



Interview/ Entrevista / Entrevista

Bruno Nettl. *Fifty Years of Changes and Challenges in the Ethnomusicological Field*

by Héctor Fouce (Universidad Complutense de Madrid)*

Bruno Nettl (born 1930) was 9 years old when he moved from Czechoslovakia to the United States. It was his first experience of the mixing of cultures, something that will become his work and his theoretical perspective for more than half century. Music was a central point of his background since his father Paul Nettl was a well-known music historian. So he seemed to be the perfect candidate to become an ethnomusicologist. Since 1964 he has taught at the University of Illinois, where he is now Professor Emeritus of Music and Anthropology. He has studied the music of the Blackfoot Native Americans and the radif tradition in Iran. Also, he was one of the pioneers to take the schools of music as an ethnomusicological object of study, pointing out their power structures and myths. I had the chance to meet Bruno Nettl several times in Spain and Portugal and to be conquered by his warm style of communication and his sense of humor, two features that also mark his writing style.

Héctor Fouce: In an interview in 2003 you said that ethnomusicology was in a resting place, without new developments both in the theoretical and the methodological framework. Does it change now, 10 years after?

Bruno Nettl: I would still agree with my appraisal, given the perspective of ten years. However, contemplating the situation of the present, there seem to me to be a number of new (or newish) developments in ethnomusicology. I can mention a couple: 1) Many or most ethnomusicologists are interested in the study of interactions of musics and of the resulting musical and cultural change. 2) There is widespread concern with the need to do things that benefit the peoples whose music and musical culture are studied. 3) Ethnomusicologists are interested in the effects of mass media and electronic media on musical life and culture. 4) There is an increased interest in the study of musics that belong, in the fundamentals of their

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musical style, to Western musical culture, and to music of modern urban societies. 5) The tendency to express the results of research in terms of interpretive conclusions rather than positivistic presentation of data has continued to increase. Nevertheless, there are issues that played a major role in the twentieth century (the opposition between musical and anthropological perspectives, for example) that had, I felt in 2003, been resolved. These resolutions, or compromises –if I can put it that way–remain a fundamental point of departure for the discipline.

HF: In the same interview, you said that scholars were more willing to say what they really think in Internet. At the moment, there is a big debate about what kind of knowledge is promoted by classical scientific journals. Are we in a kind of dual system in which internet is something like the “off academia” where people can be liberated of the restrictions of the journal way of publishing? I mean, less worried about practical academic issues like how many people is going to refer my paper and more focused in ideas.

BN: I do think we have a kind of two-track system of academic communication. I personally am not very much involved in social media and electronic publication, and, considering my age, find myself more comfortable with traditional kinds of communication, e.g. books and journals. But no doubt internet-based communication plays an enormous role now. Without having much evidence or data, I would imagine that internet-based communications typically are less carefully written and produced, and thus involve more in the way of opinions and interpretations.

But in some ways, I should think, we have always had a kind of two-track system: formal publications, as against papers, round-tables, letters-to-the-editor, all of which contain –or used to contain– the kinds of opinions and ideas, often not well substantiated, sometimes actually very insightful, that one now reads on internet-communications. Interestingly, the two tracks –positivistically presented and carefully documented research as against idea-focused and interpretive writing– have always been with us, and I think that’s a good thing. Having now been in this field for sixty years, I find it interesting that when I began, I feel that there was too much simply factual material and not enough interpretation, while now I believe that there is little presentation of data and findings, while there’s maybe too much interpretation, and that we have come to a time when everything is considered a matter of opinion, and each individual’s interpretation has equal validity.

HF: It seems clear that the ambition of a researcher is always to find something new. But at the same time, at least in some areas of ethnomusicology, the research confronts the need to legitimate some themes and issues as things that deserve attention. I think, for instance, in the position of researchers in popular music in many countries. How can we solve this tension?

BN: I assume your point of departure is the need to persuade colleagues or the world of academia of the significance and worthiness of studying popular music. I think this is a problem –weighing novelty of discovery against the significance of what one is trying to discover or learn against the validity of the subject matter. Well, I have certainly been asked whether Native American Indian music is worth the time and effort of study, and whether improvisation in the music of Iran is interesting. But actually, I think this has always been a problem for people in the humanities, or certainly in various kinds of music research. I remember some colleagues in my department in the 1960s suggesting to their students that the music of certain minor composers was not worthy of dissertations. And I remind you of the first sentence of Erich von Hornbostel’s article, “The Problems of Comparative Musicology” (published in German, of course, in 1905) –“A new subdivision of a discipline has the task of justifying its existence”. Objections to new areas of study come from many sources –political, social, aesthetic, but also as a way of protecting a comfortably established approach.

Can I give an advice? I’m not sure I have much of use to contribute. One simply has to continue pushing the new perspective in whatever ways it can be done; but it’s useful to realize that we are not the first to confront this problem. It is tempting to blame the forces of resistance, but more productive to see how to solve the problem by changing one’s own behavior. So, I guess it would be useful for us to try to find ways of integrating popular music studies into the mental framework of music scholarship in general; and to explain carefully what one is about; and to avoid specialized and arcane terminology. Within the history of ethnomusicology, these problems have also reared their heads. When I was a student, my advisor, Professor George Herzog, insisted on the significance of a concept I’ll call “authenticity”. We should research, in folk and indigenous musics, for what is authentic, uncorrupted by contact with Western or urban culture, unmixed. Herzog didn’t think, for example, that study of the popular musics of the world should be part of the purview of ethnomusicology. Today, the vast majority of publications seem to me to be concerned in some way with the interaction of cultures and music. And despite the fact that there is some resistance to the legitimizing of popular music study, as you suggest, there is no question that research in this area has made enormous strides, in the sense of providing findings and of its general acceptance in music research and also in certain social sciences.

HF: Is the fieldwork still the central point of the ethnomusicological field? How the several processes of mediation have affected to fieldwork? I’m thinking about virtual communities, digital ethnographies and so on...

BN: This answer should require discussion of the definitions of terms and concepts, but let me not get into that. The general answer to your question would be “yes”. But this would have to be modified by two points: First, the concept of “fieldwork” would have to be

expanded. In fact, it has been expanding throughout the history of this field. In 1920, it would probably have been regarded as absurd for a fieldworker to try to learn to play or sing the music he is investigating; now this is taken for granted. Before about 1980, it would have been regarded as inappropriate to study, from an ethnomusicological perspective, the musical culture of one's own society. Now this is done routinely. When I was a student, studying popular music from whatever perspective (including fieldwork) would have been regarded as inappropriate in ethnomusicology, and for that matter in general musicology as well. So now we expand in further directions. But I guess that in order for me to consider it "ethnomusicology" (which is certainly not the only method of study), research in electronic media and "virtual communities" ought to follow some of the basic principles of traditional fieldwork. I won't try to list these here, and am not sure I can. But in order for this to be accomplished –and as a further elaboration of my answer "yes" above– I would think that everyone who considers himself or herself as a professional in ethnomusicology ought to have some experience or perhaps training in traditional fieldwork in a community of culture foreign to himself or herself. In that sense, fieldwork is still the basis of this field. Of course, much research in ethnomusicology has to be carried out with other methods –archival work, study of commercial recordings, etc. But what distinguishes ethnomusicology from other kinds of music research is the common fieldwork experience.

HF: You have mentioned somewhere that the orientation to performance that have been usual in ethnomusicology degrees is problematic, since it is obvious that these "academic performers" are not qualified as the ones inserted in the original musical culture. But at the same time this kind of performance of, for instance, gamelan, are the only ones affordable to many listeners, who will never have access to original performances. Is this a real problem? Is there a way to solve this gap?

BN: I think the idea of studying a "foreign" music by learning to perform it, as part of ethnomusicological fieldwork or training, seemed at first very strange to people in my teachers' generation. Today the reasons aren't quite clear, but they involved ideas of authenticity, and of the fieldworker as an outside, "objective" observer. And also the reservations involved questions about the possibility of an American or European students becoming competent quickly and presenting, as it were, a simplified form of this music to audiences.

Many years ago, in the early 1960s –fifty years ago–, I did consider this a problem, as did some of my colleagues who were principally anthropologists. By the late 1960s, I think most of these doubts had disappeared considering the great success of the various university programs that included performance. In the late 1960s, I began, doing fieldwork in Iran, to try to learn Persian music by studying the radif with my principal teacher. At that time, also, some of my graduate students, doing fieldwork, began to study instruments. I myself never performed well, and considered what I could do as no more than demonstrating some of the

principles of the musical system. At the same time, some students did not follow this approach, preferring to follow other methods, and I also found that in some societies, fieldworkers were not welcomed as outsiders studying performance. So I have never felt that this should be the only approach. My teacher also said to me once, “You will never understand this music”, meaning that there were things about it, no matter how much I studied, that as an outsider I would never comprehend. I think he was right, and no doubt this point should also be kept in mind. But probably most ethnomusicologists understand this. It is true that in order to understand a musical system properly, one must also understand the way it is taught, the way it is transmitted in its culture. So, as an outsider learning such a music, it would be important to observe and to follow the traditional methods. Musicians in many (maybe not all) Asian and African societies, for example, have come to accept that their music is sometimes performed by outsiders to the culture. By now, the study of music in the style of an insider is totally accepted, and various world music ensembles are part of the curricula of schools of music. I consider it valuable in fieldwork and education. But I still think it is valuable to distinguish ethnomusicological study from entertainment, and that some care should be given to matters of authenticity, to understanding how this music is taught and the context and method in which it is performed traditionally, rather than only duplicating its sound. The idea that European or New World gamelans and similar ensembles might be the only exposure to such musics is of course also a point to be considered in this discussion. There is no doubt that our gamelan at the University of Illinois has served as a first introduction to this music for many members of this city. On our printed programs, however, we always explain that what is being heard is the work of students and learners, and should not be considered a full professional performance by Balinese or Javanese musicians.

HF: You have defended an ethic of the research and the idea of responsibility of the ethnomusicology towards the musical communities studied. Does it mean that the ethnomusicology approach have always a political dimension? I have the feeling you do not feel very comfortable with this assertion.

BN: Well, this is a question with large implications, and I would be tempted to try to write an essay about it –but not today. But if I might be uncomfortable with this question, it would be because 1) in my younger years, I didn’t pay attention to it, although most people in this field didn’t; 2) there is an implication that one must abide by “political correctness”, which meant that one should regard classical music traditions as a kind of enemy; and 3) a feeling of ignorance on my part regarding much of the relevant literature.

However, if one defines politics as, at bottom, the concern with the relationships, especially power relationships, among peoples, and if ethnomusicology is most concerned with the musical culture of societies of various sorts, then certainly ethnomusicological research has a political dimension, inevitably. Ordinarily, however, this is taken to apply to

relationships between the investigator's culture to that of the society and music he or she is studying, and that this "political dimension" is not part of the study, but a normative component. This can lead to oversimplifications. Some of this may be the result of believing that indigenous and folk or village societies are homogeneous in their beliefs; but in fact this is often a misinterpretation, and the political component of fieldwork may involve deciding how to deal with differences of opinion, attitudes, obedience to rules on the part of different individuals and subcultures.

In working with the Blackfoot people in Montana, I would be faced with the need to make decisions: Who speaks for the people as an informant? In finding people to teach me, should I be guided by the tribal council, which is clearly a political organization trying to show that the Blackfeet have become modernized? Or by older men who at one time were regarded as tribal leaders and who wish to preserve older practices? By people who have made anthropological studies of the culture as if they were outsiders? I was obliged to learn something about the politics internal to the Blackfoot nation, and this as perhaps a more important "political dimension" of my work than simply contemplating my own work as a kind of political act.

I am not sure whether this is the kind of response you had in mind. If you wished to direct me to the notion that the fieldworker always holds political power and uses it in data collecting and interpretation, I would have to say that this is often correct. But not always: In my own work with musicians in the classical traditions of Iran and India, I found myself definitely as a kind of supplicant. In Iran, my principal teacher was a wealthy man, who was willing to take me on as a student on the same terms as those on which he taught Iranian students (for example, unquestioning adherence to his way of presenting the subject, and a certain exclusivity) –except that I was slower and older. In India, the music masters had groups of disciples –Indian and Western– and they undertook obligations in relationship to the master, who seemed to me to be the powerful person in the relationship.

HF: The idea of multiculturalism is in the core of ethnomusicology but it can be problematic. Should we teach seminars, for instance, in Native American music in order to address this population or should we do it because of the intrinsic value of this music?

BN: This question speaks to many issues: the discovery of cultural boundaries, the ability to understand foreign cultures, the matter of cultural relativism, and the degree to which an individual is able to represent his or her culture. But without wishing to go into detail: I cannot understand why one should not study, and teach about, cultures and musics foreign to oneself –stipulating the difficulty of understanding. So, I think the understanding of musics from an ultimately comparative perspective is essential in ethnomusicology. As you point out, it is problematic; these are problems with which one has to deal. My own attitude would be that the reason for studying or teaching about musics of any sort is because they are there –ultimately, everything ought to be studied and understood interculturally. By this

I mean that an European, for example, should understand (or “some” Europeans should understand) each of the world’s musics, however one defines this. I realize that as an outsider, I can never understand a music like an insider, but one accepts these limitations.

My attitude regarding your example –having seminars on Native American music in the United States– I think the intrinsic value of the music –of every music, as art and as a major component of culture– is the driving force. For me, the social identity of the audience, or the classroom, is not an issue. If there are Native Americans in the hypothetical seminar you propose, I would be glad to teach them what I think I know, and I would probably do it no differently from the way I would address students in general. They –the Native Americans– would have to judge for themselves whether they think an outsider like me is doing them any good.

Whether it is ethical to study indigenous cultures? Of course, why not? To feel that we have to protect these people from outside intervention of this kind makes no sense to me. These people know what they are doing and can make their own decisions, as long as one is dealing with them in an honest fashion.

HF: The study of Western music is an act of invitation to revolution for ethnomusicologist, you’ve said once. Are we still in this point? Or the classical schools of music have made any effort to incorporate this kind of criticism into their field?

BN: This is a question with many ramifications, and to do it justice would require a long essay, at least. Let me just make a few remark which lead me to stray a bit from your main points. To most people who call themselves “ethnomusicologists”, the answer to this question does not make much difference; it would not change their *modus operandi*. But in fact there are a number of answers. First, if by “Western music” you mean Western classical music, then most ethnomusicologists would accept the notion that they can, with their approaches, make certain contributions to understanding this music; and that the small number of relevant studies may be incorporated in the “ethno” discipline. And most people who see themselves as historians of Western art music do, I think, accept the idea that the approaches of ethnomusicologists could make a contribution to their field –though probably simply a peripheral one. Moreover, people who have called themselves sociologists of music and systematic musicologists have bridged this gap for a long time.

You mention schools: I assume you have in mind actual institutions of musical education, such as conservatories. Well, in North America –probably in Europe and Latin America too, I’m not well informed– the field of ethnomusicology has become a component –but more in the sense that students should, or wish to, know something about musics outside the Western classical, and less in the sense that the approaches of ethnomusicology could contribute to the understanding of Western classical music. But if you mean, by “Western music”, all of the kinds of music of Western culture, then of course we are talking mostly about the various genres of “popular” music, and these are much harder to assign to

a specific “Western” or “non-Western” orientation (or other orientation to a single cultures). Actually, the world’s popular musics are almost without exception the results of some kind of cultural mix. And as such, they are definitely in the purview of ethnomusicology, and indeed, looking at the program of organizations such as SEM, popular musics occupy a very large proportion of the subject matter –perhaps the majority.

In my days as a student –and before that, the early times of pre-ethnomusicology– a major concept was “authenticity”. This meant something like the “true”, definitive music of a culture, and with this concept came the notion of homogeneity of musical style in a culture, and homogeneity of musical participation in tribe or village. And while it was clear that such truly homogeneous musical cultures didn’t really exist, they were a kind of ideal, something to seek. Thus, processes such as syncretism, hybridization, and acculturation were seen as exceptions and viewed with suspicion. We were taught, as it were, to stay away from such musical phenomena. Western music of all sorts, but popular music especially were seen as the result of combinations, and thus didn’t fit into the model of authenticity and homogeneity. Music historians, by the way, looked at Western art music also as something ideally homogeneous, the conception of homogeneity was used to define personal, regional, genre styles. Now, some 60 years later, we (ethnomusicologists and, I think, music historians as well) have moved almost totally in the opposite direction.

Finally, you referred to the study of Western music as a kind of “revolution” in ethnomusicology. Technically, it may represent a change in direction, in which I participated. I don’t think –except for some initial moments of surprise– that what I, or others such as Henry Kingsbury or Christopher Small and others did, was seen, as particularly revolutionary. At least that seems to me so in the musicology (ethnomusicology or historical musicology) of the United States.

HF: The change of styles, the innovation, is the central issue to understand Western music. You have written about it from a critical point of view, affirming that the result of this ideology is that music is each time more complicated and the group of people who can understand it and enjoy it is going smaller and smaller. In this way, I find that the ethnomusicological point of view have an educative content, it can be a tool to repair the breakdown between classical music and the general public. Do you agree?

BN: I’m not quite sure whether I understand the question properly, but I guess the increasing complexity of art music in Western culture must be related to the tendency for everything to become more complex, and as a result, that every domain of culture becomes, gradually, a specialized field not really accessible to the rest of the population. I’m thinking of science, technology, biology, but also design (for which computers are used more than pencil or pen). I’m not sure how you think ethnomusicology could help people understand this music, except perhaps to focus on music as an aspect of social life. As you suggest, fewer and fewer people find experimental music –electronic, concrete, computer-generated,

etc.— accessible, and one result is that those who are interested in classical music continue to listen to older music. To be sure, the gradual increase in complexity and unintelligibility which one saw between 1900 and 1990 has given way to composition returning to elements of older style, traditional tonality, tonal harmony, etc. But on the whole, I think my approach would be more inclined to analysis of the situation than to persuade people to enjoy any particular music —with the understanding that comprehending the analysis (musical and social) may persuade people to “like” or “enjoy” strange musics— modern Western, or from other cultures.

In any event, I guess one contribution of ethnomusicology might only be to analyze the situation and try to find out which things occurred as they did. A second one might simply be to make people aware of the great variety of world’s musics, and of the fact that each must be understood in its own terms. And therefore, that the unintelligible “new” music should be seen as just another of the world’s musics with its peculiar set of principles (or “sets” of principles).

HF: I went through to several reviews of your books while I was preparing the interview. Most of them insist in your capacity to communicate difficult issues in a didactic manner and in your sense of humor. How do you describe the fortress of your writing style? Do you feel comfortable with those descriptions?

BN: Well, some reviewers have been very kind in finding my writing style to be communicative; I am not sure that I deserve this praise. However, I have usually felt that what I write should be a communication to someone rather than an abstract statement. I think —although I am usually not conscious of it— that I am writing something like a letter to a student or friend or family member, explaining something. On the other hand, I have sometimes been frustrated by my limited ability trying to convey complicated theoretical issues. Anyway, I have no choice but to be comfortable with your description.

In trying to find sources for my tendency to write rather simply, I want to mention two people. First my father, Paul Nettl, a well-known music historian, who —especially in his mature years— wrote a great deal for an educated public, readers who might be professionals in many fields, but not so much for the profession of musicologists. And second, my principal teacher of ethnomusicology, George Herzog, whose writings seem to me to address anthropologists, musicologists, musicians, folklorists, people not explicitly in his field of ethnomusicology (“comparative musicology” at that time), to whom he was trying to explain his perspective and his data. At that time, there did not exist a population of ethnomusicologists for whom one could write; the task was quite different from the kind of writing one now finds in journals such as “Ethnomusicology”, whose authors write for their own professional colleagues.

Actually, as I look back, I too have been engaged, both as writer and as teacher, in trying to explain to people who come from other fields just what we are engaged in. As

regards a sense of humor: Well, that's a personal hobby, and it helps me in trying to be sure that I don't take myself too seriously. But looking at it as a phenomenon of my cultural background, it may come from my personal history in which I had to relate different cultures –first the Czech and Germanophone cultures of pre-World War II Czechoslovakia, and later trying to integrate these into the American culture and English language which I had to absorb beginning at age nine. I think it may be true that humor is –can be– a significant component of cultural interaction and integration.

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Biography / Biografía / Biografia

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ethnomusicology Society.

How to cite / Cómo citar / Como citar

Nettl, Bruno. 2014. “Fifty Years of Changes and Challenges in the Ethnomusicological Field”. Interview by Héctor Fouce. *El oído pensante* 2 (1).<http://ppct.caicyt.gov.ar/index.php/oidopensante> [Web: DATE].