Ethnomusicology in Times of Trouble

By Timothy Rice

Ethnomusicologists, in their attempt to understand the relationship between music and the cultural, social, economic, and political processes it reflects and influences, typically organize their work around a series of themes or issues.¹ Alan Merriam, in his 1964 book, The Anthropology of Music, provided perhaps the first list of such themes, twelve in number, for the nascent field, and that list has increased significantly in the half century since he published his seminal view of the field.² It is

¹ I began my presentation of this paper at the 2013 World Conference of the ICTM at a panel on “new research” with this brief introduction: “The “new research” that I want to talk about today is most emphatically not my own new research. It is new research being done by members of ICTM, many of whom are in the audience today. The new research that I am singling out for attention concerns the study of music in places and times of trouble, and I intend my comments to honor their work. In the interest of professional ethics, I did try to contact Paul McCartney about whether I needed to license my title, and I took his silence as tacit permission.” This article remains substantially as it was delivered at the conference.

² Merriam’s twelve themes were (1) shared cultural concepts about music; (2) the relationship between aural and other modes of perception (synesthesia); (3) physical and verbal behavior in relation to music; (4) musicians as a social group; (5) the teaching and learning of music; (6) the process of composition; (7) the study of song texts; (8) the uses and functions of music; (9) music as symbolic behavior (the meaning of music); (10) aesthetics and the interrelationship of the arts; (11) music and culture history; and (12) music and cultural dynamics.
my contention in this article that only in the last fifteen years or so have ethnomusicologists fully embraced a new set of themes concerning the relationship of music to the social, political, economic, and ecological crises faced by so many people in today’s world, a set of themes that constitutes a new form of ethnomusicology in times (and places) of trouble. These new themes represent a major break, it seems to me, from the way ethnomusicology was conducted for nearly forty years, since its inception in 1950.

I began my study of ethnomusicology 45 years ago, in 1968. Although the United States was in the middle of a horrible war in Vietnam and Cambodia, there was a great deal of excitement and optimism about this relatively new field of study, then only 18 years old and just a few years younger than I was. It seemed that, as we say in English, “the world was our oyster.” We could go anywhere (with the possible exception of Vietnam) and study anything that struck our fancy. Since then, however, and especially in the wake of the end of the Cold War in 1991, the situation for many people in the world seems only to be getting worse and worse. The United Nations today lists more than sixty countries in which there is open, armed conflict between groups or between resistance groups and the government. Some parts of the world, notably Africa, have been wracked by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and some people in the Pacific are planning for a future far from their native atolls, which are being inundated by rising ocean water levels.

More than 20 years ago, by the early 1990s at least, anthropologists already had a long history of reporting on the very real world of traditional societies beset by modernization and globalization in various forms: disease, exploitation of formerly pristine forests and lands, the impact of oppressive government regimes and policies, the shock of war, and on and on. Twenty years ago I could not find much evidence that ethnomusicologists had, in fact, begun such work. When would we in
ethnomusicology start doing that, and why had we not already begun, I wondered? I finally decided to tackle this question last year, and I discovered that there is plenty of evidence to suggest that only in the last fifteen years have ethnomusicologists engaged in a sustained way with music's role in solving or worsening contemporary social, economic, and political problems. In the context of my 45 years in the field, research in the last 15 years seems rather new – at least to me.

Why has it taken so long for ethnomusicologists, and only a few of them at that, to come to grips with an ethnomusicology of troubled times and places? I think there are five principal reasons for this delay. First, ethnomusicologists often, but not always, conduct their research on music that they love. That is, many of them are moved, first of all, by the sensual and aesthetic pleasure that music provides and only later come to the intellectual and social themes and questions that an anthropalogy of music investigates. Second, music is associated, in the anglophone imagination, with good things; “that’s music to my ears” goes the common expression when hearing felicitous news (cf. Nettl 2005: 18). So the possibility that music can be associated with the worst aspects of human existence is neither attractive nor intuitive. Third, ethnomusicological paradigms suggest that music is produced principally in stable social settings where an entire society, an effective government, or a few wealthy patrons support music making. When societies fall apart under the pressure war, violence, widespread illness, or unrest among minority groups, it may surpass our imagination that music will be produced in such settings. A fourth reason, perhaps, is that, in the early days of ethnomusicology, in my day in other words, scholars concerned themselves primarily with what this organization labels “traditional music” performed in traditional settings. This predisposition may have led us to ignore the new genres and styles of music necessary to deal psychologically, emotionally, and socially with contemporary real-world problems. Fifth, it is hard to imagine working in unstable and dangerous environments that lack the infrastructure to support safe research conditions and that harbor distracted populations unable to
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engage productively with music researchers. All these reasons seem to have combined to make ethnomusicologists slow, compared to their colleagues in anthropology, to deal with the severe problems facing people around the world, and to consider how music is being used to ameliorate or to exacerbate those problems.

A brief review of the literature reveals that concern for the study of music in times and places of trouble began relatively recently. Some of the earliest studies came out of the countries that emerged from the fire of war in the former Yugoslavia. Perhaps predictably it was ethnomusicologists living amidst the terrors and consequences of war who were the first to deal with the impact of war on music, not ethnomusicologists with the freedom and the money to travel abroad to study music in a “foreign” culture, ethnomusicologists like me, in other words. These studies from the countries of the former Yugoslavia first appeared in English in 1998 when Croatian scholars who had lived through the horrible, ethnic-cleansing wars attending the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s published a heart-felt collection of essays called *Music, Politics, and War: Views from Croatia*, edited by Svanibor Pettan (1998a). A year later, in 1999, a book-length study of the music of refugees from Vietnam appeared, this time written by American ethnomusicologist Adelaida Reyes. These were among the earliest harbingers of a move in this new direction in ethnomusicological study. A review of the major journals in our field since the late 1990s reveals surprisingly few studies that continue this line, but about a decade later, in 2007, there began to appear a number of edited collections of essays that take up this theme. I list a few of them here.


As ethnomusicologists try to absorb studies of these new themes, there are three questions they ought to ask about them, questions that place them in the larger context of the field of ethnomusicology. First, will an ethnomusicology of times and places of trouble change our methods in any way? Will it alter our relationships with the people and communities whose music we study? Second, can our understanding of the nature of music, built up in countless studies conducted in relatively peaceful, stable settings, prove helpful in ameliorating cases of conflict, violence, disease, and social disruption? Third, if we take seriously the study of music in times and places of trouble, how will that affect our understanding of the nature of human music making? I provide preliminary answers to these three questions by examining six themes that constitute what I am calling an ethnomusicology in times of trouble.

1. Music, War, Violence, Conflict, and 2. Forced Migration

Working in war zones, post-war zones, and other places of violence, conflict, and profound loss has led many ethnomusicologists to design or participate in practical projects to ameliorate the conflict, heal the wounds of loss and separation, and, as John M. O’Connell (2010: viii) puts it, “offer parity of esteem to the musical traditions of communities in conflict.” Croatian ethnomusicologist Svanibor Pettan 1998b: 9-27), for example, designed CDs, films, and other publications less for an academic audience than to educate policy makers about the plight of Roma (Gypsy) musicians displaced by the
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war between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo. To deal with the feelings of loss and separation felt by those forced to leave Bosnia because of the war, he worked in Norway to create musical bridges between Bosnian emigrants and Norwegians through shared musical performances of Bosnian repertoire with the goal of “strengthening Bosnian cultural identity” in their new home and “enlightening majority groups” about the plight of immigrant minorities in their midst. Here we see an ethnomusicologist acting on what Pettan calls “an ethnomusicology of conscience” to create programs that enact this ethnomusicological understanding of one of the ways music functions for human groups: to communicate across social and ontological boundaries. He has been joined in this effort by many colleagues in the ICTM Study Group on Music and Minorities, spearheaded by Ursula Hemetek.

Studying music in places and times of trouble has also led some ethnomusicologists to broaden their studies beyond musical sound to the study of sound in general. J. Martin Daughty (2012), for example, is working on the sound world of soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. He describes how they are trained to discern the specific nature of the threat to their lives by distinguishing between the sounds of incoming fire. How far is it away from them? Is it celebratory fire or hostile fire? Is it small arms fire or artillery fire? These are life-or-death sonic distinctions of greater importance, probably, than learning to distinguish between the major and the minor modes. The soldiers then adapt this training to their musical experiences, teaching themselves how to listen simultaneously to music on headsets, often to pump themselves up for battle, and still discern external threats by listening to the sonic environment beyond their headsets. It seems inevitable that our studies of music in times and places of violence and war will lead us to broaden the scope of our studies to the sonic environment in which musical life occurs.

3. Music and Disease and 4. Other Particular Tragedies

Ethnomusicologists have long been interested in the relationship between music, illness, and
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healing. However, only recently have ethnomusicologists finally turned their attention to what role
music might play in dealing with diseases and tragedies of the modern world, in particular the global
HIV/AIDS pandemic, the apparent increase in cases of Autism Spectrum Disorder in the United States,
and musical responses to particular tragedies such as Hurricane Katrina in the United States and the
recent earthquake in Haiti.

In the case of HIV/AIDS music seems to have been employed principally to educate people
about the clinical reality of the disease in parts of eastern and southern Africa where public policy and
cultural ideologies combine to obfuscate the causes of the disease or deceive people into ignoring safe
sexual practices. Gregory Barz (2011) describes how songs have been utilized in Uganda to deal with
HIV/AIDS in health education, biomedical interventions, promotion of communication about disease,
and as a way of linking children to their history. Barz is optimistic about music's efficacy in this case,
arguing that musical interventions, in conjunction with governmental and medical programs, can be
part of the solution. Partly as a consequence of musical interventions in this context, the incidence of
HIV/AIDS has dropped significantly in Uganda over the last two decades.

On the other hand, Ric Alviso (2011), working in Zimbabwe, described a very different
situation. The government there, preoccupied with other problems and perhaps inclined to see
HIV/AIDS as another plague visited on them by colonialism, has largely ignored the problem, and talk
about it has been veiled in an embarrassed silence. One musical artist, the so-called “queen of the
mbira,” performed a song with her band about HIV/AIDS with the intent to educate people about
condom use and other safe-sex practices. Sadly and ironically, all the members of her band died of
AIDS, and Alviso concludes that music alone was not an agent of change in this cultural context. In
comparing the case in Uganda with the one in Zimbabwe, we can perhaps conclude that in the former
case music participated in the construction of a new “cultural system” of safe sexual practices. In
Zimbabwe on the other hand, there was not a culture of change, and musical performance seems to have been ineffective on its own in provoking or “constructing” cultural change. So here is a real-world challenge to ethnomusicologists’ claims about the potential for music to model new and perhaps yet unimagined modes of culture and social behavior. Such real-world instances might cause us to modify this claim about the nature of music in light of this and other apparently negative instances that may come to light in the future.

5. Urban Violence and Poverty

Yet another aspect of our troubled times is the violence facing many people around the globe who live in urban neighborhoods wracked by poverty, unemployment, and drug trafficking. What might the ethnomusicology of urban life suffused with violence look like and what implications might such studies have for our understanding of ethnomusicology? One of the answers is provided by Brazilian scholar Samuel Araujo and his colleagues and students at the Ethnomusicology Laboratory of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (Araujo et al.: 2006). Araujo and his colleagues argue that, in addition to the dangers of real physical violence, residents of a poor neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro called Maré are subjected to debilitating symbolic violence as well. This symbolic violence is perpetrated on the residents of Maré by governmental policy, by police actions, by the interpretations of social scientists operating from privileged positions outside and “above” local, lived experience, and finally by the suppression in the broadcast and recorded media of a genre of music produced by the residents of Maré to narrate their own experiences in this neighborhood. The genre goes by the colorful names “prohibited funk” (funk prohibidão) or “evil funk” (funk do mal).

The research group’s principal methodological move was to try to eliminate the structural inequality between university-based researchers and their subjects, the poor people disconnected from sources of power. If the standard modus operandi of ethnomusicology is to write interpretations of the
musical life of the poor for the benefit of the powerful within a kind of vertical power structure, these researchers tried to create what they call a horizontal relationship in which the university researchers worked with the local, community-based group as equals. In the Brazilian case, Araujo argues, this imagined conversation between equals is virtually impossible, and he forces us to wonder whether we should all be trying harder to construct a real intellectual equality between “us” (the researchers) and “them” (the subjects of research).

6. Climate Change and the Environment

The study of music in its relation to culture and society has also led some ethnomusicologists to embed their studies of music in a larger world of sonic experience including environmental sounds and the sound of human speech. Tina Ramnarine (2009) describes the acoustemology, a term Steven Feld coined to describe the way people know their world through sound, of the Sámi of northern Europe, famous as reindeer herders. They speak about *joiking* [vocalizing with “irregular phrasing . . . a distinctive vocal timbre . . . and rising microtonal pitches”] people, landscapes, and animals into existence, in the process placing themselves discursively in the environment rather than in relationship to it, a way of talking about the human-nature relationship rather different from European-derived ones. She pays close attention to the “symphonies” of Sami composers who place *joiks* within a recorded soundscape of birdsong, water sounds, and reindeer bells to express the unity of man and nature and to call attention to indigenous concerns about the degradation of the polar environment due to climate change, nuclear-waste dumping, and forest logging. In some recordings Sámi composers have placed *joiks* in a sound environment that includes snowmobiles and other motorized equipment as a way of engaging critically with their emerging real soundscape, not with a mythical, idealized, “natural” past. These new Sámi compositions in harmony with the newly noisy polar soundscape all challenge, according to Ramnarine, “the notion that sound mediates between humans and their environments,
inviting us instead to consider human musical creativity situated within sonic ecosystems and across species-boundaries” (p. 205). Studying music and sound in this way opens up the possibility for what Ramnarine calls “environmental ethnomusicology” or what Nancy Guy (2009), in her study of popular songs about environmental degradation in Taiwan, calls “ecomusicology.” Her vision of ecomusicology leads her to ask an important question that implies both a critical stance not typical of ethnomusicology to date and a new function for music: does music contribute to our survival or is it indifferent to our possible extinction?

Conclusions

I draw eight conclusions from this briefest of overviews of the six themes that I believe constitute an ethnomusicology of times of trouble, conclusions that begin to answer the three questions I raised at the beginning of the article.

On the question of method and theory, I suggest that:

1. Studying music in conditions of gross social and economic inequality can drive ethnomusicologists to rethink their methods and move them away from vertical knowledge structures to horizontal ones in which knowledge is created in equal partnerships with communities and community musicians.

2. Studies of music in times and places of trouble tend to engage ethnomusicologists in local, practical projects and, as a consequence, may have the effect of diminishing the conceptual distance between so-called theoretical and so-call applied work in our field (Sheehy 1992).

On the question of practical solutions to problems, I suggest that:

3. Ethnomusicologists’ understandings of the nature of music and its power to mean in human culture and to function in human societies can provide the means to create helpful and effective social and educational programs and policies.
4. The impulse to act practically depends partly on the context, and seems to be amplified when ethnomusicologist work at home rather than abroad.

On the question of the nature of music, I suggest that:

5. People use music for good and for evil.

6. The study of music in places of trouble calls into question ethnomusicologists’ claims that music can, of itself, change and construct new social orders and cultural understandings.

7. The study of music in times and places of trouble may push ethnomusicologists further in the direction of the study of sound as the field of practice within which the nature of music is conceived, to an “ethnosonicology” perhaps.

8. Finally, our studies of music in places and times of trouble may lead us to new theories about the nature of music, new theories, “forged,” as Anthony Seeger (2008) has put it, “in the crucible of action.”
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