
Reviews

Mervyn McLean, *Pioneers of Ethnomusicology*

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Reviewed by David Goldsworthy

This book is a new addition of substantial scope to books concerned with outlining the nature, issues, and development of the discipline of ethnomusicology, focused in this case on the early ethnomusicologists themselves, the 'pioneers'; brief biographies of ninety-nine such people occupy over twenty-five percent of the whole book. These biographies provide useful reference material to both scholars and students of ethnomusicology, as McLean has brought together information not readily available previously in the one place. McLean deals mainly with the first two 'generations' of ethnomusicologists (up to and including Alan Merriam and Bruno Nettl), and excludes most post-1980s and living ethnomusicologists.

McLean's book has three major sections. Part 1 deals with the nature and development of ethnomusicology, covering three main periods: Early (from the beginnings up to 1960); Middle (1960 to 1980), dealing with the American schools of ethnomusicology, centred on UCLA and Indiana; and a shorter account of new directions of the Late period (from 1980). The second major section of the book (Part 3) constitutes the biographies, while the third major section (Part 5) deals with issues arising from the work of the pioneers under seven main headings: Field Work, Archiving and Documentation, Transcription, Analysis, Comparison, Product and Process, and Aftermath. McLean's book also contains a short section on the areal subject divisions of ethnomusicologists, as well as three 'intellectual ancestry charts' of the Berlin, Vienna and American schools, a Chronology of important events in the history of ethnomusicology (and the world), and a sample questionnaire for use in ethnomusicological field work.

Although the title of this book suggests a fairly straightforward account and evaluation of the role and contributions of early figures of the discipline, McLean takes this framework to embark on an impassioned argument against excessive theorising and the current emphasis of music as process, and in favour of returning to music sound systems as a primary object of study for ethnomusicologists, best accomplished through a 'back to basics' approach

(p. 15) and the tried and true methods of field work, transcription and analysis, including a plea for a return to 'preservation' as an important goal of ethnomusicology (as, for example, on pp. 256–58).

McLean's critical evaluation of some early theories such as diffusionism, certain methods of analysis developed by Mieczyslaw Kolinski, and some of the methodological problems of Alan Lomax's cantometrics experiment, is not new, nor unjustified. But McLean goes much further in this book, with an iconoclastic attack on ideas (and the contribution) of such early 'greats' of ethnomusicology as Curt Sachs (p. 56), Charles Seeger (pp. 56–59), and John Blacking (pp. 72ff). In fact, only a few ethnomusicologists receive generally positive acclaim, including Maud Karpeles, George Herzog, David McAllester, Bruno Nettl, and of course, Alan Merriam, obviously an important mentor, to whom the book is dedicated. Special criticism is reserved for post 1980s modern theorists and their writings, such as Stephen Feld, Timothy Rice, Peter Manuel, Ter Ellingson and Max Baumann.

McLean's provocative criticisms and questioning of some of the 'sacred cows' of both early and contemporary ethnomusicology is no bad thing in itself. A discipline must always be prepared to examine itself and be examined critically. Certainly there is some validity in some of his criticisms and argument, and some of McLean's views have stimulated me to go back and reread some of the seminal writings he attacks to make my own re-evaluation. I may also happen to agree personally with McLean on some points: the excess of ever more abstruse theory at the expense of fieldwork and analysis, for example, and that theories should derive from detailed ethnographic research.

It is a shame, however, that McLean's treatment of his subject is peppered with value judgements, much negativity, some contradictions, and is sometimes guilty of special pleading and rhetorical questions (rather than well documented argument). McLean sometimes makes sweeping statements, taking his argument too far, such as on pp. 71–72: 'I suggest that ... with goodwill on all sides, interpreting someone else's culture is a less difficult, though demanding, task than penetrating one's own. I look forward to more analyses of Western music from third world scholars.'

McLean takes an opposing viewpoint on several tenets of the discipline that have now achieved fairly general acceptance, such as the dubious validity of 'authenticity' as a useful concept in world music studies (p. 258), the primacy of 'insider' over 'outsider' perspectives (pp. 71–72 and 255–58), the importance of detailed 'descriptive' transcriptions (pp. 270ff), the close relationship of social and musical structure (pp. 73–76, 302–10 and elsewhere), and the importance of learning to play or sing the music of the tradition under study (pp. 262–64 and elsewhere). In this review I will deal with only the last two of these issues due to space constraints.

One of McLean's important missions throughout the whole book clearly is to argue against the generally accepted view that music sound and social structure are related organically. McLean does believe that social context is important and that ethnomusicological analysis and writing must be informed by appropriate ethnographic research. But he believes that ethnographic/anthropological and musical analysis should proceed separately because of the 'essential independence of music and social structures' (p. 308). He argues that writers like John Blacking in his study of the African Venda people, and Anthony Seeger in his study of Suyà Indians of South America never provided sufficient material and evidence to demonstrate in

practice what they believed were Merriam's theories, and seems to suggest that no one has effectively done this.

His criticisms of Blacking, Seeger (and Feld) in this regard may or may not be partly justified, but there are many studies in print that do effectively demonstrate the intimate relationship between music sound and social behaviour and identity. McLean is perhaps unfamiliar with (or discounts) the large body of existing scholarly literature on popular music, for example, that does deal with music both as social process and for its musical systems, as well as demonstrating effectively the connection between the two, or he would not ask a question such as that on p. 310: 'Why does no one look for "holistic" links between social structure and music structure for ... the latest pop song ... which [is] as much a product of behaviour as any form of ethnic music?'

As McLean is prone to do so often in his book, I could also refer him to several of my own publications on Indonesian music and the Pacific (both 'popular' and 'traditional') that deal with the relationship between social and musical identity. My article on tuning Indonesian *gamelan* is germane to this discussion.¹ In this article, through observation of, and conversations with an actual tuner (and performing musician) at work, I demonstrate how important *process* (tuning) is to understanding *product* (resultant tuning or intervals). Conclusions about Indonesian scales based solely on pitch measurements of *gamelan* at a given point in time are suspect.

McLean is overly dismissive of the benefits of, or even the need for learning to sing or play music of another culture (see, for example, pp. 261–64 and 330). He seems to think that this method of study applies more to non-Western *art* music, if at all, and that it reflects a continuation of a Western conservatory style / approach of emphasis on performance studies. Although it is quite acceptable to learn to sing a Maori *waiata* (and, in fact, lead other Maoris in singing it, as reported on p. 278) based on a prepared prescriptive notation by a scholar with a thorough knowledge of the structural parameters of the music, he regards the 'perceived necessity for tutelage—rather like attending master classes at a conservatory—from practitioners of the culture to be studied' as a 'further problem that has come to the fore in recent years' (p. 330). McLean's views on this topic are consistent with his other views on transcription and analysis, for example, regarding 'correct' and 'imperfect' versions, in that some performers are sometimes wrong and it is up to the ethnomusicologist to interpret their intentions, not faithfully reproduce their performances.

McLean grossly misrepresents performance-based study by ethnomusicologists when he says: 'What then of the alternative approach of placing oneself as a pupil wholly in the hands of an acknowledged master musician, and simply doing what one is told?' (p. 261). Possibly, McLean has never conducted this type of research or he would not make such outrageous statements. The performance learning and participation approach is not like 'attending master classes at a [Western] conservatory.' For a start, the tradition may not have a concept of 'master musician,' group rather than individual learning environments may be the norm, notation is rarely used, and study and rehearsal techniques may be quite different from Western approaches. Moreover, many world musical traditions may not have named and recognised composers (or they are vaguely or notionally acknowledged), some lack a body of articulated

¹ David Goldsworthy, 'Tuning the Gamelan: Process or Product,' *Sounds Australian* 33 (1992): 13–16.

music theory and indigenous theorists, and many have no notational systems or a repertoire of 'pieces' recorded in written form. What all traditions do have are performances of music and dance, and performers who are the living repositories of the musical culture and who, apart from ethnomusicologists who make their own observations, are the primary source of material about the music tradition under study. Furthermore, an ethnomusicologist also often studies with more than one musician or group of musicians from the culture, and never suspends his critical faculties during and after the learning process, evaluating what he is taught both in terms of other practitioners, his own observations, indigenous theorists he has read, and the relevant Western scholarly literature.

The reasons and benefits of the 'tutelage' approach, both ethical and musical are quite clear. Placing oneself in the role of student in the musical culture under study, rather than as visiting Western music expert, sets up a more acceptable, and less culturally imperialistic context in which to gain insights into the music. Learning to play or sing the music of another culture is often an important way into understanding it. Unlike McLean's experiences with singing madrigals (p. 263), many ethnomusicologists derive much benefit and insights from performance. As my first professor, Trevor Jones, said to me when I commenced my own teaching career at Monash University: 'You never really learn anything properly until you have to teach it yourself.' Translated to the context of this discussion, you can only learn some things about a musical tradition by performing it yourself (rather than observing, analysing or talking about it).

In this book, McLean also makes obvious value judgements on popular and 'world' music. McLean would wish to exclude or limit study of these areas in ethnomusicology, as this

would bring the entire far from scholarly fringe of world music within the range of ethnomusicology. It does the same for the whole field of popular music in general, which may be handy for ethnomusicologists who are already studying it, but invites intellectualising on matters perhaps left to disc jockeys, pushing the boundaries ever further outwards (p. 13).

Apart from seemingly discounting much valuable research on popular/world music by many scholars (including myself) from both social and musical standpoints, McLean has missed the point. Any music is worthy of study as a form of cultural expression (which he seems to concede elsewhere, such as on p. 260, by quoting Nettl), and the 'intellectualising' done by ethnomusicologists is quite different from that done by disc jockeys! But McLean's prejudices go further and lead him to make a pronouncement later in the book that contradicts his basic argument that ethnomusicology should focus on music sound:

For my part, I would like to see research on popular music not so much in terms of analysis of style and genres and the dynamics of performance groups, as the impact it is having on world populations at large ... What is it doing to people? How does it affect their behaviour? (p. 333)

Apart from the obvious objection that these matters are and have been addressed in the literature, apparently it is acceptable to concentrate on music sound and systems for analysis in all cases except popular music, which is not 'ethnic' (and perhaps does not really have much in the way of valuable music worth studying anyway).

Many people from non-Western cultures would not agree with McLean's evaluative views on their popular music. In many parts of Polynesia, for example (to cite McLean's own field of expertise), both 'popular' and church music, both indebted to Western music styles, are proudly embraced as important representative contemporary forms of musical expression that reflect continuing Polynesian values. Some such genres have been operating as *traditions* for some time, for example, the popular form of *ute* in the Cook Islands, and older style Hawaiian ukulele music. When, after all, does a tradition become a tradition?

Pioneers of Ethnomusicology does have an obvious value as a compendium of information on the early ethnomusicologists, and a summary of some major issues and developments in the discipline. The book is certainly a courageous attempt to argue against fashionable ideas and unashamedly propose others, and will no doubt stimulate much debate, which is a good thing for the discipline. The book would have been significantly improved, however, by a more thorough critical appraisal prior to publication by peer readers in the discipline (including a reader more inclined and sympathetic to McLean's standpoint); this could have highlighted some of the glaring excesses of the manuscript, as well as focusing the reader's attention on the merit of some of McLean's arguments. His narrative is far too polemic, his preferences (and prejudices in some cases) far too clear, and, while it is quite acceptable to cite one's own research findings in such an argument, constant references to McLean's writings and approach demonstrate that he believes only he, Alan Merriam, and a few others have got it right.

Laurent Aubert, transl. Carla Ribeiro, *The Music of the Other: New Challenges in Ethnomusicology in a Global Age*. Aldershot, Hants.: Ashgate, 2007
ISBN 978-0-7546-5343-1. pb. 108 pp. £14.99

Reviewed by Aline Scott-Maxwell

Most ethnomusicologists will find the title of this book irresistible. 'Music of the other' remains central to the ethnomusicological enterprise, even though much of it is now more or less on our doorsteps, courtesy of globalisation and, amongst other things, the world music phenomenon. Yet, as the book's subtitle indicates, global movements and cultural flows have shifted the goal posts for ethnomusicologists. No longer is it sufficient to understand a particular musical tradition, practice or event within its local cultural and social context. Rather, we must now also take into account its engagement with the world beyond, in particular, its interaction with Western audiences, markets and musics.

This problem is the main concern of this book. Specifically, it considers the issues and processes that arise from the bringing together of the West and 'the other' or, as Aubert puts it, 'The great flood into our most immediate cultural environment of music of the world and of its agents' and 'the place now occupied in our experience by music from elsewhere.' What, he asks, is the impact of this situation on the music and its practitioners, as well as on our own cultural practices and perceptions?