

BOOK REVIEW

Alan Parkhurst Merriam. 1964. *The Anthropology of Music*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Alan P. Merriam (1 November 1923 – 14 March 1980) was a professor at Indiana University in the US, and was prominent pioneer in the field of ethnomusicology during the second half of the twentieth century. His book *The Anthropology of Music* was the first anthropological book to promote the study of music not only from an anthropological perspective but, also, included musicological and ethnomusicological approaches as well from the book's cover he wrote:

...*The Anthropology of Music* is to be distinguished from other studies by its model of music and human action, making this work of interest not only to the ethnomusicologist and anthropologist, but also to those concerned with the nature of music, the nature of man, and the nature of music in human culture.

The Anthropology of Music focuses on the theoretical and methodological foundations of knowledge related to music and culture. The table of contents is in three parts. The first consists of the fundamentals of ethnomusicology – its definition, theories, methods and techniques. The reader will learn about the integrated nature of this subject as a combination of music and human culture. Part two describes the standpoints of the musical aspects to be studied which includes the historical, social psychological, structural, cultural and the functional together with aesthetics and the symbolic along with the concepts and behavior of music and language. Aesthetics and the relationship of the arts to

synesthesia and intersense modalities are also covered. He describes the physical, verbal, social and learning categories as the four major behavioral elements related to music production. This section includes the process of musical composition which he states should minimally include: the incorporation and/or the reworking of existing materials, improvisation and the communal representation of intense societal emotions in the sound structure. The third part consists of the study of lyrics or in his terminology 'song texts' along with the uses and functions of music and the role of musical symbolism, aesthetics together with the interrelationship of the arts and the history of music and culture including their dynamics. The study of lyrics can also be seen to reveal a variety of psychological meanings and/or to provide a psychological release mechanism that reflects the nature of a society and its prevailing attitudes and values while representing the culture's mythology, legends and history. He states that:

...songs lead as well as follow, and political and social movements, often expressed through song because of the license it gives, shape and force the moulding of public opinion.

He makes a clear distinction between musical uses and musical functions or what some view as the distinction between the personal use of music and the function of music in society, as in ritual for example. His details of this distinction will assist scholars and prevent confusion when they are making their own analytical evaluations.

For the study of music as symbolic behavior, he suggests four levels: symbolic evidence in the lyrics, symbolic reflection of affective or cultural meanings, cultural values and the deep symbolism of universal principles.

An example of the latter, is where melancholic music across cultures tends to have a slower tempo. It is interesting to note that under the topic “The Aesthetics and the Interrelationship of the Arts,” the author deliberately provided no detailed conclusion and left things open to motivate the reader-ethnomusicologist him/herself to acquire more knowledge and experience. The perennial question of whether all artists from the East and the West would come to a similar aesthetic conclusion or not, about a particular facet of music and culture, remains. In the last section of the book he views music and cultural dynamics from two vantage points: One that occurs in the past or that is occurring in the present and is normally subsumed under the rubric of diffusion is defined as “achieved cultural transmission” and the other comes under the acculturation term “cultural transmission in process”. The conclusion of this chapter is once again left open for the ethnomusicologist to pursue and examine further.

Even though *The Anthropology of Music* was published over 47 years ago, it remains the leading scholarly text in the field of ethnomusicology and is well-known as the principle resource for the study, investigation and teaching of the relationship between music and culture. However, in the last two chapters, under the section heading of Aesthetics and the Interrelationship of the Arts, the content and discussion is a little deficient as this topic usually needs to be expanded for music students. But this deficiency can be easily rectified with contemporary examples by an experienced ethnomusicology instructor.

The Anthropology of Music provides the reader with a fundamental explanation and exploration of the concerns of ethnomusicology in general terms and then

concentrates heavily on the analysis of music itself. Since 1964 this book has remained a major source of academic reference since it includes scholarly quotations and critical reviews of related works on music and culture from many prominent scholars as well as research and dissertations in anthropology, music, and science from the formative period of the field of ethnomusicology. Goodreads Inc. features a positive review of this book online as follows:

This is a comprehensive approach to music from the point of view of anthropology. The author maintains that ethnomusicology, by definition, must not divorce the sound-analysis of music from its cultural context of people thinking, acting, and creating.

The Anthropology of Music is an older, but at the same time a timeless and priceless book about ethnomusicology in history and is one of the most widely read anthropological books in Europe and America. It is a “must read classic” for those interested in studying ethnomusicology. The uniqueness of this work is that, it is not only related to music and culture, but it also includes details about every significant piece of human behavior related to music makers and their society. The book has, furthermore, drawn the attention from the adjacent academic disciplines of history, musicology, anthropology, culture, and the physical sciences. It is recommended as an enduring state-of-the-art book on the history of ethnomusicology that in today’s global setting should be read and absorbed by ethnomusicology and anthropology instructors, students and all those interested in the cultural context of music.

References

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