

# Looking into the sound of music

May 2 2011, By Michael Davies-Venn

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By breaking down traditional barriers between disciplines, two University of Alberta researchers say opportunities could develop that may change how we experience music. And that's just the start of possibilities.

Their concept has received the attention of [music](#) theorists across North America and, in fact, the duo won a coveted Cambridge University Press award for their research, which was recently presented at the Society for American Music conference.

Mary Ingraham, U of A musicology professor, and Michael MacDonald, ethnomusicologist and post-doctoral fellow, say their study bridges the gap between musicology—a Western European-based historical and analytical study of music—and ethnomusicology, which focuses on the dynamic relationship between a performer and audience.

To prepare the work, *Head Hunters*, *War Canoes* and *the Reciprocal Negotiation of Ritual Performance*, which won them the award, Ingraham and MacDonald examined two historical films produced with the same footage (but with different soundtracks) of a Kwakwaka'wakw potlatch. The Kwakwaka'wakw are a large indigenous group of Aboriginals on the north coasts of Vancouver Island and mainland British Columbia; the potlatch is a cultural community event composed of story, song, ritual and drama.

The researchers focused on music performance during their study. MacDonald said, "While most study of music looks at music

performance from a European point of view, which is the musician as performer and audience as spectators, the community event we studied proposes an alternative perspective, that of performance as community building through belonging.” He says their approach brings together two fields of study, ethnomusicology and musicology.

MacDonald explained that more than half a century ago, musicologists realized that they were studying a very limited amount of the music of the world and that they had to develop new approaches. “So they turned to anthropology to develop a new hybrid approach and came up with one that is partly anthropology and musicology: ethnomusicology,” MacDonald said. “An unexpected consequence is that now there are two unique disciplines that work quite separately, instead of one richer musicology.”

One implication of that separation is that musicologists often do not regard the audience as having a role in creating and playing music. But the opposite is true for most ethnomusicologists, who regard the audience as participants.

“We are working on an intercultural model of performance theory that considers the activity of the audience,” said Ingraham. “Typical Western performance theory draws a fourth wall between performer and audience but the fact is, being there as an audience member, we’re not just passively receiving information.”

By bringing the two areas of study together, Ingraham said their study has opened a whole new area to consider, such as the active role an [audience](#) plays in music, which traditionally has not been of concern to musicologists. Also the study offers a host of other possibilities to consider, from how we experience music to how we develop a taste for our favorite tunes.

“This research goes in many exciting directions. Once we acknowledge that listening is a profound experience, then we can explore the way that that impact is felt,” MacDonald said. “For example, acknowledging that listening is far more than just a momentary experience lets us consider it as a key role in belonging, which itself may be more properly recognized as a very accessible type of social therapy.”

Provided by University of Alberta

Citation: Looking into the sound of music (2011, May 2) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-05-music.html>

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