

## **Music Education and Ethnomusicology: A (usually) Harmonious Relationship\***

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I am very honored to have been invited to speak to you, members of this distinguished and powerful society of educators. As you know, music education in the most specific sense is not my field, but I have been involved with ISME for some twenty years now. I was invited then to chair a committee whose task it was to “do something” about world music—a concept then perhaps newly discovered by this organization. I learned much from lengthy deliberations with the members of this committee. We didn’t accomplish a great deal, but we did craft a policy statement that the ISME board subsequently adopted. It included the recommendation that each system of music education should include three components—the study of Western classical music, the study of local music traditions, and something of the music of the rest of the world. This was accepted, although I think a number of board members would have wished to privilege the Western art music tradition, which had always been the cornerstone of music education in the modern world. Just fifteen years later, I was approached by the then president, Professor Gary McPherson, who said something like, “why did you include the requirement that Western art music be taught everywhere?” Clearly it was no longer the concept of world music that needed defending, but the old Western tradition. I told Gary, “we didn’t think your board would ever accept the inclusion of world music if we didn’t make clear our loyalty to the old canon.” Today, that canon has become simply an option—I think.

So perhaps we can claim that ethnomusicology has finally “arrived,” as a source of musical materials, ideas about music, and ways of looking at the world’s music. But actually, ideas that characterize ethnomusicology have played important roles in music education for a long time. It is a history with an interesting narrative, but that’s not my job here. Still, let me remind us—restricting myself to the European and North American perspective from which I come, with the full realization that you, coming from all of the world’s continents, could provide many parallels.

I would like to trace, and maybe to meditate upon, relationships between music education in the broad sense, and ethnomusicology. I’d like to say a few words about questions of aesthetics as an impulse for both of our fields; the nature of the musical world; the importance of authenticity; the importance of music for understanding culture; what kind of people we are, and are we doing anyone any good?

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\* This article is a reproduction of a keynote address given at the 29th meeting of the International Society for Music Education (ISME), on 3 August 2010, in Beijing, China. It does not include musical examples that were played as part of the talk; these were largely of a punctuating nature and not essential to the points being made, and reference to these have been removed. Minor editorial corrections have been made, as have some references to relevant literature and sources of quotations, using the “internal citation” form of reference. The bibliography at the end of the article lists sources for the references as well as some general publications relevant to the essay.

Some of the points made here have also been made by the author, at greater length, in an essay, “Some Contribution of Ethnomusicology,” to be published in the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Music Education*, edited by Gary McPherson and Graham Welch.

## 1. Questions of Aesthetics

I am not sure what music educators of the world have in common, but I would guess that one thing is that they wish to impart to their students their belief that music is, in some sense of the word, beautiful. I won't get into the definition of beauty, but, in some ways, musicking is—along with everything else—an aesthetic experience. Music is, in American terminology, fun, enjoyable, something to like, to love. When I began studying ethnomusicology, my first experience was hearing music of the Native Americans of the Plain. At that time, the last thing I would have said was that I considered this music beautiful. That might have come later, and surely in various ways the people whose music this is consider it an aesthetic experience. I'm not talking about intrinsic beauty. The point is that to ethnomusicologists, surely at that time, what was important about this music was that it represented a Native American culture, it was important to its people, accomplished certain things for them, and told us things about their world. If my fellow students, involved in Bach and Stravinsky, asked me whether I "liked" this music, I told them that this was the wrong question. So, if I undertook to play some of these recordings for school children, say, it was not to be able to say to them: "see how pretty this song is." Ethnomusicologists had the task of showing that music was a serious business, that to most peoples in the world it went much farther than being simply something to enjoy. But many music educators, at least in North America, have tried to help their students enjoy the music of other cultures by making it more like their own—adding harmony or piano accompaniment, simplifying rhythm, and so on.

I'm not sure what date to give you for the beginnings of ethnomusicology in Europe, to say nothing of how you would describe the ancestry of the world's various ethnomusicologies. However, one of our culture heroes, Erich M. von Hornbostel, undertook to introduce the field in a lecture given and published in 1905 (see Hornbostel 1904-05), and said that its principal problems were the understanding of the origins and evolution of music, and the understanding of the nature of musical beauty. I have often wondered how it was that most ethnomusicologists didn't seem to follow up on the "beauty" component. I think because they came to see aesthetic issues as too culture specific. They would say, if you—American or European—don't like, for example, a piece of Australian aboriginal didjeridu music, that's irrelevant. You don't understand the musical language of the Aborigines. And, as a matter of fact, if you do like it, that's also irrelevant—you probably like it for the wrong reasons.

So it would seem that music educators and ethnomusicologists approached music from opposite perspectives. Well, my job here is to bring up, when I can, the harmonious relationship between music education and ethnomusicology. In the past few decades, many ethnomusicologists have come to look at their music more as something they love than as something that informs them intellectually. One of my department colleagues at home, a man very much involved with the anthropology of music, when I asked him what it was that determined his area of interest, told me: "It's always the music first; you have to be turned on by the music, then the other interests begin to accrue." And indeed, the fact that, increasingly, ethnomusicologists have turned to participation and to the study of performance in their fieldwork leads them to feel about this music as their conservatory colleagues would feel about Chopin and Mozart.

But at the same time I think that educators have come to realize that music can teach you a lot beyond nice sounds and how to appreciate them, and how to make them. Increasingly, they find that they learn about people through their music, that many of the world's peoples express the important things about their lives and their culture through

music. And so, while ethnomusicologists have perhaps increasingly become humanists in their hearts, music educators have—at least part of the time—become anthropologists of music.

## 2. What is the Nature of the Musical World?

We—music educators in the broadest sense—have come a long way. We no longer think that the ideal world would do away with all of the world's folk and popular musics, and live entirely on the great European classics. If I understand it correctly, ISME no longer requires *everybody* to know Bach and Beethoven. I have a feeling that this is a fairly recent development. Let me tell you about my first experience with ISME. In 1991 I had the honor of giving an address in Seoul, at a meeting at which Korean music—indeed, a festival of Korean traditional, mostly classical music—would be featured. My talk was entitled “Ethnomusicology and the Teaching of World Music,” and my point—and much of the conversation at the meeting—concerned the preservation and presentation of authentic non-Western music to music students everywhere. The nature of the musical world at that meeting was a world consisting of a large number of discrete musics. Music may be universal to humankind, but, contrary to the poet Longfellow, music is not *the* universal language of mankind but, rather, a group of discrete languages or, perhaps better stated, systems of communication, each integrated and unified, and each of them must be learned. Moreover, the general accepted attitude was that although there are these non-Western musics, Western classical music was distinct and different in a separate category. I remember playing a tape cassette with twenty 15-second examples to illustrate the world's musical diversity, and I was surprised to find some controversy regarding the appropriateness of putting Bulgarian folk music, a Chinese work for San-shien, singing by the South African choir “Ladysmith Black Mambazo,” and Persian music on the santour (the trapezoid-shaped hammered dulcimer) next to a Chopin etude. I wonder whether you today would have the same discomfort; I suspect not.

Regarding the world of music as a group of distinct musical systems, each with its boundaries, separate and discrete, was a progressive view of world music. In some ways, I still think that this is helpful—though it isn't actually that realistic. The nature of the musical world—today, certainly, and maybe twenty years ago too—is different. I'm not sure just how one would quantify this kind of a statement of change and difference, but it's my firm belief that the boundaries between musics are far more indistinct and fluid, and the integrity of each of the world's musics much less firm, than many of us believe. I suspect it has always been so, but it is certainly a lot more that way now. I don't know if I can persuade you. Is a piece of music in the genre known as “North American Indian rock music” in essence truly Native American, or Western, or is it a mix, and a bit African-influenced? Or, is the violin concerto by Mozart, nicknamed the Turkish, simply a work of Western music with reference to somebody's idea of Turkish music, or could it be (have been) considered, from a Turkish perspective, a work showing the reach of Turkish culture before 1800?

There's a lot to be argued about here; you may not agree with my implied interpretations. But the point I'm trying to make is that maybe today—and probably for some time—the world's *normal* music is a cultural mix of some kind. All music bears influences from other cultures. If you agree with that, what might this suggest to us as teachers of music at all levels? I shouldn't tell you what to do, but I have the feeling that much of the energy of music teaching (and I realize that this is an incredible generalization) has been devoted to the

presentation of music as a major factor in ethnic, cultural and national identity. In the United States, certainly, we have lately spent a lot of energy proving to ourselves that there is a distinct American music, a distinct American voice in music. My experience is limited, but I have a feeling that this has been the attitude of much music teaching elsewhere too. Maybe we should emphasize the opposite perspective, that music is one of the domains of culture that establishes and expresses cultural relationships—not because music is “the universal language” that everyone can understand, but because music expresses and interprets relationships among cultures and societies. Am I not talking here about *harmony*, the principal theme of this conference?

Curiously, it is only relatively recently that ethnomusicologists began to study, in the field, the ways different peoples teach and learn their musics. Today, it seems to me that understanding the way a culture transmits itself, if I can put it that way, is really central to an understanding of the music. What is transmitted—tunes, rhythms, the need to be consistent, or the need to always vary, and the way such pieces are broken up for teaching, special exercises—it seems to me that these are all part of the essence of music. Until the 1970s, most ethnomusicologists were satisfied with saying that people learned their music simply by rote. Well, here is an area in which music educators, music education researchers, in their detailed study of how people in their own culture learn and teach, were, it seems to me, thoroughly ahead of ethnomusicology.

In this discussion, you may think that I have given up on concepts such as tradition and authenticity. But I must tell you that what has turned me on to the study of ethnomusicology, which I began sixty years ago, has always been *not* the unity of world music and its universals, but rather the enormous diversity of musics of the world, their diverse sounds, and the diversity of ideas about the world. And so I have always toggled between a sense of science and objectivity, and a feeling that each society interprets the world in its own way. In American anthropology this used to be called the *etic* and *emic* interpretations (for explanations of these terms, see Nettl 2005, 186-87).

And so I see the nature of the musical world as dominated by the combination of cultures. But if boundaries among musics are fluid, then it's important to also accept a related notion, that each society may have its own conception of the musical world. Let me return to my first area of study, the music of the Native American peoples. To some peoples, such as the Havasupai of the Grand Canyon, the musical universe is vast. Music existed before there were humans; pre-human spirits sang to each other, but didn't speak. But it was also limited. All songs already existed in the cosmos, waiting to be discovered by human composers. The Blackfoot people, with whom I worked, saw music as something coming from supernatural sources, but without limit. Men have visions in which spirits, usually animals, taught them new songs. Theoretically, a man might have unlimited numbers of visions, and learn an unlimited number of songs. New songs could always be created; this view is somewhat similar to the Western view of composition. But the Blackfoot people today see music as bifurcated—Indian music and white music, the first mainly spiritual, and the second difficult—mainly technical, or even technological (for further discussion of the concepts in this paragraph, see Nettl 1989, 58-65, and the references provided therein).

In modern American culture, as a further example, the musical universe is infinite. Any sound—animal sounds, industrial noises, may be considered music if it appears in a musical social context, such as a concert or on a recording labeled as music. On the other hand, when I lived in Iran, thirty-five years ago, I found that the question was complicated, as certain kinds of expression that sounded musical to me were not accepted as belonging to the term music, but were considered instead to belong to a concept, *khandan*, which means reading, reciting, and explicitly singing.

The point I am trying to make is that each culture has its own conception of the musical universe. I've always found this wonderful, supporting my notion of the musical world as infinitely variable. I am not sure whether music teachers in schools believe that this is a point worth making. I think it is not only significant that the world's musics sound different, but also that the world's societies have sometimes radically different ideas about music. But of course we come upon a conflict of ideas here. Should we as educators emphasize the differences between musics, should we say that while we wish the world's peoples to live in harmony, in music, harmoniousness should mean the understanding of differences? Or should we stick to the old notion of music, the universal language of humankind, and emphasize what they have in common? I mean educators in the conventional sense, and ethnomusicologists as educators. You can see that our two fields face similar issues.

### **3. A Related Issue: Authenticity and Tradition**

But there's also the issue of authenticity and tradition. When I was a student—excuse me for always referring to those old times—my teacher, George Herzog, a Hungarian very much influenced by Béla Bartók and Zoltan Kodály, wanted to be sure that his students of non-Western and folk musics understood the importance of authenticity (Reed 1993; Herzog 1950). In studying African music, for example, he didn't want us to take much interest in popular music because it combined older African traditions with Western instruments, and because African rhythms were being simplified to be more compatible with Western rhythmic practices (Nettl 2002, 79-81). He told us that Bartók was interested in making sure that people—in Hungary and elsewhere—didn't think that the music of Hungarian Roma was the “true” Hungarian folk music, and that the music in the categories he called “old” and “new” style was the truly authentic.

Partly, this notion of authenticity takes us back to the consideration of the world of music as a group of discrete musics. But it wasn't just ethnomusicologists who cared so much about authenticity, or about collecting and preserving music that was truly *the* music of a particular society. For example, others interested in folk music—organizers of festivals, urban folk musicians—also felt that they had a major stake in this process. Indeed, when I was a student I had the opportunity of taking courses in the discipline of folklore, then only getting started in the United States, and one of the issues constantly being debated was this authenticity. Is a particular piece of folklore truly authentic? How can one tell? Must it be in oral tradition? How old does it have to be at a minimum? Can people in modern society create authentic folklore? (see Thompson 1952).

By now, we consider it an insoluble question, a moot point. Folklore and folk music are not intrinsically different from other literature or music. The fact that they usually exist in oral tradition make them simply like the vast majority of the world's music. And that brings me to another area related to this issue of authenticity: the intrinsic difference between notated music and music in the oral tradition. Maybe this is an issue in which ethnomusicologists and music educators are not quite so comfortable with each other.

Here's my point, and I hope I have my facts right. Music educators in Europe, in the Western hemisphere, and I think everywhere else, consider it reasonably important for their students to learn European musical notation. I think they pay far less attention to the ability to learn music by hearing it, by oral tradition. But if, as I've just said, an important finding of ethnomusicology is that the normal way to learn music in the world is by hearing it, then

shouldn't we, who are trying to teach music as a universal value, be most concerned with this? Ah, you will say, very correctly: Western notation works very well, so why shouldn't everyone have access to this marvelous technology? (That's what it is, after all.) But an intrinsic quality of European and American folk music is its fluidity, its variability, which derive from its aural existence—and that is an important element that may disappear when we depend entirely on written scores. And another example: If Native Americans of the Plains believe that one learns a song in one hearing, shouldn't we try to get our students to do this, or at least to appreciate it, if this music enters a classroom? I'm sure you all can think of parallel examples in any of the world's cultures.

In expanding the musical horizon of students—and I don't just mean young children—we should go beyond finding efficient ways of imparting and internalizing the sound of the music, the notes, if you will, and include an understanding of concepts intrinsic to it—concepts such as oral transmission, or of the existence of a song in many variants. The most obvious thing that comes to mind is variants of European folk songs. But in South Indian classical music, too, each musician has his or her own way of performing songs by the great nineteenth-century composers such as Tyagaraja and Dikshitar. They would not be at all alike, and I think no one would label one as more authentic than the other.

The fact that everyone has his own version is part of the authenticity of the song. But of course, while in my student days there was a lot of emphasis on authenticity, today ethnomusicologists pay far less attention to it, often seeing it as a useless and obsolete idea. To a large extent, I have to agree. I have already pointed out that the world of music today consists to a large extent of music that has multicultural sources. The idea that there is a pure Czech folk music, a pure Navajo Indian music, a pure Carnatic music in Southern India, those notions are imaginary. So does the concept of authenticity still have relevance?

#### **4. Understanding Music, Understanding Culture**

At this point, I would like to take up another issue, the uses of music for understanding culture. Let me begin by going quite far back, to a classic definition of culture, by the nineteenth-century English scholar, Edward B. Tylor. Culture is “that complex whole, including knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other habits or capacities acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor 1871, 1). Let me restate it in a slightly more modern way: Culture is the method by which we learn the ways of interpreting the world, and the rules of behavior, from people in whose company we are raised and live. Note please, Tylor included art, and I see this as one way in which people interpret their world. Quite specifically, the concept of culture is tied to that of society. Each society has its own culture, its own arts, its own music. People in a society have definite conceptions of what rules govern behavior toward relatives, and what songs and what musical styles belong to them, and they can identify others that they also know but do not claim. Even in large, complex societies, these kinds of boundaries exist. But, in the modern world, you learn not only your own culture, but also others, and music is an important way of defining your own culture, and also of apprehending the culture of another society. And by society I don't just mean nations, or groups of people defined by a language, but also groups of people defined by social class, occupation, religion, and quite importantly, age. If you wish to comprehend the culture of your teenage children, you may perhaps do it best by understanding the music in their lives.

This is quite obvious to music teachers, I think. Ethnomusicologists have only recently come to appreciate the importance of culture groups—societies—that live next to

each other in urban societies: minorities of all sorts, the people of diasporas, artistic elites, youth, old age, you get my drift.

But who is entitled to define what actually belongs to the culture of a people? To the music of a people? I want to tell you about an experience that I have remembered for decades. I was in Iran, studying Persian classical music by taking lessons and also getting theoretical instruction from a great master, Dr. Nour-Ai Boroumand (see Nettl 2002, 138-45).

At one point he said to me, “You know, Dr. Nettl, you will never understand this music.” I thought he was chiding me for not practicing enough, but he said, I’ll summarize, “You may be able to analyze it and tell us about motifs and developments and structures, but there are things that every workman washing the windows of this building understands that will always elude you.” He was outlining for me my limitations as an outsider.

Ethnomusicologists traditionally have been the students of music from the outsider’s perspective. I think they have usually been responsible people, intellectually and politically, but sometimes one got into curious discussions, as when a Native singer sang—perhaps recorded—a song in good faith, only to find himself or herself corrected by the fieldworker, “that’s not a proper song of your people.” I have to confess, Western ethnomusicologists have sometimes acted out the political aspirations of their governments, considering that the investigation of non-Western and rural societies was their proper study. Gradually, the musicians of their host societies began to say things like, why don’t we undertake these studies ourselves, after all, this is the music that belongs to us; and we understand it better than you ever will. Well, to be sure, the nations of the world have begun to produce ethnomusicologists who mainly study the local music. Actually, the idea of emphasizing one’s own nation is a widespread established custom. A little over twenty years ago, at a conference of scholars from the United States and the Former Soviet Union, we noted the contrast: All of the Americans had done fieldwork in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. All of the Soviet scholars had worked in their own republics—but probably as outsiders. I recall, at another time, hearing Professor Oskar Elschek, a Slovak scholar who had spent his life collecting folk songs in Slovakia, saying something like: “Yes, it’s my own country, but to those villagers, I am always an outsider, a cultural outsider from the big city.”

So is it best for us to stick to our own backyards? Well, we ought certainly to encourage the scholars in all nations, and, no matter where we are from, we should share whatever knowledge and techniques we have. And, speaking now as an educator, we ought to encourage the performance, development and understanding of the indigenous music of all nations. At the same time, we would do better not to give up reaching across borders.

The discipline now called ethnomusicology was at one time named “comparative musicology.” Not because we spent our time making comparisons to determine who has the best music, or, for that matter, comparison at all. “Comparative” was a code word for intercultural, or multi-cultural, or “from a universal perspective.” The term was abandoned, partly for political reasons, and partly because the study of music in culture, the ideas about music and the uses and functions of music in each society, gradually began to outweigh the interest in transcription and analysis of the music.

But I think it would be a mistake to give up studying the music of the “other.” As scholars, a balance of the insider’s and outsider’s perspectives gives us the most balanced picture of the world’s musics. As citizens of the world, we know that musical experiences, musical exchanges, have often been in the vanguard of intercultural understanding. Here in China I don’t have to give you examples. At a level of smaller populations, many Native American tribes, originally quite disparate cultures, have been drawn into a united American Indian movement, in part by the development of intertribal secular ceremonies known as powwows.

## 5. What Kind of People are We? Are We Doing Anyone any Good?

My intention was to now comment on the issue of musical change, and the role of music as an expression of society and the individual, but I've already touched on these matters. I should conclude by saying a word about us as ethnomusicologists, because I continue to think that part of my job here is to say something to you about how the minds of ethnomusicologists work. I have to ask, what kind of people are we? And are we doing anyone any good? It's probably a question that music educators also ask themselves from time to time.

Conversations I've had with people in other walks of life often begin, "what are you trying to learn?" and end with "are you doing anyone any good?" I've touched on some of the things we're trying to learn. But what good are we—ethnomusicologists—doing? I could make a list of activities and accomplishments. We now have something recognized as applied ethnomusicology, which tries to use the findings of our field to help issues of poverty, conflict, medicine, and much else. Ethnomusicologists have helped musicians in many cultures to improve their lot, creating concert tours, teaching in institutions. In all of this, to be sure, they have had to violate a basic tenet of field research: Do everything you can to avoid disturbing the life of your hosts; don't impose yourself on musical and social life. Of course, ultimately, that's impossible. My late colleague Alan Merriam spoke about his visit to a village in Rwanda where he had last been fourteen years earlier. He wanted to see what history had transpired. It turned out, to those villagers, that the most important event in their musical history had been Merriam's visit (Merriam 1977).

Well, I guess the production of knowledge is itself a good thing; people can do with it what they wish. Hopefully, music educators have been able to use what ethnomusicologists have learned in developing their own field. In my opinion, ethnomusicologists have also developed a beneficial political attitude. It is well stated by Helen Myers in her compendium, "Ethnomusicology: An Introduction" (Myers 1992, 15-16), who defines ethnomusicologists as the "great egalitarians of musicology." "On the one hand, each scholar is eager to defend the music of his or her own people—the people he or she has studied—as special and unique; on the other hand, no ethnomusicologist will rank the music of his culture over that of his colleague's." And so, while the music with which I identify myself most—European classical music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially Czech music—and while I've come enormously to admire the songs of Native Americans, and the classical music of Iran and South India, I cannot claim that they are intrinsically, or aesthetically, or morally superior to the art and folk musics of the many nations of Asia and Africa. I firmly believe that, in certain important ways, all musics are equal. Each of the world's cultures has developed its music to serve its needs. And, as each culture undergoes modernization, it takes what it wishes or needs from other musics with which it has contact, combining, synthesizing, fusing, and all of this is the new authenticity.

Some music educators—I'm particularly acquainted with the work of Patricia Campbell (1991), Barbara Lundquist (Lundquist and Szego 1998), and Huib Schippers (2010)—have looked at their own activities through an ethnomusicological lens. I think that of the various disciplines in the musical academy, music education and ethnomusicology have had a special relationship. Joint committees, joint sessions, common approaches such as the "hands on" method of imparting musical knowledge, and lots more. We have learned a lot from each other; and we have a lot more to learn.



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