

Making Public the Personal: The Purposes and Venues of Applied Ethnomusicology

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My interest in applied ethnomusicology grew out of personal experience. Probably like most of us in the field, I have practiced it, albeit in an unsystematic way, for much of my life. Of course, I didn't realize that's what I was doing when I was ten years old and trying to explain to friends why it was fun to dance to southern hoedown music; or when I was fourteen and playing James Taylor's "Sweet Baby James" for everyone who would listen; or when I was nineteen and had to explain to my college dorm counselor that Indian sitar music really was music and not necessarily related to taking drugs.

These instances involved explaining why and how various musical genres were legitimate as well as compelling aesthetic experiences. I wanted to share my own enjoyment of the music but also felt required to justify it. While I soon learned that my own tastes were rarely shared by mainstream society, or at least by my peers, I still wanted the music I enjoyed to be treated with respect and recognition. I also realized early on, however, that music did not "speak for itself." The emotive and symbolic meanings of a performance were not self-evident, were frequently interpreted differently by different listeners, and sometimes had no relation to the intended meanings of the performer. Explication was necessary.

I began studying ethnomusicology and folklore, largely as a way to understand more fully the compelling nature of music and the richness of specific musical traditions that had engaged my intellect and emotions. By gaining such understanding, I would, I hoped, be better equipped to explain music to others—and to myself.

I soon found, however, that explication frequently was not enough. Part of the dilemma of applied ethnomusicology is the dual nature of

music as both an aesthetic experience that is understood on an experiential level and a cultural experience that can be articulated, analyzed, and discussed. Talking about music can take listeners only so far. The influential musicologist/philosopher Charles Seeger observed that at a certain point, we can only “music about music,” not talk about it, suggesting that we must actively participate as listeners or performers in order to have a sense of the emotive, psychological, and social meanings of a music. One of the tasks of applied ethnomusicologists is to construct and present musical performances in such a manner that audiences “feel” the music similarly to how it is felt in its original context, while recognizing the existential impossibilities of knowing another’s experiencing.

Applied ethnomusicology did not exist as a discipline in the early 1980s when I began my graduate studies, so I tried a number of routes to understanding musical experience. Three fields contributed to my development of a framework for presenting music. Ethnomusicology, obviously, offered theories for the whys and hows of musical experience, but, from my graduate student perspective, it tended at that time period to be somewhat cloistered in academia, appearing occasionally through a “world music” concert. Folklore and museum studies, on the other hand, offered concepts relevant to understanding music as a cultural, symbolic, and communicative phenomenon; these fields of study also enabled me to explore the implications of those concepts for presenting music in practice.

Applied folklore, also known as public sector or public folklore, began emerging as a field during this time. Currently, scholars in public practice reflect academic emphases on individual bearers of tradition, on music as one outlet of expressive tradition within a culture, and on the significance of the situated performance context in constructing meaning. Applied folklorists also recognize the political nature of cultural presentations and the polysemic nature of artistic productions. Museum Studies, as relevant to applied ethnomusicology, reflects the concern of cultural institutions to develop audience appreciation and understanding of particular cultural and aesthetic forms.

These disciplines armed me with concepts and data, but actual experiences enabled me to develop a more systematic approach to staging public presentations of music. An early lesson was that scores of venues could foster the practice of applied ethnomusicology, and that different

venues called for different strategies. Audience expectations concerning an event, their prior relationship to the music being presented, and the skill and willingness on the part of performers to articulate their thoughts all shape the way in which the music should be presented. Museum exhibits and events, festivals, concerts, media productions, and classrooms, as well as informal jam sessions and community music and dance events, are the most common venues.

I first saw applied ethnomusicology in action at the Smithsonian Institution in the late 1970s. Scott Odell and Gary Sturm of the Musical Instrument Division designed an exhibit on southern Appalachian folk instruments, utilizing Odell's field research on banjos and dulcimers. The exhibit included instruments, photographs of players and their environments, exhibit text, a recording, and a short film. The Smithsonian Institution's Festival of American Folklife also provided a model for festival presentations of music traditions, utilizing "presenters" who discussed the significance, functions, and meanings of the music being performed and who also introduced the performers. Presenters, many of whom had academic training as folklorists, acted as interpreters of the tradition, more or less translating the aesthetic and culture systems of that tradition to ones familiar to a mainstream audience.

Concerts or other staged events have always been a primary venue for public music performances and therefore for applied ethnomusicology. An interesting, but I think false, assumption that occasionally appears among performers is that their music should simply be offered and the audience will appreciate it as they would a concert of Western "classical" music. Offering introductions and explanations, they feel, takes away from the aesthetic experience and implies that the music cannot stand on its own as a valid artistic expression. While I have seen introductions go on too long at times, skillful ones not only deepen an audience's understanding of a musical form; they also enhance their aesthetic experiencing of it. Ironically, a trend I now see in some western music concerts is discussion of the social and cultural contexts and meanings of the music, treating the music as "foreign" to contemporary audiences.

Educational settings have also provided venues for the development of applied ethnomusicology. I began in the early 1980s giving grade school presentations on Japanese koto and Appalachian dulcimer (not simultaneously) and have continued to do so at teachers' requests,

expanding programs to include a wider variety of musical styles and dance. These programs have usually been alongside social studies lessons on world cultures or American cultural history, and my role was to offer a live performance and classroom participation. In the last decade there has been a shift toward incorporating the arts into the core curricula, allowing music presentations to be more than just entertainment or illustration.

Media forms offer another venue for applied ethnomusicology. A documentary on Irish dance I co-produced attempted to demonstrate the artistic complexity of the dance as well as present its historical background and contemporary cultural meanings. Participants later stated that the video gave dignity and public affirmation to their cultural identity. Another media format is recordings and the accompanying jacket copy. Although I have worked in this area only recently, I frequently use such documents as authoritative references, and I find that they are particularly useful since they allow the listener to negotiate for themselves the balance between listening and seeking explication.

These various experiences have enabled me to develop approaches to presenting music that I think can accurately be termed applied ethnomusicology, and in that light I offer my own working definition of the field: applied ethnomusicology applies scholarly concepts and ethnographically based knowledge of specific traditions to musical presentations for the general public. The field is based on the premise that music does not speak for itself, nor is it a universal language. Musical styles and forms grow out of cultural conditions; their meanings and associations are tied to those conditions. Presenting a musical tradition requires a skillful articulation of the past and present conditions surrounding the conceptualization and performance of that tradition as well as an articulation of the intended functions and interpretations of that music within its original cultural context.

The purposes and functions of applied ethnomusicology are several:

- To introduce music traditions, styles, or performers that are not commonly available to a particular audience;
- To introduce listeners to the aesthetic system of a particular musical style or tradition being performed, teaching the logic of this system as well as the criteria used to evaluate it;

- To introduce listeners to the cultural contexts surrounding the musical performance, connecting the musical logic to the historical circumstances from which it grew, to the ethos and belief systems it may represent, to the actual situations in which it may be realized, and to the social groupings and individuals who participate in music-making and listening;
- To present the meanings a particular music holds for its creators and listeners and suggest the possibility of multiple interpretations;
- To encourage participation (whether continued or new) in a music tradition, with discussion about the implications of this encouragement and its impact on the tradition.

It is a natural impulse to want to share something that is personally meaningful. My own involvement in applied ethnomusicology grew out of that impulse; theorizing the field can perhaps be seen as a justification of that impulse as well as a sincere analysis of the motivations behind it and the implications of acting upon it.