INTRODUCTION

Music, the Public Interest, and the Practice of Ethnomusicology

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In *Ethnomusicology*, volume 35, no. 1, I named several special topics and invited articles on them for future issues of the Journal. This is the first: Music and the Public Interest. The authors asked me to attempt a unifying introduction. From where I stand, the theme of these articles is practice; and in this forum, under discussion is practice-informed theory. Public sector, applied, active, and practice ethnomusicology are the names that the authors in this issue give to what ethnomusicologists do in the public interest. What they have in common is work whose immediate end is not research and the flow of knowledge inside intellectual communities but, rather, practical action in the world outside of archives and universities. This work involves and empowers music-makers and music-cultures in collaborative projects that present, represent, and affect the cultural flow of music throughout the world. In the final analysis, of course, public ethnomusicology does result in knowledge as well as action.

Ethnomusicologists aren’t the only ones who work in the field of music and the public interest. The field includes, for example, music therapists, managers of symphony orchestras, rock critics—anyone who mediates directly between music and the general public. But ethnomusicologists have a particular stake here, especially now when, in many societies, multiculturalism is an affirmative action policy issue in public programming. Multiculturalism in music means recognizing the integrity of the musical expressions of all peoples. Ethnomusicologists who present themselves as experts in this area can affect public policy.

In the United States, the movement to implement musical multiculturalism has been led by the Folk Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts, and therefore we begin this issue with an article by Daniel Sheehy, *Folk*
Arts' current director, who holds the Ph.D. in ethnomusicology from U.C.L.A. For the past fifteen years Folk Arts has been in the forefront of public ethnomusicology. As a granting agency, they facilitate high-quality public outreach programs such as festivals, artists-in-the-schools, apprenticeships, workshops, radio and television programs, and so forth, meant to honor and promote traditional family- and community-rooted music and other arts. In this connection I recall a 1981 Folk Arts Panel meeting when we were trying to determine whether to fund a particular proposal. One first-time panelist from the academic world furrowed his brow and sputtered, "But if we fund this we'll be interfering!" to which Bess Lomax Hawes, then Folk Arts director, said, "That's right, we're meddlers." Her point was that many forces are always at work in music-cultures, some by Folk Arts lights good, some not so good. Folk Arts is an action agency; of course it intervenes, and it has its reasons, many of which are brought up in this collection of articles.

The issue isn't whether intervention is an option; like it or not, ethnomusicologists intervene. Cardinal Newman's lofty idea of the university as a place where knowledge is accumulated for its own sake is self-serving for academics and misleading for everyone else. Universities are no different from other institutions in that they have a stake in maintaining their priesthhoods of power and expertise and their places as guardians and arbiters of culture. Universities intervene; folk arts agencies intervene; museums intervene; research archives that do salvage ethnomusicology intervene. The issue, as Sheehy puts it, is not intervention but whether its purpose and effect is "worthy." His notion of worthy purpose is oriented towards practice: "to see opportunities for a better life for others through the use of musical knowledge, and then immediately to begin devising cultural strategies to achieve those ends."

Sheehy's review of the careers of forerunners John Lomax, Benjamin Botkin, and others reminds us that there is a history of applied folklore and ethnomusicology in the United States, as elsewhere, but that it has been omitted from the official histories of ethnomusicology. To his list of reasons for neglect I would add the pervasive belief that what we do, or ought to do, is science. For a discipline like ours with a history of worshipping at the altar of science, history itself must seem incidental to scientific progress, even a bit irrelevant. Moreover, applied work must seem too thoroughly bound to ideology, and therefore not disinterested in the way that science is supposed to be. But, again, science is scarcely disinterested, unless we equate disinterest with innocence or a failure of responsibility: consider, for example, the horrific consequences of taking particle physics (rather than, say, friendship) as the paradigm for the act of knowing. And, as Sheehy recognizes, the history of applied ethnomusicology in the United States includes many academics who may not think of themselves as working...
directly in the public interest but who have, at one time or another, “gone out of [their] way to act for the benefit of an informant or a community they have studied.”

Sheehy describes four strategic aims of applied ethnomusicology: developing new performance frames, feeding back musical models to the communities that created them, empowering community members to become musical activists, and developing broad structural solutions. Bess Lomax Hawes’s article details how a Folk Arts-sponsored event catalyzed a musical renewal among unaccompanied, African-American gospel quartets in the Birmingham, Alabama, region. The gospel concert offered a new performance frame in that the accompanying historical booklet became a bureaucratic currency and legitimized performances in other venues such as schools; it fed back to the singers and their families the musical model of the gospel reunion, and it reunited some groups that had ceased performing; and the concert and booklet “[empowered] the community studied, allowing the development of legitimate pride.” Hawes points out that, in active ethnomusicology, it is always necessary to take the next action before the results of the previous action can be known, and she reminds us that we observe this principle in daily life anyway, pragmatically “trying out what [seems] logical and what might work, based on parallel observations and one’s own reading of history.” Here, “parallel observations” and “history” let us know that public ethnomusicology is always a collaborative effort, and quite the opposite of the lone ethnomusicologist in the library, thinking the world of music. Hawes’ case study reveals the impact of a single event, one that did not seem too promising when it occurred. Multiply that by thousands of similar events in the past twenty-five years and one begins to sense the impact of public ethnomusicology.

Anthony Seeger’s article moves into another arena of public ethnomusicology: music law. His concern is copyright, a thorny issue that, as he points out, many ethnomusicologists would like to wish away. After all, if music is a priceless gift, shouldn’t it be free? U.S. copyright law states that music is property: as Seeger points out, Woody Guthrie’s “This Land Is Your Land” remains property of the Guthrie estate. And if the laws regarding intellectual and artistic property conflict with ideals, the situation is compounded when ethnomusicologists subject to one set of national laws work with peoples in other nations, or with peoples who in their dealings with others operate on the basis of local custom rather than national jurisprudence. In this journal, to take a practical example, we require authors of articles to hold us harmless against claims brought about by the publication of copyrighted material in their articles. This is standard procedure for publishers; but to the author it says, in effect, Don’t bring us your problems.
Seeger reminds us, as Henry Kingsbury did in an earlier article in the Journal (1991), that we would do well to consider interpretive discourse in the arena where it has the most obvious practical consequence: the law. Copyright is but one of several places that law impacts ethnomusicologists. Because law always involves rights and obligations, thinking about music and the public interest in terms of law requires probing the legal as well as ethical basis of our work. Who and what grants ethnomusicologists the right, as well as the authority, to study, reveal, and represent themselves and others in their works? Who grants Folk Arts the right to award money to certain groups and not others? The answers to these questions are embedded in the power relations and economic and political legitimation of publicly accountable institutions such as universities, record companies, museums, and arts institutions, not in some abstract realm where knowledge is supposedly pursued for its own sake. Seeger knows this because music law has taught it to him, and he recognizes reflexively that he has various and not entirely consistent interests resulting from his involvement with music from different vantage points.

Unlike the others, Martha Ellen Davis writes from a position inside rather than outside the academy, although I will note that all of these authors have been employed by universities at one time or another; and she reminds us that it is both possible and desirable for academics to pursue public ethnomusicology. In her wide-ranging article, she urges ethnomusicologists to consider the rewards of public work and to think of employment outside the academy and the research archives not as a less-desirable alternative to university work but as a worthy vocation in itself. She points out that the field of ethnomusicology can look to folklore as a public work role model, yet she would agree that because ethnomusicologists are not simply folklorists whose subject is world music, ethnomusicology as a profession ought not follow that model blindly or uncritically. She offers two case-studies of her public work, one from the Dominican Republic, the other from the Canary Islands. Her work exemplifies all four of Sheehy’s strategic aims; perhaps most telling is that in the Canary Islands the work is being carried on without her, by the locals whom she has helped empower, Carmen Nieves Luis Garcia and Isidro Ortiz Mendoza.

Davis’s reference to American Pragmatism as a basis for public ethnomusicology links these articles to recent developments in philosophy, sociology, and cultural studies. In the 1980s an anti-theoretical movement emerged from within the great interdisciplinary hue and cry that came eventually to be known simply as Theory. I am not referring here to those who merely resisted Theory and mistakenly hoped that it would become interred with the tarnished reputation of Paul de Man. I mean, instead, a position that elevates practice over theory, a belief that theory is empty
unless derived from practice, a feeling that, as Richard Rorty dramatically and influentially announced, philosophy as traditionally conceived was dead (1979). Rorty meant that the philosophical project of trying to find Truth, something upon which to ground Knowledge, was doomed. Rorty was but one of several thinkers (Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Hayden White, Roland Barthes, Susan Stewart, Stanley Fish—the list could go on and on) who fought the “essentialism” of those who claimed truth was something eternal, “out there” (or “in here”) to be “found.” In his view, and in the view of most Theorists, truth is shifting, situational, and humanly (if not socially and culturally) constructed. What Rorty called pragmatism (with a small p) emphasized practice and devalued theory. Theory was doomed to pursue Truth; practice would construct truths. In my view, the most far-reaching attack on scientific and philosophical essentialism is being carried out by feminist epistemologists (see, for example, Code 1991 and Harding 1986, 1991), but it is apparent throughout the (paradoxically theoretical) work of many others involved with issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

Pierre Bourdieu’s emphasis on practice is well known to readers of this journal. In a recent statement, he suggests that practice is virtually incomprehensible from the standpoint of the academy. “The scholastic vision destroys its object every time it is applied to practices that are the product of the practical view and which, consequently, are very difficult to think of, or are even practically unthinkable for science” (1990:382). That scholastic vision Bourdieu has in mind springs, of course, from Newman’s idea of the university where the scholar has time and freedom from necessity, “retiring from the world and from action in the world in order to think that action” (ibid.). This is not the vision of the authors in this special issue. As Bau Graves writes, “The discipline of ethnomusicology exists very much within the parameters of the academic world. Its internal politics, procedures of legitimization and means of communication are all received from the academic tradition [and] certainly a part of the university’s mystique rests upon its separation from the world at large” (1992:5). I myself would prefer to see a reflexive theorizing of practice that is aware of the consequences of situating ethnomusicology both inside the academy and outside of it, one that, in the words of Habermas, “investigates the constitutive historical complex of the constellation of self-interests to which the theory still belongs across and beyond its acts of insight,” yet one that “studies the historical interconnectedness of action, in which the theory, as action-oriented, can intervene” (1974:2).

When I think of music’s contribution to theorizing practice, I am reminded that I view my being in the world musically as nontrivially different from my non-musical ways of being. Although we may not all be highly skilled performers, I am sure we have experienced a manual, or practical,
side of musical being when we sing, dance, compose, or play an instrument: the relationship among sound, time, our bodies, and our consciousness, on the one hand, and the bonding among music-makers in a group on the other. Certain types of these practical, musical relationships have served ethnomusicologists as an ideal for human relationships generally (see, for example, Lomax 1968).

Public ethnomusicology and folklore is, of course, not without its critics. Some writers (for example, Harker 1985, Middleton 1990, Shepherd 1991, Keil 1978, and Whisnant 1983) have recycled the colonialist charges leveled at cultural anthropology and in one way or another aimed them at folklore and ethnomusicology, academic and public. The cultural studies critique, directed most forcefully at British folklorist Cecil Sharp and his intellectual offspring but also to the history of folklore and ethnomusicology in the United States, includes charges of elitist condescension, romantic nationalism, and an agenda of racial and ethnic segregation and purity hidden beneath the calls for cultural equity, cultural conservation, and multiculturalism.

Defenders of public ethnomusicology often feel that these charges are unfair, that they are directed against an older generation of scholars and activists, and that contemporary practice is well aware of, and does its best to guard against, colonialist tendencies in what is conceived as just the opposite of colonization: an affirmative action program for minority music-cultures (in the United States, those outside the Western classical tradition). No one would claim perfection; action is risky, and sometimes one makes mistakes; but consider the alternative, non-action. Although Charles Keil has argued passionately against the term "folk," for example, he does important public ethnomusicology on behalf of youth in the Buffalo, New York parks and schools. Moreover, public ethnomusicologists testify to an enormous number of successful interventions, public projects that worked, and for which the world is better off as a result. More recent work in cultural studies takes the point of view that fears of homogenization among music-cultures are misplaced; that all music-cultures, even supposedly endangered ones, are always engaged in appropriation; and that "popular" music ought to be viewed neither as a threatened voice of the folk nor as an irredeemably corrupt and manipulated commodity, but rather as a site of conflict, where hegemony is always resisted by popular guerilla movements and subversion, with or without the intervention of public ethnomusicologists (Middleton 1990; Lipsitz 1990).

My own view is to welcome this dialogue and think that it has much to contribute to our understanding of music, culture, and ourselves, but as another participant in it I am prepared to defend fieldwork and public ethnomusicology as a way of knowing and doing. Although that defense is out of bounds in this introduction, I hope I will be permitted to sketch out
one direction it might take. People working in cultural studies tend to disparage fieldwork as, not to put too fine a point on it, the politics of surveillance. But I think that those who would condemn it shut themselves off from a valuable way of knowing that is constitutive of those disciplines (ethnomusicology, cultural anthropology, folklore) that employ it. As a way of knowing and doing, fieldwork at its best is based on a model of friendship between people rather than on a model involving antagonism, surveillance, the observation of physical objects, or the contemplation of abstract ideas. Fieldwork, after all, is another name for a principal constituent in public ethnomusicology, work in the field rather than the laboratory; and although historically it is the biological metaphor that underlies the term, I construct a horticultural, nurturing metaphor there, and I prefer it to the bristling profusion of military metaphors in cultural studies. From a practical point of view I think nurturance better leads us to what Sheehy calls, and the other authors would agree are, worthy purposes and strategies in the world of action. With apologies to Milton, they do not serve who also stand and wait, theorizing.

References

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