
On Cultural Brokers: A Conversation with Bruno Nettl

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Bruno Nettl, professor emeritus at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, is one of the founders and most influential exponents of the discipline of ethnomusicology. His studies range over many topics, from music among North American Indians to the classical traditions of Iran and India. He has surveyed the general issues, methods, and concepts of ethnomusicology in The Study of Ethnomusicology: Twenty-Nine Issues and Concepts (1st ed., 1983), and The Western Impact of World Music: Change, Adaptation and Survival (1985), as well as two edited volumes, Comparative Musicology and Anthropology of Music, edited by Bruno Nettl and Philip V. Bohlman (1991) and Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society, edited Bruno Nettl and Gabriel Solis (2009). He has also contributed to the history of ethnomusicology in Encounters in Ethnomusicology: A Memoir (2002), Nettl's Elephant: On the History of Ethnomusicology (2010), and Becoming an Ethnomusicologist: A Miscellany of Influences (2013). A festschrift, This Thing Called Music: Essays in Honor of Bruno Nettl (2015), edited by Victoria L. Levine and Philip V. Bohlman, offers testimony to the creative scholarship he has encouraged in former students and other colleagues. Among his many awards and honours, Nettl was the 2014 recipient of the Haskins Prize of the American Council of Learned Societies and in the same year gave its annual lecture, A Life of Learning.

On July 1, 2016, Bruno and I met for a conversation about cultural brokers, discussing the concept's place in ethnomusicology and also in his own life story. A follow-up conversation took place on October 4, 2016; four days later, in an e-mail response to my request, Bruno fleshed out his concluding comments on ethnomusicology and history. Perhaps it was a sign of the contemporary relevance of cultural mediation that—without reflecting on the fit beforehand—we chose to talk in Caffè Bene, a Korean-owned franchise that feels comfortably at home in the American Midwest.

Harry Liebersohn: Did early generations of ethnomusicologists think of themselves as cultural mediators?

Bruno Nettl: One was an ethnomusicologist studying it, not an agent of cultural contact. The latter was not something they ever intended. Rather, their idea was that

they should not affect the culture of their place of research and should leave things alone, even while realizing that some influence was going to be inevitable. They also didn't go along with the idea of teaching their informants Western music.

Harry Liebersohn: Was there a period of transition to the moment when you couldn't avoid Western music?

Bruno Nettl: It's a complicated question. In answering it, we have to be concerned with two things. One: Are there cultures which have both Western and their traditional music (maybe keeping them separate)? In my experiences with the Blackfoot Indians, they started hearing Western music in the eighteenth century when the first missionaries showed up. They said to me: they had Indian music and they had white music—and these were separate. Second: Are there cultures fusing the two? In many cultures *both* processes take place. Related questions: does Indian music start to have the sound of Western music—and do the Indians in question do Western music in an Indian style? My friend Bob Whitmer worked on country music on the reservation—and all of these possibilities were there. Yet another possibility to think about in these exchanges: music as an expression of a system of ideas may change greatly while the music itself stays the same, or vice versa.

Harry Liebersohn: Let's turn from the profession as a whole to your own biography. You and your parents moved from Prague to the United States when you were nine. Did this transition influence your decision to study musicology?

Bruno Nettl: It's hard for me to connect the move with my interest in ethnomusicology. Living in a family which only partly became American, I had to find my own ways of reconciling these things, like consciously avoiding speaking German and generally defending American culture from European criticisms. You suggest that maybe that kind of background got me interested in ethnomusicology. Probably not, would be the answer, except for one aspect: I knew that ethnomusicology or its predecessor, comparative musicology, had started mainly in Europe, but when I started working with George Herzog at Indiana University, my decision had something to do with the perceived American-ness of the field. Of course, Herzog was Hungarian, and while he'd been in the U.S. for over twenty years still sounded very Hungarian. But the European-ness of it all wasn't much of an issue.

Later in life I always thought of myself as very American. European scholars thought of me that way also, but some Americans thought of me as being Europe-oriented. My deceased colleague Alex Ringer always said: "You may think you're American, but you're really very European!" He said that with an air of triumph because he thought Europeans were better. I don't think that my interest in studying the interaction of cultures, which came a couple of decades after my PhD, came from being bicultural—it had to do more with the kinds of things anthropologists were interested in at the time. Ethnomusicologists got interested in those issues later.

Harry Liebersohn: You include a moving chapter on your father, the music historian Paul Nettl, in *Becoming an Ethnomusicologist*. As you recall him, your father strongly

emphasized the multiculturalism of Prague. Did that trait in his personality and writings influence you?

Bruno Nettl: I certainly didn't think so at the time. I didn't think of Prague as multicultural until after my father had died. I thought more: "Well, that's the old country and that's how it went!" While my father enjoyed the place, it wasn't easy to be a Jewish kid in Prague. Figuring out when to speak Czech or German—it was a difficult life. When I came here life seemed easy. Nobody cared too much what language you spoke—and I became an American on the spot.

Recognizing my father's feelings on this point didn't come up until I began to study his works and biography after he died. Before that, my first exposure to different cultures came from anthropology. I took the normal society to be unicultural, to have *a* culture. The idea of places with different cultures seemed to be abnormal. That had to do with how anthropology was taught at that time: The world was supposed to consist of a large number of discrete cultures; it was probably unfortunate if they were mixed. One was taught the same kinds of things in early ethnomusicology. The norm was that you had *a* music. If other kinds of music intruded, it shouldn't have happened. Ethnomusicologists said, "let's not pay any attention to that," as if it didn't exist. Richard Waterman and Alan Merriam, interpreting African-American music and its African sources, introduced the idea of studying mixed cultures. For a while I sort of resisted that: In my dissertation about musical areas in North America, each area had its own music.

Harry Liebersohn: Did this have to do with *Kulturkreis* theory?

Bruno Nettl: Well, it was related. In *Kulturkreis* theory as I encountered it at the time of my dissertation, cultures existed independent of populations in a certain way—a certain tribe could be a member of one *Kulturkreis* and then another; this would account for characteristics that might have quite different distributions. The house type might belong to one culture, the music to another. As developed by anthropologists such as Clark Wissler and Alfred Kroeber, *Kulturkreis* theory sort of worked for American Indians because you had a large number of peoples each with a small population—so you could map them and find clusters and eventually vague borders.

The real, original purpose of the theory was to organize anthropological exhibits in museums (Wissler worked for the American Museum of Natural History). However, I was impressed by Kroeber and my teacher Harold Driver at Indiana and thought: I've got to do this for music. The idea was: each tribe had one musical style, and I would ignore other kinds of music in their repertory. No one cares much about this style of analysis now, but several people did follow up on my example and . . . I don't think it works.

This older definition of culture in anthropology had a lot to do with an authenticity concept. As to how it worked in practice, my first collecting took place with Arapaho Indians, whose songs I learned from a man whose name was William Shakespeare. (He was given that name in an Indian school for kids who had been taken away from their parents.) I tried to get him to record everything he knew, and it went on for days. When he came to singing some songs that had some English words, George Herzog would have thought, "Well, but those aren't really Indian songs"—or with songs from other tribes,

“well, they learned these more recently,” or Ghost Dance songs, “well, they learned these around 1890.” We said “well, that’s not really their music.” Looking back, we can see that “their music” itself might have been imported at an earlier moment in time.

Harry Liebersohn: It’s fascinating to compare today with your starting point—we’ve done a complete flip.

Bruno Nettl: In anthropology, the idea of cultural brokers was sort of a negative one. I think the term started as follows: you would go to a tribe and present yourself to the chief and say, “I want to learn something.” And he would say, “why don’t you go see so-and-so? He likes to talk to foreigners.” I had an experience of that sort with the Blackfeet. And there were, in fact, certain people who had learned how to present their culture to outsiders in a certain way. In the end, it was their interpretation. And you might have learned something quite different from the anthropologist who stayed there for ten years. Others in the tribe would say: “Don’t listen to him! He just makes it up as he goes along!”

In early anthropology, the idea was that tribal societies were very homogeneous; no matter whom you asked, they would all say the same things. This notion of human society as basically homogeneous—partly it had an ideological side. The ethnomusicologists said, “You music historians are interested in unique individuals (Bach, Beethoven) whereas we are interested in what the population as a whole has in common.” I believe that there *is* a cultural concept that you learn from your society and that music is part of it. So, how do we reconcile the notion of a general culture with the fact that when you really examine a lot of individuals, no two of them are identical? This was a fundamental problem that was hardly ever explicitly stated.

Now, the question is: How did ethnomusicology change from being a field saying “What is *the* music of a society?” to emphasizing change? I remember getting new grad students in the University of Illinois music department in the 1970s and ’80s and asking them, “What are you interested in?” And very often they would say, “I’m interested in change.” One reason for this new emphasis—it’s almost impossible to find societies that are even remotely homogeneous any more. While societies have always changed, they’ve been changing much more rapidly recently.

Another thing: ethnomusicology and anthropology used to be much more difficult fields to work in. The emphasis on change has to do with a certain laziness. There are a lot of ethnomusicologists today who know only English. That didn’t used to be the case. A great deal of research now is done without extensive or inconvenient travel. Ethnomusicology is more a part of the modern world, of modern living. If you read Malinowski, he’s there in the Trobriand Islands for years, and I think he hated it all the time. You can see in his *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* that he hated those natives—they probably hated him, a pain in the neck.¹ But I think these early field workers really faced a difficult life. And take the early recorders: Nazir Jairazbhoy, a major figure in the study of Indian music, studied in England, where his teacher at SOAS/University of London was Arnold Bake, a Dutchman. Bake went from village to village in South India studying folk music. It was hard to get the equipment around. There was no electricity, and you had to use generators and batteries in the

1930s. Jairazbhoy made a film of that and showed it here at the University of Illinois. (You know that Phil Bohlman's book edited with me has an article about Bake by Jairazbhoy.)² So I think working with music in a large city today is easier on you than going around tribal societies. That doesn't mean it's not worth doing. But I wonder if the change doesn't have to do with the inconvenience.

Harry Liebersohn: To push the question: If you look at the newly multicultural scholarly literature, what do you think of it? Compare that to the kind of thing Carl Stumpf did when he made the historic recordings in 1900 of a Thai orchestra in Berlin.

Bruno Nettl: Well, Stumpf just wanted to figure out what was going on in their music. I don't think Stumpf and his co-workers had a lot of influence on musical life in Germany. He was one of the few, considered exotic.

After the development of mass media, there were certain people who really influenced the culture they visited. The paradigm would be Ravi Shankar, plus Ali Akbar Khan and a few others. Something on the other side was the bringing over of the gamelan. American composers such as Colin McPhee discovered and used the instrument, as did Lou Harrison. And in Europe Jaap Kunst did the same. And then there was the idea of teaching a non-Western music in America and Europe by learning to perform it, pioneered by Mantle Hood. Who were the real cultural brokers, Mantle or the Javanese teachers he brought over? They had to produce a gamelan consisting of American students playing the Javanese instruments. Inevitably the Indonesians had to change their teaching methods. They couldn't do the teaching the way it was done over there in Java. My criticism (which I used to feel strongly about but don't so much anymore): there, in a place like Java, the way the music is taught is an integral part of the culture. If you use a different teaching method, that's not really the culture any more.

Harry Liebersohn: The question of pedagogy takes us deep into a culture. Where were the centers?

Bruno Nettl: Mantle Hood at UCLA predominated . . . he influenced the Wesleyan program . . . most programs try to do some of this performance. I always thought, "playing sitar—that's not ethnomusicology, any more than playing cello is historical musicology." Some of Mantle Hood's students became very knowledgeable about the culture as a whole, but that wasn't the idea—it was to practice eight hours a day and come out a good performer. The people who opposed this were the anthropologists, especially Alan Merriam at Indiana. Mantle Hood people would have said: We don't care how you learn—come back knowing *how* to play. But for Merriam what mattered was learning how the people think. If you want to learn at all, learn musical performance the way they teach it. This question of how wasn't important until around the 1960s. Although Merriam's book, *The Anthropology of Music*, doesn't say a lot about this, it does draw attention to how a culture teaches itself.³ Again, in early anthropology, there was not a lot of emphasis on this point. At that time, you were supposed to learn in traditional cultures through oral traditions, but how you learned—how you practiced—got no attention.

Harry Liebersohn: Isn't the pedagogy question bringing us up against the limits of cultural transmission?

Bruno Nettl: I think so. But of course by now, in a place like Java, they too are influenced by the rest of the world. One of the issues causing me to be critical of the Mantle Hood approach: Just getting people to sound right may be good music-making but it's not any good—ology. Mantle used to brag about how people in Java who listened to his students would say “How wonderful”—but of course, they were just being polite. Today, of course, there are people who admit to the weaknesses to learning non-Western music as Westerners . . . but despite the shortcomings it's worth it.

Harry Liebersohn: You yourself did this in Iran.

Bruno Nettl: My purpose in Iran—I got this master, Dr. Boroumand—he almost selected himself because of our common knowledge of German—I did not go to him and say, “Please teach me how to play.” I said, “I want to know how this music works.” He replied, “I can teach *radif* to you.” (That's the basic repertory which is the starting-point for improvisation; in a certain sense it's the audible theory—you're not supposed to play just it.) I could learn, though I was slower than the Persian students. He said come back and see me next Tuesday with an instrument. And he wasn't there. Old story, he wanted to see if I was serious.

Harry Liebersohn: Well, there you have your pedagogy, different in America . . .

Bruno Nettl: He said he'd teach me like an Iranian student, but of course I didn't have the same background. He took me to his classes at the university—but as an institution that was also a Western imposition—and I took individual lessons with him. But I think he tried to give me a sense of the important principles. It wasn't just the sound, but the ideas about the music. He was anxious that I get it right—both the ideas and the actual sound of the music. He would give little lectures about different parts of it.

Incidentally, he came here to Illinois in 1967. (I was in Iran for a month during the preceding year and went to Iran for the academic year 1968–69.) He was a cultural broker in the sense that he wanted to impart what he knew about this culture to the outside. He taught at the University of Tehran but considered it a patriotic duty to do that. When he found me, I was someone he could use in a certain way, which was to teach the world how great and especially how unique (he kept bringing it up) Persian music is. He came to Illinois for five weeks as a Miller Professor. I guess he took over a seminar I was teaching and taught it for a month. He could speak English a very little bit with a strong German accent. He had gone to Germany to study medicine. And then suddenly he had a detached retina and went blind. He had to quit studying and go back to Iran. Since he came from a wealthy family he could turn to music.

When Dr. Boroumand came to Illinois, my student Steve Blum took him around. Boroumand brought his wife, who didn't know any language except Persian. I think they enjoyed their stay here, but it wasn't easy for a blind man who knew little English and his wife (who knew no English). He decided that while he was teaching, he really ought to make available the material in recorded form for the students. He asked

Steve to come to his hotel room in the Illinois Union, which he did. These recordings are considered a great treasure in Iran. He recorded his *radif* three times. But he recorded a good bit of it here. And then we recorded my lessons in Iran the following year. I posted a photo of Steve Blum and myself with Boroumand on Facebook. And now I have about a hundred twenty-five Facebook friends in Iran because of their interest in Boroumand. So Boroumand became a cultural broker who was teaching outsiders how to appreciate Persian music—sort of a patriotic thing. There were many musicians in Iran who liked him and many who didn't. He was convinced that he was the only one who really knew about the music except for three others—but beyond that, nobody.

The pieces recorded are between 45 seconds and 3 minutes—all very much alike—so memorizing the *radif* is quite a job. You would go into the class and he would say: play this, play that. Boroumand was prepared to be a cultural broker even then. The first to come in to class at the university was a Japanese student who knew everything wonderfully. Another of the five or six was a woman who played the *santur* (Persian hammer dulcimer). But which instrument you played didn't matter. Boroumand said the Japanese student had a good technique, but didn't understand very much. But then for Bouramand, real understanding wasn't possible if you weren't a Persian. Of course, you get that attitude among Germans too.

Harry Liebersohn: So one thing a cultural broker can do is to convey ideas . . .

Bruno Nettl: But it also includes things like styles of practicing. Dan Neuman, in his *Life of Music in North India*, talks about *riaz* or discipline.⁴ You would say that someone who practices nine hours and never misses has the discipline. It is terribly important to them in its own right; whether someone plays well is not the same thing.

Harry Liebersohn: So, this emphasis on the cultural context affects the very definition of “music”?

Bruno Nettl: Yes. I wrote an essay in the last three months or so on things about which I've changed my mind, and this is one of them. When I was a student I saw music as more autonomous—relatable to culture only by talking about the occasions on which it's used. Later I began to see how [cultural] values are reflected in music and perhaps in other arts, in behaviour, in economics, in everything else. It's related to ethnomusicology and anthropology becoming more and more interpretive fields rather than positive sciences.

Harry Liebersohn: There has been a tremendous transformation of the field's relationship to cultural context from the time of Erich von Hornbostel, in the early twentieth century, to the present day.

Bruno Nettl: Hornbostel, compared to someone like Eduard Hanslick, would have been considered very cultural; but he didn't invent a methodology for integrating extra-musical things. Did I share with you my comparison of the field to continents, islands, and bridges?⁵ It has to do with the way we've looked at the interrelation of culture and music over time. In the field's earliest period ethnomusicologists, considered music one big continent, variegated to be sure. They looked for analytical methods that would apply to all kinds of music. There are still people who try to do this. But now there are also

ethnomusicologists who see the world as filled with separate islands or musics. To turn this insight into a methodology you do field work and analyse the music as the culture itself would; you go to Bali and find out how the Balinese themselves analyse their music. In anthropology, this was called the New Ethnography of the 1970s or so. By now, this is laughably obvious, but at the time it seemed new. The third stage, which would include the majority of articles in the journal *Ethnomusicology* now, corresponds to “bridges”: research emphasizes the connections between musics. The term “fusion” is often used to describe the musics that came about from the relationships between cultures.

Harry Liebersohn: Would it be correct to say that this is a moment when history and anthropology are drawing together?

Bruno Nettl: Let me go back a few decades; in the 1950s it was customary to say that music historians worked in a diachronic mode, and ethnomusicologists, synchronically. I always felt that this was a misinterpretation, and in 1958 wrote an article entitled “Historical Aspects of Ethnomusicology.”⁶ But the historical interests of ethnomusicologists were more speculative and interpretive than positivistic, because of the different kinds of data with which we worked. More recently, my colleagues have joined me, establishing, for example, an interest group on “Historical Ethnomusicology” in the Society for Ethnomusicology. We ethnomusicologists have come closer to the approaches of history in three ways: 1) We have more conventional historical data to work with, and this includes over a century of recordings and written observation. 2) We are more interested in seeing musical cultures as the result of processes, including the use of concepts such as modernization, westernization, syncretism, and many other ways in which musics affect each other. We have largely abandoned the notion of the world of music as a group of distinct authentic musics and are more interested in looking at the ways musics developed from a variety of outside influences. 3) As already mentioned, ethnomusicologists today are, I think it is fair to say, most interested in musics that are the results of cultural fusion. So, I believe you would be right in suggesting that ethnomusicology and history have more in common now than they did several decades ago. But perhaps they have always had more in common than is generally supposed.

Notes

- 1 Bronislaw Malinowski, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967).
- 2 Nettl, Bruno, and Philip Vilas Bohlman, eds., *Comparative Musicology and Anthropology of Music: Essays on the History of Ethnomusicology* (Milton Keynes, UK: Lightning Source, 2010).
- 3 Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).
- 4 Daniel M. Neuman, *The Life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1980).
- 5 Bruno Nettl, “On Bridges and Islands in Ethnomusicology: Remarks on History and Personal Experience,” Blacking Memorial Lecture, European Seminar in Ethnomusicology, Prague, 4 September 2014; publication in progress.
- 6 Bruno Nettl, “Historical Aspects of Ethnomusicology,” *American Anthropologist* 60 (1958): 518–32.