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TWO REPORTS ON ETHNO MUSICOLOGICAL RESEARCH

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SUMMARY. The two reports attempt to clarify several terminological and classification issues related to the study of folk song. From an ethnomusicologist's point of view, the concepts of composition, improvisation, authorship, paternity or similarity are not as clear-cut as might be generally understood. Several writings by prominent scholars Bruno Nettl, Alan P. Merriam and Stephen Erdely are used as a base for the debate over these concepts.

The first report focuses on the problem of what exactly constitutes music and musical creation, a question that seems to receive distinct answers in different cultural contexts around the world. The second report presents and compares various methods of classification applied to folk tunes and tune families.

Keywords: Ethnomusicology, folklore, culture, anthropology, tradition, song, tune, composition, repertoire

1. What is Music? Processes of Composition and Improvisation

We all live in a sounding world, where we hear and process many kinds of acoustic phenomena on a daily basis. Most of the time, however, we are ignorant of what the origin of most sounds is, or what influence these phenomena might have on us. There is a very fine line between what we, as individuals or as a society, consider "music" and what we regard as purely incidental sound, unworthy of being included in the same category.

In the first chapter of his book, "The Study of Ethnomusicology: Twenty-Nine Issues and Concepts," Bruno Nettl describes a number of attempts to define music. He refers to scholarly writings and dictionaries, as well as to public opinion and local traditional beliefs. His goal is to come up with a new and more inclusive perspective on what music is, by sifting through all the criteria that people from different cultures, at different points in time have formulated. Nettl is confronted with the paradox of having to deal with music all the time, without being able to determine precisely what music actually is. The approach he is taking seems to avoid the strategy of establishing what DOES NOT constitute music. Using the question of what

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music represents to the Western culture as a point of departure; Nettl gradually broadens his view to the point where he affirms the necessity of sanctioning with precision what music is in an intercultural valid way.

In Bruno Nettl's opinion, consensus upon criteria to define music is culture-specific. He reprobates the fact that most debates on what music really is do not fructify by enunciating a definition, and that even when a definition is put forward it lacks clarity and conciseness. It is however important to mention that, at the end of his study, Nettl himself provides only a vague characterization of what he believes music is. In spite of the many discrepancies between what dictionaries stipulate and what people from different societies think about music, there are a few points where all these opinions seem to meet. According to most definitions and beliefs, music must have certain traits in order to be accepted as "proper" music. These traits might vary greatly from culture to culture, but what is important is that people agree on the necessity of setting limits in general. We also find strong agreement on the fact that music in itself represents something good. The concept of "good" only pushes us further into the territory of the relative, but it nevertheless represents common ground. Westerners have much more restrictive views on what should be considered music, than peoples from other parts of the world. Most of the interviewees from Europe and North America think that music has to be preconceived, notated, and composed. Nettl explains in detail why "composition" (or preparation, in the case of performance) is regarded here as being nobler than "improvisation." People in civilized countries also believe that slightly similar phenomena happening in other societies would not qualify as music. After pointing out that all societies have music, and that all humans can identify music in some form, Bruno Nettl makes a few conclusive statements, which reveal his position as an ethnomusicologist. First, he concludes that different cultures and societies proceed to formulating definitions only after they have dealt with musical phenomena, and charged it with function and value. Thus, whenever and wherever music fulfils different functions and embodies different meanings, the definitions are very different, too. Nettl's second conclusion is that ethnomusicologists have the most topical reasons to define music broadly, since the definition of music determines the definition of ethnomusicology. In the light of these considerations, he generally describes music as being "human sound communication outside the scope of spoken language."

The second chapter of the book focuses on the more particular concept of music composition. The idea that certain music is newly composed, as opposed to just being improvised or re-created, serves as the starting point here. Judging the degree of innovation in traditional music, however, has never been an easy task. Nettl indicates clearly that there are ways in which all societies evaluate musical creation. In order to make comparison between these different criteria possible, one must establish exactly what the role of composers, performers and improvisers is in the respective cultural contexts.

While it is quite clear that Western practices imply the existence of a known composer, whom can claim paternity over the composition itself, and who can enjoy a relative autonomy from the society as a dissemination space, other cultures have very different views of what constitutes musical creation. It is difficult to analyze the way in which music, whatever it may represent, finds way into the thinking of people. What Nettl seems to be positive about is that to some extent any music is inspired. Subsequent stages of the music creation process do not differ that much from one culture to the other after all. Bruno Nettl shows that manipulation, rearrangement, and generally hard thinking are typical to every music creation context. Furthermore, he believes that pure improvisation and prepared composition are just two aspects of the same process, and are interrelated. The former involves spontaneity, speed and risk taking, whereas the later is based on laborious, thoughtful action. Nevertheless, there is no improvisation that lacks completely some sort of preparation, and no composition process that totally escapes the influence of hazard.

Nettl points out to the numerous stages that shape a piece of music (song), especially to those specific to traditional cultures: preparatory work (inspiration, trance), composition (trial and error), revision, adjustments, mistakes and cover-up, slips (some of them incorporated), and voluntary alteration (mostly applied to the texts). In the case of folk music, many variants circulate simultaneously, are orally transmitted and modified. Even when different versions of the same song remain recognizable, it is very hard to determine precisely which of their features are old and which new. From what Bruno Nettl explains, there is no certainty with respect to separating new from old in traditional music. The old lives on through tradition becoming cause for the new, and the new slips away into being old through the layering of infinite variants.

Referring to processes of composition, in *The Anthropology of Music,* Alan P. Merriam provides a more detailed insight into how ethnomusicology tries to shed light on the nature of musical creation. Chapter nine of this particular book mainly restates what Bruno Nettl had discussed before. However, the point that Merriam does not subscribe to is the dichotomy between conscious and unconscious composition. According to Nettle, uncivilized peoples create music and propagate it by various means, without being completely aware of the scope of their activities. On the other hand, Merriam argues there is enough evidence to support the idea that musically non-literate people recognize composition as a distinct and specific process. On a series of other issues, Merriam seems to have more nuanced positions. For example, he is more interested than Nettl in crediting the phenomenon of group composition, and especially group contributions to a certain traditional style.

Learning, as the first step of the composition process, plays a very important role in Merriam's description. He believes that contact with the song repertory as listeners and imitators is crucial to the overall musicianship of people, and ultimately to them being able to put together new songs. Fast-

learning and slow-learning eventually distinguish between individuals who are more or less likely to contribute creatively, to become “composers.” Among these talented individuals, Merriam identifies three categories: the specialist composer, the casual composer, and the group composer. It is important to mention that these categories are very flexible, and their configuration depends greatly on which traditional society one looks at.

As opposed to Nettl’s rather general presentation of the micro-processes that music composition involves, Merriam describes in detail what contributes to the emergence of new songs and variants. First of all, every new song or variant has to be approved by people who are to sing it. This reality stands out to define oral traditions as being very different from “properly” composed Western music, which is in essence individualistic, and sometimes seeking originality at any cost. According to Merriam, an oral tradition is the end result of infinite changes over time, since the original versions were created. As a result, all songs become property of the entire group or nation rather than of any one individual. In fact, all singers are deemed to alter the songs every time they perform. With regard to the opposition between composition and improvisation, Merriam proposes the new concept of “communal re-creation”, which includes both over-time thoughtful adjustment, and on-the-spot inspirational enrichment. At the same time, the concept suggests that no definite version of a traditional “composition” will ever exist.

Just as Bruno Nettl did at the end his study, Alan Merriam draws a set of generalizing conclusions. He affirms that all composition is conscious, that the process itself in the Western culture differs from the one elsewhere only in the question of writing. Then, those composers belong to three categories – according to their inclination and proficiency that songs must be accepted by the society at large in order to circulate, and that text is at least as important to the creation process as melody is. Detailed compositional techniques specific to oral traditions are also provided; among them are embellishment, rephrasing, elimination or incorporation of elements, transposition, combination, and word changing. This last procedure is often regarded as leading to completely new songs. Probably the most important characteristic of the composition process (absent from Bruno Nettl’s enumeration) is the implication of learning, its capital contribution to stability and change.

Both studies referenced here are thoroughly investigative and well based. With a few exceptions, they discuss problems along the same lines, also complementing each other. While Nettl seems to be preoccupied with relating all the compositional concepts to their univocal meaning in Western culture, Merriam opens up a less ideologically influenced discussion, in which features of all music cultures can be scrutinized without any trace of preconception.

2. Defining Tune Families

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, European scholars interested in the study of folk song have tried to measure the degree of similarity between entities of their object of research. While for historical musicologists outlining "difference" represents an essential analytical tool, folklorists have been seeking ways of comparing the repertoires based on similarity and common ground. Today there is still no measuring unit to designate the degree of similarity between different art music styles, eras, composers, or individual compositions. Therefore, such comparisons are merely intuitive, with the process being left to our subjective ability of discerning whether something is more or less similar to something else.

Bruno Nettl, in *A Note for Note Steal* from *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Twenty-Nine Issues and Concepts,* presents chronologically a series of scholarly attempts to lay the foundation for a universal method of classifying and comparing folk tunes. He warns about the danger of becoming too subjective when comparing and labelling songs from different areas of the globe. Often to make a point, or to attach fictitious significance to the music we are studying, we are tempted to construe similarities, and turn a blind eye to actual, touchable details.

However, methods have been devised to help with establishing the similarity degree. Among these, Nettl points out to various attempts of classifying tunes that belong to the same repertoire, to study the genetic tune relationship, and to do comparative research of different repertoires. The major step in this direction was taken by European folklorists, as early as the first decade of the 20th century. With the massive collection of folksongs, especially from rural Eastern Europe, began the grouping of tunes, rituals, and repertoires, as well as finding typologies that would help in the process of classification. Enabling to locate tunes and to distinguish among them has constituted one of the most important achievements of this undertaking. Different criteria for classification and cataloguing emerged, with some being more objective than other is. Bruno Nettl briefly describes a few theories that researchers came up with (among the most prominent theorists are Ilmari Krohn, Zoltán Kodály, Béla Bartók, and Bertrand Harris Bronson). Their separate approaches often conflict radically, but are nevertheless applicable to their respective territory of interest.

For example, Bartók's method provides fairly accurate and consistent results in the study of folksongs from Hungary and neighbouring countries, but would not work at all for German or English tunes. It means that Bartók was able to look from the inside at the repertoires he was interested. He knew intimately how things worked in the case of the respective musical dialects, and therefore identified and shaped criteria that would prove appropriate for their classification.

Bronson devised broader categories, with more flexible criteria, based on relationships between melody, mode, contour and singing style. He implied that there is a very fine line between similarity and difference, and that it is very difficult to capture the ineffable of the tunes under a very strict and rigid classification.

Later on, with all the developments in the field of computers and software, even criteria much more sophisticated of classification were born. However, Nettl is convinced that analyzing tunes and repertoires to the tiniest details will not be enough to elucidate the mystery of resemblance or antinomy. It will only result in the accumulation of huge databases, with little certitude to the conclusions. A certain amount of intuitive introspect will always be necessary to provide a perfectible perspective on these issues.

We discover a much more technical and focused point of view in Stephen Erdely's book *Methods and Principles of Hungarian Ethnomusicology* (particularly in the chapter dedicated to systems of classification). The author is limiting his area of observation to a few regions in Central-Eastern Europe. The justification for not looking beyond the frontiers of this territory lies in the awareness of the existence of a "perplexing variety of folksong styles prevailing in the Carpathian Basin."

Erdely first discusses the "Lexicographical Method" of classification employed by Zoltán Kodály. It is mainly based on identifying and ordering tunes according to their strophic structure. Melodies seem to be easily located by mechanical means when this method is utilized. It has a major disadvantage, however: sometimes variants of the same melody are placed far apart from one another. The "Lexicographical Method" of classification is not well suited for songs that belong to the *parlando rubato* singing style, for example. Kodály, who was almost exclusively preoccupied with Hungarian repertoire, held this method very dear, and did not care about its drawbacks.

A more comprehensive method, and always an adjustable one, belongs to Béla Bartók. He strongly believed that comparing repertoires from different regions was at least as important as comparing songs of the same repertoire. The striking similarities among tunes from different European cultures compelled Bartók to collect and catalogue material from Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, the Ukraine, Bulgaria, Croatia, Serbia, and even Anatolia. He also launched the hypothesis according to which a tune never existed in a singular recognizable form (model), but rather in parallel versions of its original form. It is we, as analysts, who have extracted the idealistic model, as a reference for comparison. Béla Bartók preferred the "Grammatical Method" of classification, which enabled him to group together melodies belonging to the same family. Among the precisely hierarchical criteria that he established, top consideration is given to the number of syllables per line of text (melody line). Next in line is the cadence configuration, specifically the relationship between cadence tones and a standardized final tone. In Bartók's comparative work, every tune

is reduced (transposed) to a common final (G). The third criteria for classification would be overall form (structure) of the melody. The arrangement of tunes follows a dictionary-like order, where it becomes possible for related songs to be placed next to one another. Further criteria, such as length of tunes, range (ambit), rhythmical character (*giusto* versus *rubato*), scale system, or melodic content generate particular subgroups. Bartók also advanced the theory that primitive forms in folksong are indicative of an earlier stage in evolution. Melodies evolved from fewer to more syllables per line, from fewer to more lines per song, from narrower to wider range, from a scarcity of distinct pitches to more complex scales, from ceremonial to non-ceremonial styles, from total syncretism to separation of song from dance and ritual. This theory provides us with a time perspective, and possibly a "Historical Method" for classification, which complements Bartók's "Grammatical Method."

Other classification methods that have been proposed by Hungarian scholars are based on melody types (Pál Járdányi), and on song function (György Kerényi). Járdányi advocated the idea of a unified principle of classification that would require close observation of the melodic essence of the tunes. On the other hand, the "Functional" approach tried to apply all the principles of classification that Hungarian folksong research had developed before. It represents in essence an extension and refinement of all the previous methods.

Stephen Erdely dedicates a chapter to the even trickier task of classifying children's songs. Children's repertoire throughout the globe seems to be very distinct from adults' repertoire. The former displays characteristics closer to universality, such as the constant twin-bar rhythmical motive.

Most of the classification systems described here seem viable even to a very sceptical reader. Given the fact that repertoires across countries and continents still seem to vary greatly, the conclusion that we came to is that every repertoire must determine its own classification system, based on criteria specific to it. The truth might be that insiders (such Bartók studying Hungarian tunes) will always have a better understanding of a local phenomenon, and will be able to formulate better and more appropriate criteria of classification and comparison with respect to that particular local context. Furthermore, depending on the hierarchy set among criteria, classification and measurement could produce different groupings. Bruno Nettl generalizes this idea by implying that our judgement of tune similarity often depends on discretionarily choosing special criteria.

The question of precise measurement falls into the domain of relativity. For example, songs labelled as different, but belonging to the same category, will appear to be more similar when compared to other, very different categories. So far, the study of tunes and their relationships has resulted at best in implications, certainly not in univocal statements of similarity.

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