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## Do We Need To Remodel Ethnomusicology?

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*Anthony Seeger*

**A**s an anthropologist who has consistently argued for the analysis and interpretation of musical performances as part of social processes, I found Tim Rice's paper very interesting. It is especially valuable for the way it documents some of the difficulties some ethnomusicologists have had in successfully applying anthropological approaches to musical performance. Since I agree with the author on many points, I will discuss only three issues: the description of "Merriam's model" itself, developments in Anthropology since 1964, and observations on the necessity of constructing a single model for the field of Ethnomusicology.

### **Rice's Description of Merriam's Model**

In constructing what he calls "Merriam's model," Tim Rice takes the model from three pages of an opening chapter in an introductory textbook. There Merriam argues that music involves study on three analytic levels—conceptualization about music, behavior in relation to music, and music sound itself (1964:32). These three are interrelated so that there is a "constant feedback from the product to the concepts about music, and this accounts for both change and stability in music systems" (1964:33).

This is a very simple model, as Merriam observed. Indeed, it is too simple. It does not really reflect the complexity of Merriam's thought or the variety of proposals he makes for studying music in the other chapters of *The Anthropology of Music*. It is true that the interrelationship of concept, behavior, and music sounds is often affirmed, and the origin of the idea attributed to Alan Merriam, but to limit Merriam's contribution to subsequent generations of Ethnomusicologists to the bare bones of the model omits a great many other contributions he could make to Ethnomusicology today. The "simple model" taken from his textbook is probably not what Merriam would wish to be remembered for, or is even what he is remembered for by those who have continued to study music from an anthropological perspective. Merriam should be read and remembered for many other ideas.

A major contribution of Rice's paper is his insistence on the consideration of the historical subject as a basic requisite for thought about music. If we take the simple model as a representation of Merriam's thought, it is true

that it lacks a sentient, meaning-searching historical subject. There are no people thinking, performing, and producing music, or even listening to it from within a historical tradition. This is where Geertz's suggestion, cited by Rice, that "symbolic systems are historically constructed, socially maintained, and individually applied" marks an importantly different perspective. It focuses on the subject, although differently from anthropologists in the 1980s.

Neither did Merriam situate his model in the context of a society made up of different kinds of groups in complex, and sometimes competitive relationships to one another. He did not make it clear that societies are comprised of individuals and groups, interacting with each other on the basis of relationships of kinship and comradeship, economic production and ritual consumption, complementarity and hegemony, that can bring them into direct conflict with one other. Such a view would have suggested to him that a single society can have several different ways of thinking, performing, and resulting competing musical forms. These could be related in quite complex manners, involving relationships of power and authority as well as aesthetic evaluation.

Looking at *The Anthropology of Music*, however, it is evident that Merriam was quite aware of individual experience (for example his chapters on composers and synesthesia), and had a theory of history—albeit one that treated history largely as chronology and not as the creation of the past from the perspective of the present, and action in the present from the created perspective of the past (Marx 1852; Sahlins 1981).

Rice comments on the wide variety of approaches found among Merriam's students. One of the reasons subsequent researchers have reported different results from their anthropological approaches to music has certainly been the historical specificity of the traditions they have investigated. Anthropologists who study music are also usually debating and working out ideas that appear in the works of Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Simmel, rather than simply developing Merriam's models. The anthropological study of music cannot be reduced to Alan Merriam's writings any more than those can be reduced to the simple model presented in *The Anthropology of Music*.

### **Developments in Anthropology**

Anthropology itself has changed its emphasis over the years, and is no longer what it was in 1964. This is one of the reasons for the appeal to Ethnomusicologists to read more anthropology at the 1985 S.E.M. meetings that Rice refers to in his paper. The historically situated, meaning-searching and strategizing subject has been taken seriously as an object of study and become the focus for analyses of social processes. This trend is also found

in Rice's model, and is to be applauded. The idea was indeed "blowing in the wind" as Rice suggests, and it is time that ethnomusicology incorporated it.

Another development has been the use of structuralism to interpret history. If there was a time when structuralism could be criticized for being a-historical—for over-emphasizing synchrony at the expense of diachrony—this is no longer the case. The work of Marshall Sahlins on Hawaii (1981) reveals the way pre-existing constructions of the world are used even at times of tremendous transformation such as first contacts with imperial powers. Here, as in many other places, Karl Marx has already scouted the terrain (1852).

In writings by Pierre Bourdieu (1977), the sociologist Anthony Giddens (1979) and Marshall Sahlins (1981) the acting subject has been brought toward the center of attention in the development of an anthropology of history and social processes.

### **Do We Need A Model of Ethnomusicology?**

While discussions of the adequacy of Rice's description of Merriam's model and observations of developments in anthropology since the 1960s are important, I believe it is even more important to consider whether it is necessary or desirable to develop a single model for ethnomusicology.

Tim Rice has been examining our textbooks with great care (Rice 1986) and has prepared this paper in part to reduce the distance between historical musicology and ethnomusicology. This paper is a logical outgrowth of his frustrations with teaching a field in which varied approaches are proposed and proliferate, and in which his historical musicologist colleagues have felt uncomfortable. His objective is to develop a unified rather than a divided musicology for teaching.

The idea of "re-modeling" ethnomusicology is based on the view of an intellectual field as one where consensus should reign, where people should basically agree on a single model. The proposal, however, replaces one somewhat static situation (assuming that Merriam's model was generally held) with another one. This is certainly not the only possible vision of a field. It is possible to think of models as dialectical, of a field as a ferment, and of debate as a method for advancing ideas. I prefer this vision of Ethnomusicology, where the normal state of affairs is not consensus but rather contention, where debate replaces agreement, and where exploring really different approaches substitutes for tinkering with a single existing model.

Consider the difference between Tim Rice's simple model of ethnomusicology and the complex charts designed by Charles Seeger (1977: 102–138). Rice suggests a simple common denominator and some central issues for investigation. Charles Seeger proposes that we use his charts as a road

map, but does not suggest how we should drive on them or where we should go. Instead of everyone going the same route, Seeger suggests a field in which we all travel in different directions, reporting back to each other on what we have seen, heard, or discovered on our travels. Rather than providing a single point of departure, the field and the Society for Ethnomusicology provide a place to report on our arrivals.

I have always envisioned the Society for Ethnomusicology as a place where people who are studying music from very different perspectives can report on their work as well as listen to or read each other's reports. Our meetings and our journal are modeled on heterophony rather than unison or even harmony. What we share is not a style of answer, but rather of questions. Some of them include:

How do we talk to each other about sounds and their performance?

Why do so many people make structured sounds?

Why does a particular individual or social group perform the sounds he/she/it does in the place and time and context that he/she/it does?

What do these performances achieve in the individuals and groups involved in them, as well as in the cosmos as understood by them?

What is the role of the individual in the tradition, and of the tradition in forming the individual?

By focusing on general questions rather than specific answers we continue to be a field that welcomes diversity.

There is another advantage to focusing on questions. It is questions, rather than answers, that have remained constant over the centuries. We share questions about music with the Greeks, certain medieval philosophers, the Suyá in Brazil, the Kaluli in Papua New Guinea, and with peoples the world over. By focusing on the questions, we will interact with other societies not as objects but as interlocutors: as equals in a mutual search for answers to somewhat similar, often difficult, questions. In this way we turn comparative musicology into comparative musicologies, and we can visualize our research as a mutual endeavor to investigate the nature of music through the interaction of historically situated actors (ourselves among them) employing historically situated cultural and linguistic codes to discuss musical events as we have constructed, performed, and analyzed them.

Finally, in response to Rice's pedagogical concerns, I think we should inflame our students with questions, rather than bedazzle or befuddle them with models for answering them. If we have things in common with other approaches to music, whether in our own society or in other societies, I believe it to be in the questions we ask. Ethnomusicology, and the Society for Ethnomusicology, are places to share our answers, but I am not sure they

will be well served by a search for a common denominator and the prioritization of certain kinds of questions over others implicit in his “remodeling” of the field.

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