

Whither Ethnomusicology?

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1) Introduction-Once an Ethnomusicologist, Always an Ethnomusicologist

During most of the seventies and the eighties of the last century I thought of myself as an ethnomusicologist. I read most of each and every issue of the Journal of the Society of Ethnomusicology. I attempted to follow Mantle Hood's recommendations of becoming "bi-musical" and I spent years in academia listening to and trying to analyze the form and context of the world's music in a comparative cultural framework. I also conducted ethnomusicological research in North Africa, the Middle East and East Africa.

The sixties, seventies and eighties was a period when largely North American and some European ethnomusicologists spread themselves across the developing world, lived among specific communities, recording large amounts of music in context and tried to make sense of it according to the latest social theories.

The implicit goal of this enterprise was to establish a comparative framework for the history, development and analysis of musical life. I assumed then that by the nineties or at least, by the beginning of the new century, the outlines of such a history and framework would have begun to show itself in the routine teaching of music across music departments in Canada and the States. I believe that with some very few exceptions this has not happened.

By the early nineties, other professional obligations in the world of international development reduced the amount of time that I had to follow this bold new enterprise. However, since the early nineties I have managed to speak to a number of colleagues about the present status of ethnomusicology in North America.

In short it would appear that the original vision of the founders, men like Sachs, Hornbostel, Kunst and Wiora has not been fulfilled. Ethnomusicology appears to be “lost in the details” and mired in postmodern subjectivism. So much for the ideals of social science or of a universal history of music.

I have therefore written this short and admittedly provocative essay from the perspective of a former musicological “insider” turned “outsider.” If the issues that I have raised in this essay are already well explored and have become “routinized” in the curriculum of undergraduate music departments or amongst ethnomusicologists “at large” I will be extremely gratified. I will then ask for the relevant texts and begin my catching up.

If that is not the case, then perhaps this short article will stimulate those in the field of what was once called comparative musicology, to rethink what it is they are doing and to reorient the discipline along the lines set out here.

1) On the Origins of Music

From what I have been reading in the world of science, brain scans, now show that musical perception is located in certain parts of the brain and is in certain basic, physiological ways distinct from spoken language as such.

This solves many of the philosophical dilemmas facing musicology. For example it used to be argued that music is modeled on language. Now that there is definite evidence that music is not simply “another spoken language” its study is much more a part of general semiotics than was once assumed. Much of the recent work in cognitive archaeology supports this view.

From the point of view of the politics of academia this evidence can now be used to justify the continued medieval wisdom of maintaining music as one of the liberal arts in the undergraduate curriculum, since I understand that the latest wave of enthusiasm in universities is to

turn as much of the place into the intellectual source of management consulting.

Thoughts on the physiological autonomy of music make me ask the following questions. Has there been cross-cultural testing of the perception of music using cat scans (MNR) and the like? Let me put it bluntly. Are different parts of the brain active when an Indian listens to Indian classical music or when a native born European listens to Mozart? If not, are the differences between these two sophisticated musical systems only one of content? That is to say, are the same brain processes going on and it is simply the musical form of the content that is different?

What about Westerners who (like myself) have been listening to a foreign repertoire since their teens? Do we process the music in the same way as let us say an Arab who has never left Damascus? Are these questions showing up in the literature of ethnomusicology? Are listeners studied the way segmented markets are studied by marketing researchers or, are we still focuses on musicians because most ethnomusicologists come to the field from performance?

2) The Mathematics of Music

As a graduate student of Tim Rice when I was at U of T, I remember looking through the musical analysis system of Kolinski. I felt that what I was looking at was akin to the alchemical writings of the early chemists, or better still, the musings of Kepler and Tycho Brahe before the advent of Galileo or Newton. I also looked over the writings of Jay Rahn and his extreme anti mentalist approach to music analysis.

To paraphrase Arthur Koestler it appeared to me that Kolinski and others like him were "sleepwalkers". They were on the right track but unaware of the mathematical, information and computer revolution that was going on at Bell laboratories and MIT and the information theory of people like John von Neumann.

In those days I felt that Chomsky (the linguist, not the political ideologue) must be right and that his insights could lead to effective musical analysis. That is to say, I felt that there must be a universal musical grammar of which particular styles are languages and dialects thereof. But musicologists do not usually have the training in math and computer science to pursue these avenues of research. Breakthroughs in this field have come from the fields of math, high tech and commercial music, but not from musicology.

The last twenty years has gone a long way to proving Chomsky's hypothesis and its potential transference to the field of musicology. During that period there has been a computer and information revolution that has turned the computer into something as common as the washing machine. Once software companies saw what software had done for automatic language translation they began to develop software, which could imitate (and even compose and arrange) in particular musical styles.

You are probably familiar with such programs such as Band in a Box and Cakewalk. Well, in musicological terms the software wizards who design these programs have begun the task of mathematically analyzing musical styles, reducing them to their basic vocabularies, developing "generative grammars" of the styles and then, selling them to professional musicians and amateurs as practical support systems for music making.

Now, they have only done these for a limited set of styles that are found in Europe and North America. However, I imagine that they have the ability to put let's say every Navaho melody ever recorded into digital form and give us a vocabulary and transformative grammar of Navaho music. The same could be done with the liturgical music of any Jewish community in the Diaspora, or for a body of Israeli pop music specific to the recent periodization of Israeli popular music that has been the study of some Israeli musicologists. In a sense what the software companies seem to be doing is analogous to the Human Genome Project that maps the genome that is the universal biological heritage of all humankind.

If, as ethnomusicologists assume, humankind is one, and music is one (with many variations) are the ologists working hand in hand with these kind of techno wizard/software engineers and getting funded by outfits like Microsoft Corp to do so ? And, is this kind of project being taught and encouraged in music departments in Canada and the United States ? Could I read about its ongoing progress in the latest journal of the Society for Ethnomusicology ?

3) Disappearing Worlds-Biodiversity and Cultural Diversity

In the early nineties the international development community woke up to the fact that there could be no sustainable development without better environmental conservation. Yet despite the well attested cultural ecological fact that cultural diversity is part of and supports biodiversity, few bilateral or international donors have earmarked funds for anything that even approaches the idea of “salvage ethnomusicology” as thousands of communities give up time honored ways of music making and plug into local pop music.

Africa is hard struck by this approach. That is to say, in the eyes of those in the West who have power (the bilateral donors, the European Union and the World Bank) Africa has nothing to give to the world. On the contrary it is seen as a “basket case” characterized by destruction of the rainforest, poaching of elephants, dictatorial regimes, civil wars and economic decline.

Despite the pioneering work of Melville Herskovits and his many followers the diplomats and development officers who staff these institutions are usually unaware that modern Jazz, Blues, Rock and most popular music has African origins and is now in dynamic interaction with the rise of African popular music. The same could be said for much of modern dance, sculpture and painting.

In a country like Tanzania there are 120 ethnic groups. Much of their traditional music will soon die out as the forces of economic progress or impoverishment take their cultural toll. Some of that music has been recorded and lies on quarter inch tapes in the national archives. The national archives are kept on the Indian Ocean coast, which has

90% humidity. They are not air-conditioned and will most likely rot in the very near future.

I have been told that this is the case for almost all sub Saharan countries. National elites do not usually appreciate their traditional musical heritage and they are unaware of the world's musical debt to Africa. I have direct and intimate experience of this trend in Kenya and Tanzania. The West's cultural debt to Africa is unknown and not taught at universities in most of Africa.

I know of only one project in Tanzania that has been funded to digitally record traditional music. They are having great trouble soliciting donor support and in desperation they have turned to me, closet ethnomusicologist turned development administrator that I am, to help them raise funds from the donors.

The ethnomusicological community cannot therefore assume that each newly independent country is recording and archiving its traditional music. It is not (with the possible exception of India). Who knows what has happened to Cambodian or Rwandan musical archives in those war torn places?

The Internet provides the best option whereby an ongoing Universal Library of Music could provide the framework for contributions from those who have collected traditional music around the world. To what degree those who are interested in such a library and who have access to the Internet have organized themselves for such a task at this time remains unclear.

There is therefore the need for ethnomusicologists in the West, with partnership from those who live in the third world to develop a comprehensive recording and archiving strategy for traditional music to be stored digitally and to be made available on the net, so that in the future Africans and others can reclaim their artistic heritage. If we depend on present regimes this heritage will disappear during the next twenty years.

In this regard there is a strange parallel between the disappearance of Latin Literature from the West, its preservation by Irish monks and its reintroduction to Western Europe during the Middle Ages (see

Cahill's book called "How the Irish Saved Civilization"). Western ethnomusicologists, in a sense, could become the moral equivalent of these monks who saved Virgil from the conquering tribes who burned the libraries of the Romans.

I have worked for years with African colleagues who tell me that there is almost no chance that African regimes will provide the resources to soon adequately record and archive the incredibly rich musical traditions still extant in their countries. It is the job of the musicological community to do so. One day Africans will be grateful for this selfless act of cultural preservation. African music is part of humankind's collective heritage.

A similar story could be told for those countries in the Islamic world where the authorities judge most traditional music to be anti sharia. One of the first acts of the Islamic regime in Iran was to close the conservatory. As a result classical Iranian Dastgah is more alive in France and southern California than it is in Tehran.

And so, my question is, is the issue of salvage ethnomusicology and digital archiving a regular priority of practicing musicologists and ethnomusicologists ? Is this crisis of cultural diversity a regular part of the academic discourse ? Is political pressure being put on CIDA, USAID and the World Bank to fund such projects or, are we assuming that the world of traditional music will take care of itself ? Are partnerships being worked out with record companies or must we depend on the whims of pop star Peter Gabriel and his WOMAD festival for the selective recording of non-Western music ? Are undergraduates taught about the politics of music and music policy around the world ?

Or perhaps, worse still, has the post modern discourse effectively banned the notion that there exists a largely preindustrial, traditional music carried on largely by oral tradition that is disappearing and assumes instead that such an attitude is simply the handmaiden of western intellectual imperialism and orientalism?

3) The Teaching of Classical Music History

When I was an undergraduate one of the many courses I took was a history of Western Music supported by a textbook called, if memory serves, *A History of Western Style*.

It started off with Gregorian chant and ended with the breakdown of harmony in the twenties and the attempts of Varese, the twelve toners and others (often self proclaimed as the avant garde) to establish a modern, post harmonic, classical idiom.

There is much justification for such an approach. First of all, the Western European art music tradition is one of the best-documented musical traditions in the world with an historical depth of a thousand years. Second, as the French historian Fernand Braudel has always pointed out, European thought and especially architecture and music have almost always been pan European.

Composers and performers were free to roam the courts of Europe looking for patrons and a German like Handel could end up writing English oratorios for the English king about Maccabean heroes such as Judah the Hammer.

Another justification for the study of this music is that it has seemed to move hand in hand with the "zeitgeist" of the age. Medieval music seems to express the central values of chivalry, the Renaissance that of humanism and so on and so forth.

Finally, the developing complexity of the music itself provides a distant mirror of developments in western science that even the most anti Western, anti imperialistic third world intellectual accepts as a given fact of world history and that forms the basis of modernity and technological development.

Nevertheless there are serious weaknesses to this approach. Here are just a few of them.

The seminal work of Eric Werner (*The Sacred Bridge*) is usually ignored or downplayed in the explanation of the rise of Gregorian Chant. Werner's argument is that Gregorian chant is an extension and development of Jewish synagogue music. As the Catholic

Church thought and still thinks of itself as “novum Israel” this should come as no surprise to those familiar with Western history and ideologies. There seems to be a bit of “suppression of origins” here.

Secondly, the study of European folk music suggests that one of the pan European features of this music is its variety of folk harmonies. Is it not possible that one can describe the history of European art music as a distancing from its Mediterranean and oriental monophonic interests in the middle ages and the adoption and development of the harmonies that composers must have got with their mother’s milk in central and northern Europe ?

During the nineteen twenties the harmonic tradition of European art music reached an impasse. Various experiments were carried out to develop a new musical language, the most famous being the experiment with twelve tone scales; but, for the last 80 years what has come to be called "new music" has merited less and less attention from serious listeners.

Yet at almost the same time two things began to happen. The first is the rise of film music, which has taken the Romantic tradition and made it more eclectic. Most Hollywood and many European film scores use variations of classical and romantic harmonic arrangements to provide the background for much of 20th century film.

So in an almost Freudian way one could say that in the 1920s there wasn't so much a breakdown of the harmonic tradition but a displacement of it on to a new form. As Ezra Pound once argued in his enigmatic essay on the development of the arts (called ABC) film overtook and incorporated all previous art forms-dance, theater, the concert hall, the circus and the carnival and created the dreamscape of modern film.

The second was the rise of Jazz. It is tempting to say that Jazz has become the classical music of the 20th century America. What is most interesting about it is that it came from the most downtrodden class of the Western world, Afro Americans and their pan Caribbean brethren. Paradoxically and despite the enormous prejudice and discrimination experienced by Afro-Americans, it is their affective culture that has

wiped out and replaced that of the "white" majority. Social theory is still at a loss to explain why this is the case, for it is more common that conquered and oppressed minorities give up their own culture, not the other way around. The only answer can be found in Ortega Y Gasset's prophetic early 20th century essay, *The Revolt of the Masses*.

Finally we are confronted with George Steiner's essays on modern German semantics where he argues that the experience of Nazism almost completely redefines simple German words such as reich, arbeit, lebensraum etc.

In musical terms this brings us to the use of "classical music" in wartime Germany. The evidence is clear that the Nazis and the Wagner family were one on one in the use of the Ring Cycle to support their worldview and genocide of "inferior races" with the Jews as the most important group to wipe out.

Can we really teach students about Wagner, Beethoven and Brahms only as reflections of 19th century Romanticism? Are we not ignoring what their descendants did with that music ? Must we assume that Romanticism and Hegel died during the year 1900 ? Can we really act as if they did not provide the Third Reich with much of its cultural ideology as anthropologists recognize that 19th century German anthropological pseudo science supplied the Nazis with biologically based racist ideology ?

I am not aware that these issues are dealt with in any serious way in the musical textbooks that bring the classical European tradition to the attention of young undergraduates in North America. It is as if the actual history and use of classical music in 20th century Germany and Europe is conveniently ignored. It is a "Judenrein" musical pedagogy. Would it therefore be unfair to suggest that the history of Western art music is being taught in an ahistorical way ?

4) Towards A Social History of Music

Marketing and management companies have developed sophisticated databases that on the basis of income, residence,

profession and a host of other factors can predict with much precision the consumption patterns of their potential clients.

Record and publishing companies have done the same. They have databases of who listens to what and what parts of society buy and listen to what kind of music. As they are much better funded than the community of musicologists, access to this kind of data would give us a better understanding of let us say Canadian, American, British or German musical listening habits. Using this data we may discover that contrary to our assumptions, Europeans listen to less Bach than Americans and perhaps the French listen to more Jazz than Americans do.

Starting with such a “presentist” approach would make the teaching of music more empirical and yet would avoid the culture wars between those who believe in an elite musical tradition and the populists who declare all cultures to be equal.

It would then become easier to present the metaphysical and methodological issues of teaching musical history since we would have to start with evidence, such as what recordings and documentation of varying musical traditions do we have, what is their time depth and what kinds of conclusions can we make about the relationship between style and society over time ?

What I am advocating here is a judicious mix of Annales social history (a la Braudel) with the kind of comparative framework advocated by the much passed over and much maligned Allan Lomax and his Cantometric parameters. The cognitive anthropological approach to music (the now old “new ethnography”) then fits in naturally with Foucault and other structuralist historians’ concerns with eliciting the “episteme” of periods like the Renaissance or Baroque and can be compared with them.

5) An Urban Slant

The publicly funded study of and teaching of world music in universities in America is a historically recent phenomena. It is partially a result of North American opening itself up to its multicultural reality without at the same time abandoning its

allegiance to the Western intellectual tradition of which the modern university is a part and parcel. The essence of such an approach is an adherence to the principles of a liberal democracy, open to the future yet unforgetful of the past.

Departments of Music in America will inevitably find themselves caught up in what many describe as the "culture wars" of the new millennium. On the one side are those that argue that all cultures are equal while at the same time morally criticizing every aspect of Western civilization. This is the position of the post modernists.

The radicals among us may then be tempted to put Bach, Beethoven and other composers in the category of "dead white males." Yet they do not. Is that because the power of their musical genius appeals equally to men and women, suggesting that these composers have tapped in to some universal, Platonic concept of "the beautiful"?

As one Danish scholar has recently pointed out, how these ultimate cultural relativists can justify marking their graduate students, passing some and failing others is a philosophical mystery that they have not yet confronted.

On the other side are the conservatives. One can imagine what would happen if Evangelists got hold of the Department of Education of every state in the Union. Enforced Bible readings would return to the primary school and the study of "pagan musical traditions" such as those of traditional India and Africa would not stand a chance of getting one dollar's support from the government.

6) An Optimistic Conclusion

I recognize that this essay has the flavor of an eighteenth century style broadside pamphlet and if I have stepped on anyone's sensibilities I apologize, but I have always admired Tom Paine. However, I have always felt the Founding Fathers, men such as

Washington and Benjamin Franklin established a constitutional framework that should inform universities and the “ologies”.

I believe that a universal history of music that starts with the present and moves towards successive approximations of the past provides a new paradigm for the research, performance of and teaching of music in North American universities. One must start with a great city like New York or LA and find out how music is listened to, by whom, how often and by how many. This is presentism without relativism because one quickly does find out that “classical” music is “privileged” and those foundations and corporations who sponsor it make no bones about it!

By taking such an approach one can steer a steady course between Eurocentrism and the extremes of cultural relativism, while at the same time providing undergraduate students with a musical education that is liberal in the fullest sense of the word.

Ethnomusicology is now in the thick of a cultural relativism that continually contradicts itself. Not surprisingly the field has taken on a distinctly anti Jewish and anti Israel flavour, which can be easily documented. The paradigm suggested here is empirical, testable and open to theoretical contemplation. It is unlikely it will be implemented any time soon. It is possible that the young scholars who will soon inherit the university may get a chance to read it somewhere.

