

# MUSIC FACULTY PERSPECTIVES

DALE A. OLSEN

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## A MONKEY'S TALE

Because of my background in ethnomusicology and my great interest in creating multicultural awareness, I am going to tell you a story. Interpret this, if you want, as rainforest higher education in music — but not as monkey business.

Deep in the rainforest of the Orinoco River delta in Venezuela live a native American people, the Warao, who are little influenced by European or African derived cultures. Yet they number a violin, known as *sekeseke*, within their large collection of musical instruments. They attribute the violin's introduction to a monkey from a far-off land. The Warao have their own origin myth for their violin, and I would like to share that part of their story with you. This is how it was taught to me:<sup>1</sup>

One night a monkey dreamed, and in his dream he made a violin. . . . when he woke up he knew how to make it. He said, "Wow, what a great dream I had. Today I'm going to make a violin like I made in my dream last night." . . . Now, as he did in his dream, he also made a bow. Then the monkey tried it out. It sounded good when the bow was drawn across the strings. Therefore, it was ready.

A jaguar in another part of the rain forest didn't know anything about this. He is dumb, lazy, and is a good-for-nothing brute. All he thinks about is eating. The jaguar thought, "Hey, tomorrow I am going to kill and eat the monkey." Then he slept. When it was about dawn, the jaguar sent a message to the monkey. "Look, monkey, be prepared. You know that today I am going to kill you and eat you."

The monkey said, "Who's going to attack me today?"

"The jaguar," was the answer.

"Aha," said the monkey, "Now that I have my violin already made, it's okay, let him come. If he kills me and eats me, it doesn't matter. It's not important to me. But before he kills me and eats me I am going to play some beautiful music for him. After that he can kill me and eat me."

The jaguar said, "Now is the time. At eight or nine o'clock I will arrive there, precisely to kill the monkey and eat him, nothing more." So at eight or nine o'clock the jaguar came. When the jaguar got there, he said, "Well, monkey, today is the last day of your life. Pretty soon I am going to kill you and eat you."

The monkey answered him, "Just one little minute, jaguar; before you kill me and eat me I'm going to play some music for you. Afterwards you can kill me and eat me."

Thus, the monkey passed his bow over his violin, and the music was the best ever heard. The jaguar, the deer, the agouti, the howler monkey, and all kinds of birds gathered around the monkey and began to dance. The jaguar danced, the birds danced, everybody danced, and the music they heard was the most beautiful ever. They danced until they were tired of dancing.

"It's good. Stop. We're tired. Ah, such beautiful music!" said the jaguar. "Good, my monkey friend, it's all right. I thought you were dumb and that you didn't know anything about music."

"Yes, my jaguar friend," replied the monkey, "I am your friend, your cousin. I have been a musician from the time I was very little. I am the one who made this violin, the strings, the bow, the song, everything. Now you must not eat me."

"Certainly not," said the jaguar, "because you are a musician."

I think this is a relevant story because we are all musicians, and musicians are indeed a special

people. We would agree that, as musicians, we have a special gift or power because we are able to communicate using a type of language that many other people cannot use (or even understand). I sometimes wish "music" were a verb. If we say we "speak" speech languages, then perhaps we could say we "music" music languages. Of course, we do say we sing it, play it, compose it, dance it. Whatever we say, it is something we do, and that makes us different from most people. As music makers and, by extension, music teachers, we have a great responsibility to disseminate our art; and we are generally good at it, because we love what we do.

### *WHO ARE WE?*

Michael Green, President of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (NARAS), in an address to The College Music Society during its 1993 Annual Meeting, said

NARAS is a 35-year-old organization that represents over 9,000 members. These people are songwriters, musicians, producers, engineers, and many other creative and technical members of the recording community. They are rappers, metalheads, classical and jazz performers, gospel and Latin artists, and others who qualify for membership in 27 fields of music, containing 80 categories, by having released 6 or more records commercially. They agree on absolutely nothing, except for their love of music.

At this point he was interrupted by gales of laughter from the audience, for he had described not only the recording community but also music faculty in higher education. Music faculty love music though they disagree even on the definition of what music really is. Music faculty share a tremendous passion for music (however they define it), and discussion and debate are common. There are many valid reasons for this, some of which we will touch on in a moment.

Music in higher education embraces every aspect and subspecialty of the discipline. Accordingly, music faculty have interest in, teach, and research musical traditions from every part of the world. As teachers who share and transmit knowledge to students and the public, and as researchers who gather raw information and attempt to increase what is known about music in cultures and musics as culture, music faculty reflect the depth and breadth of American higher education's vast musical interests.

The richness of the musical tapestry in higher education is a great testament to individual faculty initiative. As lovers of music, all faculty find themselves drawn to music as art, communication, or power through one means or another. Higher education's music faculty, perhaps more than any other music-teaching population, seem to have an innate intellectual curiosity and tendency to expand focuses, to move from a foundation specialty to other areas of musical life. Composers are drawn to world musics and studies done in ethnomusicology in search of new sounds; conductors to historical musicology in search of answers to intriguing questions of historical performance practice; theorists to music education to discover more about pedagogical processes; historical musicologists to ethnomusicology to better understand how music functions in culture and society. And the music faculty in higher education, perhaps more than any other higher education faculty, tend to be globally engaged — that is, engaged in study of and able to articulate the traditions of a variety of cultures from America, Europe, and other parts of the world. Questions we find that we must pose within our own subspecialties, whether for teaching or research, continually drive us to the work of our colleagues in other areas. The nexus of ideas throughout this complex matrix is one of the richest aspects of the music faculty in higher education.

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Almost thirty percent of the music faculty in higher education hold a doctorate. The Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy) is the most commonly held degree among music faculty, which tells us something about their dominant thought processes. We are, as the title implies, philosophers, and this influences how we think, what we teach, the way we teach, and what we are inclined to think is important to transmit to our students. A recent poll of faculty published by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* indicates that, by far, the highest among thirteen priorities of campus faculty is "to promote the intellectual development of students."<sup>2</sup> We are inclined to be interested in ideas, and we want to spend time examining them carefully, looking at their every nuance.

### *WHAT DO WE DO?*

Most importantly, we want to disseminate our ideas. Music faculty are some of the most naturally accountable of all faculty in higher education, and they provide a wonderful model of accountability for all of higher education. Last year, 63% of the music faculty in the United States published papers or gave public performances. Thus, the contributions to the creative, performance, and listening communities are enormous. Our teaching and research are never kept under wraps for very long, and the public presentation of our work is an assumed component of our professional lives.

Expert faculty, interested colleagues from all sectors of the music industry, and students interested in everything from accordions to zithers can be found on our individual campuses, in national forums, and in international symposia. Surveying the campuses, one will find dynamic groups of faculty and students pursuing their individual interests, studying and discussing literally every facet of our musical world, including the nuances of Mozart bowings, the techniques of Ghanaian drumming, and the advantages or disadvantages of particular software programs. And, of course, teaching and learning is being accomplished through classrooms, studios, seminars, and rehearsals on and off campus; through national and international publications and conferences; and through electronic discussion groups and distance learning presentations via the Internet.

This century has indeed been an era of growth and diversity for higher education. Our music faculty has been part of the evolution of demographics, technology, and the general campus culture. Our teaching and research have been dramatically influenced by, and have had great impact upon, the growth and diversity of the past century. Now the knowledge revolution tests our teaching and research priorities, methods, and delivery systems.

In the coming decade and beyond, higher education music faculty will become less tenured and more part time, while, perhaps paradoxically, more in need than ever of the security and resources of a great university in order to practice the twin crafts of dynamic teaching and quality research. In the future, we will see a faculty increasingly engaged in both campus and community activities, neither one to the exclusion of the other.

The music faculty in higher education might be accurately described as a thriving community of philosophers surprisingly comfortable with both the world of ideas and the practical realizations of musical dissemination. The music faculty continues to refine the methods of researching the unknown, and of transmitting music knowledge and knowledge through music. And yes, the music faculty are well prepared to contribute to the refinement of the global knowledge economies of the coming decades.

**NOTES**

1. For an analysis of this story and a description of the *sekeseke*, see Dale A. Olsen, *Music of the Warao of Venezuela: Song People of the Rain Forest* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 104-111.

2. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Almanac Issue, August 28, 1998, Volume XLV, Number 1 (Washington, D.C.: The Chronicle of Higher Education), 32.

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