

Music education: perspectives from current ethnomusicology

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This paper first outlines the focus of ethnomusicology as a discipline, pointing to its concentration on music examined as intersocial activity and identifying the methodological givens that follow from that assumption. It then looks at concerns shared with researchers in the field of music education, with references to the ethnomusicological literature. The concept of music and topics of musical transmission and ability are treated in depth, to show what ethnomusicological approaches offer to specialists in music education. A final section introduces the writing of ethnography, prior to the conclusion, which identifies further areas of mutual interest.

Preamble: What is ethnomusicology?

Contrary to popular belief, ethnomusicology is not the musicology of non-Western musics. Instead, its special contribution as an academic discipline (which arose in the 1950s as a reaction to earlier schools of comparative musicology and musical folklore) appears in the definitions of leading practitioners like John Blacking and Jeff Titon. For Blacking (1973), the essence of the subject was its concern with ‘humanly organized sound’; each element of this phrase was equally crucial, and a rounded ethnomusicological investigation would move from this equation towards the complementary ‘soundly organized humanity’. According to Blacking’s work, ethnomusicology links the psychological and physiological study of individual human beings making and hearing music (always considered in real-to-life contexts) to the anthropological analysis of their social organisation and interrelationships as activated by and in musical performance. The more tightly music-focused insights resulting from the techniques of musicological research contribute to this aim, but are not necessarily an endpoint in themselves. Meanwhile, Jeff Titon (1997: 91) has proposed that ethnomusicologists look at ‘people making music’. Titon’s proposal shares the emphases of Blacking’s, but Titon appeals to the philosophy of phenomenology and its idea of ‘being-in-the-world’ to put our special embodied experience as music-makers at the forefront of the subject. More recently again, Timothy Rice (forthcoming) has revisited the discipline’s definition, proposing a model that maps the people and the music concerned onto specific times, places and metaphors. Rice’s model reminds ethnomusicologists that all three of these factors are typically significant in shaping musical situations, and he charts directions that we might trace across these domains.

Each of these definitions is applicable to any kind of music from any kind of people, and each implies a particular emphasis on the study of music-making as a human science – this is why ethnomusicologists normally reject the idea that they study non-Western music only and equally the proposal that their study is a subdiscipline of musicology. Still, it is

true that ethnomusicologists have, in practice, concentrated on overseas societies, as well as having typically looked in more detail at traditional musics than at newly arising popular styles. There are many reasons for this, not least the fact that the music academy in Britain, at least, was for a long time not a nurturing place for ethnomusicologists. As a result, the individuals who became ethnomusicologists were typically those who had travelled and encountered music that struck them as different and interesting. Having acquired linguistic and musical competence in relation to this new area, they have tended to remain with that. Both the overseas concentration and the focus on supposedly indigenous folk traditions have been questioned in recent decades, and ethnomusicological conferences now feature many papers on the music of the Western continents and on the whole range of musical styles supported in human society. Some research into historical environments has begun to appear alongside that dedicated to the investigation of the here-and-now in music, although the latter still predominates, and several non-Western ethnomusicologies have been established (alongside older musicological traditions in several parts of Asia), so continuing change is probable as different schools of thought interact.

Since live music-making remains at the core of most ethnomusicological research, and since ethnomusicologists pride themselves on tracing the social situation of which musical performance is part, it is not surprising that the principal research method in this subject is that called participant-observation. This approach is used widely and in somewhat different forms across the social sciences, and ethnomusicologists have drawn most directly on its employment in the discipline of anthropology, taking on that discipline's sensitivity to human difference. Participant-observation demands extended work among the researched community; here, the argument is that without a basis of common experience and mutual trust (and often also of shared musical skill) the researcher risks gaining only a superficial insight into other people's musical lives. He or she may interpret their actions according to his or her own values. A minimum period of one year is typically recommended for full-time fieldwork towards a doctoral degree. Interviewing, as might well be imagined, plays only a small role in classic participant-observation, and quantitative approaches are often rejected unless grounded in the value systems and categories of the people themselves. Rather, recognising that what people do and say is generally context-sensitive, a researcher is encouraged to document particularly the everyday discussions and situations that arise in the ongoing flow of human interaction (while also acknowledging that this flow might itself have been affected by the presence of the fieldworker). In principle, this allows the researcher to recognise both people's aims and ideals in music and their actual achievements. As part of this process of trying to become an insider, at least temporarily, in the community under examination, ethnomusicologists normally learn to perform together with the subjects of their study. This provides close access to the heart of the performance event and direct personal musical experience, and those studied often share their thoughts and actions much more deeply with a co-performer than with an external observer.

This thumbnail sketch of the discipline already suggests one or two points of contact with research in music education and also some contrasts. The aim of this article is to look further at some shared concerns, pointing out areas and ideas in the accumulated body of ethnomusicological practices and literature that might prove useful to the educationist as well. But let me mention first one of the key factors that perhaps helps explain why ethnomusicology and music education research can differ in style. This may help education

researchers to adopt and adapt ideas from ethnomusicology to their own terms and needs without having to become fully fledged ethnomusicologists themselves. The factor in question is the distinction some academics make between the idea of a field and that of a discipline. At its simplest, a field is a subject of study, like music education, classical music, Chinese opera or musical instruments; a discipline, meanwhile, and still at the simplest level, is an approach. In real life, of course, certain approaches to the subject become standard in any field. Likewise, disciplines very typically coalesce around particular bodies of material, as for instance music theory, which has tended to deal primarily with Western art music. From this perspective, music education can be seen as a large but still relatively circumscribed field (gender relations in music, for instance, are only part of the subject when they impact on learning and teaching) that can, in theory if not always in practice, be equally plausibly approached from multiple disciplinary vantage points. On the other hand, ethnomusicology is a rather particular disciplinary take on a far wider range of musics and musical situations (everything on gender relations in music is included, for instance, not just that in teaching and learning). This comparison puts the letter commissioning this article, which described music education as exactly 'an eclectic field', alongside my thumbnail sketch above of ethnomusicology as a discipline; what it suggests is that where music education and ethnomusicology share concerns they may still handle them in contrasting ways. The educationist turning to ethnomusicological sources for ideas will have to take this into account, reshaping those ideas as required to better match his or her own research aims. From this point of view, it is likely that a fast skim-reading of a lot of ethnomusicology will sometimes be more beneficial than a concentrated study of only one or two items. (Bruno Nettl's book of 1983 provides a good place to begin an acquaintance with the ideas of ethnomusicology.)

The remainder of this paper offers one section across the discipline of ethnomusicology, concentrating on issues of potential utility for music educationists also. I begin by looking at the concept of music, which is perhaps the simplest but also most fundamental area in which ethnomusicological perspectives can make a contribution. The next two topics to be considered are transmission and ability. Researchers in both areas have approached these subjects, and so readers in music education can put their existing ideas alongside these outlines of ethnomusicologists' work to better grasp the potential of adopting work in ethnomusicology to educational ends. After this, I introduce the subject of writing ethnography, this being a method not so much of carrying out research (although it has implications for that) but of presenting it in written form. The different research fields have their own genres of writing, most of which are shaped towards the presentation of certain kinds of research results, and it may be that there is scope for music education researchers to more regularly take on aspects of ethnography in order to put forward the kinds of results it suits.

The idea of music

One of the first areas where ethnomusicology is potentially valuable to the researcher in music education is in opening up the subject of music itself. The point here is that the academic training in music many of us share can lead us to privilege the sonic aspect of music over and above other elements that may be equally significant to those involved.

It is self-evident that music is more than simply sets of sounds (and the notation of these sounds in symbols). Music is process as well as product, an arena for both social action and personal reflection, 'emotion and value as well as structure and form' (Seeger, 1987: xiv). In their work with the members of other societies, ethnomusicologists often begin by setting aside their assumptions as to what music is, trying instead to discover what musicians and others actually do on particular musical occasions, and listening to how these individuals explain what they do. This is an approach that can work well in our own society also, one that opens a door to understandings not imposed by the scholar but built carefully on the concepts and categories of the music-makers.

Here's an example. For the last ten years classes of my undergraduates have had the task of gathering definitions of music from people who regard themselves as non-musicians. The number of people interviewed and observed is now well over 2,000. Anna Jones (not her real name), a student reading English at Durham in 1996, offers a representative example, with her explanation of what music was to her: 'Music expresses emotion. Feelings so profound that they aren't expressed by words can be conveyed through music.' Year on year, my students gather ideas about music rather like this. Read literally – and even though Anna considers herself a non-musician she's actually a highly experienced listener, and, after all, we're talking about her life here, so she deserves to be taken seriously – definitions like this are strikingly more insightful than those found in dictionaries, which typically talk only of tones, melodies, rhythms and the like. In fact, for the majority of those questioned, the technical aspects of musical sound are only the necessary means to a more important end; among this community, music is better understood as a field of thought where feelings are experienced and reflected upon. Understanding how these people think allows us to go on to investigate how they act in relation to music. It also means that we can explain their choices in terms that value the roles for music they themselves recognise, which may not be those of the external analyst. Understanding what people are really trying to do may also give us pause in planning applied work where we put forward recommendations for improving educational practice in music. Sometimes the latter turn out to be ways of enhancing teaching and learning within certain musical traditions only, and are not pertinent across the board.

There is a good deal of literature to turn to in order to back up this point about the variability of the concept of music, including both detailed case studies and more generic discussions. Among the former, potentially stimulating examples include Lewis Rowell's (1992: 5–18) discussion of the concept of music in ancient India, which shows that it embraced theatre, gesture and dance as well as song and instrumental music. Closer to home, a team of US researchers (Crafts *et al.*, 1993) gathered materials somewhat similar to those produced by my own students, looking at the position of music in people's daily lives. Among the broader analyses, educationists will find Bruno Nettl's account (1983: 15–25; see also Nettl, 2001) both accessible and wide-ranging.

Transmission

A long-standing field of ethnomusicological study has grown up around the analysis of musical transmission. As a subject area transmission lies close in some senses to the kinds of processes often studied by researchers in music education. In their commissioning letter,

this journal's editors noted that 'music education is broad, including all the formal and informal teaching and learning of music that occurs within schools, and the development of musical skills and awareness that takes place in a variety of less structured settings'. Transmission obviously labels these same processes (and structured learning and teaching settings occur outside schools, of course), but the term also differs in emphasis. The editors define their field through relation to a division of locations important to Western school music teachers (school/non-school); the ethnomusicologist's use of transmission, meanwhile, implies a concentration not on place but on the passing of musical knowledge from one person to another. In fact, the term has been criticised for its very implication that music, rather like a physical object or heirloom, is passed intact and unchanged from one generation or musician to another, an analogy not entirely congruent with the reality that music is in a sense newly made in each and every performance. Transmission is also one link in chains of associated terms that suggest pathways through the literature of ethnomusicology as a whole. For instance, an ethnomusicological enquiry on stability versus change would probably place transmission in among other issues and sub-themes, such as: ACCULTURATION, APPROPRIATION, ASSIMILATION, BORROWING, CHANGE, COMPOSITION, CREATIVITY, DIFFUSION, ENCULTURATION, EDUCATION, FORMULAICITY, IMPROVISATION, INFLUENCE, MEMORISATION, MODERNISATION, ORNAMENTATION, PRACTICE, PRESERVATION, PROFESSIONALISATION, RECORDING, STABILITY, SYNCRETISM, TRADITION, TUNE FAMILIES, URBANISATION, WESTERNISATION and VARIATION. The exact meaning an ethnomusicologist would find in each of these terms, or how one differs from the next, is not important here; the main point is that the ethnomusicologist might approach the teaching and learning that occur in transmission alongside studying other kinds of processes in a society that are driving on or inhibiting musical change. Through reference to ethnomusicological writings, or even just by abstraction from lists of ethnomusicological research themes like this one, some music educationists will find new emphases to bring to studies of teaching and learning and new ways to explore the connections of such topics to other segments of the musical world.

There are also smaller-scale ethnomusicological studies more specifically focused on aspects of transmission open to the academic reader from music education. Natalie Kononenko's study (1998: 86–107) of apprenticeships among Ukrainian minstrels offers one thought-provoking instance, as do Timothy Rice's reflections (1995) on learning in an aural tradition. My own study (Stock, 2002) of learning in traditional opera in Shanghai shows that opera singers actually did much of their learning on the job, and after the period of formal apprenticeship; moreover, extremely successful learning occurred within an environment that almost entirely de-emphasised teaching. Indeed, it could be argued that the stars of the Shanghai opera tradition developed such impressive independent musical skills in large part because no one supported them with explicit instruction. Of course, only the ablest could succeed in this particularly extreme example of what we might now call pupil-directed learning. Among the observations we might abstract from this example is the idea, hardly original in itself, that we can sometimes study musicians' lifelong learning. An example that does exactly this is David Harnish's biography (2001) of the master Balinese musician I Made Lebah. Harnish shows the different kinds of learning that Lebah experienced and utilised through his long life. And if we can write learning-focused biographies on contemporary musicians, we could also see our subjects as open to historical study: music education research often has a focus on the here-and-now

(or history approached as a long view of the here-and-now) that emerges from the field's connections with applications in present-day education. In this sense, it shares an emphasis found in ethnomusicology, where the underlying reason is reliance on participant-observation. Still, there is surely scope for more research on historical topics in both subject areas.

Ability

The above discussion has already moved from transmission of musicality from one person to another to the examination of particularly successful musical learners, and it turns out that the individual acquisition and public affirmation of musical ability is assessed in a large proportion of ethnomusicological texts. John Blacking explored the kinds of broader theory that might emerge from cross-cultural comparison. Drawing inspiration from his fieldwork among the Venda of South Africa and his own musical upbringing in British schools, Blacking (1973: 116) argued that all humans are inherently musical even if social factors in Western society restricted the opportunities of many for creative development and expression. This interpretation sees the master figures of Western music as socially advantaged rather than as different in kind from the multitudes deemed 'untalented' in Western society. Recent advances in genetics may not entirely support this view, but it usefully underlines the role of learning music in many societies as a form of training for a full human life, teaching people the aesthetic, emotional and political structures of their societies in one affecting activity. Blacking's work has not been followed up with ethnomusicological studies specifically designed to delineate the factors that restrict musicality in particular societies, but it elicited a warm response from those in music education who shared its universalist political agenda.

In general, ethnomusicologists have tended to examine musical competence on a cultural (rather than cross-cultural) basis, perhaps fearing that the bases for comparison are not yet well established. In some societies musical ability is considered restricted to a limited proportion of individuals; elsewhere, almost everyone is deemed able (and expected) to make music, which is to say that there may be no indigenous category of musical ability or of the musician at all. Furthermore, since music is itself defined quite distinctly from place to place, the range of dimensions in which musical ability might be claimed to reside, if at all, varies considerably from one scene of inquiry to the next. Even where apparent cross-cultural overlap can be found, the ascribed source and detailed workings of special musical ability can be strikingly diverse. According to Alan Merriam (1964: 67–8), inherent musical ability was considered equally distributed among the Anang of Nigeria, who identified subsequent training as the key to the acquisition of professional expertise. The Congo Basongye contrastingly explained musical success as primarily a result of biological inheritance. The Shona *mbira* lamellaphone performers in Zimbabwe studied by Paul Berliner (1978: 136–7) cited both biological inheritance and achieved skills as necessary ingredients in the make-up of a proficient player, with the intervention of ancestral spirits stimulating the learning process at key moments. (Sceptics might like to spend a few days playing computer games intensively and then see if they dream about the games; if so, how much more might dreaming be a real force in the case of a matter of high social importance?) In certain Native American communities,

where ancestral spirits are also ascribed a role in the teaching of songs, an able singer is more prosaically recognised as being one possessed of an excellent memory and a loud voice.

Meanwhile, Henry Kingsbury's (1988) analysis of talent, a characteristic held to be the formative attribute of the budding American conservatoire musician, reveals profound links between patterns of social power and the attribution of talent. Talent was envisaged by many of Kingsbury's consultants as being natural (or unnatural, in the sense of being God-given) – the student either has it, or not – and despite the institutional setting, no amount of education could instil that which was lacking. Adding further complexity to this already highly charged matrix was the fact that many of those who saw themselves possessed of this special ability perceived it as both a benefit and a duty: given a talent for music, they felt obliged to undertake the arduous training for a musical career. To do otherwise would be to waste a precious gift.

The impressive technical and theoretical foundations – the countless hours of concentrated thought, practice and rehearsal – that underlie the performance abilities of professional musicians have been scrutinised in detail in several recent ethnomusicological studies. Paul Berliner (1994) has analysed the acquisition and negotiation of competence in jazz, while Virginia Danielson (1997) has charted the rise and extensive career of Egyptian singing star Umm Kulthūm. Both these accounts suggest that an able musician is one who learns to think in new ways. Jazz players, for example, learn to recognise regular (and transposable) harmonic gestures, larger-scale passages and song forms, a breakthrough that allows them to utilise pre-memorised chunks in their performances and to envisage new melodic possibilities without losing their place in the musical structure. A sense of the malleability of musical form replaces an earlier reliance on arduously memorised and reconstructed recorded or notated models. Umm Kulthūm, on the other hand, was able to sustain her popularity across several decades by continually training her vocal technique and boldly adapting her performance style as fashions changed.

A potentially attractive model for more general inquiry into musical competence has been proposed by Benjamin Brinner (1995: 40–2). With particular reference to Javanese music, Brinner delineates various domains within which specifically musical competence can occur: sound quality; sound patterns; symbolic representation, as for instance in notation or mnemonic schemes; transformative processes, such as transposition; interaction; orientation, whether towards a tonal centre or a temporal point of reference; ensembles; repertoire; performance context; and meaning or symbolism. Notwithstanding his separation of musical competence into disparate components for clearer analysis, Brinner's study emphasises the ways in which musicians simultaneously correlate experience from multiple domains.

A final dimension of the ethnomusicological study of musical ability, and one that might be added to Brinner's list, is suggested by research that attends to the ways in which an able musician moves (an early example is Baily, 1977). In improvisatory traditions, the patterned movements of the performer may contribute to the generation of musical material itself. Timothy Rice's reflections (1994) on his own experiences in learning the Bulgarian *gaida* bagpipe are germane here. Rice's acquisition of competence in reproducing the rapid ornamental style typical of this instrument resulted not only from his theoretical understanding of the music but also from a specifically physical process during which

Rice's fingers came to terms with the instrument. Only once he had acquired a 'feel' for *gaida* performance could Rice construct an adequate cognitive representation of what he was doing. Acquisition of such ability on the part of the ethnomusicological researcher is, of course, part of the particular ethnomusicological take on participant-observation. It has been called for, if not regularly documented as a growing experience, since at least 1960, when Mantle Hood coined the term 'bi-musicality' to remind us that in order to gain insight into someone else's musical experience we needed to become at the very least competent musicians in their own terms.

Voices and writing

Looking at work in another discipline can draw our attention to givens in our own subject that have become so habitual we barely see them any more. Ethnomusicological writing fulfils this role well for music educationists, I think, as it often asks similar kinds of questions in different kinds of ways. Furthermore, it could also be described as one of the most self-conscious of all the various music disciplines, which is to say that theoretical discussion is both quite common and quite prominent (sometimes to the ire of readers who really want to know about the music in question). The visitor from another subject area whose primary aim is to reconsider his or her own work can find plenty of explicit discussion of ideas and assumptions, which is exactly what is needed.

We have already met one of these ethnomusicological assumptions: namely that the researcher cannot assume that he or she sets out knowing what the researched are trying to do or how they make sense of their musical experience. Nor can we necessarily assume that other people's experiences fit into the same categories as our own. In ensuring that we have duly understood the people whom we study, we need to think about both the quality of our interaction with them and the aptness of our methodology in allowing genuine access to the particular issues in question. We should also consider carefully how we go on to represent people in our writing. It is sometimes feared that this means we can interpret someone's music-making only in their own terms. In fact, it is likely that our growing understanding and common humanity will equip us with some sympathy towards those terms, but as researchers writing in the main for other researchers we also need to analyse the ideas that people provide in terms that make sense for our readers. Ethnomusicological writing offers many examples that seek to present both the views of the community studied and the scholar's interpretation. Presenting both of these side by side has the advantage of treating people as more than simple purveyors of data or examples of a type, and it is not difficult for an author to clearly label shifts of voice when switching between presenting the views of various insiders and his or her own understanding.

Much of this writing is termed ethnographic – that is, it is an account of a society. Some education researchers write ethnographies, as do anthropologists, some sociologists and ethnomusicologists. As a means of presenting research in written form, an ethnography has several strengths. For one thing, the extensive participant-observation it typically emerges from arms the researcher with a wide range of experiences of people making music and, ideally, reflecting on their own and one another's music-making in the ordinary contexts of day-to-day interaction. As such, an ethnography is a good way of capturing the complexities of the life experience of individuals. It does not risk transforming the

topic under examination by lifting just some parts out of the social whole that music-making comprises; it avoids false comparison when research generalises about people or situations based on categories that lack grounding in the realities of the subject; and it avoids the danger of superficiality inherent in research based on interviews only without extensive observation or self-participation. Second, and because of its depth of grounding in the life of the community observed, an ethnography is generally rich in detail. This 'thick description' makes ethnography a suitable style for writing up research projects that investigate the more complex interactions found in situations of musical learning. Third, the written conventions of ethnography allow the researcher to reflect on any impact that his or her presence or methods had on the research. Contact between researcher and researched is sometimes seen as a problem to be minimised, but restricting contact altogether risks leading to a superficial engagement only, which is certainly the worse of the two evils.

Of course, poorly written ethnography is as unwelcome as poorly considered statistical research and as pointless as analysing badly designed questionnaires. There are actually several distinct kinds of ethnography, some of which are more suitable for certain kinds of research report than others (on these different types of ethnography, see Van Maanen, 1988). Like any technique, it needs to be acquired through effort, self-critique, through the imitation of effective examples, and ideally through discussion with experienced peers. Ethnomusicology provides examples that can help in this process, and although researchers might just as well turn to anthropological writing, the ethnomusicological ones have the added benefit of being focused on music. Specific instances include Thomas Turino's account (1993) of Peruvian panpipe ensembles in rural and urban Peru, Michelle Kisliuk's 'performance ethnography' (1998) of BaAka pygmy music in Central Africa, and Suzel Reily's study (2002) of popular Catholic processional performances in Brazil. One feature of many of these ethnographies that appears to occur less often in music education research monographs is the inclusion of a CD of music examples (notwithstanding *BJME's* provision of recordings with each volume). On one level the unfamiliarity to the target readership of the material that most ethnomusicologists study makes this a necessary communicative strategy for them, but on a deeper level, inclusion of a CD of examples places an emphasis on the performances as the primary music material, rather than whatever scores or transcriptions may also exist. This is an emphasis that music educators often wish to share, and it may be that inclusion of a CD will sometimes help put this across to the target readership.

Conclusion

World musical traditions have been mentioned only in passing so far. I have not focused on aspects of these in this article because it seems to me that they offer more to teaching in music education than to research by music educationists. In fact, though, there are several areas of overlap, as in research in curriculum design or studies of intercultural learning, and it is clear that in these cases the music education researcher needs a good working knowledge of the non-Western material in question, which can clearly be built up from personal experience and from reading ethnomusicological writings. There are also many more themes in ethnomusicological research that will interest some researchers in music

education: identity, improvisation, power and status, to name but a few. Ideally, all of us in the broad field of music studies would be trained and then continue to read widely (if quickly) outside our own special research areas. This would overturn divisions between the music disciplines based on long-outdated assumptions about subject matter, and provide us with access to a greater range of ideas and methods. It would allow us to understand what other researchers are trying to do, decide whether any of it is useful for us and critique our own disciplines more effectively. It might also help us see the special contributions and emphases of our own disciplines more clearly – it may be that a kind of heterogeneous multidisciplinary is actually needed more urgently than a facile interdisciplinarity.

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