

**STM 2004**

**From Modern Science to Postmodern Art:**

**Ethnomusicology in Transition**

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# From Modern Science to Postmodern Art: Ethnomusicology in Transition

*By Slawomira Zeranska-Kominek*

The famous article by Guido Adler published in 1885 became generally acknowledged as the moment when musicology was born. In reality, however, the concept of the new academic discipline, as formulated by the Viennese scholar, brought to a close a long period of experimentation, both in research into music and in intellectual reflection on what the study of music ought to be. It was for this reason, perhaps, that the mature synthesis of current writing on music proved to be one of the most enduring paradigms of musicology as a modernistic science. This paradigm is exhaustively expressed in the three methodological indicators of the discipline suggested by Adler in the title of his article, corresponding to its scope, method and aim.

1. The subject of musicological study is European music as an art-form, written down by means of musical notation.
2. Musicology employs musical analysis, which studies a work from the perspective of its notational, structural-formal and aesthetical features.
3. The aim of musicological study is the characterisation of the generic traits of a work that enable it to be dated and situated within the historic process.

(...) To attain his main task, namely, the research of the laws of art of diverse periods and their organic combination and development, the historian of art utilises the same methodology as that of the investigator of nature; that is, by preference, the inductive method ... the emphasis here lies in the analogy between the methodology of the science of art and that of the natural science.<sup>1</sup>

Adler's *Musikwissenschaft* became the model for the first version of ethnomusicology, which he included in the systematic part of the discipline and dubbed 'comparative musicology'. The methodological structure of comparative musicology realised in every aspect the methodological model of musicology. Of course, the scope of this new and highly promising subdiscipline was somewhat different: '... comparing of tonal products, in particular the folk songs of various peoples, countries, and territories, with an ethnographic purpose in mind, grouping and ordering these according to the variety of [differences] in their characteristics...'<sup>2</sup>. Yet, the method and aim of

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1. Mugglestone 1981, p. 16.

2. *ibid.*, p. 13.

study remained essentially musicological: the analysis of the structure and generic features of works with the aim of understanding their place in the historical process. On the other hand, however, the aims of ethnographic comparative musicology situated it within the circle of cultures in which music was transmitted orally. This fact was of far-reaching consequence for the methodological profile of this field of science from the very beginning of its existence, since the subject of ethnomusicological research does not exist in any materially accessible form and must be produced by the researcher. A key role in the creation of the ethnomusical source is played by two closely linked techniques: 1. The documentation of the musical repertory in the 'field', and 2. Transcription.

For many decades, field research was a more or less consciously methodological gathering of data, i.e. recording of musical events not recorded by other means. The standard of the work thus carried out was gauged by the effectiveness in the documentation of facts and the detail of their description, in the conviction that they provided access to an objectively existing and objectivizable reality, knowledge of which was simply a question of time, technique and method. The other indispensable component of the process by which the ethnomusical source was created was, and still remains, transcription, which gave ethnomusicology the greatest degree of similitude to musicology. The huge efforts made by generations of ethnomusicologists towards the elaboration of the most perfect method possible of notating oral music constitutes an immanent component of the methodological structure of ethnomusicology, thus realising the 'paradigm of literacy', i.e. the model characteristic of European culture by which music was circulated in social communication.<sup>3</sup> According to this model, a composer creates the musical work recorded using notation; this is then reproduced in a number of slightly different performances. A measure of the value of these renditions is their faithfulness to the notation, which remains the only conduit of the compositional idea. The epistemological foundation of the paradigm of literacy is the idea that an ontological reality, cognitive accessibility and aesthetical value is only imparted to music by its materialised form as a score.<sup>4</sup> Let us also add that for decades the paradigm of literacy embodied the advantage held by Europeans over oral cultures. The knowledge of musical notation that the researcher brought with him to the country in which he specialised was perceived as evidence of his intellectual superiority over the illiterate natives, as is testified by Guillaume André Villoteau's 1826 work *De l'état actuel de l'art musical en Égypte*.

When we had finished, we repeated the air to the great amazement of he who had dictated it to us. He had considered the writing down of sounds to be impossible. He would have given all the treasures in the world to be able to learn in fifteen minutes that which he told us had taken him many years of study. He found it accu-

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3. Treitler 1986.

4. Dahlhaus 1973.

rate, except that we had not rendered it with the same accentuation, taste or expression as he, which he deemed an important fact. Yet, he did feel a sort of admiration for our success and continually repeated a'gayb! a'gayb! (how wonderful! how wonderful!). He could not conceive what form we had been able to give to the different sounds of his voice so as to recognize them and recall the degree of their raising or lowering, of their duration or of their tempo. (...) The sheikhs themselves asked several of our colleagues in turn about this, but were not satisfied until they had asked us in person in what consisted our means of expressing with a single mark, on paper, a sound with the principal modifications to which it was susceptible.

A singularly unexpected and extraordinary event (...) led us at that moment to ask the sheikhs if they had never heard of signs for the expression of sounds and the notation of Arabic music. We went so far as to ask Turkish traders from Constantinople living in Cairo for some information on the use of musical notes in the practice of this art; they assured us that these notes were not currently admitted in ordinary practice in their country, and they doubted whether they had ever been in widespread habitual use in Turkey.<sup>5</sup>

The ultimate goal of comparative musicology, as with musicology, was to have been the elucidation of the evolution of music as an art-form:

How starting from the beginnings of simple melody the structure of works of art grow by degrees, how proceeding from the simplest postulates the artistic norms latent in the production of sound become more and more complicated, how sound systems vanish with disappearing cultures, how a series of cells gradually attaches itself to the limb and so grows organically, how elements which stand outside the movement of progress become extinct because not viable – to demonstrate and trace these principles is the most profitable exercise of the scholar in the arts.<sup>6</sup>

John Blacking considered the positivistic paradigm of a science modelled on the evolutionistic methodology of natural science to be the main obstacle to the development of ethnomusicology:

There is plenty of evidence that 'artistic norms latent in the production of sound' do *not* become more and more complicated, and that sound systems do *not* vanish with disappearing cultures (witness Afro-American music). The organic analogy for process of diffusion is unhelpful, and the ethnocentric theory of the march of progress has been successfully refuted by the activities of many of the oppressed and so-called "backward" peoples of the world. (...) <sup>7</sup>. If German scholarship and concepts of academic merit had not predominated in Europe (...), musicology might have taken a more interesting course during the subsequent decades.<sup>8</sup>

A complete break with the musicological paradigm of ethnomusicology occurred in the well-known book by Alan P. Merriam *The Anthropology of Music*, from 1964, in which the author put forward the theoretical premises of a discipline which he called

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5. Villoteau 1826.

6. Mugglestone 1981, p. 8.

7. Blacking 1987, p. 7.

8. *ibid.*, p. 9.

the anthropology of music. According to Merriam, the fundamental difference between musicology and anthropology lay in the differentiation of the subjects of their studies. The subject of musicology is the art music of the West, expressed in internal, musical categories. Musicology is an historically-orientated humanistic science, interested in that which is subjective, qualitative, aesthetic, particular and individual. Humanistic sciences see man outside of his community life, in categories of his individual life experiences. The main task of the musicologist is to interpret the personality of the musician as manifest in his work. In this sense, musicology is a science whose chief task is to construct a body of knowledge on the feelings and experiences of the musician as a unique creative individual. Anthropology, meanwhile, is concerned with all people of all times, and investigates all aspects of human culture and society as one system of interconnected variables. It employs the methods of the natural sciences and considers itself to be a social science, and its aim is to understand human behaviour. It seeks to obtain objective, quantitative, theoretical, general and reproducible results. It is a theoretically-orientated discipline; in other words, it identifies itself with not only the methods of the natural sciences, but also with their aims.<sup>9</sup>

Comparative musicology focuses on the reconstruction of the evolutionary process of music, formulating its aims in a different way to anthropology, which acknowledged cultural relativism. Yet, both versions of ethnomusicology, the older musicological version and the younger anthropological version, similarly sought to reach the methodological standards of the natural sciences; both defined their research procedures as strictly scientific and objective. The scientific nature of anthropological description was undermined by the post-modernist reflection initiated around the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, which in the 1980s became the focus of interest of western humanistic thought. One of the key post-modern texts in the field of anthropology was Clifford Geertz's sketch on *Blurred Genres*,<sup>10</sup> in which the author effects an assessment of the situation in contemporary anthropology. One of its characteristic features is this very "blurring of the genres of discourse", which involves the mixing up of scientific language with literary description and a whole arsenal of interpretational techniques. In the "blurring of genres", Geertz noted the symptoms of more profound changes in awareness on the part of contemporary anthropologists, which supposedly lay in a departure from a fundamentalist faith in anthropological theory and a reorientation towards an auto-reflective interpretation of the texts of a culture. Such an auto-reflection requires no justification in any scientific "meta-narrations", and does not lead to the extreme relativism of the results obtained.

One of the consequences of the internal critique of the discipline, as initiated by

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9. Merriam 1964, pp. 17–84.

10. Geertz 1983.

Geertz, was investigative interest in anthropological discourse, whose neutrality, objectivity and universality turned out to be illusory. Doubt was cast over the cognitive power of anthropology: we can say nothing of essence about another culture, cannot penetrate the world of its ideas, translate its views, nor describe or understand them. This is because our knowledge is always based on sources and premises, and its roots lie in us ourselves, in our culture; thus, while enabling some kind of cognition to occur, it prevents us from progressing further. Hence, in striving to come to know and understand alien worlds we are obliged to make use of the categories and concepts of our own culture, and we see the reality under analysis exclusively from our own perspective. The statements of such studies are only propositions, which cannot be ultimately justified. Therefore, ethnology is closer to art than to science, and can only function as a kind of aesthetic reflection, with the constantly unfulfilled ideal of true knowledge of the Other. It is only possible to penetrate analytically one's own culture, to focus on oneself and one's own experiences. Only here, only in relation to our own world, are we competent, do we know something for certain. The subject of reflection, the researcher's culture and the researcher him- or herself are perceived no longer naively and objectively but reflectively and subjectively.

Gnosiological doubts also cast their shadow over ethnomusicology, giving rise to a reflection over its basic techniques, i.e. field research and transcription as an instrument for the transformation of music into text. Already in the nineteenth century there were some musicologists voicing scepticism as to the possibility of achieving a genuine written documentation of exotic music by means of a European system of notation. In 1893, Francis Taylor Piggot, a sensitive researcher of Japanese music, wrote thus:

The difficulties which stand in the way of reducing the music into Western written forms are so great, that, unless Japanese musicians will come and play to us here in England, accurate knowledge of their art, due appreciation of their craft, can only come into being in the West very gradually... Much of the charm of the music, all its individuality, nearly, depend upon its graceful and delicate phrasing: and though I think Western notation is capable of expressing these phrases to one who has already heard them, I feel a little uncertain whether their more complicated forms could be set down in it with sufficient accuracy to enable a stranger to interpret them satisfactorily.<sup>11</sup>

The enormous difficulties with adapting western notation to non-European music result from the non-transferability of oral output into writing as a form in which it may be reproduced. Notation was developed in close connection with and for the use of "analytical" musical thinking. Oral music, meanwhile, is in essence non-analytical, integral and in every aspect linked to the act of performance. In oral music, not submitted to the technology of writing, the greatest importance is possessed by elements which are completely unforeseen in the analytical system of notation, such

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11. Piggot 1893.

as timbre, ornamentation, “irrational” rhythms, and also many “para-musical” or non-musical events accompanying its rendition. As a consequence, the use of linear-symbolic notation to record non-European music implies our reading into this music the familiar iconic “figurations” of musical structure which appear to be the genuine structure of a different music.<sup>12</sup> Charles Seeger stated that the transcription of any exotic music is by nature ethnocentric, since it obliges one to apply European structures of thinking to a different music, ignoring all those elements of the musical event for which we do not possess symbols.

Discussion over the function and possibilities of transcription were linked to a clear move towards the reformulation of the status and the sense of field research. Disillusionment with logocentric description and musical literacy led to the focus being shifted onto the non-verbal and subjective aspect of experience in the process of familiarisation with the music of other cultures. The model of ethnomusicological description gradually evolved from positivistic representation to post-modernistic interaction. Hands-on experience and participation in the performance of the music of the culture being studied became the supreme goal of contemporary research. The profound familiarisation with the music of other cultures through the active participation in its performance, and not merely through its passive documentation, was already recommended many years ago by Mantle Hood.<sup>13</sup> It would seem, however, that postulates, concerning the way in which one approaches the music of different cultures, currently go even further. What is suggested is not the scientific knowledge of the music of the Other, which in the post-modern era appears to be an aim as unattainable as it is ambitious, but rather the development of one’s own musical creativity and the enrichment of one’s own personality on the territory of the music of the Other. Learning music and participating actively in performance together with Bulgarian musicians, Timothy Rice sought to transform himself into a genuine *gaidar*. His aim was to identify himself completely with the emotive nuances of the musical style, and ultimately to attain the capacity for artistic creativity in a given musical idiom and for musico-cultural dialogue. According to the post-modern postulate, a full understanding with the Other is only possible through feeling the music together with him or her and personal creative experience.

My understanding was neither precisely that of an outsider nor that of an insider. Although the linguistic methods of cognitive anthropology had helped me narrow the gap between emic and etic perspectives, I could not in the end close that gap completely. When, on the other hand, I abandoned those methods and acted musically, it seemed as if I fell right into the gap between insider and outsider, into a theoretical “no place” that felt very exciting, if not exactly like a utopia. I was neither an insider nor an outsider.<sup>14</sup>

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12. Seeger 1958.

13. Hood 1960.

14. Rice 1997, p. 110.

A similar approach is also due to the significance of audiovisual ethnomusicological techniques, which were always regarded as a more refined, richer and more accurate form of music documentation than audio techniques alone. According to the positivistic principle, musical culture represents a reality that can be objectively observed, and film constitutes a transparent and neutral instrument in its description. As soon as audiovisual techniques became available for fieldwork, huge efforts were undertaken to record the material, which was then archived for future generations of researchers. However, in the post-positivist and post-modern world of today, the predominant conviction is that the camera, just as the tape-recorder, is by no means a neutral implement for research. Film and photographs are always determined by the culture of the person being filmed and the person doing the filming; they always possess the character of a dialogue. The camera becomes more of a means of artistic expression than a tool for scientific documentation. The aim of the camera-wielding ethnomusicologist is to create not a document of a given culture but rather an artistic vision of that culture. The films of Zinaida Mozheiko are devoid of educational objectivity and documentary completeness. They rather constitute a subjective and emotional tale, deeply pervaded with lyricism, of the people of rural Belarus and their music. A similar evaluation is due to the film presented in Belfast as part of The John Blacking Memorial Lecture by Paul Berliner, in 2000. The poetry of this film and the entire presentation by Berliner devoted to the music of Zimbabwe differed fundamentally from the poetry of Mozheiko's films. However, the two researchers are linked by the emphasis they place on the artistic and aesthetic, rather than the documentary and scientific, character of what they are saying about the music that they are studying. Both create a formal, subjective and artistic vision of the music and its cultural context, addressing more the emotions and feelings of the audience than their intellect.

In the aforementioned *The Anthropology of Music*, Alan P. Merriam wrote thus:

The ethnomusicologist is not the creator of music he studies, nor is his basic aim to participate aesthetically in that music (though he may seek to do so through re-creation). Rather, his position is always that of the outsider who seeks to understand what he hears through analysis of structure and behavior (...). The ethnomusicologist is sciencing about music.<sup>15</sup>

The forty years that have passed since the publication of this book have brought a profound change in the paradigm of ethnomusicology. The positivistic rigour of social science, once the object of envy and the aim of ethnomusicologists, is no longer held as the highest of values. The ethnomusicologist not only seeks to participate aesthetically in the music he or she is studying, but also wishes to fulfil the role of an engaged, sensitive and creative artist. Contrary to Merriam's view, ethnomusicology today is coming closer to art than to science – to an art that seeks inspiration

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15. Merriam 1964, p. 25.



in an artistic dialogue with the Other. How long it will wish to maintain this position is a completely different matter.

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## Summary

### *From Modern Science to Postmodern Art: Ethnomusicology in Transition*

Ethnomusicology primarily deals with living music in oral traditions. From the very beginning this oral transmission of music determined the widely-understood methodological direction of ethnomusicology, regardless of how its subject was defined. For decades, transcribing traditional music in visual notation was considered to be the chief task of the ethnomusicologist. The ideological premise behind such an approach was the belief in the superiority of written over unwritten music. Consequently, it was considered necessary to make music transmitted orally similar to the model of music handed down in written form. Moreover, visuality in notation was thought to be the only means by which music could be subjected to analytical procedures. The development of increasingly sophisticated methods of transcription was accompanied by growing scepticism about its effectiveness in studying orality-based cultures. Due to disappointment with the musicological paradigm of studying oral musical cultures, film-aided visuality has come to play an increasingly important role. The recording and “notating” of music, where its integrity and natural context are fully preserved, has its origin in postmodernistic doubts about the cognitive capacity of ethnomusicology and its methodology. Analytical commentary increasingly often gives way to poetic visualisation of music which appeals to researchers’ feelings and emotions and makes little use of scientific methods.

