

Is Ethnomusicology Relevant to the Study of British Folk Music?

Some thoughts and key references

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<http://web.ukonline.co.uk/mustrad/articles/ethnomus.htm>

Ethnomusicology has an image problem. Insofar as anyone has heard of ethnomusicologists at all, there is a fairly common feeling (and not unjustified, bearing in mind what ethnomusicologists collectively seem to do) that ethnomusicology is, exclusively, the study of non-Western musics.

Actually, this isn't so. Ethnomusicologists study Western traditions also, albeit not in huge numbers in Britain – but even here, our sparseness in the study of local traditions is probably no more marked than our sparseness in the study of overseas traditions. (There are just two British ethnomusicologists who work on Chinese music, for instance, which means that we have something like 1/8 of the world's population each; I'm happy to let the other chap take on most of these.) As we shall see below, and although the international connections are important, where ethnomusicology differs from the other fields of music studies – and where it may offer ideas of potential utility to those studying British folk traditions – is not really a function of geographical scope at all.

Sometimes, the term ethnomusicology itself is perceived as pretentious. On a practical level, there seem too many syllables, an apt reminder of the word-spinning so enjoyed by us impractical academics, perhaps. Then there are those who sense in this term the essence of something unsavourily colonialist (that E-word prefix). In fact, and as far as I know, the original intention underlying the coining of this word was neither overly academic (quite the contrary, as we shall see in a moment) nor pejorative – this was not supposed to be the science of the sounds of 'ethnics'. Instead, those who proposed and adopted this term (in preference to comparative musicology, which seemed to over-emphasize external comparison) in the early 1950s came from a background where several composite ethno-words were already in use: ethnopoeitics, ethnomedicine, ethnohistory, etc ... The point of all these terms was that the investigator sought to understand the topic from the perspective of the native 'informant'. The ethnomusicologist was as interested in, say, an Egyptian's 'musicology' - i.e., his explanations and understandings of music - as in his music itself. Adoption of the term signalled a departure from previous research, where it had often been assumed that there was no native theory. The comparative musicologist (or at least his caricature) had simply (or not so simply, when we think of old recording technology) remained in his laboratory where he amassed an archive of wax cylinders and the like. Sitting down (in an armchair, according to most stereotypes) he (less often, she) then wrote out the music and studied the resulting notation in order to produce theories about what was going on.

The ethnomusicologist, on the other hand, is himself (and more and more, herself) a collector as well as an analyst. The model of collection, however, was not that of earlier scholars like Cecil Sharp, Percy Grainger or Bela Bartok. Rather than ranging widely, but quickly, across a broad region, the ethnomusicologist was supposed to gather materials through 'participant-observation'.

Instead of gathering recordings alone, the ethnomusicological researcher gathered experience, both in the form of contextual explanation (based on observation and on informants' own readings of what was going on) and in the form of personal know-how, gained from actually learning to perform the music s/he was studying. In other words, the researcher has the responsibility of living among the researched; living as far as possible as one of the researched; taking full part in their musical lives; and gradually coming to understand, typically through personal engagement in performance, what music really means in that particular society.

So far, I would suggest, this sounds rather like what many contemporary folk music researchers do.

Distinctions between what I see as a typical ethnomusicological stance and that of a British folk

music enthusiast and collector might be listed as follows (though I'm not qualified to represent the latter):

Ethnomusicologists are mostly embedded in an academic system that encourages certain kinds of research (for instance, the writing of weighty tomes and research papers replete with footnotes), above others, particularly practical performance. This doesn't mean we only like or only undertake the former, but it may mean that there is pressure on us to devote much of our energies to fulfilling job requirements in that respect. My impression is that folk music enthusiasts might argue that the ethnomusicologist's priorities need to be reversed.

In our research and writing, ethnomusicologists draw on a literature that refers to many different kinds of music and musical cultures from all around the world. As such, and when we write, we sometimes use a vocabulary that will be distinct from that habitually employed among British folk music researchers talking one to another. Terms like 'informants,' and 'participant-observation' trip from the tongue of the ethnomusicologist, and although they make sense to others, they may not feel entirely comfortable at first. Also, knowing that we are writing for an international crowd of ethnomusicological readers, we tend to be a bit self-conscious in terms of explaining our assumptions, rather than just getting stuck straight into 'the music itself'. My feeling is that the folk music expert finds some of this vocabulary and theoretical positioning alienating, and may find references to the musics of other peoples colourful but beside the point.

In fact, ethnomusicologists have a bit of a problem with the idea of 'the music itself', in that we know 'music' is not the same thing everywhere around the world. In practice, ethnomusicologists assume music to be a kind of trinity of musical sound, musical concepts and musical behaviour.

From this point-of-view, 'the music itself' might be the musical action or processes (performances) just as much as the products (songs) that result from these processes. Also, we tend to feel that music is intimately connected to society, and so we can go to somewhat extreme lengths in our attempts to show how exactly society creates music and vice versa. I imagine the folk music experts are more confident that they know what music is, and, as a result, would tend to see some ethnomusicological enquiry into musical processes and concepts as peripheral.

Ethnomusicological research often (at least in theory - less often in practice) tends away from the explicitly evaluative. Insofar as songs or musicians are criticised, it is from the perspectives of those who perform and sustain this music. External critique was frowned on, as was the kind of 'from-on-high' handing down of expert insights characteristic of musicological research. We might be very interested in why a particular singer thinks one song is 'authentic' while another is not, but we would not ourselves (again in theory) start telling other people which songs are or are not 'authentic'. Again, as a cultural 'insider', the folk scholar presumably feels more comfortable in offering personal (and often informed) views in such instances. Ethnomusicological relativism may seem admirably even-handed but also somewhat distancing. Musical enthusiasm and communicative passion are hard to reconcile with a discipline that rather passes the interpretative buck.

Perhaps because ethnomusicologists spend long periods of time working with, and learning from, musicians, much of our study is concerned with people. Who are they, what are they doing, do they hold notions of talent, aesthetics, status and so forth? In writing about musicians, a cross-cultural perspective may be taken, to gain further comparative insight on what makes a particular musical community special. The influence of anthropology (recently of gender studies), and of our disciplinary desire to explain 'music' according to local perspectives, can clearly be felt here. My feeling is that folk music experts have been less interested in writing about musical people than ethnomusicologists. Of course, folk researchers have documented the lives of notable performers, but, I think there is a difference in kind in the ways in which ethnomusicologists and folk music scholars discuss the communities within which they have carried out research.

Conclusions

Given these areas of distinction, I would see nonetheless a rich potential for cross-fertilisation between these two fields. We ethnomusicologists might pay more attention in our teaching and writing (and perhaps also organising of concerts and workshops) to the musical traditions of the

British Isles. This would, at the very least, help ensure that all graduate musicians (many of whom go into classroom teaching and arts administration) actually know that such music exists.

Furthermore, through arming students with an awareness that aims in this music are not necessarily identical to those in classical music, and encouraging them to discover for themselves how this music continues to play a meaningful part in contemporary people's lives, we can perhaps begin to break down some of the common prejudices that characterise knee-jerk reactions to the mention of folk music. Given that few universities employ folk music specialists, then this responsibility would seem to fall to the (still few but slightly more numerous) ethnomusicologists. Moreover, some ethnomusicologists may perhaps wish to begin researching British folk music themselves - even those of us who have invested in foreign language training. Not only will we find rich musical materials and social contexts, but also we can get on with this work while waiting for the next foreign trip to fall into place. England is one of the few countries to sustain a more-or-less habitual demarcation between ethnomusicologists and folk music scholars, and we could act to remove this. Folk music experts might find, once they have become familiar enough with the ethnomusicological literature to not feel alienated by our strange use of words like 'culture', that there are ideas in this writing that can be usefully applied in their own research. Ethnomusicology is essentially about 'people making music' or 'humanly-organized sound' (e-mail me if you'd like the references) which is what folk music studies focuses on too, so it should be possible to add useful aspects of ethnomusicological enquiry to folk music research without giving up existing perspectives. The reading list set to MMus trainees in ethnomusicology at Sheffield, for instance, (and presumably elsewhere too) refers to musical traditions from all around the world, yet, thinking about it, all these writings would have pertinence to someone intending primarily to research musical life in Britain, or planning on gaining an academic qualification for research work already ongoing in that field.

These are not so much different fields as overlapping sets with much common ground but somewhat different emphases. In the end, it is up to the individual researcher to decide which questions to ask and what to do with the answers.

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<http://www.shef.ac.uk/uni/academic/I-M/mus/staff/js/JShomepage.html>

Some Key (English-language) Ethnomusicology Journals & Books

1. Journals (excepting area-specific titles)

Ethnomusicology (Univ. of Illinois)

World of Music (Berlin, Amand Aglaser)

Yearbook for Traditional Music (ICTM, Columbia Univ., NY)

British Journal of Ethnomusicology (BFE)

2. Books

a. Text books / theoretical discussions:

Gregory F. Barz & Timothy J. Cooley, eds., *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in ethnomusicology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

John Blacking, *How Musical is Man?* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973.

John Blacking, *A Commonsense View of All Music: Reflections on Percy Grainger's Contribution to Ethnomusicology and Music Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

John Blacking, *Music, Culture, & Experience: Selected Papers of John Blacking*, ed. and with an introduction by Reginald Byron, with a foreword by Bruno Nettl. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995.

Stephen Blum, Philip V. Bohlman, and Daniel Neuman, eds., *Ethnomusicology and Modern Music History*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991.

Philip V. Bohlman, *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.

Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, 10 vols. (of which 4 vols. are now available)

John E. Kaemmer, *Music in Human Life: Anthropological Perspectives on Music*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993. (Book and sound cassette).

Ellen Koskoff, ed., *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1987.

William P. Malm, *Music Cultures of the Pacific, the Near East, and Asia*, 2nd ed.. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1977.

Helen Myers, ed., *Ethnomusicology: An Introduction*. London: Macmillan, 1992.

Helen Myers, ed., *Ethnomusicology: Historical and Regional Studies*. London: Macmillan, 1993.

Bruno Nettl, *Folk and Traditional Music of the Western Continents*, 3rd. ed.. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990.

Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Twenty-Nine Issues and Concepts*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983.

Bruno Nettl & Philip V. Bohlman, eds., *Comparative Musicology and Anthropology of Music: Essays on the History of Ethnomusicology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

J. H. Kwabena Nketia, *The Music of Africa*. London: Gollanz, 1986.

Jonathan P. J. Stock, *World Sound Matters: An Anthology of Music from Around the World*, 3 vols., 2 CDs. London: Schott, 1996.

Martin Stokes, ed., *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*. Oxford: Berg, 1994.

Jeff Todd Titon, gen. ed., *Worlds of Music: An Introduction to the Music of the World's Peoples*, 3rd ed.. New York: Schirmer, 1997.

b. Ethnographies of specific musical cultures

Paul F. Berliner, *The Soul of Mbira: Music and Traditions of the Shona People of Zimbabwe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Henry Kingsbury, *Music, Talent, and Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988.

Bernard Lortat-Jacob, *Sardinian Chronicles*, foreword by Michel Leiris / translated by Teresa Lavender Fagan. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964.

Timothy Rice, *May It Fill Your Soul: Experiencing Bulgarian Music*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Gilbert Rouget, *Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations between Music and Possession*, transl. Brunhilde Biebuyck. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985

Anthony Seeger, *Why Suy Sing: A Musical Anthropology of an Amazonian People*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Thomas Turino, *Moving Away from Silence: Music of the Peruvian Altiplano and the Experience of Urban Migration*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993.

3. CDs

Instruments of the World. CD with huge booklet from Chant du Monde

Voices of the World. 3-CD set with book from Chant du Monde

Biographical Note

Having completed a Ph.D. on music for the Chinese fiddle *erhu* (Queen's University of Belfast, 1991), Jonathan Stock subsequently lectured at the University of Durham, and has recently moved to the University of Sheffield to set up a new ethnomusicology programme there. He is currently Chairman of the British Forum for Ethnomusicology and is author of *Musical Creativity in Twentieth-Century China: Abing, his music, and its changing meanings*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1996.