

Growing into Music: a study of musical enculturation in oral traditions

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Children who grow up in oral musical contexts such as the families of hereditary musical specialists commonly learn the body-language of music before they learn music itself. Throughout infancy and childhood they absorb the mannerisms of performance practice and the physical and social graces befitting of musicians. Learning music is accomplished by osmosis and imitation, largely without conscious intent. Children develop an unselfconscious musical confidence born of inherited deeply-nurtured authority.



Manganiyar boys from Hameera, Rajasthan

We are looking at musical childhoods amongst: Mande jeli (griot) musicians of Mali; Langa and Manganiyar folk musicians of Rajasthan; Hindustani art musicians of North India; ashiq bards and classical mugam musicians of Azerbaijan; Kharabatian musicians of Afghanistan; rumba musicians of western Cuba; and the música llanera harp tradition and also El Sistema of Venezuela.



A youth orchestra in Venezuela

We are documenting and analysing oral music acquisition and transmission, exploring the processes by which children in diverse cultures become musicians, beginning with passive exposure in infancy and culminating in adolescent participation in public performance.



A kora lesson in Bamako, Mali

Our outputs will include a series of DVDs and a jointly-authored volume. To date our fieldwork has produced around 290 hours of unique high-definition video footage of which we have been working on preliminary edits. We will show the same children developing musically over the course of fieldwork trips to each area during the three year period of the grant.

These cultures present fascinating differences with regard to the centrality of hereditary transmission, their positions on the continuum between art and folk music, the relative proportions of active transmission and passive acquisition, the balance between memorisation and improvisation, and the degree of mediation by musical literacy, institutionalisation, and globalisation.

We have done video-based presentations at the October Gallery, Goldsmiths College, SOAS, the London Tagore Centre, the Croydon Clocktower and at a British Forum for Ethno-musicology conference.

Our fieldwork trips have produced abundant data on how music transmission is reflecting the rapid changes taking place in its cultural contexts.



A sazes lesson in Baku, Azerbaijan



Grandfather teaching sarangi and tabla in Benares, India



Learning drumming in Havana, Cuba