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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Small Path Music (with Laurent Jeanneau) by David A. Harris

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Film, Video, and Multimedia Reviews

Small Path Music (with Laurent Jeanneau). Directed by David A. Harris. 2012. Small Path Productions. DVD, color, 56 minutes. English with Chinese subtitles. Distributed by Sublime Frequencies, PO Box 17971, Seattle, WA 98127 USA. Internet: www.sublimefrequencies.com.

Small Path Music, produced and directed by New Zealand filmmaker David A. Harris, is a travelogue of sorts, a road movie / travel diary shot over a period of eight months in 2010. The on-screen presenter-narrator is Laurent Jeanneau, a French experimental musician living in Caicun, a small village near Dali in Yunnan Province (China). He travels to Southeast Asia to record and collect the local music traditions of ethnic minorities living in the mountains of Northern Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and into the borderlands of Yunnan Province, Southwest China. Among the country's fifty-six recognized ethnic groups living in China, twenty-five ethnic minority groups, or "nationalities" (*minzu*), as they are called in Chinese, are found in Yunnan. Jeanneau comments and reflects throughout with a self-reflexive approach that offers a personal perspective on the musical cultures he documents. We see how he relates to local musicians and how his work has led his life in new directions. Through his work, he met his wife, Tanding, initially his interpreter, and together they established the recording label King Gong, where they have self-produced more than eighty albums.

The common thread of the documentary is an appeal for the preservation and survival of traditional music cultures, highlighting the impact of the modern world on traditional cultures and the urgency to preserve them. Jeanneau also focuses on the issue of "ethnic tourism" (Yunnan is an epicenter of China's ethnic tourism industry). Jeanneau is wary of government influences on traditional music in China and Southeast Asia, and he asks people to sing and play the tunes they would perform for each other, rather than for tourists. Toward the end of the film, there is a compelling scene in which a "cultural show" takes place in Shuangjiang (Lincang, Yunnan). It is a stylized and kitschy performance for tourists, and in it, the process of "folklorization" (or "fakelore") of ethnic music and dance, pushed by government officials in China under the banner of promoting

ethnic diversity, emerges. Observing this performance, Jeanneau complains about the gap between the visual dimension (dancers in traditional costumes) and the musical dimension (an awful kind of country and western swing) and rejects the creation of an artificial cliché to satisfy the aesthetic expectations of Han tourists.

A strength of *Small Path Music* lies in the filmmaker's ability to offer a tantalizing glimpse into different vocal styles and repertoires and instrumental music of a wide range of little-known musical cultures. The documentary shows a stunning richness and variety of traditional performances, well recorded with high-quality video footage, considering the technical limits imposed by the use of only one hand-held camera. Nevertheless, if the documentary provides the viewer with an astonishing aural and visual impression of the minority peoples' vast sonic environment, it reveals its weakness in the lack of ethnomusicological insight. As recognized by Jeanneau, his approach to ethnic minority music is not that of an ethnomusicologist or an anthropologist who spends years in one village studying a particular culture in depth. He confesses honestly that he is not an authority but rather an amateur who likes to record talented musicians who naturally express their emotions in song. His main interest is the aesthetic dimension of music, no matter the meaning, although he is aware of the risk of giving the audience a superficial view of these music traditions. On the other hand, the film has merit via its use of captions before each featured performance, indicating the name of the ethnic group, the location, the genre or repertoire, and the name of the performer. Despite the lack of musicological interpretation of the songs and scarce ethnographic insight into the sociocultural context of the music performances, there are sufficiently long sequences of musical examples to allow for classroom appreciation and analysis.

The video includes sequences of a wedding song of the Wa ethnic group; a *dage* group dance performed in a circle led by a *lusheng* (reed mouth organ) player, with choral singing in the antiphonal form of two choirs (men and women) recorded among the Laluo (a subgroup of Yi ethnicity); a recitation of a Taoist text of the Yi people; a "drinking tune" performed on a *tot* flute played by a Khmu musician of Northern Laos; a "drinking session" to celebrate a wedding in a Le family; improvised singing of a love song by two Laluo singers; and a funeral prayer chant among the Bai people. Yunnan Province is a veritable treasure house for multipart singing and response song form, but unfortunately very little of this is shown in the film. The DVD is well suited to classroom use, but it is also appropriate for both scholarly and general audiences. Overall the documentary is well produced and enjoyable to watch. The DVD contains Chinese subtitles, although it should be noted that the subtitle translation *renzhong yinyuexue* (人种音乐学) for "ethnomusicology," which implies the concept of "race," is not correct and should be replaced with *minzu yinyuexue* (民族音乐学).

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