Applied Ethnomusicology and Musicology

Invited essay by Dr. Elisabeth Le Guin



The irony is as significant as it is funny. While Tony Seeger sang, ‘Words, words, words,’ in his inaugural lecture, I was not in the room; I was across the hall. I had to be there because I was teaching, nothing less than Quintilian, the great Roman orator and rhetorician of the first century C.E., whose treatise, the *Institutio Oratoria*, remains one of the most effective summaries of how to construct and support an argument. The course in which Quintilian plays such a key role is called ‘Writing about music.’ In short: words, words, words.

This course, which I created and have taught for 12 years, is my ‘signature’ undergraduate offering at UCLA. This fact suggests that even more than the average musicologist, my focus and my bias are toward the verbal processing of musical experience. It may be true. Certainly in the face of the common undergraduate insistence (unconsciously recycling Eduard Hanslick) that the true essence of musical experience is and must remain ineffable, yes, I am doggedly and dogmatically logocentric. But in the face of what Anthony Seeger, channeling his uncle Pete, was singing, my response must be much more ambivalent.

Certainly, no one talks much about ‘applied musicology,’ to my knowledge. There isn’t a Study Group for it in the AMS; maybe in some minds, the more pedagogy-oriented College Music Society functions as a *de facto* Applied Musicology Study Group: ‘application’ being equated thereby with teaching. (There is also a Pedagogy Study group in the AMS). Somehow, in the institutional structure of the discipline’s most prestigious academic society, a stigma lingers around the idea of ‘putting music to use,’ as the SEM describes applied ethnomusicology: a ghost of the old idea, coeval in its origins with my undergraduates’ obdurately anti-verbal Romanticism, that music should amount to something more than its use-value.

It seems to me that words, on the other hand, could better live up to their use-value. In academia, our words have a tendency to become the currency for an internally circulating economy, complete with its working masses and rich nobilities, remarkably capitalistic in its vulnerability to inflation, rampant speculation, and insider trading. I think it may have been this tendency of words to create self-confirming economies of meaning and value, heavily biased toward logic and coherence, that caused Charles Seeger to insist periodically throughout his long career on the ‘equi-valuation’ of musical and linguistic praxis in musicology: in effect, that musicologists should music about

music as well as talk about it.

This is not confined to learning to play or sing the music one studies, though surely this must be fundamental for a great many projects. The late Christopher Small reminds us that ‘musicking’ encompasses a great many more activities than the direct production of musical sound. This broad, fertile landscape of thought is attained through the deceptively simple trick of returning ‘music’ to its status as a verb: of remembering that what music is doing, and what we and others are doing with and in and around musical sound, *is performance*.

The field of performance studies comfortably subsumes all manner of words, all manner of hair-splitting distinctions between disciplines, indeed all conventional academic activity, with plenty of room to spare; it puts our work on a par with activism and with politics, with all those arenas of human endeavor that we nervously, half-humorously refer to as ‘the real world,’ without privileging any one over the others. It gives us a flexible, generous-minded point of view, not devoid of a sense of humor, with which to evaluate the applications of our work to others both living and dead.

And this newish, still unstable field: well, Quintilian would have recognized it. In fact he would have had trouble understanding why it is not yet consolidated into a full-fledged discipline in most universities. For old Quintilian was a lawyer. His entire treatise, the rigorous, elegant systems of verbality that it sets forth, that have structured Western argumentation and pedagogy of writing for nearly two thousand years, is about nothing if not performance: he was showing how to win a case in court.

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