The Impact of Ethnomusicology

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The field of ethnomusicology has long been characterised by rumination on the nature of its own condition. More than many other scholars, it seems, ethnomusicologists have enjoyed debating what ethnomusicology is, or should be, where the limits of the field lie, or should lie, and whether the word is in any case the right one to describe whatever it is we think we are doing. In part this rumination arises from the heterogeneous nature of ethnomusicology itself and the variety of approaches it seeks to subsume under one roof; it is a church so catholic in outlook that it seems sometimes to encompass the pub across the village green. This heterogeneity then leads to certain kinds of conceptual liminality: from ethnomusicologists themselves (is ethnomusicology a discipline, a sub-discipline, an approach, a method?); from institutional administrators (does ethnomusicology fit in Music, Anthropology, Cultural Studies, Area Studies?); or from funding bodies (is ethnomusicology a social science, part of the humanities, both, neither, *sui generis*?).

The extent to which any of this actually matters rather depends on how agitated one wishes to get over the various arguments. But there is a further liminality involved which arguably supersedes the others in terms of its social significance, and that is the degree to which ethnomusicology exists in a space between the academic world that normally sustains it, and the 'everyday' world beyond. If ethnomusicology is 'the study of people making music' (Titon 1992:21), then much of this music-making occurs outside of academia; engaging with these music makers – almost by definition – therefore implies that the practice of ethnomusicology results in some degree of social impact. This inevitably begs the question: what is the social impact of ethnomusicology in the wider world, and how might such impact be evaluated?

In essence, these were the questions underpinning the British Forum for Ethnomusicology's one-day conference in December 2010, held at the Institute of Musical Research in London, and from which the following short papers are taken. The conference was titled 'The Impact of Ethnomusicology'. The call for papers contained the following guidance as to the questions we were seeking to address, and is worth repeating here as an indication of some of the ethical dilemmas ethnomusicologists face when considering the impact of their work:

- In what ways, and over what kinds of timescales, have ethnomusicologists impacted on the people with whom they work, and the environments in which that work takes place? How might the impact of such work be evaluated or valorised beyond 'conventional' ethnomusicological outputs?

- Is ethnomusicological impact usually positive – or at least benign – or are there clear instances of negative consequences? How might one construe the negative impact of ethnomusicology, and should such work necessarily be avoided?

- How does the notion of impact overlap with disciplinary considerations of applied ethnomusicology?

- When does ethnomusicology become so applied – that is, in its engagements with social issues or its advocacy on behalf of particular culture bearers – that it calls into question the boundaries of conventional scholarship and supposed scholarly distance?

- To what extent should scholarly organisations such as BFE proactively engage with organisations such as WOMAD or South Asian Arts, and what is the relationship between such engagements and other forms of research?

- To what extent does the impact of ethnomusicology define the discipline, or to what extent should it be allowed to do so?

- Notwithstanding that current discourses around impact tend to focus on social and cultural consequences outside of the academy, how has the development of ethnomusicology impacted upon the academy as a whole, or any of its constituent parts, particularly in areas far removed from cognate disciplines such as music or anthropology?

Such questions are not new in ethnomusicology. They have been considered, amongst others, in publications such as Barz and Cooley (1997), Stobart (2008) and a special issue of the *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* (2003, volume 12/1) on *Fieldwork Impact*. But the ethical issues they confront have particular currency at present because, at the time of writing, 'impact' is both a buzz word and a *bête noire* in British higher education. Scholars in publicly-funded institutions are being asked to assert the influence of their research outside of the academy, as part of the government's Research Excellence Framework, an exercise that determines the size of each slice of publicly-funded research pie received by each university in the UK. The greater the impact you can demonstrate, the more government money you will, in theory, receive.

Underpinning this ideology is the notion that 'impact' can be read as a proxy for 'social value', and that some research is 'better' – or at least, more worthy of publicly-funded support – than others, because it is deemed to have a greater social, cultural, or economic (etc.) impact than other research. It will not surprise those previously unfamiliar with the politics of UK higher education that this has caused all manner of angst-ridden expostulation among academics and institutions.

On the face of it, however, ethnomusicologists would appear to be well placed to engage with government on this issue. We can show how our research is 'out there'; how our books, films and radio broadcasts promote the music of other cultures, and enrich the lives of those who read, watch and listen to them outside of academe; how our enthusiasm for 'applied' or 'engaged' ethnomusicology has contributed to, for example, AIDS awareness and prevention in Africa; how we have stood up to the major record companies to decry the musical and financial exploitation of music makers from various parts of the globe who may not share or understand the intellectual property frameworks which the companies themselves zealously protect. And so forth.

Nevertheless, not everything in the garden is rosy. If, in facing one direction we confidently assert the positive outcomes of at least some of our activities, then this serves only to mask our Janus-like concerns with the underlying implications of some of those assertions. In choosing to focus on and broadcast the music of one particular culture group, or perhaps a single musician within it – such as Toumani Diabaté, as Lucy Duran has done – are we undertaking selective but proactive engagement that risks upsetting the delicate eco-systems which sustain fragile traditions? Do we risk engaging in the same kind of mass-mediated musical Darwinism that those such as Deirdre Ní Chonghaile fear leads to forms of 'globalisation and cultural homogenisation [that] threaten the cultural diversity of the planet', while believing ourselves to be doing quite the opposite? Does our engagement with AIDS prevention in Africa or, as Muriel Swijghuisen Reigersberg discusses here, the teaching of choral traditions to Indigenous Australians, not risk replicating precisely those colonial relationships we thought we had left behind? Is it really the role of ethnomusicologists to 'run choirs and workshops', as Caroline Bithell does, encouraging participation in music-making derived from other cultures, no matter how enjoyable or possibly therapeutic such activities might seem? Whatever happened to scholarly distance?

I have, of course, stated these issues particularly provocatively for the purposes of dramatic effect; scholars working in these areas are well aware of such ethical dilemmas, and would be able to give far more nuanced and considered answers than these baldly

stated questions deserve. Indeed, some of those nuances form part of the following contributions to this forum.

But the difficulty in having to make the case for the impact of ethnomusicology is that governments don't really do nuance. The scientistic ideology driving the impact agenda requires measurable outcomes, and begets a narrow focus on causation in which one thing leads unarguably to another; and we share with other colleagues in the arts, humanities and social sciences the difficulty that many of the outcomes of our work are difficult to quantify. 'How many people listened to that radio programme of yours broadcast in Uzbekistan?' Tick. 'How many people heard you play at that Indian wedding?' Tick. 'How many lives did you save in Uganda?' Tick.

Indeed, it might be argued that this problem of measurability increases in proportion to the significance of the issue under consideration. One can, of course, measure such things as audience numbers, CDs sold, concert attendees and so forth. What is more difficult to measure is also that which many might argue is more important: the local or global consciousness-raising that may result from a specific and sustained intervention in a given part of the world; the greater understanding of music cultures beyond those with which we readily identify, an understanding which we hope – perhaps slightly idealistically – feeds into more widespread tolerance of those who hold views different from our own; the insights we aspire to achieve as to how, to borrow John Blacking's terms, 'humanly organised sound' contributes to, reflects, engages with, and occasionally subverts, 'soundly organised humanity' (1973). No ticks there.

Building on the writings of the eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume and the nineteenth-century novelist George Eliot, Simon Blackburn has recently drawn attention to what he calls the 'incalculably diffusive processes' of certain human behaviours. He observes that 'nobody can calculate the effect that just one work had, any more than they can calculate just how much the growth of a flower, or how much of its beauty, was the result of any one raindrop falling on any one day. Yet nobody doubts that rain makes the garden grow. It is an incalculably diffusive process' (2011:29).

Music making is a quintessential incalculably diffusive process, and while we know that it brings significant personal and social benefits, after more than a century of intensive ethnomusicological study of its various practices there are still significant gaps in our understanding of how those benefits accrue, and of the very many ways that music is woven into the cultural fabrics that sustain it. And musical sound, of course, continues to challenge us in terms of our ability to analyse it and explain how it effects those who are affected by it. Moreover, if the object of our study is itself diffuse, difficult to pin

down and to measure, it is inevitably challenging to demonstrate how one might have caused any such measurements to change. In such cases, how do you measure the measurer? Or, as Blacking might have put it, How Measureable is Man?

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