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Call and Response Should Ethnomusicology be Abolished? (reprise)

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Back in my days as an ethnomusicology doctoral student, Alan Merriam had us all read an article by Fred Lieberman, "Should Ethnomusicology be Abolished?" (Lieberman 1977). I have often wondered if he did so because Lieberman had written what Dr. Merriam seemed to read as a relatively benign piece under a rather aggressive and tendentious-sounding headline. Lieberman's message, in effect, seemed to be little more than to say that ethnomusicology wasn't living up to its promises. To be sure, Lieberman had stated that "ethnomusicology has served its purpose, run its course" (ibid.:201), but we can be sure that Merriam didn't believe that. For, while Merriam certainly would have agreed with Lieberman that ethnomusicology had shown "no evidence of becoming an independent discipline" (ibid.: 198), he also felt that ethnomusicology's lack of theoretical underpinning was not so much a failing as a form of promise-unkept.

I would now like to revisit Lieberman's question in a somewhat different historical context. I want to propose, not that ethnomusicology has run its course, but rather that its recent course may have in effect doubled back on its original charter. Few, I think, would attach themselves to the idea that ethnomusicology continues to be characterized by a lack of autonomy, or that it continues to be parasitic on the fields of anthropology and musicology. Rather, it seems to me that a better case might be made for the proposition that ethnomusicology has become excessively autonomous, virtually immune to developments in related disciplines, and a guardian-protector of many of the ethnocentric biases it once worked to expose and eradicate. My proposition is that ethnomusicology's cutting edge has been made by rhetorically stropping fossilized shards of nineteenth-century thought.

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With Lieberman, in effect, I am proposing that the significance of the notion of “ethnomusicology” lies not solely—perhaps, even, not primarily—in that to which it might be said to “refer,” but rather in an organized configuration of conceptual and methodological differences: the constellation of scholarly paradigms which have traditionally contextualized the term (such as “anthropological” vs. “musicological” ethnomusicology, historical musicology, music theory). For while it is certainly true that ethnomusicology is not necessarily centered on the study of “non-Western” musics, to me it seems equally the case that Babe Ruth is not necessarily linked to the notion of the home run. However, I hope you’ll excuse me if I say that I would doubt the veracity of someone who claimed to make no mental association linking the one to the other.

Moving on: to the best of my knowledge, nobody any more tries to keep philology “up to date,” and it seems to me that we may have overemphasized the significance of having removed the hyphen from “Ethno-Musicology.” Recent developments in the field of ethnomusicology might perhaps be compared with 2400-baud modems attached to telegraph keys. Some will probably read what follows as tantamount to a program for getting rid of horses by abolishing horses and buggies. On reflection: so be it.

I recently encountered an example of what I sometimes represent to myself as “the ethno problem” as I was critiquing the very successful introductory text, *Worlds of Music* (Titon et al. 1991). I was greeted by a small chorus of, “well, you can’t really critique that. It’s an undergraduate text.” The ethnomusicological choristers seemed to be saying that it’s all right to be a little sophomoric if you’re writing ethnomusicology for freshmen. It seems to me that in the name of being “ethnomusicological,” we have a great tendency to marry ourselves to outdated concepts rather uncritically. Titon, for example, in *Worlds of Music*, states that he is using the word “culture as anthropologists do: culture is a people’s total way of life” (ibid.:xxi). Although Titon claims to have revised his text “to reflect the most recent thinking in the field” (ibid.:xxiv), the fact is that his notion of “culture” dates from the American presidency of Ulysses S. Grant (cf. Tylor, 1871); it seems to me that Titon’s statements betray an estrangement from the last two or three decades of anthropology. In the aftermath of Merriam’s death in 1980, I heard many an anthropologist raise ominous doubts that an ethnomusicologist would be sufficiently in touch with recent developments in anthropology to compete successfully for anthropology department openings, against, say, medical, psychological, or economic anthropologists. In *The Anthropology of Music* one sees Merriam at least once removed from the very phrasing used much later by Titon: “Part of the culture history of a particular people consists of a description of a way of

life" (Merriam 1964:277). Earlier in the same book, Merriam had said of the culture concept, "anthropologists have rightly given a great deal of attention to the definition of this core concept, but have never come to a universally acceptable definition" (ibid.:21). Hoosier folklore has it that Dr. Merriam was among the last in a breed of anthropologists who required students to memorize Tylor's fabled "complex whole" definition of culture, but he had abandoned that by the time I first met him, in 1978. And nine years after publication of *The Anthropology of Music*, Clifford Geertz, in the gospel of what I like to call "new testament" ethnography, distanced anthropology from the holistic approach to "culture" with the remark that it "obscures a good deal more than it reveals" (1973:4).

Moreover, it seems to me that the criticism I have just made of *Worlds of Music*—that an appeal to "Ethnomusicology" not infrequently gives harbor to intellectual anachronisms—could be made equally well with respect to Anthony Seeger's *Why Suyá Sing* (1988). I submit that a crucial trait of Seeger's presentation in this enthusiastically received book is its implicit yet unmistakable appeal to nineteenth-century conceptualizations of music.

In approaching this latter point, I want to discuss briefly Joseph Kerman's famous article, "How we got into Analysis, and How to Get Out" (1994 [1980]). In this paper, Kerman critiques a Schenkerian analysis of Schumann's *Dichterliebe* #2 in the Norton "Critical" edition of *Dichterliebe* (Schumann 1971). Kerman discusses the Schenker model of this song in a way that prepares my point quite nicely. Indeed, it should be said that at least a decade before it became fashionable to decry something nowadays called "essentialism," Kerman was trying to show us the way. He complains that the Schenkerian manner of representing the "analysis" of *Dichterliebe* #2 defeats one of the song's most fundamental characteristics: "as is not infrequently the case with Schenkerian analysis, the fragile artistic content of this song depends quite obviously on features that are skimmed in the analytical treatment" (Kerman 1994[1989]: 24–25). More particularly, it reduces away pretty much anything which might complicate the presumed-yet-yearned-for unambiguously symmetrical closure of a musical masterpiece. At this point, however, I must state that I am in such enthusiastic support of Kerman's principle—musical analysis or criticism seems to be invalidated by virtue of disjunction with what one seems to hear—that I intend presently to put it to the use of critiquing its author, Kerman himself!

The *raison d'être*, as Kerman points out, of *Dichterliebe* #2 is the fact that each phrase is ambiguous, having two cadences. The song's opening, "Aus meinen Thränen spriessen viel blühende blumen hervor," for example, might equally well be said to cadence on the dominant or on the tonic; rather, in a very real sense it does both. And Kerman—quite rightly, in my

view—puts forward the proposition that because and to the extent that a Schenkerian analysis ignores such a crucial and affecting musical ambiguity it fails as criticism.

My own response to this is to say that however admirable is Kerman's position here, he has given us only half the loaf, and hardly the whole bread. For I would answer Kerman with the claim that the *raison d'être* of *Dichterliebe* #2 is a sociomusical one: the ambiguity noted in terms of "fragile artistic content" by Kerman in fact is built upon a sociomusical ambiguity. For if it is true that the phrases of *Dichterliebe* #2 are characterized by their having two cadences, in each case the first of those cadences involves the duo—singer and pianist—while the second cadence involves only the piano. Going further, I would submit that the *raison d'être* of the *raison d'être* is the preparation/anticipation of the ending of *Dichterliebe* #16, in which, like *Dichterliebe* #2, the duo attains the dominant while the pianist finishes off the song—and, of course, the entire cycle, moving from the dominant to the tonic. For the *raison d'être* of this magnificent and fascinating song cycle is surely (like Haydn's "Farewell" symphony) that of calling attention to the social forces requisite to musical performance: who can hear a performance of this cycle without wondering, Why did the singer quit so early? Why couldn't the pianist just come to a close?

But what kind of a musicologist would seriously undertake an examination of such blatantly "extramusical" concerns as how many persons are involved, and the like. Why, an ethno-musicologist, of course, because (s)he can keep the focus on non-Western music!

What I have just done is, it seems to me, apposite to ethnomusicology by virtue of its sympathy with something that Anthony Seeger mentioned in his very successful book, *Why Suyá Sing*. One very valuable page of this book is Seeger's setting out of a table plotting questions, "What? who? how? where? when? and to whom?" (1988:84). As he points out, every song is sung by someone sitting in a particular place, perhaps accompanied by a different person and listened to by a person sitting in a third place. Seeger is saying, and very rewardingly, that we must ask, "Who did the singing? Where was singing done? When was the singing done? Was it before, during, or after something else?" His discussion here confirms my belief that ethnomusicology offers me insights which are extremely valuable. On the other hand, I am concerned that it also tempts or forces many of us into unacceptable pitfalls. It seems to me that Seeger has illustrated both the strengths and weaknesses of ethnomusicology. The strength can be seen in his suggestion that in a very answerable way we should be asking, "who sang this, and when was it sung, in which temporal and physical settings?" This gives us a very textured understanding of the musical event, or the song

event, or the speech event, or the performance event. That is something that I find very rewarding.

However, I think that Seeger in the very same book gets into great trouble by not applying some of those questions to his own work. Just a few pages earlier (ibid.:70-74) he discusses a temporal sequencing of song events in which he says, basically, If you hear song A, you know it's Tuesday and you know song B is coming up tomorrow. And if you hear song B, then you know it's Wednesday and song C is coming up tomorrow. If you hear song C, you know that song A is almost certainly going to happen, not tomorrow but the day after. What Seeger is saying is that in the Suyá singing repertoire, there is a scheduling of events which is structured right into the songs.

Unfortunately, however, he also says that this sequencing of songs "should lead us to re-think our notion of a 'piece' of music" (ibid.:73). Seeger's remark about "our" notion worries me a bit, for he is in effect asking us to ignore the work and impact of John Cage, who spent an entire career rethinking the concept of a piece of music, both in his critical writing and his composing, as did, in various ways, Henry Cowell, Charles Ives, George Antheil, and Eric Satie, among others. My point is this: the notion of a "piece" of music is the basis of a magnificent cultural controversy that goes back at least as far as Richard Wagner, who believed that a piece of music takes on meaning primarily as it becomes an aspect of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art. To Wagner, a piece of music was so because it was part of a literary, patriotic, theatrical event. Moreover, Wagner's "Ring" cycle (which was premiered the year before President Grant left office) anticipated quite exactly the insight Seeger experienced while living among the Suyá: for if today is *Die Walkure*, then tomorrow will be *Siegfried*, with *Götterdämmerung* the next day; *Das Rheingold* was yesterday. My point is that Seeger's saying "'our' notion of a piece of music" violates his own question, "who? what?" and so on. For whose notion of a "piece" of music is Seeger referring to? It's not mine, it's not Satie's, or Wagner's, or John Cage's, that's for sure. It's not Cowell's or Ives's, either. Whose is it? It's "ours."

To me it seems not altogether mischievous to ask if Seeger isn't projecting onto the Suyá a concern that some musicologists might think to be merely a warmed-over Wagnerism. Going back still further, the composer of *Dichterliebe* was himself more than a little interested in the cultural impact of musical terminology. Writing of a work which is now unquestionably a major item in anybody's "canon" of European art music, Schumann wrote, "the idea of calling it a sonata is a caprice if not a jest, for [Chopin] has simply bound together four of his most reckless children"

(1952:140). Writing of the last of those “children,” Schumann added a pronouncement sure to assail the sensibilities of any trained ethnomusicologist: one cannot complain about the horrors of the finale of Chopin’s second sonata, because “this is not music” (ibid.:142).

At this point I will submit the proposition that he who beats a dead horse is not trying to get the horse into the grave, he’s trying to get the horse into the race. Seeger, in saying that we need to re-think the notion of a ‘piece’ of music, is in effect resurrecting a notion of music which if not dead had been very much left behind by very many of our greatest musicians and music scholars.

My ambivalence about ethnomusicology, then, is: Can I eat the cake and avoid some of its carcinogenic properties through a process of enhanced mastication? I do fear that “ethnomusicology” has come to represent the institutionalization of an epistemological double standard: examination of the social interaction which generates musical experience is specific to the study of “other” musics.

Indeed, only a few pages after Seeger urges us to re-think our notion of a piece of music, he himself does exactly the opposite, taking the notions of music and using them to re-think the Suyá. The Suyá are a concert hall, the Suyá people are instruments (1988:65–80). My point is that the intuitive feeling that the best way to critique ourselves is to look at the other guys, needs itself to be reexamined.

I do not think that ethnomusicology should be abolished; it has all too much to offer. However, I do think that we must be very wary of its pitfalls, in particular its residual-yet-pervasive preoccupation with cultural “other”-ness. I would aspire to a socio-musical methodology which rather finesses those issue of “is it ‘us’ or is it ‘them?’” which I think are an almost impenetrable barrier that we face in countering our own intellectual history.

I myself sometimes urge the adoption of the word “sociomusicology” (coined, I believe, by Charles Keil, but also used in the exchange on papers by Steven Feld and Marina Roseman in this Journal [Feld 1984, Roseman 1984]) to supplant or replace “ethnomusicology.” However, epigrammatic academic monikers, while often born of ingenuity not inferior to that which engenders the names of postmodern rock bands, not infrequently come to assume traits of the nest-egg of the rhetorical gatekeeper. Surely I am not the only music scholar who has been told that his or her recent works in the field of gobbledigee has much to be said for it, but since it isn’t true gobbledigook it is inappropriate to the present publication.

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