

COMMENTARY

RETHINKING NATIVE MUSIC SCHOLARSHIP

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Abstract / Résumé

The author describes the origins of ethnomusicology and considers its future, particularly in regard to its relations to Aboriginals and their music.

L'auteure décrit les origines de l'ethnomusicologie et s'interroge sur son avenir, en particulier ce qui touche ses relations avec les Aborigènes et leur musique.

Music scholars are occasionally given some of the credit for the continuance of Aboriginal music traditions around the world. After World War II their role in the study of ethnic musics was formalized under the name of ethnomusicology. Unofficially, there have always been ethnomusicologists. Europeans, since they first encountered people of other continents, have commented upon their musics, albeit with pejorative words such as "naive, simple, savage and unmelodious". As early as 1609 a Micmac song from New France, Canada, was published in Paris. A scholarly study of the music of eastern Native people was produced in 1881 by a German named Theodore Baker, who is better known among musicians for his *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*. His dissertation for the doctorate degree was entitled *Aber die Musique den North American Wilden* and contained, among other things, transcriptions of Seneca songs.

Few persons have Baker's ability to hear a melody, remember it, and then write it in music notation. How do you remember a tune based upon what is to you an entirely foreign way of organizing sounds, and how do you remember words in a language totally different from your own? Imagine the concentration required by those pioneers to remember tunes when listening to them in cultural settings so different from their own! Imagine how difficult it must have been for those early scholars to convince singers, rooted in the ethos of oral tradition, to repeat songs, not once, but many times?

Now, of course, these questions are obsolete. Since the advent of recording technology in the late 19th century, research on Aboriginal musics around the world has blossomed and made the scholarly study (which presumes a written text from which to work) of non-western music more easily possible. The music scholars of the late 19th and early 20th centuries looked enthusiastically to the theories and methods of the social sciences, notably anthropology, for their study of music. By the middle of this century, the scientific study of music was considered the way of the future, the means by which scholars could unlock the structuring and meaning of music. Since the 1950s ethnomusicologists have struggled to create a discipline which combines music, an ephemeral subject existing, for the most part, in time, with the methods of science, which were, until quantum mechanic theories, rooted in the tangible, material world. And, for the most part, they have done it.

Ethnomusicology has its roots in Victorian times when EuroAmericans were enchanted by mechanical devices; wealthy Victorians generated a huge demand for machines of all kinds. Sound recording began in 1885 when Bell and Tainter invented the graphophone, a device which recorded onto a wax coated cardboard cylinder, and was operated by a foot treadle. By 1889 it was considered good enough to permit outdoor recording. Its

first use was to record North American Indians, when J. Walter Fewkes, an anthropologist, recorded Pasamaquoddy music and, soon after, Zuni and Hopi musics.

Only a year later, in 1890, cylinder models driven with a spring, became lighter and portable. In 1887, E. Berliner had invented the gramophone, a disc recorder, but because of its weight it was not used in the field until the 1920s. Since the 1920s, portable recorders have been available, although recording techniques did not change substantially—with the exception of magnetic tape replacing wire—until the availability in the 1980s of digital recording.

With recording machines, even scholars not trained in music can include some music in their field studies. Anthropologists such as James O. Dorsey recorded the Sioux in the 19th century; W.J. Hoffman, Ojibwa and Menominee musics; James Mooney, Ghost Dance songs; and W. Matthews, Navajo music. Other scholars began to focus entirely on oral traditions through both song and story. Natalie Curtis Berline produced the *Indian's Book* in 1905, while Frances Densmore, a prolific collector of Native music, produced some 175 books and monographs during her lifetime. Since Densmore began her extensive work, there have been many other scholars of Native American musics. Marius Barbeau recorded and studied Native music during the first part of the 20th century. He was followed, in the latter decades of this century, by such scholars as Nicole Beaudry (Dene music), Ida Halpern and Anton Kolstee (Northwest Coast musics), Robert Witmer (Plains musics), Richard Preston and Lynn Whidden (northern Cree music) and Beverley Diamond (eastern Canadian musics). Many others, too numerous to list, have also contributed to this growing field of study.

We are fortunate that recording technology came a long way during the first part of the 20th century. Native music in North America was disappearing rapidly then, and, as we have shown, at least small samplings were preserved. In fact, many of these early recordings can still be heard, in, for example, Canadian provincial archives; the United States Library of Congress; the Archives of Traditional Music at the University of Indiana; the Phonogram Archiv of Berlin, and many other collections.

As all this information was coming *out* of remote communities, however, similar amounts of information were going *in* to them. One example will suffice to illustrate this. A decade ago, if you took your tape recorder into northern Canada, you would be most likely to record a country tune performed by a local musician as he or she had heard it on the radio. Why country music? There are many reasons, but sheer accessibility is one of them. Historically, during the long cold winter evenings in Canada's North, the best and sometimes the only radio reception, was of American country

music shows from such places as Del Rio, Texas; Waterloo, Iowa; and Omaha, Nebraska. Hank Williams, Jimmy Rodgers and Kitty Wells became community favourites as people gathered around their radio cabinets. These early radios, often dating from the 1930s, were large because they ran on dry cell batteries the size of today's car batteries; they also required a ground wire and high aerial wire. Later, when portable radios became common, local radio stations such as CKDM in Dauphin, Manitoba, developed shows featuring country music, with news and messages to those on the traplines from their family and friends at home. But it is important to note that country music was adapted to fit local traditions: nearly every man in each small community could play the fiddle or the guitar by ear. Community dances would often continue all night with the musicians taking turns.

A second reason for the popularity of country music is the physical isolation of small communities. Some scholars of human behaviour have observed that humans thrive best in small groups of 20 to 200 persons: groups where one can talk to and get to know every individual. Because of the possibility of continual exchange they develop a common culture (for example, country music) which they can gather to enjoy together.

The hegemony of country music has waned considerably over the past decade, however. During this time I have noted a considerable broadening of musical preferences among my students from remote areas. The increase in the variety of music genres played and listened to is now more in keeping with that of the general population. Rock music is popular, but even "The Three Tenors" have a northern presence. While many of Canada's northern communities remain physically isolated, musical tastes have changed.

As we approach the 21st century the sharing of physical space is less and less necessary for groups defined by cultural commonalities. For example, the music tastes of some northerners may have more in common with city dwellers in Winnipeg than with neighbours in, say, Oxford House, Manitoba. Thus, in this century, Aboriginal people have become part of the world musical community. The premedia world of small human groupings bound together by oral traditions has given way to various groupings made possible by the media, even among people on remote Reserves physically separated from the majority of Canadians.

Now we know that the cumbersome radios of the 1930s were just the beginning of rapidly changing communications media. No matter how remote the community, in the 1990s there are televisions in every home, and FAX machines and computer modems in every office. Teenagers and trappers alike now carry portable radios.

Despite a few outbreaks of group superiority rooted in 19th century evolutionary theory, 20th century scholars have generally admitted the equality of all humans (although with less agreement on the equality of cultures). But it is television that has given so many peoples of the world a "face", especially in the developed world, and which could conceivably eliminate the use of such words as "stranger" and "ethnic" from vocabularies. Who is the ethnic group now? Is not European classical music as much an "ethnic" music as classical Siouan song?

To return to ethnomusicology, and perhaps the other social sciences of mid-20th century development: while their goals may be honourable, and in hindsight very useful for the preservation of musics, their means are no longer applauded. Now, at the end of the 20th century, it is clear that no people want to be defined as the "other", to be studied "objectively" and then reported upon as human anomalies. Not surprisingly, Native people object to being studied as faceless groups, the "other". Native musicians want to be given names and biographies. Television has at long last given the "other" a human face.

In response to their felt, but largely unarticulated, uneasiness with this type of research, social scientists have created ethical research forms in which they promise to behave themselves with their "informants" and their "intellectual property". This, in my opinion, is a stop gap measure, which will eventually be subsumed into a concept of copyright protecting all the world's citizens.

Few people are aware that there are vast collections of Native music from this century in which the singer is not even identified. Even when a singer's name is given, it is often—indeed normally—written in a corrupted version of the original language so that it may be easily pronounced by an English speaker. At a time when the western public was worshipping its individual musicians and composers, western researchers were providing scant recognition to the Native musicians whom they were recording. Contrast this to the cult figure treatment of many Euroamerican musicians creating at the very same time! We have all heard of Stravinsky, but what of the songs of Mrs. Gee? Densmore wrote down innumerable songs by this Ojibwe composer, yet she remains largely unknown. Most artists, no matter how strong their group affiliation, wish to be recognized by their names, not just as faceless "informants". Increasingly local Native musicians now have names and faces which go beyond their immediate communities, but the development of this recognition is a slow process. All this of course, means the incorporation of people and their musical creations, from all around the world, into existing copyright conventions. The application of copyright to traditional music is a topic in need of serious research.

In many respects, the commercial media have been good for humankind around the world. It has connected us, such that the recognition of basic human rights and democracy are spreading around the world and into remote areas. But has this been good for music? Fewer persons now have roots only in small isolated groups, and fewer yet create music through any interaction between the unique sound environments of their ecological niches and the particular natures of their social groups. "Traditional" musics still exist, but many are relics, unregenerative. Undoubtedly more music is being created now than ever before to satisfy the enormous demand of communications media. Some of this is created by Aboriginal musicians and performers, but much of this is simply the combining of old sounds to create new ones, as we have seen with world music. It can be said that all music that at one time has been, or is an electric signal, shares an essential commonality (a [ACCENT] la Marshall McLuhan), but this is another topic worthy of investigation.

It is ironic that just as musical differences are becoming highly valued by more than just a handful of scholars, unique living traditions are becoming harder and harder to find. The music collections of ethnomusicologists have become invaluable historical records as well as a contribution to modern music. Humankind has always needed differences to stimulate change and movement: we know that the chaotic is important to us all. Today music scholars have digital portable recording technology. So now where do we go, what do we do, and how do we do it while properly recognizing and respecting the unique contributions of each musician and singer in this world?