

SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT PROFESSIONAL FIELDS OF ETHNOMUSICOLOGISTS IN MUSEUMS

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Abstract

This is a short essay introducing some thoughts the professional fields of ethnomusicologists working within an ethnographic museum. It is of utmost importance to consider the growing responsibility of any kind of musicologists in the context of a wider presentation of historical facts and social relationships that are the contents of exhibitions in museums. This short report reviews some basic ideas and tries to instigate discussions.

Keywords

Ethnomusicology, ethnographic museum policies, professionalism, de-colonization, holistic sound experiences

The well-known professional fields of ethnologists and ethnomusicologists in the museum context can be differentiated into archive work and the curating practice regarding the displays of objects and facts. For a long time, the first area was primarily reserved for the activities of collecting and documenting objects, including sound objects. Compared to the “cultures of origin”, the argument of “preservation” was spread, combined with one-sided and therefore colonial ideas about “superiority through technology” as seen in ways how storage and restoration is handled. These is only one of the many reasons how European scholars and museologists constructed their kind of history discourse (Said, 1978) of cultural or collective “non-European” groups, which point towards Descola mentioning the human/non-human domain (Descola, 2005). The second field of work, the exhibition, has the main task of “conveying” these “collections” to a larger audience within Europe.

However, when considering new challenges of professional fields of ethnomusicologists, the integration and connection of sound archives to ethnological museums must be taken into account. On the one hand, the Berlin Phonogram Archive stores 150,000 recordings from all over the world (Simon, 2000) is part of the Ethnological Museum of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz). The CREM-CNRS (Centre de Recherche en Ethnomusicologie) Archive with 57,000 sound documents can be found in Paris and belongs to the Musée de l'Homme. The Ethnographic Museum in Geneva (Musée d'ethnographie de Genève/ MEG) owns a sound archive with 15,500 recordings. The Vienna Phonogram Archive, on the other hand, is not linked to a museum with 75,000 individual recordings, as it is an independent institute of the Austrian Academy of Sciences (Kraus and Lewy, 2019: 186-187).

The questions of integration are important insofar as, for example, indigenous ontologies are becoming increasingly important in the process of decolonization. One newly established focus of attention aims at overcoming the separation of “material and immaterial objects”, on which the European colonial matrix based on previously. This can still be recognized when reflecting on the historical process of archiving, since collections were subdivided according to these criteria in the last century. All “material” objects were safely stored in the ethnological museum's collections while all “immaterial” objects, like sound recordings, were

placed at phonogram archives. Interacting with representatives from indigenous communities in the archive of the museum shows how different the perception with the stored objects is. Invited members of indigenous communities, as could be observed, started immediately to sing or to do other performances when confronted with their “cultural objects” in these archives. Thus, overcoming the colonial matrix means not only reorganizing the archives as it is highly recommendable according to analyses and in terms of material culture (Guzmán and Villegas, 2018: 143), but also the integration of the “immaterial culture” into this ontological unit, which are then often those associated sound recordings. For this purpose, performance rooms in ethnographic museums and their related sound archives will necessarily be set up in order to enable precisely that ontological unity of material and immaterial objects which are often living entities from perceptive traditions that still exist and are practiced by these indigenous people (Lewy, 2018a; Lambos and Lewy, 2019).

These new tasks are also to be transferred to some exhibition concepts, because the perception of these ontological units forms one side of the coin. The other side is the individual work to accept this perception as a given certainty, and, furthermore, to translate and communicate this certainty of perceptive traditions of indigenous practices.

It needs to be mentioned that sound ontologies and trans-specific communication can be and is often built on the bias of performative expressions, i.e. the communication between singers and the physical objects. So, these interactions show clearly a very specific certainty about perception and the mode of existence for many people. Used academic notions and practices are often not sufficient or simply outdated. Therefore, it is one task of ethnomusicologists to underline that there is certainty or that people are certain to communicate with a wide variety of entities and that many non-human entities communicate and interact within human and non-human collective groups. Mainly, these interactions and communications are audible and are practiced through music and/or other formalized sound.

The acceptance of an ontological unit plays a significant role in current collections of institutionalized archives, which is also often seen as the establishment of “cemeteries of objects” (Lewy, 2020). In institutions this is a remarkable thought, in particular when the repatriation of any kind of object or entity stored in a museum storage or put at display is impossible, i.e. due to ontological reasons (Hatoum, 2015; Lewy, 2017).

Translating those processes of archive work into the exhibition spaces also appears as a new or different field of recent ethnomusicology, which is not easy to understand, as the exhibition spaces are largely reserved for classical curatorship of material culture, even if an enhanced process of rethinking and the integration of ethnomusicological works is recently underway. However, in standard exhibition areas, music/sound can still be found very strictly separated from related “physical objects” under the premise of ontological units, and it is then the moment that artists rather than ethnomusicologists are going to fight the “colonial matrix” in ethnographic museums.

However, ethnomusicologists should see this handy stereotyping as a challenge to their subject rather than to build walls separating their ideas from Western art expressions. In addition to some great advantages of often long-term cooperation with source communities that ethnomusicologists experience, the challenge lies in translating musicological and sound research for an exhibition area and finding new or derivative formats, a process, which should also be included in university trainings such as the handling of digital audio work stations within programs. As an example, I would like to point towards the transformation of research results into sound narratives, which I developed together with Bernd Brabec de Mori for various exhibitions and CD productions (Seeger, 2017).

Elsewhere, I suggested the notion of SCIENCE—SOUND —COMPOSING (Lewy, 2015, 2018b), which is certainly open to discussion. There, to say it in short, the concept of sound stories bases on narrative structures of myths and practices among indigenous Amazonian groups of people, which also operate within the ontological unity of “material/immaterial culture”. Some translations consist mainly of developing plots whose fiction content refers to Geertz's definition of FICTIO in the sense of its original meaning as “something made” (Geertz, 1987: 23).

The considerations and examples listed here are only the first very small steps that are to be understood as a suggestion for ethnomusicological subjects to get involved with the museum as an area in order to open sustainable music research results and practice knowledge exchange to the widest possible audience.

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