

the **Cultural Study of Music**  
a critical introduction

edited by Martin Clayton  
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## CHAPTER 2

### *Musicology, Anthropology, History*

GARY TOMLINSON

In their present-day forms, ethnography and historiography are twins, born of the same parentage at the same moment in the eighteenth-century dawn of Western modernity. They have most often seemed, however, to be nonidentical, even antithetical twins, each trait of the one answering to a corresponding but converse trait in the other. This complementary relation has been remarked on and analyzed almost since the eighteenth century itself. One recent summary, offered by Michel de Certeau in the wake of Lévi-Straussian structuralism, puts it this way: Where ethnography has taken as its object *orality*, historiography scrutinizes *written* traces; where the one has wanted to describe an atemporal *space* of culture, the other follows change through *time*; the one starts from a gesture of radical estrangement and *alterity*, the other from an assumption of transparent *identity*; the first analyzes collective phenomena of a *cultural unconscious*, the second the *consciousness of historical self-knowledge* (de Certeau 1988, 209-10).

These contrasts have certainly been blurred, revised, and rearranged over the two centuries of development of anthropology and history as modern disciplines. In much recent work we witness anthropology gauging informants' consciousness of change through time, and weighing written

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documents from an otherwise irretrievable past (e.g., Sahlin 1985; Comaroff and Comaroff 1992), or, conversely, history setting itself to recover an unwritten legacy and discover the distant otherness of its once-familiarized actors (Ginzburg 1985; Burke 1987; de Certeau 1988). Such moves must broach a basic doubt whether any substantive differences separate the two disciplines—any differences, that is, other than those sanctioned by time-worn ideologies or ethnographers' fond hopes for the survival of lived experience in their written accounts.

Nevertheless, the disciplinary differences of history and anthropology have never been effaced altogether. These distinct endeavors continue to elaborate, if tacitly or, often these days, in a climate of explicit self-critique, an ideology that limns a historical, alphabetic, conscious Western self and opposes to it a static, unlettered, un-self-conscious other.

The relation, over more than two centuries, of musicology to this set of disciplinary distinctions and their equivocation must be a complex one. Music scholarship assays a performative mode akin to the anthropologist's orality; at the same time it moves in the medium of writing naturalized in historiography but uneasily wedded, as a means at odds with its sources, to ethnography. Moreover, music itself was at the moment of musicology's appearance being refashioned in a manner that set it in opposition to the voices behind ethnography. It was assuming a place in European ideology that would eventually exalt it, ally it more tightly with the written than ever before, and distance it from related non-European activities that an earlier, more ecumenical designation had embraced.

*Musicology*—the very name incorporates a word that came, across the European eighteenth century, to betoken a "fine" art at the center of new aesthetic concerns and that designated, by the midnineteenth century, the *finest* art, the art to whose transcendental, spiritual capacities all others looked with envy. Across the century from 1750 to 1850, music lodged itself at the heart of a discourse that pried Europe and its histories apart from non-European lives and cultures. Perched at the apex of the new aesthetics, it came to function as a kind of limit-case of European uniqueness in world history and an affirmation of the gap, within the cultural formation of modernity, between history and anthropology. Music, in this sense, silenced many non-European activities that it might instead have attended to.

There is another side, however, to musicology's connection with the twins ethnography and historiography. If, on the one hand, the new aesthetics of music and the musicology to which it gave rise widened the

distance between history and anthropology, on the other hand, an older ideology of singing worked to emphasize their affinities and draw them together. The commonplace conception of musicology as a discipline invented after the full emergence of Romantic views of music—invented even in the late nineteenth century, with a *fons et origo* in Guido Adler's famous manifesto of 1885 (Adler 1885; Mugglestone 1981)—cannot replace this earlier formation. It not only forgets the large literature on music history produced in the eighteenth century but also ignores a fact of subtler, deeper import: the presence of singing at the heart of eighteenth-century accounts of the history of European society, of Europe's relation to other societies, and indeed of the origins of all societies.

The central position of song in writings offering generalized theories of the origins of language and society tended to unite rather than distinguish European and non-European musical experiences. This position, solidified across the 1700s in writings of Vico, Condillac, Rousseau, Herder, and others, situated singing at the nexus of the emergent disciplines of ethnography and historiography. It could even offer song as the nexus itself—as a vanishing point, so to speak, of distinctions of European from other societies. Musicology, then, is not solely the nineteenth- and twentieth-century grandchild of an anthropology and a historiography long since sundered. An earlier musicological impulse (or *cantological*, as I have called it elsewhere, half seriously, to distinguish it from later developments) precedes the full emergence of modern historiography and ethnography; forms, even, a part of their parentage; and resists, at the moment of their birth, their too-clear separation.

Song, not music, is the fundamental category here. It is characteristic of a period when a full-blown modern conception of music had not yet taken hold so that song could still pose itself as an expressive mode shared by Europe with the rest of the world. This is the general role it played in the protoethnographic accounts of European travelers, explorers, and missionaries through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Here the singing of non-Europeans was not differentiated in any categorical way from European song, but rather was assimilated into it, gauged against it, at times celebrated in comparison with it, and set with it at different points along the same spectrum of metaphysical expressive functions (usually extending from the divine to the demonic).

Later, in writings such as Rousseau's *Essay on the Origins of Language* and Vico's *New Science*, an element of historicity, in some measure novel, entered into European views. Now non-European singing was conceived

not as equivalent (in whatever manner) to contemporary European practices but as a survival in far-off places of practices Europe had long since outgrown. This perceiving of historical distance in geographical and cultural difference hinted at later distinctions of historiography and ethnography while still resisting them in the commonality of song itself. Non-European singing was still *commensurable* with European singing, though it was *displaced* along a historical axis.

Song, in this dispensation, presented authors such as Vico and Rousseau with the conundrum of Derrida's supplement (Tomlinson 1995, 346-51). At once envisaged as the earliest and most immediate of utterances—the form in which language first emerged—and as a passionate but modulated art of the present day, song was endowed with expressive features both primitive and modern, brutally direct and delicately metaphorical, barbarously non-European and of consummate (European) refinement. The conundrum points forward to later developments in European ideology while at the same time affirming for us the proximity, at this moment, of historical and anthropological perspectives. Around 1750, song offered a category, at once conceptual and perceptual, in which anthropology and historiography began to assume their modern outlines while resisting the oppositions that would later separate them.

The *music* that came to counter such *song* in the decades before 1800 was not conceived as a European version of worldwide activities but instead as a European *métier* opposed to practices elsewhere, however much it might superficially resemble them. It was sanctioned within views novel in the late eighteenth century: new conceptions of the nonmimetic expressive capacities of music and of music's transcendence of the sensible world (Dahlhaus 1989a), a novel discreteness and fixity of the musical work itself (Goehr 1992), even a revising of the human subject that perceived all these things (Tomlinson 1999). It was represented above all by the burgeoning genres, institutions, and traditions of instrumental music. If around 1700 song had offered a conceptual umbrella under which the world's musical activities, non-European and European, might gather (if uneasily), now instrumental music—music without words, *nonsong*—posed a new, exclusionary category redolent of European spiritual superiority. Such a category could not help but carry deep implications for both anthropology and historiography.

An early marking of this new category is Kant's positioning of instrumental music in his analysis of beauty in his *Critique of Judgment* (Kant

[1790] 2000 pt.1, bk.1, section 16: "The Judgment of Taste, by Which an Object is Declared to Be Beautiful Under the Condition of a Definite Concept, Is Not Pure"). The free or unattached, hence pure, beauty Kant finds in such music—in "music fantasies (i.e., pieces without any topic [*Thema*]) and in fact all music without words"—is foreign to most other human products, such as the human body itself, buildings, even horses (seemingly conceived only, by Kant, as livestock). The beauty of these human products depends on the concepts of the ends or purposes envisaged for them; it therefore emerges from a human moral and rational order. The beauty of instrumental music, instead, manifests a kind of errancy, an independence from such humanist moral orders that likens it to the meaningless beauty of flowers, exotic birds, and seashells.

The converse of Kant's example is implicit but clear: Song, music with words, must manifest a dependent beauty. Kant considers song only *in absentia*, so to speak, by specifying that free beauty is restricted to instrumental music; but this restriction poses, in effect, a deep-seated differentiation of the two. In this distinction (though he certainly would not have relished the consequence), Kant prepared the ground for the ennoblement of instrumental music throughout the nineteenth century that would take forms as different as the complexities of Wagner's relation to Beethoven or Hanslick's ([1885] 1974) resolute separation of music from speech and musical from other beauty. In its own time the effect of Kant's differentiation was to mark off, within a solidifying conception of aesthetics considered the philosophy of beauty, one precinct for singing, a different one for playing.

Kant's assignment of categorically differing modes of beauty to non-song and song punctuated a period when instrumental practices in elite Europe—the ascendancy of symphony, concerto, and sonata, the challenging of the supremacy of opera by public concerts featuring instrumental virtuosity, and so on—called forth a sense of European musical accomplishment and uniqueness that could not easily square with the global ubiquity of singing. In the years after Kant, indeed, the achievements of recent European instrumental music could be viewed as the culmination of a progressive world history. In 1800 Herder, writing in *Kalligone*, his response to Kant's *Critique*, described "the slow progress of music's history" toward the moment, in his own Europe, when it "developed into a self-sufficient art, *sui-generis*, dispensing with words" (Le Huray and Day 1981, 257; Goehr 1992, 155). It was a very short step, soon taken, from the Kantian distinction of instrumental and vocal musics to the assertion of Europe as the privileged endpoint of music history.

If in this way Kant's remark on instrumental music points toward a Eurocentric separation of music history from music anthropology, Johann Nikolaus Forkel's *Allgemeine Geschichte der Musik* ([1788] 1967), from the same years, spins out a full-fledged narrative of their divorce. The novel force of Forkel's account lies neither in its frankly progressive tone, common enough in his predecessors, nor even in its less commonplace linkage of the advancement of music to the evolution of language. Instead the crucial, innovative move by which Forkel pries music history apart from music anthropology is his insistence that music progresses not only in tandem with language but also with *writing*.

Forkel asserts first that music and language develop in parallel ways from their earliest origins to their "highest perfection" (Forkel [1788] 1967; trans. Allanbrook 1998, 280). But "Language and writing always proceeded at an equal pace in their development; therefore music and notation can be presumed to have done the same." Peoples who use imperfect music notations can, then, attain only "imperfect, extremely unordered" musics (p. 288). A perfect music depends on a perfected music writing. In language writing, Forkel reasons (echoing many eighteenth-century predecessors), the approach to perfection moves from pictographic through ideographic to alphabetic stages. Alphabetic writing emerges only after a people's attainment of a level of intellectual sophistication in which writing can be abstracted from the things it represents; ideographic writing shows a less-developed mode of abstraction, pictographs no abstraction at all. Since music writing is the inscribing of airy, invisible bodies, it requires, like alphabetism, a high degree of abstraction. Therefore, Forkel sweepingly concludes, "No people could arrive at any method at all for translating its melodies into signs before the invention of alphabetical writing" (p. 287).

Forkel's specific inferences concerning the history of music notation are complex. After the invention of the alphabet this history reverses, in a way, the evolution of language writing, moving from an incipient, alphabetic mode toward something akin to pictography in its perfected state. But we need not follow these particulars to be staggered by the blunt force of Forkel's syllogism: *Musical perfection is dependent on notational perfection; notational perfection follows alphabetism; therefore musical perfection follows alphabetism*. Forkel subsumes the evolution of musics worldwide under a history pointing toward the circum-Mediterranean achievement of the alphabet. In doing so he creates for music both a *course* of history and a *space* of anthropology, separating the two in their specific domains:

the first traversed by alphabetic societies and their precursors, the second inhabited by analphabetic peoples. Societies with the alphabet can move closer to a perfect musical art; those without must move elsewhere or not move at all. "How long a people can tolerate [the] first crude state of music cannot be precisely determined," Forkel writes. "We still find it today, however, among many Asiatic, African, and American peoples, whom we also know to have made no progress for millennia in other branches of culture" (p. 285).

In the service of a music history and anthropology thus clearly distinguished, Forkel has deployed oppositions closely related to those described by de Certeau (1988) in separating general historiography and ethnography. European music history will evolve from writing, while music anthropology encounters a space of orality. Europe's writing will enable a progressive evolution contrasting with the cultural stasis of others ("We still find it today ..."). The alphabetic writing that enables musical perfection, finally, will arise from a mode of consciousness—the capability for abstraction—not attained by others. By 1788, the date of the introductory volume of Forkel's work, the history of European musical development could be plotted as a story of the progress of writing, the anthropology of non-European musics as the trackless space of writing's absence.

The exemplary instances of Forkel and Kant may seem at first glance to touch on each other only tangentially. The one offers a differentiation of beauty in song from beauty in instrumental music that militated toward a Eurocentric music history, the other an emphasis on alphabetism that could separate music history from music anthropology. The two cases are, however, connected at a deep level. Each is predicated on a mode of abstraction: for Forkel, the capacity that leads to alphabetic writing and then to music notation and musical perfection; for Kant a humanly created instance of beauty somehow loosed from all human ends.

Each of these abstractions, in turn, represents a separation of the musical materials involved from their human creative matrices—a manner, that is, of *decontextualization*. The beauty of instrumental music is, for Kant, like that of tulips and parrots. In drawing this similarity, however, he detached (mysteriously) instrumental music from the human means and ends of its production, dissemination, and consumption. Forkel's move away from context is less self-evident than this but no less basic to his thought. For him alphabetism represents an attainment of human consciousness whereby a system of writing looses itself from the

conditions of visual perception, a detachment signally absent from pictography; in general alphabetism amounts to a mark of the separation in advanced peoples of concepts from sense stimuli. Music writing follows as a related (if obverse) detaching of sense from intellect. The attainment of a sophisticated music notation yields something like a pictographic representation of invisible, disembodied aural perceptions. In notation invisible sounds take on visible form, marking the soul's conceptual ability to discern, finally, the subtlest differences among them (Allanbrook 1998, 282). This increased conceptual power of the soul, not some change in sense perception, enables the perfection of music. The whole advancement of music is idealist, relying on the conceptual abstraction manifested in music notation. The progress of *situated* musical practice follows from the possibility music writing offers of its *detachment* from its situation.

It is not hard to recognize in Forkel's and Kant's modes of decontextualization ingredients of the novel conception of musical autonomy that would take strong root in nineteenth-century Europe. From thinking related both directly and indirectly to Kant's detached musical beauty sprang, as I have already suggested, the ideology of absolute music: the view that special capabilities and privileges adhere to music without text or program, "that instrumental music purely and clearly expresses the true nature of music by its very lack of concept, object, and purpose" (Dahlhaus 1989a, 7). The separation itself of such music from its context, in the views of its proponents, marked its transcending of history and the material world.

Viewed against the backdrop of the cantological intuitions of a slightly earlier European moment, this conception of musical autonomy appears as a powerful philosophical assertion by elite Europe of its own unique achievement and status. In historical terms—the terms already set forth by Herder in 1800, as we have seen—it presumes the European instrumental traditions of its time as the telos of all musical progress. In doing this it simultaneously posits for territories beyond Europe a set of anthropological limitations. These locales are, now more than before, spaces of primitive (that is, static or ahistorical) or regressive (historically failed) musical practices. In coming to seem a marker of European distinction, *instrumentalism* is now set off in complex ideological opposition to non-European *vocalism*. The singing that Rousseau could still offer as a trait shared across all humanity is now instead an index of human difference. (Later, near the end of the era of European colonialism, this view of instrumental music found its reflection in European or European-influenced

conceptualizations of other elite musics. Bruno Nettl has argued that European instrumentalism had a profound impact on the emergence, around 1900, of the instrumental *radif basic* to the theory and pedagogy of modern Persian classical music [Nettl 1987, 133-37]. Indian classical traditions have also felt the impact of modern Western instrumentalism since the late nineteenth century.)

The example of Forkel, for its part, shows us how this European cooptation of musical (hence artistic, creative, imaginative) history is allied from the start with conceptions of writing. From the early nineteenth century on, conceptions of absolute music ran together with views related to Forkel's of the determining importance of notation in music history. The result was another crystallizing of ideological forms and new practices reflecting them.

The idea of instrumental music as an autonomous, nonmimetic expressive means, together with the emergent formation of the modern conception of the discrete musical work, invested new and substantial powers in the written form of the work. The notated music came to be viewed less as a preliminary script for performance than as the locus of the truest revelation of the composer's intent, the unique and full inscription of the composer's expressive spirit which was elsewhere—in any one performance—only partially revealed. Music writing itself seemed an inscriptive means endowed with nonsemantic, mysterious, even transcendent significance. It was now conceivable, to a degree that it had not been before, that the work as embodied in music writing, divorced from its contexts of production, performance, and reception, could become the avatar of the transcendent spaces absolute music could attain and inhabit. The notated work took on almost magical characteristics, projecting spirit outward in legible form, and traversing the distance between musical exegete and composer. The search for the secrets of this written work could in large degree ignore and thus conceal the social interactions of performers and audience at the scene itself of music making. (The language here hints intentionally at Marx: By 1900 the musical score shows many of the hallmarks of the fetishized commodity of late capitalism; see also Tomlinson 1999, 81.)

The ability for abstraction that Forkel had seen as a prerequisite for musical notation and hence musical advancement has here posed itself in the European mind as a new, quintessentially musical ability: the ability to comprehend an unperformed work from its writing alone. The idealism behind this proposition is a direct outgrowth of the idealism attendant on

notions of absolute music all told; but this variant of the general idealism relies on the fixed inscription of the work. The music writing that Forkel had held up as a *sine qua non* of an advanced musical tradition has exerted its full prerogatives.

The two primary activities that mark the emergence of modern musicology in the late nineteenth century grew up in the shadow of this conception of music writing. First, the huge projects of establishing "critical" editions for Bach, Handel, and other composers, which arose in these years and continued at an accelerating pace across the early twentieth century, mark the new faith in the work fixed in music writing; in the possibility of representing it as a stable, authoritative text; and in the belief that this text can bring us closer to the singular expressive intent that motivated the composer.

The search for the expressive secrets of the score, meanwhile, blossomed from descriptive beginnings, in writings such as those of E. T. A. Hoffmann, into modern music analysis ([1810] 1989). Analysis, in this light, can be seen to be the interpretive praxis that arose from the absolutization of instrumental music from its context at the moment of the apotheosis of music writing as manifestation of transcendent spirit. Moreover, as an outgrowth of Eurocentric conceptions of music, writing analysis was linked to Europe's positing of its own musical (and other) uniqueness in world history. In a profound tautology it was positioned so as to confirm a Hegelian culmination of world musical history in the very absolute music that helped define it. In this confirmation, analysis offered criteria constructed on a foundation of European views, including an ideology of writing, as a universal gauge of musical worth.

We can sense here the colonial dilemma, as we might call it, that conditioned from the start the kind of musicology that attends mostly to discrete works fixed in music writing. Such musicology starts from a historically local and recent mode of musical self-awareness and projects it outward from Europe toward the rest of the world. As long as this gesture is clearly understood, it is not inevitably a bad thing. In itself it only points up the general role of musicology in a Eurocentric self-scrutiny that characterizes in varying degrees all the modern humanities—considers literature, for instance, as a category in many ways similar to music (Eagleton 1983, chap.1). It locates music in the modern university's pedagogical effort of humanistic *Bildung*, itself in some measure circular. The posing of such self-knowledge becomes problematic when it is not accompanied by more or less strenuous attempts to gain over-knowledge—when, to

paraphrase Paul Ricoeur's famous aphorism, knowledge of the self is thought to be meaningful without detour through knowledge of relatively distant others.

We can also predict from these discourses the difficulty ethnomusicology would face as it emerged, in the midtwentieth century, from a Eurocentric musicology to offer itself as the alternative to self-knowledge. Preordained as the study of de Certeau's oral, ahistorical, unwritten cultures in a disciplinary matrix that was from the first defined by European powers of writing, it was unable simply to ignore the discourses that shaped its sibling discipline. It reacted against them, instead, from a position still partially within them. Ethnomusicology's deep, even constitutive ambivalence, at once fascinated and wary, in the face of music analysis, the score, and the inscription of unwritten traditions and practices shows this as clearly as any other feature. Modern ethnomusicology and musicology, like modern historiography and ethnography before them, arose as antithetical twins; but they arose as a single, dualistic function of the emergence of music from song.

The disciplinary genealogy that is here no more than sketched encourages some general observations about the relations of musical study to anthropology and history. First, it shows the opposition of modern musicology and ethnomusicology for what it originally was: a disciplinary artifact arising in musical thought from a new stage, attained not much before 1800, in the evolution of European conceptions of self and others. In this light, modern musicology itself, and not only ethnomusicology, appears as a discipline erected on propositions of cultural difference, European versus non-European. In founding itself on such propositions, it was from the start ethnographic through and through—though the conditions of its local culture led it to found itself in such a way as to conceal its sources. Meanwhile ethnomusicology arose, ambivalently, as a reaction to musicology's concealment of the truth that it was always already a particular instance of ethnomusicology.

Second, an anamnesis is needed to foster alternatives to the conceptual categories that created and still sustain these disciplinary constructs. This might assume a number of different forms: a commemoration of the fact that European musical thought preceded Europe's modern distinction of anthropology from history; a recognition of the ways this earlier musical thought gathered together human activities that would be categorically separated by the impact of later discourses; and a revisiting of European

conceptions of writing—of its own and others', musical and nonmusical—as they changed across the eighteenth century. It might take the form of a realization that the powers of voice have come to pose themselves in our musical culture as a powerful (and in some measure suspect) "other" of instrumentalism. The anamnesis might even take the form, finally, of a meditation on how a musicology might constitute itself from a conceptual frame of sufficient breadth to see that song, the universal corollary of the human propensity toward language, is not so much a musical thing as music is *songish*.

All this suggests that a reelaborated musicology needs to embrace the fact of its position within a more general ethnomusicology. This would not involve a repudiation of musicology's canons—of its canon of works, with common-practice instrumental pieces at its heart, or of its methodological canons, revolving around close scrutiny of these works—but rather a relocation of these canons in the broader disciplinary and historical panorama. It would, at the same time, ensure that their deployment was accompanied by an ideological critique of the sort sketched above—by an awareness of the circumscribed conceptual structures and political interests that helped sponsor such canons in the first place.

The usefulness of such a critique lies in its clearing the way for meaningful comparison of the urges to make music and modes of music making across large stretches of human history and culture—ultimately, perhaps, across the whole stretch of human history and culture available to us. I mean here to espouse, in our disciplinary ruminations and pedagogical practices, a sweeping *neocomparativism* that could explore the broadest questions about the place of musical activities in human experience, aspiration, and achievement: What is the significance of the ubiquitous relation between speech and song, activities at once proximate and distinct in all cultures? Why are song and religion or song and drama constantly linked? How is the body in musical motion extended into the material world through technologies of instrument making, and how are these related to other technologies? What is the nature of the peculiar powers of repetitive musical structures, and how are they differently deployed in different situations? How are musical traditions altered by modes of music writing? How have recorded sound and sound storage reshaped the nature of song cultures? How, in different societal structures, does political power accrue to musical acts? And so forth.

This neocomparativism would take off from the particularism that has marked most musical ethnography and, certainly, most Eurocentric music

history and criticism. It would not avoid situated, detailed study of musical matters but rather transform them by making the means of their situating and the definition of their detail objects of its own scrutiny. This approach would also differ from earlier comparativisms in its critical dismemberment of the hegemonic, Europe-first strategies on which they rested. In such a neocomparativist approach, ethnomusicology and popular music studies might also find a new footing. Both might cast off their lingering defensiveness in the face of the European canon by coming to regard it as a set of practices comparable to, perhaps subsumed within, and in any case usually standing in complex relation with the musics they customarily examine.

Such comparisons of, and realignments of relations between, repertoires scrutinized in various branches of musical study cast a wide net. In doing so they bring a deep historical consciousness to ethnomusicological areas not usually conceived in this way and, at the same time, grant a cross-cultural perspective on European musics too often walled off from the rest of the world. In doing so, in other words, they enact the exchange I noted at the outset of this essay of conventional historiographic and ethnographic values. They confound the differences European ideologies have for two hundred years presumed between historical and anthropological approaches.

In the end, then, at a moment when musicology is emerging from a period of strenuous attempts to clarify the differences among various modes of musical study, the affinities of all our efforts instead need to be emphasized. At the dawn of the twenty-first century the challenge facing musical scholarship is to feel its way toward a set of intuitions about music making that preceded and has always surrounded the opposition of history and ethnography.

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