

## The significance of the evidence in historical scholarship

A recent newspaper article reported a controversy in the American Anthropological Association because the new statement of its long-range plan omitted the word 'science'. It defined anthropology as 'a holistic and expansive discipline that covers the full breadth of human history and culture', adding that anthropology draws on the methods of both the humanities and the sciences. The field includes evidence-based studies, for which scientific methods apply, and interpretive studies, where observation leads to insightful interpretations. Amongst the latter, are those whose purpose is to advocate for higher status for people who traditionally have been discriminated against.

In the field of music history (which can be considered a branch of anthropology), studies based on evidence should be treated as in science, but all too often, scholars treat them as interpretive, where evidence can be ignored as if it were a matter of opinion.

The process of evidence-based scholarship involves collecting and evaluating evidence and formulating generalisations or theories that relate and explain the evidence. Some scholars specialise in just collecting and evaluating evidence, considering that this is a more fundamental activity, more stable than formulating generalisations or theories, that are more subject to the fashions of thinking at the time. This is no doubt true, but without relating and explaining the evidence, we have gained no understanding.

If we truly believe in a particular understanding, evidence which can be interpreted as supporting it is considered to be affirmation, while evidence which apparently contradicts it is rejected as false in some way. This approach seems to be an inbuilt property of our mental processes, as evidenced in the continual beliefs in supernatural influence over the circumstances of our lives since the beginning of mankind. Scholarship is supposed to provide a more objective relationship between understanding and evidence. Yet a leading music historian apparently instructed his research students to find things that they know is true and then collect evidence to prove it. Training in scholarship usually encourages scepticism of belief in any previous understanding, and to look to the evidence for guidance.

The preferred approach should be one of conditional acceptance of the theory that best relates and explains the evidence as current knowledge, subject to change if a better theory or new evidence with different implications appears. This approach is difficult to maintain when evidence exists that is contrary to the general understanding in the field. Initially, that evidence is often ignored on the assumption that it is wrong, with the hope that future research will be able to show how it became wrong. In a fast-moving field, where a researcher's career is enhanced by overturning popular understandings, such research is quickly done, and if the evidence is supported, a high-profile controversy follows and a new general understanding gradually develops. In a slow-moving field, knowledge is so stable that it gets to be believed, controversy is rare and avoided, and research is expected to add to knowledge and not to challenge what is already 'known'. Then the evidence that is contrary to the 'knowledge' can continue to be ignored indefinitely. Music history is such a slow-moving field.

In the scientific community where I trained, a theory has to be abandoned or suitably modified if any piece of evidence can not be explained (assuming that the theory is true) with reasonable probability. In music historical scholarship, evidence that cannot be explained by the theory can just be ignored because it is considered not to be credible. Apparently, the only criterion for credibility is agreement amongst the specialists who count.

The difference between the two scholarship traditions is the relative trust that is given to judgement

about the truth of the theory and about the the truth of the evidence. Wishful thinking greatly hampers objectivity in judging the truth of a theory. In science, the judgement is focussed on the probability of the theory's explanation of the evidence, because it is easier to be more objective here than in judging the truth of the theory. The scientific tradition requires all of the evidence to be explainable while the music historical tradition allows evidence to be disbelieved without explanation.

We are all human and so can't help believing what we think we know. In medieval times, we thought we knew all that we had the right to know. Humanism and the enlightenment led us to discover new knowledge by observation of evidence and experimentation, leading to scholarship based on evidence.

The concept of 'proof' in the humanities is essentially the legal one in the courts, where the researcher presents the relevant evidence, promoting the importance of the evidence that seems to support his theory and ignoring or trying to discredit the evidence that seems to contradict the theory, with the field leaders acting as judges or jury to decide on acceptance. Objectivity is universally recognised as essential, but it is not necessarily inconsistent with promotion of a theory. With promotion so often treating evidence selectively, it is not surprising that some who highly value objectivity will distrust all theorising and confine themselves to collecting and organising evidence. With a more objective way of treating evidence, as in the sciences, the advocacy of a theory can become more acceptable to them.

My plea is, for the sake of more objectivity, please try to give all of the relevant evidence the respect it deserves, resist rejecting any of it because it seems wrong, try to explain how it may have become what it is, and try to objectively estimate the probability of that explanation being adequate in the light of precedents.