

# The Intellect Handbook of Popular Music Methodologies

*Edited by Mike Dines, Shara Rambarran, and Gareth Dylan Smith*

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Sangheon Lee

University of Huddersfield

*S.Lee3@hud.ac.uk*

*The Intellect Handbook of Popular Music Methodologies* is an ambitious and welcome addition to the expanding landscape of popular music studies. Spanning more than 700 pages, the volume surveys scholarly practices ranging from ethnography and discourse analysis to artistic and practice-based research, digital approaches, posthuman musicology, and critical engagements with technology and mediation. Its breadth is a considerable achievement, and the handbook addresses researchers at multiple stages of their careers by offering an overview of established approaches and entry points into the field.

What distinguishes this volume from other handbooks, however, is the conceptual promise articulated in its title and Introduction. As the editors emphasise, the book is not intended as a mere collection of “methods”, but as an exploration of “methodologies”: the focus is “not only on what methods we and our peers are using (...) but on the rationales for, affordances of, and challenges and opportunities inherent in” the approaches through which scholars seek to understand, explain, and do popular music (1). Taking this framing seriously, the distinction between “method” and “methodology” becomes crucial. While a method concerns how research is conducted, methodology raises more fundamental questions about the grounds, assumptions, and implications of

scholarly practice. Evaluated against this methodological horizon, the handbook oscillates between sustained methodological reflection and a survey of recent research practices.

This ambiguity is particularly visible in a chapter devoted to Chinese popular music. The author applies ethnography alongside textual and visual analysis—approaches well established within popular music studies. What is largely absent, however, is methodological reflection in the stronger sense proposed by the editors themselves. The chapter demonstrates how these methods are used, but not why they are chosen, what they disclose about music, or what they necessarily leave unexamined. This limitation is already evident in the chapter's framing, which invokes Sarah Cohen's critique of the marginality of ethnography (Cohen 1993) as a justification for the research orientation. More than three decades later, such a claim is difficult to sustain, particularly in a volume that devotes an entire section to ethnographic research and relies heavily on ethnographic methods elsewhere. In this context, the appeal to ethnography functions less as a methodological argument than as rhetorical legitimation.

A similar simplification characterises the chapter's engagement with theory. Tia DeNora's work is reduced to the claim that "meanings are established by listeners via their use of music rather than by music itself" (374), flattening her relational argument into a crude opposition between music and reception. A brief appeal to the continued relevance of musicological analysis follows, producing a conciliatory synthesis that ultimately drains the debate of its methodological force. The issue is not the legitimacy of attending to listening practices or meaning-making processes, but the absence of reflection on how such empirical emphases shape what can be known about music, and how musical organisation itself might enter into the analysis beyond discourse and practice description. In this respect, the chapter exemplifies a broader tendency within the volume: methods are applied competently, but their epistemic assumptions, limits, and stakes remain largely implicit.

A comparable pattern can be observed in the chapter on Krishnacore by one of the editors. The contribution offers a well-contextualised account of the ideological, religious, and socio-political discourses that shape the scene, situating Krishnacore convincingly within broader debates around identity, belief, and resistance. As an analysis of discourse and self-representation, it is informative and persuasive. Yet once again, the methodological emphasis falls overwhelmingly on language, narrative, and testimony, while the musical dimension itself remains largely underexamined. This imbalance becomes evident when the author cites an interviewee who describes "the means in which he narrates his experiences through the musical text" (584). Here, "musical text" refers less to organised sound or musical structure than to a vehicle for narrative expression, diverging from its usage elsewhere in the volume, where it denotes sonic, formal, or material properties. The issue is not merely terminological, but methodological: music is treated primarily as a discursive surface rather than as a constitutive medium of meaning. The relative absence of sonic or structural analysis is not framed as a methodological choice with specific affordances and limits, but is instead taken for granted, reproducing a familiar tendency to interpret musical cultures chiefly through what musicians

simply say about their work rather than through how musical organisation itself generates meaning, affect, and social force.

The final section of the volume, devoted to “emerging methodologies”, brings these issues into especially sharp relief by foregrounding approaches—such as ecomusicology and Animal-Oriented Music Criticism—that directly challenge the anthropocentric assumptions underpinning much existing research. These posthuman perspectives do not merely extend the methodological landscape; they call into question the very foundations on which earlier claims to methodological renewal within the volume rest.

Against this methodological backdrop, one chapter framed as proposing “methods for the twenty-first century” reveals a significant tension. The chapter advances artistic research as a way of overcoming a perceived dichotomy between intuition and logos through the notion of “musical reasoning” (39). Yet this proposal remains firmly grounded in human cognition, creativity, and experience, precisely the human-centred orientation that the final section implicitly seeks to unsettle. Moreover, the chapter legitimises its methodological novelty by construing earlier research as excessively logocentric—treating logos as synonymous with linguistic or rational domination—and opposing language and reason to intuition in a manner that simplifies both. In doing so, it overlooks logos as a practice of disclosure and ignores its status as a derivative mode of disclosure that presupposes originary forms of intuitive access.

What is at stake here is not a disagreement between chapters, but an unresolved methodological problem internal to the volume itself. The posthuman interventions in the final section implicitly destabilise the framing through which artistic research is presented as methodologically progressive, yet this destabilisation is neither acknowledged nor reflected upon. It is precisely such tensions—between what a method presupposes, reveals, and excludes—that methodology ought to bring into view. In this sense, *methodo-logia* would name not the accumulation of techniques, but the critical task of reflecting on the conditions under which particular approaches disclose certain aspects of music while concealing others. From this perspective, the handbook does not fully realise the conceptual space opened by its plural title, since the notion of “methodologies”, invoked so ambitiously in the Introduction, remains unevenly theorised across the volume. Nevertheless, by exposing the limits of how methodology is currently understood and practised, the book compels readers to confront a larger, unresolved question: what it might mean to take methodology seriously as a reflection on the purposes and responsibilities of popular music research today.

## References

- Cohen, S. 1993. Ethnography and Popular Music Studies. *Popular Music*, 12(2): 123–138. <https://doi.org/10.2307/931294>