musical knowledge. Though they describe very different cases, each chapter embeds notation in a broader media-historical context and shows how questions of the representational function of notation are deeply political.

Focusing on the Index of New Musical Notation, an initiative led by Kurt Stone in 1970, Giulia Accornero (Chapter Two) provides a critical account of the ways in which musicians and theorists have tried to ‘improve’ notation to increase its universal applicability and the political considerations might underlie such attempts. Elaine Fitz Gibbon’s contribution in Chapter Three focuses on a case study of music notation being employed within a visual context: artist Hanne Darboven’s Quartett ›88‹ (1989), a ‘cataloguing’ project that combines music notation with other printed media. Fitz Gibbon examines Darboven’s use of notation and its implications for ontologies of the musical work, drawing connections between time, music, the writing of cultural history, and women’s presence therein. Taking an example of an apparently aural-centric musical practice—acousmatic composition—Patrick Valiquet (Chapter Four) investigates the epistemologies of ‘listening scores’ produced in 1970s France and Quebec. His chapter reveals—in contrast to existing phonocentric accounts—the ways in which acousmatic music has been tightly intertwined with visual representation and scrutinises the contemporary political and pedagogical motivations behind this form of mediation.

Part II: Notation and the body

As a way of making musical structures visible, notation has frequently been associated with disembodiment. An essential component of the ‘ocularcentrism’ that identifies ‘the score with what the music is’ (Cook 2004, 21) is not just the prioritisation of vision over other forms of sensory perception, but the premising of this valorisation on an understanding of
vision as a somehow ‘disembodied’ form of perception (Jay 1993, 80–81). By contrast, the volume’s second part, ‘Notation and the body’, explores how the function of notation is intrinsically connected to musicians’ bodies across different musical traditions, with three chapters that, in very different ways, engage the embodied nature of visual perception. Although it might seem that the material turn would also entail a consideration of the physical human body, the exclusion of questions of embodiment in its wake has often been noted. Tim Ingold has long argued that the concept of ‘material agency’ tends to foreclose considerations of skilled practice in our bodily engagement with the material world (Ingold 2011, 89–94). Holly Watkins and Melina Esse (Watkins and Esse 2015) similarly criticise the neglect of questions of embodiment and the physical nature of musical performance and perception in the recent musicological attention to technology. For them, such neglect risks losing sight of the intimate forms of self-knowledge that music provides, as well as the politics of bodily difference.

In Chapter Five, Chae-Lin Kim examines the work of Deaf sound artist Christine Sun Kim, whose notation incorporates conventional staff notation and signs and symbols associated with American Sign Language. Kim’s analysis reveals the qualities of hearing that are implicit in such notation and how this work challenges both the notion of reading and writing as a purely visual practice and the assumption that musical notation only serves the hearing body. Notation’s powerful role in interpersonal interaction is also a significant theme in the final two chapters of this section but in two quite different musical traditions. Tim Shephard and Sanna Raninen (Chapter Six) explore the role of music scores in paintings and prints in early sixteenth-century North Italy, showing how notations choreograph different forms of physical interaction among performers and shed light on musical participation and the notion of musical community. Beth Williamson (Chapter Seven) examines combinations of notation and visual imagery in manuscripts in order to consider what they might tell us about medieval worship as a multi-modal experience.

Part III: Notation and social relations

As already noted, the main critique of work-centred music scholarship is that notation tends to decontextualise music and sets it apart from social and cultural processes. Despite the work mentioned above, the study of notation has therefore remained a somewhat marginal concern in ethnomusicology. Especially in recent decades, when fieldwork became the defining method of the discipline, and its aims moved from ‘observing and collecting’ to ‘experiencing and understanding music’ (Titon 2008 [1997], 25), discussions of notation have become increasingly rare, suggesting a lingering suspicion that notation only serves to observe and collect, and is not a form of musicking, of ‘experiencing and understanding music’ in its own right. This suggests a further significance to the study of notation proposed in this volume. If the work-concept locates music’s existence in an ideal realm, detached from the social and material processes of music-making, to understand music as only existing in performance risks a further dematerialisation of music, making it essentially evanescent and intangible. If the study of musical performance has been an important step towards the increasing convergence between musicology and ethnomusicology, it evades questions of orality and literacy that lie at the heart of the distinction between these fields. Celebrations of participatory musical practices, and arguably the field of ethnomusicology more broadly, often depend on uncritical assumptions of pre-technological, oral ‘otherness’ (Amico 2020; Hesmondhalgh 2013, 87–97). In other words, there remains some work to be done before we can claim that, when it comes to the study of notation, ‘we are all ethnomusicologists now’ (Cook 2008).