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Bruno Nettl's *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-one Issues and Concepts: An Essay Review*

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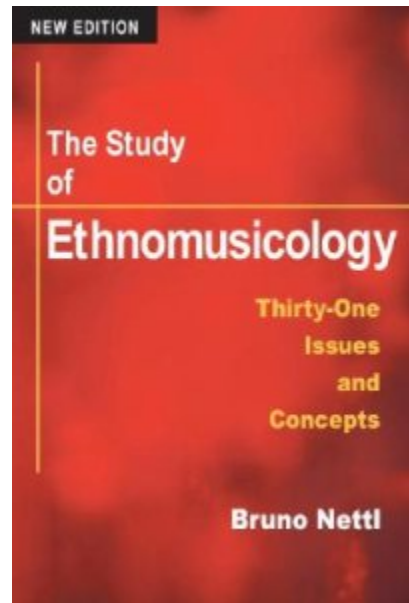
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This review examines Bruno Nettl's *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-one Issues and Concepts*, a newly redeveloped and expanded version of his classic introduction to the field.¹ Ethnomusicology is a field of study that examines musical practices internationally from a social science perspective. It is especially influenced by the theories and methods of cultural anthropology. Bruno Nettl is widely recognized as the leading scholar in this field. Regarding this new version of his influential book, Nettl writes the following in its Preface:

“there are four new (or newish) chapters: chapter 14, on fieldwork in one's own culture; chapter 17, on the writing of ethnography; chapter 26 on organology, and chapter 28, a very brief survey of women's music and women in musical culture and ethnomusicology” (p. xii).

Nettl also mentions that more content has been included throughout the book related to “power relations, ethics, minorities, diasporas, scholarship in non-European nations, nationalism, globalization, and other issues of current interest” (p. xii). These are all topics that have become increasingly important in the field of ethnomusicology over the 22 years since the first version of Nettl’s book was published.

This is an important book that merits the attention of scholars across a diversity arts fields for its depiction of how traditional artistic expression may be understood in the context of human life. This review will discuss the unique strengths and relevance of particular sections in the book for scholars in the arts, and will also make a balanced attempt to offer a few criticisms.² The review will focus especially on the newer chapters, and then proceed to consideration of the implications for international arts educators.



First will be a description of the book’s organization, followed by discussion of content and style. This book consists of four parts comprising 100 to 120 pages, each of which is divided into 6 to 9 chapters, for a total of 31 chapters plus References and an Index. The four parts are entitled as follows:

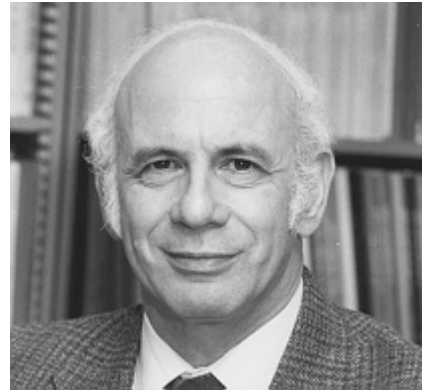
- (1) The Musics of the World
- (2) In the Field
- (3) In Human Culture
- (4) In All Varieties

The first part examines ontological and epistemological issues in ethnomusicology, essentially defining the field and delineating its objectives and theoretical scope. The second part outlines key issues in the practice of ethnomusicological fieldwork. The third part is structured around the theme of culture, providing insightful discussion of various aspects of the culture concept as well as the role of music in society. The fourth section takes diversity as its fundamental trope, exploring the role of diversity in recent ethnomusicological scholarship. Within each of these major sections is several chapters, and it seems useful here to focus discussion on the newest chapters that Nettl has produced specifically for this revised edition.

One of the newer chapters is entitled “You Call That Fieldwork?: Redefining the ‘Field’” (pp. 184-196). In this chapter, Nettl reflects on how ethnomusicologists have gradually shifted in recent decades from studying musical traditions that are remote and

“exotic” (due to the field’s anthropological lineage) toward emphasizing contemporary popular music genres and the music of minorities and diaspora communities in the context of modern industrial societies. In a section of this chapter entitled “The Names on the Building”, Nettl reflects on findings from his own previous ethnography of music education in an American university.³ He interprets this familiar environment as “a religious and social system ruled by the personalities, compositions, and principles (as we imagine them) of a few great composers” (p.191).

With later sections entitled “From Rose Bowl to Gamelan” and “Tourists and Pilgrims”, Nettl concludes this chapter by discussing both the development of world music ensembles in schools and the role of music in cultural tourism. This chapter clearly demonstrates that ethnographic studies of music in one’s community can be sufficient to produce new and valuable knowledge. Surely local fieldwork may also be a useful way of developing new insights into practices in other arts fields, such as dance and drama.⁴



Bruno Nettl

Another one of the newer chapters is entitled “The Meat-and-Potatoes Book: Musical Ethnography” (pp. 232-243). In this chapter, Nettl discusses the process of writing ethnography, reviewing both classic and modern approaches to assembling an ethnomusicological monograph, with particular attention to the various ways studies are framed by their authors. In the last section of this chapter, entitled “Points of Entry”, Nettl discusses how effective studies have taken a diversity of approaches, from focusing on a single influential musician, to a specific genre, a particular issue within a tradition, or the ways that music has changed over time, or even becoming “a kind of travelogue, a thoughtful account of a journey through the area” (p.242). Similar approaches could certainly be used to explore other performing arts traditions in the context of schools and community organizations.

One of the new chapters, entitled “The Creatures of Jubal: Instruments”, discusses organology, the study of musical instruments (pp. 376-387). According to Hebrew scripture, all musicians are descendents of Jubal, an ancient Hebrew lyre and pipe player. Nettl notes that the social rules governing the use of instruments indicate much about cultural values and call for careful investigation by ethnomusicologists. He also examines the development of scholarly classification systems for musical instruments and the role of instrument collections within museums. Dance and drama traditions throughout the world often feature elaborate props, sets, costumes, and other aspects of material culture that, like instruments, are collected for description, categorization and interpretation.

Such collections may face similar issues and challenges for scholarly analysis in terms of conceptual equivalence across cultures.

The final new chapter in Nettl's book is entitled "I'm a Stranger Here Myself: Women's Music, Women in Music" and concerns the role of music in women's lives and the important contribution women scholars have made to the field of ethnomusicology, both past and present (pp. 404-418). Similarly, women have contributed greatly to research on dance and drama, and have generally taken stronger leadership in these fields than most other areas of the academy. Nettl's discussion is quite illuminating regarding the role of gender in arts scholarship, and makes reference to many recent trends and contributions of relevance.

Since many *IJEA* readers are educators, another section of this book that deserves special mention is chapter 27, "How Do You Get To Carnegie Hall?: Teaching and Learning" (pp. 388-403). In this chapter, Nettl explores several issues related to education and cultural transmission. He acknowledges that research on this topic is "an area in which music educators with a commitment to ethnomusicology have played an important role" (p. 390). Nettl concludes the chapter by examining the complex issue of authenticity in multicultural music education, illustrated through a description of his recent impressions upon observing American school children performing a Native American song.⁵

Throughout the book, Nettl consistently writes in a compelling and engaging original style that is rich in pithy anecdotes and subtle humor. Not only is Nettl an unusually thorough and prolific scholar, but a masterful communicator who is able to effectively synthesize and convey both the importance of key issues and the current state of diverse scholarship across this fascinating field. This remarkable book is a uniquely insightful – even monumental – achievement, which makes the task of producing some valid criticisms quite difficult. Still, despite the assertions of some theologians, it is unlikely that any substantial book has ever been published entirely free of errors, and this one is no exception. There are some minor typographical issues. From the references, Andrew Killick might appear to be a specialist in the chanting of the Koran (rather than Korean music), and Japanese ethnomusicologist Tokumaru would probably disagree with each of the spellings offered for his first name. More importantly, some readers may detect a slight overemphasis on discussion of the work of ethnomusicologists whose careers are already firmly established at leading North American universities. This is understandable, as Nettl is a central figure in the development of ethnomusicology in the USA, has a long and distinguished track record as an outstanding mentor, and many of his former students – and their students – hold teaching appointments with renowned American universities. Yet some of the more interesting ethnomusicologists affiliated

with institutions outside North America are not mentioned, and little attention is given to recent and noteworthy contributions from the youngest generation of ethnomusicologists. The task of keeping informed of the latest international findings in one's field is a formidable challenge for even the greatest of scholars, but new technologies are exponentially improving the convenience of access to current research across all academic areas.

There is also minimal discussion of theories and findings from other areas of music scholarship within the book, which may reflect a general tendency within ethnomusicology across recent decades. Compared with related fields such as linguistics or music psychology, ethnomusicology remains relatively undeveloped in terms of theoretical systems for comparative study of many aspects of musical discourse and behavior. Ethnomusicologists often interpret fieldwork data through the paradigms of anthropologists and even social theorists who wrote very little about music (e.g. Althusser, de Certeau, Bakhtin, Derrida, etc.) rather than via highly-relevant theories from academic siblings such as music psychology, sociology of music, philosophy of music, and music education research.⁶ In fact, many ethnomusicologists, though deeply knowledgeable regarding their particular cultures or genres of expertise, appear to be essentially unaware of developments in other areas of music scholarship that could potentially enrich the theoretical insights of ethnomusicology. Some recent publications have begun to bridge this gap, and there are signs that the situation is beginning to improve.⁷ It seems clear that all areas of music scholarship have been enriched by findings from ethnomusicology in recent generations, and have moved toward adopting a more global and culturally-aware perspective. Thus, now it might be helpful if leading ethnomusicologists were to acknowledge this development and advocate for greater awareness of relevant theories and findings from other music disciplines among ethnomusicologists.⁸ Still, one of the objectives of this book is to define the field of ethnomusicology; Hence, Nettl may have intentionally limited the scope of his discussion to exemplary studies that he considers to best fit within the mainstream of this field.

Despite this attempt at providing some criticism, it should be clear that Nettl's latest book is well worth careful examination, and arguably provides the finest single-author overview of the field available. The diverse readers of *International Journal of Education and the Arts* should note that drama, dance, and other arts media are strongly linked to music, and may be insightfully studied using approaches similar to ethnomusicology. In fact, most of the issues Nettl describes in this book are highly relevant to scholarship within other performing arts, and the concepts examined in his newest chapters echo recent trends also seen in the scholarship of dance, drama, new media, and related fields. Finally, Nettl's latest book may offer timeless lessons regarding scholarly writing. Nettl writes with great precision and clarity, supporting each of his

points with ample data, never hiding behind his own words. Unfortunately, not all arts scholars have done the same. The “pomo” style of arcane and acrobatic scholarly writing (bravely critiqued by Sarkissian)⁹ was popular among award-winning ethnomusicologists in the 1990s, yet Nettl’s book embodies a strong counter-example, revealing the inherent impotence of contrived approaches that are unlikely to be embraced by future generations. Rather, clarity and relevance have been rediscovered, qualities that have always been associated with Nettl’s writings. Perhaps Nettl would cringe at the thought of having the ostentatious label “post-pomo” applied to his scholarly output, yet this description may be apt considering that he seems to have always been steps ahead of his peers. *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-one Issues and Concepts* confirms beyond doubt that Bruno Nettl is a unique visionary whose perennial insights will continue to define the field of ethnomusicology for many years to come. His latest book will surely provide international educators and researchers across the arts with inspiration and new ideas applicable to theory and practice in their respective fields.

Notes

- 1) The original version of this book (1983) was given a lukewarm review in Carol E. Robertson, “The Study of Ethnomusicology: Twenty-nine Issues and Concepts (Review)” *Ethnomusicology*, 29, no. 2 (1985), 337-380. It has since become one of the most popular books in the field, widely cited and used as a foundations text in university courses.
- 2) It would be an exaggeration to refer to Bruno Nettl as my friend, which places me in a good position to be fairly objective in reviewing his latest book. I had the privilege once of briefly serving as his assistant during a week-long summer course on improvisation that he taught several years ago at University of Washington. During that time I had coffee with Nettl at Seattle’s *Silver Cloud Inn*, where we discussed the theme that would become the subject of my doctoral dissertation. I recall that his suggestions were quite helpful and even inspiring.
- 3) See Bruno Nettl, *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995). Nettl has also published several education-related articles and book chapters through the International Society for Music Education.
- 4) Notable examples of such research may be found in Liora Bresler, ed. *International Handbook of Research in Arts Education* (New York: Springer, 2006).

- 5) Probably the most useful resources currently available on this topic are Bennett Reimer, *World Musics in Music Education: Facing the Issues* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2002) and Patricia Shehan Campbell, et al eds. *Cultural Diversity in Music Education: Directions and Challenges for the 21st Century* (Queensland: Australian Academic Press, 2005).
- 6) The relevant work of music psychologists (David Hargreaves, John Sloboda, Jane Davidson, Diana Deutsche, Donald Hodges), music sociologists (Howard Becker, Tia DeNora, John Shepherd, Robert Faulkner), music historians and cultural studies scholars (Trevor Herbert, Robert Walser, Richard Middleton, Gary Tomlinson), music philosophers (Stephen Davies, Kathleen Higgins, Philip Alperson, Jerrold Levinson), and music educationists (Gary McPherson, Liora Bresler, Lucy Green, Richard Colwell) comes to mind.
- 7) Noteworthy examples include Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton, eds. *The Cultural Study of Music* (New York: Routledge, 2003), Patrik N. Juslin and John A. Sloboda, eds. *Music and Emotion: Theory and Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), Nils L. Wallin, Bjorn Merker, and Steven Brown, eds. *The Origins of Music* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), Nicholas Cook and Mark Everest, eds. *Rethinking Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), Eric Clarke and Nicholas Cook, eds. *Empirical Musicology: Aims, Methods, Prospects* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), and Gary McPherson, ed. *The Child as Musician: A Handbook of Musical Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- 8) For discussion of this issue see Catherine Szego, "Music Transmission and Learning" in *The New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning*, ed. R. Colwell and C. Richardson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 707-729.
- 9) "Pomo" is a euphemism for postmodernist, a term often used to categorize a genre of scholarly writing that is known for being vague and impenetrable. The potential dangers of this writing technique are epitomized by Allan Sokal's much discussed article "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" *Social Text* 46/47, 14, no. 1 (1996), 217-252. Also see Margaret Sarkissian, "Music, Modernity, and the Global Imagination: South Africa and the West (Review)" *Ethnomusicology*, 45, no. 2 (2001), 355-356.

Author Profile



David G. Hebert (PhD, University of Washington) is an Assistant Professor with the Boston University School of Music, where he teaches graduate seminars and coordinates the online graduate programs in music education. He is also Associate Editor of *Research in New Zealand Performing Arts*. David's cross-cultural research interests include creativity, transculturation, competition, and policy in music education. His forthcoming book describes Japanese school bands and the world's largest music competition.

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