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Tim Rice Responds

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Tim Rice Responds:

I appreciate very much the responses of my colleagues and found them stimulating, useful, and graceful even when they were critical. I would like to comment briefly, however, on two issues that were raised.

First, Seeger, Koskoff and some of the audience reaction at Rochester focused on my treatment—or mistreatment—of Merriam and his model, arguing that I presented an oversimplification or “caricature” of Merriam’s thought. I am somewhat dismayed that what I intended as a critical comment on the field in general should result in a felt need to defend Merriam and his thought in particular, although Koskoff’s analysis is very worthwhile. Merriam’s thought and position in the field do not have to be defended. I have the greatest admiration for the richness and rigor of Merriam’s work, and, in assessing problems with the model, I did not intend to criticize Merriam’s thinking *per se*. The simplest version of the model has taken on a life of its own, quite independent of its creator and his thought about it, and I intended to comment on its use in ethnomusicology in the years since its first statement.

The question that perhaps needs working out in a more careful and lengthy assessment than was intended here is, what has been the life of that model. I argue that it has been influential *within* ethnomusicology, and that, because of its historical importance and simple statement of the central problem for the field, it can be interpreted as still “modeling” the “place” in which we share our ideas. I acknowledged in the paper, however, that it does not provide the model out of which anthropologists work and listed some of the theoretical perspectives they use. Social scientists such as Blacking, Keil, Lomax and Shepherd who seek structural homologies between music, behavior and cognition are probably indebted to the European thinkers Seeger cites rather than to Merriam. On the one hand, Steve Feld has pointed out to me that he could think of few, if any, of Merriam’s students who have tried to operationalize the model. On the other hand, Qureshi (1987) tries to operationalize the analytical move from structure to process and the relationship between music and context in response to problems created for the field in their clearest statements by Blacking and Merriam, respectively. If we think of ethnomusicology as “a place to report on our arrivals,” then in that place Merriam’s model may still provide at least some of the furniture.

Second, if Merriam’s model can be used to interpret research actually undertaken using different theoretical starting points, then that process illustrates the power of “simple models” to define a domain of inquiry on

the one hand and to “bedazzle or befuddle” on the other. In this regard, Seeger is critical of models and what he sees as my attempt to find simplicity, consensus and answers at the expense of complexity, debate and questions. In fact, I took some trouble to phrase the model in the form of a question. Models and questions are not mutually exclusive; rather a model can take a list of questions and find relationships among them. Perhaps more important than “prioritizing” the questions, this model “shapes” them. Models can transform long, difficult-to-remember lists with no relationships implied between items into easily remembered “constellations” of items with relationships implied. I take Seeger’s questions to be versions and variants of ones this model asks, and I certainly am not proposing answers to them in this modeling effort.

Whether debate on the complex issues before us is preferable to consensus on a simple model sets up a choice I do not feel compelled to make. There might be different strategies at different times or different strategies at the same time, depending on the purpose. I wrote this paper because I had begun to wonder whether our little debating society was quite as heterophonically convivial as Seeger implies. I am not sure we share either “a style of answer” or the questions. The notion that ethnomusicology is an arena for debate and the advancement of ideas implies a solidity of purpose (perhaps with a sharpenable “leading edge”) that I often do not detect in our frequently gaseous travelogues. Too many of the reports on what we have “seen, heard, and discovered” are written as if ethnomusicology did not exist, as if there were no general ideas to be advanced, no general questions to be asked. When ethnomusicologists write for others, it is often for those who have travelled the same roads before, that is, they write within the limits of particular area studies. How many readers of *Ethnomusicology* find a particular issue “useless” because it contains nothing on their area? How many writers report on their travels with the “questions . . . that have remained constant over the centuries” in mind? This symposium is offered “toward” the establishment of a more fruitful climate for debate and a wider recognition of the common questions we may be asking and the kinds of answers we may be creating.

Reference

- Qureshi, Regula Burckhardt
1987 “Musical Sound and Contextual Input: A Performance Model for Musical Analysis,” *Ethnomusicology* 31(1): 56–86.