
“Musical Thinking” and “Thinking About Music” in Ethnomusicology: An Essay of Personal Interpretation

I. INTRODUCTION

My assignment is to discuss the term or concept of “musical thought” from the perspective of ethnomusicology.¹ Whether, as Eduard Hanslick suggested,² the message of the musician is music, or whether instead, as recent publications by music historians argue, music expresses a subtext whose message is determined by extraneous issues such as culture, class, gender, and personality,³ all this has been in the center of the issues debated by musicologists throughout the twentieth century. Ethnomusicologists, whose task it has been to study the world’s musical systems from a comparative and culturally relativistic perspective, and to contemplate music as an integral domain of culture from an anthropological viewpoint, have tilted towards the latter view.⁴ They have not really paid much attention to the concept of musical thinking as an activity distinct from other kinds of thought, or to the notion of music as residing in a particular portion of the brain, or indeed to the separateness of musical memory or talent as distinct from other kinds of cognition. Instead, they have deduced the thought processes of musicians in cultures foreign to themselves from analysis of musical compositions and performances; and ideas about music from anthropological participant-observation-style field work.

The history of ethnomusicology, however, has moved from an interest in musical thought, in finding out how different societies, as it were, “think” music, to an interest in ideas about music. Indeed, in the first part of the twentieth century, it was the conventional wisdom of ethnomusicologists that while members of all societies, including tribal cultures, engaged in musical thinking because they clearly composed, performed, and transmitted musical entities, only those societies which had devel-

oped “art” or “classical” music systems—the high cultures of Europe and Asia—thought and theorized about music and had ideas about it. At the basis of this belief was the assumption that societies that use music for explicitly aesthetic expression require a totally different view of music than those for whom music is principally “functional,” that is, exists in order to accompany rituals and other non-musical activities.

This viewpoint has now been totally abandoned. On the one hand, John Blacking’s landmark work, *How Musical Is Man?*,⁵ asks at least by implication whether musical thinking is a human universal. We are accustomed to asking whether an individual is or is not musical, and have developed, in our culture, the concept of “talent” as a measuring device. If you are musical, you have the capacity of musical thinking; to think *about* music does not necessarily require musicality. But Blacking asks how much musical talent humans have, whether they are musical, as a species, and, answering of course in the affirmative, suggests that musical thinking is a human universal.

Now, ethnomusicologists have determined that music is a cultural universal of humans. Not all human cultures would agree that they “have” music; the concept doesn’t exist everywhere, and where it does, its shape varies. It’s true that all societies have something that sounds to *us*, broad-minded, musical Americans and Europeans, like music.⁶ And something that one can objectively distinguish from ordinary speech. Does this really mean that all people *have* music? And that they engage in musical thinking?

On the other hand, ethnomusicologists have come to believe that even those musics that

exist, as it were, for the sake of art alone, the message of whose musicians is simply music, take their structure not merely from the genius of the composers but express important values of their culture.⁷ Thus, for all musical scholars, but particularly for ethnomusicologists, the distinction between thinking music and thinking about music becomes increasingly complex as the understanding of music as a part of culture increases in sophistication. The ethnomusicological literature has changed in its scope from a body of work in which one documented the musical utterances of the world's peoples, taking for granted that this would inform us about their ways of thinking music, to work in which the ideas *about* music, expressed verbally, ferreted out from compositions, myths, forms of behavior, rituals, and taxonomies, play the principal role. There is a tension between these two approaches—they are parts of a chronology, but they also represent, respectively, the paradigmatic viewpoints of the “music” and “anthropology” components of ethnomusicology.

My purpose here is to look at two aspects of musical thought from an ethnomusicological perspective: the thinking of music, or “thinking music” by musicians, and ideas about music held by musicians and others in a society. I wish to discuss some of the ways in which these kinds of musical thought intersect with musical structure, musical behavior, and the central values of cultures, and how their study may be brought to bear on the understanding of music on a cross-cultural basis. Not qualified to talk about this on various levels that might be desirable, such as the perspectives of students of cognition and of physiological psychology, I cannot present a general theory. Instead, I want to make five brief excursions into cultures with which I have had direct experience, excursions in which the two kinds of musical thought interact, or in which the study of one may tell us importantly about the other.

II. THE BEAVER MEDICINE

A typical song of the Blackfoot people has the following structure: A short motif of five or six notes is sung at a high pitch level by the song leader, then repeated by a second singer. At that point, the entire group of singers begins what might sound like the same motif, but instead of

completing it, moves to other melodic material, gradually descending in pitch until the initial motif is sung again, an octave lower, followed by a cadence of a repeated low tone. The portion of the song sung by the entire group is then repeated. This is the entire song, or at least one stanza of it, which may be repeated in its entirety four times.

In a classroom, the teaching ethnomusicologist might, while hearing the recording, write its form as follows:

A(1);A(1);A(2) B C A(3) (octave lower) X;
A(2) B C A(3) (octave lower) X.

This is in some ways, given its length, a complex song. If we were to try to dissect musical thought here, we would perhaps say two things: a) The song is easily divided into two, or possibly three, or perhaps four, or maybe even five or six sections, perhaps more, and these sections have rather specific relationships to each other. b) There is clearly a kind of hierarchy of materials; the beginning is a motif that generates parts of the rest of the song—a kind of theme that is succeeded by developmental and episodic material. It turns out that a very large proportion of Blackfoot songs follow roughly the same pattern, although the number of phrases and the interrelationship within the interior portion of the song may vary. Clearly, we have a pattern of musical thinking that can be described and explained in musical terms.

Asking Blackfoot singers about the shape of the songs yielded a few direct statements. For one thing, three singers analyzed the song in three ways: as a song whose last part is repeated; as one with four sections, as all Blackfoot songs ought to have four sections, even if they are of greatly differing lengths; and as a song with a good beginning, middle, and end.⁸ Without going into detail: all three of these analyses tell important things about the way this song relates to Blackfoot culture, and all recognize the importance of dividing the song into sections. One would think, therefore, that these sections have some importance; for example, that one learns songs section by section, or that they may have lives of their own, moving from song to song, somewhat in the manner of the “line families” which I was able to identify in Czech folk songs.⁹

But not so. Because the other thing my singer/friends said was that one normally learns songs in one hearing.¹⁰ This is maintained even though one can observe singers at powwows recording each other's songs, obviously to play them over at home to learn them. One hearing evidently isn't really enough. We may be tempted to chuckle about what seems to be a minor kind of hypocrisy, but two things help to convince us otherwise. First, the structure of the song militates towards the single-hearing theory. It's a complex form, but if you know the style well, you can, after hearing the first line, pretty much predict what the rest of the song will be like. If you can remember one line of music you don't have to remember too much else.

Well, this tells us something about musical thinking at two or maybe three levels, perhaps concentric circles that focus on the song itself, showing how its characteristics came to be as they are. Let me try one further circle, which tells us something about the way Blackfoot people think about music, what it has to do with culture, and why the relationship to culture may result in certain theories of music, and in turn, certain compositional forms.

Central to this illustration is a summary of an important myth, the story that tells the origins of the beaver medicine bundle.¹¹ This bundle is actually a group of perhaps close to 200 objects that are kept wrapped together and opened for ceremonial purposes. The objects are the dressed bird and animal skins of all the local wildlife, plus a few other objects and a large number of sticks representing the songs that accompany the bundle, as it were. It is associated with the beaver, who is a kind of lord of the part of the world below the surface of water; and thus it is one of the principal ceremonies of the Blackfoot religious system. Before the bundle is opened, the following story is told.

A great human hunter has killed a specimen of each animal and bird, and their dressed skins decorate his tent. While he is hunting, a beaver comes to visit his wife and seduces her, and she follows him into the water. After four days she returns to her husband, and in time gives birth to a beaver child. Affairs were unforgivable in Blackfoot society, but the hunter continues to be kind to his wife and the child. The beaver, visiting, expresses pleasure at this and offers to give the hunter some of his supernatural power

as a reward. They smoke together, and then the beaver begins to sing songs, each containing a request for a particular bird or animal skin. The hunter gives the skins, one by one, and receives, in return, the songs of the beaver and the supernatural power that goes with them, and thus, the principal Blackfoot ritual.

This myth imparts important things about Blackfoot music. Here are some: Music comes from the supernatural. Songs come as whole units, and you learn them in one hearing, and they are objects that can be traded, as it were, for physical objects. The musical system reflects the cultural system, as each being in the environment has its song. Music reflects and contains supernatural power. It's something which only men use and perform, but women are instrumental in bringing its existence about. Music is given to a human who acts morally, gently, in a civilized manner. It comes about as the result of a period of dwelling with the supernatural, after which a major aspect of culture is brought, so in a way it symbolizes humanness and Blackfootness.

What is musical thought? We have the thinking of the composer, the musical system as it is described by singers with its reference to forms and ideas about learning, and we have the myth, creation perhaps of medicine men, which explains what music does for culture, and how cultural values must be reflected in music. Which of these came first I'd hesitate to guess. Did the cosmologists shape their myths to account for the way music is formed, or did composers and singers shape their songs in order to make them fit a set of values promulgated in the mythology?

III. EXCURSIONS TO THE PERSIAN RADIF

My second foray is to the classical music of Iran. I went to Iran some 25 years ago because I understood that this music was improvised; and I wanted to know how, as it were, the musicians' minds worked. How the minds of European composers worked has been a subject for music historians for many decades. And one may indeed get a sense of what is perhaps with more dignity called "the creative process" by studying the structure of compositions. The musical mind, if I can put it that way, of Wagner can be read by studying his consistencies, and the way it differs from that of a Brahms or a

Verdi. One can study sketches, of course. But how does a musician think, as it were, on his or her feet?¹²

I thought the study of Persian improvisation would help tell me, at least for one culture. And I determined to go to Iran to study in two ways, first by trying to learn music as it is learned by an Iranian student, and second, to do a kind of controlled experiment, seeing how many musicians, and perhaps individual musicians on one occasion, would play, or improvise upon, one mode. It's like seeing how Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan play Rag Malkauns, or how several jazz musicians might play and develop, say, "Georgia on My Mind."

My teacher first said that I must learn the radif. This is a repertory of some 300 short pieces which in the aggregate require some eight hours to perform. The pieces require from a few seconds to some four minutes, the entire repertory is monophonic, the majority of the pieces are non-metric but some have meter while others alternate between rhythmic predictability and what is conventionally called "free rhythm."¹³

In some ways, the radif can be regarded as the theory of Persian music, perhaps something like a theory textbook that tells you the rules of composition. I asked whether one learned the radif, and then learned to improvise, and was told, No, once you learn it you *can* improvise. You use the radif as a basis for improvisation, and its structure and content teach you, as it were, how to improvise.

My teacher of Persian music in Iran once said to me, "You know, it is really something extraordinary and fine, something quite unique, this radif that we have created in Iran." And so, clearly, he regarded it not as a kind of tool, as we might have considered the textbooks traditionally used in music theory classes. Rather, it was the center, a kind of ideal, from which the real music emanated.

I began to study the structure of the radif, especially the interrelationships of its sections, and I'm still doing this, feeling that there is much more to be learned even though I—along with several other authors, Iranian, European, American, and Japanese—have written books about it.¹⁴ What greatly impressed me was the many internal consistencies, the multifarious interrelationships by repetition, terminological

duplication, and rhythmic and melodic variation, all within the framework of twelve modes which are in some ways parallel and in others so different as to constitute genres. I also began to ask myself whether there were some basic principles of structure and emphasis.

The complexity of the radif struck me as parallel to other large forms known and long practiced in Iran: carpets, complex and book-length works of literature, compilations of poems. But the nature of the internal interrelationships did not become clear to me until I began to wonder also about the patterns of social behavior. Then I came to realize—I think I'm right in promulgating this theory—that similar patterns in music and social life could be identified. Without going into detail, I'll just say that Persians think of society on the one hand as a set of hierarchies; on the other a group of cells in which a group of people look to a single leader for authority and guidance; and in the third place, a group of equals, all humans being equal before God in Islamic theology. Also, Iranians think of themselves as individualistic, like to surprise each other, and relish the unexpected. And they have definite ideas as to what events and what people ought to precede and follow in a series of events. All of these interrelationships are found in the radif. The whole system is a set of hierarchies; the beginning of each section provides guidance in the sense of thematic development for what follows; in a sense, all 300 parts are equal, equally capable of becoming improvised music. Those parts of the radif that lend themselves to far-flung improvisation are valued; those that have predictability, such as the metric ones, are lower, following the value of individualism. The exceptional and unexpected is valued. There are further relationships,¹⁵ and so, I had to conclude that what appeared to be musical thinking in the creation of the radif either followed, or developed parallel to, thinking and acting in Persian society and culture.

IV. EXTRACTING A THEORY TEXT

If all societies have musical thinking as well as thinking about music, do they all have a somehow articulated music theory? Many societies have, of course, articulated texts, treatises, and books. But what about non-literate societies? Would the things they say about music lend

themselves to creating a theory text? Could the things they say about music be arranged into a system of articulated musical thought?¹⁶

Working with the Blackfoot people, I was often struck by their logical system of music, the way in which various components of musical sound, behavior, and ideas about music interlocked. That is why I related the myth of the beaver medicine. And I wondered about a culture that has such a neat musical system but no articulated theory, no theory text, and came to the conclusion that the myths might constitute such a text; after all, it is the function of myths to explain the world, of which music is a part. But, seeing myself as a kind of ethnomusicological extra-terrestrial emerging from a saucer in Evanston, if I were to try to find articulated forms of the theory of Western music I would perhaps try two approaches. One would be to examine formal presentations—treatises, textbooks, perhaps course syllabi, all more or less corresponding to the Blackfoot myths; and a second would be to observe how people talk about music, what kinds of statements they make, what they emphasize, and perhaps what statements are made repeatedly.

And so, having taken lots of notes and having made recordings of many interviews with learned and musical Blackfoot people who tried to tell me what their culture was all about, I decided to see what statements were made to me with a high degree of emphasis, what things might have been said repeatedly, what ideas and facts my teachers were particularly anxious for me to get right. I don't know whether I made the right choices from my materials, or whether, given a different schedule or set of contacts, I would have reached different conclusions; or whether somebody else would have had quite different experiences. But I decided to put together the selected statements to see if these could function, as it were, as a theory text. Let me read you the eighteen statements without further comment in the hope that you'll accept this as yet another way of approaching the problem of musical thought.¹⁷

The Concept of Music

1. The songs are some of the most important things we Blackfoot people have.
2. Our songs are different from white people's songs,

they are special; for one thing, they sound special, and they don't just have a lot of words.

3. Our songs came back to us (i.e., after 1950) when our Blackfoot feelings came back.
4. This Blackfoot song is one of the favorite songs of the tribe.
5. Our songs have a lot of stories that go with them.

Origins and History

6. The real songs of our tribe, our true songs, they mostly came in dreams.
7. Our songs (i.e., the style of our songs) are so old, they must go back to the days of Napi (the culture hero) (followed by a chuckle).
8. When I made up songs, dreaming had a lot to do with it.
9. Sometimes I hum a song, over and over, and that way I catch a new song.
10. We learned a lot of dances and songs from other tribes—like the Cree, Assiniboine, Gros Ventres—but then we changed them too.
11. Our tribe keeps getting new songs. There are always new songs coming into our reservation. But we try to hold on to the old songs too. Sometimes we can't, but we should.

Uses and Functions of Music

12. A good song is one that fulfills well the purpose of the song.
13. The right Blackfoot way to do something is to sing the right Blackfoot song with it.
14. We used to have a lot of different kinds of songs, you can't imagine how many kinds of songs.

Musicianship

15. A good song leader knows a lot of songs and has a good strong voice; he can get other singers to follow him.
16. Most Blackfoot people can sing a song after they have heard it sung only one time.
17. People used to have a better memory for songs than they do now. It's because they depend so much on reading and writing.
18. Our songs have a beginning, middle, and end. After beginning, somebody raises the leader, and then all sing.

V. THE FAMILY COMPOSER

In my life, Mozart has occupied something of a role of the family composer. My father devoted

years of his life to research on Mozart's relationship to Prague, and to Masonry; my older daughter has choreographed to Mozart, and my younger one got married to his sounds, and if truth be told, the first piece of music I remember ever hearing my life was *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* (K. 525). And so I decided some years ago that even as an ethnomusicologist I too must write something about Mozart.¹⁸

What does an ethnomusicologist write about Mozart? Analyze his use of folk and non-Western music, his ability to manipulate Italian and German styles, Bach-like early music, Austrian folk themes, Turkish music, and all that? Look at the social views he presented in his works such as turning the world upside down in asking whether it was the men or the women who were really more perfidious in *Così fan tutte*, or what he meant when he had Tamino begin the *Magic Flute* screaming like a maiden in distress, only to be rescued by the little army of three ladies singing of their triumph in perfectly macho triadic fanfares; or as a social critic who has Monostatos and Osmin complaining about racial discrimination? Or perhaps provide a sociological analysis of musical life in Mozart's Vienna?

These are all worth doing. But most ethnomusicologists want to present the musical life of a society in which they work. The ethnomusicological E.T. arriving in Evanston or Urbana would quickly be confronted with certain figures, chief among them perhaps Bach, Beethoven, Schubert, Mozart, who are treated as both alive and dead. And I decided to look at the function of Mozart in contemporary art music society, a composer whose works occupy an enormous portion of the concert repertory, whose name is engraved on buildings, who is the subject of innumerable biographies, analytical studies, and even entire periodicals, and about whom as a person and artist people have certain ideas. It is these ideas which, I think, tell us something about musical thinking in our society; that they are often contrary to known historical fact is interesting but not necessarily relevant to the analysis of contemporary culture.

Indeed, what I might call the Mozart mythology tells us important things about our culture and our musical values. If I were to suggest those things most widely believed or empha-

sized about Mozart, they might be these: the concept of genius at its most extreme—a composer who didn't have to try, for whom everything was easy; a composer not appreciated by his own people, but more, perhaps, by foreigners in the distant city of Prague; a child prodigy whose childlike nature never left him; a composer for whom everything musical went right, who was good at everything, but for whom things in the rest of his life went wrong; the composer who wrote what we see as the most normal classical music, the standard against which to judge earlier and later; the composer whose work you can recognize within seconds. After all, Nicolas Slonimsky describes him as the "supreme genius of music,"¹⁹ and Wolfgang Hildesheimer, as "perhaps the greatest genius in recorded human history."²⁰

But we also know that the historical Mozart wasn't really like that. We know that he was a workaholic as a composer, was ambitious to try many kinds of things in music, was proud to be able to write in a variety of styles, dealt with varied degrees of success with the practical problems of his life. He set himself demanding musical problems and solved them, and he wrote extremely complex music, was thus regarded as a difficult composer in his time. He did some sketching, and there is evidence that he did careful planning, though to be sure his mind seems to have worked with lightning speed and his memory to be flawless.

The contemporary mythology makes much of the differences between Mozart and Beethoven: Mozart, for whom everything was easy; Beethoven, the hard-laboring composer whose sketches show the intensity of his labors. A Levi-Straussian analysis would show various opposites: Mozart, the man about whose death there is mystery, who had problems with his father; Beethoven, with a mystery about his birth and origins, whose personal problems move in the other direction, to his nephew and son-substitute. Mozart, who wrote in much the same style through his life; Beethoven, whose style changed enormously. Mozart, the fun-loving lover of his wife, billiard-player, author of scatological letters; Beethoven, the man who eschewed women to save his art, avoided frivolity, kept to the moral high ground.

The two composers occupy roles of heroic types widely used in the myths of Western cul-

ture: the hard-working leader of humanity, and the genius (with supernatural qualities) who is misunderstood, betrayed, becomes a victim. It's Ulysses and Achilles, Hans Sachs and Siegfried, even—dare I intrude into theology—Moses and Jesus. It should not surprise us that humans in Western society think about musicians as they do about figures in other domains of culture, a culture in which duality and dichotomy plays a major role in structuring our way of classifying our universe, from good versus evil all the way to major and minor, and on to the typical pairing of composers from Leonin and Perotin to Bartók and Kodály. Interesting about the Mozart-Beethoven paradigm is the fact that it is related to two ways we conceive of the musical thought of composers, the difference between, put bluntly, inspiration and perspiration. Mozart is seen (again, we know he wasn't really *only* like that) as the inspired composer par excellence, and Beethoven as the man who worked things out, crafted them. It's clear also that we would all like to have inspiration and to avoid too much perspiration, and so we imbue Mozart with qualities that we like, more so than Beethoven. In *A Clockwork Orange*, Anthony Burgess²¹ associated Beethoven with the destructive and sadistic Alex who can't escape a tragic fate, and Mozart, in another novel, *The End of the World News*,²² with the escape of the fifty lone human survivors of a planetary collision in a spaceship, while listening to the strains of the *Jupiter*. Mozart is the sweet composer, there are sweets, sweet liqueurs, sweet wines, at least four sweetshops in North America, desserts in Viennese cookbooks, all named for him. None for Beethoven; all I could find was a meat-and-potatoes restaurant on the coast, and a piano moving company in New York.

The idea of the composer who writes easily, doesn't have to try, for whom problems are solved, as it were, by divine inspiration, in whose music each phrase seems the only logical successor to the one you've just heard, all this correlates with the idea of sweets, which go down easily and represent for us a certain seamlessness. For Mozart, we are sometimes inclined to think, composing was easy as pie, or a piece of cake.

Now, before you say, "Balderdash! What does this tell us about Mozart?," I must remind

you that I'm not talking about Mozart, the historical figure, but about our culture today, in which Mozart and other composers play major roles and become the symbols of important and competing values and of the tensions between them. And so our ideas about music are affected and maybe determined by our desire to juxtapose values, to present life as a set of dichotomies, looking at the universe as the tension between divine and human, divine inspiration and human labor, sweetness and salt. Never mind that the thematic juxtapositions of Mozart's and Beethoven's piano concertos work very much the same way, that Beethoven often picked up where Mozart had left off. The ideas of our culture about music and our perception of the musical thought of composers is very much determined by ways in which we structure our universe. Writers of program notes, music teachers of children, collectors of CDs seem often to be saying, don't confuse me with historical facts, the Mozart and Beethoven myths help me to teach and to clarify for myself the ways in which my society looks at the world.

VI. AUTHORITY AND FREEDOM

We are lucky to live in a society which likes music. What society doesn't? Well, "liking" may often not be the right term, but all societies seem to have and to desire in their lives something that sounds to us like music. But in our society, music is associated with good things; your favorite dog barking is "music to your ears," as is the jingling of money in your pocket; a sound you like is a "musical sound." And if you're singing, you are assumed to be happy.

It's not like that everywhere, of course. The Blackfoot people revere their songs and regard them as essential for human existence; but until recently, I think they did not associate them with the concept of fun. The grand tradition of Carnatic music is much loved by its people in South India, but music is not a metaphor for good and beautiful things; perhaps because it is taken so very seriously. There are parts of the world in which music is viewed with suspicion and ambivalence. It has often been thus in parts of Western culture; maybe it still is. But the example most cited is the Islamic Middle East.

Why devout Muslims avoid music, and how it got that way, is beyond my scope here.²³ I would like to speak a bit to the question of how the fundamental attitude towards music may affect musical thought in the most specific sense. Before beginning, I must tell you that I have hard data for certain of my conclusions, but in other cases I must provide very personal interpretations.

My experience of the Muslim Middle East comes from Iran, of course. And there the situation has always been complex, as we have a society heterogeneous in many ways. But to simplify: Music is something people were careful of, they felt guilty about its enjoyment, they looked down on musicians and visited certain disabilities on them, regarded instruments as particularly dangerous, and kept music away from the mosque. Still, they love and desire music. How do they manage to eat their cake and have it?

There are a number of—shall we call them techniques, or mechanisms, or practices?—which have been established.²⁴ For one thing, there is the structure of the concept of music. We tend to regard music as a single, comprehensive concept; all kinds of music—Mozart, rock, Carnatic, Machaut, Coltrane—are to the same degree music. They may not be equally good or pleasing, but they are all music. In Iran, different sounds have about them varying degrees of music-ness. People say, in effect, “What we’re doing is not really music in the full sense, it is only” The chanting or singing of the Qur’an, which surely sounds to us like music, is not labeled with the Persian word for music. It is, of course, acceptable; and when it comes to real music, the more a sound is like Qur’an singing, the more acceptable it is, and the less music-ness it has. So, music which is vocal, not metric and thus rhythmically unpredictable, improvised on the basis of models, texted, uninfluenced by non-Muslim cultures, and for a sacred, serious, edifying social context, and not for pure entertainment, is acceptable and non-musical. At the other extreme, instrumental music, pre-composed, metric and even with rhythmic ostinato, performed to show off the performer’s technique, and possibly even performed in places of entertainment such as night clubs, with women singing and dancing, and maybe with elements of Western

style such as occasional functional harmony, is music in the extreme sense and the most dangerous, eschewed by the devout but also looked down on by secular conservatives. (You can see from this, perhaps, how a classical system of music developed in which non-metric improvisation is central, and in which unpredictability is a major value in the thinking of musicians.)

But this tendency is contradicted by another. If the splitting up of music into varying degrees of music-ness is one technique of dealing with the ambivalence, the splitting up of the concept of musician is an analogue. Few people regard themselves as musicians; especially in villages, one may be a singer of the national epic at teahouses; or an instrumentalist who plays at weddings and similar ceremonies; or a singer of songs to praise the Imam Hossein, martyred son of the prophet’s son-in-law; or the reciter of verses and percussionist to accompany gymnastic exercises in the traditional type of gymnasium, the *zurkhaneh*. But not a *musician*. They say, in effect, “We’re not musicians, we’re only performers of” Well, since each of these genres tends to be dominated by a few tunes or melodic formulae, you can see that these singers may, in their lives as performers, be very predictable indeed. There’s a tension between freedom to improvise and having to stick to one’s set of basic materials.

But then, also, people will say, in effect, “It’s not we who are doing the music,” or “What we’re doing isn’t really making music at all.” For the first, it has long been a practice in the Middle East to attract non-Muslim minorities to music, and so a disproportionate number—though by no means a majority—of Persian classical musicians were in my time Jewish; and musicians in the popular music field, Jewish or Armenian Christian; and instrument makers, Armenian; instrument-sellers, Jewish. Having established that music is for minorities, Muslim minorities too were attracted into music; in Northern Iran, Kurds were considered the greatest singers. The structure may have even become reversed in India, where a disproportionate number of musicians in this basically Hindu culture are actually Muslims.

But also, music became a specialty of the various Sufi orders, adherents of the main mystical movement of Islam, who would say, in effect, This isn’t music, it’s just another way for

us to know and come closer to God. And related to this is the conception of the ideal of musicianship being the learned amateur, who knows the system but does not make his living from music. It is possible for such a person to be socially respected, whereas society looked down on professional musicians, associated as they were with a dangerous and undesirable activity, to which was added a reputation for unreliability, sexual promiscuity, homosexuality, habitual tardiness in paying debts, drug addiction, alcoholism, other accusations often visited on minorities, and lots more—the same kinds of things one once heard about jazz musicians. But the upper class amateur almost made a virtue of some of these same things.

My teacher repeatedly made this clear to me. Mood—being in the right mood, and being able to play appropriately corresponding music—is central to Persian musical performance practice. A professional musician must play what his employer asks, when he is commanded, however long is desired; he is told when to begin and when to stop. The amateur has the freedom to make decisions: whether to play at all, which mode, and so on. You can see why this attitude would lead to a system of musical thinking in which improvisation is central and composed music of less esteem; in which the idea of making decisions, from what mode to play all the way to the tiniest ornament, is valued over the pre-planned; in which the unexpected and the exceptional, suggesting freedom to depart even unconventionally from norms, is highly privileged.

I could characterize Persian musical thought as a tension between authority and freedom, between the authority of the *radif*, which one memorizes, and the freedom to improvise upon it; between knowledge of a canon and ability to depart from it. My work in Persian music has included a great deal of analysis of improvisations based on the same material from the canonic *radif*; I've tried to see how different musicians differ from each other, how one musician's performances differ over time. The individual differences are extremely interesting: one musician virtually memorizes his improvisations; another plans the temporal relationship sections precisely; a third plays a bit, then rests on long notes while deciding what to do next; a fourth keeps the same tempo for long periods

while a fifth changes constantly; a sixth keeps to the non-metric while a seventh moves in and out of metric structure; one goes through the sections of the *radif* one by one; another mixes things in an unanalyzable jumble. But how do the musicians evaluate each other, what makes certain performances good and others mediocre? In good measure it is the musician's ability to juxtapose his knowledge of and respect for the tradition with the various musical symbols of freedom.

VII. CONCLUSION

My approach to the concept of musical thought has been to look at the relationship between ideas about music and musical ideas. I have been unable to identify explicitly musical thought as different from other kinds of thinking, and probably I wouldn't be competent to do that. But I do suggest that the way in which musicians think musically, the ways in which they, as it were, "think" their music, depends in large measure on ways in which they think of their world at large. And within that context, the ways in which a society thinks about the concept of music, about music in culture, about musicians, may determine much about the way in which the musicians of that society think their music.

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1. This article is based on a lecture given in June, 1992, at Northwestern University. The invitation to deliver this lecture contained the request to speak about the concept of "musical thinking" from an ethnomusicological perspective, but in the hope that this perspective would help to integrate the approaches of scholars and students in musicology, music theory, and music education. I am grateful to Professor Philip Alperson for inviting me to make this lecture into an article, but feel that I must explain the fact that it nevertheless retains a good many aspects of an informal lecture.

2. As in his perhaps best-known sentence: "Der Inhalt der Musik sind tönend bewegte Formen." The view that music is simply music (not representative, to be sure, of Hanslick's total philosophy) is still widespread in the literature of music theory. See, e.g., Robert Cogan and Pozzi Escot, *Sonic Design: The Nature of Sound and Music* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976).

3. The various approaches to musicology, including those

that emphasize cultural and historical context, are discussed critically by Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Harvard University Press, 1985); see also Barry S. Brook and others, eds., *Perspectives in Musicology* (New York: Norton, 1972).

4. Definitions of ethnomusicology abound. See Alan P. Merriam, "Definitions of 'Comparative Musicology' and 'Ethnomusicology': An Historical-Theoretical Perspective," *Ethnomusicology* XXI (1977): 189–204; and Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology* (University of Illinois Press, 1983), pp. 1–14.

5. University of Washington Press, 1973.

6. During the 1970s, the discussion of cultural universals gained considerable currency in ethnomusicology. See, e.g., Klaus P. Wachsmann, "Universal Perspectives in Music," *Ethnomusicology* XV (1971): 381–84. For a summary, see Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology*, pp. 44–51.

7. See Alan Lomax, *Song Structure and Social Structure* (Washington: American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1968), for general theory; and for an illustration, Nettl, "Musical Values and Social Values: Symbols in Iran," *Asian Music* XII (1980): 129–48.

8. Nettl, *Blackfoot Musical Thought: Comparative Perspectives* (Kent State University Press, 1989), pp. 152–53.

9. Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology*, p. 111.

10. Nettl, *Blackfoot Musical Thought*, pp. 153–54.

11. A number of variants of this myth have been published, some of them by Blackfoot authors. Here I summarize the version in John C. Ewers, *The Blackfeet: Raiders on the Northwestern Plains* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), pp. 168–69.

12. The ethnomusicological study of improvisation has been developed only recently. For a publication representing current thought, see *New Perspectives on Improvisation*, with articles by Ali Jihad Racy, Gregory E. Smith, Margaret J. Kartomi, and Leo Treitler, a special issue of the periodical *The World of Music* XXXIII, no. 3 (1991).

13. For detailed description and discussion of the radif, see Nettl, *The Radif of Persian Music: Studies of Structure and Cultural Context* (rev. ed., Champaign: Elephant & Cat, 1992). Although the radif is transmitted aurally, it has been notated in several versions. For examples, see Mehdi Barkechli, *La musique traditionnelle de l'Iran* (Teheran: Secreteriat d'état aux beaux-arts, 1963) and Bruno Nettl

with Bela Foltin, Jr., *Daramad of Chahargah, A Study in the Performance Practice of Persian Music* (Detroit: Information Coordinators, 1972).

14. See the extensive bibliography in Nettl, *The Radif of Persian Music*, particularly works by Hormoz Farhat, Mohammad Taghi Massoudieh, Khatschi Khatschi, Jean During, Gen'ichi Tsuge, and Ella Zonis.

15. For detailed explanation of the relationship between social values and musical values in Iran, see Nettl, "Musical Values and Social Values: Symbols in Iran."

16. There have been, of course, attempts to extract "theories" from texts of various sorts. See for example, Hugo Zemp, "'Are'are Classification of Musical Types and Instruments," *Ethnomusicology* XXII (1978): 370–67, and "Aspects of 'Are'are Musical Theory," loc. cit. XXIII (1979): 5–48; Steven Feld, *Sound and Sentiment* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982); Paul Berliner, *The Soul of Mbira* (University of California Press, 1978), and for a different perspective, Margaret J. Kartomi, *On Concepts and Classifications of Musical Instruments* (University of Chicago Press, 1990).

17. The following constructed musical theory text is reproduced from Nettl, *Blackfoot Musical Thought*, pp. 171–72.

18. And I did. See Nettl, "Mozart and the Ethnomusicological Study of Western Culture," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* XXI (1989): 1–16.

19. In *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, 6th ed. (New York: Schirmer, 1978), p. 1197.

20. Wolfgang Hildesheimer, *Mozart*, translated from the German by Marion Faber (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), p. 366.

21. Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* (New York: Ballantine, 1963 [1981]).

22. Anthony Burgess, *The End of the World News* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983).

23. Regarding the complex system of Islamic attitudes towards music, see, for an introductory description, Nettl et al., *Excursions in World Music* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1992), pp. 50–55.

24. See Nettl et al., *Excursions in World Music*, for bibliography; also Nettl, *The Radif of Persian Music*, chapters 7 and 10.

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