

New Perspectives in American Ethnomusicology

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RESUMEN

Las relaciones entre musicología y etnomusicología han sido mucho más fuertes en las primeras décadas de la disciplina de lo que han sido desde los años '70. En los primeros tiempos, muchos estudios eran análisis técnicos de la música como "objeto sonoro". Al mismo tiempo, una aproximación complementaria se desarrollaba: el estudio de la música en su contexto social, situar la música en un dominio cultural entendido de manera holística. Era natural que hacia 1960 la etnomusicología fuera influenciada por la antropología, con resultados tan dispares como la teoría de la "bimusicalidad" de M. Hood o los "cantométricos" de A. Lomax. Una de las consecuencias más visibles de esta influencia fue la disminución progresiva del análisis musicológico dentro de la disciplina, así como un progresivo desplazamiento desde los estudios más descriptivos a los más teóricos. En general, la más moderna etnomusicología se ha ocupado de cuestiones analizadas de manera holística, especialmente el estudio de la música en su relación con la identidad social. La disciplina ha ampliado su dimensión teórica al tiempo que se ha ocupado cada vez más de comunidades locales, los mosaicos urbanos, las culturas inmigradas o las músicas más comerciales. Y más reciente es aún el interés en asuntos de "gender". Todo ello ha formado una disciplina muy diversa internamente, y con un gran número de temas y aproximaciones teóricas. Respecto a este último punto, es destacable el papel que está jugando en la actualidad la dimensión teórica, dominando desde los años '80 tanto en la etnomusicología como en el resto de las humanidades. Como tendencia común con las ciencias sociales, se destaca la "crisis de la representación", originada en los discursos conscientes sobre el "otro". Estos puntos comunes nos inducen a pensar que rara vez la etnomusicología ha desarrollado trabajos independientes; es más común el préstamo de conceptos teóricos provenientes de otros campos, especialmente la antropología.

El futuro de la etnomusicología en los EE.UU. es actualmente contradictorio: por una parte se ha definido firmemente como disciplina autónoma académicamente, y por otra, ha sufrido de manera clara la actual recesión de la economía norteamericana. El hecho de que durante los últimos 50 años hayan sido los EE.UU. los que hayan dominado en la disciplina, no debe significar un seguimiento ciego de sus teorías por parte de los profesionales del resto del mundo. En lugar de ello, sería más provechoso un intercambio mutuo entre estudiosos para enriquecer la disciplina.

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Ethnomusicology has undergone major shifts in orientation in its short history as a discipline. In the United States, where the field has received the most institutional support, ethnomusicology was not established as a recognized subject in any university before the 1950s. Since then the field has developed and changed rapidly, to some extent following contemporary trends in related disciplines--especially anthropology--and to some extent evolving along its own idiosyncratic lines of evolution. This article shall focus on some of the more recent developments in the field. A few words about the orientation of ethnomusicology in its youth,

however, are necessary in order to illustrate how dramatically the prevailing interests and issues in the field have changed. Ethnomusicology, under the name of Comparative Musicology, was initially regarded as a sub-discipline of Musicology. In American universities, of course, most ethnomusicologists continue to work in music departments, and they naturally share more interests with musicologists than with theorists or composers. The ideological and scholarly ties to musicology, however, were much stronger in the early decades of the field than they have been since the early 1970s. Much of ethnomusicological study formerly consisted of the technical analysis of music as a "sound object."² Collection of recordings was a primary goal, and archives were established in several institutions, the most prominent of these being the Institute of Ethnomusicology at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), directed by Mantle Hood. Material assembled in such archives could then be subjected to musicological analysis, often using advanced laboratory techniques. Special attention was devoted to analysis of scales, metres, modes, and intervals, and to such subjects as the classification of instruments. Transcription techniques were the focus of much debate and ingenuity, and efforts were made (especially by Charles Seeger and Mantle Hood) to design automatic transcription devices (especially the early "Melograph"). Several scholars engrossed themselves in such tasks as interval counts--e.g., enumerating how many times a major third occurred in a given melody or a given genre.

At the same time, however, a contrasting, or complementary focus in the field was evolving, which stressed the importance of studying music in its social context. Ethnomusicologists came to refer to their field as "the study of music in culture", distinguishing themselves from musicologists not only in terms of subject matter (music outside the Western classical tradition), but in terms of their approach. While musicologists tended--and to a large extent still tend--to focus on analysis of music as an abstract entity, ethnomusicologists emphasized the necessity of situating music in a more holistic cultural domain. Such an approach was natural, given the unfamiliarity of many non-Eastern cultures, and their obvious differences from that of the West, although ethnomusicologists felt that musicologists themselves distorted their subject by treating music as if it evolved in a vacuum. It was natural, then, that by the 1960s ethnomusicology was being influenced by anthropology, with Alan Merriam's *The Anthropology of Music* (1964) constituting a landmark work codifying the ties between the two fields. In subsequent years the work of cultural anthropologists like Clifford Geertz came to be particularly influential on ethnomusicology.

An influential approach, popularized especially by Mantle Hood, was the goal of "bi-musicality", wherein ethnomusicology students and scholars themselves learned to perform non-Western musics, in a form of "participant-observation." A related concept was the idea that a scholar should, during the period of study, immerse himself or herself in a foreign culture, both in order to understand its music as well as to develop a more objective view of one's own culture. Finally, while the name "Comparative Musicology" was definitely dropped, the global

comparison of musical cultures and the discovery of universal features in music remained ultimate goals for several scholars. Most notably, they motivated Alan Lomax's controversial "cantometrics" theory designed to schematize correlations between musical style and cultural characteristics on a cross-cultural basis (see *Folk Song Style and Culture*, 1968).

This sketch of the concerns dominating ethnomusicology in its early years may serve to contrast with the orientation of the field since the 1970s. The field, indeed, has evolved dramatically, such that most of the seminal important writings of the 1950s and 1960s are regarded as outdated now.

One of the most visible developments has been the decline of musicological analysis within ethnomusicology. In many cases, such analyses served their purposes well, and had to be done sooner or later; for example, any serious student of Javanese gamelan music should be familiar with the modes, formal structures, and basic genres of Javanese music as described by mid-century ethnomusicologists. Other sorts of analysis that were undertaken have been seen to have little lasting value; for example, the interval counts conducted by scholars like Merriam, Kolinski, and others are regarded by modern scholars as quite useless; in Merriam's case (e.g., 1967), such analyses are particularly odd, since they are so irrelevant to, and indeed contradictory to the sort of holistic analysis he so adamantly advocated.

On the whole, the trend away from musicological analysis represents part of a set of reorientations within the field of ethnomusicology. First, serious ethnomusicological scholarship is now expected to do more than simply describe a given music. As we have mentioned, while descriptive studies served their purpose, the important works in recent ethnomusicology have been those which are animated by a more specific theoretical focus.

Secondly, musicological analysis has now tended to be overshadowed by ethnological studies, which draw more from anthropology than musicology. To some extent, the greater prominence of anthropological-oriented studies is due to the fact that they are inherently more readable and accessible, and therefore read by more people. Thus, for example, Nazir Jairazbhoy's *The Rags of North Indian Music: Their Structure and Evolution* may be a brilliant analysis of technical aspects of Hindustani music; but its subject matter is so inherently difficult and esoteric that its readership has been largely limited to serious Western students and scholars of Indian classical music. Thus, even among ethnomusicologists, the book is not widely read or influential. By contrast, Steven Feld's *Sound and Sentiment* which is a more anthropological study, contains little technical musicological analysis, and is accessible to a much wider audience; indeed, the book is considered to be required reading by most ethnomusicologists.

In general, the focus of most modern ethnomusicology has shifted to more holistic concerns, especially the study of music in its relation to social identity. Scholars are far less concerned with designing and arguing about transcription techniques than they once were. Similarly, while the advent of digital computer technology has now facilitated all

sort of automatic transcription and analysis, such recent developments have actually elicited relatively little interest. Scholars have come to recognise that the human ear hears differently than does a machine, and that ultimately, the human perception and interpretation of music as a social phenomenon may be far more significant than its analysis as a sound object divorced from any cultural context.

As ethnomusicology broadens in its theoretical approaches, even Merriam's model (music concepts, music-related behaviour, and music sound) like much of the work of early anthropologists, has come to be seen as somewhat narrow and out-of-date. Because it was oriented primarily towards the study of classless, preliterate, technologically primitive cultures, Merriam's paradigm can contribute in only a limited way to the study of music in stratified urban societies, or to historical perspectives on music in general (see Rice 1987). Despite such advances, however, many ethnomusicologists, like most Americans in general, retain an inbred phobia of any kind of thought remotely suggestive of Marxism. Consequently, American ethnomusicologists continue to isolate themselves from some of the more significant international developments in the social sciences and humanities, such as the theoretical approaches of the so-called Birmingham School associated with Stuart Hall, Richard Middleton (see 1990), and others. Another significant development in ethnomusicology has been an increased interest in music's within local communities rather than exclusively abroad. Early American ethnomusicology, like early anthropology, tended to focus on exotic, remote culture, with special attention lavished on the "high" cultures of Asia and the Middle East. While such musical cultures continue to attract scholars, considerable attention is now given to musics at home, especially in urban environments. Thus, the concept of "urban ethnomusicology" emerged, following a similar development in anthropology. The musics of immigrant cultures have come to be of particular importance and interest. This development is itself the result of objective changes. Most American cities now host large immigrant communities and neighbourhoods. Since the 1960s, such communities have made self-conscious efforts to retain their own distinct subcultures, rather than entirely assimilating into a mainstream "American" culture. A city like New York is thus a center not only for Euro-American musics, but for various traditions of Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere.

Correspondingly, ethnic minorities now constitute significant portions of college students, and universities increasingly recognize the necessity of incorporating their diverse musical traditions into course offerings. At the same time, because of economic recession, fewer ethnomusicologists are able to conduct research in foreign countries; thus, for example, a student of Arab music may choose to focus on the Arab-American community in Los Angeles, rather than travelling to the Near East. Ironically, the renewed interest in musics "at home" has meant that even Western classical music can constitute the subject of ethnomusicological research, as in Kingsbury's ethnographic study of an American classical-music conservatory (1988).

A related development has been the increased attention to commercial popular musics. Before the 1980s there were relatively few scholarly studies of non-Western mass-mediated popular music, as academics tended to regard these genres as impure, insignificant, trivial, and corrupted by Western influence. Ethnomusicologists now recognize that such musics may be far more meaningful in various societies than are "pure" traditional folk or classical musics. Processes of syncretism are now studied as significant responses to Western influence, urbanization, mass media exposure, and at the same time, a desire to retain some distinct sense of cultural identity. While relatively few ethnomusicologists of the older generation have studied urban popular musics, most younger scholars have an active interest in such matters, partly because they have grown up immersed in Euro-American popular music (i.e. rock) and recognize how popular music shaped their own senses of identity. While my own *Popular Music's of the Non-Western World* constituted the first attempt at a comprehensive survey book, each year several other books on specific non-Eastern popular music styles are being published (e.g. Pea 1985, Copal 1985, Alumna 1991, Waterman 1990, Manuel 1993).

An even more recent development has been the interest in issues relating to gender. Feminism and women's studies emerged as important disciplines in the 1970s, and of course, male culture and music themselves can be approached from a gender-oriented perspective as well. In the wake of Koskoff's *Woman and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, a vast number of articles and papers have addressed gender-related topics, and most younger scholars cultivate an interest in the application of gender theory to the musics they study. Meanwhile, it may be stated that in general, ethnomusicology is quite an internally diverse field, with different scholars pursuing a wide range of different subjects and theoretical approaches, including various forms of historical investigation, mass media studies, and research inspired by various aspects of folklore, sociology, linguistics, acoustics, and other fields.

A few words may be said about ethnomusicology's relation to the controversial emergence of "theory" which has come to dominate much scholarly literature in the humanities since the early 1980s. I am referring here to post-structuralist literary theory as inspired primarily by Jacques Derrida and its followers, and the role of this theory in the so-called "crisis of representation" within anthropology and related fields. This is a complex and multi-faceted development which cannot be dealt with adequately in the space of a short article. Within anthropology and ethnology in general, its manifestations include a recognition that language and discourse in general constitute conceptual, epistemological systems in themselves; that any attempt to represent the values (or even music) of "the Other" is inherently a subjective distortion, since these values must be translated into the discourse, and thereby, the epistemology of the narrator; and that an element of arrogant, authoritarian condescension is inherent in any attempt at representation, particularly by scholars from the imperialist West. Such concerns have led to a growing mistrust of the ability of

traditional ethnography, and indeed of language itself, to describe anything but the narrator's own vision of reality (see Clifford 1988). These misgivings have themselves been conditioned by a variety of factors, including the refinement of structuralist linguistics and its application to thought in general, the recognition of Western anthropology's past and continuing links to imperialism, and the disillusionment of Marxist scholars, who, despairing of achieving anything through social activism, turn instead to a smug, idle "deconstruction" of all forms of committed thought.

Insofar as this "crisis of representation" has come to concern many anthropologists, ethnomusicologists themselves tend to be aware of it, and it receives a certain amount of discussion and attention. At the same time, its influence upon ethnomusicology on the whole has been rather limited, for better or worse. One reason may be that the literary theory based on divorcing the literary "text" from its social environment and conditions of production is bound to find little favour among ethnomusicologists committed to studying music in culture. Another factor is that ethnomusicologists tend to be rather pragmatic and practical by nature, such that they hesitate to slavishly follow all fashionable intellectual trends, even those besetting their model field, anthropology.

Unfortunately, the pragmatism of most ethnomusicologists can also be seen as a general deficiency in the realm of theory. Ethnomusicologists have developed relatively little independent, original theory of their own, but rather tended to borrow theoretical concepts and trends from other fields, especially anthropology. The work of Steven Feld (e.g. 1982) is often singled out as the most provocative and theoretically original in our field; his research on the Kaluli, an isolated, classless tribe of hunter-gatherers in mountain New Guinea, illuminates in a brilliant and eloquent fashion how musical structure in a given society can iconically reflect social structure and religious and aesthetic values. At the same time, Feld gives little indications to how such an approach could be applied to music in more complex societies. Moreover, while ethnomusicologists might like to claim Feld as one of their own, he is by training an anthropologist, and currently teaches in an anthropology department (at the University of Texas, Austin).

The present and future state of ethnomusicology in the United States is mixed in its prospects. On the one hand, the field has acquired some historical depth and is now recognized as a firmly established discipline. In American college course curricula, ethnomusicology plays an important role in the increasing importance of "multiculturalism"--i.e., the recognition and study of cultures other than that of the elite West. On the other hand, ethnomusicology has been substantially damaged by the decline of the American economy, and of universities in particular. There is little reason to expect improvement in the near future, given our government's refusal to cut military spending and to increase support to education, and the fact that the voting public has been persuaded by years of Reaganomics that taxes supporting social services like universities are unnecessary. As a result, colleges are cutting the size of their faculties, and "marginal" subjects like

ethnomusicology are particularly susceptible to reduction; hence, many universities are discontinuing faculty positions in ethnomusicology out of financial duress.

Ethnomusicology as a field has since mid-century been dominated by scholars from the United States, mostly because of the affluence, institutional support, and international interests of American society and economy. Thus, while the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM) is quite international in its membership, the larger Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM) is predominantly American. The development of the field has thus tended to follow trends in American scholarship in general, which may or may not cohere with those dominant elsewhere. For the purposes and readership of this article, the question might be asked: What can ethnomusicology contribute to the study of music in Spain? Spanish scholars have already published thorough, extensive, and original studies of most kinds of Spanish music, from Catalonian folk music to flamenco; American ethnomusicologists have not yet contributed in any significant way to the study of Spanish music. What could Spanish scholars gain by studying ethnomusicology as cultivated in the United States?.

On the whole, of course, such questions should be answered by Spanish scholars themselves rather than by someone like myself. I personally do not believe that American scholarship should be imitated indiscriminately around the world, for American scholarship, like any discourse, has its own ideological limitations and biases. At the same time, published literature in American ethnomusicology is quite diverse and rich, and its various strategies in attempting to situate music in culture may offer a considerable amount of inspiration to scholars around the world. Above all, what would be most productive--for American ethnomusicologists as well as their international counterparts-- would be the emergence of an active dialogue, which could be at once critical and mutually supportive. If linguistic and geographical barriers could be overcome, then we would all be able to learn from each other, and our scholarship would be richer.

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