Against Abridgment

Blake Howe, Louisiana State University

In Lewis Carroll's novel *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (1893), a bizarre man named "Mein Herr" describes a map with a map-to-terrain ratio of one mile to one mile. "It has never been spread out, yet," he says. "The farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well."[1]

In Jorge Luis Borges's extremely short story "Del rigor en la ciencia" ("On Exactitude in Science," 1946), a cartographer's guild creates "a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it." It subsequently falls into disuse, albeit in a manner that blends reality and its representation: "In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars."[2]

In Charlie Kaufman's film *Synecdoche, New York* (2008), a theater director—approaching the limits of mimesis—constructs a parallel reality for his play, every bit as expansive and detailed as the world beyond it. "There are nearly thirteen million people in the world," he says. "None of those people is an extra. They're all leads of their own stories. They have to be given their due."[3]

Three similar tales, all cautionary—yet I often find myself thinking of them longingly when I teach. Historians are in the business of abridgment: we sift through data, sorting it by its relevance. We keep what we need, and we archive the rest. As music historians, we limit our perspective to music, which—even when broadly conceived—represents only a tiny sliver of the human experience. And as pedagogues of music history, we abridge these abridgments even further: a single composition, or even a single movement from a single composition, stands in for a composer, genre, period, or style. A primary text—fragmented, littered with ellipses—focuses a student's attention only on what

1. Lewis Carroll, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1893), 169.

2. Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 325.

3. Chapter 24, *Synecdoche, New York*, DVD, directed by Charlie Kaufman (2008; Culver City, CA: Sony Picture Classics, 2009).

Journal of Music History Pedagogy, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 70–78. ISSN 2155-1099X (online)
Copyright © 2019, *Journal of Music History Pedagogy*, licensed under CC BY 3.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/)

we think most effectively exemplifies an already miniscule historical moment. Abridgments offer efficiency and clarity; there is no denying their importance, especially for classroom use. But what do students lose when they are only exposed to prepackaged primary sources, when their only view of history is that of a bird's eye?

By habit if not always by necessity, the map-to-terrain ratio of the music history classroom is stratospherically distant from the messy, day-to-day realities of the past. In a provocative and somewhat cheeky essay, Michael Beckerman offers an important call-to-arms that counteracts this tendency: "As humanists we must have some responsibility to connect the pedagogical scripts we read with some kind of reality, some kind of past that might really have happened, some kind of knowledge we can demonstrate."[4] In seeking this "past that might really have happened," Beckerman tries to imagine a day in the life of Antonín Dvořák. He immediately runs into trouble. What was Dvořák wearing? How did he feel when he woke up? What did he smell like? Probing the limits of historical knowledge, he continues this exercise to an instructive point of absurdity: "I know that Mozart died in 1791. But do I really know? I have never looked at the death certificate, never saw the body. No, I merely have decided to believe those who have looked into such things. And why would they lie? Why, indeed?"[5]

Why, indeed? Received knowledge warrants questioning, both inside and outside the classroom. A detail from a painting shows a couple making music—but what has been cropped out? A stray quotation comes from a larger treatise—but has it been taken out of context? The first movement's primary theme returns at the end of the final movement—or does it? How do I know for sure without first checking for myself? Maps, histories, summaries, excerpts, and abridgments are all predicated on trust. Trust must be earned. This is the truism that lies at the heart of Beckerman's incredulity. A teacher earns the intellectual trust of students not by relying on professorial authority but instead by linking information to its source. In this age of rampant disinformation, it is more important than ever to cultivate in students an ethic of skepticism and a habit of seeking (demanding!) corroboration—not just for assurance's sake, but also for the imaginative journey that verification takes us on, back (as nearly as possible) to that "past that might really have happened."

With the many collections of digitized historical documents now available online, well-worn quotations, images, and musical excerpts can be easily traced

4. Michael Beckerman, "How Can You Teach What You Don't Know? …And Other Tales from Music History Pedagogy," in *Vitalizing Music History Teaching*, ed. James R. Briscoe, 3–18 (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2010), 7.

5. Beckerman, "How Can You Teach," 5.

back to their original contexts.[6] The anthologized sequence *Columba aspexit* by Hildegard of Bingen[7] can be situated within the gargantuan Riesencodex (digitized by the Hochschule RheinMain): clicking through its seemingly endless pages, students experience the sheer quantity of Hildegard's literary and musical output.[8] Adam de la Halle's catchy and seemingly innocuous little tune, "Robin m'aime,"[9] takes on greater significance when traced back to the composer's "collected works" (digitized by Gallica). On folio 39 (recto), the tune appears, but now as but one small part of the *Jeu de Robin et de Marion*, surrounded by other melodies, dialogue, and illustrations of the characters themselves.[10] Charles Burney's famous description of the orchestra at Mannheim as an "army of generals"[11] can be found in the eighteenth-century printings of *The Present State of Music in Germany, the Netherlands, and United Provinces* (digitized by GoogleBooks): that memorable phrase, extolling the brilliance of the ensemble, is also accompanied by some criticism of the "bassoons and hautbois, which were rather too sharp, at the beginning, and continued growing sharper to the end of the opera."[12] The abridged quote sanitizes the historical record, whereas the restored context offers a more nuanced assessment, piercing some of the hagiographical myths that histories accrue: nobody is perfect, no ensemble—not even Mannheim's—infallible.

Presenting digital sources alongside their digestible (edited, condensed, modernized) abridgments helps students appreciate the best of both worlds—the trees *and* the forest, the message *and* the medium.[13] With convenient access

6. Popular examples include Archive.org, GoogleBooks, HathiTrust, IMSLP, Gallica, MDZ [Münchener DigitalisierungsZentrum], and DIAMM [Digital Image Archive of Medieval Music], among many others.

7. David J. Rothenberg and Robert R. Holzer, eds., *Oxford Anthology of Western Music,* vol. 1 (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 16–18.

8. Riesencodex, Digitale Sammlungen: Hochschul- und Landesbibliothek RheinMain, http://hlbrm.digitale-sammlungen.hebis.de/handschriften-hlbrm/content/titleinfo/449618 (accessed 5 March 2018). *Columba aspexit* appears on folio 476 (recto and verso).

9. J. Peter Burkholder and Claude V. Palisca, eds., *Norton Anthology of Western Music,* vol. 1, 7th edition (New York: Norton, 2014), 46.

10. Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr. 25566, Gallica, http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b6001348v (accessed 5 March 2018).

11. See, for example, J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music,* 9th edition (New York: Norton, 2014), 513, and Richard Taruskin and Christopher H. Gibbs, *The Oxford History of Western Music* (New York: Oxford, 2013), 414–15.

12. Charles Burney, *The Present State of Music in Germany, the Netherlands, and United Provinces*, 2nd ed. (London, 1775), 1:95, digitized by GoogleBooks: https://books.google.com/books?id=Ei9DAAAAcAAJ (accessed 5 March 2018).

13. In their article on the use of archives in music history pedagogy, James O'Leary and Danielle Ward-Griffin describe how archival materials encourage students to "maneuver between broader, pre-existing historical narratives on the one hand, and local, particular questions about the individual object on the other, trying to devise a plausible history of the object by noting how it meets expectations set up by past scholarly work, and (especially) how it may

to the full manuscript, the full book, and the full score (albeit in digital copy), students can verify information for themselves, fostering their sense of intellectual independence and curiosity. They will encounter mundane, quirky details that enliven the past and its cast of characters, making them seem more real, more human. (From *Synecdoche, New York*: "None of those people is an extra. They're all the leads of their own stories.") Students' maps of the past will become larger, more detailed, and more immersive. They will also begin to sense that the scope of history extends well beyond the confines of a lecture, textbook, or anthology: there is still much more music to play, many more details to learn, and many more musicians to encounter. The goals of this approach are twofold: to encourage students to seek other paths through the historical record beyond what might be covered in class, and to give them the historical skillset to embark on their own independent journeys.

For example, Marcantonio Dal Re's stunningly detailed engraving "Il Real Castello di Milano" (1751) includes a miniscule bandshell—the very one in which Giovanni Battista Sammartini's orchestra performed some of his symphonies (**Figure 1a**).[14] No orchestral musicians are visible, unfortunately, but numerous members of a costumed audience are, and showing this scene to students can awaken their historical imagination in exciting and evocative ways. Now allow students to explore beyond the cropped perimeter, and set them loose in the entire image (**Figure 1b**). The outdoor concert becomes just one facet of an extraordinarily diverse scene—one that includes traveling vagabonds, running dogs, exploding canons, and marching armies, and one that relegates music to the sidelines, instead placing a fearsome, majestic castle in its center. Zooming out from the bandshell, the detail becomes engulfed by the whole.

not." This approach equips students with "'double vision'—relating the micro and the macro, the obscure and the prominent." James O'Leary and Danielle Ward-Griffin, "Digging in Your Own Backyard: Archives in the Music History Classroom," this *Journal* 7, no. 2 (2017): 2 and 5.

14. The engraving is included and discussed in John Spitzer and Neal Zaslaw, *The Birth of the Orchestra: History of an Institution, 1650–1815* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 166–68. It has been digitized by the University of Bern, which makes it available for free in an online zoomable format; it may also be downloaded for a small fee: https://baselbern.swissbib.ch/Record/36470702X (accessed 1 March 2018).

Figure 1a: Detail from Marcantonio Dal Re, "Il Real Castello di Milano" (1751), with Sammartini's bandshell on the right. Universitätsbibliothek Bern, Ryh 3808:11

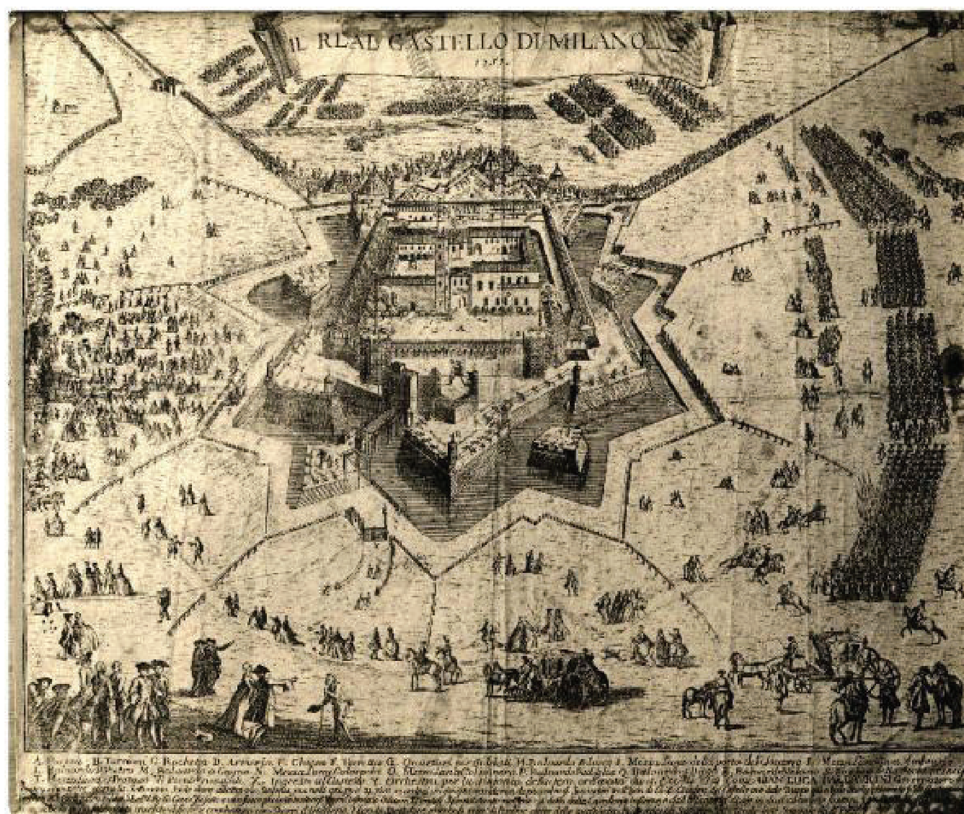

Figure 1b: Marcantonio Dal Re, "Il Real Castello di Milano" (1751). Universitätsbibliothek Bern, Ryh 3808:11

But what about the opposite approach—not zooming out for perspective, but zooming in for detail? As G. R. Elton proclaims (in instructive hyperbole), "Historical research does not consist, as beginners […] often suppose, in the pursuit of some particular evidence which will answer a particular question; it consists of an exhaustive, and exhausting, review of everything that may conceivably be germane to a given investigation."[15] In the textbook, as in the classroom, short snippets of abridged texts often serve to reinforce or prove a historical hypothesis, resulting in the kind of cherrypicked evidence that Elton warns against. Historical methods are messier, often inspired by the sort of "creative questioning" that Rebecca Cypess describes in her essay for this roundtable. Moreover, the sources used to engage in this questioning are themselves fallible, subjective, and inconsistent, thus requiring additional layers of scrutiny (an issue explored by Brooks Kuykendall in his essay).[16] Laura Sangha and Jonathan Willis suggest that a better way to deal with primary sources is

> to start with one or more research questions, then to analyse a body of relevant material, and to let the sources speak for themselves in providing an answer. The process of historical research is very often a surprising one, as we come across things that we didn't expect, and revise our initial ideas accordingly. The historian therefore needs to approach his or her sources with an open mind. Don't cherry-pick them, or misrepresent them in order to support a pre-existing theory; see what the sources have to say, and then form your conclusions accordingly.[17]

An "exhaustive, and exhausting, review of everything" is extraordinarily time consuming, but the collective brainpower of a music history classroom can accelerate the process. Following Sangha's and Willis's approach to the study of primary sources, a classroom exercise in historical methods might begin by opening a line of inquiry with a broad, expansive question. Then, using a corpus of historical sources (e.g., a collection of concert programs, dedications,

15. G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 60.

16. As Ludmilla Jordanova writes, undergraduate students seldom have this opportunity to deal with these complexities: "One characteristic of outstanding historical scholarship lies in the creative and self-aware use of the complexities of evidence. This involves conveying to readers something of the processes by which sources have been produced, so that they are not presented as static documents with self-evident authority, but rather emerge as layered assemblages that testify in a variety of ways. Although these skills are taught in universities, they begin to be properly acquired only at doctoral level, leaving undergraduates to receive historical evidence extensively pre-packaged. As a result, the ways in which evidence has been found, selected and used, how authors have chosen a particular genre to write their work up in, which audiences they have targeted and the tacit assumptions upon which their work rests, tend to be obscured." Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London: Arnold; and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 33–34.

17. Laura Sangha and Jonathan Willis, "Introduction: Understanding Early Modern Primary Sources," in *Understanding Early Modern Primary Sources*, ed. Laura Sangha and Jonathan Willis, 1–14 (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 7.

advertisements, ornament tables, sheet music, etc.), the class can be divided into small groups, each assigned to a small slice of the data set. Once students have had the chance to study their primary sources, let each group introduce its documents to the rest of the class. Then, encourage discussion (akin to the rhetorical analysis described by Timothy Cochran): What are the commonalities and trends, the "strands" and "themes," as well as the discrepancies and exceptions, within this collection of sources? In such an activity, students move from the breadth of an open-ended question, to the particular issues raised by their own unique historical document, to the collective synthesis of diverse documents. The entire class thus externalizes the historian's internal deliberations. As James O'Leary and Danielle Ward-Griffin write, "Rather than being presented with 'facts,' as one might assume in a textbook, students working with unfamiliar objects are inundated with questions. Learning to manage such questions productively—to shape, to home, to hone them—is an essential lesson in historical research."[18]

Using some of the digitization projects described above, this type of exercise can be applied to a variety of topics in the music history classroom. Here are three:

1. *What kind of music was played at the Concert spirituel?* Each group of students receives a different Wednesday issue of the *Journal de Paris* (available online at Gallica).[19] Limit your inquiry to a single month (e.g., April 1788, peak Haydn), or pick a wider range (e.g., 1750–1790) to observe the gradual secularization of the concerts. The first page of each issue offers multiple opportunities to introduce students to a strange new form of the letter "s" ("Le Soleil ſe leve…," "Obſervations Météorologiques"). Some students will be intimidated by the foreign language, but have no fear: cognates abound here (*musique*, *symphonie*). In order to preempt any concerns, students who have had elementary French can be dispersed strategically around the class, one per group. (This is a valuable reminder that scholars and musicians rely on the expertise of others.) Once assigned to an issue of the *Journal de Paris*, students will need some time to skim through weather reports, agricultural news, obituaries, and other dusty reminders of historical life (signs of that "past that might really have happened"), because the concert announcements tend to appear on the last page. The instructor can begin by asking questions ("Raise your hands if your concert includes a piece of

18. O'Leary and Ward-Griffin, "Archives in the Music History Classroom," 4. See also Sara Haefeli, "From Answers to Questions: Fostering Student Creativity and Engagement in Research and Writing," this *Journal* 7, no. 1 (2016): 1–17.

19. *Journal de Paris*, Gallica, http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb327986698/date.item (accessed 15 March 2018). See also Constant Pierre, *Histoire du Concert spirituel, 1725–1790* (Paris: Société française de musicologie, 1975).

sacred music"), but the students should interject as well ("Our concert has a symphony by Haydn—does anyone else have one, too?"). Begin to forge a history, piling these pebbles from the past to construct the two or three short sentences about the Concert spirituel from the lecture or textbook.

2. *What happened when Jenny Lind came to town on her American tour?* Each group of students is assigned a half-column from the relevant issue of a local historical paper (in my case, the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* on February 8, 1851). Depending on the quality of the copy, students may need a primer on hard-to-read texts: can the letters of a blurry, faded word be inferred from context? As in the previous example, instructors should consult with visually impaired students about their preferred accommodations (for example, a prepared transcription that can be scanned by a text reader).[20] Once situated, students will need to sift through the evidence, gauging for themselves the relevance of each piece of information. Amidst the maritime news, crime reports, wedding announcements, and retail advertisements, some students may also find information on ticket sales, concert programs, and souvenirs. (Some students will find nothing on Jenny Lind at all—a valuable lesson, too.) Scrutinize the evidence. What did Lind sing? How were tickets sold, and for how much? (Compare prices with those of other items advertised throughout the paper.) How did fans commemorate the event? (Perhaps some Jenny Lind perfume suited the occasion, and perhaps you can find some vintage bottles on eBay.) A microhistory will emerge—a day in the life of a city—but so will the outlines of a social history, one that might concern the nature of celebrity, the prestige of European classical music, or the capitalist musical marketplace.

3. *What kind of music did the publishers of Tin Pan Alley produce?* For homework, students spend time online browsing the Sheet Music Consortium; each student selects a song of interest, prints it out, and brings it to class.[21] (Students should be advised in advance about the racist content they are likely to come across.) These printed songs constitute the data set, from which students can glean aspects of musical style, social trends, and publishing strategies. For instance, the instructor may ask students if their songs

20. John Prescott offers important personal testimony on the difficulties that visually impaired scholars may have with archival materials: "John Stanley, 'A Miracle of Art and Nature': The Role of Disability in the Life and Career of a Blind Eighteenth-Century Musician" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2011), 64–65. The Smithsonian's Transcription Center is an exciting model for improving archival accessibility; it's also great for classroom activities. Smithsonian Digital Volunteers: Transcription Center, Smithsonian, https://transcription.si.edu (accessed 29 October 2018).

21. Sheet Music Consortium, UCLA Digital Library, http://digital2.library.ucla.edu/sheetmusic/ (accessed 22 March 2018).

> begin with a verse or a chorus. Guide students toward the conclusion as more hands go up for one option than another: Tin Pan Alley songs begin with the verse, and we know this not from a single anthologized example, but because a number of students with different songs arrived at the same observation. The topics of songs also warrant consideration: ask one student to display the cover of their song, then ask if other students have anything similar. Certain trends may emerge; there are likely to be plenty of evergreen songs about love, several topical songs about war or politics, and a few oddball, silly novelty songs ("Hot Roasted Peanuts: A Nutty Song with a Crackin' Good Tune"). (If no students felt comfortable bringing a song with racist content, be prepared to show one to demonstrate their ubiquity.) Students can also be encouraged to consider the medium of sheet music beyond its presentation of music. For example, they might find publishing slogans ("You can't go wrong with a Feist song"), references to performance ("as sung by…"), celebrity endorsements, or marginalia that might direct the consumer to other editions of the song if not to other songs altogether.[22]

By accessing digital facsimiles of original publications in their entirety (the full journal, the full image, the full score), students are exposed to primary sources in all of their unedited complexity. By using a corpus of sources, rather than a single emblematic work, students are exposed to the process by which historians synthesize evidence, identify commonalities, and grapple with exceptions. This approach simulates what Bernard Bailyn memorably described as the "alternating dipping and soaring motion of the mind as it drops down to scrutinize puzzling, tangled details, then struggles, not always successfully, to rise again to view the landscape whole."[23] Our perspective of the past begins with the high map-to-terrain ratio that an abridgment, synopsis, or open-ended question provides. We plummet low for the kind of "on the ground," "in the weeds" historical labor that brings us close to the "past that might really have happened." And then—reluctantly, perhaps—we reascend.

22. For more information on advertisements within Tin Pan Alley sheet music, read Daniel Goldmark, "Creating Desire on Tin Pan Alley," *The Musical Quarterly* 90 (2007): 197–229.

23. Bernard Bailyn, "The Challenge to Modern Historiography," *American Historical Review* 87 (1982): 7.