Historians have traced changes in emotional expression over the course of history. For example, Stearns and Knapp (1996) chronicled how within Western culture, public expressions of grief in response to death adapted to an evolving cultural context. In the case of music-related expressions of emotions, they have speculated about changing attitudes toward grief as reflected in musical lyrics, writing that “[i]n contrast to eighteenth-century songs about death, which were set in the artificial pastoral world of shepherds and written in the third person, Victorian grief songs were personal and immediate… Literally hundreds of songs about dying girls were published, particularly in the 1860s.” (p.136)

This paper examines this assertion from the angle of digital humanities and computational musicology. The nineteenth century is commonly characterized as exhibiting a “romantic” ethos, in which passionate emotions were more commonly expressed (Harré & Parrot, 1996), meaning that any change related to grief songs may be quite difficult to trace, as it may simply be reflective of broad changes evident across many genres of music. Stearns and Knapp limit their claim to songs specifically about death. However, it is possible that any change of language between the 18th and 19th centuries was a general change, and not limited to songs about death. This paper therefore examines the full range of song topics, and compares the results to songs specifically about death. As we will see later, there are a number of technical problems associated with the use of third person pronouns. Because of these difficulties, it will be necessary to focus on the use of first- and second-person pronouns. In other words, instead of directly testing third-person usage, we test the reciprocal use of first- and second-person pronoun use. Finally, rather than limit our study to the contrast between 18th- and 19th-century musics, we will expand our study to include music spanning three centuries.

Inspired by Stearns and Knapp, we propose to examine the use of pronouns in lyrics. Specifically, we assume that the use of first- and second-person pronouns (I/me, you) are symptomatic of a more intimate or personal expression than the use of third-person pronouns (he/she/him/her). If this conjecture is true, then we might expect to observe a change of first person pronouns in the lyrics over the history of Western music. For the purposes of this initial study, we propose to limit the research to Scottish ballads found in broadsides published between 1650 and 1910.

In approaching a test of the Stearns and Knapp conjecture, we propose to test four hypotheses that successively refine the research question. That is, we begin with more general tests that provide useful contexts for interpreting the subsequent results. Firstly, we examine whether first- and second-person pronouns increase proportional to text length over time.

Secondly, we test the conjecture that the greatest increase in first- and second-person

pronouns occurs in the 19th century. Thirdly we examine whether first- and second-person pronouns are more pronounced in vocal texts dealing with death or sorrow compared with texts dealing with other topics. Lastly, we explore the notion that first- and second-person pronouns are most pronounced in vocal sorrowful texts from the 19th century.

Once again, note that the Stearns and Knapp conjecture relates to the use of third-person pronouns. In switching our focus, it is important to note that we are not claiming that there is some sort of reciprocal relationship between first-/second- and third-person pronoun use. That is, we do not want to assume that reducing the number of third-person pronouns will necessarily result in an increase in first- or second-person pronouns. Instead, we propose that the Stearns and Knapp claim is principally a claim about the “intimacy” of the language expression. To the extent that first- and second-person pronouns are more intimate, it makes sense to re-interpret the Stearns and Knapp conjecture as better related to first- and second person pronoun use, rather than to third-person pronouns.

The study involves assembling a database of 911 ballads spanning 1650 to 1910. Rather than attempting to assemble a representative sample of Western music over the 300-year period, we assembled a single corpus of Scottish ballads. In creating this corpus, we relied principally on the collection of broadsides entitled “The Word on the Street,” which was compiled by the National Library of Scotland. Our corpus is best regarded as a convenience sample rather than a representative sample.

Procedure

In any utterance or text, a number of issues arise when identifying pronouns. An important distinction relates to the use of plurals. In English, the first-person singular “I” is more intimate than the first-person plural “we.” Indeed, Queen Elizabeth I famously used “we” as a way to defuse and depersonalize criticisms, such as “We are not amused” versus “I am not amused.” Accordingly, for the purposes of this study, we are more interested in first-person singular, rather than first-person plural pronouns.

Similarly, a distinction can be made between second-person singular and second-person plural pronouns. In English, the same word “you” is used for both the singular and plural forms. Accordingly, “you” is somewhat ambiguous.

In light of the above considerations, we might operationalize our overarching hypotheses

with the specific predictions that the pronouns “I” and “we” will both increase in the nineteenth century.

Since our procedure employs automated text-processing methods, many of the above conjectures cannot be tested without human interpretation/intervention. Thus, this study uses computational search techniques to count the pertinent instances in our corpus and follow up with manual techniques. To assure validity, we randomly extracted keyword-in-context passages to give to language-knowledgeable volunteers who will resolve the ambiguity and classify the pronoun use into the appropriate categories (this part of the study is still ongoing).

In music, lyrics are often repeated. In order to avoid undue influence of repetition in our sample of ballads, duplicate text lines are discarded. A duplicate line is defined as an exact repetition of an earlier line, excluding punctuation.

Grief-Related Content

In order to test our second hypothesis, we need to identify lyrics that exhibit grief-related subject matter. To this end, we make use of an automated procedure that has the benefit of reducing potential experimenter bias. Specifically, we identify a number of keywords that we deem symptomatic of grief-related content. In English, this includes the words cry, death, die, died, dying, sad, sadness, pain, loss, loose, tears, and lament. Rather than identifying “grief songs,” we simply identify “grief passages.” Specifically, we tallied the pronouns within close proximity of the a priori grief-related words. A pronoun was deemed to be proximate if it is on the same line as the grief-related word, or if it occurs in the immediately preceding or ensuing line.

Along with the year of composition, each piece will be represented by two numerical values, one reflecting the amount of first-person pronouns used, and the other reflecting the “personalness” of the piece as calculated by the number of first-person pronouns in grief-related passages. Using this data, we will aim to calculate a Pearson's correlation coefficient. This test assumes that the data are normally distributed.

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Author Biographies:

Elizabeth Monzingo is a doctoral student at Louisiana State University where she studies music theory, teaches aural skills courses, and manages the Music Cognition and Computation Lab. Her research interests include the areas of working memory, aural skills, and musical schemata. She is currently investigating student dictation competencies as they are influenced by primary instrument and genre preference. She also collaborates in other research, ranging from assessing melodic dictation variance to investigating associations between working memory performance and musical aptitude.

Daniel Shanahan is Assistant Professor of Music Theory at Louisiana State University, where he runs the Music Cognition and Computation Lab. His work has been published in *Music Perception*, *The Journal of New Music Research, The Journal of Jazz Studies*, *The* *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, *Frontiers in Psychology*, and *Empirical Musicology Review*, among others. Daniel recently contributed the chapter on tonality, harmony, and counterpoint to the *Routledge Companion to Music Cognition* (Routledge, 2017), and has forthcoming chapters in *Over and Over Again: Exploring Repetition in Popular Music* and *The* *Oxford Handbook of Music and Corpus Studies*(Oxford University Press, forthcoming), for which he is also serving as co-editor. Before arriving at LSU, Daniel taught music theory, history, and cognition at the University of Virginia, and was a post-doctoral research fellow at Ohio State University.

https://musiccog.ohio-state.edu/home/index.php/David\_Huron