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## The Art of Combining Tones: The Music Concept

### The Cocktail Party

“The art of combining tones.” This is how some dictionaries begin their definitions of music. But in American society, beyond the “harmless drudges,” few people can actually define music, and they certainly differ greatly in what they think is significant about music. Let me reconstruct a cocktail party conversation about 1975 that began when I confessed to working in ethnomusicology. “Studying American Indian music!” says one amazed person. “I didn’t know they even had music.” I try patiently to explain. “Oh yes, I knew they had chants, but is that really music?” From an elderly gentleman: “I spent a year in Africa, heard a lot of singing and drumming, but that isn’t music, is it? After all, they don’t write it down, maybe they just make it up as they go along, they don’t really know what they are doing.” More explanation. A lady joins in the conversation: “A few days ago, I heard some ancient music from the Middle East which didn’t sound at all unpleasant. The commentator said it sounded good because, after all, it is from the cradle of our own civilization.” A young man has added himself. “But these sounds that some peoples in Asia make with their instruments and voices, or the Indian chants, can you call them music? To me, they don’t sound like music. For example, they don’t have harmony.” And the old gentleman: “My teenage grandsons play their records all day, but hardly any of them sound like music to me.”

(Time for that second Scotch.)

For the reader of these pages I don’t have to repeat my answers. Actually, twenty years later, the guests would have been a bit more broad-minded.

They might have heard a good bit of “world music” emanating from their teenagers’ bedroom and they would have heard the didjeridu in Australian films. They might have questioned whether the motor in George Antheil’s “Airplane Sonata” was music and expressed doubts about the musicness of rap. Their increased tolerance would please me, but they wouldn’t have solved the ethnomusicologist’s first problem.

We claim to study music, and if we’ve become sufficiently broad-minded, all societies have something that sounds to us like music, but the point is that there is no interculturally valid conceptualization or definition of music. Very few societies have a concept (and a term) parallel to the European “music.” They may instead have taxonomies whose borders cut across the universe of humanly organized sound in totally different ways from those of Western societies. Studying any musical culture should surely require an understanding of its definition and conceptualization of music, but for a long time that issue was not frequently brought out into the open, at least before Merriam (1964: 27–28) attacked it. Before making a quick survey, let’s look at some difficulties into which we run even at home.

Imagine yourself coming from a foreign culture, or that you’re an ethnomusicologist from Venus or Mars, the absolute outsider. You might quickly discover that in a complex society one can find definitions of important concepts in at least three ways: by asking the society’s own “expert,” who has thought about it long and hard (or perhaps you could look in the dictionary); by asking members of the society at large in order to determine whether there is a consensus (possibly using a questionnaire and distributing it widely); and by observing what people do, and listening to what they say to each other (for example, by going to concerts and record stores, or maybe attending cocktail parties).

Many music dictionaries published in Europe and North America avoid the definition of music in its most fundamental sense. Wisely, perhaps, their authors assume that the readers know what they, and the people with whom they associate, think music is. The editors of the 1980 edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* omitted it, but thought better of it in the 2001 (i.e., second) edition, presenting an article that looks at the concept from the perspective of different cultures but begins somewhat lamely by just designating music as “the principal subject of this [encyclopedia].” The old *Harvard Dictionary* (Apel 1969: 548) under “Music” discusses the phenomenon without giving a definition, and the 1986 edition, maybe to avoid a can of worms, dropped it again.

Language dictionaries can’t escape so easily. In the *Oxford English Dic-*

*tionary*, music is “that one of the fine arts which is concerned with the combination of sounds with a view to beauty of form and the expression of thought or feeling.” A work directed to young students, *Webster’s Intermediate Dictionary*, says that it is “the art of combining tones so that they are pleasing, expressive, or intelligible.” In these and other dictionaries, including those of other European languages, music is discussed in terms of tones (which Western thinkers on music consider to be its basic building blocks), beauty and intelligibility (relating to music as art and as science), and expressiveness (giving the sense that music is a kind of communication). This appears to be a consensus of the intelligentsia of Western culture, but there are societies and musics where these criteria make no sense at all.

So much for “authorities.” What now do people in a typical American town or city who have not made a specialty of this field consider music to be? I have no systematic surveys to cite, but here’s what I learned from some informal interviews of urban Americans who were not musicians, in the 1960s (Nettl 1963) and the 1980s. They weren’t ready with outright definitions, but when pushed, they appeared to believe that almost any sound is potentially musical. They quickly started telling me what was “good” or “boring” music, and what they liked (see also Russell 1993). It may seem fatuous to point this out, but since some cultures see it differently, music seems to Americans to be innately a “good” thing, and therefore it is probably good for a sound or even silence to be accepted potentially as a component of music. Sounds that are “good” are sounds that may be included in the music concept. Thus the sound of coins about to be paid is “music to my ears,” a person whose speech one likes is said to have a “musical voice,” and a language whose sound one dislikes is called “unmusical.”

At the same time, Americans think of music as something associated with particular social contexts, such as concerts, and thus any sound produced in a concert is likely to be considered music. If asked to consider the matter, many people accept any sound as music, including animal sounds, industrial noises, and of course any of a vast number of humanly produced sounds made on instruments, with the body, and with the voice, including speech. Twentieth-century Americans like music, and they like to feel that much of their world can somehow be related to music.

For the third approach to studying definitions, let’s return to the cocktail party, this time masquerading as fieldworkers, trying to use what we hear to construct some idea of the conceptualization of music that this society holds when its members are not being asked artificially to consider the matter carefully. I had to defend my interest in non-Western music because my friends

wondered whether it was actually music. There is a curious disparity in what people include under the heading of music when given time to consider the question (when they exhibit broad tolerance) and what they will accept when giving quick reactions (when they are more narrow-minded). Fieldworkers early on learn this major lesson: They may get one kind of answer when asking a question that would normally have no place in the culture and another when observing the society’s behavior. And we may note rather different approaches from formal statements by authorities, informal interviews, and observing ordinary conversations. Of the three, the cocktail party conversation may give us the most reliable perspective of the way urban, middle-class Americans actually use the concept of music in their lives.

They weren’t interested in defining music, but in their questions, my friends divulged some of the criteria they ordinarily use by telling me what characteristics the activity and sounds they call “music” should have in order to be accepted as true and proper music. “Indians have only chants, not music,” suggests that a certain level of complexity, as it is perceived by these listeners, is a necessary feature. What my friends colloquially called “chants” have only a few pitches and no harmony, and that kind of sound is not fully acceptable to them as music. Western urban society can conceive of music without a background of chords, or without two or more simultaneous sounds, but considers this texture as clearly exceptional. “Normal” music must have harmony, or at least some kind of rhythmic accompaniment. Here is another component in our exercise: Music must have certain traits in order to be acceptable, but some of them need be present only in the mainstream of a repertory. Minority repertories (e.g., traditional folk singing, Gregorian chant) in which they are absent are nevertheless accepted. In some societies the components are reversed. Thus, in certain Native American musics there were evidently some few songs that had harmony (Keeling 1992; Nettl 1961). While these were accepted as part of the musical material of the culture, the use of harmony was not extended to the mainstream of what these peoples themselves called “Indian music.”

The idea that music is intrinsically good and pleasant was suggested in my interviews and in some of the dictionary definitions, and, indeed, my friends at that party brought it up as well, expecting music to be pleasing. Music is in itself a good and positive value, and with this goes the belief that we should enjoy its sound. Confronted with something whose sound they disliked, my friends tended to question whether it could even be music. Music critics have reacted thus to experiments in Western music. As a related point, the dictionaries implied that music must normally be composed and notated by individuals who are trained and who give thought to their work. The idea of

preconceived structure, of music being something created by people who know what they are doing, was also important to my friends, and is tied to the more formal definition of music as a science. The significance of this criterion explains much of how Western urban society understands musical structure and activity of the past and present. Among other things, it explains at least in part why Western polite society considers “composition” to be nobler than “improvisation,” which, in music dictionaries, is more craft than art.

Perhaps most intriguing is the skepticism that my friends at the cocktail party displayed over the possibility of another culture having music at all. They were not surprised at the existence of sounds such as singing, but they had second thoughts about calling it “music.” This reaction has several possible implications. First, it is conceivable that my friends, and our society, regard music as so important to our way of life that they cannot see quite how another society could also have it. We are, after all, a rather ethnocentric lot. Music, being a priori a “good” thing, must belong exclusively to ours, the only truly “good” culture. Second, our tendency in Western society is to feel that other peoples do not know how to do anything properly if they have not adopted our way of doing it. In our technology we require computers; in agriculture, crop rotation; in political structure, democracy of a sort; in marriage, monogamy. Slash-and-burn agriculture, theocracy, polygamy may not really count as proper cultural systems. And, in the case of music, the implication would be that if a society does not have at least the central components of our kind of music, it may not truly have music, just as a society would not be considered to have marriage in a sense acceptable to us (North American “Anglos”) if it permitted polygamy or incest. My friends, who love their own music, may know better; but they could not get themselves to quite admit that other cultures have something so close to their hearts as music. Or, to put it more bluntly, they may have doubted that the world’s “savages” can have created something which is so valuable as music. To be sure, this viewpoint played more of a role in 1975 than it would thirty years later, and it has been rapidly receding in the last few decades, the result of tourism, concerts by musicians from everywhere, and the “world music” movement.

There are some obvious contradictions between the formal conceptualizations of music in our society and these that were informally derived. Dictionaries stress tones, but my friends stress harmony. The dictionaries imply that music is somehow a universal language, whereas my friends hold that it is culture-specific. But the definitions agree in some respects. Music is “pleasant” to my friends, “expressive” to the authorities; it is an art and a sci-

ence in the dictionaries, and to my friends, something in which one must be skilled and therefore produce something complicated.

Amazing, what one can learn at a cocktail party.

### Do They Really Have Music?

If we have trouble defining and conceptualizing music in our own culture, it’s even harder to analyze the concept in cultures to which we are strangers. Even within one society a particular sound may be regarded as musical in one context and nonmusical in another (see, e.g., Robertson 1977: 35–40). But not so fast: European languages too have differences in terminology which indicate a variety of ways of seeing the shape of music. In German, *Musik* means “music” in general, but *Tonkunst*, glossed as “musics,” is used to refer to classical music (typically, though, music of the German-, French-, and Italian-speaking nations). In Czech, though the terms overlap, *muzika* means vernacular music, mainly instrumental; *hudba* means classical or academic music. Actually, most languages of the world don’t have a term to encompass music as a total phenomenon. Instead, they often have words for individual musical activities or artifacts such as singing, playing, song, religious song, secular song, dance, and many more obscure categories. Until recently, most ethnomusical studies did not speak to the question of the definition or conception of music in any one society, taking for granted the existence of the concept, even in the absence of an actual term for music. Merriam (1967a: 3, 1964: 3–84) discusses this matter at length, and there are some classic studies of the terminology and taxonomy of individual cultures by Zemp (1979), Feld (1982), Al-Faruqi (1985–86), and Rowell (1992).

The absence of a general term for music doesn’t necessarily mean that there’s no music concept, but the way in which terms appear in discourse about music may tell us about the configuration of the concept. According to Ames and King (1971: ix; also Ames 1973b: 132), the Hausa of Nigeria have no term for music; there is a word, *musika*, derived from the Arabic and ultimately the Greek word, which is used for a very restricted body of music. But evidently many musical activities in which the Hausa engage are more important as components of a variety of cultural contexts, and thus verbally more associated with these, than understood as a complex of structurally similar phenomena. The same seems to be true of Native American societies that have no word to tie together all musical activities. The Blackfoot have a word,

*paskan*, that can roughly be translated as “dance,” which includes music and ceremony and is used to refer to religious and semireligious events that comprise music, dance, and other activities; but this word would not include certain musical activities, such as gambling, that have no dancing at all. They have a word for “song” but not one for instrumental music. A similar attitude, incidentally, may have been traditional in India; the word *sangit* or a derivative of it is used to translate “music” rather accurately, but the term may also include dance. According to McAllester (1954: 4), the Navajo have no word for music or for musical instruments. Keil (1979: 27–29) searched in vain for a specific term for music in a dozen languages of West Africa.

Although a society has a word roughly translatable as music, that word may include things we in Western urban society, despite our own loose definition, do not include as musical, and it may specifically exclude other phenomena that we regard as music. For example, the Persian term now generally used to translate “music” is *musiqi*, borrowed from Arabic. It refers, though, primarily to instrumental music, yet includes certain vocal music. But vocal music in general is mainly called *khāndan*, a word translated as “reading,” “reciting,” and “singing.” The singing of the Koran, whose structure and sound are not very different from the singing of secular classical and folk music, is not admitted as belonging to *musiqi*, nor is the recitation of prayer or the muezzin’s call to prayer. The reason for excluding the most specifically religious singing from the main category of “music” has to do with the opinion in Muslim law that music is in certain ways an undesirable and even sinful activity and that as a concept it must be kept separate from religion. One of the first acts of the Ayatollah Khomeini upon proclaiming the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 was to outlaw certain kinds of secular music. On the other hand, the singing of the nightingale, a paradigm of beauty, is regarded by Persians as at least closely related to human singing and, indeed, as a model for it. The Iranian classification (which coincides generally with others in the Islamic Middle East) is therefore overlapping. Instrumental music is *musiqi*, Koran singing and prayer are *khāndan*, and folk song, popular song, classical vocal music, and the nightingale are in both categories. The barking of dogs is in neither (see Farhat 1990: 121; Al-Faruqi 1985–86; Shiloah 1995).

According to Merriam (1964: 64–65), the Basongye of Zaire include as music what Westerners regard as singing, exclude bird song, and are not sure about the status of whistling and humming. Keil, on the other hand (1979: 28–30), questions the possibility of deriving such a definition where, as among the Basongye, there are no terms to correspond to “music,” “sound,” and “noise” and points out that, among the Tiv of Nigeria, a large set of specific terms substitute for our holistic idea of music.

By the same token, Western society, in its Anglo-American form, may appear quite arbitrary in what it includes as music. Birds sing, we say, but not donkeys and dogs (although the latter, to a dog lover, might well produce “music to my ears,” reinforcing our contention that music symbolizes goodness and happiness). The sounds made by dolphins, acoustically as similar to human music as is bird song, are said to be “language” (see Truitt 1974: 387–92, also Sebeok 1977: 794–808, and several essays in Wallin, Marker, and Brown 2000), but the sound of birds, which also acts as communication, is not. Among the sounds produced by humans, it is clear that we are similarly arbitrary. The sound of a machine is not music unless it is produced in a concert with a program that lists its “composer” and with an audience which applauds (or at least boos). In the academic “new music” culture, even the presentation of art works on slides, in a concert listed as a general musical event, may be treated as musical composition by an audience. Examples are legion; but clearly, each society has its unique conception of music and a terminology to reflect the conception.

### What Is This Thing Called Music?

Here are a couple of thoughts relevant but somewhat tangential to the definition of music per se. First, the value of music in a society may be a major factor in determining the breadth of its definition of music. Second, the widely held view of music as merely a kind of sound is a basis of operations too narrow for acceptance by ethnomusicologists.

Obviously, all cultures regard music as at least minimally valuable, but to some it is supremely valuable, and to others a more or less necessary evil. For example, the Blackfoot people traditionally believed that they could not live without their songs, for these were a major component in the relationship of humans to the supernatural. Members of certain Muslim societies in the Middle East like music but may worry that there is something wrong with that state of affairs and thus relegate much of it to low status (see, e.g., Engel 1987; Shiloah 1995; Zonis 1973: 7). The Basongye value music itself but then proceed to degrade its practitioners (Merriam 1973: 268), something also true of the Hausa of Nigeria, who accord musicians low social status while allowing some of them a high standard of living (Ames 1973b: 155–56). Modern urban Americans, as I have said, typically consider music a good thing but not, at least theoretically, as something essential to life. Certain societies regard music as something specific to humans (Blacking 1971: 37, 71; Merriam 1964: 64), while others such as the Havasupai (Hinton 1967–68, 1984) would

assert that other beings, spirits, the supernatural, or animals, may also produce music. To the Blackfoot, mythical animals sing, but animals in real life do not (Nettl 1989a: 58–65).

These may be interesting observations, but one may ask what they have to do with defining and delimiting the concept of music. As a hypothesis, I suggest that a society which considers music to be valuable may include a great deal within its conception of music, but it places ceremonial activities and dance in the same category of thought, unafraid to put things with music that might, to a member of another society, appear to be not obviously musical. Unlike stereotypical Middle Easterners, people in such a society regard music as a good thing and do not fear for the integrity and reputation of whatever else is included. In Western society music is associated with good and with happiness. Sounds that somehow symbolize happiness to us (e.g., bird song) are called musical, while those we consider unhappy or neutral (again the barking dogs) are not. But the concept of music is metaphorically extended by Europeans to the whistling wind, musical speech, and the orchestration of political strategy, and by some American Indian peoples to the supernatural sources of creation. By contrast, Middle Eastern Muslims, according to music lower value, appear to wish to restrict the concept by excluding its religious forms. The point to be contemplated is that perhaps societies do not first develop the concept of music and then decide upon its attributes but, rather, faced with the existence of musical sound, accord it function and thus value, and then proceed to build a definition of the concept, using value as a criterion.

Members of Western society often define music with specific reference only to the sounds one hears and to their representation in written notation. But ethnomusicologists have reason to define music more broadly. Merriam, asserting that “music” is more than just sound, provided a model grouping of three areas equally central to ethnomusicological work, labeling them concept, behavior, and sound (Merriam 1964: 32–33). Concept involves the way people think about music in the broadest terms, considering, for example, what power it has, what value, what fundamental function; behavior includes the musical and nonmusical acts of musicians, the activities that precede, follow, and accompany the production of sound; thus sound, which we usually call the music “itself,” is in this context no more the primary focus of attention than the other parts of the tripartite model. Merriam regarded the three components as equally deriving from and feeding into each other; but I’m inclined to think that “concept” is primary, in the sense that the ideas people have determines what they do, which in turn determines the nature

of the sonic product. But for sure, the way we in ethnomusicology conceptualize music determines in part the definition of ethnomusicology.

### The Gluttonous Ethnomusicologist

Despite all of these definitional problems, musicologists and ethnomusicologists seem to have little trouble agreeing on the things that are within their purview for study. Defining the concept of music is basic to any understanding and study of the subject, but it is not, after all, the ultimate aim of the ethnomusicologist. The task is more properly one of studying the definitions provided by the world’s musical cultures in order to shed light on their way of conceiving of music. Even so, we need a working definition that states with what phenomena we should deal. In practical terms, ethnomusicologists seem to have arrived at such a definition from two assumptions: (1) All societies have music. (2) All humans can identify music—though not necessarily understand it—when they hear it. So what do ethnomusicologists consider fair game? Maybe the rules are these: When they find that a “musical” sound is considered speech, ethnomusicologists nevertheless include it in their area of study. When the concept of music does not appear to exist in a culture, or when it is extremely restricted so that certain phenomena considered to be music by the ethnomusicologist’s own culture fall outside it, these phenomena are accepted as music too. When a society includes in its purview of music something that Western ethnomusicologists do not recognize as music, they also accept this for study, perhaps with certain reservations.

Having frequently served on the program committees of ethnomusicological societies, I do not remember that a paper was ever considered as unacceptable simply because the committee did not think that it was about music. Ethnomusicologists as a group take a broad view, accepting everything conceivable into their scope of study. Having decided that one must look at the conceptualization of music in each culture and consider the possibility that such a thing is not even extant in some societies, they have nevertheless decided for themselves that all cultures have music. They have discovered that all cultures have forms of sound communication other than their spoken language, and much of this is arbitrarily accepted as music. Defining music as human sound communication outside the scope of spoken language makes it possible for us to include, for musical study, such “nonmusical” events as Koran reading, African drum signaling, whale and dolphin sounds, and Mexican Indian whistle speech, all of which have appeared in the journal *Ethnomusicology*.

There's a bit of gluttony here, its function maybe to avoid ethnocentrism, but the avoidance turns out to be only partial. Insisting that they know what music is, ethnomusicologists then automatically include in their work anything that sounds to them like music, yet they may only grudgingly include sounds that don't fit the model their own culture provides them. Wachsmann said it more elegantly (1971b: 384): "I could say to myself that those phenomena outside my own immediate culture to which I now attach the label 'music' because I recognize and acknowledge them to be music, are merely so labeled because, rightly or wrongly, they seem to me to *resemble* the phenomena which I am in the habit of calling music in my home ground."

It may be sad to realize that it's almost impossible to get away from ethnocentrism, that it's in the nature of culture to be ethnocentric. Ethnomusicology as understood in Western culture is in fact a Western phenomenon. We will have occasion to talk about the world's "ethnomusicologies," but they are varieties of a species united by its background in Western. Ironically, non-Western musical scholarship, such as the theoretical traditions of India, Japan, China, and so on, and the theoretical systems in the oral traditions of all culture are regarded as material for ethnomusicological research rather than ethnomusicology in itself; but traditionally, Western musical scholarship has normally not been similarly considered. With all of its pejorative connotations, ethnocentrism has its uses. To respect all cultures and to study them on their own terms is desirable, but to strive for an interculturally valid approach *equally* derived from all of the world's societies may not work. To regard all languages as equally expressive is a valuable view, to which I readily subscribe. But it does not necessarily lead to the adoption of Esperanto.

Each society divides the world it knows into realms, domains, and categories. In Western society we recognize language, literary art, music, dance, and drama as more or less separable domains for which we have developed independent scholarly disciplines: linguistics, literary scholarship, musicology, art history, choreology. If there are societies that draw the lines at different points or not at all, they have or will have developed other intellectual ways of viewing their culture, ways that correspond to their conceptual classifications, and, like ethnomusicologists in the West, they see the rest of the world through their own eyes, hoping that some insights will come to them from what is also inevitably an essentially ethnocentric approach. Thus, if ethnomusicologists have developed a definition of music for themselves, one that doesn't necessarily correspond to the definitions used by other realms of thought, that definition must nevertheless be part and parcel of the Western background of the field.

# 3

## Inspiration and Perspiration: The Creative Process

### Three Continuums

How does new music come into existence? Schubert is said to have composed a song while waiting to be served at a restaurant, quickly writing it on the back of the menu; Mozart turned out some of his serenades and sonatas almost overnight; and Theodore Last Star, a Blackfoot singer and medicine man, had visions in each of which, in the space of a minute or two, he learned from a guardian spirit a new song. But Brahms labored for years on his first symphony; Beethoven planned and sketched ideas for his Ninth for over two decades; and William Shakespear, an Arapaho, said that when he took a motif from one song, something from another, and a phrase from a third, thus making up a new Peyote song, it might take him a good part of an afternoon. The xylophonist of a Chopi orchestra made up music as he went along, but he was constrained by rules articulated by his leader (Tracey 1948: 109). The great North Indian sitarist sits down before his audience and creates a performance of new music on the spot, but he can only do this because for hours every day he practices exercises that he has memorized, and he maintains in his mind a musical vocabulary on which he can draw, and a group of rules that tell him, once he has selected a raga, what he must, may, or cannot do. A Kentucky mountaineer in about 1910 sang "The Two Sisters" in a tavern, his friends admiring a new twist in the refrain but insisting that only he can sing the song correctly. And the overjoyed Bach-lover after the cello recital exclaims, "She's never played like this before, she makes the Suite live as does no one else."

In some sense, each of these musicians has created music, but music schol-

# The Study of Ethnomusicology

Thirty-one Issues and Concepts

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