Book Review


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Keywords: ethnomusicology

We’re all familiar with the Very Short Introduction format and ethos by now: pocket-sized books targeted at readers from outside the immediate topic or discipline in question. In practice, many such volumes are also likely to be purchased and read carefully by fellow subject specialists, whether assessing the new text for its teaching potential or, more proprietarily, hoping to find the field well summarized and represented. Rice’s book pleases each of these readerships: it is full of clear and contemporaneous explanations that assume prior intelligence and curiosity but not subject knowledge, and, more than any other introductory item I’ve seen, it is marked out by a comprehensively wide selection of examples from across the (English-language) discipline.

Rice begins with a newly inflected reworking of words from John Blacking, arguing that, “Ethnomusicology is the study of why, and how, human beings are musical” (1). He points out that these emphases are also shared by researchers across the humanities, social sciences and biological sciences, and so he proceeds to emphasize what it is that makes ethnomusicology distinctive in such a context. He refers to our stance that musicality is a fundamental human capacity, not the special preserve of expert composers and performers alone, commenting that this inspires us to look worldwide for answers to “big questions about the nature of music and the nature of humankind” (2). In practice, I believe, we collectively spend more of our research time documenting the how than interrogating the why, but investigating the one inevitably involves thinking about the other, and so it is entirely positive to have the dyad formulated so explicitly.

Rice proceeds to unpack the book title’s Greek root words: *ethnos, mousiké* and *logos* (3–10). In doing so, Rice contextualizes a wide set of existing disciplinary definitions, keeping to the fore our common interest in the local construction of musical practices and meanings. Meanwhile, he notes an ongoing expansion in US settings of the use of the disciplinary name to refer
to provision of performance classes in world music and dance. Although learning by becoming a music maker remains a fundamental ethnomusicalogical axiom, Rice notes that definitions that equate ethnomusicology with practical study alone downplay the intellectual concerns and research methods that remain at the core of the field, notably its discursive and ethnographic components (9).

Chapter 2 is an admirably efficient history of the discipline, moving from classic Asian and European writings to some of the most contemporaneous ethnomusicological publications. There are two further strengths in the chapter, to my mind. First, it is fitting to see appropriate space given to the contribution of our ancestors in musical folklore. The folklorists are sometimes made to sound peripheral in accounts that emphasize the impact of the considerably smaller population of comparative musicologists. Or they are written out entirely when ethnomusicology is described as the combination of musicology and anthropology and that is then taken as inferring a disciplinary course of development, not just a quick summary of focus and approaches. Second, Rice offers suggestive cross-references to the wider social and intellectual environment in which ethnomusicology has developed. For example, he notes the role of colonial expansion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the rise of civil rights and feminist viewpoints in the 1960s (13–14, 25). In each case, Rice explores the connection of each with the ideas and scholarship of its time, rather than simply pointing to an unspecified link (but not reducing the scholarship to a reflection of those movements).

“Conducting Research” is the title of chapter 3. Space is devoted mostly to fieldwork and its complex challenges and fascinations. It is a well-illustrated account, drawing in instances from an international team of ethnomusicalogical researchers. Among the topics given special attention are such issues as interviewing, participant-observation, learning through performance and the documentation of musical traditions. This latter leads to a brief discussion of transcription and the analysis of musical notations, and then to a very insightful summary of intellectual property rights in international and intercultural contexts. In this writing, Rice isn’t trying to teach us how to undertake each task, so much as say what we have done and how it contributes. He closes with a defence of fieldwork in a postcolonial age, calling it “impossible without the friendship and cooperation of those with whom ethnomusicologists study” (43). He urges us then to go on and turn our fieldwork into writing, teaching and applied work in the wider community.

In the fourth chapter, “The Nature of Music”, we examine music as a set of resources. Rice’s opening examples are those of music’s use in social and psychological life. Again, he offers suggestive examples from his own research and from that of other leading ethnomusicologists, exploring, for instance,
music’s contribution to social cohesion, marking the passing of calendrical
time, contacting supernatural forces, evoking sentiment and as a means of
construction of self-identity. As these instances all imply, the social and the
psychological are two aspects of a single, unitary whole, and music a primary
means of experiencing the imprint of the one upon the other. The final sec-
tion talks about music as art. There are citations here to research that takes
up this notion worldwide, but there is scope to briefly illustrate some of the
specific outcomes of this type of research. Instead, Rice gives space to exam-
pies that extend our conceptual grasp of the challenges of research in this
area. He notes how David McAllester’s Navajo interlocutors assumed his ques-
tions on how they feel when listening to music to be queries about their state
of health. That is an interesting misunderstanding that reveals their sense
of music as a means of regulating one’s well-being, but not one that directly
shows much about the affordances of music as art in Navajo settings.

The next two chapters form a complementary pair. Chapter 5 discusses
music as culture, while chapter 6 considers music and individuals. Argument
over the exact relationship of music and culture was once a major theme of
theoretical debate in ethnomusicology, but with the realization that music is
an inextricable part of the totality of what people do, there has been a turn to
work that traces how music-making infuses wider collective life with particu-
lar resonance in given contexts. Rice’s text in this chapter covers the study of
local music-related concepts, processes of teaching and learning music, stud-
ies of the role music plays in identity construction, gender and music, and
music in trance, possession, ecstasy and emotion. It’s something of a sum-
mary of selected highlights from existing writing, all of which describes the
ways that musical performance enacts (or proposes) a set of values for a soci-
ety or social grouping.

Chapter 6 opens by reminding us of reasons for attending to musical indi-
viduals. Perhaps most fundamental is the ethnomusicological approach of
working close-up with specific teachers and others, leading to a fine-grained
account of the sharing of experience and communication of insights. As Rice
notes, this can be as contingent on our own personal make-up as that of the
particular people whom we document, and so studying individuals making
music is a self-reflexive process (79–80), but it is also an acknowledgement
of our recognition that cultures are “often fragmented along lines of gender,
social class, race, and ethnicity” (85). He goes on to note the interest of look-
ing at specific people as agents of culture, for instance actively sustaining
musical traditions, applying themselves as artistic innovators, standing out
as the archetypes of culture or as migrants aiming to “constitute new musi-
cal and social selves in new locations” (80). This last example is developed in
less richness than the others in the chapter, but it is overall a very readable
and effective statement of where we stand in relation to the study of individuals in music.

There’s a similar pairing in the next two chapters, with chapter 7 looking at disciplinary perspectives on the writing of music history, a topic already explicitly broached in the study of individuals, and chapter 8 entitled “Ethnomusicology in the Modern World”, which presents a series of recent and emergent study themes. In each, the examples are nicely drawn and well varied—in just a couple of pages we progress from Chinese Ming Dynasty organology to the social history of the blues in the Vietnam War era (91–93). Taken together, the two chapters offer a strong account of the discipline’s changing stance on musical change, and why it is that so many of us now write about popular and contemporary music when not so very long ago our disciplinary ancestors mostly preferred to investigate genres strongly rooted in local or national traditions. The account in chapter 8 summarizes thought on globalization-hybridity (seen as glass-half-full or glass-half-empty, depending upon which expert you consult) and on the roles of media and technology (the primacy of recorded music in so many settings raises fascinating new complexities for members of a discipline once highly performance-oriented). There are then illustrations of recent work on music and health, music and conflict, and music and climate change.

The book’s main text ends with a chapter given to “Ethnomusicologists at Work”. Rice sketches a picture of ethnomusicology becoming well established in anglophone university homes, though predominantly in the schools and departments of music, rather than those of anthropology. While now fairly numerous in such an environment, ethnomusicologists often remain a minority, pushing for the giving of attention to kinds of music that are not always equally represented or valued by many of their colleagues or in the structural assumptions of those institutions of employment. (A comparative example from another of the world’s major linguistic areas might have worked well here and so brought out the different settings of ethnomusicological work worldwide.) Other ethnomusicologists find roles in school teaching, archives, broadcasting and the broad cultural heritage industry (and one might add professional performance to that list as well). Rice gives explicit mention here to work in the public sector, which has aims that go far beyond the uncovering and dissemination of research findings. In words that portray the approachable tone adopted throughout, Rice concludes by reflecting on our current context in the face of a rapidly moving world of individuals under the impact of considerable psychological, social, political and economic pressures: “ethnomusicologists are struggling to keep abreast of old, new, and emerging music scenes and genres that speak to humankind’s enduring attempt to understand and tell stories about itself by making music and being musical” (121).
There is clearly evident thought on ordering and distribution of content throughout the book, just as there is on clarity of expression and breadth of examples. This gives the volume impact well above its page count. If I have occasionally noted points where the discussions are less richly encapsulated than they might have been, I can’t claim that any of these feels to me like an omission of something essential, and there is no question in my mind that the overall account is anything other than extremely effective. Readers new to ethnomusicology are warmly encouraged to treat this book as a reliable and welcoming source through which they can begin a critical encounter with the discipline. Those already somewhat familiar with ethnomusicology but desirous to see it more systematically explained will find this volume fully answers their needs too. And those of us who teach this subject have here an outstandingly timely and welcome contribution that we can use very readily as a launch pad for many a more detailed debate.