

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF MUSIC: THE ROLE OF SOUNDS, STORIES, AND SONGS IN HUMAN SOCIAL LIFE

Sean O'Neill

University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma, U.S.A.

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Summary

Music is a universal art form, reflecting—and revealing—many aspects of human nature, including our shared biology as well as our diverse cultural forms of expression throughout the planet. Like poetry and oral literature, music is present in all societies, arising fairly spontaneously from familiar formulas (and narratives) that have their roots in local social traditions, with histories that can be traced back to countless generations. Thus, long before the advent of writing systems, songs, often in the form of epic poetry, allowed humans across the planet to document their histories as “oral literature”; in this way, music has provided the soundtrack for life for most of humanity throughout history. Not infrequently, these local traditions in music cross paths, as people encounter their neighbors in trade, marriage, or warfare, giving rise to new and blended types of compositions—a phenomenon that is broadly called syncretism in multiple areas of human life, including religion and the arts. From a biological perspective, another question arises: Why are humans so musical as a species, when our closest primate cousins, the monkeys and apes, have so little music in their daily lives? If music is a biological faculty, like language, how could it have emerged so suddenly, in the relatively recent story of hominid ancestry? The question is one that many scholars have entertained since the time of Darwin, and this quest continues to generate new insights. Cultural anthropologists, for their part, have been exploring this central aspect in human life for over a century now, and in this setting, song has emerged as one of the most powerful of all human universals. From this broad, panhuman perspective, a “song” is a story that is sung (and therefore narrated) aloud before an audience, with an almost endless range of genres that echo the myriad tales to be told throughout the course of life. Thus, music, as a key element in human life the world over, offers answers to many

questions of human nature, including those that have arisen in modern times, such as the globalization of human culture, so-called “world music”, and tourism.

1. General Introduction

1.1. Music in Anthropological Perspective

Anthropologists have been deeply aware of music from the start—both as a site for the exploration of **world cultural heritage** and as a point of entry for understanding particular human societies from an intimate, local perspective. Generally speaking, linguistic and cultural anthropologists have found ways to integrate music—especially **songs**—into their studies of everyday human experience throughout the planet.

Franz Boas (1858-1942), one of the pioneers in the field, expressed a keen interest in music throughout his career, profoundly shaping the direction of the profession by cultivating a strong interest in music among the majority of his students. In one of his earliest contributions to the profession, Boas urged future generations of scholars to pay close attention to the vocal and verbal arts, saying, “[Anthropologists] are well acquainted with the fact that there is no people and no tribe that has not some kind of poetry and music but the study of this branch of aboriginal literature has hardly been begun.” (Boas 1887:383). Now, over a century later, this work documenting the poetry and music of the planet continues, much of it being conducted under the name of **ethnomusicology** as well as its close intellectual cousins, linguistic and cultural anthropology.

For Boas and his students, the principle of **cultural relativism** was of critical importance when attempting to do justice to human experience, especially the in the realms of art, music, and religion, where subjectivity plays a major role. While earlier observers often perceived “exotic” qualities in the music of other peoples, anthropologists have generally sought to understand music based on the significance it holds within the communities that create these sounds. By taking this relativistic stance, which grants legitimacy to insider’s point of view, anthropologists have sought to resist the (often unconscious) **ethnocentric** tendency to ground the interpretation of music in the observer’s own cultural background. The principle of relativism has proven especially vital in the realm of music, where many listeners naively assume that musical structures are somehow more transparent than other aspects of culture—or somehow more accessible to outsiders. Few people would make the same claims about languages or religions, which are not easily interpreted without considerable first-hand experience. Boas, on the other hand, assumed that music took great care and empathy to understand fully, even if he could crudely gauge the structural features of the music he heard—such as the underlying scales or rhythms of these traditions—as an experienced musician with extensive prior training in this area. Yet the deeper layers of meaning, including the language of the song texts and the meanings and moods associated the sounds themselves, take years of experience to understand as a member of the community would.

Even in first major ethnography, which consisted of first-hand description of daily life among the Inuit of Baffin Island, Boas (1888) drew on songs to gain an understanding

of the insider's point of view. In one of his first public statements about this research, he placed both language and music at the center of the stage, saying: "As I learned the language of this people, I was able to understand the old songs and tales, which are handed down from their ancestors. As I lived amongst them as one of them, I learned their habits and ways, I saw their customs referring to birth and death, their feasts, etc." (Boas 1884:271). In his subsequent ethnography (Boas 1888), he went on to compare the intricate, modal structure of Inuit songs to East Indian scales, Gregorian chants, and even classical Chinese music, given that all were based on similar permutations of well-recognized scales, or relationships among "notes" of relatively predictably spaced intervals in pitch. Despite the structural parallels between these traditions, he went on to insist that the interpretation of the songs should be rooted in everyday experience among their Inuit composers. For one, the songs were sung in the Inuit language, providing a layer of symbolism that only a fluent speaker of the language could possibly interpret in the moment, especially in terms of the fine nuances of meaning that emerge when introducing the words or melodies to new contexts. In this setting, he also paid close attention to the **texture** of the songs, even the tone of **voice** that the performers used as they emulated the sounds of the animal characters in the tales. Without this key to these linguistic and cultural layers of meaning, borne of long-term exposure to the songs over the course of many years, the outsider would be at an utter loss as to the meaning of the songs. Thus, rather than assuming the songs had some underlying essence, apart from a given performance, Boas was among the first to point out that the meaning of a song could be shaped by the setting in which it was performed (see O'Neill 2015). In contemporary terms, the writer Small (1998) illustrated this point in his book *Musicking*, where he shows that music emerges primarily as a byproduct of relatively spontaneous social interaction, rather than strictly from traditions somehow set in stone.

By the mid-twentieth century, the field of "ethnomusicology" emerged as a distinct sub-discipline within the larger profession of anthropology. As the name suggests, this new academic field was devoted to the study of **ethnic music**—in so far as its many layers of cultural meaning can be untangled by first-hand experience among anthropologists, as well as by revealing insights from those who are steeped in these traditions from birth. While an earlier generation of anthropologists integrated music into their ethnographic works, ethnomusicologists in many ways reversed this former emphasis, making music the primary object of study, though specifically in relation to local cultural ways. In this way, a new subfield was born, one that was specifically devoted to the study of one of humanity's greatest gifts, the capacity to create music. It was in fact a direct student of Boas, named George Herzog (1901-1983), who inaugurated this new intellectual discipline, carrying this holistic vision of ethnomusicology forward to many future generations of scholars. Though they are not only anthropologists who write about music, ethnomusicologists, as specialists in this area, have had to think deeply about questions of methodology—and even subjectivity—in relation to representing the musical experiences of other peoples. The ethnomusicologist, Mantle Hood (1918-2005), for instance, claimed that **bimusicality**, or fluency in the musical traditions of at least two cultures, potentially sets epistemological stage for understanding these traditions from an insider's point of view. The point has been a controversial one, given that insiders can also speak for themselves and be quoted by anthropologists regarding their own subjectivity.

1.2. Music as Discourse

Over the past century or so, social scientists have repeatedly demonstrated that to interpret any one aspect of human behavior, such as language or music, one must look beyond this single feature of social interaction, to consider all of the other modes of communication that occur alongside it, shaping its meaning. Thus, to understand music, one must look far beyond it, to uncover its many hidden layers of meaning, as they are reflected elsewhere in the social interaction of the community.

In this sense, even when watching a gifted musician in the thrall of a performance, music must be considered alongside everything else that is wrapped up in the moment—that is, all of the symbolic overtones of the event, besides the purely musical ones, which all contribute to the experience. Verbal language, gesture, facial expression, and even the spatial layout of the scene may also play a role in interpreting what is happening during the performance, even in terms of interpreting the music itself. Consider, for instance, the intimate nature of a religious performance, where the words of a song are wrapped up in the specialized meanings of its scriptures, with every movement among the performers taking on a sacred tone. Blood, crosses, and sacrifice in this way figure prominently in American gospel music, drawing directly from the Bible as the primary source, while members of the audience may enjoy close relations. Contrast this with the far more sexualized tone of secular music, such as American Rock-N-Roll or Country, where the meaning derives from both religious and secular sources, among an audience composed mostly of strangers. In this way, the presence of a given **genre** of music, such as Rock versus Gospel in the USA, presupposes a great deal about the subject of the material (spiritual brotherhood versus secular love), as well as the setting, the pace, and even the nature of the social interaction among those present (participation vs. listening).

Among anthropologists, understanding culture, including its pervasive music, has often been compared to the work of writing novels that distill whole nations, eras, or generations. The work, for either the anthropologist or novelist, consists primarily of translating whole social words for distant audiences who were not present for a given performance. Certainly, this is no easy matter for the writer, in part because of the complex nature of the **symbolism** that humans exchange when communicating. The same goes for interpreting the meaning of human social interaction from an anthropological perspective, which is about as challenging as writing novels or plays that capture the spirit of a society. In this way, the **key** to social interaction, among anthropologists, is often said to lie in its **symbolism**, which is itself best seen as a type of action, given that the participants in an exchange shape each other's perceptions, during the interaction, influencing subsequent actions. One of anthropology's most eloquent writers, Clifford Geertz (1926-2006), once summed up this sentiment, saying of culture is "... an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (Geertz 1973: 89). Clearly language provides one of the fundamental layers of symbolism, as each word is composed of a series of **sound patterns** that together bear a meaning, as with the words "dog," "cat," and "love," which otherwise sound nothing like what they rather abstractly, even arbitrarily, represent. Things become far more

complex when music enters the picture and the speaker begins to modulate his or her voice with changes in pitch, inflecting these words with layers of **musical significance**. Edward Tylor (1832-1917), the early British social anthropologist, was one of the first to comment on the limits of translation, seeing music as but one aspect among many when creating a narrative with sound; tonal languages, such as Mandarin or Thai, may have features, he noted, that may be lost in the melodic flow of another language and its lyrics (Tylor 1871:153).

For any analyst of human social interaction, from the social scientist to the philosopher, **language** almost necessarily enters the picture, becoming the primary medium of communication—even when describing the distantly related realms of art, music, or the literary imagination. For this reason, the musicologist and composer Charles Seeger (1886-1979) remarked that in analyzing music, the scholar inevitably turns to language, transforming the whole nature of the discourse from one semiotic modality to another. Something is lost in the translation, though, when switching between these two semiotic modalities, not the least of which is the texture or “flavor” of music. Hearing music is rather different, in this sense, than “talking” about it—in part since musical experience is factored out of the discourse. In terms of aphorisms, this sentiment has given rise familiar dictum that “talking about music is like dancing about architecture.” Similarly, the French semiotician Roland Barthes (1915-1980) claimed that language was the only symbolic system that could not only tackle other semiotic modalities, such as gesture or music (see Barthes 1977).

According to Bronisław Malinowski (1884-1942), one of the pioneers of anthropology, the keen observer of human behavior—or perceptive ethnographer—must take close account of both what people *say* and what they *do*, in order to paint a picture of what is happening in any given community. With these words, he initiated the whole field of discourse analysis, or the study of human symbolic action in the broadest terms (see Blommaert 2005), including language, music, gesture, and any associated activities. Music, in this sense, plays a major part in shaping *both* what people *say* and what they subsequently *do* in everyday life. In this way, Malinowski noted that the tenor of the discourse often shifts as the speaker moves from ordinary language to music: “Most magic, moreover, is chanted in sing-song which makes it from the outset profoundly different from ordinary utterances” (Malinowski 1935:222). This shift from everyday language to a heightened religious register, marked by a musical intonation, sets the stage for a sense of magic and mystery associated with sacred religious narratives; thus, he noted: “As actually recited in the spell they are pronounced according to a special phonology, in sing-song, with their own rhythm and with numerically grouped repetitions” (Malinowski 1935:219). Discourse, in this sense, often echoes behavioral elements that occur elsewhere, culling features of everyday language or echoing this or that aspect of some earlier encounter, while embellishing upon it (see Bauman and Briggs 1992). In this way, musical speech often echoes ordinary language in heightened form, reflecting everyday life in miniature, while capturing a sense of **ethnography**, or cultural interaction, in the meaning of the lyrics.

1.3. Universals and Diversity

When examining any given perceptual phenomenon—from the stars in the sky to the sounds of speech—the keen observer looks for recurring patterns, knowing full well that some of these may be mere perceptual illusions. Music is no different in this respect. So, when it comes to music, nothing could be more striking, to many observers, than the seemingly profound similarities and differences in the sphere of sound, as one listens closely to humanity's many musical traditions. One of the pioneers in the field of ethnomusicology, George Herzog (1901-1983), even went so far as to claim that in music there are only **dialects**, without anything really approximating language, in terms of their obvious mutual intelligibility (see Nettl 2005:49). In this way, the sentiment circulates in English that “music is a **universal** language,” though this may be something of an illusion, based in part of the cultural expectation that music should be instantly accessible, as mere sound, rather than taking years to comprehend in terms of its deeper layers of social significance. Indeed, the notion of music as a “universal language,” with the power to instantly mediate cross-cultural communication, is common trope in much of the early travel literature, which was popular before the rise of professional anthropology.

While some scholars have made much of the similarities, echoing the common claim that music is a “universal language,” equally accessible to all observers and somehow beyond culture, others emphasized the equally obvious differences, such as the structure and texture of music or its relationship to languages that carry the lyrical and narrative layers of meaning. During the late-nineteenth century, musicologists first began to take note of the vast diversity of music throughout the planet. Guido Adler (1855-1941) was among the first to lay out a general plan of research, publishing a revolutionary paper in 1885 that established the field of what was then called “comparative musicology.” While recognizing the universality of musical structures in human societies, Adler also sought to ground the interpretation of musical expression in everyday cultural experiences (Nettl 2010:21). In subsequent decades, comparative musicologists sought to develop a universal framework for understanding the basic structures of music—much as linguists, such as Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) were attempting in the realm of language. Among the first to chime in from the other side of the Atlantic was the American linguist, Edward Sapir (1884-1939), who questioned the extent to which musical structures could be compared or reconstructed on cross-cultural grounds, as scholars came to favor familiar features, such as scales, over less familiar ones, such as polyrhythms, microtones, and unusual time signatures (see Sapir 1912; O'Neill 2015). Since these early times, the profession has tried to strike a healthy balance—seeking out universals, on the one hand, while also celebrating the scope of human diversity on the other.

2. Social Foundations

2.1. The Culture Concept

Writers and historians—since the dawn of civilization—have been struck by the scope of human diversity, often making the mistake of taking their own familiar social practices to be **natural**, while considering those of other societies to be strikingly

exotic. Today this earlier conception provides the very definition of **ethnocentrism**, which is the tendency to see the world strictly through the lens of one's own culture, thus potentially misinterpreting the ways of other societies. Philosophers and social scientists, for their part, have spent generations pondering the question of how humans have become so diverse in our ways, to a point where a foreigner may experience sense of disorientation or **culture shock** when traveling to another land where the language, music, and customs are not immediately intelligible. For most of humanity, even our closest neighbors may not quickly understand our language or grasp the deeper meanings of our music. In this way, the scope of human diversity continues to be a deep mystery for those who speculate about our "nature" as a species, with music playing a key role in these debates about nature versus nurture, or even universality versus diversity.

During the mid-nineteenth century, the concept of "**culture**" gradually began to take shape among anthropologists, as a way of capturing the observation that people everywhere appear to take on the social ways with their closest neighbors and kinsmen—almost perfectly and without apparent effort. This simple and utterly incontestable fact would suggest that many cultural traits, such as speaking a particular language or favoring a given musical tradition. As Edward Tylor, one of the architects of anthropological thought, once put it:

Culture or civilization, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. (Tylor 1871:1)

In this way, anthropologists came to claim that the world's many cultural traditions have their roots in humble social interaction, rather than emerging from fixed biological predispositions, as previous generations of scholars had assumed on the basis of fixed racial types, as opposed to flexible **habits** or local **customs**. As recent research in brain science has revealed, understanding musical features, such as the layered polyrhythms of West African music, rests upon experience, or exposure to such patterns, rather than on mere innate wiring, as the acclaimed neuroscientist Oliver Sacks has noted (2007:233-247). Of course, this in no way negates the fact that music—or language—also has deep roots in our common human biology (see Section 5), which all people share relatively as a matter of potential. As the history of our species has often revealed, almost any element of language or music can change as we pass from one society to the next, as some feature are highlighted or suppressed.

2.2. The Dialogic Principle

Communication generally takes place in a **dialogical** setting, as messages are sent, back and forth, between the participants in any given exchange—even in cases where the nature of this exchange is not apparent because of the lapse in time involved. Thus, even when listening to music on a stereo, there is in fact a kind of exchange between the musician performing the music, the listener, and any intermediaries, such as record companies. In this way, the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1885-1975) often drew inspiration from the basic image of the face-to-face encounter, where each party comes to the exchange with a unique perspective, literally seeing what is behind the

other person's head (see Bakhtin 1981). This fundamental play of perspective often gives rise to a something new, as sparks fly between the parties, both having been reshaped by the spontaneity of the encounter. In this way, music draws heavily on a dialog between participants, flowing, like other forms of communication, in part from what the participants bring to the exchange, in terms of their social background, as well as from what they personally contribute in the emerging process. In another sense, there is often a lively dialog between vocal music and the instrumental sounds that support the lyrics, often echoing the emotion tone and even the phrasal structure of these non-musical, linguistic elements. More broadly, the dialogical process continues to apply to cases where traditions come into contact, giving rise to what is often called **syncretism** or blended traditions, whether or not this process is conscious. Thus, there has been a longstanding, though often distant, dialog, between the African American blues of the rural South and the Country music that emerged from the same geographical context, with much cross-pollination between the traditions. With the rise of modern recording technologies, similar dialogs have now emerged between many of the world's musical traditions, going far beyond what can happen face-to-face.

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Biographical Sketch

Sean O'Neill is a linguistic anthropologist who specializes in the expression of oral literature in multicultural and multilingual settings. He is particularly interested in the intersection of language and music, an area of research that holds tremendous interest today as indigenous languages undergo revitalization, with an equal emphasis on both oral narrative and song. O'Neill is author of *Cultural Contact and Linguistic Relativity among the Indians of Northwestern California* (2008) and serves as an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Oklahoma. His musical background includes making stringed instruments (guitars, ouds, and violins) as well as writing and performing in multiple musical genres.