

UDK 930.2:78

Aleksandra Wagner
New York

METHOD AS A WAY TO ATOMIZE HISTORY

*Il faut a l'Italien des airs italiens,
au Turc, il faudroit des airs turcs.*

J.J. Rousseau

Let us assume that the first fear ever experienced by humankind was the fear of nature. In order to annihilate that fear, the *species being* invented history: a strong, rational device. The result, nevertheless, has not met expectations. Nature has remained as dangerous, evolution as slow (too slow), and history soon revealed its most prominent feature: global facts may be the outcomes of individual destinies, but often contradict them. Moreover, history as a projected (perfected) flow of events introduced terror into the synchronic yet past/future-oriented human mind. In order to annihilate the second fear, or just to win the battle with both, two procedures were necessary, so the species, with wisdom given only to him succeeded in discovering formulas:

1. From nature: he learned to neutralize perfect flow, by inventing the cyclic motion. He started with the wheel and with calendar, and ended with the cycle of folklore.

2. Unconceivable time he decided to neutralize with two basic methods of atomization, with art and science.

The result as we have it today, is folklore for all, and method for the chosen few.

In book as widely used as is *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, under ethnography one will read the implication that the word is of French origin (but only after it was of Greek), and that the first chosen linguistic outcome of its unexplained roots is ethnology - descriptive anthropology. Ethnology is further defined as "1. a science that deals with the division of mankind into races and their origin, distribution relations, and characteristics and 2. anthropology dealing chiefly with this comparative and analytical study of cultures". Before ethnography you will find ethnic, ethnical, ethnicity, ethnobiology (which, by the way, is dealing with the relation between usually primitive human societies and the plants and animals of their environment), ethnocentrism and ethnocentricity. After ethnology comes ethnomusicology and ethnosience, the latter of which threatens to be "the nature lore (as folk taxonomy of plants and animals) of primitive people".

Webster seems not to be updated on contemporary notions we give to certain words, and even less to the processes we go through in order to make words work in an "appropriate way". Thus, it does not differ at all from most of the canonical

books in which the whole world seeks its global knowledge. However, it does say several things. What it says explicitly, is that ethnography certainly is about the nature of people and about the nature of writing (look also under graph), and that almost all derivations embrace the idea of *usually primitive* as a convenient one. What it says implicitly, is that the act of writing is confined to description, that there is a danger that people who are being written about are made of flesh and blood, and that they usually live somewhere else, for writers are rarely surrounded by the primitives.

This jokey remark which is not a joke entirely, shows also all that *Webster* misses from the contemporary thinking about ethnography. This thinking itself has made a centuries long move from the logic of the missionaries and imperial travellers reporting to their respective courts, through the more recent imperial attitudes cloaked in "humanism without (political) interest" which gave, or helped give birth to anthropology, to the present post-colonial but not post-imperial moment in which everything that illuminates social relations or constructs everyday life can be labeled as ethnography. The implied power of this omnipotent approach may confirm a belief that ethnography is the unavoidable first, or the necessary last, step in the process of this construction. It further implies that ethnography is a method. Even more, that it is a method of constant dialogue between shifting subjects. In fact, what was just said about dialogue, is in a way the fourth definition of method, as offered in our famous, the most published and used reference book in America: "A dramatic technique by which an actor seeks to gain complete identification with the inner personality of the character being portrayed".

Before shifting to shifts and actors, let us assume that the change in the understanding of ethnography became possible due to two major factors:

1. The debasement of the god like observer which came from an understanding that the observer is inside and not outside - a process through which the notion of "stranger" also underwent change. The ultimate result of this consciousness is that the researcher is as much the subject of a final picture as any of his "subjects" - singers, story-tellers.

2. That phenomena observed, be it a novel, colonial archive, folk-song or a friendly villager, has its own modes of resistance; that *the researcher* is not a mighty taker (or, to put it in terms of today's technology, a scanner who happens to be of human origin), but that he is given what *the researched* decides or chooses to give him. This interplay becomes extremely interesting if what is researched is the text, especially for those who believe that all texts, however *purely* musical, are written for an intended audience.

If we keep in mind two old-fashioned procedures, induction and deduction, and take them literally for the moment forgetting any possibility of synthesis, than one way to "illuminate the social relations" or to establish the "construction of everyday life" is to make one's own difficult journey through it - and call this a search for the result. The other one is to read the versions of the "result" and go back to the "origins". Whether or not these attitudes are combined, and even how, may not be the major issue. The fact is that neither the "difficult journey", nor the more or less close reading - make the researcher a video camera able to record sound too (first case), or the follower of scriptures (second case), but a person in a particular time and place, surrounded with their respective meanings. Furthermore, in both cases the researcher makes his/her own cultural translation of the observed, makes his/her

own work on the work of culture, and presents it in the field remote from the fieldwork, in the field of discourse.

Whatever its noble motifs are, and whatever its procedures, ethnography may be the process, but ends up as a written text. In many, if not in the most of the cases, ethnography is a written codification of the oral, written affirmation of the researcher's thoughts and beliefs, often a translation of one media into another - of songs and images into words. But ethnography, as any other text of ambition, is a *dialogue with, polemic against, affirmation of* theoretical discourse which informs it as much as life itself. Even more, ethnography is subject to further mediation which is too often out of its control. Much less ethnography is in itself inventive, experimental, emancipated text.

In order to bridge the gap between particularities of tradition - which makes it worth of scholarly attention and research - and its readability within the broader context, one has to state the present state of affairs where still there are countries with the "field" and even the "fieldwork", and there are countries with the "legitimate theories" which await to be implemented on the material brought from around the world. The best readability is established either through what is the most *mimetic* - a possibility to hear and see something exactly as it is (CD, video), and feel free to interpret it later, or in the most *hermetic* - Lyotard's favorite tunes - postmodern reading of folklore! Theory, after all, is the true unifying field which functions no matter where and what the fieldwork was, the one and only device that can make non-fashionable data more fashionable, that can bring fringe-phenomena into the center of discussion. Theory, as well, is the last and only resort which can take us from the national enterprises in research: national data in national language, through national methodology. Having said that, we may pick up on the last word - methodology - and go back to the history. Quite appropriate a path to arrive at the subject.

First thoughts about this text were connected with The International Congress of Ethnological and Anthropological Sciences, held in Zagreb in 1988.¹ Panel titled *Folklore and the historical process*, which by its intellectual and problem-oriented capacities could have attracted a vast number of ethnomusicologists, then succeeded in attracting only a few. Even then, and even so, only a few of them spoke about time - and probably for good reasons. Yet, music is certainly one of the most important inventions of humankind which finds its definition in time. Music is an art the organization of which is possible only within the temporal frame.

As a temporal art, music does not have many chances in history. This false paradox is easy to solve if we think of a history as written, and of music as performed. Only by the shift from time into space, which means by the notation/transcription, music obtains its place in history. We speak of history in order to better understand the subject which is not defined only by history. The history of (musical) text is not the history of music.

The basic difference between musicology and ethnomusicology, lies in the mode of the information-transmission which refers to the two appearances of music. The result of musicological analysis, an analysis of the written music, communicates

¹ Dedicated to the memory of John Blacking, "Method as a Way to Atomize History", is a version of the unpublished paper given at the panel *Folklore and Historical Process*, presented at the 12. International Congress of Ethnological and Anthropological Sciences (Zagreb, July 1988).

with the composer, as well as with the interpreters and all literate consumers. On the other hand, the result of ethnomusicological analysis, even a transcription itself, rarely forms a communicational channel towards its inventor-musician who in this case remains estranged from his own product. Besides, there are many countries whose ethnomusicology is being written much quicker from the outside, whose musical wealth/sounds are stored in foreign archives, and results of whose research - books and records - are more accessible to those who are not living in the country of origin. Displacement of such a kind could be interpreted in numerous ways, but what remains is the fact that (ethno)musicology assumes (ethnic) music, while (ethnic) music, for better or for worse, does not assume its (ethno)musicology. What happens, indeed, when field becomes filed?

The first level of thinking about the nature of musical fieldwork - about the collecting itself - brings about the question whether it is possible for imperfect time ever to be regulated by a perfect transcription. In other words, can the transcribed folk song, even in the era marked by Gutenberg - and we may well be witnessing its end - ever attain the power of tradition? Writing is the first prerequisite for the history which does not want to be mere reconstruction. It is the entrance into the authority of the Book. In the case of music, this history is ever more hermetic, for it is difficult to believe that the historical proof of the existence of Bela Bartok's work on *Serbo-Croatian Folk Songs* - the ultimate objectivity of an excellent ear and outstanding mind - could ever become a part of the repertory of an "authentic" singer. It is the written life which can be more easily channeled towards the history. Becoming history in itself, this life and its creators search for their language of programmatic meanings - for the technical language of interpretation. The mortal interpreter so establishes concepts of the beginning and end for something which in itself is boundless.

Each segment of historical time functions, or can function as a system. In the absolute synchrony, it (today) functions, or can function as a system of contemporaneity. In each of these systems tradition articulates itself in a different way. Therefore a passion for antiquity/authenticity becomes no more than system within the system, the noble timeless craft confronted with the ephemeral present. Yet, the very idea of tradition comprises our desire to "save" the time, and not merely an attempt to search for identity and "deep roots".

The fact that there are many who sing can determine the measure of vitality of the tradition, but only the fact that there is one who can sing well and, even more, that what she is singing has been written down, counts as a historical fact. Accidental or not, decision of the "writer" to write down *this* and not *something else*, is a historical fact as well. Hence the facts of history become individualistic when one least expects it. On the other hand, the name of the singer or the long tradition which keeps forgetting his/her name, is one of the classic paradoxes entailed in the production of anonymous orality. Traditional music, as any other *folk lore*, in eyes of its non-folkloric observers remained for far too long in the area of collective expression. It is this false collectivity which denies history, for individuals are those who live in the flow of time, who produce the history, and not the cyclical world of eternal return. The very classification of music into "folk", "art" and "popular" signifies concern for musical products, and not an attempt to grasp the dynamical process of music-making. Therefore, as John Blacking would argue, it speaks of nothing more

but of the battle for recorded, labeled and sold replacements of the live music - the one that marks the history on only about 97% of humankind.²

Blacking learned his lesson if not the hard way, then certainly a humorous way. At some point he was researching the Venda tribe in South Africa. Later he wrote a book about *How Musical is Man*.³ He remained in touch with Vendas and some of them were even educated under his "influence". Finally, one became a PhD anthropologist. So the colleagues sat and discussed the book - author was curious to hear opinions given by someone who was a part both of the Venda society and of the science. There were no remarks but this: "You've published photographs in your book, John, and you wrote the captions in a very strange way: *Venda boy is playing flute, Two Vendas are drumming, Venda dancing...* How could you do that after all the time you spent with us, and when you not only know their names, but you also know that they are individuals who sing, dance and drum better than others, and that it is exactly their talents which differ them from the generally musical, but not as competent society? Imagine the book I would write on Western music, include the photographs and make captions like *An old musician at his organ in Leipzig, or A deaf Viennese composer at work* - while talking about Bach and Beethoven!"⁴

This is what happens with a global approach. But not everyone is lucky enough to have and to be able to listen to the "native" of high competence. And many will say, not everything is folklore. And there is already a long-term discussion going on, which shows that no one needs anymore anyone to preach about neglected peoples and neglected genres. And there is a vast territory in which the names are sacred.

And all this could be true.

But let us be bold, and let us say that all musicology, the one of names as well as the one of sites, the one of civilization we want to belong to and of the one we were born into (of They were born into!), the one of history and the other of nature could be, and indeed is - ethnography. As much as transcription is not just a device of bringing oral into written, but also a restrictive mode of canonic uniformity, a code given the authority to represent a flux, and notation is a natural language - as much the orality is not at all absent from the written discourse. Transcription works for all musics. There is a whole orally transmitted history established through "field-works" between great students of great teachers: there is oral history linking Liszt and Bartok. There is transcription, not the notation, linking Busoni and Bach. What is history, of music, is not only a representational problem of sound transfigured into the sign. After all, to argue for ethnography of musical field would also mean to ask ourselves whether the "absent (ethno)musicologist" for whom K.A. Gourlay was looking in 1978,⁵ has by now established any presence in his own text? Or has the search for "scientific objectivity" of (ethno)musicology killed the researcher enough that he can become the object of someone else's science? Shouldn't we try to look more passionately, therefore more methodically too, into constructions of our fielded realities?

2 BLACKING, John, "Making artistic popular music: the goal of true folk", in *Folk or popular?: Distinctions, influences, continuities*, Cambridge University Press, 1981.

3 BLACKING, John, *How Musical is Man*, London, Faber & Faber 1976.

4 WAGNER, Aleksandra, "Kako je muzikalan čovjek?" - interview with John Blacking, *Odjek*, Sarajevo, June 1984.

5 GOURLAY, K.A., "Towards a reassessment of the ethnomusicologist's role in the research", in *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. XXII. No. 1, 1978. (pp. 1-35).

One of the numerous definitions of folk music is:

"Folk music is the product of a musical tradition that has been evolved through the process of oral transmission. The factors that shape the tradition are: 1. continuity that links the present with the past; 2. variation which springs from the creative impulse of the individual or the group and 3. selection by the community which determines the form or forms in which the music survives".⁶

We are speaking here, obviously, neither of popularity, nor of the origin, but of the mode of evolution, of the process defined by laws of oral communication (which keeps tradition alive), of variants (emerging from the creativity of individuals and groups) and of selection (which reflects tastes and opinions of those who participate, even if "only" listening). To give an "odd" example would mean first to consider the same global source, *New Grove*, where the definition itself is given after the skeptical prelude according to which separations between *folk* and the *other* often function questionably, or do not function at all. The example to be proposed is whether Jewish synagogal music in Istanbul - sephardic tradition - is folk or "art" music. In the literature on this theme, we will find that traditional Jewish music does not function in terms of such a divide: it is much easier to speak of the organization of musical experience and comprehension in terms of secular and sacred. Sephardic synagogal music of Istanbul, performed through the role of singer, *hazan*⁷ has an evolution which was defined by rules of oral communication. He, the creative individual, has his position because he is aware of variants; moreover, he must be able to produce them - to improvise within the frame of Turkish *maqam*.⁸ And since *imitar no es kantar* (to imitate does not mean to know how to sing), it is clear that each singer does inherit tradition from the previous one, but also that the act of inheritance comprises choice - of the singer and of the community which verifies it. In other words, the singer chooses what he likes, as long as it resonates with the taste and conventions accepted by his audience.

Still, before or after the fieldwork, there remains at least one important question: that of a language. In the theory of language, there is a definition of the native speaker, of one who can say that some language is her mother-tongue. If such a speaker would exist in music, what would her mother-tongue be? Is man indeed born with music in the same or the similar sense which enabled Chomsky to say that man is born with language?⁹ Or is the process of learning one's "own" musical tradition the process of learning foreign language?

Antiquity and authenticity, no doubt are the terms which are still treated as if they were precise and telling of anything. No matter the iconoclastic nature of modernity, these "authentic" resources of music material, a canon of folk, survive. Once written down, they are condemned to rigidity. If we add the media which allow an archive to become a source of new performances, dangers grow into normatives. Fortunately and despite everything, while storage is growing, even in the repertoires of the same musicians live variants. Sounds are changing.

6 Disputed, but not less cited definition given by IMC at its congress in Sao Paolo, 1955. Citation from the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, London, MacMillan 1980, Vol. 6, p. 693.

7 Hazan-chazzan, a professional singer and poet in the synagogue, today mostly singer and arranger. Responsible for the preservation of synagogal musical tradition. See *New Grove*, Vol. 9, p. 626.

8 Maqam (ar. place), term often translated as "mode", "scale" or "melody". See *New Grove*, Vol. 11, p. 638.

9 CHOMSKY, Noam, *Language and Mind*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. 1972.

The positive aura with which the authenticity is perceived in the hierarchy of tradition, shows itself on different models of intergenerational communication, therefore also on the level of inheritance of tradition. The "simplest" formula, live, unique being who teaches the younger generation, is often missing. On the other hand, even one's own tradition is often best understood when mediated: a folk tale can be read either from manuscript or from the printed collection. Music, song, can be heard for the first time from the record. Abstract, in terms of original context, and real in terms of economy, the space of discographic distribution is both bringing closer and relativizing the notion of *site*. The context of performance is where we are: paradoxically, or logically, the knowledge acquired this way can assume the role of an ancient "original". In fact it is not difficult to prove that the technical media are not on the opposite side of the rules of oral communication. Only records, unlike the live teachers (performers) are not offering unique, unrivaled performances. They, and the act of listening they bring about - the one without a *risqué* and surprise - are turning without variations, canonizing tradition of new times and new contexts. The limited number of excellent and "discovered" performers on big numbers of records produced somewhere in the world, offer an unified standard of identification for generations to come.

This acceleration of history - technological flesh-backs which are future-oriented - is a final part of *the end of the power of history*. It is a farewell to givens, an attempt for creativity which is not determined by the histories of creations, but by the history of reproduction. As Roger Wallis and Krister Malm had proven long ago, in their book *Big Sounds From Small Peoples*,¹⁰ both local and international styles, isolated pieces of disparate cultures, are mounted into the Pandora's box of human evolution. Music structures and sounds without context can become abstract elements of new constructs in which everything is being combined freely. The music of small groups can form a transcultural musical mix which will then strike back as uniform style: it is personal data which fill the mill of global culture. It is what is "precious" that becomes aggression - not sound *via* technology, but sound as technology.

Finally, if we are ready to write down traditional, orally transmitted music in order to make it known and to secure its place in history, couldn't we try the reverse: imagine the history of written, therefore already "historical" music on the basis of its performances? And what would we ask Luciano Pavarotti, if the answer was affirmative? Whatever we ask, I argue, he would be sending back a video.

POVZETEK

Z namenom, da bi se poigrala s vprašanjem objektivnosti oziroma arbitrarnosti dvojic, kot so zapis-izvedba, avtorsko-anonimno, normativno-efemerno, avtorica pristopa k pojmu metode z različnih strani; najprej na podlagi hipoteze, da se skuša zgodovino obvladati s prakso atomizacije. Metoda, najbolj važno sredstvo tega procesa, atomizira stvarnost (in celo zgodovino) tako, da nespoznavnost totala prevaja v spoznavno, in to s tem da omejuje prostor in čas. Z opazovanjem

10 WALLIS, Roger & MALM, Christoph, *Big sounds from small peoples: The music industry of small countries*, London, Constable and Company Ltd. 1984.

glasbe kot aktivnosti v času - ki se poenostavlja kot zgodovina ali vanjo uvaja z aktom zapisovanja - se prispevek ukvarja z "razpokami", ki so vidne na mejah "ljudskega" in "umetniškega", a tudi na mejah medijev, v katerih se uresničujejo prehodi med različnimi praksami. Temeljno tezo, po kateri zgodovina glasbenega zapisa ni zgodovina glasbe, se skuša določiti na podlagi sprememb v razumevanju često uporabljenih, vendar nekritično razumljenih pojmov, kakršni so kontekst, starodavnost pa tudi sama tradicija. Ob predlogu, da naj bi tako etnomuzikologija kot muzikologija hevristično uporabili etnografsko metodo, se avtorica ne zavzema za brisanje razlik med obema disciplinama - že zato, ker ne verjame, da obstajajo, ampak zagovarja iskanje kar najbolj kakovostnega in obenem kar najmanj vnaprej "pričakovanega" dialoga med (etno)muzikologi in njihovimi temami.