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Contemporary World Music, and: *Music Online* (review)

Alec McLane

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DIGITAL MEDIA REVIEWS

EDITED BY PAUL CARY



For information regarding the scope of this column, consult the headnote in the September 2009 issue (p. 129 of this volume). The dates of access for each review of an online source indicate the dates during which the reviewer was evaluating the resource. All Web sites were last accessed to verify availability on 18 November 2009.

Contemporary World Music. Alexander Street Press, 2009–. <http://womu.alexanderstreet.com> (Accessed March 2009 to September 2009). [Requires audio-enabled computer; Web browser and Internet connection of at least 56K bandwidth; Macromedia Flash Player version 7 and Windows Media Player version 10 (for Windows), Macromedia Flash Player version 7 (for Mac). Pricing: institutional subscription \$896 to \$4,496 per year depending on number of simultaneous users.]

Music Online. Alexander Street Press, 2009–. <http://muco.alexanderstreet.com> (Accessed March 2009 to September 2009). Search engine for all Alexander Street Press music databases.

What is “world music” and what is “contemporary” about the music in *Contemporary World Music* that distinguishes it from others? Among the many naming possibilities considered by Alexander Street Press in the creation of the database (which included the very difficult-to-define “Worldbeat”) this was probably the most appropriate, although it is not without problems. Ethnomusicologists with many years of fieldwork behind them could certainly be excused for casting a wary eye in 1987 on the adoption of the new genre, “world music,” to be used in marketing records and CDs. It seemed paradoxically to seek a market for a music that was at once exotic, allowing listeners in the West to believe they were on an adventure, and at the same time familiar, the only way to guarantee that they would incorporate it into the formation of their own musical identities, and therefore buy the recordings.

But this cynical view is eclipsed, I think, by a major shift in focus in the field of ethnomusicology itself through the 1970s and 1980s, one which moved from a view of music expressing established and unchanging differences among the many cultures of the world to one of music and culture continu-

ally being re-defined as people migrate and come into contact with each other. Mark Slobin observed this shift in 1993, noting that “any essentialist analysis of music will not hold” and that “interchange among small musics is rampant these days, and always was” (Mark Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West* [Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993], x). Not only did the new genres that constituted this modern definition of “world music” illustrate these interchanges, but the marketing itself formed a part of the process, as so many more “subcultural” musics went global.

While Alexander Street Press’s earlier collection, *Smithsonian Global Sound* (reviewed in *Notes* 62, no. 3 [March 2006]: 776–80) could be seen as a useful documentation of many established musical traditions of the world, it could be argued that it failed to reflect the many changes that these traditions had undergone since their first documentation. *CWM* can be seen as an attempt by Alexander Street Press to answer this need. Their publication literature stresses the contemporary social forces addressed by music: “Music does more than entertain. It helps us connect on the feel-

ing level with people and their conditions. The songs in Contemporary World Music address issues of racism, fair trade, and poverty . . . social injustice . . . and religious freedom. Instructors of world history, geography, contemporary events, and other disciplines will use the music to expand teaching.” (<http://alexanderstreet.com/products/womu.htm>)

This review will be devoted primarily to *Contemporary World Music*—hereafter CWM—as a database of streamed audio recordings, evaluating it for content and for its search interface. In addition I will devote some space to the Alexander Street Press federated search engine, Music Online, with particular respect to how it serves *Contemporary World Music* and related databases.

Content

There are, as of this writing, over 25,000 tracks of music from more than 1,860 albums in CWM. Their stated target is 50,000 tracks, and by my calculations they have added around 12,000 tracks in the past six months. Most of the albums are accompanied by full-color scans of liner notes. Another small but useful part of the database consists of brief biographies of performers—taken chiefly from the *All-Music Guide*.

I have heard grumblings from colleagues about the tendency of Alexander Street Press to trot out new databases with incomplete content, while selling them on their target content. It is hard to evaluate these complaints without establishing a reliable standard of cost-per-track. I can't say for sure whether their base price of \$896 per year for three users is appropriate for 25,000 tracks or 50,000. If one compares it to *Naxos*, which currently has over 500,000 tracks and costs only slightly more per year, it would not seem to measure up very well. But that may not be a fair comparison considering that this is specialized content and not available anywhere else. The true test would seem to be whether they can deliver on the numbers, and continue to grow the database after that in ways that users demand.

They have licensed an impressive list of record labels: Topic, Playasound, Budamisque, Air Mail Music, Manuiti, Crossing

Records, Lyrichord World Music, Navras Records, and INEDIT are all listed on their “About” page, while Rounder, Celestial Harmonies, ARC, and Nimbus, among others, should be added to the list. There is some overlap in content with *Naxos Music Library*, and it would be valuable here to address the question I expect is being asked everywhere by institutions with limited budgets: Do we need CWM if we already subscribe to *Naxos*, which has a “World Music” category? If this question were asked of *Smithsonian Global Sound* the answer would be unequivocal: it is unique and unlike anything found in *Naxos*. CWM, on the other hand, does cover similar ground, and it's harder to give a definitive answer. Here are some fairly neutral observations: The two databases overlap in several major labels, including ARC, Celestial Harmonies, Lyrichord, New Albion, Nimbus, and Saydisc. It is by no means a one-to-one overlap, as I found many recordings on a given label in one database and not the other. In terms of geographical coverage *Naxos* and CWM seem roughly comparable in some parts of the world, while CWM is clearly stronger in others. *Naxos* covers East and Southeast Asia fairly well—understandably, since they are located in Hong Kong and have a special category for Chinese music in addition to their “world” category. China aside, the two databases roughly match numbers for Korea and Japan while *Naxos* has higher numbers for Thailand. On the other hand, CWM is considerably stronger in Africa and Central Asia, particularly in smaller countries where the music may not be well known in the West—for example, the Congo Republic (40 tracks to *Naxos's* 4), Senegal (92 tracks to *Naxos's* 28), and Uzbekistan (89 tracks to *Naxos's* 22). They have clearly spent some effort in balancing the geographic scope of the database. All of these numbers, one must remember, reflect the current state of the database, which is only halfway to the target, so one should expect them to rise. Yet *Naxos* also has a growing database, as it licenses additional labels, so it is hard to predict where each will be in a year.

Alexander Street Press has responded admirably to user requests by providing the liner notes for most recordings. After *Smithsonian Global Sound*, where the existence of liner notes seemed to be hit or

miss, often pending licensing negotiations, Alexander Street seems to have learned a lesson and done this work up front for CWM. The only label I could find with liner notes consistently missing was Rounder Records, but I am told that they do have permission for them and hope to make them available eventually. To have notes and photographs reproduced in color for so many recordings is an enormous enhancement, particularly when these recordings often feature musical instruments and performance settings unknown to many users.

Searching, Navigating, and Metadata

CWM offers a quick search box at the top of the screen, along with advanced searching and browsing options, all standard for Alexander Street Press audio databases. The advanced search has fields for track title, album title, people, genre, instrument, place of recording, date of recording, cultural group, record label, and catalog number—with a choice of pre-sorting the results by relevancy, title, or date. As one types, potential matches from the index appear in a drop-down list. I found this more misleading than helpful, however, as I occasionally found titles in the collection that didn't appear in the displayed list. And the track title and album title fields appear to draw on the same index, so one might see a choice in the drop-down list for a track title search that is actually an album title, and choosing it will find no matches, leaving one to wonder why it appeared there in the first place.

One can choose to browse by many of the same fields as well. I was surprised not to find a browse option for record labels, but the album title browse brings up a table with columns for label, genre, and recording date as well, and clicking at the top of any of these columns sorts the entire list (surprisingly quickly) by that category. There are numerous help screens for searching, playing tracks, browser settings, and other topics.

Choosing a track or an album pops up a player window that allows the user to continue searching while listening. Audio bit rates may be selected at either 22 kbps or 64 kbps. Any user can sign up to create playlists of tracks and share these, offering an option for course reserves among other possibilities.

One of my favorite features of the interface, also available with others from Alexander Street, is the presence of search-narrowing categories above the results. This allows for all sorts of discovery possibilities in the course of the search—for example, searching for “Didjeridu” and then quickly seeing not only the list of some seventy or eighty performers of the instrument recorded here, with exact numbers of tracks each, but also a breakdown by cultural group telling you that besides the anticipated tracks from Australian Aborigines and other Australians there are thirty-nine by Americans and one each by German, Indian, and Japanese performers—or at least that the instrument is featured in music from these countries. A similar search for “Kora” shows that twelve tracks are “Italian,” and on closer examination one discovers a CD by the Somalian-Italian singer Saba Anglana, accompanied by, among others, a Senegalese Kora player. Rampant interchange, indeed!

I did discover a number of problems with metadata and indexing, and while Alexander Street Press is quick to respond to reports of errors, it appears that they have still a ways to go to correct them all. Around twenty Chinese names in their index were initially reversed, with the given name or names appearing as surnames, including the very well-known *pipa* player, Wu Man. I hasten to add that this is not the first database where I have found names of important Chinese musicians reversed (some of the errors here were also found in OCLC). I also found it difficult to determine whether or not the excellent 23-disc *Ethiopiquest* series on Buda Musique was in CWM in its entirety, because of missing series titles on many of them. Both of these problems were fixed fairly quickly after I reported them (although *Ethiopiquest* is still missing volume 12). But errors like this impede the entire process of *discovery*—so important in a database like this—and they really need to be cleaned up before users report them.

Fortunately, MARC records are on the way. From Alexander Street's Web site one can download the schedule for item-level MARC records for its various databases, and the first set for CWM at the album level is scheduled to appear on 15 December 2009. The number of records given in this list is 1,105, a little over half of the albums

currently in the database. I wasn't able to get a time frame for the appearance of the rest, but was assured that they intend to make them available for all albums. One of the obstacles that Alexander Street Press has had to overcome with its music databases—at least with *Classical Music Library* and *Smithsonian Global Sound* before this—is that they were initially designed with the track, rather than the album, as the fundamental retrieved unit from a search. They appear to have successfully created single permanent URLs for albums now as well, so MARC records can link directly to these.

Browsing genres and subgenres in *CWM* is an adventure, and I will note that any attempt to make a systematic taxonomy of a database that embodies so much of what Slobin describes as “interchanges among small musics” is brave, to say the least. I suspect that many of *CWM*'s categories come from the record labels themselves and to expect consistency here is probably just wishful thinking. Certainly there are a lot of genres. When I first encountered the database I reported a few inconsistencies I found, and these have since been modified, but there are doubtless more. A genre like “Folk” has a fascinating array of subgenres, from the very general—“Dance,” which yields nearly eight hundred tracks from all over the world—to the very specific—“al-Ghina al-San'ani,” which yields a grand total of three tracks from Yemen. The genre “Contemporary: Avant-garde” yields none at all from the browse page, but this turns out to be an error since a search for the term from the search page yields quite a few tracks from musicians like Stuart Dempster and Matthias Ziegler. There are so many other ways of finding music in this database—by geography, instrument, cultural group, etc.—that a rigorous system of controlled subject headings such as LCSH may be unnecessary. But it may be a good occasion for Alexander Street Press to institute a system of social tagging by users, which has been successful elsewhere.

MUSIC ONLINE

The Music Online interface allows federated searches across multiple Alexander Street Press databases. Clearly its usefulness depends on how many of their databases one subscribes to, but for the purposes of

ethnomusicological research the ability to retrieve articles from the *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music* and sound recordings from *Smithsonian Global Sound* and *CWM* with the same keyword search is certainly useful. At the time of writing, *Smithsonian Global Sound* had not yet been included in the Music Online search, but I was able to test this out with searches that included both *CWM* and *Garland*. The interface is much the same in appearance, but with greatly increased options in order to accommodate the various databases. For example, the Advanced Search page includes one tab labeled “All”, which searches fields common to all databases, and additional tabs for “Composer Works,” “Recordings,” “People,” “Reference,” and “Video,” each with fields unique to that category of matches. A search on any of these tabs will retrieve only matches within these categories—for example, “Reference” will show matches from *Garland*. Yet if there are recordings that also match your search terms, at least in the same fields as the “Reference” tab, you don't need to go back and repeat your search in “Recordings” or “All” but can just click on the “Recordings” or “All” categories at the top of the list of matches and it will retrieve the matches for recordings as well.

An idealized session in Music Online might progress something like this: search on the People tab for those born within certain dates in a certain country, perhaps with a certain occupation; select one of the names; read the brief biography; follow the link to “Reference” and you can listen to recordings of the person while reading in *Garland* either about the person, the style of music, or the country. In reality it's a bit more difficult, partly because these databases were not all designed together and there aren't coordinated entries for musicians or genres between *Garland* and *CWM*. The audio tracks that actually *do* accompany chapters in *Garland* are not in *CWM* and seem to be available only from the *Garland* home page itself, not the individual articles. So there is no way to get to these from a Music Online search. It would not seem so difficult for Alexander Street Press to incorporate these tracks into *CWM* and allow them to come up in a Music Online search where the corresponding chapter in *Garland* would also be matched, although I suspect complications of licensing content from one publisher

split between two databases sold separately could be a stumbling block. Still, it's such an obviously good idea that someone should be able to solve this minor problem.

Conclusion

A common characteristic of all audio databases, certainly the ones mentioned here—*CWM*, *Smithsonian Global Sound*, and *Naxos Music Library*—is that they depend on the licensing of a limited number of record labels that have very selectively issued a tiny portion of the music available in the world. Many instructors of specific topics in ethnomusicology nowadays are just as likely to use their own field recordings and Youtube as they are commercial recordings, and so a database like *CWM* would be mostly supplemental in these cases. For broader “world

music survey” courses, as well as for non-music courses needing illustrations of music's ability to “connect on the feeling level with people and their conditions,” it can certainly play a more central role insofar as it continues to offer a representative sampling of music in the world, particularly of those many currents of “interchange” occurring within the last thirty or forty years. Amid recent discussions of the decline of the CD as a medium, and the resulting difficulties for libraries in acquiring music that may only be available for individual users to download, content-hosting databases such as those from Alexander Street Press and Naxos may be the most hopeful long-term solution.

ALEC McLANE

Wesleyan University

Themefinder. Center for Computer Assisted Research in the Humanities, Stanford University and the Cognitive and Systematic Musicology Laboratory, Ohio State University. <http://www.themefinder.org> and <http://rism.themefinder.org> (Accessed August–September 2009). [Requires a Web browser and an Internet connection.]

Themefinder was developed in the mid-to-late-1990s as a collaborative project between Stanford University's Center for Computer Assisted Research in the Humanities and the Ohio State University's Cognitive and Systematic Musicology Laboratory. Themefinder allows users to search for short musical incipits, or themes. If a user knows a melody's or musical work's meter, key, mode, pitch names, or general or specific intervals, he or she may input such data to discover that work's title, composer, or genre. This type of searching is one cornerstone of the multi-disciplinary field of Music Information Retrieval (MIR), which brings together the expertise of musicologists, music theorists, computer scientists, library and information science specialists, and audio engineers. Themefinder moderators encourage use of the musical themes in teaching, non-commercial research, and personal instances, but the site does note that both the graphical notation and the underlying data are protected by international copyright laws. There is no charge to use Themefinder.

Themefinder provides a Web-based interface to Humdrum, a complex software sys-

tem that allows users to pose and answer music-related research questions. Using Humdrum's syntax, Themefinder can search one of four databases containing musical themes or incipits: Classical Instrumental Music, International Folksongs, Latin Motets of the Sixteenth Century, and RISM, series AII. Encoding of Themefinder's original collection of Classical themes began in 1996; the Classical database covers the broadest scope of the three, from Bach to Shostakovich, and contains around 10,000 entries. Currently, there are around 7,000 themes in the Essen Folksong Collection and nearly 20,000 themes in the Latin Motet index. RISM incipits have been available through Themefinder since early 2009 and number over 55,000.

Content and Scope

All incipits in the Classical and Folksong databases have at least three—most typically, four—measures of the beginning of a work or movement. The Renaissance database does not include bar lines, but all themes in this database display at least the opening phrase of each vocal part. The instrumentation of themes in each database