Notes

1. The Classic Fairy Tales, p. 204.

2. Ibid., p. 219.

3. Ibid., p. 5. They do not footnote their quotation, which comes from Dégé's Folktales and Society, p. 147.


5. Ibid., p. 11.

6. Ibid., p. 16.


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Review essay by Steve Feld.

John Blacking needs no introduction to Africanists, ethnographers, nor ethnomusicologists; the pertinent facts for the general folklorist are the following: Blacking was trained as a musician and then as an anthropologist. He has done extensive research on music and cultural symbolism among the Venda of South Africa, and secondary research on the music of many other East and South African groups. In the last fifteen years he has published many detailed analyses, including Venda Children's Songs (Witwatersrand University Press, 1967), and many papers in Ethnomusicology, the International Folk Music Council Journal, African Music, and African Studies.

Recently, Blacking's writing has taken on a new dimension. Papers like "The Value of Music in Human Experience" (1969), "Toward a Theory of Musical Competence" (1971) and "Extensions and Limits of Musical Transformations" (1972) turn from the specific problems of description and analysis of African music to the pan-human question of the nature of musicality. In these articles Blacking draws largely from his own culture and musical background, as well as from his ethnographic work. His theoretical perspective has broadened, extending beyond contextual ethnographic study to considerations of human biology and psychology; in addition he has borrowed insights from both theoretical linguistics (particularly the writings of Noam Chomsky), and from cognitive
anthropology (particularly the structuralism of Claude Levi-Strauss).

How musical is man? is "not a scholarly study of human musicality" (ix) but an articulate and enjoyable summary of a range of issues, concepts, and ideas that have been on Blacking's mind as he re-thinks the central tasks facing an anthropological study of music. Originally presented as the John Dana lectures at the University of Washington in 1971, the book is divided into four chapters, whose titles clearly indicate the nature of Blacking's concerns: (1) Humanly Organized Sound, (2) Music in Society and Culture, (3) Culture and Society in Music, (4) Soundly Organized Humanity. I will summarize the major issues broached by each chapter, and then address myself to the relevance of this book for folklorists.

The first chapter introduces two themes that are familiar in Blacking's work; in this context they underlie his contention that ethnomusicology has the potential to revolutionize the state of music education and the scope of music study. The first of these themes is that the distinctions between "art", "folk", and "primitive" music are spurious and nonsensical; moreover they merely reflect and serve the elitist class structure of the society that insists upon them. The second theme is that musical analysis is "forced" to artificiality when it limits its domain to "sounds" in and of themselves—as if musical sounds were somehow autonomous of the cultural assumptions and contexts which make their messages comprehensible.

This last theme is developed in this chapter with reference to the several ways in which a single musical passage may be analyzed and interpreted—if the analysis is confined to sound. Yet when music is analyzed in context, the interpretive choices about the relation of an analysis to the meaning of the passage are reduced considerably. Hence Blacking clearly takes the position that what is "in the notes" is not intrinsically meaningful or autonomous from the social circumstances surrounding music-making and music-listening.

Returning to the earlier theme, Blacking takes on our popular social notions about being "musical" or "unmusical." Here he points out that music psychology tests equate being objective with being context-free; he argues that minimizing the importance of cultural experience is hardly a way for cross-cultural tests to be objective. Drawing further upon the logical weakness of the "musical" versus "unmusical" distinction, Blacking makes his major point of the chapter: what makes musical communication possible is a basic biological process of aural perception—the capacity for structured listening. The implications of Blacking's position are that all members of a culture share a similar ability when it comes to the "sonic perception of order"—hence musicality must be addressed as a universal human competence further developed and stratified in particular ways by the methods of particular cultures.

Discussing music systems as an expression of cognitive processes in this way, Blacking borrows the notion of deep and surface structures from formal linguistics. Although he emphatically says (page 21)
that he "is not suggesting that ethnomusicology use the methods of linguistics" and that there "is no reason to assume that music is a kind of language" (page 21), he alludes to musical deep structure in at least two different ways—one being an abstract level of cultural representation (specific constraints on the meaning of a musical phrase), the other being an abstract structure from which melodies considered "the same" may emerge. Of course these ideas are quite provocative, and one can easily generate numerous problematic questions concerning Blacking's intent here. Suffice it to say that in the context of these lectures Blacking does not formally define his own terms, nor does he really make it clear what motivates him to borrow them. As in the book as a whole, readers looking for explicit rationales and justifications will not find them, but must look to earlier works and await future ones.

In the second chapter Blacking turns to the social dimensions of music, not to dichotomize society and music, but to show that they are mirror images of one another. "It is the human content of humanly organized sound that 'sends' people. Even if this emerges as an exquisite turn of melody or harmony, as a 'sonic object' if you like, it still began as the thought of a sensitive human being and it is this sensitivity that may arouse (or not) the feelings of another human being . . . " (page 34).

From here Blacking takes us into the ethnography of Venda music-making, drawing largely on previously published work but spicing the commentary with parallels and divergences from his own cultural experiences. For those familiar with Blacking's hefty ethnographic work there is not very much that is new here, although it constitutes a very nice summary of Venda concepts about music, musicality, musicianship, and music-making. As always, Blacking's data confirms his general position that the functions of music center around engrossing people in shared experiences within their cultural framework. He thus points out how the Venda calendar of communal activities articulates with occasions for music-making, arguing throughout that the experiences involved in creating and responding to music hold the key to understanding its value. He summarizes: " . . . if the value of music in society and culture is to be assessed, it must be described in terms of the attitudes and cognitive processes involved in its creation, and the functions and effects of the musical product in society. It follows from this that there should be close structural relationships among the function, content, and form of music" (page 53).

Chapter three begins with the notion that music must be heard with prepared ears in order for it to "mean", as its structure confirms what is already present in society and culture. Blacking goes on to illustrate this principle based on his experiences with the music of Britten and Mahler, among other Western composers. In doing so he raises several articulate and informed criticisms of Deryck Cooke's provocative study The Language of Music (Oxford University Press, 1959). Cooke's argument that music is an explicit language system of emotional symbols is shown by Blacking to be insufficiently context-sensitive,
and hence not able to account for the range of phenomena that it sets out to explain (European tonal music between 1400 and 1953).

Blacking then brings up the question of extramusical factors which condition musical structures, and cites the importance of speech tone. He shows how the story of a song affects its words, and how the words are in turn composed of speech tones which condition melodic shapes and verse variation. With this example we are again into Venda music specifically, and from here Blacking turns to an exposition of the Domba, the Venda girls premarital initiation dance, discussing as he does so well the symbolic relations between music structure and social structure. As before, the materials are extracted from lengthy previously published analyses. The basic point is to show how Domba symbolizes sexual intercourse, conception, the growth of the fetus, and childbirth.

Blacking closes the chapter by showing how the musical style of khulu (music of the Domba) is structurally related to that of Tshikona, the Venda national dance. Again he uses linguistic terminology rather freely in stating that khulu is "a transformation (of Tshikona) that is generated by the different function of the music." (p. 87). Again the implications of this statement for the general analysis of sub-styles and the specific analysis of something that might be called transformational process are not explored.

Chapter four begins with an analysis of four Venda songs in order to demonstrate the point that consideration of sounds by themselves leads to very weak explanations. Blacking shows how the contexts and functions of the songs reveal the meanings of their organizing principles, as evidenced in melodic patterns. From here we go to what was the thesis of Blacking's major book, that the children's songs are transformationally derived from the melodic structure of Tshikona, as they are "condensed by a process of ellipsis not unlike that which occurs in the early speech of children" (page 97). Again, the implications of this statement are numerous, and one wishes that Blacking would give us some more clues as to how he sees the relation between biology, creativity, and imitation songs among children in the process of learning their culture's music.

The remainder of this chapter concerns creativity in its most general sense. Here we find specific condensations of some of Blacking's major axioms and intuitions about musicality; these can be seen as four points:

1) On innateness and creativity: Music is not learned like other cultural skills, "it is there in the body, waiting to be brought out and developed, like the basic principles of language formation" (page 100). Blacking later supports this with reference to the ways that the Venda learn and adapt European musical concepts.

2) On music as "language" and as "culture": "Music is not a language that describes the way society seems to be, but a metaphorical expression of feelings associated with the way society
really is. It is a reflection of and a response to social forces, and particularly to the consequences of the division of labor in society" (page 104).

(3) On understanding music in context, across cultures, and through time: The thrust of the argumentation throughout the book has been that music "means" in contexts where listeners share symbolic codes that make sounds interpretable. Is comparison and appreciation across cultures and through time thus an impossible task? This is dealt with very briefly. First we must note that Blacking has argued that "insiders" do not receive music in a uniform and equally meaningful way. On top of this he points out that "outsiders" too do not receive music in a uniform "outside" way, and that the ability of music to transcend culture and time is not a matter of surface relationship but must have something to do with a universal deep structure—elements of music organization common to the human psyche and most directly accessible through bodily experiences. (This is a third sense in the book in which Blacking uses the notion "deep structure" and it is also the most abstract and least explicit.)

(4) On universals, transformations, and cognition: "Ethnomusicology is in some respects a branch of cognitive anthropology. There seem to be universal structural principles in music, such as the use of mirror forms, theme and variation, repetition, and binary form. It is always possible that these may arise from experience of social relations or of the natural world: an unconscious concern for mirror forms may spring from the regular experience of mirror forms in nature, such as observation of the two 'halves' of the body" (page 112). And: "... the following relationships may be transformations of a single structure: call/response, tone/companion tone, tonic/countertonic, individual/community, chief/subjects, theme/variation, male/female, and so forth" (page 112).

Here, in closing, we have Blacking hinting that surface cultural representations in music and social organization generally are transformations of basic biological structures, innate in the species. His binary pairs are of course reminiscent of Lévi-Strauss, but he does not go on to affirm or deny Lévi-Strauss' contention that the real study object is no less than the unconscious structures of the mind itself.

Let me now round out the preceding with some further critical remarks about this exposition. The basic problem, as I see it, is not what Blacking is saying—all of which is extremely provocative—but what he doesn't say. In other words, for a book that deals with no less than the gut theoretical issues of ethnomusicology, it is rather hard to pin Blacking down to explicit theoretical statements. For instance: Blacking argues both for a radically contextual approach to music as socially specific and for a universal, species-specific, innate baseline. But it is hardly clear how he wants to unify the two in terms of some particular metatheory. Moreover, what does this do to our grasp of the relationship between culture, biology, and learning.
One logical consequence here is that some empirical discipline of "psychomusicology" (or even "neuro-musicology") should be developed if we are to answer what Blacking feels to be the most basic of ethnomusicological questions. Yet on the other hand, much of his argumentation is strongly outside of the tradition of empirical paradigms. Indeed, much in this book takes on a phenomenological (the function of music is to "enhance human consciousness") and semi-mythical (the purpose of music is to prepare people to love one another) tone, rooted in interpretive symbolic anthropology.

Besides the tremendous sense one has that the book does not present much resolution to this dilemma, there are specific things that need to be dealt with. The principle problem concerns Blacking's use of linguistic analogies. Does Blacking believe that the notion of deep and surface structure has something to offer ethnomusicological theory besides a powerful metaphor? While of his own applications of this distinction is motivated by the need to explain some musical facts that are not best explainable some other way?

I don't want to dismiss these very crucial problems, but I think that when posing such critiques we must take into account the framework in which this book was written. The essays are now four years old, they were presented as lectures, they follow fifteen years of exceptionally rich empirical work, they were written at a time when Blacking was between jobs (he was in the United States after teaching in South Africa and on his way to a new position in Ireland), they came at a time when a mass of new theoretical ideas were on Blacking's mind. In a sense the book marks the end of one phase of Blacking's work, and sets the stage for another; it summarizes the importance of his intensive African experience, while bringing in the equal importance of personal intuitions and experiences, and, of course, the need for sufficiently general metatheoretical constructs.

In conclusion I want to make a few observations about this book's relevance for folklorists dealing with music. As we know from the general academic picture, various academic disciplines set up various boundaries and constraints upon the study of the same universally human activity—music. Musicologists who deal with "world music" tend to study the so-called "fine-art" music of the so-called "high" cultures; their concern is principally to transcribe this music and make stylistic descriptions from such transcriptions, for historical or comparative purposes. Anthropologists who study "music in culture" tend to flock to the so-called "primitive" cultures of Africa, North America, and Oceania to study the processual-cultural nature of music-making, musical behavior, and music sound per se. Folklorists search for "folk music" in a variety of places, incorporating some aspects of the concerns of the two kinds of ethnomusicologists just noted, but especially focusing on aurally transmitted music in the repertory of regional groups (following George List's definition).
Now if the reader will think about the implications of this last paragraph coupled with my summary of Blacking, the importance I'm claiming for this book should be much clearer. Namely, the divergence of frameworks and conceptualizations just cited have nothing to do with the phenomenological character of our study object; rather, they are a reflection of several dogmas preserved and maintained by bureaucratic structures and definitional quibblings. Whether institutionally derived blinders can be removed is a question I can't go into here, but in this context I would like to heartily join in with Blacking and insist that all music is folk music, all music is ethnic music, all musical competence is cultural competence. If musicologists ignore people, anthropologists ignore sound, and folklorists resist both types of propaganda and remain out in search of what is "folk" about "folk music", then we are bound to remain truly ignorant about "humanly organized sound." The loser in the long run will be nothing but the understanding of human musicality itself.

Several of my ethnomusicologist friends whose training is principally in folklore have expressed to me their dislike of anthropological models which contain an essentially perjorative attitude towards the work done in the field of folk music research. Whether or not such a claim is justified (I generally think it is) I think it crucial to point out that Blacking's book is not a propagandistic program of "how to do it." Rather it is quite a plea for those of us in ethnomusicology to unite, based on a realization about what we are studying that transcends boundaries drawn within university structures.

Blacking is certainly an anthropologist and he is certainly out to promote what he finds to be good thinking in anthropology. But he is also a musician who cares deeply about music, and a humanist and philosopher who believes that our work is worthless if it cannot contribute to a "soundly organized humanity." Blacking wants us to deal with music and he wants to deal with culture. But his major merit is to realize that these are not dichotomous entities, and that the study of ethnomusicology is just trivial if it insists upon a lamination approach which dissolves two separable items called "music" and "culture" into columns of trait lists with a myriad of arrows drawn to connect the columns.

Music is cultural knowledge which reveals itself in the competence to actively create music, perform music, listen to music, understand music, and learn music. In the exquisite words of Big Bill Broonzy, when questioned as to whether he sang "folk music"—"Well, I guess it's all folk music—I ain't heard no horses sing it."