

Article

Towards a Study of Incidental Music Through the Lens of Applied Musicology

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Abstract: In this article, applied musicology is discussed in the context of research on incidental music in Serbia—a task which, to my knowledge, has not been undertaken so far. In recent years, the body of publications on applied musicology has notably expanded, resulting in a number of important articles and a landmark collective monograph. This, in turn, prompted me to view my main research interests—applied music and, in particular, incidental music—through the lens of applied musicology and offer my perspective on the possibilities of regarding incidental music as a field that can benefit from applied-musicological interventions. In this article, I draw attention to challenges that arise once a musicologist sets out to analyse incidental music. I undertake this by (a) presenting what I define as a reconstructive-analytical method in approaching incidental music and (b) utilising the narrative “behind the scenes” of my doctoral research.

Keywords: incidental music; contemporary music; sustainability; theatre music; applied musicology; activist musicology; advocacy

1. Introduction

This article¹ presents a study on applying musicological skills to the research on incidental music. Applied musicology saw a recent expansion in studies and monographs (Ockelford 2013; Medić 2022; Radovanović and Bralović 2023; Dromey 2024; Teparić 2024; Lončar and Pavlović 2024), which prompted me to observe my own research of incidental music in a new light.

Some fundamental similarities between concepts of applied music (a broader field that incidental music belongs to) and applied musicology exist: not only do they share the adjective ‘applied’, but as concepts, they are ‘supplemented’ by other disciplines. Both applied music and applied musicology entail reliance on an active dialogue with other disciplinary fields; as Adam Ockelford highlighted, “applied musicology makes no claim to be able to stand in isolation from other forms of music-related research” (Ockelford 2013, p. 457). Applied musicology lies at the intersections of musicology and many other disciplines, or as Dromey points out—one of applied musicology’s earlier definitions included the “intra-musicological intersection of musicology and performance studies” (Dromey 2024, p. 4). Moreover, as Sharif documents, in the very beginning, “musicology was applied” (Sharif 2024, p. 10). Applied musicology connotes the application of musicological expertise on a particular phenomenon with the intention of dissecting, understanding, and generating knowledge on the said phenomenon.

On the other hand, numerous challenges arise once musicology meets theatre, yet it is important to acknowledge them. As part of my ongoing research, I have focused on incidental music within dramatic theatre in Serbia at the turn of the 21st century. In my view, incidental music is an invaluable part of inscenation and, as such, one that integrates seamlessly with other constituent elements of staging. It is defined by the dramatic context that it constitutes together with other elements of the stagecraft and cannot be fully understood and interpreted without other elements that it coexists with within a particular stage show. According to an entry in Grove Music Online (Savage



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2001), *incidental music* was used to represent a great number of musical practices in theatre, but it quickly became linked solely to dramatic theatre, considering the usage of other terms that were better suited to connote certain practices more precisely, for example, *music theatre* (Savage 2001). A broader term—*applied music*—encompasses incidental music, film music, video game music and other genres in which music finds its ‘application’. Incidental music, stemming from theatre, inherently coexists with many other disciplines and, thus, necessitates an interdisciplinary approach because, as composer Vartkes Baronijan (who wrote many incidental music pieces) underlined, “any music, once introduced into a dramatic structure, becomes a part of it and cannot be treated as a separate musical piece anymore” (Baronijan 2007, p. 95). Therefore, a musicologist should strive not to be (to use Isaac Asimov’s expression) *a generalist* (Asimov 2002, p. 138) but should reach for all knowledge beyond their own expertise to make well-informed and thorough insights into a particular piece of incidental music.

With an adequate ‘toolbox’, a musicologist can confidently enter theatre premises, discover, reconstruct, and analyse pieces of incidental music within their original context, thus assisting the theatre art by safeguarding its constituent part (i.e., music) and consequently making the theatrical act more sustainable. Ensuring and fostering the sustainability of artworks, including stage shows, is, in my understanding, one of the key aspects of applied musicology. When we set out to research a certain topic, we apply a set of skills to gain more insights about that topic. Our act of learning, interpreting, critically engaging with, or building upon the corpus of knowledge on a certain topic provides it with a fresh perspective, extending its relevancy and, consequently, adding to its sustainability. Previously, while contemplating the importance of discography in relation to incidental music, I have stated that

sustainability would mean turning something as intangible and fleeting as the inherent nature of incidental music into something tangible (and, at the same time, commercially consumable if we are to speak in a discographic way), tapping into its potential as a resource for research that cannot be depleted. (Novaković 2022, p. 128)

This example of a good practice does not remove the dangers that occur when musicological expertise is not called upon, which I cautioned about previously (Novaković 2022, p. 128).

In this article, I will discuss how applied musicology can ensure the “survival” of incidental music, bearing in mind Chris Dromey’s words that “an applied-musicological lens allows us to recognise how musical expertise is (or could be) brought to bear in any number of domains or situations, to examine these processes, and to understand their implications” (Dromey 2024, p. 1). Therefore, the presence of applied musicology in theatre assists with both understanding and preserving the creations of composers and directors. To understand incidental music is to understand the staging of the play and its functioning in its entirety. In Section 3, A Tailor-Made Toolbox: Reconstructive-Analytical Method and Section RA Method (Enter Stage Left). RA Method (Enter Stage Left), I present a “behind the scenes” insight into my doctoral research, aiming to demonstrate the importance of applied musicology for incidental music. However, I will begin by addressing what it means and what it takes to apply musicological expertise to this genre. I will then address the challenges of researching incidental music in Serbia that often discourage researchers from engaging with this genre in the first place.

Incidental Music Through the Lens of Applied Musicology

Through my research focused on incidental music created by composers in Serbia (Novaković 2020a, 2020b, 2022, 2023), I have observed that the academic discourse on incidental music in Serbia (and elsewhere) is severely underdeveloped. Therefore, this article highlights *advocacy* that precedes *action*. Advocacy, in my view, is one of the keywords of applied musicology, in line with the postulates and principles of activist musicology and *social engagement* (Medić 2022, p. 90) inherent in the musicological approach to theatre. Building off several points that Ivana Medić underlined in her study (Medić 2022, p. 90),

my study encompasses the artistic–theoretical work of composers and theatre directors and their creative endeavours and archival work—in the sense of advocating for preserving and making available archival materials, particularly time-sensitive (and thus fleeting and elusive) artistic products such as theatrical productions. Furthermore, applying musicology to the research of incidental music means not only advocating for the preservation and sustainability of this genre (Novaković 2022, pp. 125–42) but also reconstructing and recreating scores and music, either partially or fully lost, for which musicological expertise is needed. Additionally, I believe that the interest researchers show in a particular field might produce results and incentives to nurture the field, as I firmly support the idea that “musicologists should try to have an active influence (...) instead of being passive by-standers” (Sharif 2017, p. 119); in other words, musicologists should fully engage their expertise in furthering the knowledge of matters and practices they are interested in and would like to see improved and nurtured.

2. Challenges in Approaching Incidental Music in Serbia

The challenges a musicologist faces before researching incidental music in Serbia are plenty, and they range from a lack of institutional support and regulations that would allow researchers easier access, through poorly organised and preserved research materials, to non-existent traces of theatrical activity that could help us reconstruct the theatrical event within which incidental music took place. Copyright claims prevent theatres from posting video recordings of various theatrical productions on YouTube and other streaming platforms. However, one way of accessing recordings of theatre productions is still possible, and that is via the official YouTube channel of the cultural–artistic programme of the Radio Television of Serbia (*RTS Kulturno-umetnički program—Zvanični kanal (RTS Kulturno-Umetnički Program n.d.)*). Namely, the RTS sometimes films and then broadcasts certain theatrical shows and, after some time, uploads them to YouTube. Even then, videos are subjected to potential copyright claims due to the use of popular music in a theatrical production that the YouTube algorithm recognises as non-fair use, thus replacing the copyrighted song or removing the video entirely.

Regarding institutionalised archives, the Museum of Theatrical Arts (*The Museum of Theatrical Arts in Serbia n.d.*) is the primary place where one can acquire necessary materials, although their fund is incomplete. The museum cannot force theatres to submit documents on their activity at the end of every season, thus leading to a lack of video recordings, playbills, photographs, manuscripts, director’s notes on the production, costumes and many other materials documenting theatrical activity.

Many of these challenges have plagued other musicological endeavours in Serbia. As Bojana Radovanović and Miloš Bralović explained eloquently,

the institutions responsible for and overseeing some type of cultural and artistic field fail to fulfill their mission. The consequent absence of cultural, educational, and scientific institutions that conserve and archive art and applied and traditional music from the public dialogue is particularly dramatic in the age of global internet culture because it gives the impression of an incomplete picture and even an ‘undeveloped’, ‘substandard’, or a non-existent culture. (Radovanović and Bralović 2023, p. 2)

Recognising these issues, Radovanović and Bralović, alongside Ana Đorđević and Stefan Savić, established the YouTube channel *Serbian Composers*, thus showcasing Serbian art and incidental music to the global public, simultaneously preserving and disseminating Serbian music, and, consequently, reaching a wider audience (Radovanović and Bralović 2023, p. 2). The videos uploaded to the channel *Serbian Composers* included applied music (film music and incidental music in particular) by many Serbian composers such as Dušan Radić (1929–2010), Zoran Simjanović (1946–2021), Zoran Erić (1950–2024), Isidora Žebeljan (1967–2020), Ivana Stefanović (b. 1948) and others. The establishment of the YouTube channel that would disseminate the music of Serbian composers of all genres, and in this particular case, incidental music, is just one of the many steps in the right direction in

solving the challenges posed before musicologists and music specialists. Other important acts would include, but would not be limited to the following:

- (a) Active collaboration with the authors themselves (composers, theatre directors, etc.)—an endeavour that will result in THE concurrent documentation of the author’s work on a particular project, as well as the preservation of a vital part of their opus;
- (b) Collaboration with cultural institutions on projects;
- (c) Organised workshops that will provide music education for archivists, librarians, and other people responsible for archival practices within a particular institution, as well as organised workshops and events that will make incidental music approachable to broader audiences, etc.;
- (d) Advocating for better archival practices and better accessibility to knowledge stored in archival institutions;
- (e) Advocating for better copyright policies and regulations in place to make archival documents more accessible to researchers whose research would benefit the production of knowledge on a particular cultural and artistic practice, etc.

So far, Serbian incidental music, observed within the broader context of the history of Serbian music, as well as the history of Serbian theatre, has not received full recognition as a creative practice and a unique culture crucial to many composers, including university professors who teach composition (such as the aforementioned Radić, Erić and Žebeljan), as well as directors who recognise the potential that music lends to a theatrical production. The discourse on incidental music is scarce, primarily due to the systemic failures that researchers are not willing to tackle. These systemic failures lead to a complete and permanent loss of information regarding authors of music incidental to various plays, a lack of materials documenting the existence and use of music in staged plays, and many other problems (Novaković 2022, pp. 128–9), thus rendering the otherwise rich production within the realm of incidental music impalpable. To remedy this, and similarly to *computational musicology*, *activist musicology* or *ludomusicology*, there have been attempts to name a specific musicology that could deal with theatre—e.g., *theatrical musicology*, as suggested by Roman Benedict (Benedict 2012). I would argue that separate, theatre-specific musicology is not required, as musicology already possesses a set of tools (some of them “borrowed” from other disciplines) with which to access theatre productions and incidental music.

3. A Tailor-Made Toolbox: Reconstructive-Analytical Method

My research of incidental music has hitherto mostly focused on contemporary Serbian composers (Novaković 2020a, 2020b, 2022, 2023) due to the lack of research on their works in this field, despite a noticeable increase in the production of incidental music at the end of 20th century. This production especially flourished during the 1990s, one of the most turbulent periods in Serbian history, and was heavily affected by the socio-economic crisis prompted by the disintegration of Yugoslavia (Novaković 2023, p. 50). Theatres provided a haven for Serbian composers who were forced to write incidental music to make a living due to the lack of other commissions (Novaković 2023, p. 50); some of them continued to write incidental music even after the crisis passed. Furthermore, several composers (e.g., Žebeljan, Erić, Stefanović and others) decided to breathe a post-theatrical life into their previously incidental creations by reworking their music for theatre into “non-incidental” concert pieces and thus allowing new listeners to discover these works (Novaković 2023, p. 50).

The problems faced by a musicologist include but are not limited to a lack of sheet music scores of incidental music and/or prompt books and the fact that archival documents are few and far between, leading to an insufficient body of material that could clue the musicologist in on the ‘role’ that music has in the staging of the play. Due to this scarcity of preserved material, as well as little to no access to the material stored within an institutional context, researchers often have to rely solely on the personal archives of composers and other people who participated in the creation of a theatrical act. So, how should we gain insights into incidental music? In this case, a researcher should practice what I have named

in my doctoral dissertation, a reconstructive-analytical method. Before pursuing analysis, it is essential to ‘anchor’ the theatrical act via reconstruction that would make interpretation feasible. The method I suggest relies, first and foremost, on the intention to collect any and all documents available that will form a body of documentation—the building blocks for reconstruction, bearing in mind Foucault’s words that

reconstitution, on the basis of what the documents say, and sometimes merely hint at, of the past from which they emanate and which has now disappeared far behind them; the document was always treated as the language of a voice since reduced to silence, its fragile, but possibly decipherable trace. (Foucault 1972, p. 6)

This body of documentation allows for the highest degree of accuracy and verifiability in forming statements on a particular case of incidental music. Establishing a collection of documents provided me with a clear insight into the choice of case studies that I could reconstruct and analyse. This collection contains the following information:

1. My interviews with composers and theatre directors;
2. Private archival collections of composers, directors, playwrights, and others who participated in the creation of particular staging;
3. Musical notes, sketches and fragments of incidental music that were later either included in or excluded from the final design of the theatre play;
4. Video recordings of productions and audio recordings of musical numbers incidental to a play;
5. Copies of artefacts from the previously mentioned institutional archive of the Museum of Theatre Arts, including items from their online base Teatroslov;
6. Materials from the archives of theatrical institutions that staged a particular play;
7. Published texts and testimonies about a particular theatrical production penned by composers or directors;
8. Other material such as stage texts, news clippings, catalogues, photographs, websites, reviews, other documents, such as programme notes (Bower 2024, p. 46), etc.

This collection of documentation took varying sizes for each case study I was interested in. It is important to note that this endeavour of collecting, organising and interpreting available data would fall under Medić’s fourth category of activities covered by applied musicology, namely “archival and curatorial work”, which includes, among other things, “processing, promotion and public availability of archival materials, of discography and archival recordings” (Medić 2022, p. 91).

After gathering and organising the material, carefully examining its completeness in detail, identifying its strengths and weaknesses, and finally selecting case studies that could be reconstructed to the highest possible degree of accuracy and likeness to the original event, I realised that this material demanded supplementation of my musicological expertise with several other concepts, theories and methods:

- *Remediation* (Bolter and Grusin 2000): placed here primarily in the service of *reconstruction*. As I previously stated, many composers reused the material (either short fragments or entire numbers) originally written as incidental music and transferred it to their non-incidental music, the scores of which are more readily available. A researcher can then use these repurposed materials to reconstruct incidental music as it was performed in a theatrical production.
- Sava Anđelković’s *classification of didascalie [stage directions]* (Anđelković 2022, pp. 19–20), again in the service of reconstruction, considered the fact that stage directions found in a particular play can reveal a great deal about music (when should it be used, what particular number should be used, with what function, in association with which character, etc.)
- *Musicality dispositive* and, in particular, the concept of *intermusicality* suggested by David Roesner (Roesner 2014). Intermusicality “in theatre forms a web of references, of allusions, quotations, citations and evocations that allocate an important role to

the audience's individual and collective knowledge of the origins, context and layers of meaning that certain musical materials, principles or styles bring with them" (Roesner 2014, p. 221). This concept is one of the key elements of my reconstructive-analytical toolbox, as it is extensively manifested in case studies that I am analysing in my dissertation.

- *The historiographical method* transformed here into a *history of events*, with the added concept of the *event-ness* of performance suggested by Erika Fisher-Lichte (Fischer-Lichte 2014, pp. 41–42); according to this author, we are to understand the performance as an event in which actors interact with each other, while simultaneously engaging with the audience. Hence, it is a result of the collective mind, not one single authority, including the audience, that receives, interprets, criticises or ponders the event (Fischer-Lichte 2014, pp. 41–42).

I wish to emphasise that my reconstructive-analytical method is a customisable toolbox and, as such, allows the musicologist to add or remove the tools—methods, theories, practices, etc.—that they may or may not need when approaching a certain case study.

Using the example of one case study included in my research, I will now demonstrate the process of gathering data and making the most of them.

RA Method (Enter Stage Left)

When analysing the material on incidental music that I have collected over the years, I observed that several productions were particularly interesting with respect to the reconstruction of music incidental to them. Reconstruction was conducted by relying on scores of concert pieces and comparing the versions. Sometimes, musical fragments from a certain production were used verbatim in new pieces, but more often than not, they were used to build a new musical 'tissue'. I would like to point out several examples:

- Music for the plays *Dozivanje ptica* (*Calling the Birds*, The Yugoslav Drama Theatre, 1989, in collaboration with composer Srđan Hofman), *Pogled u nebo* (*Skylight*, Zvezdara Theatre, 2003), and *San letnje noći* (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, National Theatre in Belgrade, 1997) written by composer Zoran Erić, received transformational treatment. The composer reused, reshaped, further developed or elaborated its fragments or whole musical numbers with the creation of the following concert pieces containing traceable theatrical musical fragments: (a) *Slike haosa III: Helijum u maloj kutiji* (*Images of Chaos III: Helium In a Small Box*; first version 1991; second version 1999) which 'houses' the 'runaway' birds from the production of *Dozivanje ptica*; (b) *Sedam pogleda u nebo* [*Seven Glances At The Sky*] for string sextet (2007) which examines the musical material of *Pogled u nebo*; and (c) *Slike haosa V: Oberon koncert* (*Images of Chaos V: Oberon Concert* 1997) ridden with the playful mischief of Puck and royal arrogance of Oberon, now navigating a different type of musical forest.
- Memorable music for the play *Leons i Lena* [*Leonce and Lena*, coproduction of The Yugoslav Drama Theatre and Budva Grad Theatre] was composed by Isidora Žebeljan. In addition to musical sketches and notes that the composer made, of great importance was the score of *Leonce and Lena, a suite for soprano, oboe, ocarina, piano, viola, double bass and percussion*, which aided in understanding Žebeljan's creative process while creating the sonic world of the play.
- Composer Ivana Stefanović, whilst writing music incidental to a play *Otac* [*Father*, Atelje 212 1993], simultaneously wrote her *String quartet no. 3 Play Strindberg* (1993), proving that some works of incidental music in their inception can instantaneously exist in both versions—for the theatre and the concert stage.

Besides audibly and visually searching the non-incidental music scores in order to reconstruct incidental music and learn the mechanism behind it, I also utilised *transcription*. I have transcribed melodies and motifs of incidental music written by other composers whose sketches and scores were not available, but the music was preserved in audio recordings and/or snippets or ingrains in video recordings of stagings, recorded either by

theatres or broadcasting houses. This pursuit of incidental music is very laborious and confirms that incidental music needs musicology now more than ever.

The reconstruction of scores and transcribing audio recordings (both separate and as part of the video files) proved to be the two most important instances of *practicing applied musicology* with the intention to interpret and analyse and most importantly, preserve and sustain this time-sensitive genre of music.

4. Conclusions

In this article, I demonstrate the importance of applied musicology for researching incidental music; I also wanted to kickstart a conversation about this underappreciated field, with a plethora of potential for analysis, interpretation and learning. I hope that I justified the presence of musicological expertise in theatre, not only regarding incidental music but also other genres that belong to theatre. Preserving incidental music means preserving a vital part of theatre and, more broadly, vital parts of the history of music and theatre history—especially in a country such as Serbia where, during the tragic and crisis-laden 1990s, incidental music was the only type of new music regularly commissioned and written. By engaging with living history and reconstructing it on the basis of direct communication with its protagonists, a musicologist lends themselves to the noblest of causes—furthering and preserving human knowledge.

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