

# Ethnoaesthetics of Music

## Concepts, Criteria, Case Studies

In quite diverse cultural settings, musicians will aim to provide, *i.a.*, communal enjoyment of listeners, pleasure, stimulation of the mind and the senses, satisfaction, or a sense of wonder. The individual intentions that meet in such a way social expectations can be described as “aesthetic goals”<sup>1</sup>.

The use of this term, “aesthetic”, must, of course, give pause for reflection. From its beginnings in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the discipline of aesthetics has been not just a European, but also a Eurocentric project. For all its claims on universality, authors from the tradition of aesthetics have hardly mentioned examples apart from Western art; if they did, these typically served as mere backdrop to the latter. Architecture, and the visual arts generally, fared somewhat better than literature in that regard (in spite of Goethe’s reminder of the relevance of “Weltliteratur”, “World Literature”);<sup>2</sup> non-Western music has been the most striking near-absence in the tradition of aesthetics from its beginnings with Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in 1735/50 at least up to Theodor W. Adorno’s posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* (1970).

A narrow Kantian framework for aesthetics – “that music is an art with formal properties worthy of contemplation”<sup>3</sup> – could only be restricting to ethnomusicology. But then aesthetics is of course a much broader discourse. Some of the questions that have driven it are relevant to cultural and social anthropologists, even if they would tend to phrase them differently; ethnoaesthetics, consequently, seems an appropriate label to address some shared concerns:

- Which goals do musicians pursue in their respective practice?
- How are they reflected in diverse musical genres?
- What are the features for which performances are praised in a given culture?
- How, if at all, is success/achievement or failure of a musician identified?
- How is appraisal (positive or negative) spelt out in a community’s vocabulary<sup>4</sup> and/or manifested in its members’ non-verbal behaviour<sup>5</sup>?

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Church, ‘Introduction’ to *The Other Classical Musics: Fifteen Great Traditions*, ed. Michael Church, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge 2015, 1–23, 2.

<sup>2</sup> John K. Noyes argues that actually Johann Gottfried Herder (rather than Goethe) should be praised for opening up aesthetics to ‘the world’: *Aesthetics Against Imperialism*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Rice, *Ethnomusicology: A Very Short Introduction*, OUP, Oxford – New York, NY 2014, 61.

<sup>4</sup> Western aesthetics, of course, gave much prominence to “beautiful” and its congeners (“beau”, “kalon”, “pulchrum”, “schön” etc.). Is that helpful at all in ethnoaesthetics?

<sup>5</sup> Think of applause in Western culture as an instance of what can be meant by the latter.

- How can we ensure that translation of such vocabulary<sup>6</sup> and/or interpretation of non-verbal behaviour is adequate, especially if cross-cultural comparison is one of the aims of research?
- In which ways – through selection, rejection, hierarchization? – does aesthetic canonization (of, *i.a.*, genres, pieces, techniques, practices) operate in a given musical culture?

Ethnoaesthetics has been an under-researched field. While those questions obviously open too wide a domain, we believe illuminating answers can be approached through well-chosen case studies. Ethnomusicology can give due honour to its other name, comparative musicology, and actually draw out similarities and differences between the aesthetics of the world's musical cultures.

It might be tempting to limit issues of ethnoaesthetics to what has sometimes been called “classical music”<sup>7</sup> or “art music”. Its distinction from vernacular music is contested; as a rule, there will be a continuum. Nevertheless, a pragmatic distinction appears to make sense. If we ask about “the presence and nature of evaluative criteria for music”<sup>8</sup>, the advantage of focussing on “art music” should be that those criteria will often be explicit. Such explication can be imperative in societies that are differentiated (and typically also stratified) in themselves in such a way that musicianship makes up a special trade, a profession or specialism. But then vernacular musicians also pursue goals; to exclude these because they have been implicit in the practice seems unduly diffident.

Explication of implicit standards, just as all other issues in the field, ought not to be about ‘applying’ Western aesthetics to music worldwide. The questions we wish to pose have a different edge:

- What, if anything, can aesthetics and ethnomusicology learn from each other?
- Which categories, if any, has aesthetics developed and refined that might turn out to be useful to ethnomusicology?
- How, if at all, could social or cultural anthropology in general<sup>9</sup> and ethnomusicology in particular correct the traditional Eurocentrism of aesthetics?

Again, these questions might seem too big to tackle; yet cut down to manageable size *vis-à-vis* carefully selected research problems, we are convinced they will prove fruitful. They are meant to guide a symposium to be held jointly by the Graz Institute of Ethnomusicology and the Graz Institute of Music Aesthetics in spring 2019.

Time: Thurs 2 – Sat 4 May 2019

Place: Kunstuniversität Graz, Florentinersaal

Planned publication: *Graz Studies in Ethnomusicology*, ed. Gerd Grupe, Shaker, Aachen 2020

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<sup>6</sup> For one, metaphor may play a major role within the stock of ‘aesthetic’ phrases.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Church (ed.), *The Other Classical Musics: Fifteen Great Traditions*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge 2015. – “Court music” does not work generally because some of the relevant music isn’t socially located at courts.

<sup>8</sup> Peter L. Manuel, ‘Ethnomusicology’, in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Music*, ed. Theodore Gracyk & Andrew Kania, Routledge, London – New York, NY 2011, 535–545, 536

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Boris Wiseman, *Lévi-Strauss, Anthropology and Aesthetics*, CUP, Cambridge 2007, *passim*