

## Bruno Nettl – The Study of Ethnomusicology

### Cap. 14 – Das Volk Dichtet

1. RECORDED, PRINTED, WRITTEN ORAL
  - 1.1. For a long time in the history of ethnomusicology, the differences between oral and written transmission loomed as a major definitional paradigm.
  - 1.2. “Oral” was sometimes changed to “aural”; people learned not so much what was said or sung to them but what they heard. The concept of memory was suggested as a major factor.
  - 1.3. Charles Seeger (1950) suggested that what was interesting about oral tradition was not so much that it was radically different as a way of teaching and learning from the written, but the relationship between the two.
  - 1.4. Curt Sachs (1948) suggested four kinds of musical culture:
    - 1.4.1. Oral
    - 1.4.2. Written
    - 1.4.3. Printed
    - 1.4.4. Recorded
  - 1.5. Hood (1959), in a study of Javanese music, discusses the maintenance of certain principles in an oral tradition that are necessary to hold a musical system intact.
  - 1.6. Like students of folklore generally, they saw in the very unreliability of oral tradition the creative force of the community, developing for its tendencies to proliferate within a strict set of guidelines the label “communal re-creation” (Barry; 1933), a term derived from an earlier belief in the creation of songs and tales by folk community at large, called “communal creation”.
  - 1.7. In the long history of music research there is a close relationship between the definitions of folklore as orally transmitted and of folk song as anonymously composed.
  - 1.8. Oral tradition operates as a constraining, limiting, directing, force much more than writing.
    - 1.8.1. Human memory
    - 1.8.2. The rules of the folk aesthetics
    - 1.8.3. Patterns already established
2. SOME FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS
  - 2.1. What is it that changes in oral transmission, and what remains the same?
  - 2.2. What is it that is actually transmitted?
  - 2.3. What do we know about changes in form that take place when a music moves from oral to written tradition?

- 2.4. Do oral and aural transmission and oral creation affect the forms of pieces and repertoires?
- 2.5. Elsewhere (Nettl; 1956d) I have suggested that certain structural limitations are necessary if a piece is to be transmitted orally. Dividing music into elements, I hypothesize the need for some of these to remain simple, repetitive, stable, so that others may vary.
3. FOUR KINDS OF HISTORY
  - 3.1. To what extent does the way in which music is transmitted determine the overall shape of a repertory?
  - 3.2. Four kinds of history
    - 3.2.1. Type I – It may be carried on without change
    - 3.2.2. Type II – It may be transmitted and changed, in a single version or one direction
    - 3.2.3. Type III – It may experience the kind of transmission that produces many variants
    - 3.2.4. Type IV – Similar to type III, developing within the family principle but borrowing materials from other, unrelated compositions.
    - 3.2.5. Looking at the literature of ethnomusicology at large, one finds two contrasting implications: written traditions change slowly because they are able to hold on to their artifacts in a way not possible for oral once, for these are thought to change almost involuntarily, as a result of faulty memory, the mentioned limitations, and the like; oral traditions change slowly because the simplicity of their cultural context makes them inert, while written traditions, because of the very sophistication of their apparatus and even because there is an annotation system, move quickly.
4. THE PROOF OF THE PUDDING?
  - 4.1. Analysis of cultures
    - 4.1.1. Contemporary musical culture of the Blackfoot
    - 4.1.2. Peyote songs of the Plain Indians
    - 4.1.3. Anglo-American folk song
    - 4.1.4. Persian classical system
    - 4.1.5. Persian folk music
  - 4.2. Yet the approaches developed in ethnomusicology can underscore something already understood but rarely expounded, that oral (or more correctly aural) transmission is the norm, that music everywhere uses the form of self-propagation, that in live or recorded form it almost always accompanies the written, and that it dominates the musical life of a society and the life of a piece of music.