Music as Culture? Reflections on an Ethnomusicological Moment

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During the 1970s North American ethnomusicologists began using the phrase “music as culture” to refer to a specific approach to ethnomusicological analysis: the search for homologies between the structure of musical sounds and the purported abstracted structure of the cultures they belong to. In this article I describe this analytical approach, summarize some examples from the literature, explore some possible influences on and links to this approach from cultural anthropology, provide a critique, and suggest where this approach might be seen as fitting within the development of ethnomusicology as a field. The intent here is thus to provide a fragment of the intellectual history of ethnomusicology. I begin with several short summaries of studies using this approach in order to illustrate the basic theoretical premises and analytical methodology they all have in common.

CASE STUDIES

Cognitive forms and values
Marcia Herndon inaugurated this ethnomusicological “moment” in the early 1970s by coining the phrase “music as culture” and giving it its first application in her 1971 paper on the songs of the Cherokee stickball game. Working within the framework that would later be called “the ethnography of musical performance,” with its approach to the “musical occasion” as the encapsulation of “basic values and beliefs in a given society”, Herndon proposed an approach that explicitly attempted to move
beyond Alan Merriam’s functionalist “music in culture” formulation of the previous decade:

[...] music, as a form of human behaviour, is subject to the primarily subliminal constraints of human groups – culture. What we are talking about, then, is the study, through the occasion, of the ways in which music actually reflects other aspects of a culture [...]. In considering the musical occasion, we are thinking, not only of music in culture, but also of music as culture.4

The way in which Cherokee music “reflects” other aspects of Cherokee culture, in Herndon’s analysis, is in what she calls “basic cognitive forms and values”.5 Herndon seems to find the “cognitive” emphasis useful because it was a convenient framework in which to explain her data, which specifically have to do with Cherokee magic numbers, four and seven, as the basis for what she calls the “cognitive organization” of the musical occasion she analyzes.6 These magic numbers show up in the structuring of events within the occasion and in various structural levels of the songs sung during it, the number of parts to a melody, the number of repetitions of text units, and the number of tones sung in certain descending contours.

The important place of these numbers in Cherokee culture as a whole, and the “reflection” of this importance in the cognitive organization of the musical occasion and the very sound structure of Cherokee songs, are then the basis of her music-as-culture argument. Herndon’s analysis was one of the first in the ethnomusicological literature that finds a culture-specific cognitive basis for the structure of music sound itself, and so it is perhaps appropriate that she should be the one to have introduced in print the rubric of “music as culture”.

Translations of ideology

In her work on structural segmentation in the Islamic arts,7 Lois Ibsen al Faruqi uses the term translation

[...] to mean a restatement in different artistic “language” or medium [...]. [A]ll artistic expressions are seen as restatements or “translations” of a basic ideological message of the culture or people in question, and it would be difficult to assign unchallenged priority in time or significance to any one of these types of art.8

Among the premises basic to her study of Arab music are that “the various aspects of culture achieved by a particular people at a particular period of time reveal a basic correspondence of purpose which combines them into a comprehensive unity”9 and that
there is a basic unity among the various arts which accords with the culture complex to which they belong.” 10

The “basic ideological message” of Islam, what al Faruqi also calls the Islamic “world view”, 11 is embodied in the Arabic-language term *tawhid*. This term refers to a concept of the other-than-naturalness of the Divine which results in basic Islamic tenets such as the prohibition on representation of the Divine with natural figures, the prohibition on any attempt by man to create or imitate life, even through painting or sculpture, and the requirement that when figures from the natural world are to be used, they should be “stylized and fitted into an aesthetic scheme consistent with the religious convictions”. 12

According to al Faruqi, these requirements of Islamic ideology are “translated” into the non-representational style characteristic of the visual, verbal, and musical arts in which segments are repeated and combined in various ways. The principle of segmentation is the basis for the Arab art form known as arabesque, found in rug and tapestry weavings, as well as for the calligraphic inscriptions carved in stone on mosques. Segmentation can also be found in architecture and the plastic arts throughout the Islamic world of the Middle East, including areas outside the ethnically Arab world proper, such as Turkey and Iran. Segmentation is also heard in the characteristic forms of musical and other sound expression in the Islamic world, as in the non-developmental form of Qur’anic cantillation (which from the perspective of Islam is not considered music), the way phrases are strung together in instrumental music, the period of silence between musical phrases in non-metered cantillation and vocal and instrumental music, internal repetition and cyclic completion determined by modal practice in secular vocal and instrumental music, etc.

The Islamic ideology embodied in the concept of *tawhid*, then, is “translated” into the modal practices and forms characteristic of musical arts in the Islamic world. Like Herndon, al Faruqi sees the structure of musical sound as proceeding from a pre-existing cultural core, in this case described not in terms of cognition, but as an “ideology” that is translated into different media.

Musical values and social values

In his study “Musical Values and Social Values: Symbols in Iran”, Bruno Nettl identifies four particular “values” in (pre-1979 Revolution) Persian society that he sees “reflected” in stylistic and structural characteristics of Persian classical music: hierarchy, individualism, unpredictability, and a concern with the relative temporal position of items in a sequence. 13 Nettl sees these values reflected in the structure of the *radif* – the repertoire of Persian classical music – as well as in the way it is taught and performed. The basic assumptions about the nature of culture that Nettl holds, and which lead to this methodology, are by now familiar: “I am assuming the existence of a central core of values which are reflected in many domains of culture, including
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music, and my purpose is to try to learn the relationship between certain of these values and aspects of music. 14

After presenting his analysis, Nettl concludes that Persian classical music “is an abstract symbol of the social core of culture” and that “it symbolizes the traditional way of life in an environment which is changing daily”. 15 Nettl’s study thus represents a search for structural homologies between music sound structure and social structure or a set of cultural “values”, but the basic approach is similar to the way Herndon uses cognition and al Faruqi’s concept of the translation of an ideology.

Iconicity in coherence systems

Judith and Alton Becker share with al Faruqi a concern with the inter-relatedness of different art forms in particular cultures. 16 They develop this concern in their discussion of “coherence systems which inform music or literature”, 17 as they analyze the specific coherence system which informs the music of gamelan orchestras as well as other art forms of Java. Central to their discussion is the semiotic concept of *iconicity*, which they define as “finding the image of something in another realm”. 18

In their analysis, the peculiarly Javanese principle of coincidence, or simultaneous occurrence, emerges as “operating across epistemologies” 19 and as the “central source of both meaning and power in traditional Javanese culture”. 20 The principle of coincidence informs the structure of gamelan pieces, multiple overlapping calendrical cycles of different lengths, and the narrative development of shadow-puppet plays. For example, gamelan pieces are built on the simultaneous sounding of melodic-rhythmic cycles of different lengths, the endings of which eventually coincide at a key point in time, explicitly marked by a stroke on the largest gong.

The Beckers maintain that the centrality of the principle of coincidence in the organization of so many Javanese expressive forms is the result of a “remarkably integrated worldview”. 21 Like al Faruqi’s concept of translations of ideology into different artistic media within a culture, their concept of iconicity across different kinds of artistic expression can be seen as closely linked to the concept of *trope* developed by Keil and Feld, to which I turn now.

Tropes

The concept of *trope*, in the meaning I am concerned with here, was introduced by anthropologist Robert Plant Armstrong in the context of his discussion of African artistic expression. By *trope* Armstrong means a metaphoric order, a single “master affective set or principle”, 22 that mediates between a cultural metaphoric base and what Armstrong calls the *affecting presences*, or artistic expressions, of a culture. Affecting presences can include sculpture, graphic arts, poetry, music, dance, drama, etc.

Armstrong’s basic agenda was to develop an approach to aesthetics that is free from Western concepts of “art” and “beauty”. He argues that the affecting presence (i.e. work
of art) does not refer to (symbolize) an affective state external to the work itself. Ultimately, however, it is in the cultural metaphoric base – rather than in the emotions the artist seeks to embody in the work, or in the “common affective recreation” in those who engage art objects – that he is able to account for the specific forms of artistic expression. Though Armstrong would probably balk at the suggestion, it seems that in the end, the cultural metaphoric base is logically prior to and ultimately determines the form of art objects and other kinds of artistic expression. At the largest analytic level, then, Armstrong’s solution to the problem of aesthetics includes a concept not too far from previous “culture core” concepts of anthropology (see further discussion below).

Armstrong’s idea of tropes was developed and used by Charles Keil and Steven Feld in their respective analyses of Tiv and Kaluli song. Each of these writers finds a core cultural metaphor that helps to explain certain aspects of song structure or performance style. For the Tiv of Nigeria in West Africa that Keil discusses, the core metaphor is “circles and angles”; for the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea with whom Feld researched, the trope is phrased as “lift-up-over sounding”. I will discuss first Keil’s use of the concept, since he was the first to apply the term in ethnomusicology, and return later to Feld’s elaboration of tropes, since he takes the concept in new directions.

Keil says he is “describing the ways in which the whole culture has ‘an esthetic aspect’ or ‘embodies an esthetic’.” He finds the Tiv aesthetic in the trope he calls “circles and angles”. Keil sees “circles and angles”, or concentric circles cut by straight lines radiating out from the centre point, in the form of many different Tiv expressive media including stools, calabash designs, body scarification, roof structures and settlement patterns, as well as in the melodic contours of Tiv songs. In song, Keil suggests, the trope takes the form of level contours (especially on the tonic), which Keil relates to circles, followed by passages with wide interval leaps, which he suggests correspond to angles.

Summing up these brief case studies from the literature: Herndon phrases her argument in terms of cognition; al Faruqi explores what she calls the translation of ideology into different expressive media; Nettl finds a central core of values which are reflected in many domains of culture; the Beckers discuss iconicity in coherence systems; and Keil elaborates the concepts of trope and a metaphoric order. While they each phrase their arguments in different terms, all of these writers similarly analyze the structure of musical sound as proceeding from a prior cultural core, finding structural homologies between different media. This, then, is the core methodology of the music-as-culture approach. Besides these more high-profile articles and books, numerous other examples from the ethnomusicological literature of the 1970s and 1980s that use similar approaches could be discussed here, as this kind of analysis became a genre to itself in ethnomusicological writing.
PRECEDES AND PRECURSORS

While I have thus far identified this approach with ethnomusicology as practiced in North America in the 1970s, it has precedents in earlier periods of research there as well as outside the North American tradition. The basic approach is strikingly similar, for example, to aspects of German sociologist Max Weber's analysis of rationality in western music in *The Rational and Social Foundations of Music*. As Martindale and Riedel explain in their introductory essay to the English translation, Weber "attempted to trace the influence of social factors on the very creative core and technical basis of music. In its broadest sense, Weber's thesis was that Western music has peculiar rational properties produced by social factors in Occidental development." Martindale and Riedel explain that

It was Weber's view that one of the ground trends in Western civilization is the movement toward rationalization. In every institutional arena, in the rise of business, in political parties, in government, in religion, calculation in terms of means of efficiency and appropriateness of means to ends tends to be the rule.

Weber's argument is that the principle of rationalization has also been applied to the development of Western music, and can be observed in, among other things, such technical aspects of the musical system as the privileging of the diatonic scale over other possible scale systems, the adoption of the tempered system for intervals, the evolution of the system of tonal harmony, and the development of a more efficient system of notation. In effect, to use one of the contemporary terms discussed above (though Keil would probably wince at the thought), Weber identifies rationalization as a trope that animates and motivates developments in Western music. The similarity between Weber's arguments and the music-as-culture approach is all the more striking considering that Weber first wrote notes for this essay ca. 1910.

If Weber's essay represents a somewhat remote intellectual ancestor of the music-as-culture moment, a more immediate precedent is American ethnomusicologist David McAllester's 1954 monograph *Enemy Way Music*. This book provides a link (discussed further below) between earlier North American anthropological approaches and the later ethnomusicological ones I am primarily concerned with here. Drawing on the work of other anthropologists who worked among the Navaho, McAllester summarizes a set of core Navaho values (quiet, humour, provincialism, individualism, etc.) and discusses how these are manifested not in the actual structure of musical sounds, but in how they can be observed in the behaviour of musicians during performance.

Also writing in the mid-1950s, and drawing on some 20 years experience living in Uganda, British ethnomusicologist Klaus Wachsmann suggested that there were homologous relationships between the social structure of some Ugandan tribes and the or-
The social relationship of group and leader finds its strongest expression in the interplay between soloist and chorus. This pattern lends itself to a limitless variety of forms, and it may be well worth a separate study to trace the extent to which social characteristics can be held responsible for these differences in musical form. Is it too fantastic to suggest that the songs of the Sebei are so dominated by short choral interjections because the tribe is so loosely organized, and that the autocratic rule of the Ganda chiefs is reflected in the large share which falls to the soloist in their songs?35

The kinds of ad hoc observations Wachsmann made in Uganda were investigated more systematically on a global basis by the cantometrics project headed by Alan Lomax. While the merits and implications of this grand-scale comparative project have been widely debated in ethnomusicology, and would require a separate article to summarize and critique, particularly relevant to my argument here is that some of the conclusions of this project are also consistent with the music-as-culture approach that would emerge shortly after the project’s main published report, Folk Song Style and Culture.36 Lomax famously proposed two broad sets of correlations between singing styles and cultures around the globe: “First, the geography of song styles traces the main paths of human migration and maps the known historical distributions of culture. Second, some traits of song performance show a powerful relationship to features of social structure that regulate interaction in all cultures.”37 While the first of these sets of correlations is thus based on historical-diffusionist assumptions, the second is based on the assumption of symbolic relationships between musical style and social behaviour: “[S]ong style seems to summarize, in a compact way, the ranges of behaviour that are appropriate to one kind of cultural context.”38 In practical analytical terms, this approach is expressed through a number of very generalized correlations between singing style and social style in different cultures around the world that are cited in ad hoc fashion to support Lomax’s thesis, as in the following example:

Among Amerindians of North America, for example, it is common for most public singing to be done by groups of males in a harsh-voiced, forceful style, where strong voices are matched in a roughly organized, hearty unison with no singer more prominent than his fellows. The most frequent activities in Indian communities (hunting, fishing, making war,
ritual curing) were carried out in associations of equal males, who joined together temporarily and by mutual consent, and conformed to some traditional plan of action, on their own accord and without a dominant leader.39

In the approach of cantometrics, then, there is not one single cognitive or metaphorical principle animating whole cultures, but rather a set of universal variables that come together in a particular, unique configuration in each particular culture. Lomax began exploring these ideas in the early 1960s, and presented the basic argument as early as his 1962 article “Song Structure and Social Structure”, in which he suggested there is an essential relationship between the egalitarian values and acephalous social structure of central African pygmies and the integrative techniques of hocketing, polyphony, polyrhythm and vocal blending characteristic of their music.40 Lomax used this example to support his suggestions “that musical structure mirrors social structure or that, perhaps, both structures are a reflection of deeper patterning motives of which we are only dimly aware”.41

SYNTHESIS AND CRITIQUE

Basic presuppositions
Researchers in the 1950s and 1960s such as McAllester, Wachsmann and Lomax worked primarily at the analytical levels of the social organization of the performing group and the behaviour of musicians in performance, and thus explored how these factors influenced more general aspects of musical style. Beginning in the 1970s, however, researchers began to combine a holistic approach to culture with more detailed analysis of musical sound structures, giving rise to the “music-as-culture” approach. Writers discussed above such as Herndon, al Faruqi, Nettl, the Beckers and Keil were all tackling the same problem of accounting for musical structure in terms of cultural structure (sometimes expressed in terms of social structure); each comes up with a similar music-as-culture answer, found in structural homologies between an abstracted “culture” and the patterns of musical sound. Culture comes logically first in these analyses, and music is the way it is because culture ultimately determines the formal patterning of sound.

The theoretical approach these writers share, then, has two basic presuppositions: (1) individual cultures each have an overall gestalt, expressed variously in the form of core “values”, “cognitive patterns”, “ideology”, “tropes”, etc., and (2) once the researcher recognizes and understands this gestalt, the researcher can explain how musical behaviour and the resulting patterning of sound proceed from it – how the cultural gestalt determines the patterning of music.

Antecedents for the cultural gestalt idea may be seen most directly in the “culture and personality” school of North American psycho-cultural anthropology of the 1930s
and 1940s. This school “assumes that each society can be characterized in terms of a
typical personality and that these characterizations can be compared.” 42 The seminal
text for the important “configurationist” branch of this school is Ruth Benedict’s Pat-
terns of Culture, in which Benedict famously characterized four different cultures in
terms of their distinct personalities: the apollonian Zuni Pueblo Indians of the Ameri-
can southwest, the dionysian Plains Indians, the paranoid Dobu Islanders of Papua
New Guinea, and the megalomaniac Kwakiutl Indians of the northwest coast of North
America. 43 Anthropologist Edward Sapir was also a proponent of this school, and elo-
quently states its basic assumptions:

The more fully one tries to understand a culture, the more it seems to
take on the aspects of a personality organization. Patterns first present
themselves according to a purely formalized and logically developed
scheme. More careful explorations invariably reveal the fact that numer-
ous threads of symbolism or implication connect patterns or parts of pat-
terns with others of an entirely different formal aspect.44

While the ethnomusicological version of this approach de-emphasizes the psychological
“personality” aspect of the school, the concept of a “culture core” of values is clearly de-
sceded from it. The basic methodology of searching for “core values” in a culture, and
then analyzing how these values show up in musical behaviour and/or sound structure,
has much in common with Benedict’s concern with identifying cultural “fundamental
attitudes” of which behaviour is an outward symbol.

The idea of “threads of symbolism” interconnecting cultural domains itself has even
older antecedents in the social sciences. Anthropologist Robert Lowie argued that “Durk-
heim also illustrated the ‘pattern idea’ […] where the search is for a central idea, mood,
or disposition which is expressed in all the practices of a society.” 45 This intellectual ge-
nealogy can, of course, be extended even further back. Appadurai suggests that anthro-
pological holism – the idea of cultures as wholes – and its totalizing tendency of “mak-
ing specific features of a society’s thought or practice not only its essence but also its to-
tality”, can be traced back to Hegel, and ultimately to Plato.46

While the gestalt/culture core concept can thus be most immediately traced to the
culture and personality school, the overly deterministic aspect of the music-as-culture
approach has perhaps an ancestor in the “cultural determinism” of anthropologist Al-
fred Kroeber’s concept of the superorganic, in which the role of the individual social
actor is minimized, and individuals are seen only as the “inevitable mechanisms or mea-
ures of cultural expression”.47 Paradoxically, Kroeber formulated his idea of “cultural
determinism” explicitly as a critique of psychological approaches in anthropology, but
the deterministic aspect negates only Sapir’s argument about the importance of the indi-
dividual to culture, and is not incompatible with the “personality” approach as a whole.
Direct anthropological influences

The influence on ethnomusicology of at least one of these theoretical strands – the culture and personality school – is direct and specifically traceable. Ethnomusicologist David McAllester was immersed in it, first in his early studies in anthropology at Harvard in the 1930s under the tutelage of Clyde Kluckhorn, and later at Columbia University in the 1940s, where he studied with luminaries in the field including Ralph Linton, Abram Kardiner, and Ruth Benedict herself. McAllester recounts these formative years of his anthropological study in a fascinating autobiographical sketch, in which he is quite explicit about the influence of the culture and personality school on his thinking at the time, and cites a meeting with Margaret Mead as directing him toward a psychoethnological consideration of music within the configurationist framework.

I have already mentioned above, as a predecessor for the music-as-culture approach of the 1970s, the product of McAllester's concern with studying music from this perspective, his monograph *Enemy Way Music*. This study directly resulted from McAllester's participation in the Harvard Values Project coordinated by anthropologist Clyde Kluckhorn. Kluckhorn was thus McAllester's mentor both in Navaho studies and in matters of anthropological theory, hence McAllester's interest in the relationship between Navaho "values" and Navaho music. While Kluckhorn is more closely associated with the "national character" school of psycho-cultural anthropology, the concept of values used in this project and inherited by McAllester has affinities with the configurationist approach of Benedict and Mead. But rather than characterizing Navaho culture in terms of one overall personality type, in the fashion of Benedict, Kluckhorn's project described Navaho culture in terms of a core set of values, the Navaho "quiet", "provincialism" etc. that McAllester used to explain Navaho behaviour at ceremonials involving musical performance.

While *Enemy Way Music* (widely read and cited during the 1950s and 1960s) can be seen as an ethnomusicological ancestor and mediator of this intellectual tradition to the music-as-culture moment in the 1970s, the earlier anthropological ancestors continued to have their own more direct influence on at least some ethnomusicologists. Nettl, for instance, specifically cites his reading of Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* as influencing his thinking in the study, discussed above, of "musical values and social values" in Iran.

Alan Merriam also had in mind the culture and personality school and its potential application to the study of the place of music in the overall "integration of culture" when he noted, in the "Music as Symbolic Behavior" chapter of *The Anthropology of Music* that

[...] various psychological approaches to the problem of the integration of culture have indicated basic themes, configurations, sanctions, or patterns which tend to run through an entire culture bringing holistic unity to it. We would expect, therefore, that any aspect of any given culture would reflect other parts of it, and this is certainly the case with music.
Alan Lomax also studied, along with McAllester, at both Harvard and Columbia in the 1930s and 1940s. Lomax was thus also exposed to the early development of the culture and personality school through the work of Kluckhorn, Linton, Kardiner, Benedict and Mead. The impact of Lomax’s early training in anthropology on the later development of the central theoretical premises of cantometrics also deserves further attention, but is beyond the scope of this paper.

There are thus important intellectual threads connecting North American anthropology of the 1930s and 1940s to the music-as-culture approach that emerged in North American ethnomusicology in the 1970s. The music-as-culture approach can also be seen, however, as growing more organically out of the ethnomusicological theory that most immediately preceded it, the functionalist approach championed by Alan Merriam in the 1960s – which itself was firmly based on an established anthropological theoretical school. Merriam presented his approach – widely known under the rubric “music in culture” – in The Anthropology of Music. Merriam’s approach to ethnomusicology tied it closely to the functionalist anthropology of the time, with its particular understanding of culture as a system in which the parts play roles or have functions in maintaining the system as a whole. For Merriam, a major goal of an anthropologically oriented ethnomusicology was to discover the function(s) of music in maintaining social and cultural systems (Figure 1).

Merriam’s famous “concept-behaviour-sound” model sought to incorporate the study of musical sounds into an anthropologically oriented ethnomusicology, but in actual practice this approach often led to separate considerations of “the culture” and “the music” that were not actually integrated. This is evident even in Merriam’s own monograph Ethnomusicology of the Flathead Indians, in which the first 160 pages were given...
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over to “the ethnography of Flathead music”, focusing on ideas about music, uses and functions, while the second, separate part of the book consists of some 145 pages of transcriptions and musical analyses of the Flathead repertoire that are not integrated in any systematic way with the ethnographic material in the first part of the book. Merriam’s study of Flathead Indian music thus epitomized what Gourlay somewhat dryly refers to as “the potted-ethnography/music transcription/analysis model”. The music-as-culture approach, as an outgrowth of and critique of Merriam’s functionalist approach, thus represented an attempt to more closely integrate musical analysis with cultural analysis, methodologically allowing each to illuminate the other. This was potentially a significant advancement over the previous “music in culture” approach, as Herndon suggested in her 1971 article quoted near the beginning of this paper.

The “culture core” model of central values, tropes, etc. that animate different domains, as used in the music-as-culture approach, however, can also be seen as related to the place of culture in the functionalist model. The theoretical assumptions about the relation between culture and its constituent domains results in a sort of “functionalism in reverse”; instead of a model where domains such as music, religion, political life, etc. contribute functionally to the continued maintenance of culture/society, the relationship of part to whole is reversed, such that the working model is one where the culture core determines the formal character of each of the domains, which thus stand in homological relationship to each other (Figure 2). The approach as a whole thus ends up simply being a reversal of Merriam’s terms: not “music as culture”, but “culture in music”. The approach is touted (by Herndon, for example) as being a move far beyond Merriam’s formulation, but in the last analysis still sees “culture” and “music” as separate entities that first have to be explained individually, then related to each other.

Figure 2: Culture core model. The culture core determines each of the domains (including music); each domain “reflects” the culture core. Relationship of homology between the different domains.
Methodological critique

In addition to a re-evaluation of its theoretical premises, the music-as-culture approach is also open, in retrospect, to critique on the basis of its methodology. The homologies that are its stock in trade are generally found and abstracted out from field data by the ethnomusicologist. The correspondences between musical structure and the structure of culture are thus not necessarily perceived by those who originally actually make, listen to, or otherwise use the musics or inhabit the cultures in question. The academic metaphors used to describe the homological relationships (cognition, ideology, translation, iconicity, coherence, trope etc.), as well as the summary terms used to characterize the relationships themselves (segmentation, coincidence, “circles and angles”, etc.) are thus those of the ethnomusicologist, not those of the people who create and use the music, such as the metaphors of Kaluli music theory and aesthetics that Feld identified through careful linguistic research while in the field.57

In some cases (for example, those by Herndon and by Keil mentioned above) the purported homological relationships seem to be less about how the music is actually structured than an artefact of transcription – the structural similarities are easier to see on the written page than to actually hear when listening to the sounds.58

Why then was this approach so appealing? Aaron Fox has noted in an unpublished paper that anthropologically oriented ethnomusicologists of the 1960s–1980s were especially attracted to models with “the appearance of scientific rigor, formalism, explicit (even mechanical) methodology, and explanatory power”.59 I suggest that the music-as-culture approach, like the roughly contemporaneous profusion of linguistically derived approaches in ethnomusicology, seems to have been popular exactly for its perceived explanatory power and elegant descriptions of how music and culture are necessarily related. It performed the work, perceived as necessary at the time, of relating culture and musical sound more intimately than previous research paradigms, and thus allowed ethnomusicology to begin to move into a post-“music in culture” period. With its non-functionalist approach to musical symbolism, the approach also represented one of the first sustained attempts to develop a research paradigm that (at least tentatively) would begin to integrate interpretive humanistic approaches with previous ethnomusicological practice (see further discussion below).

Excursus: The CCCS and homologies in urban youth cultures

The methodological use of homology as explanatory tool in North American ethnomusicology during the 1970s paralleled a similar use of homology in the contemporaneous approach to cultural studies associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham, England, theorized in Hall and Jefferson’s edited volume Resistance Through Rituals and further developed in well-known monographs by Willis and Hebdige.60 At first glance, one might think there is little comparable between these two very different research traditions, since the ethnomusi-
ecological music-as-culture approach focused exclusively on non-Western, so-called traditional cultures and musics, while British cultural studies of the period was concerned with urban youth cultures in England, including (often only peripherally) their uses of heavily mediated popular music styles. For all its different empirical subject material and very different intellectual genealogy, the way the concept of homology was used in British cultural studies, however, has intriguing parallels with its contemporary North American ethnomusicological application. As the CCCS elaborated it, homology is the process by which the members of post-WWII subcultural groups such as Skinheads, Teddy Boys, Mods, Punks, etc. adopted objects (usually consumer goods) and behaviours and combined them into unique ensembles that reflected “their focal concerns, activities, group structure, and collective self-image”.61 These ensembles of things and ways of acting were made to cohere such that they “form a unity with the group’s relations, situation, [and] experiences”62 For example,

The adoption by Skinheads of boots and short jeans and shaved hair was “meaningful” in terms of the sub-culture only because these external manifestations resonated with and articulated Skinhead conceptions of masculinity, “hardness” and “working-classness”.63

Many of the same critiques that would later be levelled at the Birmingham School’s approach64 could also be directed at ethnomusicology’s exploration of the potential of homology for musical and cultural analysis. For example, homological analysis is typically synchronic65 and assumes a stable, even static cultural system, which begs the question of history: how such coherence systems evolved in the first place. And there is a tendency to emphasize in analysis the non-contradictory aspects and ignore things that would upset the easy homological fit between different elements or domains.66

One positive aspect of the CCCS approach that should not be overlooked, however, was the assumption of the agency of people in its analytic framework. The members of subcultures were seen to be active agents in the construction of subcultures, actively choosing from and adapting pre-existing elements and creatively re-combining them in new original ways and investing them with new meanings. The CCCS approach thus considered, at least at some level, the actions of real people. This suggests what is probably, in retrospect, the most important critique of the music-as-culture approach: the question of agency. People are not automatons, mindlessly enacting pre-existing structures to produce static products. While (musical) practice is always conditioned by previously experienced (musical) structure, that structure is best viewed as a resource that people can creatively draw on, playing with its conventions and exploring its potentialities in the course of performance. Here, Steven Feld’s further elaboration of the trope concept, alluded to above, is relevant.
I discussed above Charles Keil’s use of Armstrong’s concept of trope and his application of it to Tiv song. Building on Armstrong and Keil, Steven Feld further elaborated the concept of trope, adding a number of important new dimensions. In a way similar to that in which Keil posits the trope “circles and angles” for the Tiv and identifies its expression in a number of Tiv expressive media, Feld identifies the trope “lift-up-over sounding” and uses it to explain the Kaluli (Papua New Guinea) perception of and preference for dense textures and overlapping parts in their natural and humanly-produced soundscapes. There is an important difference, however, in the way in which Feld and Keil derive the respective Tiv and Kaluli tropes. The “circles and angles” that Keil sees throughout Tiv culture are clearly the product of his own interpretive work. What’s missing from his analysis – as from most, if not all, of the music-as-culture analyses discussed above – is a native Tiv “ethnotheory” or local exegesis that uses a “circles and angles”-type metaphor to talk about song structure and analogous formal structures in other media. In contrast, the Kaluli trope of “lift-up-over sounding” that Feld bases his analysis on is explicitly verbalized by Kaluli themselves – the phrase “lift-up-over sounding” is Feld’s translation of the Kaluli-language phrase dulugu ganalan, which Kaluli individuals themselves used to characterize process and style. The core metaphor and aspects of its exegesis are provided by the Kaluli themselves, and are not just abstracted through speculation by the ethnographer. This is not to say that interpretation by the ethnographer is not involved, but that these interpretations are co-constructed in dialogue with individuals from the culture being studied.

While this is significant in terms of field methodology, even more important is the difference between the implicit static and processual views of tropes that Keil and Feld respectively take. Armstrong originally developed the idea of trope in the context of his analysis of West African plastic arts – sculpture, wood carvings, etc. – and thus the concept is elaborated in terms of finished art works. Keil receives this static concept of trope, and while he critiques what he calls Armstrong’s static visual bias, I would argue that Keil himself ends up largely replicating a bias toward the static object, despite his attempts to extend the concept of trope to include processes that unfold in time such as bodily gesture, dance and storytelling performance. As noted above, the circles and angles Keil finds in the melodies of Tiv songs seem to come not so much from an appreciation of form in performance, but rather seem to be an artefact of the transcription of Tiv melodies in Western staff notation. Keil treats Tiv songs more as finished, static entities, like Tiv stools and body scarification patterns. Despite Keil’s rhetoric of “vital forces” and “expressive strategies”, in the end “circles and angles” is not a way of socially organizing songs, not a process realized in performance, but rather a cross-modal pattern that seems at an abstract level to relate Tiv songs to other artistic products in the Tiv expressive universe.

By contrast, the Kaluli trope “lift-up-over sounding” is heard by Feld not as a static aspect of form to be perceived in or retrieved from finished products – transcribed
songs – but rather as the Kaluli way of socially organizing sound in performance. Feld does retain the cross-modal aspect that made the trope concept so useful in the first place, noting that “the same trope that animates musical ‘lift-up-over sounding’ is highly patterned in artistic verbal, visual, and choreographic expression, as well as in the patterns of everyday conversation and social interaction.” But rather than focusing on the analysis of finished artistic products, Feld emphasizes instead the social-processual aspect of the trope. “Lift-up-over sounding” is thus the basis for a Kaluli aesthetic of social interaction, including song performance. This is a substantial expansion of the concept of trope as first elaborated by Armstrong, moving it out of the domain of static objects and into the world of social interaction in performance.

In relation to the literature discussed above from the earlier music-as-culture moment, this move in the processual direction has other important implications. Feld does not mechanically draw simple homologies between supposed Kaluli cultural themes/values/cognition and the sound structure of their music. His emphasis on communication (including singing) as social interaction leads him to phrase his argument not in terms of “music as culture” but rather in terms of “sound structure as social structure.” Despite the emphasis on the term “structure” in this phrase (which is intended to refer to, and expand upon, the title of and ideas in Lomax’s 1962 article “Song Structure and Social Structure” discussed above), Feld’s emphasis on communication as social interaction leads to a view that is much more processually oriented than the music-as-culture kind of analysis ever was in the 1970s, and can be seen as representing a sort of transition between the music-as-culture approach and the practice-centred perspectives on music that would follow.

As already alluded to above, Feld’s approach represents the influence of the interpretive turn in anthropology, exemplified in the work of Clifford Geertz. In his often-cited essay on “thick description”, Geertz famously argued:

Believing […] that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.

Associated with this interpretive approach to meaning is the humanistic metaphor of culture as text, which one can produce a reading or interpretation of.

Since the 1980s ethnomusicology has been profoundly influenced by the Geertzian turn. Approaches such as those previously championed by Nettl, Merriam, and Lomax, analogous to Geertz’s description of a previous era of anthropology as “an experimental science in search of law” – in this case the search for predictable regularities in the relationships between music and culture – have been largely displaced by explicitly interpretive approaches to music that seek to understand its meaning in real people’s lives.
In retrospect, the analyses presented by the writers using the music-as-culture approach, despite the problems with theory and method noted above, can be seen as embryonic attempts at providing readings or interpretations of cultural texts. The whole music-as-culture moment of the 1970s–1980s – the search for homologies between music and culture – can thus be seen as a transitional period within anthropologically oriented ethnomusicology between an earlier emphasis on scientific methods – epitomized in Merriam’s famous aphorism that the ethnomusicologist is “sciencing about music” – to a more explicitly humanistic interpretive approach. One the one hand, the music-as-culture approach represents a “scientific” attempt to find predictable regularities between the structure of music and the structure of culture, elaborating a method potentially applicable to all cultures and musics. On the other hand, the kind of interpretive reading of culture and music used in this approach – even as reductionistic as it is – can be seen as representing a preliminary engagement with the overall humanistic turn within the social sciences that began to emerge during the 1970s, epitomized and championed by Geertz. Feld’s extension of the trope concept to the consideration of how aesthetic systems are engendered in performance can be seen as furthering this transition, while also nudging ethnomusicology toward the performance-as-practice orientation that followed.

AFTER “MUSIC AS CULTURE”

The music-as-culture approach largely ran its course by the mid-1980s, as ethnomusicologists became interested in other issues such as music and identity (including especially gender), ethnographic approaches to popular music, and a newer paradigm of musical performance as social and cultural practice, influenced by European social theorists such as Bourdieu and Giddens, which by this time had begun to have significant influence on North American social sciences. Culture and society were now seen not as simply determining musical behaviour and structure, but rather musical performance began to be seen as an arena for the re-creation, negotiation, and transformation of culture and social relationships.

An even more recent intellectual context for thinking about the relationship between music and culture is provided by poststructural and postmodern humanistic approaches that stress the indeterminant, contingent nature of social life and de-centred, emergent identities. An important theoretical strand within anthropology itself since the 1990s is based on a critique of anthropological holism – cultures as wholes, or coherent, stable, timeless units. The very concept of “culture” itself as a geographically bounded group of people who share a single way of life has thus been called into question. Writers working from within this critique suggest that ideas about the boundedness of cultural units in particular places are no longer tenable, if indeed they ever were, and that the elegant coherence of supposed individual cultures is actually a construc-
tion created by the researcher during the writing process, while making choices to include some facts and leave out others. Within this line of thought, the disciplinary boundaries between social-scientific anthropology and humanistic cultural studies have also become blurred, and under the joint influence of Foucauldian and Lacanian theory, the “culture” of anthropology comes increasingly to look like the “culture” of cultural studies – not “peoples and cultures”, but systems of representations that produce subjects and subjectivities within systems of power.

The disappearance of music-as-culture approaches from new research since the 1980s suggests that ethnomusicologists have also become suspicious of totalizing theories or models, and so the concern with all-encompassing theories and models of culture has receded from the research agenda – the need is no longer felt to come up with a “model of everything” in which music has a specific, predictable relationship with other aspects of culture. Ethnomusicologists have perhaps been a little tardy, however, in exploring the implications of poststructural insights and approaches for their own work, though there is some indication that ethnomusicology has also begun to be theoretically informed by cultural studies, while still maintaining its strong tradition of empirical ethnography.

My purpose here has not been to try to breathe new life into the music-as-culture approach, but rather to give a critical account of this ethnomusicalogical “moment”, and to give an outline appraisal of its place in the history of ethnomusicology. With today’s suspicion of totalizing narratives it seems perhaps downright silly to try to reduce whole cultures to formulas such as magic numbers or root metaphors. But in retrospect it can be argued that the music-as-culture moment represents a significant transitional period between earlier scientific methods and later humanistic approaches to culture, and thus pushed ethnomusicology in the direction of interpretation, paving the way for more sophisticated approaches to musical symbolization and meaning that are not so flagrantly reductionist.

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Music as Culture? Reflections on an Ethnomusicological Moment

Notes

1 McLeod and Herndon 1980.
2 Herndon 1971, p. 351.
3 Merriam 1964.
4 Herndon 1971, p. 341, emphasis in original.
5 Ibid., p. 340.
6 Herndon and McLeod offer a somewhat more carefully developed account of music, cognition and culture in their later book, *Music as Culture* (1979), than the undertheorized, somewhat simplistic implicit concept of cognition in this early article by Herndon. Strangely enough, despite the title of their 1979 book, they do not dwell extensively in that book on the approach discussed here, even though by this time the phrase “music as culture” had become closely associated with this approach (cf. Nettl 1983, pp. 131–133).

8 Al Faruqi 1985, p. 71.
9 Al Faruqi 1974, p. 5.
10 Ibid., p. 8.
11 Ibid., p. 15.
12 Ibid., pp. 17–19.
13 Nettl 1979, p. 131.
14 Ibid., p. 151.
15 Ibid., p. 143.
16 J. and A. Becker 1981; see also J. Becker 1979.
18 Ibid., p. 205.
19 Ibid., p. 203.
21 Ibid., p. 212.
22 Armstrong 1971, p. 64.
23 Ibid., p. 194.
24 Ibid., p. 98.
26 Keil 1979, p. 182.
27 Ibid., p. 201–202, 256. I should note here that the “circles and angles” chapter of Keil’s book, in which he exhaustively analyzes the Tiv trope and finds it in so many Tiv expressive media, should actually be seen as being questioned or de-centred by a larger meta-narrative about materialist vs. idealist approaches to culture that encapsulates the book, as established in the book’s introduction. Within this larger meta-narrative, Keil seems to be taking the analysis of tropes to its virtuosic limits precisely in order to demonstrate its inadequacy. Thanks to Aaron Fox for reminding me of this point.

28 Examples of less prominently cited articles employing a music-as-culture or related approach involving homological relationships between different media or realms of experience might include Such and Jairazbhoy’s (1982) discussion of parallels between cyclic structures in Indian classical music and Hindu cosmology, Humphreys’ (1989) interpretation of cosmological structures in the form of Pueblo Indian songs, Tolbert’s (1987) use of the Jungian concept of archetype and the idea of sensory translation to explain cosmological symbolism in the form of Karelian lamenting, Schechter’s (1987) analysis of the relationship between what he calls a “structural metaphor” on the Quechua-language term *purina* (walking) and the structure of highland Ecuadorian harp tunes, and Wade’s (1976) discussion of the duality of fixity and flexity in Indian classical music and Indian culture and society.
30 Martindale and Riedel 1958, p. xii.
31 Ibid., p. xx.
32 Weber’s notes were posthumously edited, organized into an essay and published in German in 1921; an English translation was first published in 1958.
33 McAlister 1954.
34 Wachsmann 1956.
36 Lomax 1968.
37 Ibid., pp. 3–4.
38 Ibid., p. 6.
39 Ibid., p. 8.
41 Ibid., p.35. 
42 Bock 1988, p. 79.
43 Benedict 1934.
44 Sapir 1963 [1934], p. 594.
46 Appadurai 1988b, pp. 41–43.
47 Kroeber 1944, p. 10.
48 McAlister 1986, p. 204.
49 McAlister 1954.
50 Bock 1988, p. 42.
51 Nettl 1979, p. 144.
52 Merriam 1964, p. 247.
53 Ibid.
54 This model of functionalism is, of course, greatly simplified, and does not represent differences be-
between different sub-schools of functionalism. For British social anthropologists E.E. Evans-Pritchard and Edmund Leach, for example, at least some cultural domains and their institutions – specifically kinship and politics – were in a dynamic or mutually re-creative relationship with society, and thus the arrows in this diagram would be bi-directional.

Merriam 1967.


Feld 1981, 1988; see discussion below.

I should express here my thanks to Charles Keil for being so kind as to send me during the late 1980s a cassette copy of the Tiv songs transcribed in the appendix of his book, thus allowing me to actually listen to recorded examples of the music and compare them with his transcriptions.

Fox, n.d.

Hall and Jefferson 1976, Willis 1978, Hebdige 1979. Another contemporary parallel, emerging from yet another distinct intellectual tradition, is sociologist John Shepherd’s (1977) discussion of what he calls “the musical coding of ideologies” in the music of medieval and late industrial Europe, in which he presents paired analyses of “the articulation of an ideal feudal structure through pentatonicism” and “tonality’s encoding of the industrial world sense”. Shepherd’s theoretical framework is complex and would take more space to adequately summarize and critique than there is room for in this paper.

J. Clarke et al. 1976, p. 56. The use of the verb “reflect” and the noun “coherence” by the CCCS also parallels similar usages by ethnomusicologists in the music-as-culture approach.

Ibid., p. 76, emphasis in original.

Ibid., p. 56.

E.g. by G. Clarke (1990), Middleton (1990 pp. 150–166) and Shepherd (2003).


G. Clarke 1990, p. 82.


Feld 1981.

Armstrong 1971.

Keil 1979, p. 197.

Ibid., p. 183.

To be fair to Keil, I should note here that soon after he arrived in Nigeria in late 1965, his fieldwork was abruptly interrupted by the military coups and ethnic violence leading up to the Biafran War. As Keil himself explains in the book’s introduction, this led to him not being able to do the kind of fieldwork he actually wanted to do, focusing on issues of process and performance.


Feld 1984.

Geertz 1973, p. 5.

In his monograph Sound and Sentiment (first edition 1982, second edition 1990), Feld explicitly cites Geertz’s approach to interpretive ethnography as one of the theoretical tools he has found most useful (1990, p. 15). Another monograph from the same period that stresses interpretation as meaning-making activity by both the subjects of the ethnography and the ethnographer herself is Stone’s Let the Inside Be Sweet (1982).

Merriam 1964, p. 25.


Seeger 1987, Sugarman 1989, Turino 1989. The influence and elaboration of practice theory on and in ethnomusicology since the late 1980s deserves a separate discussion, and is outside the scope of this paper.


Some anthropologists have resisted this blurring of disciplinary boundaries, and have adopted quite defensive postures against cultural studies’ perceived poaching on the anthropological territory of culture. See, e.g., Thomas (1999) and some of the essays in Nugent and Shore (1997).

This trend is exemplified, for example, by Gupta and Ferguson (1997). For a related discussion from an ethnomusicological perspective, see Stokes (2003).

See, e.g., recent monographs by Meintjes (2003) and Fox (2004).
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Summary
During the 1970s North American ethnomusicologists began using the phrase “music as culture” to refer to a specific approach to ethnomusicological analysis: the search for homologies between the structure of musical sounds and the purported abstracted structure of cultures. This article describes this analytical approach, summarizes some examples from the literature, explores some possible influences on and links to this approach from cultural anthropology, provides a critique, and suggests where this approach might be seen as fitting within the development of ethnomusicology as a field. A parallel with the use of homology as an analytical tool by scholars associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies during the same period is also noted. This approach to musical and cultural analysis can be seen as representing a transitional stage between earlier ethnomusicological paradigms that emphasized scientific approaches and later paradigms that drew more explicitly on humanistic interpretive approaches.

Key words
Ethnomusicology, culture theory, homology, holism

Biography
Thomas Solomon is Associate Professor in the Grieg Academy, Department of Music at the University of Bergen, Norway. He has taught ethnomusicology and popular music studies at Istanbul Technical University, The University of Minnesota, and New York University, and has done field research in Bolivia on musical imaginations of ecology, place, and identity; and in Istanbul on place and identity in Turkish hip-hop. He has also done research on Turkish video clips and on music in the Turkish diaspora in Europe. His publications include articles in the journals Ethnomusicology, Popular Music, and Yearbook for Traditional Music, as well as papers in edited volumes, including one on the Eurovision Song Contest.