

**Music theory, nationalized or internationalized: Reflections on global music theory
occasioned by Steven Blum's *Music Theory in Ethnomusicology***

Comments for AAWM 2023 panel, "Stephen Blum's *Music Theory in Ethnomusicology*:
A Book Dialogue," by Jason Yust

As an undergraduate music student in the early 2000s I remember being baffled by the institutional categories I encountered in music academia. To study music theory, I had to learn about Beethoven. To learn about any other musical tradition, I was supposed to be concerned about sociology and anthropology rather than music theory. Luckily I was able to take classes with Marc Perlman, who introduced me to Steven Blum and Harold Powers and the rest of the cohort of ethnomusicologists who cared about music theory and theorists who thought outside the conservatory box. Steven Blum's recent book is an incredible summation of what this continually expanding group of scholars has accomplished as of 2023.

The music theory topics of mode, scale, and tuning attracted my greatest interest in those seminars of Marc's. Now, twenty years later, reading Blum's summation of ethnomusicological efforts on these topics, I am newly aware that the ways in which European theory continues to distort our perspective on them.

The legacies of colonialism in ethnomusicology and its nineteenth-century precursors are well appreciated by ethnomusicologists. Music theory was often involved in those early scholarly failures and moral embarrassments, which is perhaps why ethnomusicologists learned to distrust music theory. It is also perhaps why theorists retreated behind an imaginary wall they built around the European classical canon.

The topics of mode, scale, and tuning stand out in this history. In his book Blum recapitulates Powers' demonstration of how a cross-cultural concept of mode ultimately falls apart because it remains at root a concept shaped by European music history. An implication of Powers' argument is that the project was a colonialist one, an attempt to assimilate non-European musics to a European music-theoretic framework. I believe this conclusion is correct, but there is also a danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. There really are big and important cross-cultural resonances in many of the concepts that get inaccurately translated as mode. Some of these shared features, for instance between Arab maqam and Persian dastgah, reflect shared histories and cross-cultural intercourse. Other shared features reflect the simple fact that music is always a product of humans and human societies. Dismissing or denying these shared histories and shared humanity can itself be a form of colonialist violence.

Central to the failure of a global theory of mode is the idea of projecting a feature from the ancient history of European music, modality, onto non-European music. One person is clearly implicated here: French theorist François-Joseph Fétis. I have recently written about Fétis' late project of a white supremacist global history of music in an essay forthcoming in the *Journal of Music Theory*. Ethnomusicologists typically do not consider Fétis part of the history of their discipline, but I see a deep influence of his theory of tonality on nineteenth-century discourse around comparative musicology. The idea that a first step in understanding a musical culture is to identify its scales comes from Fétis' theory of tonality, in which scale plays a central role. Fétis believed that each musical culture had its own tonality, but in late writings he also asserted that only certain tonalities could support true art, and that these differences reflect racial superiority. I will leave it to you to guess whose tonality he thought was the best.

Culture-specific elements of the scale concept make it problematic for ethnomusicology. One of these is the concept of a gamut or set of available pitches. This is endemic to a musical tradition that relies heavily on fixed-pitch keyboard instruments, and ignores the possibility of flexibly defined pitch and interval categories. Another is octave equivalence, which has been thought by many to be universal. There were good reasons to think this: the principle has a clear basis in human physiology and the acoustics of sound. But while perceptibility of octaves as a special interval probably is universal, that's not the same thing as octave equivalence. Octave generalization, giving a single name to all pitches an octave apart, is something we do for European concert music in order to talk about harmony, one of the weirder features of that style.

The cross-cultural concept of mode is perhaps the clearest evidence of how Fétis' racist project endures in ethnomusicology in coded forms. The concept of "modal music" is effectively a translation of Fétis' *tonalité ancienne*, the tonality of plain chant. Fétis likened non-European musics to an ancient form of European music to index their primitiveness. The use of the term mode as a translation of *maqam*, *dastgah*, *raga*, and *pathet* into Western-European languages, as Harold Powers has shown, has no real theoretical justification. Its original purpose remains the only logically consistent one, to establish the inferiority of these musical styles to European ones.

But there's a danger of overreach in calling out these problems. Powers and others have also showed us a lot of important things that concepts like *maqam*, *dastgah*, *raga*, and *pathet* share in common. Among these are centonization, the establishment of special roles for specific tones such as finalis or recitation tones, and the important role of special intervals like fourths, fifths, and octaves. The racist background of the cross-cultural mode idea does not invalidate these observations. In fact they are important windows into our shared musical humanity. Treating them as the property of one tradition robs them from others.

Globalist comparative musicological projects are also not the only ones susceptible to the legacies of colonialism. Blum discusses many nationalist music theory projects in Chapter 3 of his book, one of which is the famous Arab congress of 1932. One outcome of that event was to establish the quartertone scale as the theoretical basis of Arabic maqamat. Participants, especially European-trained Arab musicians, described the motivation for such a standard in explicitly colonialist language. In order to become "civilized" or "elevated" Arabic music needed to establish a tuning standard which would make it possible for musicians to form larger orchestras and play harmony. While participants in the conference argued about tempered versus non-tempered standardized scales, they left unexamined the more insidiously European concepts implicit in that discussion, octave equivalence and the inflexible gamut. These were demonstrably foreign to much of the practice of Arabic music. Colonialist mentalities can thus infect nationalist projects of instituting stylistic boundaries and creating musical identities. These hazards are not unique to comparative research.

While I don't have time to do justice to the topic, I would like to also outline the many parallels between the concept of tonality and one more central to the work represented in this conference, meter. Like tonality, meter is a concept that tends to deceive us into thinking it is a simple, relatively neutral, concept, when it really includes many independent working parts. This can cause us to introduce endemically European theory into what might appear to be unbiased studies of rhythm in non-European music. Following the cognition work of Mari Riess Jones, Ed Large, and others, and its interpretation by music theorists like Justin London, meter has been understood as a psychological phenomenon, equated with neurological entrainment, which leads to an idea that

meter is a kind of musical universal, a property of human perception rather than culture. To some extent this is true: as a basic feature of human perception, entrainment plays a role in virtually all musical cultures and is not the property of any one. But meter is not equivalent to entrainment; it is a complex, multifaceted concept that includes elements specific to European musical practice. The concept of meter is tied to notation, measures, beats, and time signatures, which, as we have seen at this conference, can misrepresent ways of understanding rhythm in other musical contexts. At a deeper level, the concept of meter leads us to think in terms of musical events occurring at extensionless points of time, related to one another by rational time intervals. Deviations from these rational metric grids become microtiming or expressive timing. But as we have seen in many of the presentations at this conference, sometimes non-isochronous rhythms and rhythmic intervals that are not counted out in some smaller isochronous unit are features of the rhythmic system, not deviations from it. And flexibly defined rhythmic intervals, which are not accommodated by concepts of meter, are essential features of many styles. Habits of mind governed by meter therefore can lead to Eurocentric distortions and devaluing of non-European music. At the same time, it is unhelpful to deny other musical traditions other more neutral aspects of meter such as entrainment. Kofi Agawu, for instance, has shown how this is a major problem in earlier research on African rhythm.

There's a crucial role for music theory to play in decolonization of these approaches to global tuning and tone systems. There are two complementary goals of, first, understanding musical traditions in the context of their interactions with other traditions and shared musical humanity, and, second, identifying and correcting the distortions caused by European-derived concepts misapplied to other musics. The only way to pursue both of these essential goals is to deconstruct concepts like tonality and meter, so that we can keep the helpful elements and discard the harmful ones. Music theory has the necessary toolset for such an endeavor. Thanks to Steven Blum for his book, and all his work, which is an incredible resource for anyone who will contribute to these efforts.