



Interview / Entrevista / Entrevista

**Timothy Rice. *Human Musicality and the Future of Ethnomusicology:
Musical Experience and the Perpetual Question of Objectivity***

by Raúl R. Romero (Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú)*

Timothy Rice, professor of ethnomusicology at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), specializes in the traditional music of the Balkans, especially from the Slavic-speaking nations of Bulgaria and Macedonia. In that field he is the author of *May It Fill Your Soul: Experiencing Bulgarian Music* (University of Chicago Press, 1994) and *Music in Bulgaria: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2004), as well as numerous articles in major journals such as *Ethnomusicology*, *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, *Ethnomusicology Forum*, and *Journal of American Folklore*. He has written on musical cognition, musical experience, politics and music, meaning and music, mass media, music teaching and learning, and theory and method in ethnomusicology, including a book entitled *Ethnomusicology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2014). He was founding co-editor of the ten-volume *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, and he co-edited *Volume 8, Europe*. He has served the field of ethnomusicology in a variety of ways, including editing the journal *Ethnomusicology* (1981-1984), acting as President of the Society for Ethnomusicology (2003-2005), and serving on the Executive Board of the International Council for Traditional Music (2007-2013). He served as Associate Dean of the UCLA School of the Arts and Architecture from 2005 to 2008 and as director of The UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music from 2007 to 2013. He is currently working a textbook titled “Understanding Music Today”, which brings together in a single intellectual frame the world’s music in its full historical and geographical scope including European-derived classical music, world music, jazz, and popular music.

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Raúl R. Romero: In *May It Fill Your Soul*, your classic book on Bulgarian music, you state that you did your fieldwork in Bulgaria throughout 20 years –you made your first trip in 1969. What do you think about the scholars today, that write a book on the music of a foreign country after spending only a year doing fieldwork?

Timothy Rice: Thank you, Raúl, for your kind words about my book. It seems to me that ethnomusicologists have borrowed the model of one year of fieldwork from anthropologists, who thought they should live in the field for a year so they could observe all the annual calendric rituals and seasonal work patterns of a given society. The criticism implicit in your question, that this is too short a time to understand another culture, has been levelled at this version of professional anthropology. Although anthropologists are often critical of the amateurish and unsystematic observations of missionaries, government officials, and others, in fact many of those people often dedicate many years of their lives to living with the people they write about, learning the local language fluently, and really getting to know a people and their culture thoroughly. Can anthropologists who spend much less time in research settings really claim more knowledge than these “amateurs”, some critics have asked.

Nowadays the one-year model corresponds to the realities of funding and of life, especially for graduate students, whose research for their Ph.D. dissertations provide the bulk of data for the book-length musical ethnographies produced today. Students can't spend their whole lives training and studying abroad before they get their degree and write their first book. The work they (and we) do in one year is probably not adequate for the deepest possible understanding of a music culture, and I know of two UCLA graduate students who spent four years or so in the field, so dedicated were they to attaining linguistic and cultural fluency.

Ph.D. dissertations today are usually quite modest in their claims to knowledge, not least because of our growing realization that our knowledge is produced in dialogue with others, and those dialogues, and thus the knowledge we acquire is always limited, not least by the personality of the researcher. Also ethnomusicologist since the late 1970s have employed writing strategies that mitigate against claims to objective truth. Many musical ethnographies contain lengthy quotes, sometimes even called “lectures”, by local consultants, who are given space in our books to convey their knowledge unmediated by anything other than the questions we ask and our interlocutors' understanding of why we are asking those questions. Finally, and to be fair, many of the musical ethnographies produced today, while they may not reflect a 25-year gap between first contact and publication (in my case from 1969 to 1994), it is not unusual for them to be published a decade after first contact. This period might include a first, short visit to assess research possibilities, a year or so of intensive fieldwork, and two or three visits after the fieldwork during the writing of the book. I did an informal survey a few years ago of book-length musical ethnographies like

mine, and found that the average time between the filing of the dissertation and the publication of the book was about seven years. So I think it is fair to say that many, perhaps even most, ethnomusicologists over the last thirty years or so have been deeply committed to long-term, on-going research in the cultures and with the people they study.

RRR: How did your lengthy experience in Bulgaria, during which you learned to understand another culture than your own, change you as a scholar and as a human being?

TR: My first encounter with Bulgarian culture was through dancing Bulgarian village dances in a subcultural scene in the U.S. called international folk dancing. (Mirjana Lausevic –2007– describes very well this scene, which generated my interest in Bulgarian music). This form of dancing in lines opened up a totally new expressive modality for me, one much more directly emotional than what I had experienced to that point as a musician. While my music-making at that time seemed to me constrained by the demands of disciplined performance, dancing in the Bulgarian way freed me to express my emotions in a manner I had not before. This dance form, which has plenty of rules and patterns to follow, brought new, more emotional aspects of life to the surface for me. When, after something like five years of dancing to this music, I had the chance to visit Bulgaria in 1969, I was further awakened to new ways of being, different from the ones I had been raised in. Bulgarian life and the music and dance it supports are based on a kind of intimate sociability that I had not known as a child growing up. I imagine this type of sociability is not unknown in U.S. culture, but perhaps because my father was an army officer and we were always traveling, our family and I did not have the kinds of close friends one might develop in, say, a small-town setting. Bulgarians, on the other hand, even if they live in cities, are somehow always small-town folk. They love to visit, to sit for long hours eating and drinking, dancing and talking, and thinking about the vicissitudes of life in a semi-public manner. I love this feature of Bulgarian culture; I value it, and I look for opportunities to act in this sociable, connected way in my life in the United States, where it seems that so many of us eat alone, watch TV alone, and generally live a sort of disconnected, ultimately lonely life. Bulgarian instrumental music is also highly demanding, requiring more technical facility and improvisational creativity than I had developed on the clarinet and saxophone as a child. But I wanted to play this music for my own enjoyment, and acquiring the skills to do so made me a much better musician. This was another gift Bulgarian musical culture gave me.

Finally, I might add that one of the things that impressed me about Bulgarian culture was the broad range of competencies that every Bulgarian village man possessed: they could build their own houses, bring water from a spring to a faucet, take care of farm animals, and produce their own wine and brandy. I realized that, although I was much more highly educated than they were, my intelligence, as it were, was limited to little more than being

able to read and write. So I set about to acquire some of the knowledge that all Bulgarian village men possess, and I learned, if not how to build my own house, at least how to build and finish its interior and install electricity and plumbing. And I learned how to make wine and brandy (the latter highly illegal in the U.S.). From all these new skills I have derived enormous satisfaction over the years. Thanks to Bulgarian culture and music, I think of myself as a more complete person intellectually and emotionally than I would be if I just lived a life of the mind at home in the U.S.

RRR: You talk about “musical experience” as subjective, and of the discipline of musicology as “objective” and how does that antinomy constitute a sort of dilemma. Do you think that, giving your long involvement with Bulgarian music, society and politics, you have been able to transcend that dichotomy, and have finally arrived to a true understanding of Bulgarian identity? In other words, do you feel that you are equally competent in Bulgarian society and culture, as you are in American society?

TR: I suppose that somewhere I have written about musical experience and musicology using the terms subjective and objective, but I think that one of the points of my work, especially in *May It Fill Your Soul*, has been to overcome or move beyond that antinomy, as you put it. Already in 1978 Kenneth Gourlay critiqued the notion of objectivity in musicological work. He argued that all our work is done in dialogue with particular interlocutors, a fact of our research method that makes impossible a kind of above-the-fray, objective viewpoint. So if our research can't be objective, then what is the alternative? I don't think it is to be subjective.

To deal with this problem, I have been influenced by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's “phenomenological hermeneutics”. Researchers in the social sciences using this approach, and Clifford Geertz is the archetypal example, acknowledge that they are not producing objective knowledge but a series of interpretations that are unavoidably rooted in their particular social and historical position. This means that differences in results between researchers may not be due to one being right and the other being wrong, as a belief in objectivity would demand. Rather, “it is because absolute knowledge [objectivity] is impossible that the conflict of interpretations is insurmountable and inescapable. Between absolute knowledge and hermeneutics it is necessary to choose” (Ricoeur 1981: 193). In *May It Fill Your Soul* I chose hermeneutics.

So what about musical experience? Is it necessarily subjective? I think phenomenology helps with this problem. First, let me say that my interest in what I call musical experience is my way of overcoming the antinomy that plagued our field for many years between musicological and anthropological approaches. I reasoned that, although some people might be interested primarily in musical sound and its structures and others interested primarily in cultural and social processes, we are all interested in people. And

what people everywhere have in common are musical experiences, some of them musical in nature and some social and cultural. Following this line of thought, I have further argued that the researcher's own musical experiences, usually characterized as subjective, might provide the basis for reasonable interpretations of a musical tradition. But I think these interpretations escape the limits of subjectivity when they are based on long-standing ethnomusicological research and when those experiences are shared with members of the cultural under investigation through discussion and musical and dance performances.

RRR: In your book *Ethnomusicology: a very short introduction* (in my opinion one of the best pieces I have read on the topic in recent years) you state that music is intrinsic to humanity. Why humanity cannot live without music?

TR: Thanks again, Raúl, for your kind words. I am influenced in this opinion by John Blacking and his 1974 book *How Musical Is Man?* When I was a graduate student at the University of Washington, I had the pleasure of hearing the lectures that eventually became this book. All ethnomusicologists know that all cultures have music just as they all possess a language, arguably humankind's most important attribute. Blacking goes on to claim that everyone in egalitarian cultures has both the capacity and the opportunity to make music in one form or another. Taken together, these two pieces of evidence seem to suggest that music is intrinsic to the nature of humankind. From our studies of music in diverse social and cultural setting we know that music is not only intrinsic to humans in many different ways, but it enhances human life in a myriad of ways: it is aesthetically pleasing, intellectually coherent with other aspects of culture, emotionally satisfying, socially useful, physically stimulating, economically beneficial, and powerfully productive of imagined pasts and futures. We all experience directly the way language does these things, but it has taken ethnomusicologists to demonstrate, through thousands of studies, that music does these things as well, often in ways that complement, add to, and expand the capacities that language provides us with.

RRR: If you are right, why then do the other academic disciplines tend to ignore music and the arts, not feeling any guilt about it?

TR: Good question! There are many reasons for this I think. The first cause, John Blacking suggested, is that, when egalitarian societies give way to social stratification, specialization of labor, and capitalism, professional musical performance became the domain of a small subset of the population, who provide art and entertainment for everyone else. The cost of professional musicians' expertise has been not only the money the rest of us have to pay them to hear music; it has been the loss of certain kinds of musicality in the

rest of the population and a narrowing of the understanding of the importance of music in the eyes of people in the general population, including other scholars, educators, and social policy makers. A second consequence of the specialization of performance skills is the widespread belief that music is a specialized domain of study, requiring talent, skill, and knowledge not available to scholars in other fields, let alone to the general public. A third factor is the lectures of generations of historical musicologists who have taught their undergraduate students, in “music appreciation” classes, that only one kind of music is worth studying and that this kind of music is an example of transcendent human genius best studied for its aesthetic qualities. In other words, music has no social significance. And so scholars and educators who have learned these lessons, that music is mainly about aesthetic enjoyment and that it takes specialist knowledge to talk about it, come away from those classes and their own enculturated musical experience with the sure knowledge that they can safely ignore music without “feeling any guilt about it”. Ethnomusicologists need to continue the struggle against these views by teaching their important lessons about the nature of music and its importance for humankind.

RRR: If ethnomusicologists are, as you say in your book, abandoning the “ethno” part of the discipline because of the blurring of ethnic groups in many parts of the world, should not we go back to calling us just “musicologists”? Would not that option resolve all the problems surrounding the name of our discipline?

TR: Even though I have argued for what I call “subject-centered musical ethnography” (Rice 2003), not least because of the fluidity of cultural boundaries in the modern world, I still think that some of our most powerful explanatory concepts are linked to notions of shared culture and social relationships. So I would not be anxious to change the name of the field just because many cultures and societies are fragmenting today. Migrants, refugees, and immigrants, and the disposed still try to understand themselves culturally and socially and find new ways to bring social and cultural coherence and stability into their lives.

When I was president of the Society for Ethnomusicology, I hosted a “president’s roundtable” at the fiftieth-anniversary meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology in 2005 on the theme of whether it was time to change the name of our discipline. While many expressed their dissatisfaction with the name, the consensus formed that changing it at this point would be a strategic mistake. The reason is that, in the United States at least, ethnomusicology seems, after many years of struggling on the margins of music disciplines for recognition, to be gaining in respect and increasing its influence. In effect, the word ethnomusicology functions something like a brand name as much as a disciplinary label. I think we are stuck with it for a while. That doesn’t mean that the situation in the U.S. needs to be accepted elsewhere. For example, I recently attended a small conference in Italy at which some were arguing for the term “cultural musicology”. It seems that in Italy the word

“ethnomusicology” has associations that do not correspond to some local scholars’ evolving goals about the direction research in this general area should take.

RRR: You say in your book (and it is actually true in almost all the world), that usually the public tend to think of anyone who plays an instrument as a musicologist or an ethnomusicologist. How this practice does affect our reputation in the academic world, and in society as a whole?

TR: I entered the field in the late 1960s, and for the next couple of decades ethnomusicology seemed like a very obscure discipline. Certainly we were not helped by our seven-syllable name. So I always rejoiced whenever I saw or heard the word in public media such as newspapers and radio broadcasts. I think we should use whatever means we can to publicize the discipline, including allowing accomplished performers to call themselves ethnomusicologists. On the other hand and to your point, this practice can have odd effects. I recall that at the University of Toronto, which was my first academic job, when I received tenure and the rank of Associate Professor I wasn’t, at the same time, admitted to what they called the “graduate faculty”, the faculty with the right to supervise doctoral dissertations. It turned out that the faculty committee making this determination was confused about why I would include my own musical performances on my Curriculum Vitae (CV). My performances were part of a scholarly persona indebted to Mantle Hood’s notion of bi-musicality, that is, they were a component of my research methods. But the committee had not read Mantle Hood and didn’t understand the relevance of performance to my scholarly life as an ethnomusicologist. So the next year I removed my performances from my CV, and I was admitted to the graduate faculty.

RRR: You also say that one of the main motivations for the surge of the discipline of ethnomusicology was the interest on the music of “the other”. Don’t you think that this still holds up for current graduates in the field? Is not it true that most doctoral candidates still choose their dissertation topics far away from the United States? Is this a sign that ethnomusicology has yet to transcend the lures of exoticism and the enigmatic?

TR: An interest in music of the other is still an important component of our field. It is possible to view this interest under the sign of the exotic, but another interpretation these days might be to interpret U.S. scholars’ interest in the music of the other as flowing from three other factors: first, the multicultural nature of U.S. society; second, a cosmopolitanism engagement with the world; and, third, our scholarly goals. As to the first, although I can’t quantify it at this point, I believe it is true that the plurality of English-language, book-length musical ethnographies published since the late 1970s have concerned North

American musical cultures. I think this speaks to an interest in various kinds of home-grown music, music that in many cases is close to nearly ever one's listening experience in the United States. As for the second point, studying music of the other in the United States can be understood as a cosmopolitan intervention in what I regard as the excessively parochial culture of the United States. In the U.S., it seems to me, we act if as we live on an island, disconnected by our monolingualism and notions of U.S. exceptionalism from the rest of the world. In that context, taking seriously all the world's music seems to me a positive ethical and aesthetic act. As for the third point, in the book you mentioned I defined ethnomusicology as "the study of how, and why, humans are musical". In other words, through our particular studies of the other, ethnomusicologists contribute to the knowledge about humankind being generated in the humanities, social sciences, and biological sciences. I pointed out that the principal approach we take to answering this question is to study music in all its geographical and historical diversity. So argue that our interest in what some might characterize as "exotic music" and exotic cultures follows from three highly principled efforts to deny the exotic and bring the unfamiliar within the horizons of our understanding. This effort seems to me one of the most important paths we have toward peace in the world.

RRR: To what extent can we talk today of "ethnomusicology" in general, when there are so many "regional ethnomusicologies" around the world, each with their own agendas, objectives and predicaments? For example, SEM is still considered by many to be a national association only (of United States-based scholars), and prefer to gather around the ICTM, which is perceived as a worldwide organization.

TR: I have been attending ICTM world conferences fairly regularly since 1981, when they held their first one in Asia, in Seoul, Korea. I agree. ICTM's world conferences are excellent venues for gaining an understanding of regional and national ethnomusicologies and alternatives to the U.S. version of the discipline. For me the most exciting of variants gain their energy from dealing with local issues and problems. In the 1960s and 1970s, many of these local issues and problems concerned defining national musical styles and recounting national histories of music, and, as such, were far from the developments in the U.S. version of ethnomusicology, which was absorbing insights from social and cultural theory and philosophy. But in the last ten to twenty years some of these local ethnomusicologies have shifted to worrying about the relationship between music and the social, economic, and political problems within their own cultures. As a consequence, they have become more interesting and perhaps more important than some of the old preoccupations of the U.S. version of ethnomusicology. I am thinking here of Croatian scholars studying music and war (see Pettan 1998), Brazilian scholars studying music and urban poverty (Araujo and Cambria 2013), Austrian scholars on the treatment of ethnic

minorities (Hemetek 2010), and many other similar projects. Scholars in the U.S. have a lot to learn from these kinds of studies.

RRR: How do you explain what happened at UCLA, the only university in the United States that maintains an independent Department of Ethnomusicology? Do you think that this model will be replicated in the future by other universities, or it is only one of a kind?

TR: There were two reasons that UCLA was able to create its large program in ethnomusicology in the late 1950s and 1960s. The first and most important was the fact that, in the state of California in those days, there was a great deal of optimism about, and public support for, the idea that having a great public university system was in the best interest of the economic life of the state and the well-being of its citizens. So the state government allocated lots of taxpayer money to all levels of public education, from kindergarten to Ph.D. programs. As a consequence, California after World War II had, inarguably, the greatest public schools and the finest public university system in the United States. That relative wealth in the university system created an ideal environment for a visionary and activist to make something new. In the case of ethnomusicology that visionary was Mantle Hood. He was able to marshal university resources to create an ethnomusicology program of unprecedented size and scope, with students and faculty from all over the world engaged together in the study of music from all over the world, with special strengths in the classical music traditions of East and Southeast Asia and later of Africa and Latin America.

For years ethnomusicology at UCLA was a “program” within the Department of Music. But in 1989 internal disputes within that department led to its dissolution into three smaller departments. Ethnomusicology, long recognized as perhaps “the jewel in the crown” of that music department was large enough to become a department in its own right. When we became a department our Dean mandated that we should have what all university departments have: an undergraduate major. Up to that point ethnomusicology had been exclusively a graduate discipline in the United States, and I believe we formed the first undergraduate degree in this field in the U.S. So our departmental status is a product of our unique history. I am not sure that it can or even should be replicated in other universities in the United States, not least because I believe that music should be studied by an integrated discipline that takes seriously all forms of music making including world music, European-derived classical music, popular music, jazz, and so forth.

RRR: Your idea of an integrated approach to music study may be a fine idea but won't it require musicologists in other Music Departments to see ethnomusicologist as equals? Will historical and systematic musicologists ever consider traditional and popular music in the

same level as western art music? In other words, do you really think that there is a chance for musicology and ethnomusicology to merge in the near future?

TR: You make a good point, and these are good questions. In my long experience teaching in schools of music in the U.S. and Canada, I came to believe that most professors in these schools, and they include not only historical musicologists but also performance professors, music educators, composers, and music theorists, employ the following syllogism: Since Western art music (I prefer to call it European or European-derived classical music) is the best kind of music in the world (don't ask us how we know that), therefore the people who play and listen to it are the best kind of people in the world, and scholars who study it are smarter than scholars who study other kinds of music. And yet, despite this and other kinds of similar evidence, I remain a "cock-eyed optimist", as we say in English. Young people entering the field of music study today have a broad experience of all kinds of music, and they seem ready to encounter all this music in scholarly and artistic ways. In the U.S. we have the models of Yo-Yo Ma, the Kronos Quartet, and the composer Nico Muhly, just to mention a few. These youngish professionals seem prepared to engage the world as they find it and not as their teachers might have wished it to be.

In the field of musicology historical musicologists, at least since the advent of so-called New Musicology under the leadership of Susan McClary (who taught at UCLA) and others in the early 1990s, has become a kind of cultural musicology and now asks many of the same questions ethnomusicologists ask about music. Furthermore, ethnomusicologists and historical musicologists now meet on the common ground of popular-music studies. So I think these two fields have a good deal of potential to reconcile in the future.

I recently completed work on a taskforce on the undergraduate music major of the College Music Society of the United States. I came to understand that the prospects for changing the curricula of schools and departments of music in order to consider all music "on the same level", as you put it, are dim, even though many people in these schools and departments seek change. One of the most radical points the taskforce made was the claim that, in a multicultural society like the U.S, when musical styles dearest to its citizens' hearts are excluded from the music curriculum, then nothing less than social justice is at stake. How can university presidents, who in nearly every case have as one of their most important goals the creation of diverse student body and a diverse curriculum to serve them, allow their university's school or department of music to flout those goals? When will schools and departments of music wake up to the mission of the universities of which they are a part to create new knowledge and serve the needs of the local communities and the nation as a whole? Someday I hope that all these factors will come together to change the thinking of professors in schools and departments of music concerning the value of all music and its importance to every human being, but I acknowledge that it will be a long, slow process.

Thank you, Raúl, for your questions. I am honored by them, and I enjoyed the opportunity to try to answer them as best I can.

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Biography / Biografía / Biografia

Raúl R. Romero is a Peruvian ethnomusicologist who earned his doctoral degree at Harvard University. He is the Director and founder of the Institute of Ethnomusicology at the Catholic University of Peru, where he is also a professor in the Department of Performing Arts. In this institution he has also been Director of the School of Music from 2009 to 2013. He has been a visiting professor in the Department of Ethnomusicology of the University of California, Los Angeles, and has occupied the NEH (National Endowment of the Arts) visiting professor chair at Colgate University, New York. He has published numerous books and articles on the topic of Andean music and culture, among them *Debating the Past: music, memory and identity in the Andes* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2001), and *Andinos y Tropicales: la cumbia peruana en la ciudad global* (Lima, 2007). In 2005 he received a Guggenheim fellowship for the study of music and nationalism in Peru.



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