

Ethnographically sourced experiences of Ethnomusicology – a further response to the debate

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Since posting online **my position statement on the question ‘Are we all Ethnomusicologists Now?’** (the full debate **can be viewed here** – see also **Michael Spitzer’s statement here** and **other responses to the event here**), there has been a fair amount of negative responses from some ethnomusicologists, not least on social media. I would genuinely welcome open, scholarly, and proper responses to the specific arguments I made (they could be posted in the comments on this blog, for example); the comments I have seen have mostly not been of this nature.

I would urge all respondents to look up the **ad hominem fallacy**, and consider whether it is applicable to my statement, which I believe is entirely focused upon the arguments of the authors I discuss (save for the concluding statement, which parodies common ethnomusicological parlance to make a point).

Furthermore, few of the above seem to have read the first paragraph of my statement:

‘...when the object of study for this sub-discipline is Western art music, and it is on this body, or even canon, of work in English that I intend to concentrate today’

In that context, the following should be very clear:

‘Much of the ethnomusicological work I have been looking at does not simply consider the relationship between sounds and contexts, but brackets out sounding music out entirely. . . . What remains is what I call ‘musicology without ears’. This requires little in terms of traditional musical skills (in whatever tradition), and I believe the more this achieves a dominant or hegemonic place within contemporary musical education, the more it contributes to what I have referred to elsewhere the deskilling of a profession (meaning the loss of many skills specific to that discipline). Musicology can become little more than a more elementary sub-section of sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, but rarely with the breadth or depth of methodological awareness to be found in some of those other disciplines (though I have wider doubts about cultural studies/industries in general). This can facilitate the ominous possibility of musical departments being closed or simply incorporated into others.’
[reverse italics added for emphasis]

My critique is focused on method, not on the object of study. There is a surplus of excellent ethnomusicological work, some of which I mention in my statement; other especially notable examples which come to mind include David P. McAllester's *Enemy Way Music: a Study of the Social and Esthetic Values as Seen in Navaho Music* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Museum, 1954), Paul F. Berliner's *The Soul of Mbira: Music and Traditions of the Shona People of Zimbabwe* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), or Christopher Alan Waterman's *Jùjú: A Social History and Ethnography of an African Popular Music* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990). The position statement, however, deals with a very specific canon of texts, much celebrated by a small group of authors, and which I find to be deeply problematic (and in some cases hardly deserving of the epithet 'scholarly') for reasons outlined in the statement, which will be explicated in more detail in a forthcoming article.

In another post on the subject, I gave some further reflections and posted a long section from Paul Harper-Scott's book *The Quilting Points of Musical Modernism* relevant to the subject. There I mentioned a forthcoming response to the **position statement given in the debate by Laudan Nooshin**. I think it will suffice to say that several of the traits I identified in the ethnomusicological work I considered in my original statement – a tendency within the subdiscipline towards 'endlessly telling its own story and creating its own canons of hallowed figures' (not least in the statement contained in PPT 6); an uncritical attitude towards any work which simply ticks a sub-disciplinary box; a rather dismissive attitude to the one thing which defines musicology as a discipline – the study of sound; the padding out of material with often rather unremarkable verbatim quotes; the use of loaded politics and language ('musicological hegemony', 'occupied musicology') to try and close down debate, rather than more measured critical engagement; and the need to denigrate Western music and established forms of musicology in order to bolster ethnomusicological disciplinary identity – are all clearly on display in that paper. To talk about 'occupied musicology', using a backdrop of the Israeli Wall, and thus to imply her own situation, and that of other ethnomusicologists, is akin to that of Palestinians living under brutal occupation, is hyperbole unworthy of a response.

Nooshin's claims made elsewhere in the debate that imply that ethnomusicologists know all about Western music, but only they are qualified to have a view on their own field, are not only self-serving and territorial, but simply not credible. An Arnold Whittall or a Helga de la Motte-Haber is in a position to make broad statements about twentieth-century music, a Carl Dahlhaus was on the nineteenth-century, a Manfred Bukofzer on the Baroque era, and so on, all after many years of intense study of these periods. I feel reasonably able to make some broader observations on Western art music since 1945, though know there is still plenty more to learn. It takes a very good deal of study, perhaps a lifetime, to be able to make broad statements about 'Western music' (or 'Western art music'), even within restricted geographical and/or chronological parameters; it seems unlikely that scholars who may only have studied this music at undergraduate level or in general survey courses can pronounce expertly on it.

I am especially interested in Nooshin's remarks about a 'fetishist focus on music as sound', which prompts me to ask why she would describe in this way the type of study which arises out of a fascination with music and its most defining attributes? This common type of Anglophone ideology, by which focused study on sounding

music is viewed as a decadent or effete triviality (as literary study has also been viewed at various times in the English-speaking world) compared to the more supposedly weighty social sciences, is highly concerning. I strongly disagree with that rather narrowly utilitarian attitude which privileges social function over art. A study of Tomás Luis de Victoria's contrapuntal practice, of orchestration in late-nineteenth-century French composers and the influence of Berlioz's *Traité*, or of approaches to phrasing and rhetoric in the work of contemporary performers (as was undertaken by Franz Kullak in the 1890s, one of a great many examples which disproves Nooshin's erroneous claim that traditional musicology has only recently considered performance), or developments in crooning technique and genre in line with new microphone technology and employment at the hands of Frank Sinatra and others, are not of lesser value than a focus group study of iPod preferences on a particular housing estate, or an interview with the composer of music for a specific computer game, despite the surface topicality of these last two examples. Nor are studies of the provenance of lesser-known Icelandic sagas, of archaic and classicising tendencies in the poetry of Vasile Alecsandri, or the relationship between post-1945 Polish experimental theatre and the earlier work of Zygmunt Krasinski, then Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, less relevant than a study of celebrities' choices when appearing on BBC Radio 4's *Poetry Please*. The arts are not to be valued simply to the extent that they overlap with elementary and broadly populist sociology or other more 'relevant' disciplines, or are superficially contemporary (nor should the study of, say, sixth-century history be dismissed in the manner of **the Vice-Chancellor of Queen's University, Belfast**). And what evidence is there that the study of music in the context of war, or torture, has any more impact upon these latter fields* than the study of techniques of motivic or cellular transformation in one composer's work might have upon other composers looking to develop these techniques?

Nooshin's attractive idea of 'a more holistic field studying music in its broadest sense' is not what I actually find in the work I surveyed, in some of which music is just mentioned in a token manner, in the context of otherwise essentially journalistic writing. In her paper she refers to 'music in all its diversity and beauty: as physical movement, as behavior, as ideas – something that people think and talk about and that plays a central role in and shapes their lives', implying that no-one other than ethnomusicologists had considered these things. In fact, none of these subjects are at all new to traditional forms of musicology (nor various other disciplines), but they supplement and enhance the study of sound rather than replace it. The study of physical movement without sound is theatre or dance. The study of behaviour without sound is psychology. The study of ideas without sound is philosophy. All of these are highly sophisticated disciplines in their own right; few scholars could plausibly claim mastery of all of them. But the exclusive use of questionnaires and interviews to deal with these subjects is a very narrow approach, just as they are for the study of music. 'Interdisciplinarity' (a term **wittily decried by the musicologist Mark Everist**) can sometimes amount to 'Jack-of-all-trades-ism'; drawing upon other disciplines can be extremely valuable, for sure (and is nothing new), but to enhance a field of study, not to compensate for lack of real expertise in *any* one discipline or artistic field, or to satisfy those who hold the study of art in low esteem. It is difficult to see how the claims being made by Nooshin for ethnomusicology could ever be fulfilled when sound becomes a dispensable factor.

Anglo-American musicology is in a poor state, for sure, compared to some of its counterparts elsewhere, in the UK beset by a wider educational culture involving cuts to primary and secondary musical education leaving many upcoming students ill-prepared, a wholehearted embrace of commercial music above most else since the Thatcher years, a broader political and intellectual culture disdainful of the arts in general and music in particular, not to mention the insidious effect of the Research Excellence Framework, which reduces much research to attempts to game that system. It is perhaps not surprising if some ethnomusicology reflects these various trends, which can be found equally in various other sub-disciplinary areas.

Nooshin wrote 'I, however, do do ethnography and for this debate thought it would be useful to put the central questions to some real people, mainly but not only ethnomusicologists.' With this in mind, I have done similarly, and asked six musicologists (three men, three women) and one post-graduate student (other students promised replies, but they have not yet materialised!) about their experience of ethnomusicology or ethnomusicologists in their professional or academic life. None of these are at my own institution or any at which I have worked, but I hope Nooshin will agree they are 'real people' (I am not sure what would be another type). The results are varied, but some are quite disturbing. These were provided to me in writing and I have not edited any content.

Musicologist A: My experience of ethnomusicology and ethnomusicologists is quite varied. I've taught in departments where there was no such thing, and those departments certainly felt rather old-fashioned and crusty. I've also taught in departments moving towards a large new intake of ethnomusicologists, many of whom were barely trained in traditional technical skills for western music and who I felt were basically doing forms of sociology, cultural history, anthropology, etc. with something often unreflectively called "music" (whether 'soundscapes' or practices) as a central focus. Certain individuals, especially if they were converts from western music training, can in my experience be evangelical in tone about their work. Enthusiasm is fine, but this tone comes with a censoriousness that implies that anyone not interested in the popular/rural/amateur music(al practices) of country X (X being country far away from the UK, expensive to fly to, with a better climate) is at best a Eurocentric prig or at worst a racist Nazi. This evangelism extends in research presentations to a rather flat, uncritical reporting of what the people of country X say about their music(al practices). As someone whose research materials all pre-date sound recording and whose human subjects are all dead, I find ethnographic emphasis on live interviews/recordings rather limiting and am often horrified at the uncritical attitudes scholars have to the 'texts' generated by these methods. The best ethnomusicologists I have worked with have strong critiques of authenticity narratives, skepticism about the general way the ethnographic method is conducted, read books (including historical writing and writing about history) and use various kinds of theory that pervade other kinds of humanities scholarship. The worst simply show what look like lovely holiday snaps, give a pseudo-literary, 'atmospheric' narrative about their trip, and quote their interlocutors at length, nodding sagely. I would say that the latter are in the vast majority. I tend to view them as well-meaning but misguided. One former colleague (who works on Western music and has left the UK to work in a country where there is basically no ethnomusicology) said privately that they are 'those who think they will go to heaven because they work on the music

of poor people'. Given that I do not know any ethnomusicologists who did not attend fee-paying schools, which places them in the top 7% of the country's children economically, I imagine they view their work as a kind of penance. (I realize I've described ethnomusicology as a kind of religion, which is what it feels like. In some departments it feels like they want to convert or excommunicate everyone else until there's one united church of ethnomusicology. I'm a heretic, I'm afraid.).

Musicologist B: Ethnomusicology is no longer just a complementary area of study and research in tertiary music departments. It has become the locus of an ideological 'given' that compares, whether overtly or by implication, but always unfavourably, the music of 'authentic' popular genres, or non-Western societies, with an apparently hopelessly sexist, racist, decadent and/or anaemic Western art music tradition. That tradition, and the skills needed to study it, can, thus, be dismissed as a field of serious study ever earlier in undergraduate degree programmes. We are at growing risk of losing our capacity to understand our own musical culture, let alone anyone else's, as little more than the triumph of the here and now, with no historical depth or genuine critical potential.

Musicologist C: Just before I arrived at my institution, where the Music Department was going through a period of development and planned expansion, an ethnomusicologist had been appointed to develop and build on what was deemed to be a burgeoning research and teaching area. I got on well with the ethnomusicologist. After some time, with little development in the area, the institution appointed another ethnomusicologist to try to stimulate the desired development it had seen little return on. After a year, it was clear neither ethnomusicologist got on with the other and they effectively refused to work together. Within a decade, both had moved to pastures new. There are no plans to employ ethnomusicologists in the department's strategy going forward.

Musicologist D: What really surprises me is how nasty my colleagues can be, both to staff and to students. Intellectual disagreements are to be expected, and I can even understand how passions can rise in meetings where the redesign of the degree programme is being discussed. But ethnomusicology colleagues victimize staff who work on "imperialist" music, by which they mean Western classical music: they shout them down in meetings, alleging that they are the only people who are interested in the social contexts of music and therefore have a moral high ground. This makes everyday dealings unpleasant. But what is worse is that they single out students for humiliating treatment in lectures. Over the years I've had many students tell me how they're been laughed at by ethnomusicology lecturers, told that their views (for instance that it's worth studying the history of music, or that there's something of interest in nineteenth-century symphonies) are conservative, "have been unspeakable since at least the 1990s", and so on. Again, what the students describe isn't just disagreement: it's real vitriol, communicated with a clear sense of moral as well as intellectual superiority. If ethnomusicologists practiced what they preached, they would be open to the varied perspectives of their colleagues and their students. But far from that, I find too often that ethnomusicologists feel that their way alone is right,

that their knowledge alone is permitted, and that the views of their classical-music Others should be suppressed.

Musicologist E: *Ethnomusicology and ethnomusicologists have not loomed large on my horizon; as student I avoided the optional lectures on Egyptian music just as I steered clear of contemporary music. At the university where I got my first job, there was one 'proper' ethnomusicologist in the traditional sense, i.e. somebody who studies a non-European musical culture and its practices. With my own interests in early music, we were both a bit odd in the context of this very 'contemporary' department, so we shared eye-rolling moments when other colleagues universalised from their 20th-century perspective. There was also one other colleague who took an anthropological approach to Western music, but since the study of instruments (organology) is quite a traditional and non-controversial pursuit in the academic system where I received my training, I never thought much about how his approach differed from – or was superior to – any other way of dealing with this topic.*

Recently I had the opportunity to engage with several ethnomusicologists at a conference in Germany. Their interests were refreshingly diverse: the construction of Inka music as masculine, heavy metal, music and migration, German Schlager, transnational music pedagogy. Since the conference was organised by music historians and mainly dealt with issues of historiography and biography in the digital age, the ethnomusicologists helpfully slanted their presentations in a way that translated well into more historical ways of thinking, weighing carefully the advantages and disadvantages of our different methodologies (for example, how the traditional format of the artist's biography is currently adapted in ethnomusicology). Funnily the ethnomusicologists were the most critical of a recently set-up programme on 'global' music; we all agreed that it would just encourage cultural tourism. Exchanges were lively but not hostile – you can always get a lively discussion out of any bunch of musicologists if you throw the word 'canon' into the ring! However, it should be noted that we were in a decisively non-competitive situation and didn't have to squabble over curriculum design, student numbers or funding allocations! And perhaps it does make a difference that ethnomusicology has been built into the fabric of Musikwissenschaft from the start (starting humbly as 'vergleichende Musikwissenschaft') – so historians are less tempted to belittle it as merely a complement to their 'canon', and ethnologists are less tempted to cast themselves as revolutionaries who have to overturn the entire discipline.

Musicologist F: *In my professional capacity as a musicologist who has worked at a number of universities in Europe and the US, I have never encountered any of the institutional tension that is reported elsewhere between faculty in musicology and faculty in ethnomusicology. In my professional experience, both subject areas have happily co-existed, often strengthening and enhancing one another whilst also giving students an impressive intellectual base and a broad range of skills. The fact that the two have happily co-existed in my experience is largely due to the fact that they are not competing with one another. Neither is under threat.*

The debate at City University is timely, and I found it to be hugely informative in terms of the professional experience of others and the light it shed on the current state

of the discipline(s). The one aspect of this debate that relates directly to my experience, as a self-confessed WAM musicologist, concerns the increasing marginalization of Western art music in academic musical spheres, whether on the conference circuit, in the classroom, or in publications. Here, I am acutely conscious of an epidemic that Ian Pace has been at pains to warn us about for some time: the deskilling of musicology. And, as Michael Spitzer notes in his contribution to this debate, in this respect, there is not a two-way street between ethnomusicology and musicology.

The merits of embracing ethnomusicological approaches in WAM musicology (to speak only to my own perspective) seem self-evident and were rehearsed very well by Bailey, Lind, and Nooshin at the City University debate. The urgent issue, to my mind, is not the riches to be gained in such an embrace but, conversely, what stands to be lost by the marginalization of Western art music. Approaching this from the point of view of skills, the marginalization of WAM musicology risks losing something which cannot subsequently be regained. Unlike ethnomusicology, which speaks to music through a range of disciplinary voices, WAM musicology relies on a knowledge of the music itself, to employ another much maligned phrase. The difference to my mind, then, is illustrated by paraphrasing Johannes Brahms: there are those who think in tones, and those who think about tones. There is room in our academic world for both, and an abundance of the latter. The former are an endangered species. Let's not risk losing any more of them.

Post-graduate student: My experience of ethnomusicology during my undergraduate degree was not an entirely positive one. Whilst certain lecturers in the discipline were undertaking research and teaching, which I felt (both then and now) to be important, just as many espoused positions, which I found frustrating. I shall attempt to outline my reasons for this as follows: Whenever certain ethnomusicologists in the department broached the topic of Western Art Music, there was an assumption that only middle class people, who had been to private schools, could like classical music. Indeed, we were told that, as we were studying for a degree, sold to us on the basis that most of us probably quite liked Beethoven, that we almost certainly were too. Whether this is a fair comment or not (in the case of my educational background, it actually wasn't), I nevertheless found it a strange one. We were told, so often, that Western Art Music relied on universals, that worked to corrode and obfuscate the memory of historical privilege. We were told that ethnomusicology was the antidote to such empty universality: it focused on the particular, the autochthonous, and the 'local'. Ethnomusicology seems to rely on universals of its own, however, although these are never acknowledged. They posit the spectrum of people interested in classical music as apparently homogenous and unchanging, who are, by and large, often separated, by their privilege, from the economic concerns of 'ordinary' people. Ethnomusicology posits musicology as its universal 'Other', then, both morally and academically, so that writing a paper on something non-Western becomes a morally courageous and virtuous thing to do. I'm not sure I agree, largely because value judgements, of any kind, were often censored by certain members of staff. This is, of course, a perspective quite common to much of present academia, non-musical as much as musical, and whilst it is a point I disagree with, it is not grounds, on its own, for the character assassination of a discipline. My experience, however, was that it was often adopted by certain lecturers, as a portentous display of personal morality

(i.e. it is 'immoral' to dislike something), and I could never escape the feeling that there was a somewhat more insidious subtext to these demonstrations. As an example, a friend of mine was marked down in their essay on globalisation and world capitalism, for implying that there might be something in any way negative about these things. It just wasn't a scholarly perspective, apparently. The fact of the matter is that much of this music only exists because of capitalism. Often it does not constitute the type of 'authentic' experience ethnomusicologists claim it to be; it is a cultural commodity in the same way that a can of Coke is. If one is to criticise the economic system, which incubates it, however, then one cannot escape criticising the musical object, either, and one is forced to make value judgements. On the other hand, if one keeps their distance, one can keep on writing about the musical object, without really passing comment on its ethical or political efficacy. This is economically and morally convenient, perhaps (i.e. one can publish more and more, whilst feeling themselves to be doing good), but it is not good scholarship. For one, it is descriptive, as opposed to critically incisive, and second of all, it claims to be doing moral work, when it actually amounts to no more than laissez-faire, postmodern fingering. The situation, for those people being studied, remains exactly the same, whilst the reputation of the academic in question grows. The criticism of this perspective would no doubt be that it is elitist to think things can be altered for the better. In an argument that sounds no different than a defence of Victorian economic conservatism, if one were to intervene in the lives of disadvantaged people, then it would be contrary to their own 'choice'. In the current academic vocabulary, one might be accused of robbing them of their 'agency'. However, I think it is misguided to think of many people's lives in these terms. 'Choice' is a predominantly middle-class concept. If you live a hand-to-mouth existence, then choice has little to do with it; one does things out of necessity. By making out that those people studied have choice, and by celebrating their music, they simultaneously celebrate the secret necessity of those choices, which, to my mind, is the exact opposite of what we should be doing.

For reasons detailed in my original position statement, I make no scholarly claims for this method of investigation. Nonetheless, I believe these results demand some sober reflection.

[* It could of course be argued that the study of the use of music and torture might help equip a musician who wanted to write or locate some new music which would have maximum effect in such a context. But I can hardly imagine students and future torturers and dictators at the School of the Americas being deterred by some musicological study.]