

# Ethnomu And Alchemy

*By Diane Baxter, NCTM*

**M**usic is alchemy. It has the ability to profoundly change our perceptions of and interactions with the world. It is a kaleidoscope of views from a nearly infinite mosaic of possibilities. Music can lift and transport us to anywhere on the globe and then suddenly drop our anchor at unexpectedly exotic locales. Sitar place us immediately in India, gamelans in Indonesia and didgeridoos in Australia. Bagpipes march us to the Scottish Highlands, while pan pipes climb the Andes. We know these instruments have a home in the world, but what is not readily apparent is their role within those home cultures. That juncture of place and role is where the discipline of ethnomusicology lives. It focuses on that interaction between music and culture, providing one window into the soul of a people.

The discipline of ethnomusicology has been defined in many ways. A recent Google search of “What is ethnomusicology?” turned up 2.72 million results in .50 seconds.<sup>1</sup> Some researchers look strictly at the music itself, its structure and how it may be similar to or different than Western music. Others look at how the music is used within its culture as well as how it is made and played. Musical cultures represent a complex interplay between people, ideas, religion, geography, technology, language and more. It is an understatement to say that such a continuum provides a very broad and active range for research and performance.

## **Social Process**

Ethnomusicologists examine music as a social process to understand not only what

music *is* but what it means to its practitioners and audiences. It is highly interdisciplinary, with individuals often having training in music, anthropology, folklore, performance studies, dance, cultural studies, gender studies, race or ethnic studies, and other fields. The generosity of the field allows for many diverse special interest groups, such as cognitive ethnomusicology (the cognitive study of music, language, metaphor, narrative and emotion), ecomusicology (to support social justice), economic ethnomusicology, music and violence, disability and deaf studies, cultural revitalization through music, and medical ethnomusicology (health, healing and cultural practices) as well as study of specific types of music, such as Celtic music, Balinese music, jazz or rap.<sup>2</sup>

What human beings always have in common is their basic biology. All humans are faced with the same problems: How do we adapt to our environments, both natural and social, to survive and prosper? Defined as that set of attitudes, beliefs and values that shape the behavior of a population, culture provides stability and yet is fluid and responsive to change. Culture guides us to “do the right thing” to keep society functioning, and it allows us to pass on that knowledge. It changes when needed, but it also alters what



# sícolo gy

A composite image featuring a view of Earth from space, showing the Americas and surrounding oceans. Overlaid on the lower half of the image is a golden musical staff with five lines. Several golden musical notes are placed on the staff, including a large treble clef on the left and several eighth and quarter notes. The word "sícolo gy" is written in a large, bold, golden font across the top of the image, with the "s" and "g" being significantly larger than the other letters.

we are likely to perceive or attend to. Music is one cultural vehicle through which people share the commonality of their experiences. Ethnomusicologist Patrick Burke writes that “most ethnomusicologists reject the common claim that ‘music is a universal language.’ One might as well call talking a universal language—lots of people around the world do it, but they don’t automatically understand one another. That said, music appears to be a universal behavior and a universal preoccupation.”<sup>3</sup> John Blacking states that “music is both a social fact and multi-media communication: there are many societies that have no word for ‘music’ and do not isolate it conceptually from dance, drama, ritual, or costume...”<sup>4</sup>

In every society music expresses the inexpressible, without violence (blues, rap, heavy metal, folk, marches, drumming). It bonds people to their society and culture. Poise, confidence, a sense of place, and team play are taught to the young, while such performances serve as reminders to the rest. It socializes children by instructing them how to learn and to acquire proper behavior and attention. It unites and rallies people during crises, supports religion, encourages mating and coordinates work. And sometimes it even entertains. “Music is a basic need of human survival. Music is one of the ways we make sense of our lives, one of the ways in which we express feelings when we have no words, a way for us to understand things with our hearts when we can’t with our minds.”<sup>5</sup>

## Around the World

In many areas of the world, it is more important that everyone in the society participate in the music making than it is to note their expertise. For the Maori of New Zealand, music and dance are found together. Traditionally, to sing without a purpose is regarded as an evil omen. If there is no reason to sing, then you don’t sing. For this reason, traditional recordings are difficult to obtain. While strict rhythm and proper vocal unison are very important to the correct performance of Maori music, this concern is not just aesthetic. For the traditional Maori to break the continuity of a song is to invite death or disaster. Accuracy is crucial because you can bring on harm from a supernatural power. In

other societies to sing without purpose can be considered an expression of joy or of misery and is seen as a basic human right. In religious settings, music can be only vocal, or only instrumental, or essential or forbidden. It can be socially affirming, or a protest. During the 1960s civil rights movement, the act of singing together became the movement. The act of music speaks power.

Native American music varies widely in terms of geography, but certain generalizations hold. Music is an oral tradition, deeply enmeshed in society, often integrating ceremonial and social events. It can have supernatural power. Song texts are often filled with vocables (nonlexical syllables), therefore it is the act of singing that holds the power. For example, in the traditional Blackfoot culture a medicine man may have a bundle of objects for curing purposes. There is no power in the medicine bundle itself, until the act of singing enables interaction between the medicine man and the supernatural world. Navajo music ranges from personal songs for pleasure to deeply sacred chants that can be sung only in the appropriate ceremonial context. Bruno Nettl aptly points out that “the rather athletic view of music taken in Western culture, where star performances by individual composers and performers and their ability to do very difficult things is measured, is replaced in Native American cultures with quite different values.”<sup>6</sup>

In North Indian Classical traditions, central to the music is the belief that everything in the universe moves in repeating cycles, endlessly going through cycles of creation, dissolution and recreation. Rhythmic patterns known as *tala* are clear examples of this cyclical concept. Patterns based on from 3 to 108 beats are used as the foundation for performance, where as much as 90% of the melodic material may be improvised. These musical traditions can be traced back nearly 2000 years, with origins in the Vedic hymns. Ravi Shankar has written: “To us, music can be a spiritual discipline on the path to self-realization, for we follow the traditional teaching that sound is God. By this process individual consciousness can be elevated to a realm of awareness where the revelation of the true meaning of the universe—its eternal and unchanging essence—can be joyfully experienced.” The concept that “sound is

God” is a profound realization of music’s critical role in the society.

In Bali, serious literature, poems and prayers begin with the letter “ONG.” The sound of this letter resonates through the body, alerting all of one’s gods and demons (your emotions, qualities and thoughts) to alertness. Balinese music specialist Michael Tenzer notes that “Music is ubiquitous in Bali; its abundance is far out of proportion to the dimensions of the island. The Hindu-Balinese religion requires gamelan for the successful completion of most of the tens of thousands of ceremonies undertaken yearly.”<sup>8</sup> Music is simply a part of everyday life, whether it be to accompany martial arts, to sell goods or to race bulls. There is music for entertaining the gods in festivals, to accompany offerings at a temple, to provide for cremated remains, even to be played during a young woman’s ritual tooth filing ceremony. In Bali, music and dance share structures and terminology. They are wedded together.

## World Music in Films

The concept of world musics being combined with other art forms is nowhere more evident than in contemporary film, but it is an endeavor that is not approached lightly. After all, does one approach a supernatural being lightly? Film composers, orchestrators and arrangers have become extremely skilled in thinking globally.

*Moana*, the animated Disney movie released in 2016, is set in Polynesia on a fictional island. To be cognizant of culturally sensitive issues, Disney formed and consulted with Oceanic Story Trust, a group of advisors that included academics, anthropologists, linguists, historians and choreographers, as well as “tattoo artists, navigators, fishermen, elders, and artists.”<sup>9</sup> Disney Animation sponsored research trips to the South Pacific Islands of Juri, Samoa, Tahiti, Moorea, New Zealand, Bora Bora and Tetiaroa. “Every name in the movie either comes from or was approved by the Oceanic Story Trust. *Moana*’s name means ‘of the sea.’ Every draft of the script, every little change, was sent to the Oceanic Story Trust to vet.”<sup>10</sup> Most of the cast members are Polynesian. The songs were written in Samoan, Tokelauan and English by Opetai

Foa’i, Lin-Manuel Miranda and Mark Mancina. Dave Metzger arranged and orchestrated all of the music in the film. It took three full days to record the percussion parts alone.<sup>11</sup> Samoan by birth, Opetai Foa’i started a contemporary music group called *Te Vaka*, which claims a “distinct original sound and un-touristy devotion to the South Pacific and the stories of its ancestors.”<sup>12</sup> Band members are featured in many of the songs of *Moana*. This inclusion of cultural sensitivities gives an indication of the seriousness in trying to understand and represent various areas of the world without simply appropriating materials.

## Contemporary Compositions

The incorporation of world musical traditions into contemporary composition is exemplified in Kevin Walczyk’s 5th Symphony, *Freedom From Fear: Images From the Shoreline*.<sup>13</sup> The commissioned symphony was to be centered around displaced peoples. Walczyk thought of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s address to the United Nations in 1941 when he spoke of four essential human freedoms. The last of the four was freedom from fear. The symphony’s four movements are “The Relinquishing,” “Sands of White and Black,” “Lullaby” and “Sea Crossings—Mother of Exiles.” Two images of shorelines served as the foundation for the second movement. The first is a photograph entitled “Three Americans,” which appeared in a September 1943 *Life* magazine article. It depicted the battle of Buna-Gona in Papua, New Guinea, and was the first image of dead Americans that President Roosevelt allowed to be published during World War II. Walczyk incorporated two percussion instruments indigenous to Papua, New Guinea: log drums, known as “slit” drums, and a bullroarer. “In Papua New Guinea, bullroarers hold a traditional place of honor in men’s ceremonial clubhouses. The Namau people of the Purari River Delta used them during funerals of important men and called them imunu viki (‘weeping spirits’).”<sup>14</sup> The log drums and bullroarer were used to represent the “weeping spirits” of the three dead soldiers.

The second image shows protesters in Biloxi, Mississippi in 1959. As part of the struggle for civil rights, people participated in “wade-ins”

in an effort to desegregate the use of public beaches. Walczyk used the civil rights anthem, *We Shall Overcome*, throughout sections of the movement. To speak to its Mississippi locale, he incorporated an abstraction of Delta blues.

The third movement of the symphony, *Lullaby*, takes its inspiration from the image, *Humanity Washed Ashore*. This is the photograph of three-year old Aylan Kurdi, a Syrian refugee who died when the raft he was on capsized before reaching the Greek Island of Kos in September 2015. His brother and mother also drowned. Walczyk took the title of the movement from a Syrian folksong that originated near Aylan's home. A second folksong provided some lyrics and melodic motifs. A boy soprano sings in this movement to represent Aylan, while a soprano represents his mother. The movement also utilizes an abstraction of Syrian music by using specific tunings of the traditional instruments, *qanun*, *arghul* and *ney*. The middle of this movement features an intense jazz-like section that incorporates rhythmic elements and variant forms of the *muwashshat*, a musical form that is popular in Aleppo, where Aylan's family originated. Sensitivity such as Walczyk's when incorporating materials from around the world is paramount to maintaining the integrity of cultures.

Metzger and Walczyk are not using these musics to just make interesting sounds. Carefully, they are trying to let the voices of those cultures speak to the world. They know, because they are musicians, that American music tells the American story. The music of other cultures tells their stories. Ethnomusicology provides us with profound and illuminating ways to understand the human condition. ♪

## Notes

1. Google, accessed September 27, 2019,
2. The Society for Ethnomusicology, accessed September 20, 2019.

3. Patrick Burke, "What is Music?" *Humanities, The Magazine of the National Endowment for the Humanities*, January/February (2015), Volume 36, Number 1, accessed September 12, 2019, <http://www.neh.gov/humanities/2015/januaryfebruary/feature/what-music>.

4. John Blacking, *A Commonsense View of all Music*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 3.

5. Karl Paulnack, *2003 Address to the Parents of the Freshman Class*. Speech Transcript, delivered August 28, 2003. Reprinted on <https://staff.ithaca.edu/kpaulnack/transcripts/2003welcome/>.

6. Bruno Nettl, Charles Capwell, et. al., "Native American Music", in *Excursions in World Music 4th Edition* (New Jersey, University of Chicago Press, 2004), 268.

7. Shankar, Ravi. "On Appreciation of Indian Classical Music." Accessed September 12, 2019. [www.ravishankar.org](http://www.ravishankar.org)

8. Michael Tenzer, *Balinese Music* (Berkeley and Singapore: Periplus Editions, 1991), 3.

9. Poblete, Jordan. "Disney Animation Created an Oceanic Story Trust," *The Disney Examiner*, Nov 2, 2016.

10. Poblete, "Disney Animation."

11. David Metzger, Public Address, Western Oregon University, Monmouth, Oregon, May 31, 2019.

12. "Te Vaka" [www.tevaka.com](http://www.tevaka.com), accessed September 20, 2019.

13. Kevin Walczyk, composer. [www.kevelimusic.com](http://www.kevelimusic.com).

14. "Bullroarer," [www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/504985](http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/504985).

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