

Views of a Christian Ethnomusicologist

The meaning of the word “ethnomusicology” is, according to its etymology, the study of the music of a particular culture. When Jaap Kunst, a Dutch lawyer, coined the word, it was to substitute for the term “comparative musicology”. Traditionally, musicology dealt with the history and literature of music in Western civilization. Comparative musicology recognized that there were other legitimate music cultures. The new word, coined in the 1950s, was generally accepted by music researchers, all of whom seem to be included in its broad definition. However, it is the wide scope of the definition that makes the word ambiguous.

What is an ethnomusicologist? And what is his task? 1) Some call themselves ethnomusicologists who study the history of musical instruments, but this is the field of organology and does not necessarily include an understanding of the music itself or of the people who make it. 2) Others calling themselves ethnomusicologists study the customs associated with musical events and practices, but this is more properly the field of anthropology, and again may preclude any knowledge of the music itself. 3) Others may be concerned exclusively with the texts of vocal music, but is this not the field of literature and linguistics? 4) Still others research the tuning of scales and pitches without necessarily investigating the form and grammar of the music; this aspect of musical studies is acoustics. A background in music per se is not required of those who pursue this laboratory work. 5) Some Westerners who perform non-Western music may refer to themselves as ethnomusicologists, but one does not have to be an ethnomusicologist to do this. 6) Even further afield are those who merely collect ethnic music on audio or video tape and refer to themselves as ethnomusicologists without understanding either the music or the language of the culture. These folk are recordists or videographers.

By now it is evident that there are many parameters of ethnomusicology, but we must never lose sight of the root of the word - “music”. All of the research described can be included as subheadings of ethnomusicology, and all are aspects of research employed by the well furnished ethnomusicologist, but skill in one parameter does not an ethnomusicologist make. The foremost consideration in the study of music is its structure. The other aspects are important but peripheral to the main focus which is the music itself. Thus, one who studies the anthropology of a culture, but is not trained to transcribe

music, is an anthropologist. Likewise, the technician who is concerned mostly with rates of vibration and mechanical measurements of tones, but who has never seen the people who make the music, and who cannot analyze the whole structure of the music, is an acoustician more an ethnomusicologist.

Linguists have a similar problem with definition. Many think of a linguist as an interpreter, a performer, as it were, or one who speaks multiple languages. That is only one parameter of linguistics, like the one who performs non-Western music. However, just as in music, linguistics has its theorists, historians and researchers. A comparative linguist, for example, researches languages to discover any traits in common and is interested principally in the historical aspect of language. The descriptive linguist, on the other hand, is mainly interested in describing the structure of language. The point is that, just as the linguist's task is far more than speaking other languages, so the ethnomusicologist's task is far more complex than performing or adding imported snippets of melody or rhythm to his own composing or teaching.

The field of descriptive linguistics is a rewarding study for the musically trained student who is interested in the theoretical aspect of ethnomusicology. Descriptive linguists are pioneer linguists. Languages which interest them most are those languages that are unknown outside the communities which speak them. The speakers of such languages usually cannot directly assist in the analysis of their language because they are unaware of its linguistic structure. They have learned their language merely by hearing it. Their language has never been symbolized, never written, only spoken; many have never seen writing.

A descriptive linguist approaches one of these languages with two assumptions: 1) man's behavior is structured, and 2) all languages share features in common. This is not to imply that there is a universal language, but that all languages are subject to analysis because they are structured. There is order, or communication would not be possible. It is the linguist's task to decode the structuring. His advance preparation includes the study of phonetics. As a phonetician, he is able to notate and imitate all known speech sounds. He prepares himself psychologically to approach the language objectively and methodically. He guards against forcing the target language into the mould of his own language. Rather, his task is one of discovery and of

describing what he has discovered about the way that language operates.

The ideal approach to ethnomusicology might be called descriptive ethnomusicology as its procedures are closely related to descriptive linguistics. Its main thrust is the analysis of music within a preliterate tradition. Like the trained phonetician, the trained musician begins by transcribing what he hears. Music in preliterate cultures is not only unwritten, but it is also rarely discussed except to correct mistakes in performance because everyone in the culture understands the system by tradition, in the same way he that he learns and understands his language. Music is learned in the same way that a child learns to speak. He hears and imitates, blissfully unaware of the parts of speech or how words are arranged grammatically. He just talks, not knowing that he is responding to grammatical relationships without which he could not communicate, as words and syllables in wrong sequence produce nonsense: out-this-you-to-I-if-try-kidding-am-think-figure. These are all English words producing nonsense because they are in a wrong grammatical sequence. In a correct grammatical relationship the words make an intelligible sentence: "If you think I am kidding, try to figure this out." Like words and syllables in wrong grammatical sequence, the elements of music such as pitches and intervals produce nonsense if they do not follow the syntactic rules of the particular culture's music system.

So tones, even when they are sung correctly as pitches in the oral tradition, may produce a contrived if not unintelligible melody when performed in a wrong grammatical relationship that violates the traditional syntax. What is the idiomatic ordering of a culture's musical elements? That is the intriguing question for the descriptive ethnomusicologist. First, he must identify what the basic elements are in that system. Exactly what pitches, for example, occur? And how are they arranged? Perhaps you are saying to yourself, "One just sums up all the pitches and declares it a scale." Ah! That was very early thought to be the case, but one learns not to assume that every pitch heard is a separate entity. Adding up pitches only yields an inventory. For a series of pitches to qualify as a scale, one must be able to explain the function of each pitch (Sachs 1961:148-9).

Early investigative efforts in the analysis of oral music traditions also considered pitches to be the minimal element in a music system.

Ten years into this author's own investigations, she concluded that the minimal unit was not a pitch but the melodic interval, that is, the distance between two pitches. The procedures for analysis she taught for 15 years were based upon more than 30 years of discovery in field work which embraced the oral music traditions of over 50 language groups. The procedures became what is now known as etic (the phonetic shape) versus emic (the significant shape) analysis.

One cannot say too often that music is NOT a universal LANGUAGE but a universal PHENOMENON. Like language, it is a universal occurrence among the world's peoples; both activities are common to mankind but not mutually intelligible. The linguistic barrier is self-evident, whereas the music barrier may be deceptive if one is able to imitate some parts of it. However, when a music system differs drastically from that of the major-minor temperament, unfortunate evaluations have been made which declare a people "unmusical." Such pronouncements are rather like saying that a people has no language - only signs and grunts, meaning that their language is "unlinguistic?" The first step in overcoming a music barrier is to recognize the fact that there is one, an avenue of communication that is closed to the uninitiated.

For a society without a written music tradition, the introduction of foreign music could annihilate the indigenous system in less than a generation. Such a loss is irrecoverable. The tragedy is that neither the supplanting language or music system can fill the place of the system destroyed, for with its demise comes a loss of cultural identity, as individuals in the society are not capable of equal competence in both systems; history has shown that the more powerful culture's music will dominate. Music is more easily supplanted than language, and it seems reasonable that the foreigner should make an effort to give priority to the local music, if only as a spectator, rather than to introduce music from his own culture. Of the well-meaning people who have introduced Western music or instruments, few ever realized that they created a communication vacuum in which a borrowed form has been substituted for the dynamic integration of form and meaning inherent in locally conceived music.

The most effective way for a foreigner to overcome a language barrier is to learn the local language. In the same way, the most effective method of

overcoming a music barrier is to learn to appreciate the music of the people, placing cultural empathy above the desire to perform. For one steeped in a single music style, acknowledging the legitimacy of other styles is sometimes a problem. It is even harder to accept the validity of another music system when it serves the indigenous church but bypasses all the heartfelt favorites in the foreigner's preferred style. It must be remembered that any music system is capable of expressing a given people's response to the universe and to the Creator of that universe. This makes it unnecessary to adapt old songs - local or foreign - for church use. Because all melodies have meaning through association, some therefore may be incongruous with a new text fitted to it. It is the music system underlying all indigenous melody which needs to be sanctioned for the creation of new songs, in both words and music. This is the credible and dynamic singing of the church.

In the investigation of any music system one finds styles within the system, each having a traditional function and meaning and an identifying musical grammar. Some styles are not compatible with the worship of a supreme being. Such categories of song are those producing magic, those associated with inciting to war, those used in orgies, and the like. Only the long-term investigator is aware of these distinctions. If a novice unwittingly encourages a local to use one of these categories by attaching Christian texts to them, the meaning of the music usually speaks more powerfully than the words.

It comes as a surprise to some that music carries meaning apart from texts. The ability to interpret or decode that meaning is shared by the individual members of that society for whom a given music system speaks. In some societies, only a few specialized individuals are able to use the local musical idiom to its full potential. These are the musicians and composers. However, the music itself is intelligible in varying degrees to every member of that society. Foreign music, on the other hand, while it may be enjoyed, does not carry a meaningful message. Music's fundamental meaning is not denotative but connotative. It does not convey information; it communicates attitude and emotion, and expression through music is often more powerful and more effective than through words, but like language, music must be domestic to be understood. Worship in the vernacular language strikes home; likewise, music in the vernacular idiom reinforces a spoken message at the greatest depth.

To reiterate, the focus of ethnomusicology is to describe the musical practices of a particular people. Its aim is analysis not only of the formal aspects of musical structure but also of the role of music within the cultural framework. The analysis of music systems having an oral tradition is not a task for laymen. It requires a specialist. Music is an integral part of any culture's self-expression, and if an intimate knowledge of a people is desired, it is important to learn what they sing about and their reasons for making music. To understand their music is to understand them.

If the purpose in residing with another culture is to relay the Christian message in terms which are the most lucid, the newcomer may be forced to learn a new mode of musical expression as well as a new language. If the newcomer at first finds learning difficult or has a negative opinion of the music, he should remember that his preferred music may pose the same problems for the members of another culture. Preliterate peoples have additional difficulties when faced with the task of learning European music, for they have neither the learning aids of literacy nor musical notation, and in many cases, they are subjected to a style more complex than their own. The burden of learning a new musical idiom should rest with the missionary, pastor or volunteer, not with the people who are to be served. It seems unfair to expect of others a musical feat which the foreigner, with superior advantage, is unable (or unwilling) to accomplish. But over time, the foreigner with willing ears will become familiar with the music to a point where he is not uncomfortable. Music is a part of communication, and the outsider who, for the sake of communication, strives to be bilingual, should also seek to become bimusical or at least a vicarious listener.

Because the practice of introducing Western church music into non-Western cultures is so widespread, it is important to consider the validity of such a practice. What has prompted this practice? Part of the answer must lie in the belief that music is an essential part of worship. This belief is based upon a scriptural mandate to sing praise to God, and there is earnest desire to include the newly evangelized in the worship service. The motivation may be worthy but, the misconception that Christian music is somehow Western, coupled with the notion that all music is heathen before there is conversion to Christianity has encouraged this practice of supplanting the indigenous music

with Western styles of music-making. There may be secondary reasons as well, but this seems to be the primary one.

The identification of Christian music with Western styles of worship is an unfortunate misinterpretation of the facts of history. Christianity has certainly influenced the course of Western music's development, and some of our greatest music has been inspired by strong Christian faith. Nevertheless, we cannot say that Western music tradition is one and the same with music that is Christian. This would invalidate the musical worship of all baptized people having a different music system. What Western civilization knows today as "Christian" music is not the music idiom of the New Testament. The present-day church would be ill at ease in it as New Testament music was Middle Eastern, and what Jesus and His disciples sang would be foreign to our ears. There was no music notation at the time of Christ, so one will never know the exact melodies sung; what we do know is that major and minor scales, along with their familiar chords, had not yet been invented. Fortunately, the gospel reached Europe without prescribing a foreign style of music in the name of Christianity; the evangelized were free to develop their own hymnody. Church music of Western culture is rightly cherished, and it belongs to its faith through its own culture, but it is no more mandated for worship worldwide than is the use of Latin or the English language.

A non-Christian society has concepts and practices which may be in violent opposition to those of a Christian society. These practices which run counter to Christianity are expressed in both the local language and music and would invite syncretism if borrowed by the church. However, music SYSTEMS (rather than repertoire) are vehicles of expression which are themselves without moral quality. Like languages, music systems are able to accommodate new concepts and to eliminate old ones. If this were not so, Bible translation would be impossible. Western civilization absorbed the concepts of Christianity without forsaking either its language or scales, harmonies and other music components. Instead, both the languages and regional musics were used in a new way to express new-found faith. It seems reasonable to expect that cultures evangelized today should be encouraged to do the same.

Music is a vital part of both worship and witness. It is important for new believers to worship and witness in song, but over-anxiousness in teaching them to sing immediately thwarts the chance for them to respond musically to their new faith. When a people develops its own hymns in the vernacular language and music system, it is good evidence that Christian faith has taken root. The introduction of Western songs before a people has an opportunity to express itself idiomatically can, in fact, stifle their spontaneous expression. New believers too easily come to accept foreign music as the appropriate idiom for expressing Christian experience, contributing to the stigma of “foreign religion” attached to the Christian message while robbing the church of an avenue for self-expression. Its members may be able to imitate the foreign music, especially if they are indoctrinated at a young age, but there is little chance of their mastering its structural grammar to the extent that they can create within it. Their musical expression therefore will always be that of another culture, not their own. Just as Western hymnody has been the by-product of a vital faith and is a catalyst for Christian growth, should not every society also have opportunity to create a hymnody of its faith?

The message of music falls upon ears unable to hear when it is presented to those outside its cultural tradition. Again, some may be able to imitate the music but are not able to interpret its message. A hymn is more than words set indiscriminately to music. It is a composite of two mutually reinforcing communication systems - language and music. Simultaneous encoding of the two media multiplies the effect and significance of the message. If, when the message is decoded, only one medium is understood, the whole point of dual encoding is lost. In other words, unless text and music carry the same message, and unless they are both understood, there is no justification for combining the two. It may be held that enjoyment, rather than understanding, justifies the incongruity. One may, it is true, enjoy some things that are not understood, but should music for worship be based on enjoyment without comprehension? Who is edified by what is not comprehended? Enjoyment may stem from an adrenaline rush or through social satisfaction gained by participation; in some cases, there is a misconstrued prestige of identifying with the most easily imitated features of a more popular culture. This is especially noticeable in tribal cultures who in recording songs will first imitate those of a larger, more powerful people (even though they do not understand the meaning) before they will record their own, such is their feeling of

inferiority. Both edification and enjoyment are attainable through a people's own music, whereas music which is merely enjoyable must be regarded as less dedicatory in its focus, regardless of its power to appeal. The function of a worship song is to glorify God, to edify, and to fix man's attention upon His Maker. Anything less is incongruent with the purpose of music in worship.

A lack of understanding the music sung is one of the dangers of using a foreign music idiom, but misunderstanding is even a greater danger. In a magic oriented society, for instance, it is very easy to relate foreign music to a new and powerful magic. This type of association is not uncommon to those who borrow rituals from other language groups, and the performance of such does not necessitate understanding either the words or music. In his book entitled Road Belong Cargo, Peter Lawrence presents evidence of the use of hymn singing by New Guinea peoples as a formula for obtaining European goods, a rite substituting for a former magic. The risk of such misinterpretation is not to be ignored. If there is to be an ethnic hymnody, encouragement from Christian emissaries is needed to foster the creation of new songs by local composers. The ideal source of indigenous hymns is the indigenous composer, one born into the language and music who is moved by a genuinely spiritual motive. He may be inspired by a Biblical message and give it a musical setting as an act of sharing, multiplying the inspiration he has received. Such creativity may spring forth spontaneously, or it may need to be encouraged. It is of little use to encourage one who hasn't the gift of song-making any more than to expect that every Christian can compose music. It has caused needless pressure and embarrassment to some tribesmen who have been expected to compose music for the church simply because they have knowledge of the culture and its language, but there will undoubtedly be those in the community who are song-makers. These are the indigenous composers whose gifts are needed by the church.

Nevertheless, a few ethnomusicologists have, according to local musicians, been able to grasp by analysis the various local styles of a music system and, by composing the first hymn (with a vernacular text furnished), have served as a precipitating agent to encourage local composers to do the same. Cross-cultural fluency in both speech and music, training and aptitude are required for this to succeed.

(Summary)

Is it a moral issue that one might intentionally or unintentionally cause the extinction of a people's music heritage? God could have created uniformity instead of diversity, but He chose not to. In the Revelations of St. John, we may have support for the idea that diversity has an eternal dimension, the whole of which is needed to adequately praise its Creator. John sees those around the eternal throne as still culturally identifiable. A believer in the God of Creation surely recognizes the intrinsic worth of indigenous cultures and their artistic expression even though he may be tempted to evaluate them on the basis of his own culture, opinions which do not transfer cross-culturally. This is an unfair practice made without knowledge of another's music system, its structuring and purpose. A more productive role would be to foster creativity as a declaration of the worth of a music system wherever it is found. Continuance of a vital music heritage is beneficial, providing communal as well as individual identity, both of which are important to well-being. A cultural orphan is doomed to lament the loss of his musical heritage when that loss is irrecoverable. Oral traditions lead a precarious existence, and often it is the foreigners "who took away our music" that are blamed for this loss in that they supplanted the indigenous music by insistence on their own.

The Christian ethnomusicologist must address the social and evangelical problems related to indigenous music and offer any solution which would promote a continued vernacular creativeness. Under such conditions, an ethnic hymnody can arise, produced by indigenous composers in the church who will uniquely contribute to that whole praise due the Creator.

- Vida Chenoweth

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