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2. WHAT'S TO BE LEARNED? COMMENTS ON TEACHING MUSIC IN THE WORLD AND TEACHING WORLD MUSIC AT HOME

Ethnomusicologists as a professional group are interested in discovering the ways music is taught in the world's cultures, and in learning how musical systems are taught – transmitted – through the generations. They are usually also, naturally, interested in the way the world's music are taught in American and European systems of primary and secondary education. Less attention has been paid to the ways these two areas of endeavor can inform each other. This essay provides some comments, largely from my own experience as an ethnomusicologist and a parent.

NATIVE AMERICAN MUSIC IN FIRST GRADE, 1999

In December of last year, I carried out an annual ritual which I've always found satisfying but for which I always prepare with several days of stage fright. I visit the first-grade class of my daughter, an elementary school teacher, to teach for an hour and a half about Native American music. Of course it was fun for me to see my daughter, whom I still see as a little girl, now the experienced educator very much in charge; and fun for the children to imagine their (they think) middle-aged teacher having a dad who knew her when she was small.

But what to teach? I know that a number of texts in music education provide material and sophisticated relevant discussion, but the purpose was for me to bring my own experience and background. I could play recordings, but the children's attention span wouldn't be long; I could teach some songs, but in the end they wouldn't sound the least bit like Native American singing; I could try to explain some rudimentary things about musical style, but that's a lot to ask of first graders. We could imitate some activities, learn a gambling game or a Peyote song, have a miniature powwow. These activities would show something about the musical styles and a bit, too, about music as it contributed to culture. We could maybe learn to do a Stomp Dance

Actually, I tried them all, none with great success, none total failures. Surprisingly to me (but broadly described by Campbell, 1998), the children quickly picked up simple songs, bits of typical dance steps, and at least some comprehended the difference between the cascading melodic contour of Plains music and the undulations of a Navajo song. But I wondered whether they would, the next week, be able to recall anything — identify contours, tell what a Stomp Dance is like, know that songs are important in worship, say that drums and rattles and flutes are the principle instruments.

Probably not, my daughter thought, but rather, twelve years from now, in college, in a world music course, one or two of them might say to themselves, "Oh yes, I remember this from first grade." So, I'm not sure how worthwhile my attempt was, but throughout I kept wondering about my mission — not the cultural, but the explicitly musical one. Should I be trying to show that this music is really like "ours," whatever "ours" is, easy to understand and internalize; in that case, would these songs have been integrated more, given English words and piano accompaniment? Or should I stress that this music is really very different, very strange, show how we can't really make our voices sing it without a lot of practice, that they really employ a different language, if you will? Should I say to the kids, "This is really like the other kinds of music you know," and compare the Stomp Dance to some call-and-response games they knew, and the Peyote syllables to tra-la-la or ee-yi-ee-yi-yo? Or should I keep pointing out how the songs always go with other activities — ritual, recreation? How could I bring up, at a first-grade level, concepts such as ethnicity, questions such as "whose music is this," and the validity of comparison? Most important, should I put forward or guard against the implication that this music is only interesting because it is associated with Native Americans, while the great music by Mr. Bach and Mr. Mozart — the kids had heard of them — is always interesting to everyone? Well, in the end, these energetic first-graders didn't think this music strange, didn't question whether it sounded like music, took for granted that this was indeed the music of Native Americans, different from their own, but that one could listen to it and sing it.

The questions raised in my experience are also the ones that I always faced as a college teacher of world music, who must decide whether the basic assumption in his courses is that all of the world's music is basically one system that can be comprehended by all of our students with modest effort, or that the world of music is a group of discrete musical languages each of which can be learned only with great effort and never completely, whose role in culture cannot be fully comprehended by outsiders. And the approach to my daughter's pupils that I should have followed, had I had time and expertise, results from the following assertion: In any society, the way in which music is taught and transmitted is an integral part of the musical culture. And so, in thinking of how to teach something essential to my first-grade friends, I should have tried to do it in the way the Native Americans, whose music I was presenting, taught their children.

HOW DO YOU GET TO CARNEGIE HALL?

Not an easy task; but we as educators should probably pay more attention to the learning processes — and the purposes of learning — that lead to the music, or to any domain of culture, that we ourselves are imparting. To ethnomusicologists, discovering the way a society teaches its music — well, more broadly, the way a musical system "teaches itself" or "transmits itself" — should be a major endeavor.

"How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" asks the newcomer to New York, trying to find his way to a concert. "Practice, practice, practice," replies the Broadway wag. But there are actually many ways in which one arrives at the Carnegie Halls of world music and, like "practicing" as a concept, "learning music" means many things. One may

learn pieces, or a way of performing, or the abstract fundamental principles of a musical system. Perhaps one learns how to listen and appreciate music; perhaps one learns exercises such as scales, or short and easy pieces composed for learning. Each of these, or any combination, amounts to learning a musical system, and this in any case consists of many (and sometimes various types of) discrete units that a musician – composer, performer, improviser, even informed listener – learns to manipulate. In one way or another the method of teaching breaks a system down into these basic units. In Western academic or classical music they may be pieces or compositions, or smaller ones such as chords, characteristic sequences of chords, or tones in a melody. The way the members of a society teach the music of their culture tells us what is important about the music; but also, learning how the music works teaches us about the values and guiding principles of its culture.

In many societies, including in particular some of those of the South Seas, children and young people learn the important elements and values of their own culture through musical experience, and adults continue to undergo this process into old age (Ramseyer, 1970, pp. 28–31). Among the people of Yirkalla, South Australia, only old men knew the entire ceremonial musical repertory (R. Waterman, 1956, p. 49), and the men in some North American Plains Indian tribes moved every few years into a new warrior society, learning each time new ritual and cosmological materials, education continuing well past middle age. Perhaps music has something of this enculturative function everywhere, but if we have recognized the importance of music in the learning of culture, we have not paid much attention to the way in which people learn music, and surely not to the ways in which the elements and values of a culture affect the learning of music. If we are to take cognizance of all the music of a culture, we must be concerned with the way it is learned and even with the materials that are used to teach it.

In the general Western academic conception of music, learning plays a major role. Study and teaching at all levels come up in many American conversations about music. A large proportion of musicians make their living by teaching, and much of the population spends time and energy in formal learning of music, though in most cases not with the aim of professional musicianship. A large percentage of published music is didactic in nature. We care greatly with whom one studies music and how one goes about learning. If one could monitor all musical sound produced in this society, perhaps the majority would turn out to be for the purpose of learning, in some sense of that word. One reads general statements to the effect that in non-Western cultures, and certainly in nonliterate cultures, learning is “by rote,” and there are of course writings about the nature of oral tradition. Often we know little more, even where other components of musical culture are admirably documented. Merriam (1964, pp. 145–64) was one of the first to look at the problem as a whole.

There are a number of issues for us to be concerned with; let us look at a few. Most important among them, perhaps: When music is transmitted, what is actually learned? While we assume that a musical system in written or oral tradition is transmitted more or less as a unified whole, there are probably certain things which people learn about a musical system that are most important, and which must be handed down, while others are left more or less to be picked up by chance without special

attention or instruction. Another area of interest in this sphere of learning is how people practice, in what activities they actually engage when they are teaching themselves music, when they are carrying out the instructions of a teacher, mediating between the points of instruction and performance. Also related is the use and nature of special materials whose purpose is to help people learn – exercises, etudes, texts on the principles of musicianship. Then there is the identity of teachers and their role in society and in music. And we should know, in an intercultural context, how people in infancy acquire music, and the way in which a musical system, first heard by small children before they are in a position to reproduce it, is perceived by them. There are many other matters that might be of interest, but these issues are sufficient to illustrate a general point that I am trying to make, that a musical system, its style, its main characteristics, its structure, are all very closely associated with the particular way in which it is taught, as a whole and in its individual components.

Western academic musical culture is surely one of the most specialized, in the sense that a musician is primarily involved in one aspect of the “music delivery” process – composing, performing, teaching, etc. It is further specialized in rather rigorously separating various kinds of musicians from each other. Singers in the United States are not even members of the musicians’ union. Solo violinists rarely play in orchestras. A pianist is regarded mainly as a soloist, or accompanist, or jazz ensemble musician. Yet the course of musical education is very much the same for all. One normally begins with an instrument (even if one ends up as a singer), and almost everyone at some point learns to play piano. Piano lessons normally begin with exercises, and the terror of serious beginning students is the requirement that, before all else, they must master the scales in all of the keys and always begin practice with them, with the knowledge that even if they become virtuosos, the need for practicing these scales will not abate. After becoming somewhat proficient on an instrument, one is likely to take up the study of music theory, a subject that is theoretical not in the general sense of the word but rather in that one learns material which does not apply directly to the making of musical sounds but is generalizable to all aspects of musical activity. Until recently, music theory concentrated almost exclusively on harmony and began with types of chords, its basic units.

In both cases, instrumental and theoretical, one first learns things that do not normally constitute music but that must be manipulated and extended in order to be recognized as components of music. Few serious pieces merely use scales or use chord sequences precisely in the way they are learned at the beginning of music theory classes. In Western academic music, then, much of the musical system is learned in the abstract. What the teacher first teaches is largely theoretical concepts and gymnastic exercises rather than units of a higher order, i.e., actual compositions.

In most of the world’s cultures these compositions are imparted directly by the teacher to the student. Not so in Western academic music – or at least one does not learn the teacher’s special approach. Piano students usually do not learn Beethoven sonatas *from* their teacher, with the latter first playing the piece for them, asking them to interpret as they have heard. Rather, the teacher usually confines herself more to general observations, to the instruction of technique and of the materials that make possible the learning of technique, and beyond that asks the students to imbibe

Beethoven from the written page, learning, as it were, from the composer. I see our system of teaching as a combination of theoretical and practical materials, with the teacher playing a much larger role in the former.

TEACHING AND LEARNING THE BUILDING BLOCKS

In the classical music of South India the situation is somewhat similar. While the Western musician learns the basic system through piano and theory classes, the Indian is likely to learn it by exposure to vocal music, even if he turns out an instrumentalist. At the knee of the teacher he studies a long series of exercises that exhibit the characteristics of *raga* and *tala*, melody and rhythm, and juxtapose the two in various combinations. These exercises and some simple introductory pieces constitute or include fundamental units such as rhythmic and melodic motifs that are later used in learned compositions and, more important, in the improvisation which forms much of the core of musical performance. The emphasis is upon memorizing materials that will make it possible for one to improvise. Indian composers who, in contrast to improvising, create songs such as the extended South Indian *kriti*, whose structure has common features with improvisations, evidently undergo training similar to that of the performer. In the Western classical system, by contrast, performer and composer in part at least have rather different kinds of learning experience.

Western and Indian musicianship have in common the concept of discipline, the need to practice the building blocks of music for many hours at a time, directing one's effort only indirectly to what will happen in a performance. A pianist spends much time on scales and exercises, even with a Chopin recital coming up. South Indian singers do not spend their time only trying out various combinations of material and improvising, as they will have to do in public, but also devote hours every day to exercises, from the simple to the very difficult. Indeed, Indian musicians are evaluated by each other only in part in accordance with their musicianship as exhibited in performance or with their knowledge of repertory and in large measure by their reputation for disciplined practice and study, called *riaz* by North Indians (Neuman, 1980, pp. 32–43). "If a musician wants to celebrate the genius of another musician, he will do so. . . in terms of practice habits" (Neuman, 1980, p. 31).

To these two cultures, Persian classical music provides a contrast. The musician of Iran studies the *radif*, memorizing it precisely from his teacher's version, which may be similar but not identical to that of other teachers. The teacher is concerned only with the student's ability to reproduce what he sings or plays for him with utmost exactness. He does not explain the minutiae of the structure of the *radif*, although the student needs to learn these in order to engage in improvisation, the central activity in true performance. The student must deduce from the *radif*, with its many examples of variation, melodic sequence, extension and contraction of motifs, that its very structure is the guide to improvisatory procedure. Once the *radif* is memorized, the student is considered ready to perform without further instruction. He has learned a theoretical construct and must now suddenly move to improvisation. The Indian musician studies building blocks of varying degrees of complexity, units that gradually become



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