Response to “Global Notation as a Tool for Cross-Cultural and Comparative Music Analysis”

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IN 2007, the editor of the musical edition series *Music in the United States of America* (MUSA), Mark Clague, approached me with the idea that I would create a musical edition of Native American music for the series. Initially I had no clue how to do this, in large part because Victoria Levine had done a masterful history of transcription and notation in American Indian music for the series in 2002 (which included a transcription by me). I finally realized there was only one avenue available for me to produce a volume that would fit into the series as a musical edition: record a “work” of some kind, and transcribe it in its entirety. By the time I had done the ethnographic recordings, the editorship of MUSA had turned over, and James Wierzbicki was in charge. When I started the grind of actually transcribing the songs, he was very specific with his desired outcome, stating that “a trumpet major at the University of Michigan should be able to sight read the melodies from it.” This meant adapting Western notation the best I could to work with Northern and Southern Plains pow-wow songs, and the volume was eventually published in 2009 as *Songs from “A New Circle of Voices”: The Sixteenth Annual Pow-wow at UCLA*.

MUSA 20 was, and may still remain, the only musical transcription of a complete event from ethnographic fieldwork recordings, and includes 216 pages of transcribed-by-ear pow-wow songs recorded live. Doing a project on this scale may have only been possible because I have perfect relative pitch and hear melodies as a series of intervals rather than within a fixed or movable do system (I am a timpanist and tune the drums with that technique). At that time there were no computer applications up to doing the grunt work for me, and even now, I would not trust anything available I have seen. In any case, doing a project of that size and scope has given me a unique set of practical experiences to line up against Professor Killick’s global notation proposal, and they, plus feedback from the larger community of ethnomusicologists, will be the basis for my response.

An enormous amount of transcription was done of Native American songs between 1882 and the early 1950s, and all of it is in Western notation. Without a doubt, the most prolific transcriber of this era was the venerable Frances Densmore, who many people don’t realize did a vast amount of transcription for her books, at a time when recording technology was new and you only had a certain number of passes over your wax cylinder before the sound started to degrade. Densmore did cheat a bit by sounding a note on a pitch pipe before her singers began their renditions—they were often hopeful notes, but did at least give her a reference pitch at the start of the recording—but then again, to her the purpose of the transcription, which was to get a sense of the overall shape of the song, seemed more important than note-by-note accuracy:

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> The collection of songs is followed by their transcription and analysis. There are two methods of transcribing Indian songs so that the melodies can be presented to the eye and made available for practical use. One of these methods concerns minute variations in pitch. . . . The other method, which is the one that I use, may be compared to a painting. . . . Thus if we were to study the oak we might photograph single leaves, or we might paint the tree, giving its outline and environment. . . . As one might draw the outlines of many field lilies, lay these drawings one on the other, and let the light shine through the tracings in order to observe the common outlines, so I have transcribed Indian songs and, as it were, let the light shine through the transcriptions to observe the common forms. (Densmore 1915, 192–94)

Densmore is asking a question that does not, I believe, get asked enough, which is essentially what are we trying to show when we transcribe from a recording, or for that matter, transnotate from a score of some kind. The other side of this question has to do with audience, and why they would bother with what we transcribe. I seriously doubt any trumpet players are in a practice room somewhere with MUSA 20 on a stand in front of them, but using Western notation did give me the maximum potential audience for my transcriptions. Densmore was initially looking for much of the same audience, as her earliest transcriptions were at a time when "Indianist" composers such as Arthur Farwell were using ethnographic transcriptions as the basis for their compositions. This practice petered out post WWI, but Densmore doggedly kept at it for fifty years, and her original wax cylinders are stored in museum collections all over the United States (I have personally handled some of them).

Given that what Densmore was aspiring to was a kind of broad accessibility combined with a somewhat inexact style, what have other transcribers done in terms of notation? There are (at least) two sets of articles about this: a transcription and analysis set in *Ethnomusicology* titled "Symposium on Transcription and Analysis: A Hukwe Bow Song with Musical Bow" (England 1964, 223–77), and a "Forum on Transcription" in *Twentieth-Century Music* (Stanyek 2014, 101–61). In the former, everyone is doing a transcription of the same recording, and in the latter, the participants discuss their notation and transcription styles and priorities in real time (we were interviewed in pairs). The diversity of styles is really apparent in the Symposium, but a bit less so in the Forum, which makes sense because ethnomusicology as a discipline was noticeably more freewheeling in the days of Seeger's melographs. What I see in the Forum is more of an awareness of what actually gets done with the transcriptions once they hit the page—in other words, a concept of an audience and what use they might have for the transcription in front of them.

This conundrum of audience comes up regularly when I teach versions of transcription and notation at UCLA, because as the birthplace of the Time Unit Box System (TUBS), I can't really ignore it, even though I know of no program that currently uses it (Koetting 1970, 115–46). There are many aspects of TUBS that remind me of Killick's global notation, from the idea that it was created for people who do not read Western notation and has no cultural baggage, to its graphic nature. The problem with TUBS, in a practical sense, is its BIGNESS.

At various times I have given students some drum ensemble-based pieces (Brazilian) and asked them to transcribe the first few minutes, and inevitably the transcriptions were large and unwieldy. Something that was two pages in Western notation was four to five pages in TUBS. I see some of this same problem with Professor Killick's global notation, in that it is BIG from top to bottom on the staff. Musicians who read scores in Western notation do so in groupings, which are conveniently provided by beams and stems (measure lines are less important). I suspect that global notation would also be unwieldly to sight read, because the eye cannot quickly take in and process that much information spread out over that much space. Therefore, my sense is that the audience for it is not performers, which is odd given that most ethnomusicologists do perform in the tradition they study.

Killick makes a valid argument about not just Western, but any "indigenous" notation system, writing:

> Indigenous notations, written or otherwise, provide "emic" insights into how musicians conceptualize the operative categories of their music. That is another reason why staff notation, the indigenous notation of Western classical music, does not produce "neutrality" when used for all music: staff notation brings its own preconceptions as to what constitutes a "category" and what the default categories are. As a result, the emic concepts that it reveals are those of Western music, and they often interfere with the ones that a transcription of non-Western music seeks to elucidate. (Killick 2020, 269)

He is correct here, in that Western notation gradually developed from early forms (mensural notation) through four- and five-line staffs to what we see today. At the same time, it was by no means exact until the late Baroque and J. S. Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier, simply because the notes on the page more or less instructed the performers what to do mechanically with their instruments, but pitches and tunings were all over the place. Even today, the weakness of Western notation for transcriptions is in terms of pitch and the strength is in rhythms, which were far more fixed as the system developed. Western notation is much more of a layer cake than a static system, although in my experience type-setting programs such as Finale and Sibelius work against flexibility.

Killick continues:

> Hence I suggest that, if we want a single notation system for all music, the best place to start is not staff notation or any other system indigenous to a particular tradition, but Hood's idea of a new notation system designed from the beginning to be as universally applicable as possible, like Labanotation, the International Phonetic Alphabet, or the Sachs-Hornbostel instrument classification system. (272)
>
> Today, we are in a better position to attempt this because we are largely free from the practical constraints that Hornbostel faced: it is reasonably cheap and easy to produce whatever graphic images we want using affordable computers and printers. (236)

There are all sorts of problems with this series of statements, and I am going to unpack them in reverse. Computers and printers are no less artifacts of Western culture than is Western notation. So too are Labanotation, the International Phonetic Alphabet, the Sachs-Hornbostel instrument classification system, and for that matter the concept of "universals." For example, the Sachs-Hornbostel classification system from an Indigenous American perspective is useless, as it says nothing about the Spirit within the instrument and how it might interact with other living instruments. John Cage famously categorized the instruments used in his work *27' 10.554" for a Percussionist* as Wood, Metal, Skin, and All Others. Personally, I see universals as a kind of flattening mechanism and something that discourages creativity.

My late colleague Nazir Jairazbhoy had his own take on notation (and indeed everything), writing, "There are many instances in the literature of our field to show that our scholars are not ignoring those elements for which we have no symbols, but creating new symbols" (Jairazbhoy 1977, 270). This describes exactly what I did with my MUSA edition, because I added a dance footwork line at the bottom of each staff, used a kind of equal-distance approach to the rhythmic elements of the notation, and added custom symbols such as + signs to indicate quarter tones above the written note. The musicians whose music I transcribed were extremely pleased with the results, with a number of them requesting laser-printed pages on heavy stock so they could be framed and hung on the wall.

This brings me to my final point. We live in a social world, and as ethnographers we work with people, not recordings in a machine or colleagues in a profession who may or may not want to learn and adopt a "global notation." Personally, for me Western notation suits my purposes and I find Killick's global notation to be, for lack of a better term, aesthetically displeasing and inelegant. Others may find it a useful tool for presenting and analyzing their work, and it is their choice whether to adopt it or not, as it may work much better in contexts outside of the musical realms I work in. But for now, I'll stick with what I term the Jairazbhoy approach: inventing new symbols when needed, and dealing with notation as a creative process built upon a pre-existing framework.

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