
Voices of the Weak: Music and Minorities.

Zuzana Jurková & Lee Bidgood (eds.)

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In the context of Czech social sciences and humanities, a unique book about music and minorities has recently been published in cooperation with the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University in Prague.

If one coincidentally appears at an ethnomusicological conference somewhere around the world, he would be surprised at the ubiquitous presence of the word "minority." Why are ethnomusicologists so obsessed with minorities? One could suggest that it is because they often feel like a minority themselves. In the field of musicology, they are the ones studying "weird" music and using such "weird" methods as participant observation. On the other hand, in the field of anthropology, they are also often the "weird" ones dealing with such an elusive phenomenon as music and suspected of being hidden "old musicologists" or "folklorists."

The Nestor of world ethnomusicology, Bruno Nettl (interestingly enough: born in Prague, 1930, as a member of the Jewish minority in Czechoslovakia), said: "Many ethnomusicologists, after all, have seen themselves for many decades as students of the music of the downtrodden of the world. At the same time, they have often seen themselves as a kind of minority among music scholars and musicians of Europe and North America. Looking back to my days, ca. 1950, as a student, however, I find it ironic that in several important ways, we also saw ourselves as the defenders of majorities, perhaps labeled best as 'neglected majorities.'[...] It was the music historians, we thought, who were the ones interested in the exceptional - in understanding the greatest of [Western] composers." (Nettl 2009:12)

Nevertheless, one has to bear in mind that, as Nettl adds, "there's no doubt that the concept of minority [or majority], and the identification of minorities is to some extent a construction of the observer." (Nettl 2009:13).

Recently, the little Czech ethnomusicological minority celebrated a great success: not only that it hosted an international conference on music and minorities in May 2008, which was attended by more than 60 scholars from 23 countries (see <http://musicandminorities.googlepages.com/musicandminoritiesgroupmeeting2008>), but it also found enough support to publish a collective monograph accompanied by a CD.

The book consists of the most interesting conference articles related to the following themes: (i) reconsideration of the term "minority"; (ii) music of Romani subethnic groups (iii) music of other minority groups such as ethnic, regionally specific, religious or social; (iv) cultural policy; (v) representation.

Yet, the publishing itself was not the only goal. The book attempts to bring ethnomusicological research paradigms closer to each other. Only 22 articles which were successfully chosen by an international advisory board have been published. (However, in order to keep maximum scholarly openness, all of the papers that were submitted are published on the conference Web pages.)

The book opens with Zuzana Jurková's concise and pregnant introduction about the state of Czech ethnomusicology. Her text is followed by Bruno Nettl's "meditation" (as he calls it), summarizing his experience of research of American Indian cultures, minority music makers in Iran and his living in musical minorities in prewar Czechoslovakia. From the methodological point of view, one of the highlights of the book is undoubtedly the article "Cultural Policies and Minority Musics in Kosovo and Sri Lanka. What Can We learn from a Comparative Study?" by Svanibor Pettan and Lasanthi Manaranjanie Kalinga Dona. Let me also mention Johannes Brusila's "Between Minor and Major. Discursive and Neomaterialist Reflections on Lasse M?rtenson and 'Finland-Swedish' Popular Music", which is one of the most theoretically interesting papers published here.

Concerning the topic of Romani music, we can learn about communities in Bulgaria, Turkey, Poland, and Ukraine and the Machwaya Roma in America. Two articles also deconstruct stereotypical Gypsy images in post-romantic academic music and the popular music of Goran Bregović. Similar to that, the phenomenon of Yugomania and Yugonostalgia is entertained. Other music cultures and topics we can encounter in the publication are: hardcore rap culture, the Armenian minority in Ukraine, contemporary musical peasant traditions in Slovenia, the musical heritage of the Czech Brethren in Poland, Bulgarian cultural politics concerning the Turkish minority, Bessarabian Bulgarian musicians, the Sorbian minority in Germany, minority cultural policy in the media in the area of Vojvodina, policy of the music archives, and finally, music of prisoners.

If we take into account that, in the Czech environment, interest has been concentrated much more on the construction and consolidation of its own cultural identity than on the knowledge of different cultural groups, least of all, minorities (Elschek 1991, cit. Jurková 2009:8), then we could say that this seemingly marginal book is a big achievement. The person who put both the conference and the book together, Zuzana Jurková, is a founding member of the Study Group Music and Minorities of the International Council of Traditional Music and the founder of the Ethnomusicological Program at the Faculty of Humanities of Charles University. She says: "If we consider the situation of ethnomusicology in Czech culture as an indicator of the state of this culture then Czechs would appear to be emancipated from their egocentric complex as they begin to pursue knowledge of those "others," including those who at first glance are the minorities and the weak." (Jurková 2009:9).

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