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SOCIAL CONTEXT AND ABSOLUTE MUSIC

An Introduction

From 1969 to 1971, when so many American campuses were embroiled in student unrest over the war that was raging in Southeast Asia, I was a piano teacher and Assistant Dean of the College of Music at Midland University.¹ One of my primary duties was academic counseling—advising students on matters of selecting or changing their major area, counseling students who were in some danger of academic probation, discussing such topics as postgraduate plans, problems of adjusting to the social and academic environment of a music school, and the like. Through this experience, I became increasingly concerned with the importance that music and music making played in the personal lives of these young adults, and I was compelled to focus increasingly on these matters in the consideration of higher musical education.

For many students, there was a great deal of ambivalence, concern, and social or personal tension relating their musicality to their most elemental sense of self and identity. A striking example of this was a young piano student who, halfway through her freshman year, came into my office to discuss some of her difficulties in adjusting to the musical and social ambiance of the College of Music. From the

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admissions officers as well as from members of the piano faculty I had heard that she was one of the most promising students in her class, and yet she herself was having great misgivings about being a piano student. Toward the end of a rather lengthy and diffuse discussion of her feelings about the College of Music, she mentioned that she had been quite enthralled with a course she was then taking on Japanese culture. “But,” she said, “of course I couldn’t major in something like that.” When I asked her, “Why not?” she answered, in a remarkably innocent way, “Oh, because I’m talented.” I suggested to her that she need not experience her own musical talent as an albatross strung around her neck. The next day she was back in my office, saying that it had never before occurred to her to think of her own musical talent in such a way. She had always felt that if she should go into any academic field other than music, it would not only upset her hometown piano teacher and guidance counselor, but more than that, it would devastate her parents, who took great pride in her musical gifts and accomplishments. My memory went back to a few years earlier when one of my own conservatory classmates joked that his mother had stood over him with a baseball bat when he was a child, to enforce disciplined piano practising.

Many music students had been admitted to Midland on the strength of their virtuosity in, say, violin, only to confront for the first time the complicated—and, in the context of the curriculum at the College of Music, absolutely basic and essential—matters of four-part written “harmonic dictation” and the playing of harmonic progressions at the keyboard. One young soprano, presumably equipped with an exemplary singing voice (or in musicians’ parlance, a “good instrument”), confessed to me with a definite element of horror that she could not read music written in the bass clef. One might, of course, be tempted to ask how such people could get into a music school in the first place but the fact is that admission to a music school is generally awarded specifically to a high level of skill in a narrowly specified area. The important point for me, however, was the intensity of some stu-

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dents' concern for their identity, engendered by the new set of expectations they found upon entering the College of Music.

Clearly, the social environment was rather unpleasant for some of these people; the College of Music was an environment in which their musical "talent," which had in their childhood been a mark of their remarkable individuality, suddenly became a mark of similarity with all the other students. In such a context, some students inevitably came to entertain doubts as to whether they "really" had talent at all. Such feelings, moreover, were manifested in a complex weave of intensely ambiguous friendly-competitive social relationships. Of course, networks of such relationships constituted fertile ground for the negotiation of conservatory "politics." It was in this light that, in one of the first meetings that I attended of the various Midland University administrators, the Dean of the liberal arts division observed that "of course, in the College of Music they learn more about politics than they do about music." That dean had previously been a professor of political science.

Partly because my own academic training had been in piano performance and not, for example, in educational psychology or some related discipline, the impact of my counseling experience was to impress me with the difference of orientation there can be between the teaching of music and the nurturing of musicality. I came to view musicality as a "drive" rather like sex: certainly the association in many music students between their musicality and their self-image was not unlike the link between a teenager's self-confidence and sense of sexual attractiveness. To me it seemed equally certain that music curricula centered on highly disciplined approaches to musical "technique," formalistic studies in "music theory" omitted far more of the social and personal experience of music and music making than could be adequately dealt with in my own rather haphazard "counseling."

The interplay between music and musicality is an important theme of this book, and many of the problems studied here first presented

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themselves to me in the context of my experience as a counselor for music students. However, there is a second incident—or rather, pair of incidents—from my career as a music educator and administrator that gave rise to the questions that have energized the present study. These incidents challenged my own conceptions of “absolute” music, of music as something that exists on its own terms, having its own meaning, quite independent of the vagaries of mundane social life.

In the fall of 1969, the Student Mobilization to End the War organization planned a series of nationwide strikes, the first scheduled for October 15, to protest the American war in Indochina. A few weeks before the October 15 date, some of the administrators at Midland were discussing ways of demonstrating “official” concern about the war to an increasingly distressed and turbulent student body. The feeling expressed was that the time had certainly come when students should see that university administrators sympathized with the students in their restiveness, and in at least some way shared their concerns regarding the war.

Someone suggested that the College of Music sponsor a concert for peace on the night of the demonstrations, and I was asked to discuss this possibility with Dean of Music Trevor Waterhouse. When I presented this suggestion to the Dean a few days later, he hesitated, but then told me that he would not allow such a concert to take place, explaining that when music is performed as part of a political protest, its purity is destroyed and its meaning undermined. Music, he said, must not be affixed to any specific political cause. At the time, my personal dismay was checked, albeit feebly, by my musician’s intuition that Trevor was speaking from an unassailable position: classical music is a pure and autonomous art form (after all, it is sometimes referred to as “absolute music”²) whose true meaning and beauty lie outside the sphere of social life or political tensions.

Seven months later, Midland University was one of the many American colleges and universities to suspend its academic operations in the aftermath of the massacre at Kent State University. During this

period there was a veritable spate of student political activism, but at Midland the unquestioned consummation of these activities was two performances by a Midland chorus and orchestra of the Mozart *Requiem*, once on the Midland campus and once in Washington, D.C. The idea originated in a general meeting of the students of the College of Music: why, they asked, didn't the College organize a performance of the *Requiem* in protest against the deaths in Vietnam and Ohio? The suggestion received spontaneous and general enthusiasm. Dean Waterhouse, who was revered in the College of Music as a distinguished and charismatic choral musician (the students knew nothing of his views of politics in music), was the obvious choice for a conductor of this performance. He accepted the students' invitation to lead a performance of the *Requiem*, and for the next few weeks led intensive rehearsals of the chorus and orchestra, culminating in the two public performances. The entire period was one of high emotions, and a rush of enthusiasm could be sensed throughout the College of Music.

The experience of the Mozart *Requiem* forced me, however, into an intense quandary regarding the rejoinder that Trevor Waterhouse had given me a few months earlier. If he really believed that music was a "pure" art that should not be associated with a particular political cause, then why did he agree to lead the *Requiem*? If, as everyone participating seemed clearly to perceive, his involvement in the *Requiem* was complete, was this not in spite of the fact that it was on behalf of a political cause and because of the fact that the *Requiem* was a classic item of the choral repertoire? Was the performance truly a protest against the war and the Kent State massacre, or had the carnage of Vietnam and Kent State become a metaphorical pedestal on which the "pure" beauty of Mozart's masterpiece would be heightened? What was the meaning of the actual music in this case? Indeed, what or where was "the actual music," in the pure, absolute sense that Waterhouse himself had articulated? Could there be any such truly pure music in such a situation, or indeed at any time?

This incident loosened the metaphorical earth around the roots of

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my own intuition that “classical” music is indeed absolute and in some sense pure, existing in its own right and on its own terms. Although for a while I struggled to resist it, I was eventually unable to avoid the general conclusion that music “itself” is no less but also no more than what people make it and make of it. The contradictions of Trevor Waterhouse and the overwhelming power of the performance of the Mozart *Requiem* unraveled for me the notion of “absolute” music in which I had been trained.

A little over a year later, I left Midland University in a spirit of confusion regarding both the musical and educational work I had been doing and its pertinence to the cultural and political upheaval that was taking place in connection with the war in Asia. About this time, I read Ben Sidran’s *Black Talk* (1971) (provocatively subtitled *How the Music of Black America Created a Radical Alternative to the Values of Western Literary Tradition*), a book that made a very strong impression on me for the fairly simple reason that it presented an analysis of Afro-American music which argued the character of the music to be inextricably linked to the cultural history of American blacks. Not surprisingly, a reviewer’s quotation printed on the book jacket claimed that Sidran’s study presented “a totally new way of looking at black culture in America.” To me, however, Sidran’s book implicitly suggested a “totally new way” of approaching what I considered to be “my” music, that is, Western “classical” music: if the music of black America took its character and meaning from the cultural fabric of American blacks, didn’t that imply that “classical” music—so-called “absolute” music—drew its meaning and character from the sociocultural ambience of middle-class white America and perhaps Europe?

Such a chain of events led me to view music as a metaphor of the society in which it takes place, a perspective that I have subsequently learned is similar to what ethnomusicologists refer to as the study of “music as culture” (Merriam 1977: 204, Herndon and McLeod 1979). Of course, the field of ethnomusicology has traditionally been associated almost exclusively with non-Western musical idioms, so much so

that this non-Western orientation has been central to many scholarly conceptions of the very word “ethnomusicology.” (For an historical collection of such conceptions, see Merriam 1977.) More recently, ethnomusicologists have shown interest in applying ethnomusicological principles—particularly those involving the study of music in its cultural context—to Western as well as non-Western music. I suspect that few present-day scholars, for example, would subscribe categorically to Bruno Nettl’s early definition of ethnomusicology as “the science that deals with the music of peoples outside of Western civilization” (Nettl 1956: 1). On the other hand, the acceptance of the possibility of applying ethnomusicological principles to the study of Western art music has not entailed its practise, a fact noted in Nettl’s more recent observation that “the definition of ethnomusicology as the study of non-Western and folk music, although widely criticized, is descriptively correct” (Nettl 1983: 4).

Thus it was with an eye to putting the shoe on the other foot, as it were, that I began graduate study in ethnomusicology and sociocultural anthropology. Whereas most of the people who take up anthropology do so in order to study the ways of some distant non-Western civilization, I was turning to anthropology in order to deal with issues pertaining to life in what I took to be “my own” culture. The difficulties of starting off in a completely new discipline were considerable. When I began my study of anthropology, the only prominent anthropologists I could name were Margaret Mead and Claude Lévi-Strauss. (As an undergraduate I had read *Magic, Science, and Religion*, but I did not realize that its author, Bronislaw Malinowski, was an anthropologist; since I had read him in a religion course, I presumed he was a scholar of religion!) I might well have been utterly overwhelmed by the entire experience, but for the fact that in the first term of my study I read Edmund Leach’s *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1977), a book that not only gave me my first experience of what anthropologists call “elegance” of analysis, but also presented a particularly unforgettable proposition:

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With every kind of technical action, there is always the element which is functionally essential, and another element which is simply the local custom, an aesthetic frill. Such aesthetic frills were referred to by Malinowski as “neutral custom,” and in his scheme of functional analysis they are treated as minor irrelevancies. It seems to me, however, that it is precisely these customary frills which provide the social anthropologist with his primary data. Logically, aesthetics and ethics are identical. If we are to understand the ethical rules of a society, it is aesthetics that we must study. (Leach 1977: 12)

Leach’s equation of ethics and esthetics was a revolutionary right idea in the right place at the right time. For me the thought that ethics, in the broadest sense of the word—collective values bearing on the dealings of people as they interact with other people—was inextricably linked to esthetics—collective values as they bear on created formal structures or objects—was a major breakthrough. Such a formulation presented a succinct model for bringing together my experiences at Midland—Trevor Waterhouse and the *Requiem*, the supposed “purity” of classical music, the profound connection between the musicality and the self-identity of the music students—and the idea sparked in me by Sidran’s book, that musical values must be understood as emanations of social and cultural processes.

Music and Anthropology

The discipline of anthropology is at least somewhat in advance of its cousin, ethnomusicology, in regard to the study of contemporary Western cultural idioms and social issues. (For an overview of anthropological studies of American culture, see Spindler and Spindler 1983.) Nevertheless, one of the standard textbooks for graduate and

undergraduate anthropology classes is entitled *Other Cultures* (Beattie 1964), and a preponderance of anthropological theory and method maintains this traditional orientation toward cultural other-ness. Prominent in the anthropological literature have been books whose titles simply name a particular people (*The Andaman Islanders*, *The Nuer*, *The Tiv of central Nigeria*), others whose titles take the form of characterizing epithets (*The Harmless People*, *The Forest People*), and others whose titles specify a domain within a particular culture (*Navaho Witchcraft*, *Nuer Religion*). Underlying much of this literature is an implicit conception of “cultures” as boundable entities (*The Nuer*, *The Tiv*). The association of anthropology with portrayals of “primitive” societies frequently entails the characterization of a social organization in static equilibrium, presented in the rhetoric of an omniscient “ethnographic present” tense (The Nuer do thus-and-so).

Although the rhetoric of static equilibrium has become somewhat less prevalent among present-day anthropologists, one of the simplest ways to lend an anthropological aura to studies of modern American culture is to refer to the tradition of studying “simple” or “primitive” societies. For example, J. M. Weatherford entitled his ethnography of the U.S. Congress *Tribes on the Hill* and peppered his account with comparisons of congressmen with “shamans,” “bigmen,” “warlords,” and the like. Weatherford likened newly elected congressional representatives to age-set initiates among the Shavante, a horticultural tribe who live in Brazil: “Just as Shavante men are always known by the name of the cohort with whom they spent their formative years in the bachelor hut, congressmen are always known by the name of the cohort with whom they spent their formative years in the Longworth Building” (Weatherford 1981: 30). Such an association of anthropology with “tribal” peoples, of course, extends well beyond the community of professional anthropologists. For example, I was recently introduced to a conference of musicologists, quite without prompting from me, as “an anthropologist who has studied a conservatory as a tribe.” Similarly, one of the secretaries in the conservatory, when

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informed that I was an anthropologist making a study of the conservatory, exclaimed with both mirth and embarrassment, “Oh, so *we’ve* become the savages now!”

In light of this state of affairs, I would begin this book by postulating the idea of cultural otherness as centrally important and yet fundamentally problematic and unsettled. Certainly I do not perceive, nor do I want to represent, conservatory musicians as “exotic,” “savage,” “primitive,” or “tribal.” On the contrary, a fundamental starting point for the present study is the fact that I myself was trained in several music conservatories and later went on to teach in one; because of my personal and professional background, conservatory culture is very familiar to me. Nevertheless, conservatory culture is also something from which I now feel some distance—the world of a conservatory is in a sense no longer “my” world. Perhaps more precisely, conservatory culture is in different senses both “mine” and “not mine.” Thus for my part, I would suggest that the question of whether the people of the Eastern Metropolitan Conservatory—or the U.S. Congress, or, indeed, the Nuer—are ultimately more “us” than “them” is more a humanistic than a scientific question, one more one of attitude than, say, of taxonomic classification.

The problematic, unsettled nature of cultural otherness is nicely exemplified by the phenomenon of musical “talent.” On the one hand, people who have musical talent are perceived by many as something of a breed apart, fully appropriate for discussion as an “other” group. On the other hand, one of the fundamental characteristics of musical talent is the indefinite gradations in which it is manifested. I suspect, for example, that some who read this book are likely to feel that they have a certain amount of musical talent, yet not enough to gain admission to a conservatory, and there are certainly some who gain admission to the conservatory who nevertheless continue to harbor uneasy questions about whether their talent is such that they truly belong there. The problem of how much talent it takes to be “really” talented is constantly at issue, and will forever confound efforts to

achieve consensus regarding the makeup of any group of “talented” people.

Moreover, although it may seem only common sense to say that “self” and “other” (or “us” and “them”) are fundamentally opposed, musical talent confounds, in at least one sense, the experience of “other” with that of “self.” In the context of everyday life, to be identified as talented is frequently to be identified as different, and a talented person’s knowledge that “I am different” is at least sometimes congruent with the feeling that I (self) am one of them (other). In the context of the conservatory, however, where it is the norm—perhaps more precisely, the expectation—to be talented, the reverse is likely to be the case.

Of course, “exotic” cultures hardly constitute the sole focus of anthropological study, and some of the best recent ethnographies have been studies of educational institutions—some of these by anthropologists, probably more by sociologists. In this connection, it is perhaps worth noting that this book is at least somewhat anomalous regarding the ethnography genre, at least in what some would call its “realist” phase (Marcus and Cushman 1982: 29). In saying this, I mean only that I will not attempt to “sketch vividly . . . the boundaries of a cultural unit” (Marcus 1980: 509). The present book is not intended as a narrative portrayal of the Eastern Metropolitan Conservatory of Music, as an ethnography, in a technical sense, of an educational institution.

On the other hand, a significant distinction was made by Clifford Geertz when he noted that “the locus of study is not the object of study. Anthropologists don’t study villages (tribes, towns, neighborhoods. . .); they study *in* villages” (Geertz 1973: 22, emphasis in original). In light of this distinction, it can be said that this book is indeed based on ethnographic research, not so much *of* a conservatory (although one chapter will be devoted to the dynamics of the conservatory institution) as *in* a conservatory. This study is ethnographic in the sense that it draws on what social scientists call “participant observation” research, that day-by-day process of watching, listening,

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asking, interviewing, recording and note taking that constitutes the production of “data.” It is in this sense that this work is presented as ethnography, although less as an ethnography of a conservatory than as an ethnography of music.

This book deals with music not as a nicely bounded “cultural unit,” but rather with an open-ended framework of cultural concepts and social configurations. The succeeding chapters deal with various contexts in which music is produced, experienced, and evaluated, with a concluding chapter suggesting a “cultural system” constructed from a consideration of the relationships among and interpenetration of these contexts.

The first of these contexts, that of the conservatory institution, will be discussed in Chapter Two; a main focus of this chapter will be the relationship between the “aural tradition” of Western art music performance and the decentralized “political” organization of the conservatory institution, both of which are centered largely on the school’s individual performer-teachers. Chapter Three will discuss a second, cultural, context, namely the concept of “talent,” which for the conservatory is a point of both contrast and similarity with the world around it (while a music conservatory might be distinguished as a community of the talented, nevertheless “talent” is at issue not only in music, but also in literature, sports, business, and so on). The starting point for this chapter will be the fact that, although talent is often conceived as something which you either have or you don’t, nevertheless, conservatory life—and probably, American life in general—is characterized by disagreements among people regarding whether or not a particular person “really” has talent. The following chapter will discuss a series of “master classes” in chamber music performance, focusing on the importance the teacher placed on playing what the score said to play, and yet not to play simply because the score said so, but rather because one “felt” it that way. As with other musical contexts, the matter of social power is of central importance in the master classes, here particularly in connection with the social authority of the

distinguished teacher in evaluating whether or not the students were playing with feeling. Such a judgment is closely related to, if not indeed identical with, an evaluation of talent. Chapter Five will analyze the context of formal solo recitals, presented here as rituals in what Emile Durkheim called the “cult of the individual,” rituals in which the social separation between the soloist and the audience is, in an important sense, sacralized.

The concluding chapter draws on materials from the previous chapters as well as from writings in the musicological and social science literature in putting forth an anthropological conception of music as a polymorphic cultural reality. Such a conception draws on the variety of representations of what music “really” is, and on an interpretation of this variation in terms of social configurations in and around the conservatory. The point is that notions of “music” in the conservatory are varied and divergent—no single meaning of the word applies in all cases—and yet these varied conceptualizations of music are also mutually interdependent. Music is presented here as a cultural integument of social process (Leach’s equating of ethics and aesthetics, mentioned earlier, is directly to the point), the cultural garb of interaction among conservatory persons. Although musicians conceive of “music” as being intrinsically extrasocial, many of their most intensely spoken references to “the actual music” are unambiguous comments on particular persons in specific social situations.

I hasten to emphasize that the various musical contexts in terms of which this book is organized are neither independent nor discrete domains, nor are they all contexts in the same sense of the term. The concept of *talent*, for example, is a musical *context* in a very different sense from the conservatory institution. It should also be stressed that each of these four contexts entails other contexts (for example, the context of the authoritative pedagogue in the master class also entails the context of the authoritative musical score, or *urtext*), and that these various contexts contextualize each other. Each is a musical context in the sense that it lends a particular significance and meaning to music.

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I would emphasize also that the various contexts which constitute the basis of this book are not intended as either definitive or exhaustive, and the “cultural system” suggested here is just that—a suggestion. For clarification, I would stress the indefinite article in the book’s subtitle—*A* Conservatory Cultural System. No claims will be made in this book in terms of *The* Conservatory Cultural System. Nevertheless, I do think that the notion of “cultural system,” conceived in terms of intertwined musical contexts, is an optimal, perhaps even ideal, manner of characterizing what music really is, partly because such a notion facilitates a central focus on the variety of the senses of what music is taken to be.

Of course, such an approach will seem anomalous to some, for although it is common enough in musicological books to read that, for example, “music is a product of human activity,” such statements are made more often as parenthetical asides than as substantive comments on musicological method. Indeed, many scholars of Western art music believe that musicological inquiry can only be distorted by the introduction of problems of social action, which are characteristically perceived as “extramusical” and hence parasitic on studies of “the actual music.” (This is, of course, the musicological equivalent to Dean Waterhouse’s original opinion that the purity of great music should not be linked in performance to any specific political cause.) The standard rhetoric for this is that music be studied “on its own terms,” a phrase which generally means that certain abstract concepts (“melody,” “harmony,” “rhythm”) are to be analyzed in terms of other similarly abstract terms (“structure,” “form,” “development”). The prevailing idea is that music is not to be understood in terms of its sociocultural context, but rather in terms of its internal organization and cohesion.

My own view is that such an approach is at bottom a way of taking “music” out of context in order to study it. I am in fundamental agreement with the statement of ethnomusicologist John Blacking: “we must recognize that no musical style has ‘its own terms’: its terms are

the terms of its society and culture” (Blacking 1973: 25). In light of this idea, the value of anthropological “participant observation” in a conservatory of music is precisely that a conservatory is an environment in which musical terms are negotiated, largely in terms of the preceding configuration of musical contexts, with great intensity and on a daily basis. A music conservatory is a place where musical disagreements are continually being negotiated toward consensus, and where consensus is in turn continually breaking up into contention. If the strength of theory, whether scientific, social scientific, or musicological, is linked to the logical possibility of either confirmation or refutation, then anthropological study in a music conservatory might be said to have a privileged position regarding music “theory,” in that it takes as its data base that very continuum linking disagreement with consensus in musical discourse.

This book is a study of that musical idiom which more than any other has traditionally been referred to in academic literature simply as “music,” with no modifier such as “folk,” “popular,” “country,” or “primitive.” It was not too long ago that when one read the newspaper reviews of concerts of “classical” or “serious” music the reviewers could and did claim simply to be writing about “music”: the word with no modifier (although sometimes simply called “good” music! see, for example, Salzer 1962: 3-4, or Cone 1968: 13) was taken to conflate a particular repertoire with music per se, with music in its essence. I would prefer, however, to characterize this book as a study of a cultural idiom produced by and in a rather specific configuration of social production. This configuration entails (1) the lionized composer (even though the composer is stereotypically not living), (2) the gifted and highly trained performers who render faithful and “felt” interpretations of the composer’s sacralized text, and (3) an ostensibly anonymous public audience. The configuration also includes (4) the scholarly musicologists and (5) the journalistic critics who write about this musical idiom. Until recent years, such writers reserved for this idiom the sole claim to the domain of “music.”³ Finally, the configura-

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tion is characterized by (6) highly formalized private teacher-student dyads. Such a sixfold configuration, taken as a mode of cultural production, a configuration of collective action, is suggested as a preliminary conceptualization of the present study.⁴

Entering “the Field”

Anthropologists characteristically refer to participant-observation research as “fieldwork,” and it is of at least passing interest to wonder just how much this terminology is linked to the historical fact that anthropology has traditionally been concerned with the study of what until fairly recently were called “tribal,” “simple,” or “primitive” societies. The study of such societies is often done in an environment quite dramatically different from that including automobiles to go to and from the supermarket, workplace, or cinema, or to huge libraries with microfiche readers and computerized search procedures. Indeed, the matter of getting into “the field” is for some anthropologists reckoned in terms of miles hiked beyond the last access to four-wheel drive vehicles, airlift, or boat landing, as well as in terms of finding—perhaps even making—a place to stay, and adjusting to sometimes dangerous factors concerning nutrition and hygiene.

In view of such factors, it is with considerable hesitancy that I would call my research “fieldwork” or the Eastern Metropolitan Conservatory of Music the “field.” EMCM is, as I knew in advance it would probably be, a music school rather like those that I had experienced previously, yet also different in various respects, and its location is nothing particularly more nor less than a typical major American city.

The Eastern Metropolitan Conservatory of Music offers the degrees Bachelor of Music, Bachelor of Music Education, Master of Music, and Artist Diploma. In the specialization of its focus, the con-

servatory might be compared with schools of law, medicine, or nursing, but its relation to the economy and the world around it is quite different from that of a professional school. For one thing, professions such as law, medicine, and nursing are regulated by governmental licensing agencies, and students in law schools, for instance, are precluded from practising law until after finishing school and obtaining the appropriate license. By contrast, many students come to the conservatory as already developed performing musicians, and conservatory students are frequently engaged at least part-time as wage-earning performers, and have a certain self-image as “professional” musicians. That said, it must also be emphasized that students of law, nursing, or medicine can afford to be much more sanguine regarding professional employment after their training than can conservatory students. In contrast with these professional schools, it is only a small minority of conservatory alumni who will be able to go on to a financially life-supporting career in music. In light of this, the paid performing done by conservatory students might be better understood in economic terms as comparable with a summer job rather than as “professional” work. Indeed, the conservatory maintains a “gig office” for the purpose of arranging performing jobs for students in need of financial aid.

With regard to the long-term economic prospects that await conservatory students, Becker’s observations (1982: 52ff.) regarding students at various kinds of arts schools are, in all probability, to the point. He points to several studies that indicate that the students and alumni of arts schools participate more as devoted and sophisticated consumers (subscribers to concert or theater series, memberships in museums, and so on) than as performing or economically productive artists. My own research includes only relatively superficial information on this point, and yet my sense is that a conservatory is probably more appropriately compared with a seminary than with a professional school, in that the concentrated focus of conservatory training seems more an inculcation of devotion than a preparation for a career. The sense of

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commitment among conservatory students seems more personal, moral, and emotional than professional or economic.

My choice of EMCM as an object of research was based mainly on the fact that it is a well-known and highly respected music conservatory, but one with which I had had no direct experience during my own career as a musician. In the summer of 1980, I discussed my plans for research with Stuart Robinson, Director of EMCM. My primary intent at that time was to give Robinson and the EMCM administration ample advance notice of my interest in doing my research in their institution. While I was able only to give him a rather general account of my intended research, his response was largely favorable. When a year later I did send a copy of my research plan to Stuart Robinson, it developed that there were reservations regarding my research at EMCM, mainly due to some administrative changes taking place at that time, not the least of which was Robinson's own imminent departure as Director. I tried to reassure Robinson that I would not create a problem for either him or his successor, that I saw my presence at EMCM as in essence a "mock student," needing no more special attention from the conservatory administrators than any regular conservatory student.

Although Robinson had said that there might be some restrictive "ground rules" pertaining to my visit, I was aware of no such rules when I arrived. Indeed, Robinson referred me to Emeritus Dean Harold Sullivan, who gave me something akin to red-carpet treatment upon my arrival at EMCM. He gave me a guided tour of the premises, as well as lengthy discourses on the conservatory's history and governmental and administrative structures. He also helped me to arrange a schedule of conservatory classes to attend.

My research at EMCM lasted one semester, January-June 1982. I selected four classes to attend on a regular basis. One was a freshman class in "Sight Singing and Ear Training," another was an upper class course entitled "Diction for Singers," and a third was a course in chamber music performance. Dean Sullivan came with me to the first

meeting of the classes, introduced me to the teachers, and explained to each that I would be a visitor to the conservatory for the semester, observing classes and rehearsals, and asking if the teacher would object to my presence in the class. The latter question was not simply rhetorical. To one teacher he said, “NOW, Andy, if you’ve already got more than you think you can handle in this class, then you just say so.” The closest thing to a negative response was one teacher’s comment that he usually did not like to have auditors, but in this instance it would be okay. The fourth class was a “music literature” course dealing with twentieth-century composers. Since this met on a day when Dean Sullivan was not at the conservatory, I introduced myself to the teacher of this class, and asked if I might sit in on it. He too was agreeable to the request.

Particularly in the first weeks of my stay at EMCM, I spent a considerable amount of time chatting with the three secretaries in the outer reception area of the Director’s office. It is, of course, a widely accepted element of academic folklore that departmental secretaries are generally repositories of extensive knowledge of the ways of the department they work for, and I have no doubt that these women fit this stereotype as well as any. One of them, Ellen MacDowell, was the special administrative assistant to Stuart Robinson, and would occasionally claim—in a way that was both in jest and in earnest—that she was an administrator and not really “just” a secretary. In saying this she may have been simply making a comment on her somewhat superior rank in relation to the other secretaries, but the correctness of her assertion is argued also by the fact that by midsemester her own dismissal had been effectively attached to Robinson’s. Another secretary, Margaret Arnold, was also a part-time student finishing a graduate degree in the conservatory. Margaret was the only trained musician among the secretaries, but it should be emphasized that all of these women were and felt themselves to be very much involved with the conservatory. As Ellen once said, “Those of us who don’t have the talent or the creativity can still be creative in nurturing musical talent—

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and I think that's important."⁵ Ellen had, in fact, previously worked in a theological seminary; she told me that she had thought that working in the conservatory would be a move into the secular world, but she had come to feel that there was much in common between conservatory and seminary life.

In addition to the four classes I attended regularly, I also sat in on occasional master classes given by visiting artists, and many rehearsals of choral, orchestral, and smaller chamber music groups, when these rehearsals were held in large rehearsal halls where I could watch unobtrusively if not unobserved. My original hope had been to make a fairly intensive longitudinal study of rehearsals, in an effort to learn about what changes are made over time in the way a piece gets played, and how these changes—"improvements"—are negotiated within the group. I was unable to do this, due partly to the complications of the rehearsal schedules of the larger groups, and partly to the self-consciousness and consternation which greeted my requests to visit rehearsals of student trios and quartets. Similarly, I was unable to organize my intended project of interviews and rehearsal observations of students preparing degree recitals, for reasons that were partly bureaucratic (the conservatory had no reliable student directory) and partly emotional: numerous students declined to be interviewed until after their recital was over. I did, however, do about two dozen "formal" interviews, that is, interviews set by appointment, with a prepared list of questions, and usually with an audio tape recorder going. Many of these interviews were with seniors and graduate students who had recently performed their degree recital and were approaching the end of their stay at EMC.

For two interrelated reasons, the heading "entering the field" could appropriately be applied to the entire duration of my stay at EMC. First, my visit was so brief that even when it was coming to an end, I was not only still meeting new people, but also learning some seemingly basic things about the institution, such as where and when the opera rehearsals took place, or the fact that the piano department had