

Introduction to Ethnomusicology

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Key concepts, history, methods, and areas of study

1. What Is Ethnomusicology?

Aspect	Description
Definition	The scholarly study of music in its cultural, social, and biological contexts.
Scope	Encompasses all musical traditions—folk, popular, ritual, art, and everyday sound practices.
Goal	Understand how people create, experience, and give meaning to sound.
Interdisciplinary Links	Anthropology, sociology, linguistics, psychology, history, cultural studies, biology, and media studies.

2. Historical Development

Period	Milestones	Key Figures
Late 19th?–?early 20th?c.	- Collection of “exotic” folk songs for museums and archives. - Music seen as a cultural artifact to be catalogued.	Béla Bartók, Cecil Sharp, Francis James Child
1930s?1950s	- Shift to fieldwork and participant observation. - Music studied as a lived cultural practice.	Alan P. Merriam (three?component model), Mantle Hood (bimusical competence)
1960s?1970s	- Influence of anthropology (cultural relativism). - Emphasis on power, identity, and politics of music.	John Blacking, Steven Feld, Thomas Turino

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Period	Milestones	Key Figures
1980s-1990s	• Introduction of post-colonial, feminist, and critical theory perspectives. • Expansion to urban, electronic, and global popular music.	Su Yin, Deborah Wong, Christopher Small
2000s-present	• Digital ethnography, multimodal analysis, and global network studies. • Collaboration with musicians, communities, and technology developers.	Kofi Agawu, Timothy Taylor, Ellen Koskoff

3. Core Concepts

Concept	Meaning	Example
Musicking	The act of engaging with music (performing, listening, dancing, rehearsing).	A community drum circle where participants both play and listen.
Bimusical Competence	Ability to understand and operate within both one's own musical culture and that of another.	A Western-trained ethnomusicologist who can read Javanese gamelan notation and play a gamelan set.
Soundscape	The acoustic environment, including natural, built, and human-made sounds.	The ambient sounds of a marketplace that shape a city's musical identity.
Embodiment	How bodily movement, gesture, and physiology shape musical experience.	The posture and breath control of a qawwali singer.
Cultural Relativism	An analytical stance that avoids judging musical practices by one's own standards.	Describing a ritual chant without labeling it "primitive" or "advanced."
Agency	Musicians and listeners actively shape musical meanings and social relations.	Youth using hip-hop to negotiate ethnic identity.

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4. Research Methods

Method	When to Use	Typical Steps
Fieldwork / Participant Observation	Studying music in situ; building rapport with communities.	1. Obtain ethical clearance. 2. Conduct rehearsals, performances, interviews. 3. Record audio/video and field notes.
Interview & Oral History	Capturing personal narratives, meanings, and transmission.	Semi-structured or life-story formats; often recorded and transcribed.