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MANY FACES OF ETHNOMUSICOLOGY

During the 135 years of its existence ethnomusicology has been undergoing and is still undergoing a constant change. There were many reasons of these changes. Today I will discuss two of the prominent reasons: changes in political and ethical viewpoints, and the advances in technology.

1.Changes in Political-Ethical Views

The initial aim of ethnomusicology was to study and systemize the musics of non-European peoples. It was these theoretical aims that created a fruitful basis for the wide use of the comparative methodology.

Deep understanding and details of compared cultures were not considered necessary nor feasible, so scholars did not trouble themselves with the enormous task of learning the languages of the compared cultures, or of organizing fieldwork, even brief projects. As a result, scholarly works from this period of the development of the discipline on one hand had an extremely wide vision of the problems, posing issues of tremendous theoretical depth, and at the same time, the methodological basis of these works was very shaky, and knowledge of the compared cultures suffered from the lack of many useful details.

For example, neither Siegfried Nadel, nor Marius Schneider, who were actively working on aspects of Georgian polyphony, ever visited Georgia, and for sure, it was never expected that they would learn the Georgian language or study an existing literature on Georgian language.

During this first period of development of ethnomusicology the most influential school was in Berlin, Germany. With truly a German diligence, those scholars utilized the situation created by the WWI, when the great number of nationalities gathered in Germany as prisoners of war. The recordings made by the Viennese and Berlin Phonogrammarchiv are of great scholarly value even today. In many cases, they represent the very first sound recordings from some cultures.

Unfortunately, this same period had given Germany the rise of questionable Nazi racial theories. It was believed, because of these theories in the 1920s and the 1930s, that various races had inborn differences in intellectual development and learning faculties. It was also believed that language was the central defining element of culture and race, and that there was a pre-determined genetic link between the language and music of a people.

Because of similar beliefs, for example, the rich polyphonic music of the North Caucasian Balkarians and Karachaevis were recorded as monodic melodies (by Balkarian musicologists themselves!), as they tried very hard to bring their Turkic language and related identity closer with their own musical traditions (this is the case for example, in Sheibler's several collections of Balkarian songs, all recorded as monophonic versions).

It is true that great Berlin school of comparative musicology played a major role in the development of our discipline and gave the world a generation of widely thinking scholars (among them Erich Moritz Hornbostel, Alexander Ellis, Carl Stumpf, Curt Sax, and Marius Schneider), but their theoretical constructions had "clay feet" and crumbled as soon as WWII finished. By the way, WWII itself, with its racist attitudes and genocidal atrocities, became the main political reason

for the destruction of comparative musicology. Not only was comparative musicology outlawed, but also even the term “race” was found to be untenable for the contemporary development of the natural sciences, and the more neutral term “population” was substituted for “race.”

It was after WWII that the term “ethnomusicology” was widely used in its contemporary meaning. The study center of the discipline shifted from the ruins of Berlin to the thriving Los Angeles.

According to the new approach to the discipline, the demands of ethnomusicologists also changed completely. If a typical representative of the Berlin School of comparative musicology was an armchair scholar who was never expected to organize fieldworks, in the new doctrine ethnomusicologists were obliged to have fieldwork organized, and not only short-term field studies but also long-term studies for months, or even better for years, living in among representatives of the studied culture, learning their culture and language, and reading their literature on native language. Moreover, field studies had a different aim, not so much gathering materials as exploring the role of music in people’s lives.

With the introduction of the new methodology of study, ethnomusicology was completely transformed. First of all, spending prolonged periods of time in a single culture and the requirement to study the native language greatly limited scholars’ cultural viewpoint and range of interests. Scholars were able, as a rule, to establish close contact with a single culture and single language. Wide cross-cultural studies were completely out of reach.

This brought certain negative results as well, as ethnomusicology found itself cut off from any wide-ranging theoretical studies requiring cross-cultural perspectives. This tragic result was critically discussed by prominent ethnomusicologists (Bruno Nettl, Tim Rice). I remember very well when Tim Rice learned from me that Steven Brown and I were going to organize a special “comparative dinner” during the ICTM World Conference in Rio de Janeiro in 2001; he told me that when ethnomusicology refused any cross-cultural comparative research, they, in his words, had “thrown out the baby with the bath water.”

Gradual changes of a political-ethical nature were caused by diversification in the ethnic profiles of ethnomusicologists as well. Before the 1960s, the entirety of ethnomusicology was divided into two huge spheres. The first part constituted the cultures with richly preserved materials, including many cultures of Africa, South America, Asia, and Native Australians.

The second big part of ethnomusicology constituted the cultures the ethnomusicologists came from. These were affluent countries, mostly of Western Europe and North America. It was believed at the time that in such affluent countries creative folklore was the thing of the past. In this period a widespread practice was for European or American ethnomusicologists to marry a representative of the exotic culture, and conduct long-term fieldworks in this culture, learn their language, and get a deep understanding of the culture.

This widely accepted practice had obvious overtones from the colonialism era, when scholars from technologically advanced countries were helping the cultures that were rich with materials but did not have required technical and financial means and professionals to study and properly classify their rich traditions.

This problem gradually found a logical solution when representatives of the cultures rich in traditional heritage started researching their own culture. As would be expected, elements of a certain rivalry resulted in some cases between the Euro-American and native experts of the culture.

There were lucky exceptions as well. For example, despite the fact that during this period

of the development of ethnomusicology research projects based on comparative studies became non-existent, remarkably the largest comparative project in history was undertaken exactly at this time. This was “Cantometrics.”

By the way, the project was conceived and carried out outside of musicological academia. The leader of the project, legendary American singer Alan Lomax, was not a professional ethnomusicologist, and in fact he was unable to read or write musical notation. Therefore, the entire project was undertaken without musical notations. The academy reaction was generally negative towards “Cantometrics.”

Because of the heavy concentration of non-European cultures, there were interesting curiosities as well. This was primarily caused by organizing a great number of fieldworks and making thousands of recordings in exotic cultures, whereas many extremely interesting regions of Europe remained outside of the interests of ethnomusicologists. For example, polyphonic traditions from Polynesia and Africa were widely known among musicologists from 19th, and sometimes even from 18th centuries (actually, before the birth of the discipline), and in contrast very interesting archaic forms of vocal polyphony from Albania or Greece only became known to scholars after WWII.

There were lucky exceptions as well. Among such exceptions we can name Bulgarian, Georgian, Lithuanian, and Russian polyphony that became known to scholars during the early stages of the development of our discipline. Naturally, these cultures were for many decades studied by native scholars. Today this is the leading tendency in ethnomusicology.

2. Ethnomusicology and Technological Progress

Now let us have a look at the role of technological progress in ethnomusicology. From the very birth of our discipline, the development of ethnomusicology was intimately connected to the technological progress of humanity. Initially, the invention of the phonograph was a great push for the development of discipline. For the “armchair ethnomusicologists” that constructed grand classification schemes of the world’s musical cultures, the large amount of recorded material (often without the cultural context) was simply a must.

By the way, the invention of the phonograph brought about a very specific “Golden Age Myth.” The essence of this myth is that the first local artists (even professional singers) recorded by phonograph became legendary figures in many cultures. The phonograph enabled the magic of transcending time and geographical barriers so that the recordings could be heard anywhere, anytime, in other countries, in future generations. This was actually achieved a kind of performance immortality that earlier generations of performers could not even dream about.

For that reason, if you ask any Georgian person who is well-acquainted with Georgian traditional music a question about the “golden age” of Georgian traditional performance when the largest number of folk performers were active in Georgia, there is a high likelihood that you will hear in response that the end of 19th century and about the first three decades of the 20th century were, in fact, the “Golden Age” of Georgian folk performers.

Interestingly, the same question is answered the same way in many other countries as well. This is a strong indication that the appearance of the first gramophone recordings had a crucial influence in most cultures, raising the first recorded folk performers to the status of the legendary.

This myth of the “Golden Age” influences the realm of professional music as well. Let us recall what great authority some early professional singers had and still have, such as Caruso, Chaliapin, or Vano Sarajishvili.

Later constant technological progress introduced more high-quality recording and more portable means, but the psychological impact of the first gramophone recordings was never replaced or even replicated.

For ethnomusicological fieldworks, the wide introduction of cassette recordings in the 1980s and then digital recordings in the 2000s were very effective.

The new epoch came together with the digital recording of both the audio and video channels with the internet creating the new possibilities of sharing lots of unique materials on YouTube. The new YouTube epoch of ethnomusicology started, but we have not yet noticed increased new possibilities.

Today the scholar only needs a personal computer and reliable internet to access virtually all the needed information, or to share his or her new finding with colleagues. The internet has drastically changed the everyday life of scholars. For example, when I need to cite something from my books, instead of getting up, approaching the bookshelf and checking the information in my book, I often go to the internet, find my book there, open it, and search for the required text in the file.

That sounds like magic, but today in a single internet-connected computer we can find much more information than in the entire Tbilisi or Moscow public library, and free Wikipedia has 20 times more and more updated information than the legendary *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

New technical means of communication, sharing and storing information will give ethnomusicologists more possibilities to conduct research, and without any doubt these possibilities will only increase in the future.

I remember very well when at the time I was working on my Dr. Mus. dissertation, I needed some foreign sources, and my colleagues from the ministry of Culture specially requested some of these works from the Moscow University library (some works were not present even in the Moscow library). This was the end of the 1980s. It is very difficult to imagine such problems, particularly the need to request a literature from Moscow today...

The only requirements for the ethnomusicologist today are knowledge of the English language, computer literacy, and most importantly, unconditional love of the subject of study. This last requirement is often the hardest-to-get ingredient today, as in the contemporary world students look to their profession according to its strictly utilitarian function.

The rector of Melbourne Conservatory, Gary McPherson, comes to my mind. He was working for many years with a Chinese child prodigy who was showing amazing mastery on a piano. When the time came, the prodigy was asked what he was going to do after finishing school. I've read the interview with the prodigy and was somewhat disappointed that he was going to become a dentist...

If we try to evaluate the new perspectives in ethnomusicology, we must confess, that if we can ever dream about the comeback of comparative musicology, and comeback of the big theoretical problems in our sphere, there will hardly be a better time than now. It was therefore very timely that in Canada in 2012 there was an attempt to organize a conference to bring back comparative musicology.

Several well-known contributors—Steven Brown, Michael Tenzer, Victor Grauer (symbolically the important collaborator of Alan Lomax on “Cantometrics”), and some others—were involved in the conference. Unfortunately, I was not able to go to Canada, due to my other plans involving the trip to India. So far, the return of comparative musicology is only a dream without much results. What is the reason for this?

Conclusions: The Need for Free Science!

Contemporary ethnomusicology, as it seems to me, cannot recover psychologically from the horrible legacy of WWII. Our technological means are extremely advanced, but we are still tied in the intangible shackles of “political correctness.” It is still difficult to mention the term “race,” and my colleagues still feel terror when someone starts talking at an ethnomusicological conference about the existing parallels between the data of polyphony and physical anthropology.

We need to realize that modern research technology and easier communications alone will not bring back the new perspectives of comparative musicology. We need to get rid of the ideological shackles that hamper the free development of our discipline.

Generally, many fields of science are deeply divided into two parts, with one part (the biggest part) trying with all they can not to violate the sanctity of principles of “political correctness”, and ready to sacrifice and scientific progress. The rest of the scientific community tries to get rid of the harmful effects of the notions of “political correctness,” but their efforts are met so far with a brick wall.

I have experienced this myself firsthand. As recently as 1991, at an international conference of musicologists and ethnomusicologists, I remember very well the audience’s reaction of silent terror upon hearing my arguments of the closeness of the data on traditional polyphony and the data of physical anthropology.

I had a conversation on this sensitive topic years later with Bruno Nettl, and I must declare with a pleasure that there are welcome shifts in this direction. We could probably say that ethnomusicology is moving forward, unlike many other spheres.

For example, the experts of human speech pathology have no clue, why there is a much higher prevalence of stuttering in Africa (and among the descendants of Africans in different continents) than in Europe or East Asia. They have problems in accepting even such a fact, although I wrote a paper dedicated to this question together with Professor Sheree Reese at an international conference in 1998. There has been no interest in this paper, not even attempts to prove us wrong, despite the passage of almost 25 years.

We must be keenly aware that technological progress cannot guarantee scientific progress. We need to fight for the freedom of science from any restrictions, ideological, political, cultural, ethnic, or historical. Unfortunately, our technology is growing much faster than our ethical-political views. Free development of science needs freedom from any political and ideological dictate.

These political constraints feel particularly acute in our sphere, in ethnomusicology, and especially when researching the phenomenon of polyphony. There are reasons for this.

No scholar can disprove the closeness of regions of vocal polyphony with the regaining of related genetic markers. We are witnessing a gradually amassing data about the genetic nature of our musical abilities. The brain centres that control music are localized in much deeper structures of the brain than language or speech. It is widely known that in cases of loss of memory and gradual degradation of our mental abilities, musical memories are last to disappear.

We know also very well that musical information is stored in the so-called “reptilian brain,” where only the basic means for survival are maintained. Therefore, we should not be surprised when we see obvious links between the spheres of distributions of human musical styles and human genetics. These links might still seem subtle, but we should not discard them just because they do not agree with our pre-conceived principles of “political correctness.”

Of course, scientific progress is not a single victorious line that goes ahead farther and higher.

And we should be aware that there always be scholars who will try to use the facts of science for their political aims, but we still need to remember that keeping science away from all kinds of pre-conceived ideas of “political correctness” can only benefit scientific progress.

Ethnomusicology, a younger sister of the big commonwealth family of the humanitarian sciences, probably has a good chance today to show to everyone the new perspectives of free development, following the only acceptable to science principle of “scholarly correctness.”

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