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Call and Response: Music, Power, and the Ethnomusicological Study of Politics and Culture

"New Directions for Ethnomusicological Research into the Politics of Music and Culture: Issues, Projects, and Programs"

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The following six texts are revised and expanded versions of papers delivered for the President's Roundtable at the 57th Annual Meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology, which was held in New Orleans, Louisiana from November 1 to 4, 2012. Harris M. Berger, section guest editor.

Across the humanities and social sciences, a wide range of scholars seek to understand the role that expressive culture in general and music in particular play in the politics of social life. Though it may once have been controversial, the notion that music has meanings or social dynamics that we may call *political* would not, I think, be a provocative one for scholars in our field today. For example, we now agree that music is a key medium through which identities emerge. In musical practice, agents construct new identities, subjects are interpolated into pre-existing ones, interlocutors negotiate or battle over identities, and all this occurs in ways that can be oppressive or resistant, mundane or extraordinary, residual or emergent. Further, music may serve as one or more form of capital. Individuals committed to notions of musical ownership as different from one another as the CEOs of multinational corporations and

hoary indigenous tradition bearers may scramble to take control of musical property, while hackers—white hat or black hat; cultural, legal, or technical—seek to loosen or break that control, or even replace the notion of property with other metaphors for musical interaction. If intellectual property is convertible to economic capital, musical phenomena may also operate as a form of social or cultural capital, when hipsters or rubes, teachers or students, virtuosi or common people, insiders or outsiders to a particular group vie for status through musical knowledge or skills. If you have tried to make your instrument heard in a large ensemble or been marginalized in a performance, scene, culture, or industry because of your identity, you know well that the practices of music making themselves have their own micro- and medial-level politics. Perhaps most importantly, all of these forms of musical politics are shaped by large-scale social forces and may impinge back upon those forces ways in ways intentional or unintentional.

This roundtable seeks to understand what ideas from the interdisciplinary dialog about politics, music, and expressive culture in general are most productive for our field today. More importantly, the participants' remarks will explore ethnomusicology's contributions to the broader scholarly discourse on this topic and suggest where that conversation is—or should be—heading. In this discussion, we will construe our theme broadly, including but in no way limiting our ideas to music and the politics of class, race/ethnicity, nationality, gender and sexuality, the culture industries, and beyond. I hold the perhaps heretical view that music is not what philosophers might call a natural kind thing, not a universal and trans-historical category of social experience. While the term "expressive culture" itself is problematic, whenever I say "music" today I am intending the phrase "music and other forms of expressive culture," though the particularity of the politics of music (as opposed to the politics of dance, material culture, or narrative, for example) could conceivably be a productive avenue of investigation.[1]

I am honored to share this stage with an extraordinary group of ethnomusicologists. Before I turn the floor over to them, though, I would like to briefly suggest five issues in the politics of music that call out for careful thinking and empirical investigation today.

Historically, our field has been premised on a populist orientation to expressive culture: the notion that it is not only the music of Western European elites that deserves careful attention but that all musics are valuable and worthy of study. In the context of an academy still dominated by the Western high art cannon, this perspective rightly continues as a bedrock value for our discipline. Looking closer at this issue, though, we must recognize that all individuals have multiple and cross-cutting intersections of identity, and this results in complex layers of domination and subordination—for example, indigenous elites who

align themselves with colonial or post-colonial powers; sexual minorities whose strategy for gain is to reaffirm normative values like patriotism or class hierarchies. In fact, while the term *populism* has largely positive connotations in American English, it is, I understand, a more neutral or negative term in British English, where the word often operates as a gloss for *nativism.* Independent of the differences of meaning and usage across these two dialects, there is a fundamental issue at stake here: a populist scholarship that uncritically celebrates the mundane life of subordinated groups, may, if it is not careful, end up reaffirming the very power relations that it seeks to critique. In this context, I believe that it is time to *rethink our traditional but undertheorized populism and replace it with a commitment to anti-elitism.* What this would entail is a theoretical project of exploring the dialectics of populism and elitism, accompanied by empirical investigations into how these ideas play out in the movement of musical signifiers, musical practices, and the broader ideologies of music in differing social worlds. There are deep issues here that have not yet been plumbed.

A second dialectic that needs more study is *the relationship between the expressive and instrumental dimensions of musical practice*. We know well that music's aesthetic and affective power can be used to achieve social business and that even the crudest and most mundane forms of pragmatic activity can themselves can be aestheticized. The issue at stake here is the differing ways in which musical meanings can be used and the political valence of those uses. Certainly, pleasure (musical or otherwise) can degenerate into escape from the strictures of social life; however, manipulation can sometimes be reclaimed and transvalued as enjoyment, and we would be mechanistic and dogmatic in our interpretations if we read all forms of music as nothing more than a distraction from underlying power relations or a ventilation of social tensions. The questions of which forms of musical experience operate in which ways and of who gets to make those calls—indeed the question of the very meaning of aesthetics itself—are of fundamental importance. To explore this dialectic, we need analyses of the ways that these issues play out in the concrete practices and ideologies of particular social formations, as well as broader ethnomusicologically informed theoretical work on the significance of expressivity in a world necessarily fraught with power relations.

A third dialectic at the heart of our field *vibrates between critical and relativistic scholarship*. At their worst, relativistic scholars may stamp any critique of local practice with the "ethnographic veto," dismissing anything other than a celebratory description of insider belief as a patronizing failure to understand and honor native perspective. For their part, the worst critical scholars are willing to write-off vast swaths of cultural terrain as nothing more than false consciousness. Happily, most of us avoid the Scylla and Charybdis of these worst-case positions, but the issue itself needs to be more thoroughly considered.[2] Cultural

practices demand a deeply contextual and empathetic understanding, at least at their first readings; however, it is also true that social life is fraught with power, and subordinated groups sometimes participate enthusiastically in their own undoing. Forging a set of tools to grapple with this difficult dialectic is a necessary project for our discipline.[3]

The more thoroughgoing that our analysis of the politics of music becomes, the more the skeptic in us aches to understand *the concrete mechanisms by which practices in the music event might shape practices in the home, workplace, voting booth, town square, or battlefield*.[4] Here, we face deep questions of epistemology and methodology: how do we know if any musical experience matters once the audience leaves the concert hall or club? What kind of evidence could we imagine would help us to really answer that question, and is it possible, in practice, for anyone to collect it?[5] This turn to the methodological leads us to a set of pragmatic questions about *the social significance and utility of our work*. Many enter the academy as undergraduates with a scholarly project that echoes that of the enlightenment: fostering cross-cultural understanding, encouraging critical thinking, and forwarding rational inquiry. But these tasks have been deeply problematized by insights from contemporary work in critical social thought—that social life is chronically shaped by the dynamics of power and resistance, that subjects may construct but are also constructed by their social world, and that the production of all knowledge, including scholarly knowledge, is bound up with larger patterns of domination. Too few of us have systematically reconciled the older enlightenment intuitions that formed our field with the more contemporary critical ones, and doing so is an essential task that forces us to ask difficult and very pragmatic questions about our teaching, research, and public sector work. We seek to shed light on social dynamics, but what is that project good for, exactly, and how does it operate? If ethnography is a suspension bridge that links two different social worlds, how do we know that a General won't use it to help his army storm a foreign territory, or that a marketer or PR flack won't plaster that bridge with advertisements, co-opting ethnographic knowledge for the benefit of capital? If ethnography is a toolbox for activists, how do we know that the forces of social control won't reverse engineer those tools and use them to crush the opposition? Those who are skeptical of narrowly activist scholarship and seek only to provide broad social insights are not off the hook here. They must ask themselves how—or even if—those insights will leave the environment of the conference, the classroom, or the public program to have a meaningful life in the larger world. And how do the political goals that we have for our work articulate with the imperatives of our increasingly constraining institutional homes?

What underlies all five of these difficult problems, I think, is what Anthony Giddens ([1976] 1993:117–18) saw as the fundamentally dual nature of power.

Power is, in one sense, the power to act, the ability to bring forth events in the world. But because our action is always social—always something we achieve because of and with others, past, present, and future—the potential for domination is inherent, even ripe, in the entirety of social life, and even the most mundane, equitable, or convivial practice is informed by larger social contexts and the legacies of domination that they entail. This is as true of practices of music making, teaching, research, or public sector work as it is of any other kind of activity. Seeing the social life of music as a domain of coordinated practice that is inherently, rather than contingently, political is one way of coming to terms with these difficult issues. Today's roundtable participants will address these and a host of other topics in ways that I know will be stimulating to the field, and I am pleased to give the floor to them.

Notes

1. In their essays for this roundtable, three of the six other ethnomusicologists here today take up this theme as well. Jayson Beaster-Jones and Henry Spiller explore this notion by critiquing the tendency toward "musical exceptionalism," while Deborah Wong's remarks take up this idea to problematize the very definition of ethnomusicology and its place in the academy.

2. That this issue is central across music studies is reflected by the divergent perspectives that contemporary scholars have on the work of Theodore Adorno. Brutally critical of popular culture in much of his work, Adorno is more or less dismissed by some writers as an unredeemable elitist, while others see his writings as invaluable for clearing away the obfuscations of social life that capitalism fosters. For a critical analysis of the place of Adorno in the history of popular music studies, see Tagg (1998).

3. In previous writings, I have examined various facets of these dialectics. On the relationship between the expressive and the instrumental dimensions of social practice, see Del Negro and Berger (2004:20–21). On the tension between relativistic and critical scholarship, see Berger (1999).

4. Linked to this methodological problem is the issue of the relationship between music and its social base. Contemporary approaches to this topic—from the notion of "communities of practice" (see, for example, LaDousa 2007, especially n. 3, pg. 478) to the richly elaborated traditions of scholarship in the discipline of performance studies—deserve further engagement in our field. Current perspectives on this issue do not merely critique the equation of a nation state with "a society" and "a culture" or attend to differential identity, transnational flows of people and media, border cultures, or the re-appropriation of the music of dominant groups by those that they have subordinated. Rather, they understand the very relationship between expressive culture and its social base as inherently emergent and grounded in practice. In so doing, they take the concrete social activities involved in the production, distribution, and reception of expressive culture as their object of analysis and view "societies" or "social groups" in the same way—as relatively stable patterns of practice. Understood from this perspective, social formations arise around expressive forms just as frequently as they emerge from pre-existing "societies," and such a view emphasizes that expressive forms may take on their own life and may have the capacity to develop dynamics that exceed the meanings, intentions, and sites of their original practitioners. None of this is to deny that in some situations, sets of expressive resources, styles of performance, and interpretive practices might line up with more-or-less well-defined (and pre-existing) social "groups." It is to say, rather, that such neat mappings are a kind of limiting case, that the coalescing of expressive resources into stable genres or styles is always emergent, situated, and historical, and that the social

formations that establish those texts in practices of production and reception are equally emergent, situated, and historical.

5. For further discussions of this topic, see Berger (2009:97–135) and Street (2012).

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