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From Structure to Intention, from the Other to the Self, from the Ear to the Eye: The Multifaceted Ethnomusicology of Bernard Lortat-Jacob

Bernard Lortat-Jacob
(Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, CNRS, Paris, Île-de-France, France)

Yuri Prado
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2205-4512
(Universidade de São Paulo, USP/ Departamento de Antropologia, São Paulo-SP, Brazil)

Abstract: A leading figure in French ethnomusicology, Bernard Lortat-Jacob gained recognition for his study of a broad range of musical practices through experimenting with different research methods and formats. In this interview, we discuss his trajectory as a researcher, the aesthetic and epistemological assumptions that have guided his work, and his vision of ethnomusicology in contemporary times.

Keywords: ethnomusicology. musical analysis. ethnomusicology of the individual. audiovisual ethnomusicology.

Da estrutura à intenção, do outro a si, do ouvido ao olho: a etnomusicologia multifacetada de Bernard Lortat-Jacob

Resumo: Um dos maiores expoentes da etnomusicologia francesa, Bernard Lortat-Jacob se notabilizou pelo estudo de uma ampla variedade de práticas musicais por meio da experimentação de diferentes métodos e formatos de pesquisa. Nesta entrevista, são discutidos a sua trajetória como pesquisador, os pressupostos estéticos e epistemológicos que nortearam sua obra e sua visão sobre a etnomusicologia na contemporaneidade.

Palavras-chave: etnomusicologia. análise musical. etnomusicologia do indivíduo. etnomusicologia audiovisual.

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Ethnomusicology is permeated by epistemological and methodological dilemmas that have a direct impact on the daily lives and careers of researchers dedicated to this field of study. The most well-known of these dilemmas concerns the discipline's ambivalence between an approach more focused on the structural aspects of music and another more attentive to its constitution as a sociocultural phenomenon, which would respectively guide an analysis of a musicological or anthropological nature (Menezes Bastos, 2014. Merriam, 1969). Another dilemma is related to the scale of analysis: should we focus on the study of musical practices of collectivities, as was the focus of the discipline throughout the 20th century, or on individuals, as explored more recently by some authors (Stock, 2010. Rice, 2003. Ruskin; Rice, 2012)? There is also a dilemma linked to the research output: should we favor the written format for our productions, considering it is the privileged means of disseminating knowledge in the academic environment, or should we do justice to the multisensorial nature of fieldwork through the use of sound and audiovisual media (D'Amico, 2020. Harbert, 2018)?

While some researchers, in an attempt to resolve ethnomusicological dilemmas, prefer to specialize in a particular repertoire, scale of analysis, or methodology, others view the tensions that define these dilemmas as an opportunity to question the epistemological foundations of the discipline. This is the case of Bernard Lortat-Jacob (Figure 1), one of the leading figures in French ethnomusicology, who, over the course of his more than 40-year career, has produced a vast and varied body of work that bridges approaches often seen as opposing: the understanding of the cognitive and formal models of orally transmitted music alongside the analysis of the social contexts in which these musical traditions are practiced (Lortat-Jacob, 1984); the study of collectivities, such as festivities in Morocco, Sardinia (Italy), or Romania (Lortat-Jacob, 1994), combined with the creation of biographical profiles of his interlocutors (Lortat-Jacob, 1995a) or even of himself (Lortat-Jacob, 1991); and the publication of articles and books together with the release of recordings and the production of films.



Fig. 1: Bernard Lortat-Jacob (Photo: Yuri Prado)

This interview is organized into three axes that correspond to the dilemmas mentioned above[1]. The first axis is centered on the role of musical analysis in ethnomusicology— an approach that, although it has lost importance due to the discipline's emphasis on "context," has recently been reassessed (Solis, 2012). The second focuses on the individual, encompassing both the interlocutor and the ethnomusicologist, discussing the importance of taking into account the actors involved in the research process. Finally, the third addresses audiovisual ethnomusicology, an expanding subfield that seeks to foster a more immersive and sensory understanding of musical practices.

At the time we conducted this interview, in June 2022, Bernard Lortat-Jacob was still actively working and had even organized a discussion event that same month for his latest book (Lortat-Jacob, 2020). However, in July 2024, during the process of publishing this interview in *Opus*, we received, with great sorrow, the news of his passing at the age of 83. We hope, therefore, that the topics discussed here will contribute to the dissemination and deeper understanding of the legacy of an ethnomusicologist who not only observed the transformations in ethnomusicology during the second half of the 20th century but also played a key role in shaping many of them.

Musical Analysis

Yuri Prado: In your interview with Vincent Dehoux (2000), you mentioned that your first work as an ethnomusicologist was at the Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires. Could you describe that work in detail?

Bernard Lortat-Jacob: At that time, in 1966–1967, there were temporary jobs that involved transcribing musical pieces I hadn't personally recorded. There was this idea—one could even say this ideology—that music could be transcribed independently of the research context. So, as Bartók had done, for example, it was a matter of compiling a corpus and making classifications, primarily of melodies. At the time, I was working on the repertoire of Brittany, the Massif Central, Provence, and Occitania. I made transcriptions, but I didn't yet know exactly how they could be contextualized. In the end, you can find pentatonic scales, for example, in Auvergne, Brittany, and Provence. If there are differences, they are not necessarily in the musical systems but rather in the forms of vocal expression, in the language, in the way the "r" is pronounced, or in how the repertoire is maintained—whether in a collective or domestic context. Music has configurations that are linked to the transmission context. Therefore, it is very difficult to separate music from the conditions in which it was conceived, as was done at the time. The second approach was to conduct formal analyses, as Bartók had done. He made classifications, such as A A' B B' and larger structures, without considering the dynamics of performance, which could lead a singer to sing A four times, B five times, and so on. Therefore, the idea of formalism remained. When I entered musicology, like everyone in my generation, the focus was on identifying structural patterns, preferred sequencing types, and how variation occurs within a given formal system. After transcribing over 1,000 musical pieces over several

[1] The interview was conducted during Yuri Prado's post-doctoral research internship at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), with scholarship granted by the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP) (process n. 2020/14875-2).

years and conducting field research, I reached a moment of reflection. I said to myself: "Music can be understood in this way, but it is a very limited perspective. We need to understand the intentionality of singers and musicians, their tuning techniques, what they are striving for, what their aesthetic goals are, and what sonic world they imagine when making music—all of which requires field knowledge. By talking to the singers, I will understand their intentions; we will establish deep, intimate relationships, which will shape a different object that is built within the field itself." Thus, we initially worked from a somewhat scientific perspective, strongly influenced by France and its institutional framework, particularly the Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires. Today, much has changed. We can now consider that the object of ethnomusicology is something constructed, reflected upon, and ever-changing, with a much more porous relationship between researchers and the people in the field.

Yuri Prado: In what ways did this transcription work rely on sensitive listening, and conversely, how did this practice contribute to the development of what you would later call the "ethnologist's ear" (Lortat-Jacob, 1995b)?

Bernard Lortat-Jacob: At that time, the question of the ear was not considered, because in the 1950s or 60s, or even earlier, the ethnomusicologist's ear was infallible, so to speak—it was the ear of the Conservatory. An A 440 was an A 440. When we made a transcription, it was considered the objective and reliable reality. In fact, there was an expression that illustrates how the notion of the ear developed in our discipline. They used to speak of "complete transcription" at the Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires, where Constantin Brăiloiu—the great Romanian researcher who founded French ethnomusicology—was also present. A complete transcription meant that everything that happened had to be recorded. If a dog barked, we wrote it down. Everything was noted, based on the idea that the object of study was constructed in this way. As for the ethnologist's ear, the most important thing is to learn to listen to music as the people themselves do. There are several ways to do this, but one of them is first to listen to a lot of local music, becoming familiar with it. In the case of Sardinia, this cost me at least ten years when I began my studies there in the late 1980s. I understood the music, I was touched by it—because it is wonderful—but I didn't yet have the codes. Eventually, by singing with people, by interacting with them, I was recognized as an interlocutor. My listening was certified, naturally, by my understanding of music theory and my training as a musician, but also—and above all—by my practice and interactions with the local musicians and singers. Therefore, my skills are better now, and I believe this is an irreversible process. I am always very surprised when I give seminars or lectures at conservatories and meet musicians who do not hear anything I hear. They have incredible ears—they are from the Paris Conservatory, they can transcribe a polyphonic piece by Boulez in no time. However, when it comes to research on timbre, for example, on how a note is attacked, how to hold the breath, the emotion that comes from it, or the subtlety in sound, they are not necessarily better prepared. And I have seen children, men, or women who were not necessarily trained in music yet possessed a sensitivity that allowed them to immediately perceive beauty. And when I speak of beauty, I acknowledge it's a somewhat vague concept, but let's say it refers to the aesthetic success of a musical piece that, upon first hearing, did not appear particularly remarkable. This

musical ear is fundamental. The ear is not just the piece of flesh we have on the side of the head; it is, naturally, all the cognition behind it that makes music into something constructed by the mind.

Yuri Prado: You have produced significant works in the field of musical analysis, especially on improvisation and modeling. However, in your interview with Vincent Dehoux, you mentioned that at a certain point, you had to learn on your own that music "is not just about notes." I would like to know, therefore, what importance you attribute to musical analysis in contemporary ethnomusicology.

Bernard Lortat-Jacob: It is clear that music, as an acoustic object, has taken on much less importance in contemporary studies. We have dealt with issues such as gender, colonialism, and post-colonialism—problems that are more sociological than musicological. Personally, I continue to be deeply interested in music as an object because it is fascinating and arouses curiosity, and therefore, I don't give up on it. Moreover, technologies such as the sonogram have been developed, allowing us to visualize how the musical spectrum is constituted. Sometimes, spectral relationships are more meaningful than note relationships. In Sardinia, polyphony is built on consonant chords. If we transcribe it—G, D, G, B—it's straightforward, just a four-note chord. However, what matters is the fusion that occurs between G and D, where the G is double the fundamental, creating harmonic relationships. We hear the music not just in the construction of the chord but in the harmonic fusions that occur far beyond it. A successful performance is not one that merely produces the notes, but one that finds the timbral quality of each vowel, resulting in a fused voice that is produced by the chord. Just look at people when the singing begins—you see them raising their finger as if to say, "It's coming!" The performance is considered successful because the listening focuses not on the fundamental but on the third, fourth, fifth, or sixth harmonic, to the point of producing something akin to a second voice, a woman's voice, or a voice of the Virgin, depending on the metaphor we use. Had I not seen this gesture, I might never have paid attention to how people listen. This raised finger actually means that you should not listen to the fundamental around 100 Hz but rather to the note around 500-600 Hz. That's where the ear should concentrate. And until we have produced that sound, there's no point in doing musicology. You must be able to reproduce it to understand how it happens.

Ethnomusicology of the Individual

Yuri Prado: Recently, some authors have discussed the importance of a more individual-centered approach (Stock, 2001. Rice, 2003. Ruskin; Rice, 2012). How do you see the issue of the individual versus the collective?

Bernard Lortat-Jacob: Gilbert Rouget, for example, who was my supervisor and a wonderful man—a friend, and a great researcher—always spoke about ethnicity: "Ethnomusicology is the musicology of ethnicity." Within the framework of colonialism, there was a tendency to consider populations as ethnic groups, and consequently, knowledge was constructed at the ethnic level. As a result, the expression of the individual was often inadequately addressed, since there was a tendency to consider music as a collective

representation and practice. However, we quickly realized that even in the case of an ethnic group deep in the forest, there is always someone who will tell you, "Hey, it's better to do it this way," and another who will say, "No, if you do it like that..." Ultimately, it's not obvious that this knowledge is entirely collective. Today, we recognize that even in traditional music, there were highly gifted, inspired individuals with distinct personal styles—some of whom even had vocal defects. Yet, because of these defects, they were considered the representatives of their village, and over time, their defects became the norm. That is why we must be cautious when assuming the supposed depth of a culture.

Yuri Prado: What contributions has this individual-centered approach made to research in ethnomusicology?

Bernard Lortat-Jacob: I would like to share an anecdote from Vincent Dehoux that perfectly illustrates this point. When he was recording with the Gbaya in Africa, there was a singer named Maurice. Vincent said, "I couldn't record with Maurice. He sang out of tune and ruined all my recordings. So, I took action: I knew that on that day, Maurice had gone fishing or had visited another village, and I summoned the villagers. They started singing, and after a verse, they stopped and asked, 'But where is Maurice?' 'But he doesn't sing well,' I said. 'Yes, but he is Maurice! He has to be here!'" This means that, in fact, they could not sing without Maurice's presence. Here, we see a clear tension between aesthetic production, which, according to Vincent Dehoux, needed to be calibrated, and the social need of including a man who was essential to the song, even if he sang out of tune. Furthermore, one should not assume that the researcher is the only one asking questions—people constantly ask themselves questions, but their questions are nothing like ours. They are particularly interested in historical causality, whereas I am more concerned with synchronic causality: "He sang like that on that day because he was in conflict with a person and wanted to prove that he was better. So, he raised his voice, but it was too loud, and I realized that it didn't work." Thus, it is this internal dynamic that allows us to understand what is happening within a group, and only music can give us that insight.

Yuri Prado: *Sardinian Chronicles* (1995a) [*Chroniques Sardes* (1990), in the French version] is a major example of the biographical approach in ethnomusicology. Could you talk about the motivation behind producing this work?

Bernard Lortat-Jacob: It's a book of youth. Not of my own youth, because I was already fifty years old, but it's a book of discovery. I was discovering Sardinia through individuals who were quite striking. I realized that in every village, there were stories of musicians, and that by following individuals, we learned a lot about the community. For example, when the wife of an accordionist dies and he wants to sell his repertoire, it shows that he wants to separate himself from village life—like a doctor might sell their clientele. These are things that can only be perceived at the individual level. Everyone thinks he's crazy, and people laugh. At the same time, the so-called "crazy" people are very interesting to study because they always embody something representative of the place they come from.

Yuri Prado: You also published a memoir, *L'ordre intime des choses* (1991). Could you talk about the process of creating a work that focuses not on others, but on yourself?

Bernard Lortat-Jacob: *L'ordre intime des choses* is a fantasy. I happened to be born into a very bourgeois family. I have benefited a lot from this bourgeois culture, but it is possible to benefit from something while still being critical of it—for example, class relations, the relationship with domestic workers, with peasants, with sexuality, and with racism. These are aspects that seemed to belong to the realm of an intimate ethnography that I wanted to explore to settle some scores. They are biographical issues, but they were approached from a dual perspective—that of a young man who had lived comfortably, yet still allowed himself to say, "Your values are not mine." And it was through writing that I could release this kind of small trauma. It is a somewhat tangential book, in the sense that ethnology can approach distant groups with an extraordinary yet still fundamental possibility: distancing. The eye or the ear must be immersive, but initially, there needs to be a kind of movement towards the other, enabling a contrast between what the object offers and what you bring to see it. It requires an eye, and the principle of the eye is that it distinguishes its object. When the eye is absorbed by what it sees—when it is too close—it ceases to see. This is why ethnology is founded on the notion of distance, what Lévi-Strauss called "the view from afar." If the perspective is too distant, the work is uninteresting because you can't see anything. If it is too close, you can't see either. There are publications that seem "blind" because the authors are immersed in their own concerns without situating them within a broader, more anthropological perspective. Thus, the cursor lies in the interplay between detachment and close approximation. Generally, we begin from afar and gradually move closer. I always say that if you do fieldwork for three weeks in a supposedly exotic place, you can write an article when you return. If you remain for a year, you'll have no trouble writing a book. If you do this for ten years, you won't write anything else because you'll have the impression of already knowing the exact words to use. You won't want to employ tools other than those you have come to know on-site, and you will no longer have the desire to explore that view from afar. That's my situation in Sardinia now. I go there on vacation with friends, sing with them, spend time with them—and I no longer feel much like writing about them.

Audiovisual Ethnomusicology

Yuri Prado: How did your interest in making films about music arise?

Bernard Lortat-Jacob: I've always been deeply drawn to cinema, but I never had the means to make beautiful films. I often say that making a film about music is extraordinarily difficult. In general, the temporality imposed by cinema and that of music are quite different things. In addition, there are editing techniques. We can create a long take, but often it's poorly executed because the camera moves without truly framing anything, leaving us uncertain of where we're heading. It lacks that extraordinary pleasure we experience in cinema with a well-edited film. Filming alone is very difficult. I made three films in my life. The first in 1968 when I went to film in Col de Tende [*Vievola. Chœurs et danses du Col de Tende*, in collaboration

with Jean-Dominique Lajoux]. Later, I had an experience with a director named Georges Luneau, who wanted to recreate *Sardinian Chronicles*. He liked the book and suggested transforming it into images. It was a major production, and I found myself in a large team of five people. Georges had many qualities but also the flaw of not being immersed in the culture, so he did not see things as I did. He wanted to make *his* film, while I saw things differently. That discouraged me somewhat. The film is good—it's called *Musica Sarda*—but it follows a literary structure that overlooks deeper ethnographic realities and relies on voiceover narration, a relatively artificial process that is no longer used in cinema. Then, about a decade ago, in Albania, I met a singer who had only one idea in mind: to return to the land of his ancestors. He told me an unbelievable story— his family came from Chamery, that is, from the Greek part where there were and still are Albanian speakers. Following the rectification of borders, due to international agreements, part of this region became part of Greece but remains inhabited by Albanians. At the time I made this film [*Chant d'un pays perdu*, 2007, co-directed with Hélène Delaporte]—which is no longer the case today—Albanians were not allowed to visit their ancestral villages. He told me he wanted to find the land of his ancestors. In fact, he wrote the script, and I simply followed him. The film captures unforgettable musical moments that could not have been made if I hadn't embraced this dynamic. In truth, I have always been deeply connected to cinema. But above all, making films requires courage. It is a language that must be mastered. I have read many books on cinema to learn how to film, but I am still afraid to do it, it's difficult. Writing a book is easier because we have time, we control almost everything. If something is missing, we can ask our interlocutors. Cinema, on the other hand, is instantaneous. You need to be smart and have a cinematic eye.

Yuri Prado: How does your relationship with your interlocutors unfold during the filmmaking process?

Bernard Lortat-Jacob: What I always suggest to students who want to make films is: "Reach an agreement with the people you're going to film with. Doing everything alone is quite difficult. Find people with whom you share a common understanding, particularly regarding the issue of rights." Not financial rights—that's secondary, contrary to what people think—but moral rights: Who is the architect of the film? Who will sign? Who will take the lead? Who will make the final decisions? So, it is important that these terms are clear from the very beginning. As for my books, I signed them because, in the end, I assumed responsibility for them. In this sense, I do not align with postmodernists. I consider myself modern because I believe that an acknowledged and signed perspective is part of the construction of the discipline.

Yuri Prado Is it possible to speak of an audiovisual ethnomusicology (D'Amico, 2020) or a ciné-ethnomusicology (Harbert, 2018)?

Bernard Lortat-Jacob: Certainly. I believe that ethnographic films about music already have a rich history. There have been significant advances. If we look at films from the 1980s and 1990s, we find various profiles. There was the didactic film—a bit tedious—showing how Pan flutes were made: you had to cut them in a certain way, tie them together... Or, for the xylophone, we see the guy going into the forest with his axe, cutting down a tree, transporting it, shaping it, making the blades... it's a kind of technological film. This led to some good films, but they were very limited because, from the first image, we know we won't experience any great emotional fervor. Later, we changed our approaches. There were attempts, and ethnographers made some very beautiful films. A few years ago, La Huit, a small company that works a lot with music, asked me to select twelve films that represented the ethnologic treatment of music. So, we put together this box set, which was very successful, especially in the United States, called *Écouter le monde* (*Around Music*) [2015]. There's the beautiful film by Sandrine Loncke, *La danse des Wodaabe* [2010], which I would say is a truly classical ethnomusicological film. It follows the rituals from start to finish, showing the people's adornments and raising questions related to the festival—it's very ethnological. *Pratica e maestria* [dir. Rossella Schillaci, 2005] is another very beautiful film, about two musicians from central Italy. It captures very well the sensitivity that peasants have toward their own practices. *Plan-séquence d'une mort criée* [2005] is an admirable film. It was made by a friend, Filippo Bonini Baraldi, who placed his camera on the day of the funeral of the woman whose house he had been staying at in Transylvania. It's a magnificent but also somewhat unbearable film because the women cry for an hour. It's a masterpiece—the camera doesn't move, it's a fixed shot, but the film is built on the dynamics of voices that intensify over time. It won the Jean Rouch Festival, largely because I defended it strongly. Some filmmakers argued that it wasn't really a film, but it absolutely is a film—because the camera was in exactly the right place at the right moment. And since the tape lasted an hour, the film is exactly an hour long. In *Entre nous* [1999], the filmmaker Stéphane Jourdain follows Emmanuelle Olivier, an ethnomusicologist who works in Africa, and shows, perhaps without her realizing, the limitations of ethnographic work. We see, for example, people dancing magnificently where they live, and then we see them on tour at the Maison des Cultures du Monde, where everything is calibrated: they need to dress in a certain way, and it's not the same thing anymore. *Bamako est un miracle* [dir. Samuel Chalard, 2003] shows a great American trombonist from New York [Roswell Rudd] who wants to make fusion music with musicians from Bamako and tries to record an album with them. He understands nothing about African music, puts the musicians into businesses that don't work, there are money issues, there's the producer who wants to fix everything... but it's so well done, it's funny, and it's a very beautiful film. Therefore, the field is very open. Many sensitivities, many perspectives. And, ultimately, music, as always, can give rise to fantastically diverse films. I've seen films about music that are admirable, without being ethnological. There's a filmmaker named Thierry Augé who made a film about the conductor's gestures (*Quand les mains murmurent*, 2012) and another about what happens between four women playing Beethoven's last quartet (*De quelles voix êtes-vous la beauté?*, 2020). Here, there's a subtlety of gaze that could be ethnomusicological. There's a filmmaker's gaze that is intelligent and refined.

He's a musician, by the way—he couldn't be anything else—and it's through that gaze that the filmic object is constructed.

Yuri Prado: Do you believe there is a specificity in the ethnomusicologist's gaze?

Bernard Lortat-Jacob: Let's say that the ethnomusicologist, through their training and perhaps a personal gift, is prepared to observe with a certain critical eye—I'd even say an ironic one, in the deep and meaningful sense of the word. For example, in the film about the conductor, there may be bluffing, verbal and gestural cues, and misunderstandings. Therefore, the task of the ethnocinematographer, then, is to capture these moments rather than proclaiming the greatness of Karajan or of music itself. So, there is a kind of irony, or perhaps a perceptive gaze—an ethnographic perspicacity, if you will. But ethnologists do not have exclusive ownership of this perspicacity. Fortunately, there are very intelligent people who possess it. And, of course, there are ethnologists who do not have much—but that is another matter.

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Bernard Lortat-Jacob was a research director at the CNRS and head of the Ethnomusicology Laboratory at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. At the Musée de l'Homme, he restructured the ethnomusicology laboratory; at the French Ministry of Culture, alongside Maurice Fleuret, he promoted the development of traditional music within the Music Directorate. He was named an Officer of the Order of Arts and Letters and founded the French Society for Ethnomusicology (SFE). For more than twenty years (1987–2008), he was responsible for the doctoral program in ethnomusicology at the University of Paris X–Nanterre–La Défense, where he expanded the discipline into related fields (acoustics, linguistics, and cognitive psychology) and coordinated several publications addressing issues in anthropology and musicology.

Yuri Prado is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Anthropology of the Universidade de São Paulo (USP), having carried out a research internship at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris. He holds a PhD in musicology from USP, with a research internship in ethnomusicology at the Université Paris VIII. As a composer, he won first prize at the 1st Composition Competition of the Orquestra de Câmara da USP (OCAM), the XIX Prêmio Nascente-USP, and the 1st Composition Competition of the Orquestra Jazz Sinfônica do Estado de São Paulo. As a filmmaker, he produced the documentaries *A Step Towards Victory* (2020), *Two Brothers* (2021), *Open Gasy* (2023), and *Djazz* (2024). yuripradobs@gmail.com

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