11 It Takes Two – or More – to Tango: Researching Traditional Music/Dance Interrelations
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INTRODUCTION

Within the second half of the twentieth century, music has moved from the realms of the special occasion to the everyday: from belonging to the ‘Sunday sphere’ of life, when work is over and all other duties are taken care of, music has become a major component of everyday life’s soundscape. At the same time, from being an activity for the few, those especially inclined, gifted or wealthy, music has become a pursuit in reach of almost everyone. To a lesser extent the same is true for dance: take Sweden as an example. Here, well into the twentieth century, dance was seen as an activity merely for the young. It was customary to stop dancing after marriage or at least after the arrival of the first child. Today, dance is a favourite activity not only among the young, but also among the middle-aged and the elderly. ‘Senior dance’, a genre of specially designed ‘folk dances’ for the elderly invented in Germany in the mid-1980s, has become a popular dance genre in Sweden since the early 1990s, and continues to spread fast (Ronström, 1994).

To meet this development, the music industry has made an almost infinite number of dance and music styles, genres and so forth globally available. These constitute an enormous palette of expressive forms through which people can express and communicate the most detailed and nuanced messages about themselves: who they are, what they stand for, their wishes, dreams and hopes. In the past, literature was regarded as a sound indicator of personal interests, affiliations and values: today, it is more likely to be the record collection.

Such radical changes have made music and dance newly central to the formation of individual and collective identities, local, regional,
national and international; to ways of socializing and networking; to the world economy, as the music industry has become one of the largest capitalist concerns in the world, and to the allocation of cultural and economic capital and power; and much more. Two major consequences are, first, that any attempt to understand contemporary human life, culture and society that ignores the serious consideration of music and dance will be inadequate and misrepresentative. Second, instead of dwelling on the peripheries of academia, ethnomusicologists and ethnochoreologists have now taken on a new and crucial role in research on human life, culture and society.

FIELDWORK

Greater insight into the complexities of contemporary human life may be gained through the method of ‘thick description’ advocated by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1975).

Such descriptions can only be produced through meticulously performed fieldwork. Initially at least, music and dance researchers often possess an advantage over fieldworking colleagues from other disciplines. Much of what is important to people is performed backstage, in the private sphere, well covered, sometimes even hidden. Access to these areas of life is often restricted for outsiders. In contrast, it is not usually difficult to gain access to the arenas where music and dance are performed. As entertainment and pleasure, these pursuits are happily shared, even with ethnomusicologists and ethnochoreologists; yet, they may carry intense meaning and significance for the participants.

If access is easy, the rest is not. For many reasons, research in music and dance is a notoriously difficult task. One problem lies in the discrepancies between insiders’ and outsiders’ perspectives: the ‘emic’ and the ‘etic’. The cognizance of the community being investigated is seldom the same as that of the newcomer from the outside. A second difficulty is the disjunction between the feelings and experiences of those involved in the music- and dance-making and the aural and visual perception of the more removed onlooker.

Most music and dance research has been restricted to observation from the outsiders’ perspective, leading to interpretation from a distanced position. A third and perhaps most important problem is the necessary verbalization of observations in the research process. Many individuals in western societies have some knowledge and competence in music and dance, but often this extends only to doing. Few are able