

It was Never Just about the Music: How Artistic Communication Genres Could Liberate Ethnomusicology

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Abstract

In this rhetorical short essay, I argue for the benefits and possibility of grounding ethnomusicological research in enactments of artistic communication genres. I describe the conceptual imprecision and incomplete analyses that often result from our fieldwork being guided by abstract categories like music and dance. I go on to outline the kinds of research needed to better understand any and all artistic acts formally and socially, and point to the promise of richer, more coherent, more productive, more multi-disciplinary output, with more relevance to the world.

Introduction¹

Early in my PhD studies in ethnomusicology at the University of California, Los Angeles, I posed this question to a professor: ‘What am I learning to study? How do I know what ‘music’ is?’ The response: ‘You’ll know it when you see it.’ Twenty years later, I believe a better answer is that our primary research objects are enactments of artistic communication genres. Such enactments constitute a universal human activity, one that ethnomusicologists are particularly suited to exploit.

Ethnomusicology has always elicited voices passionate in their desire to redefine its foundations. Within a year of the Society for Ethnomusicology’s (SEM) founding, Mantle Hood prophesied that only through ‘the constant examination and re-appraisal of fundamental attitudes and procedures can we expect to assume the responsibility inherent in ethnomusicological inquiry’ (1957:8). The nature of ‘music’ has been a frequent object of contention in these re-appraisals. Scholars like Mieczyslaw Kolinski (1957) and Robin Cooper (1977) argued against the neglect of identification and analysis of musical sound objects.

This robust reflection climaxed in arguments about the relative importance of musicological and anthropological approaches, most notably in the debates between Mantle Hood and Alan Merriam in the 1950s and 1960s. These antagonisms forged a conceptual merger that became one of ethnomusicology’s greatest strengths: Marrying cultures and their musics into inseparable wholes. Though schools vary in emphasis, ethnomusicologists insist on exploring music in its cultural context. I believe this has generated some of our most novel contributions, such as Blacking’s ‘humanly organized sound’ (1973) and Feld’s emic metaphors resulting in homologies between music and society (1984).

Ethnomusicology research, however, also unearths traditions permeated with non-musical elements with which we are not equipped to deal. Capoeira (Brazil) includes patterned movement, singing, and instrument playing. Likay (Thailand) integrates acting, singing, dancing, visual arts, and storytelling. Likano (Baka, Cameroon) enactments consist of storytelling, poetic features, punctuated with sung call and response. Broadway musicals

contain musical, movement, poetic, dramatic, visual, and other features. In fact, it is difficult to identify genres with musical features whose enactments do not also exhibit characteristics of other artistic domains. So how have we flourished with little disciplinary guidance in understanding traditions with non-musical features?

I believe we have—mostly unconsciously—developed at least six strategies to mitigate this incongruity. The first consists of partnering with scholars from other disciplines to understand the arts we work with, like those in performance studies and folklore. Second, we have given birth to a parallel discipline, ethnochoreology, a process which could be repeated with other artistic domains (see Kaeppler and Dunin 2007). This approach, however, provides little help in knowing and explaining artistic action as a whole with features from multiple domains. Third, we hope supplementary elements in our educational systems will provide tools to analyze phenomena associated with other domains. Studies of poetry in our secondary level education, for example, have helped some of us identify metaphor, synecdoche, or assonance in lyrics.

Fourth, we are naturally drawn to studying traditions that include elements that match our individual interests, knowledge, and skills; this sometimes obviates the need to learn something new. Fifth, we use ‘music’ as a meta-term expansive enough to encompass almost anything related to performances of any kind. Figure 2 displays a rough survey of arts-related words in the 2017 International Council for Traditional *Music’s* (ICTM; italics mine) World Congress programme, illustrating the nature and limits of our big tent propensity:

music (alone)	136	dance (alone)	109	song	40
sound	38	music and dance	35	ethnomusicology	28
arts	24	performing arts	13	ethnochoreology	7
dance and music	7	folklore	3	poetry	2
drama	2	sports	2	story	1
ethnoarts	1	visuality	1	mask	1
ethnodramatology	0	architecture	0	proverb	0
food studies	0	ethnopoetics	0		

Figure 1: Arts-Related Words in ICTM’s 2017 World Congress Programme

Sixth and finally, we have developed epistemologies that at first glance appear to avert the need for external terms like ‘music,’ in that the researcher ‘constructs reality together with social subjects’ (Hofman 2010:23). But the question remains: to which parts of reality do we add insight?

Though these strategies often result in superb scholarship, I believe that an obscuring internal disorder remains. Symptoms of this conceptual disorder fall into two broad categories. First, imprecision leads us to invest energy addressing problems whose solutions would be apparent if viewed through the lens of artistic communication genres. ICTM’s 2017 World Congress themes included the following:

- ‘Might we investigate music and dance as a unitary phenomenon?’
- ‘Re-theorization of both music and dance practice has attempted for some time now to transcend, or at least mediate that gap and bring these perspectives into conversation.’

If the enactment of a genre includes features of both music and dance, then those features are obviously part of a single phenomenon. Ugandan Benon Kigozi states: ‘In Africa, when we do music, we do it with dance, we do it with drums, we do it with costume, and all of the other art forms. So we do not have one thing to describe just music. But we have one thing to describe the arts, and that’s why we came up with the terminology musical arts, because we start to sing, we dance, we gesture, we act’ (Kigozi 2017; see also Kigozi 2014; and Stone 1998:7).

Sylvia Nannyonga-Tamusuza (2015) acknowledges the inadequacy of one-domain investigations, citing Kaeppler (1996): ‘Analyzing sounds only is nearly useless, if one does not focus on the visual or movement dimension as well’ (1996:140). Nannyonga-Tamusuza cleverly connects musical and movement analysis of Baakisimba genre enactments (Baganda) with microphones strategically placed on artists’ bodies. But lexical imprecision remains, as she sometimes refers to the genre as musical, sometimes as dance (2015:84). In addition, by taking the abstractions of ‘dance’ and ‘music’ as first-order lenses, she neglects other integrated artistically marked features, such as poetry in lyrics and color symbolism in regalia. This short article also did not connect the artistic form to social facts and dynamics, which can also affect performance.

A second result of internal disarray, then, is exclusion. When we design research with ‘music’ as our central organizing thought, we are often blind to evidence of other artistic features or unprepared to explore them. My own early research in northwestern Democratic Republic of Congo produced melodic, rhythmic, and text transcriptions, but left the ubiquitous concomitant patterned movement—part and parcel of the genre enactments I was studying—with barely a sentence. The ‘music’ lens conceals people and features we don’t expect or know how to describe.

From ‘Music’ to ‘Artistic Communication Genres’

Ruth Stone hinted at the solution to such problems with this insight: ‘For the Kpelle, music as performance involves the production and audition of musical sound as part of a constellation of artistic communication, much less easily segregated and isolated from other verbal art than is often the case in Western conceptualization’ (1981:189). Building on this ‘constellation of artistic communication’, an artistic communication genre is a community’s category of artistry characterized by a unique set of formal characteristics, performance practices, and social meanings (Schrag and Van Buren 2018:295). It can draw on features from multiple artistic domains. Artistic communication genres may be enacted for special occasions, like Kanoon (Ngiemboon communities, West Cameroon), Huayno (Andean communities, Peru), or Olonkho (Sakha communities, Siberia). They may also be integrated into every day, informal life, as when a father speaks a proverb or sings a lullaby to his daughter. Enactments of artistic communication genres exist in every group of people with language, and thus constitute the most basic level of human communicational activity (for discussion of genres in Prototype Theory and Cognitive Linguistics frames, see Schrag 2019:190-192).

If we make the ethnomusicologist’s primary research object events containing enactments of artistic communication genres, I believe we will increase the profundity and replicability of ethnomusicological research. Anchoring our research and analyses in the visceral expressions of people keeps us close to reality as understood by local communities. Analyses that do not consider non-musical features when they exist in a genre are incomplete.

Make Arts for a Better Life: A Guide for Working With Communities provides a methodology for analysing artistic communication genres (Schrag and Van Buren 2018; <https://tinyurl.com/MakeArts>; see also its companion, freely accessible website: global.oup.com/booksites/content/9780190878283). Each research task originates in an event

containing at least one enactment of at least one artistic genre. This event serves as the touchstone for researching a genre’s artistic features, which we integrate into insights about the genre’s relationships to its broader cultural context. The multicolored Celtic knot in Figure 2 represents an enactment of a genre, and the ovals above depict the kinds of research lenses we apply to the enactment.



Figure 2: Analyzing Enactments of Artistic Communication Genres through Lenses (Schrag and Van Buren 2018:95)

Crucial to this approach is a method to integrate analyses of multiple artistic domains. Instructors at the Center for Excellence in World Arts at Dallas International University have developed a course called Expressive Form Analysis (EFA) dedicated to teaching students basic concepts and vocabulary for five Euroamerican artistic domains. These domains include drama, dance, visual arts, oral verbal arts, and music (students are also encouraged to explore genres with features from additional domains, like architecture, design, sports, and food).

In EFA, we invite teachers and practitioners who specialize in each artistic domain to build modules based on a common event-focused framework. One course-long assignment has students analyzing an event first through Artistic Event Lenses (categories in the blue rectangle in Figure 2), then the same event through each of the five artistic domains (listed in the yellow rectangle). Students graduate able to recognize and describe at a basic level the particular features that are part of any artistic communication genre they may encounter. We have captured these basic domain concepts in research activities in Step 4 of Schrag & Van

Buren (2018).¹ For a video analysis of some of the kinds of arts and culture analyses this approach entails, see ‘Arts Consultant: Understanding’ (<https://vimeo.com/29683436>).

Identifying the Banana

Anthony Seeger famously likened ethnomusicological research to slicing a banana (Seeger 2013:2-4). Particular theoretical positions are like cuts at different angles and depths with various knives, each revealing unique views of the banana. ‘By calling the banana music, we have created a false concreteness in our object—it appears to have clear yellow boundaries’. Seeger notes the weaknesses in this metaphor, in that an overripe banana can indeed influence its surroundings, and focusing on a single banana leaves us ignorant of how it fits into bunches, grows, and reproduces.

But Seeger leaves a fundamental question unanswered: What should the banana refer to? What do ethnomusicologists bring to the world that linguists, anthropologists, performance artists, music therapists, musicologists, and rock stars don’t? I submit that the banana is the artistic act of communication, the enactment of an artistic genre of communication in its socio-temporal-locational context. It is musicking (Small 1998), but in artistic and cultural fullness.

This common clarity would provide us the freedom to do everything we’re already doing, but with greater confidence and camaraderie. It would allow us to more readily identify the signs and symbols crucial to success in our efforts in applied ethnomusicology. It would help us forge partnerships more intelligently with folklorists, dancers, visual artists, storytellers and actors. We would more easily build models that can be tested, improved, or discarded. It would allow those of us who enjoy formal analysis to take flights of conceptual fancy with the whole always in view, perhaps revealing previously hidden connections.

Human life and communication can be frustratingly complex and fraught. What if we could simplify just one part of life’s equation, tethering our discipline to concrete acts that every human experiences: communicating in artistically enhanced ways?

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¹ We first drew the idea of performance features of artistic domains from concepts William Beeman developed for a Brown University course that brought anthropology and arts students together, culminating in a cabaret (2002). Bauman (1977 & 1992) and Saville-Troike (2002) also played key roles in identifying the phenomenological reality of communication genres.

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¹ This article is based on the paper "What keeps us from much more influence in the growth of knowledge and the improvement of human existence? how ethnoarts can save ethnomusicology from irrelevance," presented at the International Council for Traditional Music's (ICTM) 2017 World Congress in Limerick, Ireland.