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Recordings in context: the place of ethnomusicology archives in the 21st century

This is an exploratory paper. A work in progress paper. In fact it's not a paper at all, but rather a part of the research process. I'm hoping to gather data from this session rather than convince you of my arguments. I acknowledge in advance, therefore, that there are generalisations, stones left unturned, and ideas misinterpreted, issues raised and not resolved.

To contextualise my questions I should give some of my own professional background as well as some background to the collection I work with on a daily basis. I'm an ethnomusicologist with research focus on African music, in particular on music from South Africa and from the Swahili Coast in east Africa. I have made my own field recordings in both locations as part of my on-going research. I'm the curator of the World and Traditional Music section of the British Library Sound Archive. The World and Traditional Music Section holds one of the world's largest collections of recordings variously described as traditional, folk or 'world' music. It encompasses most musical traditions of the world with published and unpublished recorded performances dating from the infancy of sound recording to the present day. The collection therefore contains music of most of the world's major religions, work songs, wedding and funeral music, accompanied songs and instrumental music, as well as popular styles based on folk traditions such as bhangra, rumba, soukouss, highlife, son, cumbia, tango and rebetika. The work of the section supports the discipline of ethnomusicology, broadly defined as the study of people making music, and encompassing the study of all music, including art or classical traditions from around the world as well as popular musics. The section provides advice in field and documentation methodologies and we receive new and existing recordings from active and "retired" or indeed deceased researchers, mainly ethnomusicologists. We maintain close contact with similar archives and collections in the UK and abroad. We also initiate or participate in important recording projects such as the Traditional Music in India project that resulted in over 200 hours of audio and video recording in rural areas in India made by Rolf Killius. We are heavily involved in issues of access, exploring the potential for internet dissemination. We have recently completed a digitisation project that allows open access to around 250 ethnographic wax cylinder recordings in a New Opportunities Funded project that we call Collect Britain, and we are currently working on an Archival Sound Recordings project funded by JISC to mount recordings on the internet for access to higher and further education institutions. It is an essential reference collection for students and scholars, for the media, and for musicians of all backgrounds. In this paper I'm concerned with the role of the collection

and existing recordings in collections like it within scholarship, within ethnomusicology.

I have a number of related starting points:

1) The basic principle behind the CHARM itself, where the "purpose" stated on the centre's website reads:

"[t]raditionally, music has been studied as a text reproduced in performance - almost as if it were an obscure kind of literature. This approach has little bearing on how most people experience and enjoy music, and has tended to distance musicology from the listener.... With a century of recorded music now available, the time has come to put performance at the heart of the discipline."

The statement implies a correlation perhaps synonymity between recorded music and performance. This needs to be better understood from the ethnomusicological point of view. How has ethnomusicology put performance at the heart of the discipline?

2) I would like to get beyond the generalisation, or invite reflection, of our thinking that "I'm making recordings for my own research purposes and I hope they will be useful to others too". Why make recordings and what do we mean by "useful to others"?

3) I'm beginning with the assumption (though no-one so far has refuted it) that ethnomusicologists don't tend to question the now accepted methodology of making field recordings. If a researcher heads for the field, the question is seldom "will you be making recordings while there?", but more often "what recording equipment are you taking with you?" It's a methodology taken for granted and is, I suspect, seldom questioned.

By extension, and often perhaps exacerbated by archivists such as myself, we take for granted that all recordings made are widely valuable and should be archived for broader access. How are they valuable and should all recordings be archived?

4) The need to understand (and this might seem like an ulterior motive) how the recordings I work with at the British Library and how the work my section does serves the scholarly community. I'm looking to get past generalisations such as "Wow, that's such a valuable resource!" (period) to specifics such as "Wow, that's a valuable resource and I'm coming in tomorrow or I'm accessing it in this or that way in order to research x, y, and z."

In some ways these are all the same question and they can be helpfully explored from the CHARM perspective.

My methodology thus far has been on the one hand to turn to the literature with regard to the origins of ethnomusicology and its relationship with recordings, and on the other to conduct online fieldwork by sending out a research statement, prompted by CHARM's "purpose"

statement, to various ethnomusicologists and archivists, to invite their comment.

This was the research statement/invitation:

“Ethnomusicology has had a somewhat different relationship [to the CHARM purpose quoted above] with recordings and the concept of text. The discipline came into being with the invention of sound recording technology, with recordings placed from the outset in archives. Early research centred on transcribing and analysing these recordings - "as if [they] were an obscure kind of literature" - primarily for comparative purposes. The recordings were taken out of their cultural context and the music was equally valid in the field and in an archive. By the 1960s emphasis had shifted and researchers concentrated on empirical research and their own recordings made during extended trips to the field. This was specifically to "put performance at the heart of the discipline", that is, to observe how culture was played out through music performance. Recordings made by others and deposited in archives lost their significance as the discipline turned to an exploration of music in context. Thus, by placing performance at the centre of ethnomusicological research, the use of existing recordings has been displaced, somewhat contrary to the CHARM principle.”

The research statement was phrased to ensure consideration in light of the CHARM “purpose”. I realise it could have been phrased differently and as the conversations developed and hopefully will develop with my research consultants the issues will have been further teased out. What I present in this paper are the questions and thoughts that have arisen so far, through both methodologies, and that will need to be further explored.

If we “unpack” the research question by highlighting points raised by some respondents we find ourselves with two issues to explore.

1) Firstly is the issue of the origins of ethnomusicology 2) and secondly, and this might be the crux of it all, the term “performance”.

1) “A key question would be whether it is entirely appropriate to conflate ethnomusicology with comparative musicology (and only with that)? If not, then your 1960s point is really the rise of a new discipline, and so the earlier discussion might usefully include the other ancestors (like musical folklore) and their uses of recordings (if briefly).” –Jonathan Stock

Perhaps the mainstream understanding of the emergence of “ethnomusicology” is to cite Jaap Kunst’s coinage of the term in 1950, as Mantle Hood wrote, to “replace comparative musicology” on the ground that the comparative method is employed in every scientific discipline” (Hood “Ethnomusicology”, in *Harvard Dictionary of Music* (2nd rev. ed.), Will Apel ed (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969) , comparative musicology itself emerging as a defined or serious discipline in the late 19th century with the arrival of Ellis’ theory of pitch measurement in cents and of Edison’s recording technology, the phonograph, that allowed for the creation of an “exact record of the stories as the Indians tell them with their exact pronunciation” (Walter Fewkes in a letter to Alfred Cort

Haddon dated Boston 20 March 1890). [Of course we could replace the word "Indians" with "Zulus" or "Maoris" or "Samis".] In other words the phonograph allowed for the creation of a text. Fewkes was writing as a folklorist to another folklorist, and folklorists have generally continued collecting stories, songs, "texts" as the focus of what they do. But Haddon was soon to embark on Britain's first *anthropological* expedition, to the Torres Straits, in 1898, on which he took a phonograph at Fewkes' suggestion and roughly 100 wax cylinder recordings were made. These were transcribed, interpreted and analysed. From this point on comparative musicologists, folklorists, anthropologists employed recording technology wherever possible to assist in data gathering. The point is to agree that ethnomusicology has several ancestors, including comparative musicology, folklore and anthropology. Recording technology was important for all these ethnographic disciplines and my questions/starting points are not undermined but reinforced if we look at the place recordings have had in them as a group. [I don't really want to go into the distinctions between the disciplines in too much detail here as there was a good deal of cross-over then as there is now.]

Erika Brady's book *A spiral way: how the phonograph changed ethnography* (University Press of Mississippi, 1999) is enlightening:

"Wax cylinder records themselves were valued as a means to derive written transcriptions in phonetic orthography, English textual translations, or musical transcriptions in standard notation more easily from the collected material. It was these "derived texts" not the cylinders themselves [or the performances they represent] that represented the primary basis for descriptive and analytical work in folklore and anthropology. Consequently, the wax cylinders containing recordings of songs and narratives seem to have been considered hardly more important than steno pads, once a letter has been typed in its final form. The cylinders were often discarded, the texts derived from them more subject to modification according to the needs, taste, ideology, or whim of the transcriber." (p62)

In musicology the cylinders were also often discarded, or shaved and reused once the content had been transcribed. However, many recordings were deposited in institutions such as the Library of Congress, the Berlin Phonogrammarchiv, the Vienna Phonogrammarchiv and Paris where they could be, and were studied as texts again and again by researchers back home.

PLAY TS example C80/1069 Announcement: "Ngata kbaunau pidaiki", sung by Pita, Mabuiaq.

But at that point in the 1950s when Kunst felt the need for a new word to reflect the study of music, the realisation had begun to strike that the recording was only ever a partial representation of a performance. In other words, in these disciplines we were questioning the place of our "texts" a good 50 years ago. Erika Brady offers two examples that demonstrate the limitations of depending solely on recordings. As she was dubbing recordings at the Library of Congress for preservation and research access she was aware that some of the recordings she processed

were being entered into Alan Lomax's rather controversial Cantometrics system of description. Researchers on the programme were asked to note down, among other things, ensemble size, which they would do by listening to the recordings. But Erika was aware that recorders had sometimes noted they had recorded a reduced size ensemble due to technological limitations. The information gathered from the recordings gave a skewed view of the genre. (This is also noted in reference to the recordings that Charles Myers made in the Torres Straits. Most performances were by groups of singers, usually with percussion accompaniment. Myers' recordings are predominantly of solo male singers without any accompaniment.)

Secondly Brady comments that "one respected ethnomusicologist was prepared to conclude on the basis of listening to archival recordings that American Indian songs at the turn of the century averaged 4 – 6 minutes in length – the duration of most cylinder recordings" (p6). "I was dismayed", she reported. "Was I spending my workdays on tedious and demanding technical tasks only to see them result in misleading scholarship and mistaken assumption?" (ibid.)

Hugh Tracey in his 1955 article 'Recording African music in the field' (*African Music*, vol 1 no. 2 pp6-11) makes his views clear. "Any sound recording is only a partial statement of the whole event...recording is an art form the aim of which is to suggest a complete representation of the occasion" (p7). He suggests the recordist needs sensitivity towards the music, rapport with the performers and artistic discrimination, but that they should remain unobtrusive "so as not to put the musicians off". He's hinting that the best recordings are made through familiarity and trust built up over time, i.e. through extended field work. He further says "Perhaps the most exacting task in the course of a recording session is that of writing down the detail of each and every item on a card or in a book kept specially for this purpose. It may well be said that one cannot write enough, and said with equal truth that one never does...This is where a good anthropologist comes in to the picture. If a good anthropologist can go ahead of the recording team and note down the persons who are normally considered to have talent, hours and days of unnecessary waiting can be avoided. But, one asks, in how many places in Africa is there a musically sensitive anthropologist?" (p10-11).

All things were pointing to the shift in the discipline to a more anthropological approach, perhaps formalised by Alan Merriam in his seminal book published in 1964 *The Anthropology of Music*. To fully understand a musical performance, scholars around the mid-century point were coming to believe, one had to better understand the context or culture in which it operated. One needed to spend extended periods in the field in the way that anthropologists had already begun to do. But recordings for analysis had become customary (anthropologists were doing it, folklorists were doing it and comparative musicologists were doing it) and we all headed into the field armed with the latest portable

recording equipment (with a number of consequences that I attempt to describe below).

As something of an aside, but important, we should note that the Torres Strait expedition, for example, was at the height of the colonial period, as were all ethnographic expeditions in the first half of the 20th century. The idea of collecting artefacts was big for this reason (travellers and explorers were doing it, colonial administrators were doing it), as well as for scientific reasons. Such artefacts were being deposited in museums back home. But the idea of collecting became rather un-politically correct from the 1950s and '60s as countries began to attain independence. Depositing recordings made in Ghana, for example, in an institution in the UK, could be construed as colonial, imperialist – perhaps the beginning of the ethics debate that was taken on at that point and still rages without solution, and continues to affect questions relating to recordings (ipr, copyright, etc.). The claim that recordings were being made for one's own research purposes therefore was a way of avoiding such labelling. Recordings were not and still are not automatically deposited in institutions. Thus, although ethnomusicology has grown exponentially during the 20th century and recordings have continued to be made, they are not always made accessible to other researchers.

By 1974 Merriam was writing that: "in my association with ethnomusicology through some twenty five years now, it seems to me I can see a progression ... from a focus on music sound structure [where recordings are useful and fieldwork not essential] through a concern with music as a socio-cultural phenomenon, and on now to a preoccupation with musical emotion, feeling and meaning" ('Ethnomusicology today' in *Current Musicology* 20, p64) [where fieldwork is essential]. Looking at Groves Music list of headings under "contemporary theoretical issues", we see this clearly illustrated. The list reaches 10 issues: Theory and culture; communities and their musics; ethnicity; nationalism; diasporas and globalization; race; sexuality and gender; new historicism; practice theory; music theory and analysis. In this shift we have, on the whole, become more interested in context than in sound, in process rather than product, in all aspects of performance rather than recording or text. And where product is arguably our principle model for analysis (such as in practice theory – interested not so much in how culture is produced as how and what it produces, a non-historical, non-synchronic form of analysis derived from social anthropology and using its primary methodology of participant observation) we recognise it as a representation of a larger whole. This is where the word "performance" in the context of this CHARM symposium needs to be discussed.

John Baily wrote in response to my research statement: "I do not agree with your statement that when researchers started to concentrate on empirical research and their own recordings made during extended trips to the field, this "put performance at the heart of the discipline"... It was not until the advent of "the ethnography of musical performance" period in the history of ethnomusicology (mid-1970s) that performance was put

at the heart of the discipline. In other words, making field recordings [as Klaus Wachsmann did in the 1940s and 50s, or Hugh Tracey did in the 1950s and 1960s in the field] of music out of context does not really constitute the study of musical performance (9/3/05). In other words recordings don't equal performance.

And here we must recognise that we make different types of recordings for different purposes. Of course they overlap. John Baily talks about "text" recordings and "in-context" recordings. He, like we all do I suspect, professes to have made and used both in the course of his fieldwork in Afghanistan since the 1970s. "Text" recordings might be used for analysis and/or for learning to play the music. I would suggest that these recordings are widely useful to others also wishing to analyse or learn from them. These might have been made more with the concept of product in mind. "In-context" recordings on the other hand are made during an actual live performance and contribute to an ethnography of musical performance – "the detailed description and analysis of what goes on in a performance and how the "audience" shapes the performance on that particular occasion" (Baily, pers. comm by email 7//04/05). It is recognised that these recordings are only partial representations of performance. They are best used by the researcher themselves for what Angela Impey calls "situational analysis" – listening back to the music but also to extra-musical aspects such as comments, other sounds, etc. (In many contexts video recordings may be best for this sort of work.)

Compare these recordings I made in Zanzibar. The first is what I would call a "text" recording. I arranged with the musicians to go to their rehearsal space one evening to record them.

PLAY Chaganlal Keshavji Pithadia – Indian taarab – Nakupa salamu (I give you my greetings)

The second is definitely an "in-context" recording. It's of a women's taarab group playing at a wedding in Dar es Salaam.

PLAY Sahib al Ari - Namnikome

This is where the split between musical folklore and ethnomusicology became more pronounced. Folklorists were interested in musical product, in collecting recordings for posterity. Peter Cooke tells of his work at the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh and compares it with his research in Uganda. The former he characterises as research "at home" and recordings were part of the process of oral transmission where artists themselves wanted access to learn the repertoire and had an interest in the protection of the tradition. It was important to record to the highest quality and to document to the highest standard. The product was important. The latter was work in the field when he was away from home for extended but nevertheless restricted periods of time. In this context recordings were made so that they could be more closely examined once home with more time. They were a living reminder of the event. Not a product, not a complete representation, but intended as a personal

reminder. The former might be “text” recordings while the latter are “in-context” recordings.

In short therefore, in ethnomusicology there are impediments to the straightforward adoption of the CHARM purpose to “put performance at the heart of the discipline” by turning to existing resources of recordings.

- Recordings have been made for different purposes, often to document a process rather than a product. The recordings is only a partial representation of that process and might only become useful to others as a product if documentation is meticulous, broad ranging, and done in the first place.
- Ethnomusicologists acknowledge these short comings of the recordings they make and don’t automatically deposit. [I suspect that if our attitude to documentation changed this situation might improve for the benefit of all.]
- Thus, relevant recordings are not always available.
- Time is wasted by lack of accessibility often due to lack of documentation
- As we’ve become more interested in process and less in product, technical and documentation standards have fallen
- Studies are increasingly focussed and narrow, or involve thick description or deep structure analyses, making them more complicated and detailed analyses that aren’t always easily transferable to other contexts for comparative work – it’s hard to find like with like.

So how are recordings used then? I was hoping to really get into the promised models for an ethnomusicology based on archived ethnographic recordings here. Instead I’m really only reporting the ways in which my research consultants so far have claimed to use recordings. It’s not an exhaustive list and the boundaries blur.

- “Text” recordings used more for analysis, learning a repertoire and/or to perform it
- In-context recordings used more for “situational analysis”
- Recordings are used in research relating to social memory (for example, to play historic recordings for members of a community who may have forgotten the tradition), as tools to instigate conversation, to elicit information.
- They are used in teaching. It seems we prefer to use our own recordings, which are easier to bring to life for our students
- There is some emphasis in ethnomusicology at the moment on exploring ways in which recordings can be used by communities – for example the numerous land claim cases where recordings have been submitted as evidence of previous habitation by Aboriginals in Australia; or as a means of forging or reinforcing a sense of identity for displaced people, such as refugees, for forging “imagined communities”.
- Commercial recordings are being used. Philip Yampolsky reported on his current research in Indonesia that involves an examination of locally-produced recordings in connection with a representation of

regional identity and on his discographical work on 78rpm discs, in which he seeks to compare commercial output with actual performance (he's doing this through fieldwork and comparison with radio broadcast output.)

What I can't seem to get around is that for the majority of current ethnomusicology, it seems to me that ethnomusicologists require or can best use their own recordings. And so I conclude that recordings have always been central to ethnomusicology. They have always been our "text" – at first quite literally, thought of as exact recordings, later seen as representations, reminders, tools in research - of reduced use to others but nevertheless central and indispensable as they have always been to our own work.