

Applied Ethnomusicology: Bridging Research and Action¹

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THE ACTIVIST RESEARCHER

This article provides a brief sketch of how scholars may be actively involved in conflict transformation efforts using music or the arts beyond their purely artistic connotations. Here I will explore the ways in which music has been employed in some ethnomusicological projects based on my personal experiences, which can hopefully stimulate debate and provide some ideas for other scholars in different branches of humanities and social sciences.

I would argue that scholars should at least occasionally break away from a position of contemplative self-sufficiency, the so-called ivory tower of academia, and efficiently employ their knowledge and understanding of music in the broadest sense for the betterment of humanity. In ethnomusicology, such pragmatic involvements represent a growing field commonly known as “applied ethnomusicology”. The two projects presented here, the project *Azra* and the project *Kosovo Roma*, employ several concepts derived from applied scholarship. These ideas draw on a relevant theoretical precedent in the field of anthropology, where concepts such as adjustment, administration, action, and advocacy are particularly pertinent (see Spradley and McCurdy 2000). They are also informed by practices in applied ethnomusicology, such as developing new performance frames, feeding back musical models to the communities that created them, providing communities with access to strategic models and techniques, and developing structural solutions to broad problems (see Sheehy 1992). Both projects are related, although in different ways, to the succession of wars that erupted in the territories of what was Yugoslavia. One of the projects was conceptualized far from the war-torn territories, in Norway, while the other was meant to take place in the former Yugoslav province of Kosovo. In both cases, music was treated as a powerful tool, able to empower minority groups and at the same time to enlighten majority groups.

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My personal experience as a researcher made me sensitive to the destinies of individual communities in ethnically mixed regions during the war. In particular, my study of the musical traditions of Croats and Serbs in the Banija/Banovina region of central Croatia during the 1980s was especially poignant. I remembered the inhabitants of the ethnically distinct villages as culturally related neighbors, whose senses of identity, cultural practices, and mutual relations received appropriate attention (see Ivančan 1986; Jambrešić 1992; Muraj 1992). During the war in the 1990s, these neighbors were forced to replace their musical instruments with weapons and became mutually confronted victims of a larger ethno-national conflict.²

My interest in applied ethnomusicology stemmed from my wish to understand the reality of “war at home,” especially the potential of the field to explain the war-peace continuum. Thanks to residencies in Croatia, where I was born, and Slovenia, where I live; to my principal research, which was conducted in the disputed province of Kosovo; to both professional connections and friendships in the other territories of the former Yugoslav territories; and to a broad range of relevant educational and research experiences and contacts abroad, I was able to internalize a variety of perspectives, shape them into projects, and check empirically the validity of applied ethnomusicology in dealing with concrete problems. Although linked to the specific circumstances of the discord of Yugoslavia, these projects, I hope, will inspire similar undertakings in applied ethnomusicology elsewhere in the world.

THE AZRA PROJECT

The Azra project was a case in applied ethnomusicology that brought together two very different groups of people: Bosnian refugees and Norwegians. In cooperation with the Norwegian scholar Kjell Skjellstad, the project was undertaken in Norway during the 1990s when eleven thousand refugees from the war-torn homeland of Bosnia and Herzegovina lived in Norway on a temporary basis. Cultural sensitivities and cultural differences often contributed to misunderstandings on several levels both within and between the two communities. The project had two objectives: to strengthen Bosnian cultural identity among the refugees; and to stimulate mutually beneficial cross-cultural communication between Bosnians and Norwegians. It also sought to help the refugees achieve some of their social and cultural needs while residents in Norway and to prepare them for their eventual return to a multiethnic Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In this project research was done into the cultural identity and the musical activities of Bosnian refugees in Norway; educational initiatives were organised for both Norwegians (through classes at the University of Oslo on “Music in Exile”, etc.) and Bosnians in Norway (by organizing special lectures in refugee centers on relevant musical topics such as “Music and War on the Territories of Former Yugoslavia”) and finally through music making within the Azra ensemble. Each of these activities was designed to benefit the others. Data collected in the course of research were utilized for educational and musical purposes. Education promoted research, which in turn served as a basis for music making. A performing Bosnian-Norwegian group, Azra, was put together and performed mixed Bosnian and Norwegian repertoire at the University of Oslo, in refugee camps all over Norway and in the Norwegian

²My own fieldwork resulted in a series of radio programs and two LP records featuring the musics of four villages populated by ethnic Croats and four others by ethnic Serbs.

Theater in Oslo. Azra gained public (media) attention and support for the refugee cause and has since performed at various public gatherings, e.g. fund-raising concerts.

ROMANI MUSICIANS IN KOSOVO

Romani musicians in Kosovo had traditionally operated as cultural mediators, living in a society that could be described as multiethnic, multireligious and, multilingual. Due to their ability and willingness to perform a wide variety of musics, they enjoyed the status of superior specialists and successfully served a broad range of audiences. My research concerned the interaction between Romani musicians and their customers, focusing in particular on the musical creativity of this group. Such a focus sharply contrasted with that of music folklorists, who were generally interested in the older strata of the repertoire associated solely with the majority (in most cases their own) national group. For me, this concentration on the established ability of the Roma to cross musical boundaries seemed most appropriate. In the course of ethnographic work, I was in a position to see and examine the ways in which the Roma brought neighbors from different backgrounds together through their flexible manipulation of musical styles and through their skillful musicianship.

My experience of life in a Romani family of musicians allowed me to document several events that took place not only in domestic and communal contexts but also in a variety of venues outside the Romani community involving musicians on professional assignments. My recordings, using exhibitions, video and CD media, enabled me to compile a project dedicated to the Roma of Kosovo. This had two principal purposes. First, in the short term, they were used to raise awareness and even some funds to support the physical and cultural survival of the Roma in Kosovo, seriously endangered by the conflict between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs. Second, in the long term, they were employed to recognize the legacy of Romani musicians from Kosovo through the wide dissemination of information and as a contribution to knowledge. This legacy proved to be a powerful metaphor for coexistence and, at the same time, a suitable alternative to the ongoing inclination toward ethnic segregation.

In contrast to the Azra project (which was structured and controllable), the Kosovo Roma project was a case of advocacy in which scholars made the necessary data available to be used in the public domain. Possession of these data had unquestionable potential to assist decision makers in their attempts to improve the circumstances for the Roma and for people in Kosovo in general. Almost everyone who contributed to any of the four parts of the project (book and articles, picture exhibition, CD-ROM, video documentary) understood its importance and humanitarian value, providing services without the expectation of financial reward. Thanks to a favorable reception of some of the publications, the project has reached a wide variety of audiences ranging from youth clubs in the former Yugoslavia to university classrooms in America. However, the limited commercial distribution of these products has resulted in limited financial gains accruing to the Roma.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

An increasing number of projects question the ultimate goal of scholarship (e.g. Araujo, Laughran, Newsome, and Tan; in Pettan 2008, Sweers forthcoming); that is, they employ ethnomusicological knowledge, understanding, and skills for the improvement of the human condition in various conflict-related circumstances. On the one hand, one can design projects by controlling the parameters of execution

and by evaluating the results, as in Azra. On the other hand, one can chose to empower others by providing relevant ethnomusicological data, tools, and methods, as in the Kosovo Roma project. As demonstrated in this brief essay, good intentions and convincing arguments are not necessarily sufficient to achieve the full realization of a proposed ideal. It is hoped that further work in this area will provide additional insights with regards to what long term impact educational and performative aspects of applied ethnomusicology have.

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