



Why Work Songs?

Music was created not only for pleasing the ear: it must have a meaning, express an activity, a natural or supernatural force, a feeling. Without meaning, it loses its reason for being.

—Yaya Diallo, Malian drummer

A prevailing characteristic of art has long been its growing distance from the daily concerns of human beings. Most artists and critics have seen this as a positive development. “I think what an audience wants from a concert or a recording is to get something larger than life, something more than going to work at nine and coming home at five,” explains one performer. “I think that’s the function of art in our society. It’s relief from the gray and the noise and the din.”

Probing this same sensibility, Lydia Goehr has given it a name, the “separability principle,” which represents the now-dominant attitude toward art that separates it “completely from the world of the ordinary, mundane and everyday.” Ralph Vaughan Williams makes a similar point in his essay “Why Do We Make Music?” when he confidently answers the question phrased in his title by proclaiming, “One thing we can be certain of: we do not compose, sing or play music for any useful purpose.” For Vaughan Williams, this represents a tremendous achievement—waxing enthusiastically, he continues: “Music is just music, and that is, to my mind, its great glory.”

Lowbrow art forms embrace this same “separability” mandate. Yes, we can dismiss these offerings as simple “escapism”—which is another name

for Goehr's principle, I would suggest—but a panoply of so-called entertainment industries expend billions of dollars each year trying to create, package, and sell it. Popular art eschews “relevance,” almost luxuriates in its absence. Yet even highbrow critics express the same attitude, although they do so frequently in jargon-laden pronouncements that few pay any attention to, praising the “autonomy of the text” or the “incommensurability” of the work of art—hard, cold phrases that are outside the vocabulary of the average person, yet act as significant code words for creative endeavors drained of their connections to everyday life. This is truly an odd alliance. Yet both movie moguls and deconstructionist academics share the same determination to relieve art from the burden of its relevance, its linkages to a boring quotidian existence. They want to set free the surface images of art to play and dance, unfettered by the need to serve a higher purpose or function. The student writing a term paper has always fretted over the “deep inner meaning” of the work of art—in my day they even gave it an acronym, the “DIM.” Ah, but this bugbear has finally been put on the run. The work of art now merely *is*, it no longer *means* anything and it is expected to *do* even less . . . except perhaps generate a good return on investment.

At first glance, this is an approach that seems to elevate art so as to distinguish it from the merely human. On closer inspection, it consigns art to the dustbin. In lacking a connection to our day-to-day experience as human beings, art can achieve nothing more than to distract us for a few idle moments. In the disheartening words of another respected scholar, Steven Pinker, music is nothing more than “auditory chessecake” for the brain, merely one more pleasurable stimulus little different from junk food or “recreational drugs”; it “could vanish from our species,” he adds, “and the rest of our lifestyle would be virtually unchanged.”

Compare the “separability” or “auditory chessecake” view of the role of music to the part it plays in less leisure-driven cultures. In describing the music of Native American tribes, for example, John Bierhorst writes: “There were very few songs that did not have some definite purpose, and it is this purposefulness, more than anything else, that distinguishes Indian music from the music of modern Europe or America.” Native American songs would assist in healing, courtship, propitiating spirits, greeting visitors, giving thanks, or preparing for war. Sometimes a single song might have multiple purposes, such as the one sung by Native American women of the Southwest while grinding corn, which both made their

physical labor less draining and also served as a prayer for rain to ensure the continuance of the corn supply. Probing these many purposes of music, we are tempted to concur with the Motu tribesman of New Guinea who told James Chalmers, “No drums are beaten uselessly. There are no dances that are merely useless.” We are now far afield from Vaughan Williams’s one certainty, that music has no purpose, as far away from such a view as can be imagined.

We are faced here with two incompatible attitudes. One celebrates music for its very uselessness; the other demands that music enter into the many varied spheres of day-to-day life. Is Vaughan Williams right? Must music merely *be*, and never *do*? Are our songs like those grand kings of olden times whose very glory demanded that they sit aloof on the throne, languorous and inactive, forbidden from entering into the streets and fields, inns and taverns, schools and playing fields where real life flourished? Or should we expect something more of music? It is one of the premises of this book that we should; that music has many roles to play in our lives; that it becomes richer, not poorer, by taking on these added dimensions.

Some years ago, the philosopher Arthur Danto made a striking prediction about the future of art. The current era represents, he suggested, the end of the history of art as a series of progressive movements: “The time for next things is past. The end of art coincides with the end of a history of art that has that kind of structure. After that there is nothing to do but live happily ever after. It was like coming to the end of the world with no more continents to discover. One must now begin to make habitable the only continents that there are. One must learn to live within the limits of the world. As I see it, this means returning art to the serving of largely human ends.”

Danto is vague about what these “human ends” might be. And, at first, it must seem puzzling to view art in this manner. Everywhere we hear the mantra of “art for art’s sake,” yet almost never do we hear about art for *our* sake. It is almost as if the “separability principle” has become so ingrained in our cultural thinking that we have lost sight of the many other ways of relating to art. As a society, we have put art on a stage . . . and kept it there, safely out of the way. Above all, any suggestion that people might be able to *put art to use* in their lives will strike many as an archaic, perhaps even dangerous, notion. But once we adjust our vision to art as an essentially human endeavor, and comprehend that all such

endeavors are purposive to some degree—indeed, people stop putting things to use only when they no longer see value in them—then the fear and befuddlement may perhaps disappear. Instead, lifting itself above the horizon a broad landscape of art integrated into the day-to-day lives of people can suddenly become visible.

Music and the other arts have no greater role to play than to enchant and transform our everyday existence. The average person knows this on a deep, almost intuitive, level, even if many critics and reviewers, and indeed some artists themselves, appear to have lost the thread. And in recent years, a growing cadre of scholars, immersed in a wide range of disciplines, have undertaken the task of reassessing this rich if little understood process, each working from the distinctive vantage point of a specific area of expertise, often in ignorance of each other's efforts but nonetheless striving toward a common end. Their efforts have helped in paving the way for my own work and also, I believe, have the potential to influence and enhance the ways in which art and art making are situated in contemporary society. The academic field of ethnomusicology has an especially important part to play in this process, given its focus on that critical nexus point at which music and social forces intersect. One wonders how widely the works of John Blacking, Charles Keil, Bruno Nettl, Steven Feld, and others are read outside of this field, but their focus on how music shapes and enhances individual and social activities would be worthwhile for anyone dealing with creative pursuits to consider. Christopher Small, a secondary school teacher in New Zealand who later became a lecturer in education, might seem to be an unlikely ally, and even less a potent force to revolutionize our thinking on music. But he has probed deeply into these issues, in thoughtful works such as *Music, Society, Education, Music of the Common Tongue* and *Musicking*, forcing us to re-assess our most basic notions of what an artist is and does. During this same period, cognitive psychologist John Sloboda has approached these issues from a completely different perspective, but has perhaps done more than anyone else to reveal the richness in how people use music in their daily lives. Sloboda's work also deserves to be far better known outside his field, for his research establishes in many ways the psychological basis for a completely different aesthetic approach to music and other arts. I must also call attention here to the insightful studies of the anthropologist Ellen Dissanyake, the bioevolutionary theories of Frederick Turner, the writings of the sociologist Tia DeNora, the histor-

ical inquiries of William H. McNeill, the research into soundscapes and acoustic ecology conducted by the composer and scholar R. Murray Schafer, and other efforts by experts operating in a range of diverse fields. Given the fragmentation of contemporary scholarship, few researchers pay attention to the linkages between these different currents of contemporary thought. And even fewer people involved in creative fields—performers, painters, dancers, poets, and the like—comprehend the tremendous implications of what they mean. A completely different attitude to artistic creation and consumption is presently being outlined and developed—one that, I believe, may emerge as the dominant approach in the coming decades and may serve as a potent alternative to the “separability” model described above. If (as I believe) art making is enriched, not lessened, by entering into the fabric of our day-to-day lives, then the outlines of a roadmap for appreciating its riches and untapped potential can be traced in the works of the authors cited above.

The present work and its companion *Healing Songs*, as well as a planned third volume *Love Songs*, will attempt to provide the historical underpinnings for these lines of inquiry, connect them to the other emerging areas of research, show their roots in timeless patterns of behavior, and above all, reveal their implications for artistic creation today. My goal is to comprehend a history of music not as an account of great composers, of artistic movements, or of evolving styles, but rather by focusing on the points of impact, on those decisive moments in which artistic creation and consumption meet and in which the lives—of individuals, of communities, of tribes and nations—are transformed. For me, this is not a small matter, but rather the critical component in the whole equation, the key to understanding what music has been and can be.

But as much as I want to write good history, my motivation is even more rooted in a desire to create good practice. I believe that the current paradigms of assessing art and fostering art making are at a point of exhaustion. In essence, we have come to a crossroads. The most powerful model for the last five hundred years has postulated that arts must progress, much like sciences, with each generation going beyond the boundaries set by its predecessors. This view is so deeply ingrained in our approach to artistic creation that many people merely assume that we have *always* thought about art in these terms. In fact, this approach was initially little more than an organizing principle employed by a few critics and commentators (most notably Giorgio Vasari in the early sixteenth

century), who found it a useful perspective for assessing the rapid progress of artistic innovations after the end of the Middle Ages. And it did prove useful, and continued to prove useful until quite recently. But gradually over the last several decades, this positivistic model of artist movements has lost its power to explain and enlighten. In the area of music, for example, the progressive view cannot explain the rise of minimalism, the abandonment of serialism, the vitality of jazz and popular forms of music, the pervasiveness and influence of “ambient” music, the resurgence of many traditional and regional forms of music, the emergence of music linked to New Age philosophies, and many other unmistakable trends and developments. For any critic who accepts this ingrained progressive view of the arts, these movements must be ignored, explained away (often under the convenient rubric of “postmodernism,” which still betrays the chronological, progressive bias of our time, as illustrated even more tellingly by the more recent and lamentable term “post-postmodernism”), or denounced as reactionary tendencies of the worst sort. In short, much of what is interesting or appealing or provocative in contemporary music cannot be addressed by the models of progressivism and separability that permeate our critical perspectives. A new paradigm is demanded: one that gives due attention to the living reality of creating and experiencing music as part of our personal and social soundscapes.

Mapping this terrain has been the key focus of my thinking about music for most of the last decade. But even earlier I sensed that contemporary theories of artistic production and consumption were missing a rich and vital part of how people actually respond to music. In trying to come to grips with the nature of jazz while writing my first book, *The Imperfect Art*, I vaguely understood even then that the human and personal element was what made it special. By grappling with the imperfections of jazz as an *improvised* art I instinctively comprehended that these human flaws could not be eradicated from the music, and in fact were the elements that gave jazz its allure and special magic. At the same time, I had learned—perhaps most clearly from Ortega y Gasset in his brilliant essay, “The Dehumanization of Art”—that this same intimate, personal element was being purged from virtually every other sphere of creative endeavor. An exploration of the underlying causes and dramatic scope of this shift are beyond the scope of this volume—indeed, these elements are more driven by tendencies in the social sciences and philosophical currents than by the needs of

artistic pursuits—but composers, musicians, and lovers of music are left to cope with the end result, namely a cultural environment in which artistic pursuits have been cut off from the purposes, meanings, and values that gave them vitality for thousands of years.

Back then I still subscribed half-heartedly to the separability principle. Or, perhaps it is more accurate to say, I did not comprehend at the time how art could focus on meeting human needs without diminishing its scope, without limiting it to the narrowest, most utilitarian purposes. But, as I see it now, the exact opposite is true. When allowed to serve the needs of people, music actually broadens its scope. It becomes more than just the isolated pursuit of performers on a stage or in a recording studio, and enters into a myriad of intimate relationships with individuals and the surrounding world. How does music meet human needs? Let us count some of the ways. There are work songs, the topic of this study; but also songs of courtship and love; of spirituality and worship; healing music; game songs; storytelling ballads which relate an important event, or capture the history or mythology of a people; military music; lullabies; school or team songs which create cohesion among a community; patriotic anthems which do the same for an entire nation; mnemonic melodies which assist in learning everything from the alphabet to the periodic table of elements; music for social dancing; or for exercise, or stimulation or meditation; songs of greeting or thanks, or for boasting or praise; or ritual music for all passages of life from births to funerals . . . the list goes on and on. In essence, the music of human needs is as broad as music itself, tapping every source of inspiration and addressing all situations. Even the escapism of popular music, when seen from this perspective, is yet another example of a human need being met. In truth, the moguls of pop music would be standing in unemployment lines if it were not for the public's persistence in integrating music into all the steps of love and courtship, from the quasi-licentious slow number at the high school prom to the sobering first dance at the wedding reception. Even when artists think they are making art for art's sake . . . the cussed public insists on using it for other, more functional, purposes.

Seeing this broad array of purposeful songs, deeply integrated into the fabric of social and individual life, I am tempted to propose a “connectedness principle”—the mirror image of Lydia Goehr’s mandate of separability. The “connectedness principle” would suggest that all music creates linkages with our daily lived experiences, and that this is its great-

est blessing for us. A music totally divorced from human concerns is as impossible as a cuisine made without food or a dance without movement. How can music, a social institution, exist in isolation from human needs? John Blacking makes this point persuasively when he writes, “A person may create music for financial gain, for private pleasure, for entertainment, or to accompany a variety of social events, and he need not express open concern for the human condition. But his music cannot escape the stamp of the society that made its creator human, and the kind of music he composes will be related to his consciousness of, and concern for, his fellow human beings.” Even when the uses of music are frivolous or contrived—perhaps to secure tenure in a music department or to please an insistent piano instructor—they are still part of the connectedness principle.

I am reminded here of the British philosopher J. L. Austin, who turned linguistic philosophy on its head with his book *How to Do Things with Words*. Most philosophers, focusing on the meaning of words, viewed them as mere symbols. In contrast, Austin described a class of speech acts that he called “performatives” because they could actually perform tasks, could literally “do” things. How so? When someone says “I promise to pay you ten dollars tomorrow,” or “I take thee Susan to be my wife,” or “I christen this boat the HMS *Bounty*” they are not just describing the world but are actually changing it in some small measure, altering it through the words they are speaking. Music can do this too, although we are often oblivious to the fact. For many years now, I have felt increasingly drawn to these musical performatives, sensing that they may hold the key to revitalizing our sense of the enchantment of song; that in them may reside the power that music still has to change our lives and not just provide an unobtrusive background soundtrack.

Applying Austin’s view to music, for all its apparent novelty, literally returns us to the earliest stirrings of song in human societies. The Latin word for singing—*cantare*—contained as part of its original meaning the working of magic, a sense still held for us by the word “incantation.” Perhaps all songs actually did something in their early days, revealing their magical powers in the process. In his study of music among the Flathead Indians of Montana, Alan Merriam reports a concept strikingly similar to Austin’s idea of performatives. “For the Flathead, the most important single fact about music and its relationship to the total world is its origin in the supernatural sphere. . . . A sharp distinction is drawn by

the Flathead between what they call ‘make-up’ and all other songs. ‘Make-up’ songs are those which are composed by individuals in a conscious process of creation and those which are known to be borrowed from other peoples. These songs have no inherent power and, according to the Flathead, are ‘used for enjoyment.’” The other songs convey specific powers in a range of social situations. From a Flathead perspective, the music of the West is comprised almost exclusively of those songs that have “no inherent power,” while the efficacious music is marginalized, dismissed, neglected, or even destroyed.

In traditional African cultures, music is similarly integrated into day-to-day life to a degree hardly imaginable in Western societies. In a host of African languages—Igbo, Tiv, Yoruba, Efik, Birom, Hausa, and others—it is difficult to find a word corresponding to the Western concept of music as a stand-alone practice abstracted from particular activities. As Charles Keil reminds us, in these languages “it is easy to talk about song and dance, singers and drummers, blowing a flute, beating a bell . . . but the general terms ‘music’ and ‘musician’ require long and awkward circumlocutions that still fall short . . . So what seems to us a very basic, useful and rather concrete term is apparently a useless abstraction from a Tiv, Yoruba, perhaps even a pan-African or non-Western point of view.” In his explorations of the Tiv language, Keil shows how the verb *dugh*, which is used to describe the act of composing music, can also refer to catching fish, gathering yams, collecting honey, or digging a well. The terminology is revealing: the study of music in such a setting seems to lead inevitably back to the workaday activities of daily existence.

The degree to which we have lost this “connectedness” is made clear by a review of the early travel literature written by Western visitors to Africa. In 1795, twenty-four-year-old Mungo Park embarked on a risky journey into the interior of Africa—an eighteen-month trip that found him, at various points, robbed, imprisoned, enslaved, left for dead, stricken with malaria, fending off lions, nearly overcome by thirst or famine, and finally reduced to beggary. When he eventually returned to the coastal settlements at the end of his ordeals, Park was almost unrecognizable: unkempt, unshaven, and dressed in rags. The scraps of notes he took during his travels were his only surviving possessions, and formed the basis for his celebrated 1799 book *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*. Although Park was ostensibly writing about geography and describing travel routes, his work also bears witness to the wide range of music and

its social importance in the many towns and villages he visited. He describes war drums used to raise four thousand fighting men; women singing to while away the hours spent spinning cotton; villagers called to evening prayers by sounds blown through hollowed elephants' teeth ("the sound is melodious," Park wrote, "and, in my opinion, comes nearer to the human voice than any other artificial sound"); songs employed to conciliate and praise a political leader ("they are so loaded with gross adulation, that no man but a Moorish despot could hear them without blushing"); drums used to announce a wedding and accompany singers at the celebration; initiation into adulthood marked by the formation of groups of youngsters who spend two months traveling throughout a neighborhood singing and dancing; numerous encounters with *jilli kea*, or singing men ("one or more of these may be found in every town"), who sing of historical events, accompany soldiers into war, and compose various extemporaneous songs; songs used to request hospitality, to uplift the crestfallen, to describe a trip, or to greet a returned villager after a long absence. Presented with vivid descriptions of this rich mosaic of music—music that was truly lived and experienced, not watched dispassionately as a mere performance—I am forced to wonder at how much we have lost.

But much can also be regained. I mentioned above that the "separability principle" is now the dominant view in the world of art. Yet I should clarify that statement. Yes, it is the dominant view of theorists and critics, and perhaps some artists. But, as I have already suggested, when one looks at how most individuals approach art, we find something quite different. Cognitive psychologist John Sloboda has undertaken a number of fascinating studies of how music plays a role in people's lives. Sloboda's findings are invigorating and surprising. Most might assume that the modern listener treats music as an inobtrusive background soundtrack, diverting or entertaining perhaps, but counting for little else. But through a growing and impressive body of research, Sloboda has shown that the exact opposite is true. Music is not only deeply embedded in day-to-day lives, but in fact serves as an invaluable tool in meeting demands and necessities, and in navigating through challenges and crises. In a survey of sixty-seven respondents, he found that forty-one called particular attention to this role of music in their lives. "The most commonly mentioned concept," he writes, "was that of music as *change agent*." In another study, Sloboda and Susan O'Neill asked subjects to carry a pager that was

rung once during each two-hour time period between the hours of 8:00 AM and 10:00 PM, although the specific moment within these 120-minute slots was determined at random. At each paging, the subjects would note in a logbook their most recent musical experience. The study results conveyed both the pervasiveness of music in our lives—44 percent of the entries indicated a musical experience since the last paging—and its integration into day-to-day activities. Active listening to music accounted for only 2 percent of the instances; the rest of the time, people were doing other things while the music was being heard. But the music did not merely provide a sonic background. As Sloboda and O’Neill note, “We found, on average, the experience of music resulted in participants becoming more positive, more alert and more focused in the present.” Other research by Sloboda has highlighted the particular importance of music in various work situations—desk work, housework, traveling to and from places of employment, unwinding after work—which in totality account for close to half of all listening experiences. Who can deny that the need for song to accompany labor is just as important in our postindustrial age as it was for earlier generations who wielded hammers and axes, or spears and clubs? Sloboda’s research can leave little doubt about this matter. Songs still make things happen, can change us, and even in some degree alter the world around us. This capacity of music is not restricted to Native American tribes and traditional societies but continues everywhere, everyday.

And even our highbrow cultural legacy is not without precedents for bringing music and other creative pursuits into the center of our activities, where they are no longer restricted to the periphery of our experiences. As M. I. Finley points out with regard to ancient Greece, it was a culture that reached the pinnacle of artistic achievement, yet totally lacked museums: “Art was meshed in with daily living, not set apart for occasional leisure time or for the enjoyment of rich collectors and aesthetes.” In contrast, musical performance for the purpose of mere entertainment was seen by the ancients not simply as a lesser art but in fact as a low art. Tacitus, for example, describes as a “national disgrace” the emperor Nero’s desire to perform music on a public stage. In fact, the “connectedness principle” is not very far from Aristotle’s ancient view of the complicated, various roles of music, which included alleviating toils and pains, providing refreshment, strengthening the soul, firming the character, and—yes, but almost as an afterthought—also offering enter-

tainment. If we have forgotten all but the last of these roles in our media-dominated commercial culture, we need do nothing more than listen with open ears to the pathos and intrinsic dignity of the work song to be called back to this richer view of the role of music.

For this reason, paying attention to the work songs and healing songs, the love songs and ritual music, the “embedded music” of different times and places, can be much more than a mere antiquarian pursuit; more than just another revival of some forgotten craft. Such a study represents, rather, a return to first principles and a much-needed corrective. Above all, it serves as a telling reminder of the most essential element in all music, namely its ability to enter into intimate communion with our everyday lives in multifaceted ways, addressing our deepest concerns and most heartfelt needs, both as consumers and as creators. Traditional work songs, so deeply woven into the meanings and manners of everyday life, may never come back, but the spirit that gave them impetus can and should be nurtured. Certainly we need what they had to offer more than ever today, in our sad and dehumanized musical culture, with its machine-made songs that are bought and sold like one more commodity, no different than barrels of oil or crates of produce.

The future of music cannot simply be an extension of these stultifying trends—that way madness lay. Instead we must reclaim our heritage, and this starts by comprehending what a music might be if it were truly our own, meeting the exigencies of our human condition. There is no better place to begin this process than by coming to terms with the music that enlivened our labors, gave continuity and substance to our life’s vocation, and empowered our efforts.