Ethnomusicology and Education in the 1990s
by Vladimir Simosko

(A Paper Presented at the Raga-Mala Conference, 1991)

For anyone interested in the authentic ethnic music of any of the variety of cultures on the planet, the question inevitably arises: "Why are information on and examples of this music so hard to find?" The simple answer, of course, is that not enough people are interested enough to make it profitable to disseminate such information and examples. While ultimately one realizes that an adjustment in values, even a paradigm shift, would be necessary in North American culture to provide for this field to assume its appropriate role in education, ironically, it is only through education that improvements in value orientation of this nature can occur, and ethnomusicology is one of the great tools available for this transformation.

It is helpful to review a few basic historical facts to gain perspective. Most cultures on the planet have high regard for the spiritual and healing qualities of music, and its functional role is part of their way of life. Throughout history, in many cultures one could not be considered educated, or in some cases even civilized, unless musicianship was among one's accomplishments. Music ranked with mathematics and ethics among the subjects to be studied in reaching a stage of development which could be considered enlightened or educated, and this was in civilizations whose appreciation of mathematics amounted to mystical interpretations of the basic structure of reality.

Unfortunately, the culture generally referred to as "Western Civilization", which is gradually encompassing the world with its materialistic and commercially-oriented value system, has adopted an increasingly secular orientation. Mathematics has become an engineering tool, music a commercial commodity, and ethics has been replaced by law school and management courses. While modern physics has revealed that perspectives held by Eastern thought are valid after all, the implications of these insights do not seem to be studied in reaching a stage of development which could be considered enlightened or educated, and this was in civilizations whose appreciation of mathematics amounted to mystical interpretations of the basic structure of reality.

Carl Jung, the psychologist, whose interest in the teachings of India is well known and whose work shows that influence, stated, when asked why he showed so little interest in music, that he was exhausted and irritated by listening to performers who failed to realize that their music was dealing with deep archetypical material. Some insight into what is meant by this concept is necessary to grasp the full implications of the way music is taught in the West and into the potential role of ethnomusicology in education, music therapy and the psychology of music in general.

It should be obvious that the art of music is in the shaping of sound vibrations. These vibrations are literally a series of geometrically-shaped shock waves emanating from the source and translated by the ear to impact on the psyche, playing the mind and emotions the same way the performers play their instruments or sing. Most people have experienced discomfort in the presence of inexact performers or off-tune singing. The reason is that the shape of the vibrations is wrong. The inexperienced listener may not know whether this "wrongness" is a conflict between the shape of the vibrations and the listener's expectations or the shape of the vibrations relative to the purpose of the music (as in the case of a composer's music or a raga played in the wrong tuning). Furthermore, the way in which the music is shaped to impact on the psyche conveys messages or signals which affect emotional and mental states with such power that most cultures in the history of the world have attributed mystical and divine abilities to the effects of music.

Shandra Dey, of Calcutta and New Delhi, in his recently-translated book The Quest for Divine Music, notes that the vibrations of spiritually-oriented music, continually repeated, gradually transform the performer and the listener into spiritually-oriented individuals. One could simply note that the vibrations resonating through the organism naturally realign the biorhythms and brainwave accordingly. Perhaps this process would work both ways: music which speaks of negative or hostile things would gradually transform the listener accordingly as well. The same can also be said for music out of tune with itself, as Jung in fact felt.

The implications for music therapy, still an infant field in the West, and for the psychology of music generally should be too obvious to belabour here. Those who criticize rock music for the lyrics instead of for for its vibrational matrix could learn a few things here, and the subject of noise pollution generally, which after all is also shaped sound, but chaotic, and therefore disruptive, could
also profit from these insights, as the Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer points out in his excellent book The Tuning of the World. Sun Ra, the avant-garde composer, keyboard artist and musical philosopher, has spoken often of the powers of music, and has been a pioneer in cross-cultural stylistic blends towards a musical approach which reflects the entire musical legacy of mankind consciously focussed as a positive orientation.

On a more directly cultural level, the shapes in the music also reflect the value system and lifestyle patterns of the culture of its origin, as pointed out by folklorist Alan Lomax in his landmark study Folk Song Style and Culture. Lomax showed through his cantometric comparisons (using a computer to correlate the Human Relations Area File, a monumental anthropological data base, with his cross-cultural catalogue of nuances in styles of performance practice) that certain signals in the music were always present when certain values or lifestyle patterns were present, and conversely. The entire cultural package is one piece: musical nuances, decor, values, lifestyle, and so forth. Clearly, authentic music from any culture would convey a subtle subliminal summary of a culture’s orientation, a "feel" or "flavour" of its character. Similarly, it seems apparent that watered-down, Westernized or similarly unauthentic versions would not represent the culture, in that many important signals would have vanished.

It should not take too much imagination to perceive that the power of music in dealing with archetypical psychic imagery would make authentic ethnic music an ideal cultural ambassador, a bridge between cultures in promoting understanding through the sharing of the messages offered in authentic musical performances. As the world "shrinks" and people from all cultures literally rub shoulders in an increasingly Westernized world, promoting understanding, gaining appreciation for others' cultural offerings, and bridging the gaps which cultural differences build into our psyches with the automatic fear of strangers and resistance to differences become increasingly important factors in enabling us to live together in harmony. Hopefully, educators will realize this, and ethnomusicology will become a high-priority educational feature in the near future. But the aforementioned paradigm shift will almost certainly be a prerequisite, as without appreciation of the power of music and the way it works and, even more importantly, perception of the need to transcend ethnocentricity and prejudice, such a move is unlikely. After all, the transmission of alien signals will not necessarily be well received by those with different values and lifestyle orientations.

As an individual, I have always felt that other cultures have much to offer in terms of ideas and insights unavailable elsewhere. My life has been enriched and my own character molded by exposure to and interaction with all cultures which I have had the opportunity to explore, but I realize that many individuals feel just the opposite. Unless it becomes fashionable to explore the offerings of all cultures on a well-informed level, with the whole planet a sort of non-stop "Folklorama", but on a deeper level of offering, understanding and respect, it is hard to feel that such problems will be resolved easily. Clearly, ethnomusicology education could be a superb tool in this direction, but ideally taught with understanding and appreciation of the authentic music cultures and the significance of departures from authenticity.

Of course, the Westernization and commercialization of the music of all cultures can be perceived as an authentic representation of what that culture is doing now, but in most cases it is a symptom of the loss of deeper aspects of traditional expression, and hopefully the distinction will be kept clear. Even the classical European tradition is not immune from this tendency; ignoring authentic tuning is an example.

One cannot really have expected the educational institutions, given the orientation of the culture as a whole, to have understood the significance of the blossoming of availability of the music of other cultures to North American listeners, beginning with the media developments of the 1950s, specifically the long-playing record, television and tape-recording on a mass scale. Of course the emphasis in all these media was on commercial marketability, as it remains so in the present. But the opportunity for quantities of material of ethnomusicological interest to also permeate the marketplace and become available on a large scale represents the beginning of a potential cultural revolution such as we have been discussing. Improvements in travel conditions and the multicultural mingling which multinational businesses necessitate resulted in a flood of available cultural phenomena from all cultures spreading to all cultures. Reflecting on the difficulty of travel and relatively limited media techniques even in the earlier part of this century, let alone previous centuries, compared to the situation today puts this development into perspective. Nothing like this would have been possible in the past.

Yet, as we proceed through the early 1990s the economic recession seems to result in a devaluing of the arts, as government grants, educational funding, taxes on books and recordings, cutbacks in publishing of both unless good sales are expected, and lack of even basic ethnomusicology survey courses in most universities, let alone public schools, seem to guarantee a future of mass-market-oriented consumers without interest in, or opportunity to become informed about, other cultures or their music.

This is why I began by noting that a basic paradigm shift in value orientation in North American culture is...
necessary to enable the potential renaissance in cultural dissemination to blossom. The vision of a well-informed population eagerly appreciating the cultural offerings of all the varied ethnic groups surrounding them, instead of the cultural awkwardness of misunderstanding, lack of appreciation and prejudice still permeating our society, seems too much to expect given the materialistic orientation pervading in our culture, and increasingly the whole planet. One may well ask why it is too much to expect our leaders in education and government to perceive the directions available and make a wise choice, but as things are going it does seem too much to expect.

Meanwhile, of course, different groups of interested people are busy working towards this vision of interactive multiculturalism. Winnipeg’s own Folklorama phenomenon is obviously a healthy giant step in this direction. Individuals like myself wanting to learn more are nurtured by groups such as the India School locally, and Raga-Mala, who provide instruction and recitals for anyone interested, an open door into the community. Many of us, continuing our self-education through independent study, feel that these organizations provide ongoing cultural enrichment of the sort which makes life worthwhile, and only wish that other cultural groups were offering similar opportunities so actively and visibly. At least one student, whom I in my enthusiasm dragged bodily to a Muthulakshmi Ranganathan recital, went on to learn tabla locally, and is now working towards a Master’s degree in ethnomusicology at York University.

While this example may represent exceptional interest and commitment, the student is not unique, and many others have been similarly inspired and enriched, even if they do not go on to study for graduate degrees in the field. Perhaps, in fact, sad to say, that is a good thing, for where will all the budding ethnomusicologists find employment in their field? The current trend of cutbacks is hardly encouraging. As Music Librarian at the University of Manitoba, I occasionally provide statements on library resources when new courses are proposed within the School of Music. Recently, for example, efforts have been made in areas which logically would involve ethnomusicological instruction, and, although the School of Music’s Library can provide for basic survey courses in that area, ethnomusicology was in fact not emphasized in the program proposals. It is typical of most universities in North America that basic survey courses are rarely offered. This of course is an interesting testimony on the field of music education, both in how it is being taught and regarding those being trained. In fact, the University of Manitoba has been almost a pioneer in providing opportunity for at least one student, the aforementioned graduate student at York, to obtain credit for his tabla instruction while an undergraduate at the School of Music. This was accomplished in co-operation with the India School. This kind of working together, while encouraging, seems far too rare. Despite the enthusiasm which I have seen among the students at workshops when artists from India have been brought into the School of Music for presentations, or in this particular student’s ensemble credit recital for his tabla instruction, when local artists were brought in to perform with him, few go on to deep involvement with the music of India or any other ethnic form. Presumably this is due to lack of opportunity to pursue further study efficiently as part of their program of studies. Students rarely have time to pursue areas of academic interest outside their routine program of courses.

I have also taught courses in jazz history and world music appreciation, both for university credit and for Continuing Education programs. Credit courses invariably draw larger enrolment, and the jazz history course does better in Continuing Education programs than the ethnomusicology survey. This cannot be blamed on the current recession, as I have been teaching in these areas for over 20 years, and the trend has been consistent. Perhaps it is encouraging that at least there is a constant trickle of a few interested individuals. But again this may be an indication that a shift of values on a wide scale among the population is required before sufficient support and interest can be generated to provide for the kind of activity referred to earlier.

Meanwhile, all anyone can do is keep trying. Those who can perform should perform; those who can teach should teach. Those who can be organizers or spokespersons to the government or to educators should speak out. One can only hope that organizations like the India School and Raga-Mala can keep up the good work, since their activities are providing the catalyst, stimulation and inspiration for so many to learn, both within and outside the parent community.

§§§

L’ethnomusicologie et l’éducation pour les années ’90.
-par Vladimir Simosko (conference presentée au congrès de Raga-Mala, 1991).
-résumé, traduction : André Garneau.

Les gens qui s’intéressent à la musique traditionnelle authentique se posent souvent la question suivante: pourquoi est-ce si difficile de trouver des échantillons et des renseignements sur cette musique? Evidemment, si un produit n’attire pas assez d’acheteurs, il sera moins disponible. L’auteur suggère qu’il faudra une transformation importante dans les valeurs éducatives pour que la musique populaire prenne sa place légitime dans le domaine de l’éducation.

L’histoire démontre que la plupart des cultures du monde ont accordé une place importante à la musique. Souvent une connaissance de la musique était considérée un aspect essentiel dans le développement d’un citoyen. On ne pouvait se considérer instruit connaître la musique, à
necessary to enable the potential renaissance in cultural dissemination to blossom. The vision of a well-informed population eagerly appreciating the cultural offerings of all the varied ethnic groups surrounding them, instead of the cultural awkwardness of misunderstanding, lack of appreciation and prejudice still permeating our society, seems too much to expect given the materialistic orientation pervading in our culture, and increasingly the whole planet. One may well ask why it is too much to expect our leaders in education and government to perceive the directions available and make a wise choice, but as things are going it does seem too much to expect.

Meanwhile, of course, different groups of interested people are busy working towards this vision of interactive multiculturism. Winnipeg's own Folklorama phenomenon is obviously a healthy giant step in this direction. Individuals like myself wanting to learn more are nurtured by groups such as the India School locally, and Raga-Mala, who provide instruction and recitals for anyone interested, an open door into the community. Many of us, continuing our self-education through independent study, feel that these organizations provide ongoing cultural enrichment of the sort which makes life worthwhile, and only wish that other cultural groups were offering similar opportunities so actively and visibly. At least one student, whom I in my enthusiasm dragged bodily to a Muthulakshmi Ranganathan recital, went on to learn tabla locally, and is now working towards a Master's degree in ethnomusicology at York University.

While this example may represent exceptional interest and commitment, the student is not unique, and many others have been similarly inspired and enriched, even if they do not go on to study for graduate degrees in the field. Perhaps, in fact, sad to say, that is a good thing, for they do not go on to study for graduate degrees in the field. Perhaps, in fact, sad to say, that is a good thing, for perhaps it is encouraging that at least there is a constant trickle of a few interested individuals. But again this may be an indication that a shift of values on a wide scale among the population is required before sufficient support and interest can be generated to provide for the kind of activity referred to earlier.

Meanwhile, all anyone can do is keep trying. Those who can perform should perform; those who can teach should teach. Those who can be organizers or spokespersons to the government or to educators should speak out. One can only hope that organizations like the India School and Raga-Mala can keep up the good work, since their activities are providing the catalyst, stimulation and inspiration for so many to learn, both within and outside the parent community.

§§§

L'ethnomusicologie et l'éducation pour les années '90.
-par Vladimir Šimsko (conférence présentée au congrès de Raga-Mala, 1991).
-résumé, traduction: André Gareau.

Les gens qui s'intéressent à la musique traditionnelle authentique se posent souvent la question suivante: pourquoi est-ce si difficile de trouver des échantillons et des renseignements sur cette musique? Evidemment, si un produit n'attire pas assez d'acheteurs, il sera moins disponible. L'auteur suggère qu'il faudra une transformation importante dans les valeurs éducatives pour que la musique populaire prenne sa place légitime dans le domaine de l'éducation.

L'histoire démontre que la plupart des cultures du monde ont accordé une place importante à la musique. Souvent une connaissance de la musique était considérée un aspect essentiel dans le développement d'un citoyen. On ne pouvait se considérer instruit connaître la musique, à