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Timothy Rice

# ETHNOMUSICOLOGY

A Very Short Introduction

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## Chapter 1

# Defining ethnomusicology

**Ethnomusicology is the study of why, and how, human beings are musical. This definition positions ethnomusicology among the social sciences, humanities, and biological sciences dedicated to understanding the nature of the human species in all its biological, social, cultural, and artistic diversity.**

**“Musical” in this definition does not refer to musical talent or ability; rather it refers to the capacity of humans to create, perform, organize cognitively, react physically and emotionally to, and interpret the meanings of humanly organized sounds. The definition assumes that all humans, not just those we call musicians, are musical to some degree, and that musicality (the capacity to make and make sense of music) defines our humanity and provides one of the touchstones of human experience. Musical thinking and doing may be as important to our human being in the world as is our ability to speak and to understand speech. Ethnomusicologists would claim we need music to be fully human.**

**Ethnomusicologists believe that to understand our humanity through our musicality, that is, to understand why we need music to be fully human, we must study music in all its diversity. The basic question, why and how are humans musical, will not be**

answered by studying a small slice of the world's music. All music, in its full geographical and historical extent, must be studied. Ethnomusicologists do not begin their research with a judgment about what they imagine is "good music" or "music worthy of study" or "music that has withstood the test of time." Instead, they assume that whenever and wherever humans make and listen to music with the keen devotion and attention that they do, then something important and worthy of study is going on.

So another definition might state that ethnomusicology is the study of all of the world's music. Although this definition tells us what ethnomusicologists study, it does not explain why they cast their net so widely. They do so because they want to answer big questions about the nature of music and the nature of humankind. The British ethnomusicologist John Blacking (1928–90), in his book *How Musical Is Man?*, to which my opening definition is partially indebted, captures this ethnomusicological sensibility this way:

In this world of cruelty and exploitation . . . it is necessary to understand why a madrigal by Gesualdo or a Bach Passion, a *sitar* melody from India or a song from Africa, Berg's *Wozzeck* or Britten's *War Requiem*, a Balinese *gamelan* or a Cantonese opera, or a symphony by Mozart, Beethoven, or Mahler may be profoundly necessary for human survival, quite apart from any merit they may have as examples of creativity and technical progress. It is also necessary to explain why, under certain circumstances, a "simple" "folk" song may have more human value than a "complex" symphony.

These opening definitions imply the study of the music of all the world's peoples as a path to understanding human beings. Other ways to define the field emanate from unpacking the word "ethnomusicology" into its three Greek roots: *ethnos*, *mousikē*, and *logos*.

## Ethnos

In ancient Greek *ethnos* referred to people of the same nation, tribe, or race. It is the root of such phrases as ethnic group, ethnic minority, and ethnic music. Its inclusion in the term "ethnomusicology" suggests that ethnomusicology might be defined as the study (*logos*) of the music (*mousikē*) of groups of people (*ethnos*), especially those sharing a common language and culture—ethnic groups in other words. That was undoubtedly part of the original conception of the field when the Dutch musicologist Jaap Kunst (1891–1960) first published the word "ethno-musicology" in 1950 in a small book called *Musicologia: A Study of the Nature of Ethno-musicology, Its Problems, Methods, and Representative Personalities*. In creating the name, Kunst combined the names of two older disciplines, musicology (created in 1885) and ethnology (often dated to 1783). Musicology is the study of music. Ethnology is the comparative study of human linguistic and cultural diversity based on direct contact with, and ethnographic accounts of, particular groups of people. Ethnomusicology, by extension, was to be the comparative study of human musical diversity based on musical ethnography.

This alternate definition has the advantage of adding the principal method ethnomusicologists use to study why and how human beings are musical, namely, the ethnographic, or fieldwork, method. Applying this method to particular cultures and societies has yielded thousands of studies of the extent to which music is governed by, and affects, deep cultural principles and social structures. The extensive application of the ethnographic method in myriad intensive studies has moved the field away from the comparative impulse inherent in the term "ethnology" and toward the definition of the field as the study of music in (or as) culture and to studies that posit something called a "music culture." In 1960 Alan Merriam (1923–80), one of the seminal figures in the field, defined ethnomusicology in just this way: "[T]he study of music in culture"; but a sentence or two later he returned the definition

of the field to the universality implied in my opening definition: "[T]he study of music as a universal aspect of man's activities." The two poles of the culturally particular and the humanly universal, whether understood as a tension or productive antitheses, have galvanized ethnomusicologists' thinking about their field ever since.

The interest, inherent in the name of the field, in music making by groups of people has also broadened over the years. While the majority of ethnomusicological studies continue to focus on music making within a culture or society traditionally understood as a national or ethnic group, modern life is causing many societies and cultures to fragment and recombine. Individuals find it advantageous, and in some cases necessary, to escape their social and cultural roots, move to new places, and connect with, or even create, new social groups. These new social groups sometimes have their basis in ethnicity. Just as often modern conditions invite individuals to create "subcultural" or "microcultural" groups based on shared work, class, recreational experiences, or affinity for surfing, sci-fi movies, or flamenco music. Hence, the simple definition I started with does not emphasize the study of why, and how, human *groups* are musical, as the name of the discipline implies, but how and why humans, individually and in any of the many ways they congregate, are musical. This caveat has led some to argue that the very name of the field is no longer appropriate and should be abandoned.

### Mousikē

The Greek word *mousikē*, in the form of the English word "music," has come to refer to the art of organizing sound in pleasing or thought-provoking ways. As ethnomusicologists have studied musical diversity around the world, however, that simple definition of music has proven problematic.

Music is not an easy word to define, partly because its meanings expanded considerably in the second half of the twentieth century.

Whereas music may once have been defined as pleasing sounds organized around such reliable elements as melody, harmony, and rhythm, some modern music has added to or subtracted from these elements in ways that challenge any simple understanding of what music might be. Rap music, for example, substitutes rhythmic declamation of lyrics for singing them to a tune, leaving some uninitiated listeners mystified as to whether it is "really" music. The American composer John Cage (1912–92) famously composed a piece called *4'33"* (1952) that directed the pianist to sit at the keyboard for that length of time without playing a note. Even the notion that music should be "humanly organized sound," a definition proposed by John Blacking, may be too limited. Cage and others sought to create music in which the organization was left to chance rather than human agency. In another twist, English speakers frequently, if metaphorically, speak of bird and whale "song." Are the organized sounds of animals music? These challenges to the definition of music within Euro-American culture mirror similar challenges in the cultures ethnomusicologists study.

Ethnomusicologists have learned, for example, that in agricultural and pastoral cultures, where people work outdoors most of the time, humans sometimes sing in counterpoint with the sounds of animals and the natural environment, as if animals and nature were singing to and with us. Does this mean that our definition of music as humanly organized sound is too narrow? Because all humans live in and interact with sounding environments, whether the sounds of nature or the sounds of modern warfare, some ethnomusicologists have begun to suggest recently that our object of study should be that of sound and not just of music. That view challenges our simple definition of the field. Perhaps someday ethnomusicologists will have created an "ethnosonology."

The boundary that my first definition implicitly erects between music and other performing arts, such as dance, poetry, or theater, is not universal. In parts of Bantu-speaking East Africa, for

example, the word for drum, *ngoma*, has been extended to include singing, dancing, hand-clapping, and ululating on social occasions. There seems to be no term quite comparable to “music” in English. In other cultures the word music applies to a narrower range of musical behaviors than in the West. In some strict interpretations of Islam, for example, music and singing refer only to secular practices and have a distinctly negative connotation, whereas the musical qualities of sacred expressions are labeled “chanting” or “reciting” and have positive associations. In Bulgaria, where I conducted my ethnomusicological field studies, villagers used the term “music” (*muzika*) to refer only to instrumental music. Other modes of what I would consider musical expression, such as singing, drumming, and lamenting, had different names and were considered distinct from music.

Another problem with the term “music” is that it refers to a product rather than a process. As a result, early studies in the field of ethnomusicology often focused on elements and structures of music that had been fixed in musical notation or in sound recordings. Such studies did not capture what ethnomusicologists observed during their fieldwork, namely the interactions between all the human beings present during a musical event, the motivations behind their behaviors, and the significance they attach to them.

To capture the intellectual, physical, cultural, and social dynamics and processes that generate musical products, we need a locution with a verbal rather than a nominal form. One might be “to make music,” giving us ethnomusicology as the study of how and why people make music, or more simply, the study of people making music, a definition advanced by Jeff Todd Titon. This definition works if we understand “making music” to include not only the playing of music but also how humans “make” music perceptually, conceptually, and emotionally as well.

The music educator Christopher Small (1927–2011) provided another solution in a book titled *Musicking*. By transforming the

noun “music” into a new verb, “to music,” he redefined music as an activity rather than a thing. He wanted this neologism to capture all the musical thinking, the “musicking,” humans do—not just playing music but responding and assigning meanings to the musical sounds made by others. To capture this sense of music as activity, I settled on the verb phrase “are musical” in my opening definition. Echoing John Blacking’s title, *How Musical is Man?*, this definition avoids the inconvenient noun music and the yet-not-widely-used verb “to music,” and implies an interest in all the ways humans are musical as they make, perceive, interpret, and respond in myriad ways to sound.

Beyond the vexing questions of what is music and whether to refer to it as a product or a process, there is the question of what kinds of music ethnomusicologists study. If the goal of the field is to understand human musicking, or how and why humans are musical, then the answer must be that ethnomusicologists study all music. However, the first published definition of the field, by Jaap Kunst in 1950, limited its scope:

The study-object of ethnomusicology, or as it was originally called: comparative musicology, is the traditional music and musical instruments of all cultural strata of mankind, from the so-called primitive peoples to the civilized nations. Our science, therefore, investigates all tribal and folk music and every kind of non-European art music. . . . European art- and popular (entertainment-) music do not belong to its field.

Because most ethnomusicologists believe they should study music as a universal human phenomenon, it makes no sense to exclude some part of that phenomenon, as Kunst’s original definition did. And yet, as a practical matter, the vast majority of ethnomusicological research and teaching today concerns what have been variously called—and few ethnomusicologists are happy with these terms—“traditional music,” “non-Western music,” or “world music.” (World music, in the ethnomusicological sense, is

a category far broader than the use of the phrase, since the late 1980s, to denote commercial and popular “ethno-pop” musical fusions.) While popular music from most parts of the world, as well as American “ethnic” forms of popular music, are now well-accepted “study-objects,” studies of European classical music and Anglo-American popular music, with some important exceptions, remain rather thin on the ground.

This definition—ethnomusicology is the study of traditional forms of non-Western or world music—has some advantages. It is easy for nonspecialists to understand, and it is an accurate description, within limits, of what ethnomusicologists actually do. Ethnomusicologists tend to use it when family and friends ask what “ethnomusicology” is. But it is not a very popular definition within the field, because it places the West in the center and marginalizes the rest, arguably the vast majority of human beings. This definition also fails to explain why we conduct these studies, and it obfuscates the larger goals of the enterprise captured in my opening definition.

## Logos

In Greek the word *logos* means, among other things, “word,” “reason,” “logic,” “discourse,” and, in the form of the suffix “-ology,” it has been adopted for many disciplinary names in English. Hence, ethnomusicology is word-based, reasoned discourse about music. This definition does not distinguish ethnomusicology from other forms of musicology, such as the study of European art music. However, it does set up a dichotomy between ethnomusicological study, which results in reports in the spoken and written word, and other forms of “studying music,” such as taking music lessons and learning to play and compose music. Because ethnomusicology is sometimes defined as the study of “world music,” some musicians who learn and perform music beyond the realms of Euro-American art and popular music call themselves ethnomusicologists. Historically this appropriation of

the term “ethnomusicologist” by performers and their critics has caused some consternation among academic ethnomusicologists. Today, the general attitude seems more relaxed. The website of the U.S.-based Society for Ethnomusicology takes an ecumenical view and welcomes not only scholars to become members but also performers. As a matter of method, during their fieldwork with musicians, ethnomusicologists ask questions about how various musicians make and think about music, inviting them to provide “reasoned discourse” and, in effect, to become musicologists. Still, it would probably be fair to define ethnomusicology as an academic discipline based on reasoned discourse in words about the full range, in all places and time periods, of human music making.

Defining ethnomusicology is not a simple matter. The definition I started with proliferated. Each one tells us something slightly different about what people who call themselves ethnomusicologists do, and each is useful as a tactic for specifying the intellectual goals of the field, its subject matter, its methods and actual practices, or its differences from other fields.

Ethnomusicology is the study of why, and how, human beings are musical.

Ethnomusicology is the study of all of the world’s music.

Ethnomusicology is the study of groups of people making music.

Ethnomusicology is the comparative study of human musical diversity based on fieldwork and musical ethnography.

Ethnomusicology is the study of traditional, non-Western, or world music.

Ethnomusicology is the study of music in (or as) culture.

Ethnomusicology is the study of humanly organized sound.

Ethnomusicology is the study of music and the sound environments in which it is made.

Ethnomusicology is the study of people making music.

Ethnomusicology is the study of human musicking.

Ethnomusicology is word-based, reasoned discourse about all music.

Ethnomusicology is the study of world music by any means, verbal and nonverbal.

Ethnomusicology is an academic discipline based on reasoned discourse in words about the full range, in all places and time periods, of human music and music making.

The remainder of this very short introduction looks in more detail at how ethnomusicologists have studied the diversity of human musicality, including the history of the field, its methods, principal insights, and the contexts in which it is practiced.

## Chapter 2

### A bit of history

The ethnomusicological interest in understanding why and how humans are musical clearly has its roots in older ways of thinking about music.

#### Ancient and medieval precursors

The ancient literate cultures of China and Greece generated philosophical treatises on music because they believed, like modern ethnomusicologists, that music is an extraordinarily important cultural expression with deep cosmological, metaphysical, religious, social, and political implications. Early Greek thinking about music, often personified by Pythagoras (ca. 570–ca. 490 BCE), held that the cosmos and the key to wisdom were governed by ratios of small whole numbers. Once the Greeks demonstrated that musical intervals such as the octave, perfect fifth, and perfect fourth could be explained by ratios of small whole numbers, they concluded that music must be an important cog in the moral universe and the cosmological “harmony of the spheres.” This view is expressed in many variants in the nonliterate cultures ethnomusicologists have studied.

The ethnomusicological literature is filled with arguments that echo the ancient Greeks about whether music helps to construct behavioral, cultural, and psychological patterns or whether