Julia Byl


By the end of the very short first chapter of *Antiphonal Histories*, Julia Byl establishes herself as a writer of rare eloquence. She sustains her unique voice throughout the book, lending a refreshingly literary flavor to the sometimes complicated, always compelling, and ultimately convincing account of music’s power in the lives of Toba Batak communities, and, indeed, in the lives of people everywhere.

The book’s premise—that people conduct their lives through a delicate counterpoint between their understandings of the past and their current circumstances, needs, and desires—is not complicated. The subtlety with which she explores the premise, on the other hand, is quite impressive; she weaves together Batak worldviews and practices, a variety of interrelated cultural metaphors, her own experiences, and stories, legends, and historical accounts.

Take the title’s ‘antiphonal histories’, for example. Marsialus-alusan is a Batak verb based on the noun alus (answer) that means ‘answering back and forth’, which Byl glosses as a sort of antiphonal discussion that doesn’t privilege one particular answer. Batak people, she asserts, develop a practice of simultaneous listening to make sense of such conversations. Byl likens Batak histories to this antiphonal practice, which emerge when the various layers of past events and epochs are put in dialogue with one another. Inspired by this attention to multiple voices, Byl engages a variety of historical sources, from both western and non-western traditions, and puts them into improbable but revealing conversations with one another, as well as with her own ethnographic experiences, to make sense of the crazy quilt of contemporary Batak social and musical practices.

In the book’s two main sections—*Tarombo* (Genealogy) and *Partuturan* (Positioning)—Byl similarly expands uniquely Batak metaphors to organize her own eclectic collection of information into a coherent account of Batak music history. (A preliminary section, *Bindu* [Introduction], provides an entry point into these Batak world views for the sake of her readers). She explains that individuals routinely rely on their understandings of Batak society’s complex kinship reckoning as well as their own position and circumstances at any given time to ‘frame individual relationships against a backdrop of possible affinities’ (p. 41)—to negotiate a sensible path forward given the long-established conventions of Batak social behavior and the particulars of the current situa-
tion. I should note that proponents of Pierre Bourdieu likely will see parallels in Byl's formulations with the sociologist's notions of *habitus*, and might be disappointed that Bourdieu does not appear in the bibliography. Byl's analysis, nevertheless, stands confidently on its own.

Indeed, as the book proceeds, readers come to understand both the musical genealogy (how various outside influences have been assimilated, and the sometimes contradictory received histories of and conventional wisdom about these musical encounters) of different Batak musical expressions, as well as the myriad ways in which modern Batak individuals, who must consider an array of modern problems, actively create coherent worlds for themselves by resourcefully interpreting the givens of Batak culture. Byl provides compelling analyses of these negotiations for a dizzying array of Batak musical expressions: *gondang sabangunan* (gong chime music), for which she engages in a detailed and astute 'tallying of coercive pasts' (p. 127), including the effects of Indic, Islamic, and Christian missionization; the oeuvre of a Toba songwriter, Nahum Situmorang; participatory musicking at palm-wine bars; choral hymn-singing in Christian churches; funeral laments; and professional music-making by Batak musicians in Jakarta. (Recordings of some of the case study music are available for easy download from Wesleyan Press's website.) Each case study provides historical and descriptive material, not readily available elsewhere, as well as keen insights about how the musical practices in question retain traces of the multiple layers of their history as well as their adaptability to present circumstances.

In my estimation, *Antiphonal Histories* provides a model for the future of ethnomusicological writing in its frank engagement with ethnography as a genre, in its vivid prose, in its commitment to presenting the multiple sides of the stories that make them ‘antiphonal’, and in its handling of the thorny problem of self-reflexivity. Early on, Byl eloquently suggests that ethnography itself is always an antiphonal undertaking, and ethnographers would do well to approach the seemingly solid edifice of past scholarship ‘recognizing that a weighty historical background is itself a cumulative deposit of the ephemeral, performative moments that make up our present’ (p. 4). Indeed, her graceful turns of phrase evoke the immediacy of those lived moments, transcending the ‘dense fact and inert detail’ (p. 4) she associates with historical accounts. She skillfully balances her authorial voice and the voices of her consultants, and inserts herself into the story in ways that strike me as exactly right: never self-indulgent, always using her own experiences to clarify her arguments, admitting to failures as well as successes. Although some of her personal stories are indeed intimate, surprising, and even hair-raising, I never experienced the ‘TMI (too much information)’ discomfort I frequently feel when reading
self-reflexive ethnographic accounts. She introduces herself slowly, but as the
book progresses we learn more and more about her own deep involvement with
the communities about which she writes.

To conclude, Julia Byl has produced a work that anybody interested in
the Indian Ocean world would profit from reading—not only because of the
well-researched information it provides, or for its insightful analyses, but as a
rewarding literary work and as a thought-provoking meditation on the art of
ethnography as well.

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