Book Reviews


In our age of popular science, interdisciplinarity, global communication, but also professionalisation, the assertion of minorities, everyone being famous for 15 minutes – in an age, in short, when we are always being watched, and ever watchful – it is hardly surprising that ‘practice’ and ‘theory’ nowadays offer no place to hide. The editors and contributors to this volume revel in interaction, and one of the many merits of the result is that its commonality of purpose and method is far more than cosmetic. For example, every one of its 21 chapters is written by two authors, one ‘artistic’ (p. ix), the other a scientist: reading their biographies (pp. 353–62), most of them being already well-established researchers, it is clear that by and large they are themselves ‘interdisciplinary’ individuals, and the breadth of their enthusiasms and knowledge is infectious and stimulating.

The chapters are partitioned into three areas, ‘The Developing Musician’, ‘Subskills of Music Performance’, and ‘Instruments and Ensembles’. In the first we find the generic categories that most readers are likely to expect: potential, environment, motivation, anxiety, the brain, and medicine. Perhaps it is easy game to pounce on fields that might have been covered in an integral way. Development, for example, in its clinical and psychological senses, is a possible stand-alone topic, as the literature amply testifies, and as does the index here to some extent (p. 376). And in a book that is partly, overtly psychological, a more sympathetic treatment of psychoanalytical aspects would have been interesting, even if only to flesh out Glenn Wilson and David Roland’s comments in ‘Performance Anxiety’ about ‘notions’ that ‘do not satisfy scientific criteria of evaluation’ (p. 52). The subskills in Part Two cluster around reading music, around practices (improvisation, ‘practice’ itself, memory, intonation), and around communication (‘structural’, ‘emotional’, and ‘body movement’). Part Three is perhaps more introusive for the music educational establishment, with its treatment of voice, choir, piano, strings, wind, and conducting, where again the reader may be tempted to second-guess even such a comprehensive approach and ask about ‘creative strategies’ concerning music technology (which is in the editors’ list of disavowals, pp. x–xi, along with gender, motor control, and percussion, as well as everything outside ‘Western tonal “art music”’).
Of course, what we call ‘science’ begs a lot of questions. Sometimes, as in Anthony Kemp and Janet Mills’s opening chapter on ‘Musical Potential’, the smell of the lab is distant almost to disappearing point, and in fact the conclusions about children’s ‘natural surroundings’, ‘inner motivation’, or ‘personality’ and the like take me back to that question about psychoanalysis, for if criteria of evaluation are at a premium they are of a highly fuzzy epistemological status here and elsewhere in the book – which is not a fatal problem, but something for which the scientifically, and indeed philosophically, oriented reader will need to be on guard. Equally, there are places, understandably, where the panoply of ‘science’ does not really seem to get to the point. Steven Morrison and Janina Fyk are refreshingly aware of this in ‘Intonation’ (Chapter 12), and one cannot but be sympathetic when their highly professional account of pitch discrimination and pitch matching, and their discussion of the implications for teaching, lead to the frank conclusion that ‘truth is subjective when it comes to pitch’, which of course can make a good premise for a different kind of enquiry.

I do not mean to demean the other chapters by picking out three cases where the tightrope strung up by the editors seems to have been crossed in particularly interesting ways. First, ‘Solo Voice’, by Graham Welch and Johan Sundberg, seems effective in relation to the central purpose of the book, since while as they rightly say ‘the scientific study of vocal production in singing is a relatively modern phenomenon’, perchance, it has also been clear for generations in treatises going back at least as far as Tosti that singing can be enhanced by scientific and psychological introspection – one might say that singing is, in and of itself, nothing but ‘feedback’, music unmediated. Secondly, mention should be made also of ‘Brain Mechanisms’ by Eckart Altenmüller and Wilfried Gruhn. Neurology is, as readers will know, flavour of the month, decade, millennium probably; and there is sharp debate between the medics, their acolytes who excitedly probe mechanisms of production and perception of human signals, and the grand functional visionaries such as Damasio (The Feeling of What Happens) and Edelman (Bright Air, Brilliant Fire) on the one hand, and on the other hand those in the human sciences, and it may be said in philosophy especially, who ask ‘so what?’ repeatedly and prevalently in the humanities press. Yet Altenmüller and Gruhn seem to touch base in where they arrive: concentrate on the early years, they recommend, with abundantly good and demonstrable reason; optimise (i.e. variegate) the focus of learning strategies; integrate the different types of representation. They may well be right, after all, that the best learning, for music practitioners at least, is where ‘cross-modal representations’ in the human brain are exploited most efficiently and therefore effectively. Thirdly, and finally, there is ‘Body Movement’ by Jane Davidson and Jorge Correia. It is tempting to flag up this contribution if only because of its subject matter, a fairly new field of concentration of self-evident importance to performers and to ‘performance studies’, and one that is also finding its way, a little vicariously, into what may be called ‘mainstream’ musicology (see for example the outstanding monograph by Naomi Cumming (2000)). This chapter is a rich and superbly constructed resource in any case. It argues that movement in performance is biomechanical, individual, or culturally determined. Awareness and control seem to be at the heart of pedagogical applications, in Dalcroze and in Pierce for example, and conditions such as ‘fluency’ and ‘personality’ (the balance of the ‘inner’ and the ‘outer’ in performance movement) are, if not easily testable,
nevertheless ‘feelable’ (my word) and undoubtedly fundamental to active musical communication – all of which is excellently described in the concluding pages of this chapter (pp. 244–8).

This is a finely produced publication, and a tribute to the expertise and, I should think, perseverance of its two editors. Its target audience of music educators and music psychologists will be well pleased and will find much to cite here. Whether ‘practising musicians’, as they are called, will be so interested remains to be seen, not least because, as the editors rightly indicate (p. xi), this is as much as anything a repository of questions, indeed research questions, as of conclusions. Yet that implies considerable interest, as there deserves to be, among the third target group mentioned, of advanced students in music education and music psychology.

Reference


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In the last 20 years or so the ways in which most of us think about and teach music history have undergone substantial changes. Gone are the unquestioning acceptance of the canon, the idea of history as progress, or the old set of hierarchies whereby Western art music stood head and shoulders above all other musics while both composers and their works loomed above performers, institutions, or investigations of broader social and cultural contexts. The idea of ‘teaching’ itself is being supplanted by ‘learning’ (or perhaps the task of enabling students to learn). This collection of 16 essays on various aspects of teaching music history at university level is perhaps best regarded as a thought-provoking response to these changes as well as a useful handbook of experiences and suggestions. Most of the contributions explore either new ways of presenting material to students or a rethinking of the material that is presented (or in some cases, both). Recurring themes throughout the collection include ways of interrogating or moving beyond the canon and the incorporation of cultural, social and economic histories into our understanding of music and musical life. Another recurring theme is the move away from the lecture as primary mode of delivery (even for large groups of students). One essay quotes Janet Emig: ‘A silent classroom, or one filled with only the teacher’s voice, is anathema to learning.’

The contributors, from a range of institutions and with diverse specialisms, are brought together, in the words of their editor, by ‘our love of music and our commitment to teaching others about its beauty, passion and power’. Their essays are organised into four clearly defined sections, looking at music history surveys (medieval and renaissance, baroque, classical and romantic, and twentieth-century); music appreciation or courses for non-majors; courses on specific topics (women in music, film music and American music); and general issues (a mixed bag including writing about music, peer learning and the creation and use of anthologies).

The contributions vary quite widely – in length, in the amount of specific detail they provide in terms of sample course structures or bibliographies, and, perhaps above all, in the degree of passion for teaching music history that they convey. Certain essays stand out for their enthusiastic embrace of new,
radical approaches. In ‘Teaching Music History (After the End of History): “History Games” for the Twentieth-Century Survey’ Robert Fink, for example, explains the ‘history games’ that he has used in various twentieth-century survey courses as a way of exploding the increasingly untenable ‘modernist metanarrative’ in this postmodern age. Defining a history game as ‘a complex, idiosyncratic, pragmatic, often self-reflexive performance of music history that foregrounds its own contingent nature’, Fink provides three fascinating examples of courses he has taught using such an approach in recent years. Ralph P. Locke, in ‘What Chopin (and Mozart and Others) Heard: Folk, Popular, “Functional” and Non-Western Music in the Classic/Romantic Survey Course’, explores the ways in which he has incorporated non-canonical musics into the confines of the classical and romantic survey course. His introductory remarks on the importance of what he calls high and wide multiculturalism argue persuasively for the necessity of a move beyond the canon, although his suggestion of playing Polish folk music and nocturnes by Field in a class otherwise devoted to Chopin may seem somewhat less than radical. In ‘The Myths of Music History’ Vincent Corrigan provides an incisive exposure of the assumptions that lie behind some of the lazily perpetuated musicological and pedagogic fallacies of music history. For example, he suggests that it is the desire to maintain the central significance and importance of polyphonic composition and of the artist as individual that has led to what is essentially the invention of Leonin, not only as the leading composer of his day but even as a musician at all.

Less radical, though no less interesting, are the three essays on specific topics which cover what is by now well-trod ground. However, any non-specialist working in a music department that does not yet offer film music as part of the syllabus will find the detail and enthusiasm provided by Michael Pisani in ‘Teaching Film Music in the Liberal Arts Curriculum’ quite enough to encourage her or him to embrace the teaching of such a course. The inclusion of Mary Natvig’s essay ‘Teaching “Women in Music”’ (and indeed the paucity of women featuring in some – though by no means all – of the other essays) clearly shows why such courses are still necessary. I suspect, though, that many institutions, in keeping with the way musicology itself is moving, have substituted courses that focus on the issue of gender rather than of women. Susan C. Cook’s experience of teaching American music, as detailed in ‘Don’t Fence Me In: The Pleasures of Teaching American Music’, echoes in many ways my own experience of teaching courses on the similarly overlooked topic of British music – particularly the liberation of teaching a subject where ‘there is no formula for what . . . [the] course is supposed to do or be’.

Some of the essays concentrate on more practical teaching and learning suggestions. Pamela Starr’s use of the research journal provides an appealing alternative to the essay or research paper. As she explains in ‘Teaching in the Centrifugal Classroom’, asking students to keep such a journal and answer a specific set of questions as their research progresses trains them to think about the research process in a self-analytical way. One of the useful strategies that Carol A. Hess suggests in ‘Score and Word: Writing about Music’ is ‘in-class writing’, specifically a variety of short writing assignments, such as asking students to spend the last five minutes of a class summarising the main points of the session, thereby providing not only practice in writing but also a useful indicator of how much of the session they have accurately absorbed!
The major drawback to this collection for a British audience is its entirely North American focus. Many of the issues facing university teachers in the United States are clearly similar to those that we face in Britain (and doubtless similar to those facing teachers in other countries), from the rethinking of music history to teaching non-specialist students who may not be musically literate in an increasingly modular degree structure. Other issues are different, such as the problems of teaching a course on which close to 800 students are enrolled – as discussed in Noel Bisson’s ‘First Nights: Awakening Students’ Critical Skills in a Large Lecture Course’. An essay or two detailing experiences and strategies in other countries or comparing the situation in the United States with that elsewhere would have been useful and illuminating. Having recently been involved in devising a new BA syllabus that does not include a single survey course, I was interested to discover, for example, that none of these American contributors appears to work with syllabuses or in institutions that have questioned the validity of the historical survey itself. Even if lack of space prevented such contributions, a realisation that not all interested readers will necessarily be familiar with the university system in the States, and the inclusion of a preface or appendix detailing structures and terminology, would have made some of the contributions (such as Mary Hunter’s ‘Teaching at a Liberal Arts College’) more accessible to those of us living and working elsewhere.

This caveat aside, there is much to recommend in this collection. I found it reassuring to know that other teachers are trying to find new ways of enabling students to learn about the history of music and experimenting with some of the methods I myself have used in order to convey to students a sense of what music history can be in the age of the ‘new’ musicology. But I found it most fascinating for the new ideas and the new strategies that it has suggested. I can only imagine that other teachers will be similarly intrigued and inspired.

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This is an intriguing book, not only for its content, but also for the way in which the book is itself a reification of some of the issues around ‘world music’ which Philip Bohlman discusses. It might seem overly focused on a few particular areas and topics, it might seem to fail to integrate the various elements in chapters, but in fact all this contributes to an interactivity which is ultimately far more enriching than a more staid or predictable summary of currents in world music. In many ways the most vitalising theme of this small but potent book is its urge that we should ‘engage more directly with world music as experience’ (p. vii), and that should be our own experience, rather than unduly mediated.

The book has seven chapters, each of which develops a theme: In the beginning...myth and meaning in world music; The West and the world; Between myth and history; Music of the folk; Music of the nations; Diaspora; Colonial musics, post-colonial worlds, and the globalisation of world music. Each chapter then follows a pattern of: encounter – historical/theoretical excursus – profile of a musician – aesthetic issue – profile of an ethnomusicologist – ethnographic present and popular music. Thus Chapter 1 deals with ‘first encounters’, although always the ‘West’s’ and Bohlman’s own first encounters with the ‘world’ and ‘world music’. One of the features of such encounters is the recognition, even shock,
that music has different meanings, different ways of existing in, and relating to, culture. The origins of music and musicians are then explored through religion and myth, before discussion starts on the links between music and religion, tradition and aesthetics. The ethnomusicologist looked at in this chapter is Charles Seeger, particularly his interest in the discerning of musical meaning. The last element, on popular encounters with world music, considers Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and his crossings between tradition, religion and popular music, and makes a particularly interesting case that this crossing is mutually enriching, promoting both ‘return and revival’.

Chapter 2, ‘The West and the World’ opens up issues around the collection, recording, publishing and ownership of world music and on where power is to be found, through looking at a number of case studies. It moves on to discuss ‘musicians of the middle passage’, or of the route from Africa into slavery. Part of the impetus here is to problematise the binary of ‘self’ and ‘other’, through recognising the breadth and depth of its impact and to suggest roles for ethnomusicology in encounter, although with some uncertainty that these can avoid the seemingly inbuilt biases of its histories and practices. Johann Gottfried Herder is proposed as the inventor of world music, and an interesting part of the argument for that is his multidisciplinarity – his skills in theology, philosophy, linguistics, etc. which allow him to explore music in its cultural fullness, thus aligning him to what ethnomusicology would become. The chapter concludes by looking at Grammy award-winning albums Santiago, by the Chieftains (1997), and Harry Smith’s Anthology of American Folk Music, reissued by the Smithsonian Institution (1998). Chapter 3, ‘Between Myth and History’, starts with an examination of the 1932 Cairo Congress of Arab Music. The stagnation of the Western approach to music at this event is a salutary reminder to us all. Too often we (those who can’t join in the songs fluently because we live outside the locus of song-generation) have wanted to preserve traditions, styles, patterns and forms in a temporally specific aspic, when this militates against any notion of cultural dynamicism, of music effecting or reflecting social change, or indeed of music having much significance of any sort. The wider role of North Africa in world music is then developed, and it is good to see such a large geographical indicator explicated further, so that any notion of ‘North Africa’ as a single identifiable unit is quickly unravelled. Bohlman moves on to discuss Umm Kulthüm in the context of her crossing between the traditional, the sacred, the modern and the popular. The ethnomusicologist Robert Lachmann is included in this chapter because of his links with the Cairo congress.

Chapter 4, ‘Music of the Folk’, starts in Budapest and looks at folk music, cultural tourism and authenticity, and the ability of musicians and music in Hungary to remain very closely recognisable as ‘Hungarian’, principally because of the considerable public investment in ‘cultural identity’: music educators will be well aware of Hungary’s vigorous music education system, with Kodály as its focus and driving force, and the centrality of Hungarian folk songs to its repertoire. This forces us to think again about ‘self’ and ‘other’ and how Hungary has decided to act in this regard, taking different decisions from the UK. Bohlman goes on to speculate on the movement from ‘folk music’ to ‘world music’, drawing on Huddie Ledbetter (‘Leadbelly’) to show the rising profile of folk music, and on the shaping of Celtic music to show the transformation to world music. The Lomax family are discussed in their work to show that ‘folk music existed to empower one to seize the moment and to make a mark on history’ (p. 83). The chapter finishes with a section
on the ‘Polka Belt’ to track some specifics on this movement from folk to world.

The segue into Chapter 5, ‘Music of the Nations’, leads us rather abruptly and surprisingly to the Eurovision Song Contest. The issue Bohlman makes us consider is the relationship of music to national identity, and the ways in which that is constructed, perceived and challenged. He moves on to the notion of the ‘singing nation’ and the problems this causes, for although ‘nation’ is most frequently used to categorise musical origins, it does this job either very incompletely, so that multiple musics are not recognised (this can even be a continental problem: one record producer decided against issuing some of my Maasai recordings because ‘it did not sound African enough’), or so completely that national music may become ‘nationalistic music’. This discussion continues in sections on national anthems (including the point that for music that is supposed to represent individual nations, many national anthems are remarkably similar in style and lack of musical interest), the International Folk Music Council/International Council for Traditional Music and international anthems.

Chapter 6, ‘Diaspora’, looks at the diasporic impact on music focused through the 500 years since 1492. It shows the importance of musical instruments in tracing the origins of dispersed groups. Bob Marley is brought in to show how multiple diasporas can become focused and realised in and through music. Bohlman then considers music in the South Asian diaspora, and the ways in which it encourages conditions for change, particularly in a move towards popular music. There is a section (interruption?) on Idelshohn and his ten-volume Thesaurus of Hebrew–Oriental Melodies, before bringing the South Asian musical diaspora into the violent context of England in the summer of 2001.

The final chapter, ‘Colonial Musics, Post-colonial Worlds, and the Globalisation of World Music’, starts in Cluj Napoca in Romania and looks at the way street musicians become the iterators of music required in each location: what will sell to the students, what to the tourists, to Hungarian- or Romanian-speaking residents. For Bohlman they exemplify modern world music in the postmodernism of their juxtapositions and unpredictability, their eclecticism, their marketing skill and professionalism, their adaptability: ‘it is global music performed locally’ (p. 131). The very qualities of cities themselves in shaping encounters with world music are explored. The Cameroonian musician Manu Dibango is examined for the nature of his links to Cameroon during his career, as he moves to and fro, and the section ends with an assertion from Dibango that the power of African music lies in the fact that it is a ‘music of encounters’, and readers are then left to explore for themselves the notion that some musics may not be. The next section is on recording and other technology, particularly the ethical implications of future technologies and their relationships with the earlier (but ongoing) dilemmas about power, appropriation, and so on. Then Bohlman moves on to review the Rough Guides with some concern. He makes the point that they focus on popular world music, but doesn’t go on to point out the liberating factor that this means there are many other ways to encounter world music that is not ‘popular music’, and that the Rough Guides remain just that – a first invitation to an encounter. The final section of this chapter, and thus of the book, is on world music festivals and their potential to be dismissed as ‘entertainment and tourism’. But Bohlman celebrates the potential of such events to ‘[remap] the world without boundaries, thereby charting a utopian world in which . . . difference[s] dissolve’ (p. 149).
In declaring a firmly grounded personal standpoint Bohlman allows us both to appreciate his particular ‘take’ on issues and their co-/contexts and to engage in a dialectic from our own standpoints. In my first reading of this book I kept coming back to ‘this is similar to/but this is at variance with my experience in/but what about . . .’, and of course that’s the point: here we are reminded of our own encounters, we are minded to review them and enjoy the experiential as well as the analytical/critical discourse. This starts, of course, with the title itself. Bohlman works at bringing together for shared discussion world musics both as ‘all the musics of the world’ and as a ‘global phenomenon’, both the diverse and the universal. My own standpoint is to applaud the former and be suspicious of the latter, but in this book I am forced to confront some realities about this position that will keep me entangled for some time. I do wonder, however, about the binary positions, even polarity, assumed by Bohlman as regards world music and Western music. For example, there seems to be the proposal that world music has a ‘complex aesthetic embeddedness’ which is radically different from Western music (p. 13), and brief examples are given of such embeddedness in forms of Buddhist music. The reason for the polarity seems to lie in the notion that Western musicology has often sought to find aesthetic meaning in the music alone, divorced of its co-/contexts, but I am not convinced that this makes the embeddedness any less deep in reality, as Kofi Agawu writes: ‘Isn’t European music . . . similarly rooted in the extramusical?’ (Agawu, 2001: 9). This reiteration of the old binary could be more vigorously critiqued here; this should be a way in which looking at world music as meaning ‘all the music of the world’ can make us look anew at Western music (and perhaps label it rather more cogently). We could have been helped in this by being given a few more pointers to the ‘new ethnomusicologies/ists’ as a source for developing the critique: of musicians–scholars working from within their own co-/contexts – cultures – musics.

While there are links between them, the chapter sections are not carefully brought together and integrated by the author, and so this book is not for the reader looking for a plain and easy guide to world music. But I have found that there is a certain joy in that – it allows, in fact demands, that the reader approach these as lexies (in a Barthesian post-structuralist sense), as individual meaningful units which then have to be brought together and interpreted by the newly empowered reader-as-writer.

In summary, this book does not teach us all about world music, and I am supremely grateful for that. It does, however, plot a pattern for engaging with, and critiquing, our musical encounters that is energising and dynamic. For that reason I shall return to this book often.

Reference

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