

## Audiovisual ethnomusicology: filming musical cultures

by Leonardo D'Amico, Bern, Peter Lang, 2020, 470 pp. (paperback), ISBN 978-3-0343-3609-3

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for whom he sings. Finally, it is probably not surprising that a scholar rooted in Irish studies would emphasise narratives that centre Irish culture in the history of the genre maintaining the pattern that grew, as Schreffler shows, only as the actual practice of shantying at sea was dwindling.

*Sailor Song* is compact and pretty but its value to this audience is more as an exemplar of a particular narrative history or as a tool to understand certain current shanty performance practices. That said, I cannot help but lament the lost opportunity to have the weight of a University Press and the august British Library to begin to correct the historic marginalisation of the voices of black workers who sang at their labours before the brief flourishing of deepwater shanties and who, both fishing for menhaden in the USA and whaling in the West Indies, continued to sing at maritime work long after the tall ships had gone.

Despite a title previously used by Roy Palmer for a 2001 collection of sea songs, imperfect editing, the lack of an index and unhelpful design, Schreffler's book makes an important contribution to shanty scholarship. We can hope that he continues his efforts, particularly in addressing the disconnect between popular narratives and historical evidence and thus piloting scholars and performers towards a more inclusive and informed shanty discourse.

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**Audiovisual ethnomusicology: filming musical cultures**, by Leonardo D'Amico, Bern, Peter Lang, 2020, 470 pp. (paperback), ISBN 978-3-0343-3609-3

As someone who was educated in the Finnish apparition of ethnomusicology in the 1990s, with its dubious association with all 'other' kinds of music than Euro-Western 'art' music, I have greeted the emergence, in the last decade, of audiovisual ethnomusicology as a field of research, with mixed emotions. On one hand I have felt that it has been long overdue; on the other, I continue to wonder whether it constitutes yet another form of re-inventing academic wheels. Much depends of course on how one conceptualises ethnomusicology, both overall and in relation to audiovisual media in particular; while the unabashed elitism of Finnish musicology in the 1990s has been a source of much professional anxiety personally, three decades later I am rather content to note how it pushed a number of 'failed musicologists' like myself over various disciplinary boundaries. In many cases, this meant musicologists acquainting themselves with sociology and media studies, particularly if one expressed interest towards music videos and other musical assortments of audiovisual media. While there is much to be said about the disciplinary trenches dug by (ethno)musicologists, sociologists and media scholars alike, to this day I fail to discern any meaningful difference between the fundamental conceptual points of departure in ethnomusicological ideas of

music-cultures and those evident in the apparatuses and assemblages praised within cultural studies.

The field of audiovisual ethnomusicology is being institutionalised under the auspices of the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM), whose eponymous study group is chaired by Leonardo D'Amico, the author of *Audiovisual Ethnomusicology* under the magnifying glass here. He is also the director of two 30-min documentary films – *Cantar l'Ottava* (2016) and *Bulang Music* (2017) – and the Ethnomusicological Film Festival in Florence, Italy. In his words, the book deals with 'the new field of audiovisual ethnomusicology, its principles, methods, theories and developmental history set within the parameters of the discipline of ethnomusicology, which has recognizable methods, research strategies and debates' (39). Furthermore, it is D'Amico's attempt to 'stimulate a critical reflection about how audiovisual means are used by ethnomusicologists and/or filmmakers to represent musical cultures', as well as to 'examine the most representative ethnomusicological films' (39). These formulations betray a key definitional issue, namely that audiovisual ethnomusicology is equated with ethnomusicological filmmaking, as suggested also by the book's subtitle. As long as one is willing to accept this, the treatment fulfils the aims abundantly.

*Audiovisual Ethnomusicology* comprises seven chapters of varying length, a one-page conclusion and a brief promotional preface by Timothy Rice. After framing the field in the first chapter, D'Amico moves on to dissect the main subject, the ethnomusicological film and its styles, in chapters two and three, respectively. The separation of the 'styles' from the preceding lengthy discussion on types, taxonomies, ethics, authorship plus uses and functions of the ethnomusicological film is somewhat abrupt and artificial, and in the end emerges as a homage of sorts to acknowledge the historical importance of three institutions and one scholar in particular: the Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film (IWF) in Göttingen, Germany; the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) in Paris, France; the National Film and Television School (NFTS) in Beaconsfield, England; and Hugo Zemp, also associated with CNRS. To the extent to which the CNRS and NFTS 'styles' are further personified by certain individuals – namely Jean Rouch and Gilbert Rouget in the case of the former and John Baily regarding the latter – and their oeuvres, the isolation of discussion risks hinting towards academic hagiography.

The fourth chapter deals with 'the history of ethnomusicological films in six areas of the world: sub-Saharan Africa, India, China, the United States, Latin America, Oceania ... and South Europe' (181). The somewhat circular justification for choosing these 'geocultural areas' is 'their valuable quantity and quality of ethnomusicological films made by ethnomusicologists and/or filmmakers, which made it possible to analyze and trace their chronohistory' (181). The next chapter in turn carries the title 'Analysis of *Sounding Images*' (243; original emphasis) and includes subsections on visualising music, audiovisual or videographic transcription, animation techniques and choreometrics (as devised by Alan Lomax and executed with the aid of film). As the subsection topics indicate, at issue is the utility of audiovisual media when conducting formal dissection – which some might call (structural) description instead of (theoretically informed) analysis – of musical phenomena, whether attention is paid to sounds, events, interaction or dance. Indeed, audiovisual media are treated as tools, not as objects of analysis themselves. The sixth chapter is a continuation of this in its coverage of how '[t]he audiovisual document may reveal significant information relating to performance techniques, the use and construction of musical instruments, and processes of interaction between producers and users of the musical event' (267). In the seventh and final substantial chapter ethnomusicological filmmaking is discussed in relation to the media environment – or, 'big and small screens' (305) – and different kinds of music

documentaries predominant in both broadcast media and the festival circuit, thus further adding to the classificatory conundrums.

Returning to the equation between audiovisual ethnomusicology and ethnomusicological filmmaking, one should note that it carries crucial methodological implications that are linked not only to conceptualisations of ethnomusicology but also to what is meant by the epithet 'audiovisual'. In the pages that precede stating the aim and objectives, D'Amico focusses particularly on how film – as a shorthand for 'all varieties of motion picture media' – is best suited to communicate and represent 'things, people and events in their physical and temporal context', and how

the *sounding image*, as a moving picture with synchronous sound, allows us to document and convey a significant amount of useful information related to a musical performance and its context that, in many cases, becomes essential to achieving in-depth knowledge of music in traditional cultures, as well as in contemporary societies. (21; original emphasis)

There is ample relevant discussion on how music never exists in a sonic form only but is constantly infused with various visual stimuli in particular, whether in live or mediated circumstances. Yet the question why audiovisual ethnomusicology should translate as ethnomusicological filmmaking remains unaddressed; in other words, if people's lives are audiovisual (and more) by definition, why is the adjective taken straight-forwardly as a reference to media techniques? Furthermore, given that D'Amico understands film not only 'as an individual creation' but also 'as an audiovisual *text* whose structure can be subject to an in-depth analysis' (39; original emphasis), why are such analyses presented as subservient to the individual creations in question? In my estimation, the answer is related to the conventional and rigid understanding of ethnomusicology as a type of ethnographic research that dominates the treatment, and while there are references to both early remarks and recent discussion about the applicability of ethnomusicological approaches in analysing audiovisual media, such a stance remains implicitly outside audiovisual ethnomusicology 'proper' (357).

D'Amico's axiomatic insistence on filming music documentaries in the ethnographic present is problematic not only in relation to defining ethnomusicology in general but particularly with respect to the field of historical ethnomusicology. This has further repercussions towards historical documentary film as one of the main subgenres within the film industry overall, inasmuch as such an orientation towards the use of audiovisual media becomes excluded from audiovisual ethnomusicology. With these doubts in mind, I had high hopes for the seventh and last chapter of the book, titled 'Music on Screen', but was ultimately disappointed as the subsection on the 'audiovisual representation of music on big and small screens' (305–316), for instance, turned out to be mainly a *presentation* of relevant fora at the expense of theoretically informed discussion. There is a useful passage included about 'the popularization of scientific knowledge' in the context of mass communication and how this affects 'ethnomusicological films broadcast by TV or screened at film festivals' (313), yet the subsequent remarks of the 'problematic ... relationship between traditional music and mass media' combined with a reference to 'a "democratization" of knowledge' through thematic cable or satellite channels (315) raise suspicions over an antiquated treatment of the media environment and social stratification overall. Or is it really so that smartphones and social media platforms have no part to play in audiovisual ethnomusicology, not to mention augmented or virtual reality and haptic or kinetic interfaces? If it is possible to engage in virtual reality game-playing in order to entertain oneself by hunting some orc amongst other things, why not also for research-oriented musical purposes? Relatedly, while there are separate subsections earlier in the book about the technological developments of audiovisual media (141–147) and its use as 'a multimedia tool in museums and exhibitions'

(133–134), here again the media are instrumentalised for fieldwork and preservationist purposes, respectively, with only brief allusions to online applications.



Admittedly, there is a fair amount of appurtenant discussion about the distinctions, inter-relationships and overlaps between ethnomusicological films and more experimental or fictional treatments (74–88), with a plausible emphasis on the conventions of both documentary and fictional audiovisual expression. This is also where a more thorough juxtaposition with film and media studies would have been beneficial, particularly when referring to the inspiration provided by music videos for ‘experiment[s] with a new language to represent traditional music’ in the form of ‘ethno-clip’ (87). Such cross-disciplinary dialogue would also be of help in clarifying the use of ‘types’, ‘modes’ and ‘styles’ when discussing and demonstrating the variety of tendencies in ethnomusicological filmmaking; given the urgency D’Amico assigns to ethnomusicological film becoming a subcategory of documentary film, it is especially striking that when treating the ‘modes of filmic representation of music’ (47–63) and notably those ‘of classifying documentary films’ (50), scholarly support is drawn from visual anthropology as appropriated by ethnomusicologists, instead of relying on the research on documentary film in its own right. This has the consequence that a number of documentary film modes become deemed irrelevant for ethnomusicological filmmaking, without any explicit discussion or justification for exclusion. A closer familiarity with studies of film music and sound would have furthermore helped in avoiding what is effectively a factual error, namely the confusion about (non)diegetic music and sound as (off- or) on-screen sound (92) – as diegesis refers in this context to the narrative space, both within the image frame (on-screen) and outside it (off-screen). One only needs to pan the camera.

The above discussion leads to reiterating my main point: to claim disciplinary coherence in audiovisual ethnomusicology risks stultifying it as a subgenre of (amateur) ethnographic filmmaking. Rather than celebrating the possibility ‘to outline a disciplinary field proper’ (357) I would welcome a more inclusive approach where ethnographic filmmaking is but one option amongst many, and in constant critical dialogue with various ways of analysing audiovisual media ethnomusicologically, also drawing from media studies in particular.

This surely is a matter of academic identification to a considerable degree. For the representatives of the dominant Anglo-American anthropological variant of ethnomusicology, D’Amico’s treatment provides an affirmation of their disciplinary identity. For many others, *Audiovisual Ethnomusicology* presents itself as a valuable encyclopedia into the world of filmed musical cultures, as it were; in addition to a 50-page filmography, there is a 25-page appendix of ‘[e]thnomusicological films listed by content categories’ (445–470). For the sake of comparison, the bibliography occupies 25 pages – and this is also where those expecting to encounter critical crossdisciplinary theorisation will be disappointed. Stylistically, the volume is accessible and laudably proofed, apart from occasional tautological passages as well as mysterious ‘Notes’ that most likely are written by the copy-editor and intended for the author, not readers, with suggestions of what the ‘author should possibly doublecheck’ (9). All things considered, I have no doubt the volume will find its place in the shelves – and hands – of ethnomusicological filmmakers, past, present and prospective alike.

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