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Svanibor Pettan: an Appreciation

Svanibor Pettan is that rare kind of gentleman who immediately puts his acquaintances at ease and encourages them to feel as if they'd known him for a long time. These qualities have enabled him to succeed in helping to make the world a better place through music, and in helping his colleagues in Europe and abroad to mobilize around the field of applied ethnomusicology. For Svanibor, this has meant taking ethnomusicology beyond mere scholarship – that is, beyond the accumulation of knowledge and its dissemination within the community of scholars – to the application of that ethnomusicological knowledge in service to a deliberate intervention into the ethnic groups under study, to resolve conflicts that may lead to violence and instead to promote peace among them.

As a student at the University of Zagreb in the early 1980s, Svanibor experienced ethnomusicology as then taught in many central and eastern European nations: that is, as the analytical study of domestic folk music cultures. Nonetheless he undertook fieldwork outside of Yugoslavia, in Zanzibar and Egypt while working toward his Bachelor's and Master's degrees. He began to think about music and minorities, and the possible uses of music to improve relations among ethnic groups. His service in the Yugoslav People's Army furthered his desire for peace and his ambitions to find a way for music to help resolve conflicts among peoples. Stationed in Kosovo as the instructor for cultural affairs, he brought together people (including soldiers) from different ethnic communities to form a choir and foster feelings of togetherness. He came to the US to study at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, where in 1992 he received his Ph.D. in ethnomusicology. As he was finishing the degree, he contemplated attempting a career as a professor in the United States. But the nation of Yugoslavia had in the meantime broken apart into smaller units, while ethnic nationalism fueled uprisings and eventually wars in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, and Macedonia. He felt that his project to put ethnomusicological knowledge to use for peace was needed at home, and so he returned to the region. One result was his work in the refugee camps to bring diverse and sometimes inimical populations together through music. In addition, he undertook research, publications, radio programs, films and other activities in the service of peace and conflict resolution.

In 2000 he was appointed professor of ethnomusicology in the department of musicology at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, where he helped to internationalize the field while building a program that encouraged applied ethnomusicology.

Svanibor first came to my attention in 1997 at the SEM conference where we met to establish, under the leadership of Doris Dyen and Marta Ellen Davis, a Committee on Applied Ethnomusicology. In 2000 one of our entering ethnomusicology graduate students, Erica Haskell, mentioned to me that Svanibor had been helpful to her when she was working on music projects with refugees in Bosnia. This was before she returned to the US to take up a short-term position at Smithsonian Folkways and then was admitted to our doctoral program in ethnomusicology at Brown. Erica told me that Svanibor had, himself, done applied work in the refugee camps some years earlier; and so he was able to help open doors for her, give her the benefit of his experience and also alert her to the more subtle aspects of cultural differences and culture conflicts in the region. Erica progressed in our program and furthered her research music in war-torn Bosnia, and Svanibor continued to help guide her work in ways that I as an outsider to that region could not.

As Erica was completing her final year of course work, she partnered with another graduate student, Maureen Loughran, and with me, to plan for our university to host the first international conference – indeed, the first conference ever – on applied ethnomusicology. It was obvious to us that Svanibor must be invited to speak at the conference. When Erica got in touch with him, he suggested that we also invite his Norwegian colleague, Kjell Skyllstad. Skyllstad had also put music to use for restorative well-being. The two had collaborated when in the mid-1990s Svanibor was a visiting professor for a semester at the University of Oslo, in a project involving music and education among Bosnian refugees in Norway. Erica, Maureen and I raised grant money to pay for their travel, and for the travel of a dozen other speakers, including my Passamaquoddy friends Wayne Newell and Blanche Sockabasin. Wayne, whom I have known since 1988, is an educator and tribal elder who has been instrumental in sustaining Passamaquoddy music and language in the state of Maine. Among the other participants were Martha Davis, Nick Spitzer, Tony Seeger, Judith Gray, and Dan Sheehy, all applied ethnomusicology pioneers inside and outside the US academic world. The conference, which took place at Brown University in April 2003, was a great success due in no small part to Wayne and Blanche, and to Svanibor and Kjell. During this time I was able to thank Svanibor in person for being so helpful to Erica. He had done so out of the goodness of his heart – she was not studying at his university, and he received no payment for becoming, in effect, an outside expert and unofficial member of her dissertation committee. Incidentally, the conference was videotaped, and Svanibor's presentation and the others are on the Brown University website.¹

During this same spring of 2003 it became clear that the Bush-Cheney Administration was hell-bent on a US invasion of Iraq. With others I had marched and held vigils in the streets; we had lobbied our representatives in Congress to do everything they could to prevent the conflict. A few days before the conference took place, I

1 "The First Conference on Applied Ethnomusicology; Invested in Community: Ethnomusicology and Musical Advocacy," *Brown University Library Center for Digital Scholarship*, https://library.brown.edu/cds/invested_in_community/.

and others had spoken to a large crowd of students, faculty, staff and city of Providence residents gathered for a teach-in on the main green of my university. We were continuing our efforts to galvanize popular opinion to try to stop the invasion. I told them it was likely that any US invasion would cause far more terror and death than it would ever prevent. A few days later in closing out the conference I repeated the same idea, positioning applied ethnomusicology as a means for promoting peace. I told the attendees that

*A sense of history pervades this conference in more ways than one. For one thing, this is the first conference of its kind, the first devoted to applied ethnomusicology, a historical first. But while we have been hearing and speaking at this conference about music solving conflict among peoples, we are as a nation about to cause conflict. We are about to invade Iraq. It's not enough to point out the irony. Scholars in my generation are good at irony. The problem with irony is that however much intellectual satisfaction irony gives, it doesn't stop tanks. It's not the same as action. Advocacy requires action [...]*²

Svanibor and I and the others were part of a larger movement that had its roots in earlier decades, and my role in it may be worth mentioning here. My work in applied ethnomusicology had arisen as an organic outgrowth of my political activism during the 1960s. I had marched and leafleted and knocked on doors to get the US out of Vietnam; I participated in teach-ins at my university and out in the community at large. With my professor Mulford Sibley I explored non-violent resistance, direct action and community organizing as a means toward social change and justice. When I met Walter Mondale (just appointed to fill Hubert Humphrey's vacant Senate seat) at a university gathering I struck up a conversation and urged him to go to Vietnam and see for himself – which he did, and came back opposed to the War. I had also started my work in applied ethnomusicology on behalf of African Americans, the Civil Rights Movement, and the blues music culture – in which I also was a participant. During my graduate school years I played guitar in Lazy Bill Lucas' blues band and learned a great deal from Bill and our other bandmates, especially bass player JoJo Williams (who had heard Son House and Charley Patton while growing up in the Mississippi Delta), and Mojo Buford, who played harmonica and had recorded with Muddy Waters. In the 1970s and 1980s my applied work moved in the direction of public folklore as well as ethnomusicology and our then-mission of cultural conservation. Combining this work with political activism was my chief motivation for arranging sessions on music and the politics of culture at the 1989 SEM conference and for the special 1992 issue of the SEM Journal on “ethnomusicology in the public interest.” And as the new century dawned and my thinking moved from conservation to an ecological approach to cultural and musical sustainability, I also returned to my earlier political activism, in no small part due to the influence of Erica and Svanibor and their work with music for peace and conflict resolution.

2 “Closing Address,” *Brown University Library Center for Digital Scholarship*, (The First Conference on Applied Ethnomusicology; Invested in Community: Ethnomusicology and Musical Advocacy; March 9, 2003), https://library.brown.edu/cds/invested_in_community/Titon_Closing.html.



Picture 2: Svanibor Pettan at the 44th ICTM World Conference, Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick, July 2017.

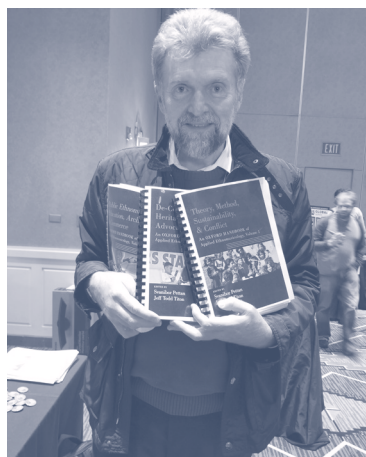
In short, that applied ethnomusicology conference at Brown was a turning (or, rather, returning) point for me and many others. So, for example, in the following year (2004) I urged our SEM Ethics Committee to propose to the SEM Executive Board a position statement condemning the use of music for torture. I'd learned that the Bush-Cheney Administration was torturing detainees during their so-called war on terror. Evidently the detainees couldn't stand hip-hop, and listening to Eminem at high volume for hours on end caused the most pain. (Much later it was revealed that two members of the American Psychological Association had helped mastermind the torture, and when the executives of that academic organization learned about it, they did nothing to condemn it.) Our Committee sent up to the Board the proposal that SEM condemn the use of music for torture, and after much discussion the Board approved it and in 2007 posted the Position Statement on the SEM website, where it remains today. Although SEM had come out with position statements opposing the unjust incarceration of individual scholars, this was different. It was the first time that SEM as an organization took this kind of bold and controversial public political stand. It was a victory for applied ethnomusicology and for those of us like Svanibor and so many others who had labored for so long to turn our professional organizations from social organizations for sharing knowledge among scholars, into socially responsible institutions working within the larger political system to bring about well-being and a more just world. The recent turn within SEM toward an examination of "ethnomusicology in the Anthropocene" and the role of ethnomusicologists in confronting the political, environmental and economic crises of our era is an outgrowth of this triumph of applied ethnomusicology. The Applied Ethnomusicology Section of SEM is now the third largest Section, just behind the Student and Popular Music Sections. Forty years ago, when Alan Merriam was calling applied work

“sandbox ethnomusicology,” it was dismissed as being apart from ethnomusicology’s proper subject, scholarship. Today, scholarship and its applications inside and outside of the academy are united.

When Erica returned to Bosnia for her dissertation research, she and I and Svanibor stayed in touch, of course, and he continued to serve as a guide and mentor. To my delight, a few years later (2008) Suzanne Ryan asked me to co-edit, with Svanibor, the *Oxford Handbook of Applied Ethnomusicology*. If memory serves, she told me she had been at the 2007 ICTM conference where Svanibor lobbied for an ICTM Study Group on Applied Ethnomusicology. His enthusiasm was infectious, the group formed, and she approached him and asked him if there might also be a book in it. As they discussed the project, Svanibor mentioned the SEM’s earlier institutional involvement with applied ethnomusicology – in 2003, our Committee had become a full-fledged Applied Ethnomusicology Section – and suggested to Suzanne that she enlist me as co-editor. She and I discussed the book project at the 2008 SEM conference and I told her I thought it was an excellent idea, thanked her and Svanibor for coming up with it, and said I’d be glad to join him in the effort to gather a group of articles from applied ethnomusicologists internationally (including Erica Haskell, who by that time had completed her dissertation and was a professor at the University of New Haven). I thought that our knowledge of the field complemented each other’s, for Svanibor knew a good deal about applied ethnomusicology in the ICTM and European context, whereas I had been active in US public folklore and applied ethnomusicology for many decades both inside and outside of SEM. Of course, we also hoped to avoid a Euro-American bias for the book insofar as possible.

Thus began a continuous and almost constant international collaboration between us that lasted seven years (the *Oxford Handbook of Applied Ethnomusicology* was published in 2015). Much of this collaboration took place by email, of course, but a lot of it was done via Skype. Svanibor made the time to travel to Providence and be a visiting scholar at Brown while we spent some time working together on the project, and I also got to meet his brilliant and charming partner Lasanthi during this period. I am sure that Svanibor knew more about applied ethnomusicology in the US than I did about it in Europe, but in any case we were discovering that the field didn’t develop at the same time or in the same ways in those two regions. Indeed, in different parts of Europe it developed in characteristically different ways, and also in Africa, Australia, and Latin America. I was fortunate to be invited to give a series lectures on music and sustainability in Beijing in 2009, and plant the seed of applied ethnomusicology over there; Zhang Boyu’s article on applied ethnomusicology for the *Handbook* was the result. Svanibor, of course, drew on his network of ethnomusicologists in the ICTM, while I drew on my connections with public folklorists as well as applied ethnomusicologists in North America, as we began inviting contributions to the book. Svanibor convened a conference on applied ethnomusicology at the University of Ljubljana in 2008, which gathered international momentum for our book project. Not everyone was able to accept our invitations, but as the abstracts began to come in, and as the proposal to Oxford became formalized, Svanibor and I adapted our different ways of working to each other, as writers, colleagues and especially as editors. This also to some extent meant adapting to the somewhat

different cultural styles of European and North American scholars, Presses, and their (and our) expectations. I think Svanibor may have been surprised that Oxford made us jump through so many hoops: abstracts (and revised abstracts) for all contributors; our proposal; one internal review and two sets of external reviews after the manuscript was completed, followed by revisions from all contributors; another external review; more revisions; and then of course the copyedit stage and two page proof stages. Whew! But this is the way university presses proceed in the US, for better or worse (and we had a two-year reprise when Oxford announced a paperback version of the *Handbook*. After a series of small corrections and further revisions it was published in March 2019, in three separate, less expensive volumes).



Picture 3: Svanibor Pettan with spiral bound page proofs of the three volumes, 63rd Annual Meeting of The Society for Ethnomusicology, Albuquerque, 2018.

I am sure that our long collaboration tested the diplomatic skills of the co-editors. While I helped him to understand the sometimes labyrinthine procedures of US university presses, for example, he helped me to understand the expectations that well-established European scholars had with regard to suggestions for improving their research, and for timetables and deadlines. We never went fishing together, but I imagine that he is an infinitely patient fisherman. This patience coupled with diplomatic and organizational skill has served him well in his important and time-consuming administrative posts in the ICTM. Several times during our collaboration on the *Oxford Handbook* I realized that Svanibor had taken on more tasks and travel than was good for his health; yet he is a person of uncommon energy, strength, and determination. On this, the occasion of his 60th birthday, we celebrate Svanibor: who he is, what he has accomplished, and the principles of social responsibility and justice that he stands by, and for.