Introduction

In Eugene, Oregon, at the Saturday Market, an open-air festival that happens weekly from spring through fall, a blues guitarist sits in the middle of a small group of onlookers, strumming and singing a song he has made especially for the locale, “Goin’ Back to Eugene.” At the Mescalero Apache reservation in the southeast corner of New Mexico, an old man in a wheelchair sings his way through a ceremony of several hundred songs to which a young girl dances her way to womanhood. A singer living in Washington, DC recalls her youth in the coal-mining district of West Virginia by singing the song she made up about escaping from that environment. College students carry repertoires of thousands of tunes in their heads, constantly updating them through their iPods. And a young pianist sitting in the studio of her teacher learns the lineage of her teacher by hearing how a certain phrase was played by Leschetizky—and therefore maybe by the composer Beethoven himself.

All of these musical scenarios and many more like them occur daily in the USA—and all of them have one thing in common: they do not depend on the use of musical notation to make their power felt. They are the products of multiple oral traditions that make up an important part of the rich fabric of music in this country. It is to the study of these traditions that this book is dedicated. We start with a proposition:

> The power of American music exists chiefly in its oral traditions.

This book sets out to document and illustrate this proposition. By looking at several streams of music ranging from religious songs of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries to twentieth-century amateur rock bands and twenty-first-century hip-hop “beat”[1] producers with many stops between, I hope to illuminate both the importance of the aural/oral[2] in several representative kinds of

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[1] The specialized meaning of the word “beat” in hip-hop music will be explained in Chapter 2.

[2] For the sake of convenience and customary usage, I have used the term “oral” tradition to cover *all* facets of a process—the aural, or taking in by ear of sounds, and the oral, or the transmission by mouth (but also understood to cover instrumental performances passed on without notation). The dual term oral/aural would be more accurate, but then we should also add the visual and kinesthetic elements of instrumental music, as explained below under “Vocal vs. Instrumental Oral Tradition” and in Chapter 3, making the term a cumbersome oral/aural/visual/tactile. Therefore, the term “oral tradition” will be understood

American[3] music (without attempting to cover them all), as well as its processes.

Histories of music, like histories of civilization, tend to be based on written documentation, since that seems the most reliable evidence. We are taught to evaluate sources, examine watermarks, and analyze handwriting to determine dates and compare variant manuscripts. But, just as the bulk of human history has never been written down and exists as an oral tradition, the greater part of music in the world exists only in oral tradition, and even that which *is* written down often relies on oral tradition to transmit it in an intelligible form. How do we know, for example, what kind of connections to make between notes, how to produce tones on difficult instruments, how to play rhythmically correct-sounding jazz? These refinements of music cannot be learned solely from books any more than the details of such human actions as riding a bicycle or dancing can be. They have elsewhere been called "tacit knowledge,"[4] and the means of learning them is primarily via unwritten or oral tradition.

Oral tradition in music, then, refers to those aspects of music that are passed down by humans teaching one another the art form, whether in person or by means of recordings, radio, television, or other non-written means. It also refers to the kinds of composition that occur completely without reference to written notation; that is, the creative as well as the re-creative forms of oral tradition.

As chant scholar Peter Jeffery has eloquently stated, oral transmission is the norm of music, not the exception, and it is perhaps a tendency of music historians to focus on the exceptional that has led to its being ignored. He states:

> Oral transmission is not a particular feature of some music at certain times, but rather a universal characteristic of almost all music at almost all times. What we call "oral transmission" is what most human beings throughout history have known simply as "music"—something to play or hear rather than something to write or read. We modern Westerners are the ones who do things differently, and our preference for writing is our handicap.[5]

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to encompass all music not handed down in or necessarily learned from a written form, unless specific component processes are being discussed.

[3] "American" is of course a misnomer—US music would be more accurate for the scope of this book (see footnote 8 below for further explanation). However, "American" is common usage, and as a short-hand, I will continue to use it, especially in its adjectival form.

[4] For further discussion of tacit knowledge, see Lars Lilliestam, "On Playing by Ear," *Popular Music* 15/2 (1996): 195–216, who defines this notion as "the unverbalized knowledge of skills that manifest themselves in actions, but are not dressed in words …" p. 194.

[5] Peter Jeffery, *Re-envisioning Past Musical Cultures. Ethnomusicology in the Study of Gregorian Chant* (Chicago, 1992), p. 124. I would add that in some cultures, what is transmitted is not even called "music," but rather "singing" or "playing," or even "dancing" or "celebrating." Jeffery's comment is perhaps overstated, since oral and written often exist in parallel in other cultures (for example, China, India, Japan), not just in the West.

The purpose of this book, then, is to explore in some depth that "universal characteristic" of music and the many facets of oral tradition as they affect American music. From the microcosmic example of the performances of a single singer to the macrocosm of the passing on of a whole cultural tradition, with many stages between, we can hope to come to grips with the vital importance of oral tradition and the especially important role it has played in American musical cultures. In fact, it is my contention, as stated most succinctly in the proposition given at the end of the second paragraph of this introduction, that the importance of oral tradition in relation to the written in American music has given that music its particular stamp, its freshness and vitality, and its ability to capture the attention of musicians and audiences worldwide. If one contrasts the musical reputation of Germany or Austria with that of the USA, the differences become readily apparent. The giant names of written composition—Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, etc.—come to mind immediately for the German-speaking countries, while for the USA, though we certainly also have a fine written tradition, the names of "Satchmo," Ellington, Elvis, and so forth are more likely to be thought of as characteristic—and each of these musicians has had closer connections with the oral than with the written traditions of music.[6]

It seems clear that without the broad underlying oral repertoire of folk music, many important styles—from that of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Singing Schools and shape-note traditions to the piano music of Gottschalk, the minstrel tunes of Foster and the orchestral music of Gershwin and Copland—would not have their distinctive rhythmic and melodic content. Also, without the strong *processes* of oral tradition—the ability to communicate effectively to a particular ethnic or social group—American folk and popular music would be much less multi-dimensional and vital. And, without the idea conveyed by oral tradition that every man and woman has a voice and is entitled to sing (or play), the more elitist view of European music might be stronger than the participatory model appropriate to the American version of democracy.

Oral tradition is, of course, present in every human culture, as the Jeffery quotation above underscores. The question here is of its impact on North American music-making, in all its multi-faceted presence. As with oral histories of civilizations, oral traditions in music can emanate from the economically underprivileged, and the illiterate, who are often one and the same. Yet there are aspects of oral tradition also to be found in the most sophisticated music as it is practiced in symphony orchestras and opera companies, and certainly as it is taken in aurally by their audiences. I therefore include all of these genres in my sweeping statement about the importance of oral tradition in American culture.

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[6] This is not to deny that the Americans mentioned left written documents, either by themselves (in the case of Ellington) or by those associated with them (in the cases of Louis Armstrong (Satchmo) and Elvis Presley). But the origins of each of their music-making traditions were oral in nature rather than written and were it not for the recordings they made, their contributions might well have been mostly lost or at least under-appreciated.

Hence I will look at the so-called art music traditions as well as traditional folk music, indigenous Native American music, and popular music, where perhaps the workings of oral tradition are most readily seen.[7] The oral/aural is present everywhere, and it mixes freely with the written; therefore I will not try to confine discussion to "purely" oral traditions, but rather to those in which the aural/oral is an important factor. Because the scope of this book is so broad, there will be no attempt to be comprehensive in coverage. Music in America[8] is a vast subject; one book cannot hope to encompass it all. In fact, even in delimiting the boundaries to the USA, we will provide only a sampling of the many micro-musics that exist.[9] However, we *can* hope to provide a lens and perhaps even a methodology by which others can examine the many other traditions.

Focusing on the oral tradition in American music in and of itself is unusual. In the grand textbook histories of American music—those by Chase, Mellers, Hitchcock, Hamm, Nicholls, and others, and most recently Crawford[10]—oral tradition is sometimes mentioned, but is almost never of central interest. [11] (The one exception to this seems to be jazz, which is covered well in several of these books and in many specialized studies and for this reason does not figure heavily in this study.) Histories of music in general account for the chronology of music as the progression of musical personalities, be they composers, performers, patrons, critics, or scholars.[12] As such, oral tradition, which often occurs without attribution to a particular person, gets left out of the picture as a process until a "personality" takes it up, at which point it has often been transformed into another sort of music—most often written or, in this day and age, recorded. Thus in part this book is seen as corrective to the composer-driven music history, much as Howard Zinn's history of American life as told from the ordinary person's point of view was written as a corrective to the prevailing view of the "great-man" theory of history.[13]

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[7] Charles Seeger made the four-part division consisting of the tribal, folk, popular, and art music idioms (he uses the term "professional idiom") in his article "The Music Compositional Process as a Function in a Nest of Functions and in Itself a Nest of Functions," *Yearbook, Inter-American Institute for Musical Research* (New Orleans, 1966) vol. 2, 1–36, republished in *Studies in Musicology, 1935–1975* (Berkeley, 1977), pp. 145–51. Each one of these terms can and has been challenged for its validity (see my own article, Anne Dhu Shapiro, "The Multi-Layered Concept of 'Folk Song' in American Music: The Case of Jean Ritchie's 'The Two Sisters'," in *Themes and Variations: Writings on Music in Honor of Rulan Chao Pian*, Bell Yung and Joseph S.C. Lam (eds) (Cambridge, MA, 1994), pp. 212–30, but while there are nuances, overlaps, and other problems with the terms, they do have the advantage of having been in use for a number of years and of responding to a basic reality of American musical life. Most readers will readily understand the general classifications, though their precise boundaries may be in dispute.

[8] It is with apologies to Canada and countries of the Southern hemisphere that I adopt the common parlance of "American" music to refer mainly to music of the USA. No good substitute common name has been widely adopted, but it is definitely beyond the scope of this book to treat music beyond the borders of the USA, even though many of the principles and processes may be similar elsewhere.

[9] Mark Slobin deals extensively with the meaning of this term in his *Subcultural Sounds, Micromusics of the West* (Hanover, NH, 1993).

[10] Gilbert Chase, *America's Music*, rev. 3rd ed. (Urbana, IL, 1987); Wilfred Mellers, *Music in a New Found Land* (New York, 1987); H. Wiley Hitchcock, *Music in the United States: A Historical Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1988); Charles Hamm, *Music in the New World* (New York, 1983); David Nicholls, (ed.) *The Cambridge History of American Music* (Cambridge, 1998); Richard Crawford, *America's Musical Life* (New York, 2001).

[11] However, a search of the indices of the books by Chase, Hamm, Hitchcock, Mellers, and Nicholls yielded no results for the term "oral tradition." Crawford in *America's Musical Life* devotes a whole chapter to African-American oral tradition, and the topic is mentioned in passing in several other places. Nonetheless, although some oral practices are discussed

One Process or Many? Oral Tradition and the Human Mind

The first question when confronted with the many traditions of music in America is: Does oral tradition work alike in all musical cultures? The question is not easy to answer. At the surface level it is clear—different aspects of an oral tradition are emphasized in different cultures. In much of Native-American ritual music, for example, there is a premium on rendering orally taught songs with complete accuracy, not changing them in the least, though over time certain changes have crept in. In many kinds of jazz, on the other hand, it is imperative to play a new improvisation with each performance.

However, under the surface of cultural differences, there do seem to be some common elements that apply to all human cultures that transmit music orally. These elements have to do with the human mind, the limits of memory, the power of repetition, and the urge toward creativity. The first chapter, in introducing four different case studies—an Appalachian-raised singer of the British-Irish-American folk tradition, a Native-American healer/singer, an African-American blues singer, and an Irish-American fiddler—will demonstrate the breadth of our

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in these books, the lack of emphasis on their importance is striking. It should also be noted that oral traditions *have* formed the focus of study in some other countries, such as Russia and parts of Europe.

[12] In the case of early American history, there are fewer distinctive personalities to deal with, but starting with the nineteenth century, each of the texts mentioned in footnote 10 above begins to center around musical personalities, most often composers. Crawford's recent *America's Musical Life* is the least prone to this kind of viewpoint, but nonetheless, starting with Lowell Mason, chronicles each major composer in chapter headings.

[13] Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York, 1980).

oral traditions in some of our most purely oral/aural cultures, the so-called “roots music” or “traditional” music[14] of North America.

Following this will be the first of four “Interludes” on the subject of the brain and music—a subject that has seen an explosion of knowledge since the late 1980s. Each interlude synthesizes recent research from infant studies, psychology, and cognitive neuroscience in this area and applies them to the topic discussed in the previous chapter. We are at the beginning of an exciting new era, when it may once again be possible for the findings of science to contribute directly to the better understanding of all of the arts.[15] The musical workings of the brain have been an important part of this research, in part because music is such a distinctive mental process. The research of Ian Cross, Irène Deliège, David Huron, Daniel Levitin, David Rubin, Sandra Trehub, Colwyn Trevarthen, and many others who will be cited in these chapters has led to some truly new insights into how music is taken in, remembered, and re-created. This research has also shown how important music is as a human activity from earliest infancy on. Oral tradition is the medium of this activity, and to begin to understand it from a scientific as well as a descriptive point of view has been a breakthrough for me personally, and I hope it will be for the reader as well. After the first interlude, on memory and oral tradition, Chapter 2 will deal with oral tradition in popular music followed by Interlude 2, focusing on creativity and the brain. Chapter 3 describes important points of oral tradition within American musical history, including the impact it has had on America’s concert music, or so-called “art music”; Interlude 3 focuses on the interactions of written and oral/aural traditions in cognitive processes. In Chapter 4, I examine how oral tradition operates in the lives of ordinary humans, even those who do not see themselves as musicians, again through several case studies. This is followed by Interlude 4, which explores the mental musical capacities of *all* humans, that which we all have in common as listeners and/or purveyors of musical traditions, and how these capacities help define us as humans. Finally, Chapter 5 will revisit the importance of oral tradition and will evaluate what the processes of oral tradition can contribute to culture, as well as summarizing and integrating the previous interludes on music and the brain to show how inevitably the makeup of the human brain causes us to take in music, remember it, and make it meaningful. A brief look at how oral tradition may operate in the future—the impact of new and old technologies, and the opportunities for research in oral tradition in present-day society—will conclude the book (excepting the appendices with transcriptions of certain selections). An accompanying compact disc illustrates some of the examples.

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[14] “Traditional” as an adjective substitutes for the older term “folk” music, a term continually under siege. In its truest sense of music being handed down, “traditional” is, of course, applicable to almost any form of music. However, in circles of folk-music scholars it is often meant as a term that covers music created by those who grew up in a regional tradition, rather than by musicians who acquired the tradition second-hand or from printed or recorded sources. “Roots” music has recently started to be used as a popular alternative term for such music.

[15] This conjunction of scientific and humanistic studies is acknowledged in the set of articles in the journal *the world of music*, edited by Ellen Koskoff, in which she states that ethnomusicology is beginning to move away from “the older ‘experimental vs. humanistic’ controversy towards a more friendly, collaborative arena, where multiple understandings of knowledge are mutually imbedded.” “Introduction,” *the world of music* 34/3 (1992): 5–6.

Vocal vs. Instrumental Oral Tradition

One of the primary distinctions to make is the difference between instrumental and vocal music in oral tradition. The use of an instrument versus the use of text introduces variables that make it necessary to consider certain aspects of these traditions separately. The externalization possible with the presence of an instrument brings in a kinesthetic and visual awareness that is not so present in vocal music.[16] Besides relying on the ear and the memory, hand and finger movements on a fiddle, flute, or other instrument may be important ways of remembering certain tunes, for example. On the other hand, text also provides opportunities for and constraints upon memory that are not present in instrumental music. The text is often so important to singers that they pay no particular conscious attention to the tune. This can be both an advantage and a disadvantage for the researcher: Since the changes in tunes in the case of vocal traditions are usually not consciously thought out, the unconscious processes of the brain can be studied. On the other hand, singers will seldom be able to talk about their tunes or compare them to others, as instrumentalists often can. Since both vocal and instrumental traditions rely on aural memory, however, they also have much in common, and quite often tunes in one tradition will be used in the other. While both will be considered in this book, and in much more detail, there will be times when only one or the other will be under consideration because of their differences.

A Personal Note

I am by nature a synthesizer of ideas, and this book is a synthesis of several areas of my research, as well as a look at some new ones. My own musical background contains portions of each of the main areas covered. I started out in childhood as a classically trained pianist; taught to read notation by age five, I nevertheless was actively engaged in many forms of oral/aural tradition, including the political and entertainment songs of my family, improvised duets with my sister, the enjoyment of folk and popular music at every stage of my life, and "revival" folksong performance in both the 1950s and 1960s. And, of course, the classical lessons themselves were full of oral/aural learning, including the metaphors used to induce more expressive playing, the lore of my teachers' various lineages, and the examples of older students. My scholarly study of oral traditions commenced in earnest once I learned how narrow and well-trammeled the study of written music was. My specific inspirations were courses with two professors at Harvard University: Albert Lord's seminar on the Serbo-Croatian epic led me to think more about the amazing creativity of "ordinary" people and about both the limitations and the power of oral tradition; John M. Ward's free-wheeling mixture of the oral and written in both his undergraduate and graduate courses was particularly inspirational. He modeled the idea for us that music was music, no matter where it came from or what its purpose—whether as the center of a concert performance, as a collaboration with dance, as part of a religious ritual, or as whistled on the street. All music is fair game for study, and all is capable of analysis and contextualization. This is the basic message of my book as well; it privileges the oral/aural as opposed to the written, because for so long the balance has been tilted the other way.

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[16] See, for instance, Tim Rice, "Understanding and Producing the Variability of Oral Tradition: Learning from a Bulgarian Bagpiper," *Journal of American Folklore* 108 (1995): 266–76, and Lilliestam, "On playing by ear," as well as our discussions in Chapter 3 below.