

Let It Be Called “Comparative Ethnomusicology”

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The discipline currently named “musicology” emphasizes the humanistic study of Western art music, what I call WAM. This makes good sense because the discipline emerged and operates in the West. In parallel fashion, and tinged perhaps with a dose of post-colonial irony, African scholars of African music have suggested the moniker “African musicology” for the scholarly study of their culture’s music. According to this logic, the world can support multiple musicologies, each focused on the scholarly study of a musical field defined by geo-cultural boundaries. None of these musicologies would be plagued with insoluble problems that arise from the fraught exercise of trying to be what they are not, i.e., global in a non-ethnocentric way. “Chinese musicology” could operate from a Chinese paradigm (and fight over what exactly that might entail). Within each of these culturally-bound discourses, the elegant unity “musicology” need not be modified, but none of these many musicologies should arrogate to itself the task of being supra-culturally objective and free from cultural bias. In addition to looking inward, each musicology could address global issues from its own vantage point.

“Western musicology” is a thoroughly operationalized institution within a large industry that not only includes historical and interpretive scholarship but systems of pedagogy, performance, and consumption as well. This powerful status quo works well within its boundaries. It is less well adapted to the unbiased study of what I call WEFT, that is musics that have been labeled in the West as “world,” “ethnic,” “folk” and/or “traditional” music. In fact, it requires sustained effort to carve out a place within the “arts and culture establishment” for WEFT. Within the academy, this place is ethnomusicology. Ethnomusicologists are properly wary of those who would chip away at these accomplishments.

Ethnomusicology is more than a “rebranded” version of the original comparative musicology. In addition to the issues of intellectual paradigm (unilinear cultural evolution) and existential bias (racism) mentioned by Savage and Brown, those who founded and continue to “do ethnomusicology” also were motivated by anti-imperialism, cultural relativity, activism for cultural diversity and sustainability, ecological holism, and sheer humanistic appreciation of art. Furthermore, professional musicology’s emphasis on the historical and critical study of WAM, left the “WEFTonians” little operating room. In the 1950s, the Society for Ethnomusicology and the Society for Music Theory both hived off from the American Musicological Society because they sought more “space” to creatively discover their potential.

Ethnomusicology may be understood variously as a mode of inquiry, a field of content, and a cultural formation. Its mode of inquiry integrates humanistic and artistic paradigms, leavened with social and natural science as needed. Its field primarily is the WEFT musics. As performed by its eclectic membership, its cultural practices are marked by an inclusive intellectual and artistic attitude, progressive activism, and a quality of

rebelliousness and freedom. Because they most often work closely with oppressed peoples, ethnomusicologists make intellectual and emotional investments in moral and ethical issues that arise from the world's history of imperialism and class privilege. I would opine that Savage and Brown address their brief primarily at ethnomusicologists because they recognize that our discipline, not Western musicology, likely will be more receptive to it.

Thus, I would argue that the proposed musical discipline of global comparison be named "comparative ethnomusicology." It would be the sub-discipline within ethnomusicology most focused on the global questions of biological history, cultural evolution and species-wide behavior.