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How an Ethnomusicologist Looks at Music

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How an Ethnomusicologist Looks at Music

Everything in this text has been viewed from the perspective an ethnomusicologist. The important element and the one that separates an ethnomusicologist from the traditional musicologist who specializes in Western European music is that, for the ethnomusicologist, the cultural context is always part of the consideration and a very important one. The same is also, in fact, true of the Western musicologist. However, because he or she studies the music of his or her own culture, many general assumptions about the cultural and historical context and its affect on the music are made. The Western musicologist may refer to religious music, entertainment music, military music, for example, without bothering to understand or re-explain these concepts because they are already understood in our culture. The ethnomusicologist cannot assume that cultural definitions from one culture, his or her own, for example, can bear relevance to the culture being studied.

Although the discipline has been consistently changing and evolving, it nevertheless, owes much to two older disciplines, musicology and sociocultural anthropology. If we were to follow the tenets of each these “parent” disciplines, anthropology and musicology, we might believe that a distinction could be drawn between these two points of view: that the ethnomusicologist whose inclinations are more anthropological might be looking for the general meaning of music to the people of a particular culture whereas an ethnomusicologist whose disposition were more musicological would be searching for the unusual and exceptional use of music in some culture, the Mozart or Beethoven of that culture, say. If one observes the work of most ethnomusicologists, such distinctions are difficult to draw. What is basic, however, is that all depend on the cultural definition for the parameters of that music as it is found in that culture. An ethnomusicologist who might decide to study Mozart would accept that he has been defined as a “genius” in today’s culture while at the same time seeking to understand how that definition is manifest in the culture. He or she does not merely accept Mozart as a genius for himself, although it may be important to do this. The ethnomusicologist must try to understand the culture that produced and defined Mozart as such.

What Ethnomusicologists Do

One of the goals of ethnomusicology is to define music generally, as it is manifest in all human cultures. This requires working from specific cultures as a

first step. Although there are some important earlier studies, such as those of Curt Sachs, which did not always concentrate on the music of one particular culture, most classic studies in the discipline have been based on the performance practice of a particular culture. Many ethnomusicologists from the period before World War II did not participate in active fieldwork, relying instead on artifacts and information brought to them by anthropologists and other field observers. The concept of “participant observation”, in which the observer attempts to come close to living in the culture and participating in it in order to better understand how it works, was not used to any great degree prior to World War II.

Today it is expected that ethnomusicologists will spend a considerable period of time in the culture they are studying themselves, and usually learn the language as well. One of the important changes that has taken place in ethnomusicology since World War II has been the influence of anthropological field method and the importance of participant observation. The kinds of questions being asked by ethnomusicologists today vary greatly. Many ethnomusicologists work on the study of current performance practice of the traditional music of many different parts of the world. Such studies have ranged from the many cultures of Africa, the Middle East, India, Indonesia, the Far East and Latin America. In order to undertake the study of such musics, it is always understood that the principles of structure and organization, as well as the values are the result of the unique character that brought forth the tradition. Therefore and in order to minimize the potential for culturally biased assumptions, ethnomusicologist working in this way had to begin at the beginning in each culture. That is, along with learning the language, they had to begin at the first steps of learning music in that culture, just as anyone from that culture might do. The goal is not primarily to shine as an interpreter of the music tradition of the studied culture, although many ethnomusicologist have done very well at this and some such as the Vietnamese ethnomusicologist, Tran Van Khe and the South Indian musicologist, T. Viswanathan are known and respected musicians in their own culture. Rather, the intent of this study is to better understand the music culture from within its own cultural parameters.

More recently many ethnomusicologists have devoted themselves to the development of new popular musics in ascendancy all over the world. This has required looking into the economics of these new music ventures as well as understanding the nature of the adjustments of the traditional music to the new music. Others may study lineages and teaching traditions of guilds and families of musicians while others study the relationship of gender in relationship to music in a culture and others study the musics of various ethnic groups and special communities within a larger society. There are studies of the effects of migration and diasporas on music and a few ethnomusicologists work on the form and structure of the music itself and others delve into the historical connections and

antecedents to many of today's music.

In its broadest sense, ethnomusicologists study all aspects of music made by humans with the understanding that the cultural context is basic to this understanding. Much of the work of ethnomusicologist is original, in the sense that they travel to countries and cultures that have been but little studied previously. Therefore part of the process of doing fieldwork concerns itself with mapping out a basic ethnography of the music if none has been written before and only after doing so and more clearly delineating the topic can the work proceed. Unlike the Western musicologist, who often relies on written notation for study, the ethnomusicologist must rely almost exclusively on live performances and on recordings as a source of study. Transcription using Western notation can be unreliable unless it has been carefully documented to show the important characteristics of the music and in which ways it is different from the traditional Western interpretation of that notation. For the sake of demonstration, some ethnomusicologist devise transcription methods for the particular music they are studying, attempting to make a notation system that is more accurately descriptive rather than prescriptive.

The Tools of the Trade

Ethnomusicologists use many tools in their studies of the many musics of the world. Some of these are basic to anthropology and others to musicology and others quite new and unique to the discipline. Since the discipline of musicology is, in fact, synonymous with the study of Western music, in particular, Western classical or art music, tools borrowed from musicology must be considerably modified to the study of musics produced in other cultures. Anthropological method while at first glance seems better suited to the study of music in other cultures, also needs adaptation for the study of music. For example, the role and importance of particular individuals may play a much more important role in the development and transmission of a music than might be the case in general cultural anthropology.

The notation system used for Western music is quite flexible and allows for great detail. Nevertheless it is in essence, a prescriptive tool rather than a descriptive one. That is to say that it was designed to aid in their interpretation and performance of Western music, to remind performers of the notes and tempi in a tradition that they already know. It is not, as such very useful, without considerable modification, for describing other kinds of musics because of the fact that it was designed as a shorthand for the performance of a particular kind of music, rather than as a general descriptive tool for music in general.

Ethnomusicologists have devised ingenious modifications of the notation system usually suited only to the one particular music being studied. The Charles Seeger Melograph, which could by writing on graph paper describe melodic activity

with great accuracy, certainly with far greater accuracy than would be possible using the traditional, even modified Western notation system. Sound recordings first available early in the 20th century were a great boon to ethnomusicologist. Here at last it was possible to capture the sound, and with ever increasing accuracy as the years went by. With the addition of film and video and further refinements of recording and documentary technique, one might imagine that the work of an ethnomusicologist had become easy. Yet the basic problem remained. As with the Seeger Melograph and so with sound recordings, it is still entirely possible to misunderstand or to miss what is culturally significant in even the most accurate recording. But these tools have aided greatly in capturing details and providing documentation of the rich diversity of musical expression devised by man on this planet. The need for study remains.

Etic and emic as useful tools from anthropology

Some basic anthropological tools are helpful in explaining and understanding the function and process of music in different cultures. The consideration of what is -etic and what is -emic, for example, are simple basic ways of looking at culture both from within and without that culture. Both are very useful and reveal distinctions that may be important to ethnomusicological study. While the ethnomusicologist usually begins by attempting to understand the -emic definitions within the culture, that is, the way things are organized and defined within that culture, -etic definitions, those that are applied by analysis and comparison between cultures are also important.

In studying a musical culture, it is important to know how it is viewed and categorized in that same culture. We can learn about the values in that culture through such investigations and well as learn something about how the music and the tradition that sustains it is valued in that culture. For example, upon arrival in a new and previously to us unknown society we might not know from the sound of a particular music what its function or status in the society might be. After repeatedly observing the performance of this music in a certain context we begin to feel that we can make some preliminary assumptions about the possible function of the performance. Subsequent performances may substantiate this first assumption, may broaden or even challenge it, but gradually by this means we are able to establish a kind of functional taxonomy of the music in this culture to which we can make comparisons and judgments about other musics we later hear in that same culture.

We gradually can begin to abstract of definition of this function in this particular society and can then use this extraction as a means of measuring and understanding other forms and traditions in the same society or in others. In current American popular music for example, there are a great variety of forms and styles,

many of which are very different from each other and are enjoyed by different and isolated segments of the larger society. We may make an -etic definition of popular music as music intended for wide distribution and acceptance with the concomitant feature that this often means a relatively short lived span of popularity. Another element frequently encountered in this -etic definition of popular music is that it is music that tends to be associated with a particular performer or creator, unlike folk music, which tends to be anonymous. Generally, popular music is intended to ensure profit for the creators and performers. However, within the realm of popular music today there are numerous groups and performers who while falling within the stylistic parameters that we might describe as popular music, but the nature of the content of these performances they seem to fall outside the -etic definition. Groups like Faust, Future Sounds of London, Photek and many others like them, produce music that is challenging and difficult and do not seem to be following the same tenets for success as those groups and performers who have attained top 40 status. Thus they fall within the -emic classification of current popular music but not within the -etic definition of popular.

In the same way we may find it useful to create an -etic category based on the observation that certain human social activities tend to make use of music. In many cultures we find music associated with such rites of passage as coming of age, courtship, marriage and often also death. Using any of these or other categories as a yardstick will show us not only that many cultures may use music for similar life cycle events, but the music they use and manner in which it is employed will itself shed light on the values in that culture. If we compare the solemn ritual and seriousness of such music as is employed at a funeral service in Western Culture, as when a requiem mass is performed, we have an indication that this is an example of shared grief and it is this sense of grief and resignation that dominates the event. In many Asian cultures while grief may be genuine, it is also important that the ceremony be given weight and dignity and even manifest some opulence of expenditure because it befits the respect and honor due to the deceased. It functions to reinforce the status in the community of the bereaved family.

Music and songs that express feelings about death reveal something about the culture as well. In many old Lutheran chorales, particularly notable in their settings by composers such as the 18th century German composer, Johann Sebastian Bach, death is seen as a joyously awaited reward for a life of hard work and devotion. Similarly, but a bit different is the expression of joy at the death of an infant in some Latin American cultures, the *muerte de angelitos*, or death of a little angel, is an example. In such a case however, it seems to be a desire to encourage the bereaved family to take heart in the fact that the deceased has gone directly to heaven. A similar sentiment is noted in the return from a New Orleans funeral when the band that had been playing solemn hymns on the march to the cemetery now begins to

console the families and friends by “jazzing” up the hymns and inspiring a joyous dance in the streets. In this way the use of music serves as a key to the expression of values in the culture and is a valuable tool for the person attempting to understand that culture.

Today and Tomorrow

If one looks at the recent corpus of works by ethnomusicologists, clearly a great number of new avenues are being followed. Although some argue and maintain that the study of music itself, as the manifestation of unique cultural values is a valid and worthy object of study, the preponderance of recently published work looks otherwise. There is an increasing concern with archiving materials and the legal responsibilities and liabilities that are thereby implied, about the complexities of defining the distinction between what is borrowed, what is appropriated and what is being stolen. There have been studies of the use of music in shopping malls and of the formation of small ascendant popular music groups, philosophical and critical studies of the nature of the discipline and its true direction. Peppered among these, there continue to be a good sprinkling of empirical studies about music itself.

It might seem that the distinction, so clear only 30 or so years ago, between what was tradition and what was modern and popular and the result of mass media dissemination is much more difficult to make today. It leads one to speculate that the reason fewer ethnomusicologists devote themselves to the study of the great traditions that absorbed so many ethnomusicologists some years ago, might be because there are significantly fewer of these traditions alive today and that many of those are in disarray. But this is to view the situation from the perspective of the past. Classical music in Turkey today, a heritage from the Ottoman Empire, is still today one of the most complex and tenaciously surviving traditions in the world. The classical music of India, in both North and South, survives with both fervor and complexity. Both the Indian and the Turkish music traditions of today are very different from what there were only 30 to 40 years ago. Some of the older practitioners can be heard to say that what exists today, is simply not the same thing.

What exists today is a great diversity of musical activities, much of it growing out of responses to what has been recently heard and absorbed from outside the culture itself. But what was outside the culture some years ago, is now clearly inside the culture. What was considered traditional a few years ago, is still there and is still considered traditional, even though it is perhaps not so easily representative of the culture as it might have been thought of earlier. Ethnomusicology has changed and is changing in great measure because the object of study is changing. In times not so long ago, when cultures were more isolated from each other and travel and contact were sporadic, there was a great diversity of musical expressions all over the planet.

Today, while one might expect that propinquity would make us all share the same few choices, a healthy diversity of options continues to thrive. There is little fear that ethnomusicologist will run out of things to study and intrigue them.

