

The Quarterly Review of New Music

Tempo



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Reflections and Revitalisation

Welcome to the new-look *Tempo*. As many readers will know, this is the first issue of the journal to be published by Wolke Verlag and the transition from Cambridge University Press to our new home has also involved an enlargement of the journal's editorial team. Christopher Fox continues as Editor-in-Chief but is joined by Ed Cooper as Co-Editor and Anna M Heslop as Copy Editor. After eight years in which Heather Roche built up the splendid team of writers who review for *Tempo*, she is stepping down from the role and the new Reviews Editor is Celeste Oram.

These changes have provided an opportunity to reflect on what *Tempo* is about. The journal has always presented a mixture of longer and shorter critical writing and, during the two decades – the Cambridge University Press era – became a sort of light-touch academic space. We hope to maintain the best of this – insight, debate, analysis and critique – but steer clear of more run-of-the-mill scholarly norms. In the future *Tempo* will include shorter articles, review-articles, interviews, longer-form pieces and more themed issues. What will remain the same, and what we hope distinguishes *Tempo* from other journals, is rigorous, timely and bold writing.

Tempo is a journal with a global readership and we want the journal to engage with this worldwide new music community in all its extraordinary diversity, to act as a node for exchange and debate. We hope that this inaugural issue with Wolke is something of a testament to that: the articles and reviews draw in voices from Japan and South Africa, as well as north America and Europe. There's also a feature on the 2025 Darmstädter Ferienkurse, offering a range of critical insights into their events and controversies, demonstrating not only the polyphonic possibilities of the new *Tempo* but also that even the most established new music festivals need to be considered in a global context.

We also hope that you, our readers and subscribers, will be part of this revitalised *Tempo*. With Wolke Verlag we have tried to make it much easier, and more affordable, to become an individual supporter of the journal but we hope that this involvement will also include much more input from readers, responses to what we publish and proposals for new directions that the journal might take. In the April issue our intention is that this feedback should materialise as a 'Letters to the Editors' section. Please send your ideas to tempo@wolke-verlag.de. We look forward to hearing from you.

Tempo 315

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Music Defined: A Provocation

Hollis Taylor, Robin Ryan, Richard Barrett,
Alex South, Gabriella Smart and Jim Denley

What does music do? What does it mean? Musicology offers no settled characterisation of its subject. Although a definition might be expected to embrace the entire musical experience, including its multifunctional nature, we know that scholars have long struggled to map out what 'entire' might mean. Even the discipline's benchmark, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music*, provides neither boundary line nor border fence. Tasked with crafting *Grove's* 'Music' entry, Bruno Nettl eschewed 'an authoritative definition', acknowledging the impossibility of a 'properly comprehensive treatment of the concept of music, at all times, in all places and in all senses'.¹

Despite music's definitional insecurity, Western art music has long claimed authority to characterise, categorise and evaluate sonic experience. In practice, sonic phenomena may be discounted as 'not music', even in the absence of a working definition. In our 2024 symposium, *Music Defined: A Provocation*, we addressed this tension much as Nettl did in his *Grove* entry by 'selecting from a number of alternative viewpoints'.²

Starting from the conviction that the range and vitality of alternative viewpoints remain underreported, underestimated and undercelebrated, we rejected the quest for an unassailable definition, and our symposium instead sought insight from diverse – even fringe – sources with competing and

inconsistent perspectives. These insights could be pithy, partial and personal, but, most importantly, they were to be provocative.

Held on 11 October 2024, the symposium convened with a select group of musicologists, ethnomusicologists, zoömusicologists and other scholars as well as performing musicians, composers and practitioners from a range of contexts. Short provocations of between three and five minutes were invited that might:

- Explore a wider understanding of music that looks at the relationship it has with sound, nonmusic, noise, silence and language, this includes human versus animal and even music versus musicking.
- Celebrate both the qualities with which a definition might concern itself and what a definition might tell us about its makers.
- Either affirm or overthrow maxims such as 'music is emotion' or 'music is a universal language'.
- Delve into how music is always political.
- Offer up pithy but provocative definitions.
- Present a sonic provocation.
- Riff on genius, originality, mimicry, natural laws, things superhuman, groove, notation and recorded music.

The result was a kaleidoscopic assemblage formed out of pieces of disparate size and colour. Live Zoom presentations intermingled with the reading out of brief email contributions by colleagues unable to attend, as well as a reading of 'Definitions of Music in the 21st century', a section of the book *rosenberg 3.0: not violin music*.³ Among these exchanges, correspondence with John Whiteoak offered a provocation that crystallised the symposium's charge:

Perhaps the real answer to the 'music' question is not to ask it and, instead, clearly identify all the problems with it and define a set of terms that can actually achieve universal definition (like 'musicking'). Keith Humble always started his First Year undergrad lecture series with the same statement, or 'demand' – namely, that the real lifelong question for the music scholar/maker should not be: 'What is music?' but instead: 'What if it were music?'.⁴

As the term 'music' gives way to alternatives such as 'musicking' or 'organised sound', what comes into question is not only its definition but the viability of the word itself. 'I decided to call my music "organized sound" and myself, not a musician, but "a worker in rhythms, frequencies, and intensities"', declared Edgar Varèse, exemplifying this unease and thus positioning practice over category.⁵ In our symposium, this slippage of language generated recurring concerns – intentionality, silence, vibration, inclusiveness, physicality and animal efforts – suggesting that the struggle to define music is less about fixing its boundaries than about tracing the shifting terrain of ideas that it continually unsettles.

1 Bruno Nettl, 'Music' in *Oxford Music Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com> (accessed 5 August 2025).

2 Nettl, 'Music'.

3 *rosenberg 3.0 not violin music*, eds. Jon Rose, Hollis Taylor and Nick Shimmin (Camperdown: Blurb, 2014).

4 John Whiteoak, personal correspondence with the author, 2024.

5 Edgar Varèse, 'The Liberation of Sound', in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, eds. Christoph Cox and David Warner (New York: Continuum, 2007), p. 20.