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## Timbre Is a Many-Splendored Thing

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I should start this piece with an admission: I had no idea at the time I attended the “Timbre Is a Many-Splendored Thing” conference that I would be asked to review it. If I had known, I would have attended every panel or at least a far greater portion of the conference than I did. To be sure, I was present for at least a part of each of the conference’s four days. But I also played a good bit of conference hooky. This is not typical for me. Usually as a conference participant I am very plugged in. And that is why I am choosing to open this piece with a not very flattering admission rather than disguise my disengagement by cleverly writing around the things I missed. More than most conferences I attend, the Timbre 2018 conference made me feel like an outsider to the discussion at hand.

The reasons for this were partly disciplinary, and partly concerning the institutional backing of the conference; the two are in a sense inextricable. Timbre 2018 was billed as an interdisciplinary conference, and indeed it was. But the principle organizer, Stephen McAdams, specializes in questions of music cognition and psychoacoustics. He has done pioneering research on timbre as an element of music perception and recently was awarded a very large research grant that has enabled him to bring together scholars from a variety of fields into dedicated study of timbre as a feature of orchestration. The framework that governs McAdams’ work was, logically, predominant at the conference, and a large proportion of the participants were part of his project. Two interrelated areas of inquiry most characterized the conference as a whole: how timbre might be defined as a phenomenon that stands at the intersection of the material properties of sound and the physiological and psychological aspects of human hearing; and how this understanding of timbre might shape the efforts of composers in using it as a defining feature of their work.

This framework, which foregrounded the research of cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists on the one hand and composers on the other, left little room for popular music studies. Zach Wallmark is an exception, a UCLA-trained musicologist who has learned the tools of cognitive scientific research and applied them to work on heavy metal, among other topics. His paper, which investigated the relationship between how listeners perceive certain sounds and the language they use to categorize those sounds, was one of

three on a panel that also included Paul Théberge and Simon Zagorski-Thomas, probably the most popular music-oriented panel at the conference aside from the one that included Wallmark, Zagorski-Thomas, Théberge and myself, along with Cornelia Fales, Robert Fink, Melinda Latour, and Catherine Provenzano, in a roundtable discussion of timbre in popular music.

That this panel was scheduled on the first day of the conference, which was marked off as a “preliminary” day and drew about half the number of participants as the regular sessions, was indicative of the dynamics at work throughout the event. This was not only a programming issue, nor was it simply an issue concerning the marginalization of popular music work in a sphere where art music was still being upheld as the most worthy of possible subjects—although that attitude was also very much on display.

Rather, as I listened to the keynote address by neuroscientist Vinoo Alluri—an insightful and well-delivered piece on the unique challenges of studying human perception of timbre with regard to musical listening as opposed to using isolated sound sources—to Stephen McAdams’ opening statement on defining timbre, and to other speakers at the conference, I realized what was missing for me above all: the dominant mode of inquiry at the conference concerned timbre as it was experienced by an individual listener. Timbre as a social, let alone socially constructed phenomenon, was a decidedly subordinate concern.

A telling exchange along these lines came during my panel, which comprised contributors to a forthcoming book, *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music*. The three editors of the book—Fink, Latour, and Wallmark—served as panel co-chairs and used the book’s introduction as the basis for their remarks, raising questions about the semantic and theoretical relationship between the terms “tone” and “timbre,” and emphasizing how the effort to achieve the right tone has been a driving force in the consumption and production of musical instruments and related gear. A representative example was a 2010 ad for C\*V Guitars that proclaimed in large bold print, “I Don’t Sell Products . . . I Sell Tone,” a claim made in connection with the promotion of a unique design for a guitar bridge said to provide “superior sustain.” From the perspective of the panelists, this sort of advertising rhetoric should be taken seriously as an index of the ways that the pursuit of tone has become a primary fascination for musicians and also a major facet of the commodity fetishism that has developed around the guitar and other instruments. An audience member—later identified as a prominent composer based at McGill University who was part of the conference planning committee—asked with considerable skepticism whether this fetishistic fascination with tone was somehow isolated. Maybe it was just an American delusion, he posited, with the implication that it had little bearing upon the more serious effort to study timbre scientifically. A few of us on the panel pushed back rather strongly, insisting that the social and cultural contingency of “good tone” is precisely the point. For us, the relevant filters are not the biomechanics of the ear canal or the regions of the brain where sound information is processed. What matters to the work of many of us engaged in popular music studies are the cultural frameworks that shape our perception of tone and timbre and manifest themselves through variable musical practices and competing values about what constitutes listening pleasure.

Stepping back from this exchange, one might observe that the field of sound studies has served as a space where these competing paradigms and disciplinary orientations have been brought into some sort of dialogue. The work of Jonathan Sterne, Emily Thompson, Veit Erlmann, Trevor Pinch, Karin Bijsterveld and many others has brought tools of cultural history and critical theory to bear upon the scientific study of sound and hearing, and the technological development of listening devices and musical instruments. At the “Timbre Is a Many Splendored Thing” conference, such approaches were on the whole notable for their absence. Going further, I would say that the study of timbre as practiced by most of the conference’s presenters, when considered against the backdrop of fifteen years of sound studies research, marks an effort to reassert the primacy of squarely “musical” sound and supplant the socially grounded investigation of sound with an analysis that is more firmly technical and individualized. Popular music scholars, and especially those whose work is oriented toward the cultural study of music, sound and technology, may have much to learn from this evolving paradigm, but also much to contribute about the ways in which timbre as an integral element of sound and human perception is shaped by matters of social identity, aesthetic value and modes of economic production.

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Dozens of colleagues must have forwarded me the call for papers (CFP) for the Timbre 2018 conference, certain that this was an excellent fit for my somewhat interdisciplinary research. I study timbre in popular music from a broadly musicological perspective, combining my training as a music theorist with cultural modes of inquiry more familiar to ethnomusicologists. The CFP advertised the conference as a multidisciplinary one, and four of the first five disciplines listed were those that inform my research most strongly: music analysis, music theory, musicology, and ethnomusicology. The possible topics similarly echoed my own interests: “history of the concept of timbre,” “compositional approaches . . . in which timbre plays a significant role,” “problems and opportunities of communicating about timbre with language,” “timbre and tone in traditional and vernacular music”—it was like someone had written the CFP specifically for me.

I was surprised, then, when I went to write my abstract for submission and found that I was to rigidly adhere to an APA format designed for reporting on scientific research, with the standardized subsections “Aims/goals,” “Background information,” “Methodology,” “Results,” and “Conclusions”—divisions which that resemble my actual research process very little—considering that the conference was advertised as an interdisciplinary one that explicitly included many humanities fields. I struggled to pour my research into this mold and ended up with an organization that seemed less than ideal, but I submitted the proposal and ended up getting my paper accepted as a poster rather than a talk.

I mention all this because this submission experience wound up mirroring my experience of the entire conference: interdisciplinary in theory, but not in practice. Although the talks programmed had diverse focuses, I found the speakers often did not design their talks for a multidisciplinary audience. I went into the conference excited to learn what

was going on in timbre research in the worlds of cognition, perception, and data science; unfortunately, the majority most of these talks were laden with jargon that I am unfamiliar with to the point where I was hardly able to understand what was going on. Like Dr. Waksman, I found my attention span slipping during these talks, and eventually decided my time might be better spent taking in the dozens of posters and chatting with colleagues.

Many talks were conference highlights for me, however. In addition to the talks mentioned by Dr. Steve Waksman, I attended a few other papers that dealt with cultural conceptions of timbre. Heather Buffington-Anderson discussed vocal timbre and persona in songs by Oscar Brown, Jr., and Nina Simone; Rebecca Flore discussed the way online guitar communities talk about timbre; David Blake and Alessandro Bratus combined spectrogram analysis with more ad hoc and culturally-sensitive description in analyzing the music of Björk. I took notes furiously through each of these talks and found them to be very useful for the pop music scholar.

Across all of these papers, I found that pop music scholars were primarily interested in studying the untidy and unruly cultural and social aspects of timbre. These are precisely those aspects that (in my outsider's view) do not lend themselves well to the more scientific approaches to timbre, such as neuroscience, perception, cognition, and data science; my impression is that the scientific method, which serves the important duty of ensuring provability and replicability, often demands that cultural and social inconsistencies be stripped out of the equation. I felt a wide divide between these two schools of thought, which I might generalize as being musicological versus scientific. I was inspired by the conference to consider the ways in which we might bridge this gap. Certain papers were already well on the way toward this goal—I think particularly of the papers by Zach Wallmark, and by David Blake and Alessandro Bratus, and note that each of these scholars have degrees in musicology. It seemed to me that musicologists were bringing scientific approaches into their work, but the reverse happened less often.

To make generalizations (always a dangerous move, but perhaps productive in this discussion), I saw musicologists keen to bring the methodologies of scientific research into their own work. Scientists, on the other hand, seemed to keep their methodologies; their interdisciplinarity instead seemed to be mainly confined to the topic (timbre, as a musical phenomenon). This raises the question of why scientists are not interested in bringing humanities-based methodologies into their work, the way we humanities scholars like to bring scientific methodologies into ours. It might be easy to resurrect New Musicology discourse, and wag fingers at pop music studies and other musicological fields for reaching to the sciences to bolster their own legitimacy and egos. However, I think it's not this simple. The sciences can afford to ignore humanities' methodologies in a way that the humanities cannot—and here, I mean “afford” in quite a literal, financial sense. At many institutions, budget crises loom over the humanities departments, which tend to be significantly less profitable than STEM departments; a wealth of opportunities for grant funding appears for research either fully within the sciences or research that is “interdisciplinary” with the sciences, but resources to fund purely musicological research remains pitiful by comparison. If the majority of pop music scholars are humanities scholars, this means that many of us are actually financially rewarded for incorporating scientific

methodologies into our work. The costs of attendance at an international conferences easily pass the \$1,000 mark, so it's not unreasonable to question whether those able to submit and present are better represented by people who have access to this funding stream. Even if the humanities end up less well-represented at such conferences, I still trust that the social and cultural work that we do as pop music scholars continues to thrive. I have no doubts that even as financial incentives pull the field in one direction, our messy work will continue to be indispensable to pop music studies as a whole.

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In her thoughtful keynote address at the Timbre 2018 conference, musicologist Emily Dolan discussed the requisite “timbral litany” that accompanies most scholarly work on the topic. The standard set of maneuvers goes something like this: timbre is only ever defined in the negative (as *not* pitch or loudness), scholars are “timbre-deaf,” it's long been marginalized as a “secondary parameter” despite its vital importance, and so on. This set of defensive moves was familiar enough among conference goers to elicit a few knowing chuckles, as everyone in the field regularly engages in its rhetorical stock-in-trade. Dolan was optimistic in pointing out that a recent surge in interest may soon enable us to dispense with this litany. But until such a leveling occurs, timbre specialists will tend reflexively toward revisionism.

Dolan's notion of the “timbral litany” may bite particularly strongly among scholars of popular music. It was not long ago, of course, that popular music was itself a marginalized and somewhat feral topic in serious musical discourse, when the scope of the budding discipline was still in flux and invidious comparisons to art music were still largely a matter of course in the academy. In 1995, David Brackett called this the “musicological quagmire”: the inappropriate application of tools and theories designed for one analytical context to another. Popular music scholars have deployed a number of defensive litanies of their own over the years to drain the quagmire, legitimize their topic, and secure a hard-won seat at the table of mainstream musicology. Timbre researchers, right now, are struggling to do the same.

Yet despite the clear progress, a number of apparent and hidden quagmires populate the field of timbre studies as well, and a few of these were on full display at the “Timbre Is a Many-Splendored Thing” conference. (Full disclosure: I was a member of the program committee.) First is the question of disciplinary turf and the potential perils of colliding vastly different epistemological frames. Never have I participated in a conference as profoundly interdisciplinary as this one, involving contributions from psychologists, composers, theorists, historical musicologists, ethnomusicologists, popular music scholars, performers, computer scientists, and acousticians. On the face of it, this would seem to be an unassailable good, and at times this vast scope of perspectives was indeed tremendously energizing. As others have noted, however, the discourse at Timbre 2018 reflected what we might call “tossed salad” interdisciplinary: great effort was made to foster breadth of exposure to different discrete viewpoints and methods—the plenary sessions all but assured

this—but not necessarily to enable participants to effectively understand and synthesize how these perspectives might fit together.

The greatest barrier in this regard, I think, was terminological: at a certain point along the spectrum of interdisciplinarity, we simply cease to speak the same language. Panels were generally geared toward the members of each speaker's disciplinary tribe, with few communicative concessions made for outsiders. This was not a realistic approach in a plenary format: We can no more expect a popular music scholar to understand the equations underlying recursive neural networks than a computer scientist to immediately grasp a tough concept from French cultural theory. This conspicuous lack of “melting pot” interdisciplinarity—combining perspectives and methods in such a way as to catalyze discourse between disciplinary silos, not just within them—coupled with the lack of space given for tutorials aimed at making the jargon of each other's disciplines intelligible to the uninitiated, justifiably led to some confusion, alienation, and just plain absenteeism.

A few papers and posters stood out, however, as particularly compelling statements of melting pot interdisciplinarity. In addition to the excellent popular music-oriented papers already mentioned, I would add Megan Lavengood's computationally and culturally informed model of pop music timbre analysis and Jonathan Berger and colleagues' analysis of the interplay of architectural acoustics and musical style in a seventeenth-century Roman church. A number of more squarely scientific papers I likewise found riveting; for example, Carmine Emanuele Cella and Philippe Esling's software to create computer-aided orchestrations of audio signals, and Marcelo Caetano's toolbox for morphing audio into uncanny chimeras. These innovations could have a number of conceivable implications for popular music. But for attendees like myself without extensive background in computer science, the mathematical formalism of these talks regrettably obscured the conceptual novelty of the content.

Terminological fuzziness isn't necessary a bad thing. Dolan, in her keynote, spoke convincingly for the need to retain some of timbre's “productive unruliness” and resist too rigid attempts to finally settle the age-old “problem” with a Grand Unifying Theory of timbre. But the glaring lack of a clear, inclusive definition of the concept that people from varying disciplines would all recognize as their own, especially in such a self-consciously interdisciplinary context, naturally led to the sense that we were more ships passing in the night than equal interlocutors in the discourse at hand. The lively exchange about “tone” versus “timbre” described by Dr. Waksman was a particularly revealing moment of two discursive communities essentially talking past each other. At issue here, as Waksman notes, was a privileged definition of timbre as an individual perceptual response to sound, with social entanglements playing a less important role. Perhaps more than any other, I think this notion is the biggest quagmire to cross as popular music studies engages with empirical timbre research. Though explicating the perceptual attributes of timbre is of undeniable importance to all stripes of music studies, unless we also consider timbre perception in cultural and historical context—as always already taking place within a specific “cognitive ecosystem”<sup>1</sup>—and expand our definitions and theories accordingly, many students

1. Edwin Hutchins, “Cognitive Ecology,” *Topics in Cognitive Science* 2 (2010):705–15.

of popular music will continue to find the scientific discourse unsuited to their questions, much as Brackett felt about art music-dominated musicology in the '90s.

In sum, interdisciplinarity (of both varieties) is no panacea: in the context of the “two cultures,” the humanities/sciences split in particular, it is often tremendously fraught (and sometimes seemingly impossible) to bridge this gap in perspectives, methods, and terminology without doing some small violence to the fragile bonds that hold communities of dissimilar thinkers together. In some cases, it can end up reproducing the same hierarchical divisions and bolstering disciplinary tribalism as people increasingly come to feel that the other side is not for them. Nevertheless, melting pot interdisciplinarity (if this is the goal) must begin with simple proximity, even if such exposure is jarring or alienating. In my final analysis, I believe *Timbre 2018* took us a few baby steps closer to an integrated, pluralistic research community around timbre. But as much as I believe the conference was ultimately a success—in part because of organizer Stephen McAdams’s fairly audacious overture at engineering such a singular and unlikely gathering of dissimilar scholars in the first place—*Timbre 2018* was also a cautionary tale in the epistemological perils of interdisciplinarity.

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“A pluralistic array of disciplines matches up with a pluralistic vision of the world: endocrine cells for the biologists, tectonic plates for the geologists, librettos for the musicologists, and so on. Pluralism of this variety should put limits on the way disciplines are coordinated. It should insist that no one discipline is reducible to another.” - Jonathan Kramnick, “The Interdisciplinary Delusion,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 18, 2018

As I gathered my thoughts to report back to the readers of this journal on the wide-ranging interdisciplinary conference on musical timbre sponsored by McGill University’s program in music cognition this summer, my mind kept turning to the methodological argument—a warning, really—set out in the epigraph above, part of a defense of the humanities couched as a response to the selfsame interdisciplinary impulse that gave rise to the ambitious program of *Timbre Is a Many-Splendored Thing*. A few popular music scholars made the trek to swelteringly hot Montreal, some there for a round table on a new book (*The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music*), others to present their work, either as a talk, or in a poster session, where the investigator stands ready to engage in a dialogue in front of a large printout displaying their research question, methodology, and results.

Those of us who work in the humanities may not be used to poster sessions, but they are a wonderful mode of conference interaction, especially if, like me, you find question-and-answer to be more interesting than the presentation of research that often swallows up all time in formal paper sessions. At this big, radically interdisciplinary gathering, posters were an opportunity for scholarly crate digging, and I definitely found a few unexpected treasures I wanted to take home with me and share with whoever will listen.

To give you a sense of the variety, here is a complete list of topics from the first poster session on Friday. (The titles are numbered here for easier reference; authors and abstracts can be found at <https://www.mcgill.ca/timbre2018/program>)

1. The closer the better: The role of formant positions in timbre similarity perception and timbre classification.
2. Timbral function in Klangflächetechnik.
3. Understanding the perception of acoustic space from the perspectives of timbre.
4. Score and sound-based interface for exploring music performances.
5. Computational modeling of new timbre dimensions for automatic violin tone quality assessment.
6. Towards translating perceptual distance from hearing to vision using neural networks.
7. Sound signifying light: The sunrise topic as a transmodal perceptual metaphor.
8. New wor(l)ds for old sounds.
9. Local sound signatures for music recommendations.
10. The (obvious) influence of pitch and dynamics on the perceptual dimensions of the timbre of musical instruments.
11. An investigation of the acoustic features supporting the perception of timbre and other auditory objects.
12. Timbre spatialization.
13. Communication through microphone choice and placement.

It is an interesting task to match these “naked” titles with (a) disciplines; (b) methodologies; and (c) stylistic repertoires. (Go ahead, hide the rest of this page and give it a try.)  
[...]

If there is a standard methodology in timbre research it is the empirical study of human perception (1,3,10,11,13), either directly reported or as evidenced by behavior (13). One might build a dialectical picture of the conference by counterpoising to this objective master technique the more speculative, introspective hermeneutic analyses of music (2,7,12), which rely on connoisseurship, that is, on personal artistic intuition and knowledge of art history (8). Here in microcosm were the familiar “two cultures” of academia, and here is the familiar—still necessary, it seems—lament of the musical humanist about an interdisciplinary space in which he is outnumbered and off-balance.

The historical, ethno, and pop musicologists at the conference adopted, understandably, the protective coloration of scientific method. (After all, we’d been asked to fill out an application form that assumed we *had* a definitive methodology, instead of what we do have, which is a set of conflicting ideological positions and a lot of arguing about it.) But when we trotted out what to us seemed like truisms (timbre is a social construct; race, class, and gender are key experimental variables, not just things to control for), we were often met with polite incomprehension or condescension.

That was expected. Unexpected, though, if you’re not doing grant-supported research on timbre, was the strong presence of technologists, whose main focus is not empiricism,

but innovation and the creation of labor-saving devices. Whether specifically based on machine learning (5,6,9), or bringing AI-style software tools to listening (4) and composing (12), the vast majority of posters in this session, and at the conference, could be classified as technological (3,4,5,6,9,12,13) in the Heideggerian sense: they seek to discipline the vagaries of timbre creation and perception into an orderly “standing reserve” of digital information for use in various types of human commerce (non-profit or otherwise).

These inventors are familiar figures from a history of popular music and automation that reaches from Auto-Tune through the drum machine back to the player piano, and they *could* be natural allies—or at least research subjects—for a popular music studies that seeks to shed the old ideology of individual genius and understand music production and consumption as a transhuman pursuit. Consider, for instance, this description of how a machine can learn to “hear” aspects of violin timbre (from poster 5, above):

“Low- and high-level descriptors were extracted from the audio signal using the Essentia library (Bogdanov et al., 2013). Automatic feature selection methods (i.e., wrapper with genetic search) were used to obtain a subset of low-level frame based, spectral descriptors. After feature selection, machine learning techniques were applied to obtain a model for each tone quality pair . . . obtaining a total of 10 models.”

Although the language sounds scientific, this is not empirical research into timbre; it is research and *development* of an automated approach to what I would recognize as (and they call) “tone quality,” that is, a socially constructed set of value judgments about sound production agreed upon within a given interpretive community. The arbiters of this community are, as the poster tells us, “music experts in violin education,” whose aesthetic judgments are assumed to be beyond empirical question.

On the one hand, it’s odd to realize that, at least in Montreal, the technologists, who really should be on “our” side, the popular side (where the money is, dammit), were almost entirely concerned with art music, still in thrall to its narrow canon and exclusivist value system. Of the thirteen posters in that first session, only the last, a behavioral study that showed correlation between verbal descriptors of guitar tone given to studio engineers and their subsequent microphone placements, dealt with popular music in any systematic way. Still, I could not help but feel a slight dystopian thrill as the computer scientists explained how they train their neural networks by making them “listen” over and over to old-fashioned humanistic musical stimuli. Someday, those listening machines are going to assert their own taste. If, as journalist Cherie Hu asserts, “public recognition of AI-generated music as viable art has gradually expanded from the confines of esoteric research centers and experimental composers into the commercial, playlistable, VC-funded mainstream” (<https://www.getrevue.co/profile/cheriehu42/issues/is-ai-generated-music-worth-anything-139424>) what will we do when machine *listening* becomes the norm? Will androids one day dream of (their own) electric orchestras?

While we wait for that future, there are fascinating insights about popular music and timbre lurking among the posters and papers. Here are some of my personal faves.

*Lost histories reconstructed:* **Stephen A. Spencer** opened a fascinating window onto how vernacular theories of tone color develop by presenting Hollywood composer Arthur Lange’s 1943 *Spectrotone* system, with its elaborate attempt to use optical color relations to

codify the registral and spectral affinities of various wind and brass combinations used in jazz arranging. **Benjamin Luce and James Beauchamp** shared unpublished documentation of the research Luce's father, David A. Luce, did at MIT on analog sound starting in the early 1960s, which ultimately led him to develop pioneering synths like the Polymoog and the Taurus line of bass pedals.

*New Theoretical frameworks:* **Simon Zagorski-Thomas**, building on what perception researchers have dubbed the "ecological" theory of timbre processing, as an instantaneous, empathetic understanding of "how things sound," used Pete Townsend's guitar tones in live performances of *Tommy* (how do you play an electric guitar so that it sounds like an orchestra?) to explore how visual ("see me") and aural ("feel me") percepts interact in the service of timbral metaphor. Ecological and semiotic perspectives also drove **Maria Perevedentseva's** cogent timbral analysis of a recent underground EDM track by bass music producer Objekt, in which the quick gestural evolution of low frequency lines comments on the historical evolution of EDM itself. And my fellow Field Reporter for *JPMS*, **Megan Lavengood**, quite elegantly presented—in a poster session no less!—a well-developed theoretical framework for the musicological analysis of timbre in popular music, in which spectrographic investigation of acoustic tone can not only co-exist with but generate key insights for the decoding of tone as a socio-cultural construct, evidenced by a nimble reading of the Yamaha DX-7's "piano" preset that was a Proustian sonic madeleine for anyone who lived through the 1980s.

Did I understand every paper? *No*. Was I frustrated by the pervasive pseudo-empiricism that concealed unthinking adherence to Euro-centric canonic principles? *Preach on*. Will I sign up for *Timbre 2020*, and do I encourage those of you reading to attend? *Yes. Let's shake things up a little.*

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In her electric keynote address at *Timbre is a Many Splendored Thing* in July 2018, Dr. Emily Dolan noted that such a conference would have been unimaginable when she was a graduate student. Over the past few years, the study of timbre has gained traction and interest among scholars across a range of disciplines, making *Timbre 2018* possible. But perhaps it is at this moment when the serious study of timbre is becoming more mainstream in Western academia that such enthusiasm could stand for some direction or tempering.

Celebrating timbre's splendor is one way to galvanize its study, but it might inadvertently also confine it. What about when timbre isn't so splendid? What if it is achieved by underpaid and undervalued labor? Or used to assume the "essence" of a body? Timbre, perhaps more than any other musical value, can act as a gatekeeper, as many of my co-contributors on *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone* roundtable articulated. A handful of presentations echoed the themes of the ways timbre can be an elusive barrier or contested terrain, notably Heather Buffington-Anderson's on black power and polyvocality in the

work of Oscar Brown, Jr., and Nina Simone. But many others tried to assert a more objectivist approach to a sonic phenomenon not well-served by it.

There are good reasons to explore and create systematic or perhaps scientific ways of evaluating and writing about timbre. Such work might create models that other scholars can apply to new inquiry, or make wieldy descriptions of a part of sound that is famously slippery. Hazel Burns and Gabriel Ferreyra's "comprehensive guide to recording the Kichwa instruments of Ecuador" stood out as an example that took seriously and treated as foundational the expertise and insight of practitioners of Kichwa music, as opposed to abstracted assertions on the part of researchers. But, as Dr. Steve Waksman suggests, there was a strong feeling in many other presentations and throughout the conference that the point was to "reassert the primacy of squarely 'musical' sound." As Marie Thompson and others have argued, there is plenty to be skeptical of in these days that about what she and others have called the ontological turn in sound studies. If past lessons of positivist approaches in music and sound studies have taught us anything, it's that they have a tendency to leave out more than they reveal, to the detriment of considerations of context, practice, and politics.<sup>2</sup> A positivist approach to timbre would do little to help us answer the questions: If timbre is splendid, who says so, why, and to what ends?

Other respondents in this thread have noted that, though there were some exceptions, disciplinary bridges were seldom crossed in the individual presentations. To me, this seemed less bothersome and instead indicated that there is a world of approaches and in-depth research going on that may well be more interdisciplinary than any person might be able to reveal in a 20-minute talk. Furthermore, these often bounded presentations gave an opportunity to get a sense of the limits and strengths of any number of methodologies, which, on a more macro level, were united under one roof (or more accurately, in one room!). And one great strength of the conference was its built-in sociality. As a smaller gathering of scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds, there were ample opportunities to engage and converse with participants across fields at Timbre's many and well-orchestrated poster sessions and social breaks. If not yet evident in the presentations themselves, these kinds of meetings will hopefully create a community of people who speak to one another, and whose scholarship will ideally grapple with a diversity of approaches to the study of timbre.

Another great strength was the space given to musical performances, which, at larger conferences devoted to the study of music and sound can often feel like an afterthought or optional bonus. At Timbre, performances were front and center as a grounding and exciting part of the conversation. It should be noted, though, that there should have been a greater effort to include more women and non-binary people in the composers and performers given pride of place at the event.

While studies of popular music had some representation at the conference, it was also clear that there is room and good reason to push further the presence of contemporary pop music studies at such gatherings in the future. Much of today's pop music is defined by timbre as an organizational structure, and software developers, studio workers, and

2. Thompson, Marie. "Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies" (2017) in *Parallax*, 23:3, 266–82.

performers go to great lengths to harness, mold, and sound out timbre as an affective and structural tool. In other words, timbre is as central to pop music production as it is to any other kind of orchestration, as David Blake and Alessandro Bratus's paper on Björk's *Utopia* highlighted.

The fact of the conference itself, a conference devoted to an oft-ignored and understudied part of sound and musical practice, is reason to celebrate. But as we move forward, we can take a moment to both hear each other and give some thought to orchestrating what the future of our research might sound like. ■