



A Reply to Erlmann

Mark Slobin

Ethnomusicology, Vol. 37, No. 2. (Spring - Summer, 1993), pp. 267-269.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0014-1836%28199321%2F22%2937%3A2%3C267%3AARTE%3E2.0.CO%3B2-B>

Ethnomusicology is currently published by Society for Ethnomusicology.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/sem.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

postmodern era, a more systemic notion of global cultural production prevents us from essentializing music as a “source of difference” per se (Chambers 1992:144). Systems theory might provide an opening in which to rehearse an aesthetic theory that goes beyond a random collection of ethnoaesthetics “unto themselves,” a theory that defines difference ontologically, as it were, as an intrinsic, internal feature of global musical production rather than something resulting from the purely descriptive juxtaposition of incompatible sets of socio-historical circumstances.

The relevance of this point for my argument needs to be particularly emphasized, because even where, as in much of the current postcolonial literature, the Other is constructed not as an ontologically given, where the binarisms of “Self” and “Other” are dissolved and differences are seen as historically produced and contingent upon each other, there remains at times a hint of a tautology, an unaccounted-for space in which difference cannot be further theorized: “every subculture, each micromusic, is a world unto itself.” (Slobin 1992:75) Charles Seeger’s dictum of half a century ago that music is “a means of communication between people” serving “to embody what is common (or strange) between them” and that some humans “must of necessity sing their difference” (1939:149) may remain valid, but we now sing our difference as part of a system that condemns us to seek the signets of otherness in the images it produces from within itself.

References

- Beaudrillard, Jean. 1990. *La transparence du mal. Essai sur les phenomenes extremes*. Paris: Editions Galile.
- Chambers, Iain. 1992. “Travelling Sounds: Whose Centre, Whose Periphery?” *Popular Music Perspectives* 3:141–46.
- Jameson, Fredrik. 1991. *Postmodernism Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Luhmann, Niklas. 1975. “Die Weltgesellschaft.” *Luhmann, Niklas, Soziologische Aufklärung* 2:51–71. Aufsätze zur Theorie der Gesellschaft. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- . 1982. *The Differentiation of Society*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Seeger, Charles. 1939. “Grass Roots for American Composers,” *Modern Music* 16:143–49.

A REPLY TO ERLMANN

MARK SLOBIN

WESLYAN UNIVERSITY

I would like to thank Veit Erlmann for his thoughtful and stimulating response to “Micromusics of the West.” Because I must be brief, I would like to highlight just his interest in my having more of a “system,” apparently

based on the "omnipresence of commodity production," in "late" (why late, Mr. Jameson? this could be middle) capitalism's drive to control the global economy. Erlmann's disclaimers notwithstanding, I sense here a nostalgia for an older sort of order in our investigations of the all too-rapidly evolving contexts of today's shifting musical environments. Somehow, it reminded me of a critique I had from the other end of the spectrum, urging greater scope for localism, and it seems useful to answer Erlmann by responding to both types of disagreement. A helpful reader's response to the book version of *Micromusics* (Slobin 1993) faulted me for not finding enough *oppositional* content to musical subcultures: surely there must be some fight left among small groups in big social systems.

I find both positions suggestive but not conclusive. I am not being "nebulous," as Erlmann says, but realistic in conceiving of the dialectic between large and small units within Euro-American societies as being unremittingly complex. Yes, there are times in which all manifestations of subcultural self seem to be mere identity politics confined to the marketplace (often true of Euro-American groups). And sure, groups (Native Americans, for one) sometimes carry on active resistance to co-optation, labeling, and packaging. But there are two reasons for further thinking through the issues. First, neither explanation covers all available evidence of musical diversity, so both fall short of covering what I think are very significant loopholes based on parameters as simple and as telling as *preference* for one or another style, instrument, or genre. Second, I do not see an avoidance of single-answer systematic responses to complexity as being merely "postmodern," a word I hope will soon vanish to the museum of terminological curios. I think it is the responsibility of ethnomusicology to imagine that answers to what makes societies and subcultures tick are not only not easy, but are *musical*, that is, multivoiced, contingent, improvisatory, and contextual. I am not afraid of the possible analytical dissonance that might result.

Ultimately, what is missing in both *Micromusics* and the cited responses to it is grassroots study of *reception* among the consumers of supercultural wares and subcultural sounds. When Edward Larkey actually surveyed both musicians and audiences about "Austropop" (a subculture of the world pop superculture) he found that it "has both a critical subversive component on the one hand, and a commercially successful, affirmative form on the other. These tendencies co-exist, but are also at odds with each other intermittently." (Larkey 1992:158) So even after solid reception studies, I will probably remain committed to the idea of multi-angled vision and plural perspectives. I guess I really do believe that the age of unitary models and satisfying systems is past.

References

- Larkey, Edward. 1992. "Austropop: Popular Music and National Identity in Austria." *Popular Music* 11/2:151–85.
- Slobin, Mark. 1993. *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West*. Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press.