From the Editor

Notes on Contributing Authors

Articles

1. Meditations on "Objective Aesthetics" in World Music
   Michael Tanzer

31. "Becoming One": Embodying Korean 'P'ungmul'
Percussion Band Music and Dance through Site-Specific Internodal Transmission
   Donna Lee Kwong

61. Still Like That Old Time Rock and Roll: Tribute Bands and Historical Consciousness in Popular Music
   John Paul Meyers

82. The Intermediate Sphere in North Indian Music Culture: Between and Beyond "Folk" and "Classical"
   Peter Manuel

116. "Don't Go Changing to Try and Please Me:" Combating Essentialism through Ethnography in the Ethnomusicology of Autism
   Michael B. Bakan

Book Reviews

145. Carmen Nieves Luis Garcia, La Música Tradicional en Icod de los Tírigos [Tenerife, Canary Islands]
   Martha Ellen Davis

149. Susan Fast and Kip Pegley, eds., Music, Politics, and Violence
   Gavin Douglas

153. Falu Bakrana, Bhangra and Asian Underground: South Asian Music and the Politics of Belonging in Britain
   Stefan Fiol


161  Jason Pine, *The Art of Making Do In Naples*  

**Recording Reviews**

165  Hélène Delaporte, Grèce, *Koumpania Xaikies: Musiciens traditionnels d’Épire/Greece, Koumpania Xaikies: Traditional Musicians of Epirus*

168  Various Artists, *Gaelic Songs of Scotland: Women at Work in the Western Isles*

**Film, Video, and Multimedia Reviews**

Information for Authors

MANUSCRIPT SUBMISSION

Note: Article manuscripts should be submitted to the Editor, Ellen Koskoff, Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester, 26 Gibbs Street, Rochester, NY 14604. Inquiries and soft copies (see items 1 and 6 below) should be sent to ethnomusicologyjournal@gmail.com.

1. Submit one hard copy and one soft copy (see item 6 below) of all material related to the article, a brief biographical data sheet, and an abstract of no more than 100 words. Copies must be printed on one side only, on standard size paper. Authors must obtain in writing all permissions for the publication of material under copyright and submit a copy of the permissions file when the manuscript is first sent to the editor. Authors hold the editor and the Society for Ethnomusicology harmless against copyright claims.

2. Manuscripts must be typed double-spaced (including endnotes, quotations, song texts, references cited, indented material, and captions for illustrations). Copies using single line or one and a half line spacing are not acceptable. Leave 1½ margins on all sides with only the left-hand margin justified.

3. Do not submit original artwork for review; submit copies. Original artwork may be requested upon acceptance for publication, in which case it must be of sufficient quality to permit direct reproduction.

4. All illustrations should be labeled and numbered consecutively. We use two labels: "Table," for Tables, and "Figure," for everything else, including music examples, photographs, maps, diagrams, line art, etc. Captions should be typed on a separate sheet. A callout, i.e., <PLACE FIGURE 1 HERE>, should indicate clearly where in the text the illustration should go.

5. Citations are carried within the text, as in (Rhodes 1955:262). References should be typed, double spaced on a separate sheet, alphabetically by author and chronologically for each author (most recent first). A recent issue of Ethnomusicology or Fig. 15.1, p.788, of the Chicago Manual of Style, 16th ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010) will serve as a model. SEM style differs from the Chicago Manual example in the use of US postal codes for state abbreviations, and in the placement of page numbers for edited collections after the editor’s name, preceded by a comma, and with no “pp.”

6. The soft copy should be sent as a .doc or .docx file, with personal identification and copyright protection removed. Please do not send PDFs. Each file should be smaller than 1 MB. (If accepted for publication, high-quality photos or musical examples will be used.)

7. Acknowledgments are to be presented in a separate paragraph, thusly labeled, at the end of the text, preceding endnotes. (See also Manuscript Processing, item 2.) Authors whose articles are accepted for publication are encouraged to include their email addresses in the Acknowledgements.

8. Manuscripts submitted to Ethnomusicology should not have been published elsewhere—including in electronic form, other than on personal web pages—nor should they simultaneously be under review or scheduled for publication in another journal or in a book. Further, if an author submits a paper to Ethnomusicology that is based on material closely related to that in other published or submitted papers or books, the author should explain the relationships among them, in a cover letter to the editor.
“Don’t Go Changing to Try and Please Me”: Combating Essentialism through Ethnography in the Ethnomusicology of Autism

Michael B. Bakan / Florida State University

Abstract. Ethnomusicology is the study of how people make and experience music, and of why it matters to them that they do. Building from the epistemological foundations of the autistic self-advocacy and neurodiversity movements, as well as from the musical, ethnographic, and relativistic priorities of ethnomusicology itself, this article advances the position that our field, thus defined, is inherently well suited to the task of creating and sustaining vital, neurodiverse musical communities. The focus is on one such community, the Artism Ensemble, which serves as the basis of a case study featuring transcripts of dialogue with a child member of the group diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome.

Autism is a part of who we are. As sure as skin color or sexual orientation, we cannot change being Autistic...we are not broken, defective, or diseased. We do not need to be fixed or cured... Yes, autism is a disability, and yes, some Autistic people are very severely disabled. Accepting autism does not mean ignoring or denying disability; it means accepting us for who we are, as we are...We can speak (or write or sign or type) for ourselves, and it's time to listen. (Silberman 2012:364-65)

The preceding quotation is from the landmark anthology Loud Hands: Autistic People, Speaking (Bascom 2012). This volume was published by The Autistic Press of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN). It is arguably the most significant work to date in a growing literature authored by people with autism spectrum conditions, or ASCs, which are more commonly—though less appropriately—known as ASDs, autism spectrum disorders.

© 2015 by the Society for Ethnomusicology
In published memoirs, scholarly journals, and edited volumes; in documentary films and the visual arts; in music, dance, and drama; on blogs and websites and through social media; via speech, writing, and a range of ever-evolving augmentative and alternative communication systems and technologies (AAC), Autistics are speaking out in their own ways on their own behalf. Their articulateness, social agency, and political activism, as well as their diverse and often starkly contrasting views and positions on the issues, push back against the damaging and pervasive stereotypes that have historically cast them as people “in their own world and locked away from culture and interaction” (Fein 2012:31), as individuals with neither the means nor the motivation to communicate, engage socially, or contribute much to the making of human cultural life at all.

That pushing back often commences from an epistemological stance that may be said to fall within the rubric of another relatively recent social phenomenon, the neurodiversity movement, with neurodiversity defined as “the understanding of neurological variation as a natural form of human diversity, subject to the same dynamics as other forms of diversity” such as race, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation (Walker 2012:233). It is further linked to larger discursive and historical trajectories in disability rights, disability studies, and the anthropology of autism.

In this article, I take the promotion of autistic self-advocacy and neurodiversity as primary points of departure in discussing a neurodiverse music group called the Artism Ensemble. Artism was founded in 2011 and is based in Tallahassee, Florida. It is comprised of several children diagnosed with ASCs, co-participating parents of these children, and a musically and culturally diverse cohort of professional musicians and ethnomusicologists. I have both performed with the ensemble and served as its coordinator since its inception.

Ethnomusicology is the study of how people make and experience music, and of why it matters to them that they do. The principal position I advance here is that the field of ethnomusicology, thus defined, on account of its integration of musical, ethnographic, and relativistic foundations and values, is inherently well suited to the task of creating and sustaining vital, neurodiverse musical communities comprising both Autistic and non-autistic individuals. It is, in turn, a discipline that has the potential to contribute to the advancement of neurodiversity in significant and meaningful ways. I use the case study of the Artism Ensemble to illustrate these points. Ethnomusicology teaches that listening to the things people say and the ways that they play are important. An ethnomusicological approach to the study of autism must insist on adhering to that premise.

In terms of narrative presentation, the article shifts between discussions of the Artism Ensemble focusing on the group's musical approach and philosophy, transcribed passages from an enlightening 2013 conversation I had with one
child member of the band, and larger considerations of matters autistic, musical, and beyond that are informed by both scholarly and advocacy perspectives, but with an emphasis on the latter. This advocacy emphasis admittedly generates a particular slant, indeed a bias, favoring the voices and views of specific Autistic self-advocates over those of other active and integral contributors to contemporary discourses, practices, and policies relating to autism and neurodiversity. Individuals across the spectrum differ tremendously in terms of what they are capable and incapable of, what they are able and unable to express, what they want and value, whether or not they can speak (or otherwise communicate) for themselves, what they experience and how they process that experience, and who, if anyone, they feel can speak best to their concerns and interests in instances where they themselves cannot. A contextualizing discussion of the particular Autistic voices—and kinds of Autistic voices—privileged in the article is included in its latter portion, along with a rationale explaining the justification for employing such an approach to the neurodiversification of ethnomusicology.

The Artism Ensemble

The Artism Ensemble had its genesis in January of 2011 under the aegis of a three-year National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant. I was awarded this grant to develop an ethnomusicology program centered on the agency and creativity of children with autism spectrum conditions.

The guiding concept in forming Artism was to bring children on the spectrum together with their co-participating parents and a group of accomplished professional musicians and ethnomusicologists of wide-ranging background to make innovative music. This generationally, musically, culturally, and neurophysiologically diverse music performance collective would serve to promote autism acceptance and neurodiversity throughout the state of Florida and beyond by means of its concerts and other public performances, as well as through workshops, webinars, conference presentations, and other media. All of the participating children/families in Artism had previously been part of a related, earlier project that ran from 2005–2009, the Music-Play Project (Bakan 2008a and 2008b; Bakan 2009; Koen et al. 2008), and were originally recruited through an open letter of invitation sent to families on the client registry of Florida State University’s Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD).

Artism’s music is improvisation-driven but centers on a repertoire of works composed and arranged by the children in the group. These children have ranged in age from 7–16 and have collectively encompassed a large span of different ability and diagnostic profiles along the continuum of the autism spectrum. Of the five children who were members of the ensemble during the 2011 to 2013 NEA grant period—three girls (Mara, E.S., and Zolabean) and two boys (Coflebot
and NICKstr)—four had strong verbal skills and were on school grade level for their ages, while the fifth used less verbal communication and was older than her grade peers at school.³

Initially, the musical protocol of Artism was modeled after that of its Music-Play Project (MPP) predecessor, with an emphasis on cultivating an environment of free, unstructured, improvisational music-play in which the staff musicians, along with the participating parents, were tasked to “follow the children’s lead” wherever that might take the music, and them. There were no pre-established genres, pieces, repertoires, or other set musical signposts, though the staff musicians were encouraged to draw upon the resources of their extensive personal and collective musical and improvisational experience to nurture whatever seeds of creative, agentive, and social musical expression the children made manifest.

This protocol changed dramatically at the children’s initiative within very short order, however, indeed within the space of the group’s first few rehearsals in 2011. Once they were informed that this group, unlike the music-play groups of MPP in which they had formerly participated, was going to actually be getting out and playing public concerts, the children became very motivated to “make sure we do some real, good quality music,” to quote Coffeebot (personal communication, 6 February 2011).

A turn-taking protocol in which all of the children would direct one or more of their own pieces every rehearsal gradually emerged through the children’s own collective agency. It was well established by about the fourth rehearsal. In place of the rather nebulous free improvisation aesthetic that had prevailed in MPP, Artism become a forum for the children to compose and develop clearly conceived and often formally complex works, a composer’s workshop in essence.

While there has always been a strong element of improvisation in the group’s pieces, and while most have originated through the improvisational development of one or more fairly straightforward rhythmic or rhythmic/melodic motives, each child, as a composer, has incorporated relatively greater or lesser degrees of control and fixity into the structural features and formal designs of their works. In some instances, the degree of precision called for has been so high as to allow very little room for improvisational license on the part of the performers at all.

The physical nucleus of the Artism Ensemble’s programs and activities is a specially designed E-WoMP, or Exploratory World Music Playground, which is located at the COCA building in downtown Tallahassee. The E-WoMP includes a large variety of percussion instruments that are distributed somewhat randomly about the large area of the rehearsal space. Most of its instruments were manufactured by project sponsor Remo, and are modeled after traditional drums and other percussion instruments originating in West Africa, Latin America, Native America, and other world regions. They include djembes, congas, bongos, ocean drums, thunder tubes, cuicas, a Native American-type gathering drum,
tom-toms, egg shakers, and steelpans (steel drums). All instruments selected for the E-WoMP have to meet two basic requirements: they must be high yield for low input (i.e., easy to produce pleasing/satisfying sounds without need of specialized training) and safe for use by the children in the program.

All of the players—children and adults, parents and staff musicians—are free to roam about the playground-like space of the E-WoMP, playing whatever instruments they wish to whenever and however they choose. Several of the staff musicians play mainly their own, personal instruments—steelpan, guitar, bass, flute, clarinet, didgeridoo, zheng—but they often move fluidly between those instruments and E-WoMP percussion instruments, while one or another of the children may switch over to the steelpan, guitar, or zheng from time to time as well. There are no prescribed rules of how or when to play the instruments or how to behave, with the exception that all players are asked to commit to ensuring the physical safety of everyone and treating one another with mutual respect.

Figuring out how to be mutually respectful vis-à-vis the wants and needs of others in the group is a critically important dimension of the musical, improvisatory, and social aspects of Artism participation for all involved. The staff musicians—virtuoso performers hailing from locations as far afield as China, Peru, Trinidad, and Bolivia, as well as from regions throughout North America—have a particularly interesting challenge in this regard: they must continually acclimate to an unfamiliar and ever-changing aesthetic environment in which “sounding good,” at least by the measure of conventional musical standards, is not the norm. Since in the Artism context these musicians are followers not leaders, responders not directors, learners not teachers, they must be willing to go where the children take them, which is often to places where rhythmic grooves fall apart or fail to emerge, where growing musical momentum and direction suddenly disintegrate for no apparent reason, where they are asked to play things and to play in ways that defy their “common sense” musical sensibilities, and where they must resist the urge to momentarily take charge of the group to “fix” the musical problems they encounter, even when it would be so easy to do so.

The parents, none of whom to date have been trained musicians, face their own sets of challenges. Many were initially self-conscious and shy about performing in the group, and especially about taking part in the concerts, but they have all eventually come around, each in his or her own way. Some, like Zolaban’s mother, Suzanne, have taken on very active roles as performers. Suzanne has even gone so far as to express her gratitude to Artism for “unleashing the hidden drummer” she believes has always resided within her. Others, like NICKstr’s father, Roland, prefer to stay very much in the background of the musical texture, but their contributions to the overall proceedings are also valued and important to the group.

Perhaps the greatest collective challenge faced by the parents has been resisting the temptation to interfere with their children’s activities during rehearsals.
The children in Artism are the culture-bearers, the cultural insiders, of this group’s musicultural world; it is they, a priori, who define the standards and norms of musical and cultural expertise in the E-WoMP, who have the primary voices in the ensemble’s musical conversations and whatever other kinds of conversations arise around them. Therefore, barring breaches of basic safety or mutual respect, the parents must discipline themselves to stay out of their children’s way and to let them play, create, and dictate their own—and others’—terms of what constitutes the Artism Ensemble experience. They need to avoid the strong impulse to correct their children, tell them how to do things “better,” or instruct them to listen to “the teachers” (which is not what the staff musicians are in any case).

As for the children, they too negotiate a variety of issues in aspiring toward the achievement of mutual respect within the group. The two boys, Coffeebot and NICKstr, like to play loud most of the time, but they have worked hard at being attentive and respondent to the sound sensitivity issues of E.S. and Mara, who can have a difficult time coping when the volume level in the room or on stage gets too high. All five children have struggled but ultimately found ways to deal with the perpetual challenge of being willing to relinquish control and direction of the ensemble to their fellow players as Artism’s turn-taking protocol unfolds, at the same time stretching to accommodate the varied aesthetic preferences of their peers.

The compositions, arrangements, and directed improvisations fashioned by Artism’s child members reflect the group’s overall musicultural diversity, as elements of festejo, rumba, flamenco, calypso, raga, reggae, and gamelan combine with those of jazz, blues, funk, hip-hop, rock, classical, and other genres—as well as with ideas and concepts that are uniquely the children’s own and bear no recognizable resemblance to any pre-existing musical genre or tradition—to forge the unique sound and approach that define Artism’s music. Some of the pieces are fully original works, while others draw freely from pre-existing source materials: a melody from Liszt’s Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2, a Bo Diddley beat under an extemporized rendering of Dr. Seuss’s *Green Eggs and Ham*, a steelpan-led take on the Beatles’ “A Hard Day’s Night.” The accompanying endnote provides links to video recordings of Artism performing two original compositions by ensemble members in a 2013 concert: E.S.’s “Joobai I” and NICKstr’s “Steel Percussion.”

**Words and Music**

“If you’ve learned to play it, to sing it, to dance it, then you’ve earned the right to talk about it,” I recall Mantle Hood proclaiming during a lecture he presented at Florida State University (FSU) in 1997. Those words have stayed with me ever since, but in reflecting on my relationships with the children in the
Artism Ensemble over the past several years, I find they modulate into a different key: if you’ve learned to play with them, to sing with them, to dance with them, they may decide you’ve earned the right to talk with them, too. Making music with these children is what has enabled me to establish rapport and gain their trust to the extent that we are now able to really talk to each other. I regard this musical bridge to conversational and social connection as a key methodological feature of this work as ethnomusicology.

Sometimes our talking takes place almost exclusively in the non-verbal practices of music making itself. This has been the case thus far with E.S., with whom I have incrementally developed a deep and rewarding musical relationship over the course of several years, despite the fact that she and I have shared very little in the way of verbal interaction of any kind during that entire period.

E.S. was fourteen when she joined the group in 2011. Through Artism’s entire first season (January-May 2011) and through the first several weeks of its second (commencing January 2012), she and her mother, Sylvia, attended virtually every rehearsal and were on hand for all but one Artism concert (participation in the concerts is always optional for the children, right up to the last minute). Yet through that span of time, E.S. hardly played a note with the group. Usually she would sit outside the circle of players with her back to the rest of us, covering and uncovering her ears with her hands. She would rarely, if ever, speak with anyone other than Sylvia in rehearsals, and when she did want to communicate something to someone else, she would use Sylvia as her proxy. For example, she would occasionally instruct Sylvia to “Tell that man to stop playing that drum” if I was playing in a manner of which she did not approve, even though I might be sitting right next to her.

E.S. generally seemed to be happy when at rehearsals in spite of not being actively involved as a musical participant. Her mother also reported that E.S. was always excited to come to rehearsals, saying that they were “the highlight of her week.” Moreover, the rehearsals seemed to be inspiring E.S. in her musical life at home. There, in the comfort and relative privacy of the kitchen, she would create amazing and highly complex solo percussion compositions using stools, countertops, pots and pans, and coffee cans as her personal instrumentarium.

The pieces she invented often had elaborate programmatic elements, for example, the ones called “Manhotas I” and “Manhotas II,” which, she explained to Sylvia (and only Sylvia), were meant to evoke an imaginary world called Chabatha that bordered another imaginary world, Manhotas, and finally reached a road that ended in the village of Gota Springs in the land of Konamangotias. Artism rehearsals, Sylvia informed me, were firing E.S.’s fertile musical imagination toward the creation of several new compositions in this vein.

E.S. still would not play with the ensemble. On January 25, 2012, though, that situation changed. She showed up for rehearsal that day with a purple-and-yellow painted wooden box and a couple of coffee cans from home. These instruments
she was willing to play with the group, though she still refused to play any of the many Remo or world percussion instruments that were available to her and the rest of the players. Moreover, she would only play on pieces that she herself had composed and that she, with Sylvia as “translator” of her intentions (and often with unsolicited assistance from NICKstr as well), would direct. She would not perform the works that other children in the group had created.

It was not until April of 2013, near the end of Artism’s third season, that another shift occurred. We were preparing for a big concert in Orlando (discussed further below) and the ever-charismatic NICKstr and his parents were not going be able to make the trip. We needed others to fill the void and I took a gamble by imploring E.S. to help out.

“E.S.,” I said, smiling and looking at her in hopes of getting her attention. She looked down at the floor and did not seem to be listening, but I continued anyhow. “We have a problem,” I explained. “NICKstr can’t play in our concert and I need someone else to play more since he won’t be there. Would you be willing to play in the other pieces, too, not just in yours?” To my surprise, E.S. neither ignored me nor answered through her usual proxy, Sylvia. Instead she looked up, looked right at me, and said, simply, “Yes.” And play she did from that point forward, on all the pieces; and while the kind of direct conversational interaction with eye contact that happened in that fleeting moment has only sporadically occurred between us subsequently, there has been some, and I expect that there may be more in the future.

I hasten to add, though, that this should not be interpreted as a story of provisional triumph over autism or as a chronicle of Artism’s efficacy as a therapeutic intervention for working with Autistic people. E.S.’s participation in Artism has been fine all along. The fact that she was not actively playing with the group in 2011 and the early part of 2012 did not mean she was not participating in her own way. She was: by listening, taking it in, enjoying the experience, using what she heard to expand the horizons of her very active at-home musical life as a percussion soloist and composer. When she then started playing with the rest of the ensemble after bringing her painted wooden box and coffee cans to rehearsal in late January 2012, this did not necessarily mark a qualitative leap forward in terms of her musical or social experience of being a member of the group, even if it seemed that way to me and others in the band simply because we enjoyed having her play with us. And similarly, when she honored my request to help the rest of us out by playing not just in her pieces but in everyone else’s as well, there is no reason to assume that this constituted a “breakthrough” from E.S.’s perspective. It is just as likely that she simply saw that there was an expressed need for her to do something beyond what she had been doing and figured there was no harm in helping out.

I don’t actually know what E.S. thinks about these various transitional moments that loom large in my neurotypical conceptions and memories of Artism’s
life course to date. She has not chosen to speak with either Sylvia or me about them, perhaps for the simple reason that they are not really all that interesting to her. But music is, and from Sylvia's perspective, it is central to who E.S. is and what she's all about. "This is why I find music so important for her, and for our relationship: music is [E.S.'s] best way to communicate," Sylvia wrote to me in a December 16, 2013, email. "Only when she thinks of music can one actually 'see' her actively thinking."

Sylvia's last claim is open to debate, but it certainly appears to be true that making music, more so than making talk, is an important zone of comfort and expression for E.S. In the case of the highly verbal and articulate Mara, the situation is very different. Mara, diagnosed with the ASC Asperger's syndrome, was eight years old when she and I started playing together in the Music-Play Project in 2009. Musically—and especially when she would dance—the bond and communication between us was strong right from the start, but when the music stopped, she would close up, put up walls, shut me out. This gradually changed over the years, however, particularly after 2011 when Mara joined the Artism Ensemble. Slowly, gradually, our shared musical experiences opened up other communicative channels, and I am convinced that the candor, openness, and boldness evident in the transcribed passages of dialogue that follow reflect that development.

Dialogue 1: "It's just there, wound into your personality"

"Come in," I say to twelve year-old Mara, inviting her into my heavily air-conditioned office on a burning hot Tallahassee summer afternoon. She enters with eyes downcast and sporting a mild frown, seemingly nervous, at least a bit uncomfortable. It has been six weeks since we last saw each other. That was in Orlando, Florida, where the Artism Ensemble had been the featured act for the Opening General Session of the 2013 international conference of the Society for Disability Studies (SDS).

The climactic, closing number on that concert was an original composition of Maras, "Purple Eggs and Ham." (A link to a rehearsal video of the piece is provided in the accompanying endnote.) Mara performed the role of "Mara-I-am," after the iconic Sam-I-am character in Dr. Seuss's classic book Green Eggs and Ham. I played the unnamed, skeptical interlocutor of the story (who I will refer to here as "the Skeptic"), whose resistance to sampling the purported delicacies Mara-I-am offers him propels the story forward.

The piece begins with the Skeptic eating by himself, minding his own business. Then Mara-I-am bounds onto the stage.

"Hey, you want some . . ." she begins enthusiastically, but the Skeptic cuts her off.
“Oh, not you again, the green eggs and ham girl!” he complains. “No, I don’t want any green eggs and ham, thank you. Leave me alone. Go away.”

“Wait!” Mara-I-am protests. “They’re not green. They’re purple!”

“Purple?” the Skeptic echoes, at least slightly curious.

“Purple,” Mara-I-am affirms.

“Purple eggs and ham?!” he inquires again, unbelieving.

“Purple,” she restates.

The Skeptic pauses for a moment to consider the offer.

“No, I don’t want them,” he says finally. “Go away, little girl.”

“Whaaa!” Mara-I-am cries out tragically and with dramatic gestures worthy of grand opera. “You’ve ruined my life! You ruined it!”

“Oh, okay,” the Skeptic says, suddenly taking pity on the poor girl. “Do you have anything else?”

“Oh, um, um, my red eggs and ham. They’re red, they’re red!” Mara-I-am proclaims as she bounces up and down in excitement and with renewed hope, thrusting a red plastic shaker in the shape of an egg in his face.

“Red eggs and ham?!” the Skeptic exclaims, and with this cue the full band comes in playing a Bo Diddley-rhythm vamp in C over the chord progression ||| C - C - C - C - C - Bb - C - D - - - - ;|||

Mara starts dancing to the music at this point and then rhyming over the beat: “You can eat them highly spiced, all chopped up and maybe diced.” To which the Skeptic replies: “All chopped up? Highly spiced? That’ll burn my tongue. That’s not nice.”

“Well, what about yellow?” Mara-I-am offers as an alternative, now holding out a yellow egg shaker for the Skeptic.

“Yellow?!” he retorts, and at this point the band modulates up to the key of D and continues the accompanying vamp: ||| D - D - D - D - C - D - D - D - - - ;|||

“You can eat them on the run, you can eat them in the sun,” Mara-I-am raps over the Diddley beat as she dances, and the Skeptic fires back with “In the sun? On the run? I’d never do that just for fun.”

“Well,” Mara-I-am proposes, coming full circle as she now thrusts forward a green egg shaker, “how about, what about, green? Green!”

“GREEN EGGS AND HAM?!!” the Skeptic shouts in exasperation.

Another modulation by the band, this one taking the continuing vamp into the key of E.

“I don’t LIKE them, Mara-I-am, you know I don’t like them!”

“You haven’t even tried them!!” she counters.

The band comes to an abrupt stop on Mara-I-am’s cue. She bounces up and down again before the Skeptic, hands now in prayer position, expression anxiously hopeful.

“Okay,” the Skeptic says softly, “If you promise to never bother me again—”
"I will!"
"—ever again—"
"I promise!"
"—I will try them, you will see."
"I promise!"

“Okay,” says the Skeptic, again quietly, as he places the whole green plastic egg in his mouth and pretends to chew. The band re-enters now with an ensemble drum roll, building anticipation. The Skeptic gently takes the egg out of his mouth and smiles broadly. “Hey, I do so like green eggs and ham!” he announces with great enthusiasm.

The band again stops playing, though Coffeebot continues to roll on his drums as the Skeptic adds to his endorsement. “I do so like them, Mara-I-am!” She pumps her fist triumphantly.

“Try them!” he urges. “Share them with me! They’re delicious!”

Mara-I-am takes the egg from the Skeptic and cautiously takes a bite. She immediately becomes ill, as though poisoned, gagging and lurching as she begins to fall to the ground accompanied by a descending chromatic guitar run and more drum rolls from the group.

As she touches down, Mara-I-am manages to squeeze out one final utterance with her dying breaths. “Wait, wait!” she blurs out as the band again stops playing, and then her voice begins to fade in its weakness. “I didn’t want to give you green eggs and ham in the beginning.” And weaker still, “I wanted to give you green fish.”

There is a silent pause. Then the full band and the Skeptic disgustedly cry out in unison, “GREEN FISH!! YUUUCCKK!!!”

The performance closes with the band playing a “shave and a haircut, two bits” tag as Mara lies “dead” on the floor.

With her rousing performance of “Purple Eggs and Ham” and several other shining moments, Mara was a star of Artism’s concert at SDS, but her contributions to the evening did not end there. Immediately following the show, the ensemble hosted a Q&A session with interested audience members and Mara shone just as brightly in that context. Her insightful, thought-provoking responses to questions relating to the ensemble, its music, and a variety of autism-related issues were a highlight of the event.

Now here we are, all these weeks later, sitting in the stillness of my fake wood-paneled digs in the College of Music at FSU. We are surrounded by computer and audio equipment, stacks of papers and piles of journals, shelves stuffed with books and folders. It has to be a bit off-putting for Mara. She probably thinks she’s in trouble, that she’s done something wrong. Setting up this meeting to talk with her was probably a bad idea, I think to myself.
But things immediately change for the better the moment Mara feasts her eyes on a nice black office chair positioned adjacent to my desk. She plops herself down and gives it a good kick start.

"Whee!!" she exclaims with glee as she tucks up her knees and whirls about in the chair, over and over and over again. The downcast eyes alight and open wide. The frown becomes a radiant smile and Mara's laughter fills the room.

"I love spinny chairs!" she shrieks. "Spinny chair! Everyone loves the spinny chair!!"

She spins and spins, round and round, and she continues spinning as she quickly shifts from her playful tone to a much more serious one.

"So what do you want?" she asks abruptly. I'm caught off guard. I stumble a bit, trying my best to navigate through this moment of awkwardness.

"Want?" I say, pondering, stalling, searching for just the right words. "Oh, what do I want—well, I just want to talk to you, about autism and Asperger's and stuff like that," I venture, not sure how that's going to go over. Mara continues to spin.

"You know?" I continue, "you had such wonderful things to say about all that stuff during the question-and-answer session after our Orlando concert with Artism, and since then I've been reading this book written by Autistic people—it's called Loud Hands: Autistic People, Speaking—and what you were saying is really in line with what they're saying. So now I'm trying to write about music, and autism, and Artism and all that, and I think it would be great if you could write with me, because you have such amazing insights and I think having you share those would make the things I'm working on way better than anything I could write by myself."

"So you want me to help you write a book?"

"Well, yeah, a book, some articles, a few different things actually. Is that okay?"

"I think that sounds cool."

"Great. So how about you talk and I'll type out what you say, or else you can just sit here at the computer and type yourself if you prefer. That's fine, too."

"You type," she says. "I like spinny chairs!"

"Remember how our concert in Orlando was at that conference, you know, the one for the Disability Studies society?"

"Yeah."

"Well, after the rest of you guys left, I stayed around for the rest of the conference. There was this one session that was run by people who do disability studies but who also have autism themselves, and they thought that our concert was sponsored by this big organization called Autism Speaks. It wasn't, but they thought it was because I had handed out this questionnaire to the audience and one of the questions had to do with 'promoting autism awareness.' Well, it turns out that 'autism awareness' is a phrase that these people, and a lot of other Autistic
people, too, really hate. They think it's offensive, because what they want is autism acceptance, not autism awareness; because a main mission of Autism Speaks is to find a cure for autism, to get rid of it, and these people with autism say they don't want to be cured, they just want to be who they are and to be accepted for being who they are. So then—"

"Who says autism is a bad thing?" Mara interjects in a tone of righteous indignation. "It sounds like this organization [Autism Speaks] is treating autism like cholera. Autism isn't cholera; it isn't some disease you can just cure. It's just there. You don't need to be aware of it; you just have to accept that it's there. I mean, you can accept cholera; it's a disease... And honestly, curing autism doesn't come in some kind of a pill or medication. And there is no cure. There really isn't. It's just there, wound into your personality."

Complexities of Autism and Challenges of Representation

The anthropologist Elizabeth Fein suggests that the principal spokespersons advocating for neurodiversity and autistic self-advocacy, for all their many differences, may be described as sharing something akin to a common profile that marks a relatively narrow band of identity along the autism spectrum. The term neurodiversity, initially popularized by the sociologist Judy Singer in the late 1990s (Singer 1999), "connotes a pluralist acceptance and sometimes embrace of atypical neurological development," Fein writes.

In theory, the term encompasses all the many variations of human neurology; in practice, it is most often used by people on the autism spectrum who value their condition as an intrinsic and in some ways beneficial part of who they are. The movement gained steam in response to campaigns... in which people with autism are depicted as tragic or absent. We're here, neurodiversity activists said, and we're okay. Many, though not all, are people...[who are] smart and verbal enough to mount sophisticated, ironic rhetorical campaigns; estranged and excluded enough from the world of normal social life that being described as nonexistent really hits a nerve. (Fein 2012:16)

Influential Autistic writers and activists like Jim Sinclair, Julia Bascom, Nick Walker, Elizabeth J. Grace, and Ari Nééman (each a contributor to the aforementioned Loud Hands anthology) could arguably be described as belonging to such a camp. So too might a verbally eloquent and intellectually prodigious Autistic child like Mara, even at her much earlier stage of life and in the absence of significant exposure to neurodiversity and autistic self-advocacy literature and identity politics (i.e., at least up to the time of our 2013 conversations from which I draw here).

These are the particular Autistic voices, and more broadly the particular kinds of Autistic voices, that are mainly at the foreground of this article. They are undeniably important voices in the discourse, but they are not the only ones. Less prominent than they might be in the present discussion, for example, are
the voices of individuals on the autism spectrum who contest, and in many cases even resent, the "we do not need to be fixed or cured"-type proclamations of Autistic self-advocates; of non-verbal Autistics on whose behalf their more verbally adept counterparts cannot unequivocally claim the right to speak; of parents and siblings, spouses and therapists, teachers and co-workers, and physicians and researchers who themselves may champion agency and self-determination for the Autistic people with whom they live and work, but who see therapeutic interventions and protocols targeting at least some degree of "normalization" or "cure" as necessary steps toward their ultimate goals.

Autism and the autism spectrum are extremely complex. Fein posits that the spectrum constitutes "a category whose parameters are in a dramatic state of flux" (Fein 2012:9), but one that ultimately reveals two core theoretical orientations. Each of these, she states, "has its own distinct history and rhetoric; each suggests a very different approach, with high moral stakes. According to the first, autism should be accepted. According to the second, autism should be fought."

Neurodiversifying Ethnomusicology: A Twofold Rationale

The inclusion here of certain Autistic voices to the exclusion of other voices, be they of people autistic or not, must be acknowledged for what it is: a limitation prefigured by the epistemological constraints of relativistic priorities. "At their worst," writes Harris M. Berger, "relativistic scholars may stamp any critique of local practice with the 'ethnographic veto,' dismissing anything other than a celebratory description of insider belief as a patronizing failure to understand and honor native perspective" (Berger 2014:3). Uncritical alignment with the professed stances of autistic self-advocacy and neurodiversity proponents, which run the gamut from rigorous scholarly studies to unapologetically polemical emotional appeals in terms of the grounds from which they spring, opens the door to the kinds of problems and deficiencies Berger evinces.

But we must consider the flipside of the issue as well. "For their part," Berger continues, "the worst critical scholars are willing to write off vast swaths of cultural terrain as nothing more than false consciousness" (Berger 2014:3). That has been business as usual in mainstream medical-scientific and popular discourses on autism since the term was coined by Leo Kanner more than 70 years ago (Kanner 1943).

In navigating the complex dialectic of critical and relativistic modes of engagement in our scholarship, Berger (2014:3) opines that most ethnomusicologists succeed in avoiding the "the Scylla and Charybdis of these-worst-case positions" of monistic adherence to one extreme or the other. I hope that the present work succeeds on this level, but I also recognize that it leans heavily to the relativistic side of the continuum by privileging neurodiversity and autistic self-advocacy as it does. This begs a rationale, the premises of which are twofold.
First, my approach is intended to combat the pervasive, indeed near-ubiquitous, proclivity for deficit-centrism that has historically dominated discourses on autism and all that they yield, right up to the present moment. Telling examples of such deficit-centric language and tone may be found in the text of the DSM-5 “Autism Spectrum Disorder” Fact Sheet, which is published on the website of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) as an adjunct to the APA’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5):

People with ASD tend to have communication deficits, such as responding inappropriately in conversations, misreading nonverbal interactions, or having difficulty building friendships appropriate to their age. In addition, people with ASD may be overly dependent on routines, highly sensitive to changes in their environment, or intensely focused on inappropriate items … (American Psychiatric Association 2013b)

This language is profusely negating, focusing almost exclusively on what is ostensibly lacking, wrong, difficult, or inappropriate. It is to such depictions that the celebrated Autistic author and livestock scientist Temple Grandin speaks when she states, “I’m certainly not saying we should lose sight of the need to work on deficits. But . . . the focus on deficits is so intense and so automatic that people lose sight of the strengths [of Autistic people]” (Grandin and Panek 2013, 180–81).

The second rationale for the approach advanced here has to do with the shared priorities of relativism that encompass the ethnographic and musicological dimensions of ethnomusicology, the guiding priorities of autistic self-advocacy, and the epistemological premises of neurodiversity alike. Of all the epistemological and rhetorical constructs that have emerged within and around the domain of autism, those of autistic self-advocacy and neurodiversity are the most trenchantly relativistic, in the sense that they give primary voice to, and primarily privilege the perspectives of, persons speaking from within the focal Autistic culture-bearer community (or, more accurately, neurodiverse culture-bearer communities). They are therefore especially amenable to convergence with the kinds of ethnographic priorities of relativism that guide so much work in our field, and beyond that, to generating the kinds of insights for which music, musical experience, and musicological inquiry are especially well equipped, particularly when engaging with an ethnomusicological context like the Artism Ensemble.

**Ethnography and Ethnomusicology, Neurodiversity and Autism**

When we do ethnomusicology, we do not go into the field looking to identify the deficits or impairments of our ethnographic consultants; we don’t endeavor to “fix” or “improve” their music, their behavior, or their values; we don’t try to normalize them according to our standards of musical or cultural normativity, let
alone to measure their "progress" toward such ends. Yet as an ethnomusicologist of autism, the first question I am usually asked by people is what measures I am using to assess the benefits of my work, with the term "benefits" here implying therapeutic gains: increased abilities, greater functionality, advancements toward normalization.

Imagine an ethnomusicologist going to Bali and working to remedy the paired tuning of gamelan instruments in accordance with an A=440 uniform tuning aesthetic; or trying to convince Balinese musicians that working under the direction of a non-playing conductor could be advantageous to their musical and social development. These are ludicrous propositions, entirely untenable within the epistemological and ethical frameworks of our discipline. We go to the field to learn, to understand, to partake of and ideally share in the musical and other life experiences of people whose musics, thoughts, and lives interest and inspire us. Whether they are adults playing gamelan in a bale banjar in Bali or children with ASCs playing percussion instruments on an E-WoMP in Florida is ultimately immaterial. The ethnomusicologist's assumption either way is that these are people who are experts at being who they are, whether as individuals, music makers, or exponents of the cultural worlds and lifeways they reflect, embody, and inform. And since they are already experts at being who they are, the job of the ethnomusicologist does not generally involve endeavoring to make them any better at being themselves. Rather, it begins, all caveats aside, with the effort to perceive and understand them on something like "their own terms," and to do this from the vantage points of multiply intersecting lenses of music, musical experience, and the ideas and fields of discourse and practice that inevitably surround them. From there, challenges can be identified and addressed, social and therapeutic supports conceived and implemented, but first there must be listening and a meeting of minds.

This foundationally relativistic epistemology opens out onto a near-infinite range of possibilities in terms of how ethnomusicological work actually takes shape and develops; the robust variety and fervent eclecticism of our field attest to this. Cultural, political, and economic advocacy, community building, public health initiatives, political mobilization efforts, and programs directed toward promoting healing and wellness for the people who form the subjects of our studies all fall within the purview of contemporary ethnomusicology. Moreover, with the rapid ascent of fields such as applied and medical ethnomusicology in recent years, such approaches are taking on an ever increasing role of prominence in the discipline at large.

For all its diversity, then, I would propose that ethnomusicology remains fundamentally, at its root, a relativistic domain of inquiry and action. Where we choose to go after first presuming that people are experts at being who they are, dedicating our efforts to understanding them more or less on their own terms,
and placing music at or near the foreground of our investigations is quite wide open. But at some level—sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit—an epistemologically relativistic point of departure is something that we as ethnomusicologists tend to share, despite the diversity of our respective approaches and the far-ranging scope of our collective scholarly, musical, personal, and communal ventures and aspirations.

This shared ground of epistemological departure not only helps to define what unifies us as practitioners of a discipline, but also illuminates key factors that distinguish core approaches and values of our discipline from those of others. Where the study of autism is concerned, this is highly significant, since the vast majority of research and clinical work in this area has occurred not in ethnomusicology or epistemologically kindred fields such as anthropology, cultural studies, or disability studies, but rather in the biomedical sciences, psychiatry, psychology, speech-language pathology, special education, and various therapeutic disciplines including speech, occupational, behavioral, and music therapy. There is, of course, an extraordinary range of diversity across such fields and within each of them; there are many points of convergence among and between them, too, not to mention with the methods, values, perspectives, and priorities of more distantly related fields like ethnomusicology.

That said, however, I would posit that much as a discipline like ethnomusicology may be said to exhibit unity within its diversity at the level of a foundational commitment to relativism, so too may the health science, medical, and therapeutic disciplines in which the study and treatment of autism is a major focus of attention be said to exhibit a different underlying unity. That unity occurs at the root level of a shared commitment to diagnosis and treatment, that is, to the identification of problems that affect people in negative ways (diseases, disorders, impairments, disabilities) and to the investigation and application of treatment modalities designed to address, and ideally solve (prevent, rehabilitate, heal, fix, improve, cure, eradicate) these problems.

It must be stressed that researchers and clinicians in these fields may be unabashedly relativistic and deeply committed to ideals of meeting their patients or clients where they are. They may even embrace and employ the very kinds of ethnographic, experiential, and participatory theories and methods that ethnomusicologists or anthropologists do. Ultimately, however, their responsibility, by and large, is to promote and bring about change, to figure out what is wrong with people and to make them better, to diagnose their afflictions and facilitate the achievement of beneficial outcomes. They are, first and foremost, agents of change in search of solutions. The following excerpts from a 2012 article entitled "Music Therapy as a Treatment Modality for Autism Spectrum Disorders," which was published on the website of the American Music Therapy Association, illustrates this point:
Music Therapy is the clinical and evidence-based use of music interventions to accomplish individualized goals within a therapeutic relationship by a credentialed professional who has completed an approved music therapy program... Music therapy provides a unique variety of music experiences in an intentional and developmentally appropriate manner to effect changes in behavior and facilitate development of skills... Music therapy can stimulate individuals [with ASD] to reduce negative and/or self-stimulatory responses and increase participation in more appropriate and socially acceptable ways... Because music is processed in both hemispheres of the brain, it can stimulate cognitive functioning and may be used for remediation of some speech/language skills [in persons with ASD] (American Music Therapy Association 2012).

The focus throughout these passages is on effecting changes—reducing negative behaviors, facilitating the acquisition of specific skills, remediating deficits in communication—with the music therapist acting as the primary agent of change working on behalf of her or his clients. The orientation is quite different from that to which we tend to direct ourselves in a relativistic field like ethnomusicology.

Or is it? Many ethnomusicologists, perhaps especially those who identify with the epistemological orientations of medical ethnomusicology and applied ethnomusicology, do work that is explicitly directed toward effecting changes in the lives of the subjects of their investigations, and often even in collaboration with physicians, therapists, and medical, scientific, and public health researchers. Understanding, promoting, and endeavoring to bring about health, healing, wellness, and even cure—in other words, change—through musical and ethnomusicological means is often a priority of such work. Still, I would maintain that ethnomusicology and the relativistic purview it foregrounds remain central in such contexts, with profound implications for distinguishing this kind of work from medical/scientific research and practice that does not share its basic orientation.

Any attempt to generalize “what ethnomusicologists do,” or what music therapists do, for that matter, cannot help but lead to some degree of essentialism and misrepresentation: there are as many ways of doing ethnomusicology as there are ethnomusicologists who do it. Music therapy—and music therapists—are no less diverse; the selected passages from the AMTA publication above can by no means be regarded as fully representative of that field, or even of a majority of its practitioners and theorists. Nonetheless, the foundational relativism of ethnomusicology yields a way of thinking about and interacting with people that differs markedly from the foundational diagnosis-and-treatment orientation of music therapy. The epistemological underpinnings of the one or the other are not inherently better or worse comparatively; indeed they posit great potential for synergy and collaboration. But they are different, and not least of all because they come with different basic job responsibilities, as it were.
For therapists to be successful as such, that is, in providing therapy, they generally must identify problems faced by their clients, work toward finding solutions to or lessening the severity of those problems, and supply evidence (usually in the form of quantitative or qualitative measures) to document the efficacy of their methods. That is essentially their job.

Contrastingly, as an ethnomusicologist, I am not expected to identify things that are wrong with people or to devise possible solutions to make them more right in order to do my job successfully. Quite the opposite, for I have been trained to conceptualize the ways in which these people are different from me—musically and otherwise—not as markers of anything like disability, but rather, to borrow from the emerging lexicon of neurodiversity, as expressions of their *diffability* (Kennedy 2012): their differing kinds of ability and the different values and circumstances that inform them. And if there is a problem to be addressed in some therapeutic manner and I am to be part of the solution, my training and relativistic purview incline me to assume that this is not for me to determine, but should instead be something brought to my attention by members of the community with whom I am interacting through my work. The provision of therapy, however conceived and defined, should be at their initiative, not mine.

My job, as an ethnomusicologist who works with Autistic people and promotes neurodiversity, involves using ethnography and music to debunk ill-informed or misinformed public perceptions of difference as problematic, deficient, or symptomatic. It encompasses an aspiration to advance and expand public perceptions of difference as, well, just difference—neutral and benign at least; positive, enriching, and inspiring of progress more likely.

The kind of change to which I wish to contribute through a project like Artism begins, and in a sense remains, at the level of understanding and communicating with my fellow ensemble members through music and ethnography. I want to better know who they are, how they think about themselves and their world, and where they are coming from. I want to learn to perceive them as they wish to be perceived—individually, culturally, socially, agentively, and musically. I do not want to use music or ethnomusicology to change them; rather, I want to use music and apply ethnomusicology to work jointly with them as advocates for both local and broad-based social change and justice; to ensure that their voices—literal and metaphorical—get heard by people in a plethora of contexts and settings that move dialogue and action forward with new ideas and through the debunking of old stereotypes.

**Making Neurodiverse Music:**
**Performance and Performativity**

Making and performing music are central to the ethnomusicological aspirations of the Artism project. These activities, beyond their inherent joys and
rewards, have the capacity to build bridges that deepen relationships and mutual trust on multiple levels, and additionally to enable the production of alternative models and images of autistic and neurodiverse realities in public space. Again, there are potential problems and risks. Artism is undeniably a product of the very hegemonic constructs it resists and challenges. It highlights the staging of autism and the performance of disability. In so doing it paradoxically resists and is co-opted by an essentially (and essentialist) pathologizing view which posits “autism” in contradistinction to “normal,” thus propagating the very constructs of exclusion and hierarchy it aims to overturn, at least in some measure.

A key to minimizing such problems and maximizing the project’s positive potential may well rest in a distinction between performance and performativity, as articulated by Henry Spiller in a recent article in this journal:

Ethnomusicologists who have tried to make music in the style of the Others that they study may have a unique understanding of what it is like to transition from performance—in the form of awkward, self-conscious attempts to embody a different kind of music-making—to performativity, where those once self-conscious attempts come to feel as if they were instinctively emanating from some stable aesthetic core. (Spiller 2014:342–43)

It is the continual and collective attempt to make that transition from performance to performativity that defines and models the neurodiverse ideals—and hopefully also realities—of the Artism Ensemble. This is the case regardless of how successfully the transition itself is made. Performativity, in Spiller’s sense of the word, implies a striving for communitas. That striving is mutual. The children in Artism may be the designated cultural insiders of the ensemble’s musical world, but they, every bit as much as the rest of the players, demonstrate an ever-present and always growing commitment to the kinds of giving, flexibility, and reciprocity that make music work as a social and communal experience.

This collective spirit of striving for common ground projects outward in Artism performances, and in its modeling against separation, against isolation, and against disability, it militates against any proclivities for essentialist perceptions of autism that it might confront. This does not ensure success by any means, but it does generate its possibility. Artism concerts are by and large joyful experiences: the children look to be having fun with each other and with their adult fellow players; they are mainly “in charge” but not always, and they take turns leading and following. The music works to the extent that performativity is evident as a product of both collective and individual agency, whether in manifest form or in a dedicated process of becoming.

And when all that is before you, say, as an audience member at an Artism concert, “autism” tends to pale in comparison to the real thing: people. Different kinds of people—different ages, different cultural backgrounds, different musical abilities, different kinds of neurodiversity—but people all nonetheless and people engaged productively, and mainly happily, in a common endeavor moreover.
Dialogue 2: “Why does it matter?”

Mara has stopped spinning for the moment. Now she resumes. “Spinning chairs! Spinning chairs make everyone happy!” she sings. Then, in a mock serious tone, “I get distracted easily,” and after that, throwing back her hair and laughing wildly, “especially by things like this that are SPINNY CHAIRS!!”

“You know,” I say to Mara, laughing along with her as she continues to spin away, “the scientists and the doctors and therapists and people like that who specialize in autism, and the people in those organizations like Autism Speaks, would say that what you’re doing now—spinning and spinning and spinning while we have this conversation—is an example of stimming, that it’s a ‘symptom’ of your Asperger’s or your autism or whatever.”

“Stim—what?” Mara asks, seemingly confused. “What is that?”

“Stimming,” I repeat. “It’s a word that they use to describe so-called ‘self-stimulating behaviors’ that Autistic people do when they’re, I don’t know, feeling stressed or uncomfortable or whatever, or maybe the scientists don’t know why they do those things but they know they do them and they say that’s one of the things that makes them autistic.”

More hearty laughter from Mara.

“That’s just ridiculous!” she states incredulously. “I mean, I bet that the President has a spiny chair and sometimes he spins around. . . . [He] probably doesn’t laugh like I do because the President doesn’t laugh, or at least lots of people think that, but that’s just another stereotype—but still.”

There is a brief pause in the conversation as Mara continues to spin.

“I like to talk a lot,” she explains, “but the President likes to talk a lot too. And he gives all those speeches, so why don’t they say that the President needs to be ‘cured,’ because the President talks a lot too. If he’s like me in any way, he needs to be ‘cured,’ doesn’t he?”

I chuckle. Mara stops spinning, leans forward, and points to the spot on my computer monitor where I have just transcribed her last remark.

“Just say that I said that sarcastically,” she insists. “I don’t want to offend the President.”

A little later in the conversation, the subject turns to the Artism Ensemble. Mara tells me that she really likes being in the group, that it’s fun, and that she thinks it’s good for her. How so? I ask.

“. . . [Y]ou know, I like to make my songs funny,” she begins, before launching into a summative assessment of the compositional styles of the other three kids in the current group. ‘And NICKstr likes to make his songs really precise. E.S. liked [sic] to make her songs quiet. And Coffeebot likes to make his songs precise and sort of loud, and he really likes the steel drum. Me, I really like all their songs. They’re always so great. I mean, I don’t know how Coffeebot comes
up with those awesome beats; and E.S. [is amazing!] NICKstr, I don't always understand his songs. They've never been very predictable, even though he likes them to be precise, and honestly it's really cool seeing all these kids come up with different songs and different styles of songs."

"And of course the Autism Ensemble [sic] is not a cure," Mara continues. "I don't treat it like a cure, because it isn't, and if you call it a cure I will disagree with you. It's simply the kind of way you can calm down and, you know, help with the bad parts of autism without restricting the good parts. Yeah."

["How does that work?"]

"Well, what I mean is, a lot of famous people were Autistic or Asperger's or something. [My] Mom tells us that people like Einstein and Marie Curie and a bunch of other famous people had it. Mom tells me that a lot of people who have autism and Asperger's can be more creative and insightful than other people, insightful in a way, you know, where they've experienced a lot of the emotions that they're either writing about in stories, or plays, or poems; because a lot of people who have autism can swing between different emotions really quickly. I'm like that. Someone will just say one word and I become like a stereotyped emo. (Once again, if you haven't heard it before, an emo is one of those really sad, dark people. I just go around telling people 'Life is pointless' when I'm like that.) Of course, the bad parts in my situation are that when I get angry, I get ANGRY!! I mean, like, yelling, slamming-door angry. Of course, I never get physical angry. I don't punch or hit or bite, though I have bitten someone, but that was in third grade."

Mara fidgets a bit then continues.

"What I meant by helping with the bad parts but not restricting the good parts is that Artism kind of helps with my anger issues without restricting my creativity . . . it's the fact that I'm allowed to bang on drums for a while—and any instrument I want (as long as I don't break it or it's not meant to be banged)—without anybody telling me I'm supposed to do it this way, or I'm supposed to do it that way, or I'm supposed to put this there or that THERE, or I'm doing it wrong."

"Is that the most important one—the one about not being told you're doing it wrong?"

"Yeah."

"Why is that so important, not to be told you're doing it wrong?"

"Because I'm told that every day. I want a break from it!"

Mara laughs. "Spinny chairs!" she exclaims and whips around in circles a few more times. "It's just nice being there with other people without them telling me what to do, or just jabbering about all the things they can do that I can't," she explains, returning to the subject of her Artism experiences.

"If Artism continues next year and you stay in the group, what would you think about having an adult musician with autism join the band?"
“That would be good actually; it sounds pretty cool. I’d like that.” Mara pauses and redirects her attention. “I like spiny chairs, paper clips, wolves, and a bunch of other things.”

“What do you think it would add?”

“It would add to themselves and to us. It would be cool seeing an adult with autism in the group instead of just kids with autism. And the Autistic adult would be happy to see so many Autistic kids being happy too . . .”

“Would it be good to have kids who weren’t Autistic in the group as well?”

“What do you mean?” Mara asks, looking perplexed, as though the question doesn’t even make sense. “Well, why not?” she finally exclaims. “Does it matter? I mean, just because it’s called the Artism Ensemble doesn’t mean we only have to have Autistic kids in there . . . We’re all just kids in the end. I mean, that’s the whole point. We’re all just kids in the end. Who friggin’ cares whether we’re Autistic or not? Why does it matter?”

Concluding Thoughts

Why does it matter? Mara evidently presents this as a rhetorical question, the clear implication being that it doesn’t. She is of course right, and she is of course not. The effects and challenges of autism are real and profound, and the stakes are high. Autism is a defining phenomenon of our age. Recent estimates from the CDC indicate that approximately one in every sixty-eight children in the United States is on the autism spectrum (CDC 2014). That is a lot of people, and in my own experience it is rare that I meet anyone these days who is neither on the spectrum nor has relatives, friends, classmates, or co-workers who are.

Autism touches all of us. It is here to stay, and so too are Autistic people. We all need to embrace that fact. There may be more questions than answers, more possible paths forward than clear indications of which ones are best to follow. Yet the right first steps are perhaps not so hard to determine if we take to heart the overarching messages of autistic self-advocacy and neurodiversity while grounding ourselves in the foundations of relativism and close listening that form the core of ethnomusicology. ‘Accept us, Respect us, Support us, Include us, Listen to Us,’ declare Autistic self-advocates and neurodiversity proponents in something like unison voice (Silberman 2012:364–65). ‘We are here. We are what we are. Whatever is said and whatever is done, that is not going to change.’

The values, priorities, and epistemological foundations of ethnomusicology, neurodiversity, and autistic self-advocacy are eminently compatible, in many ways nearly identical. They are linked by a common, overarching humanistic imperative, which holds that working from a template of mutual acceptance, respect, support, inclusion, and listening is always a good idea. Making music and sharing music through performance offer powerful vehicles for making
such ideals real and tangible; the ethnographic principles of ethnomusicology provide a strong foundation from which to make and understand music that works in these ways. In the tools and resources of music and ethnography, then, ethnomusicologists are well equipped to contribute productively and creatively to the making of a more accepting, respectful, supportive, and inclusive world of neurodiversity, and indeed of all forms of diversity. We are likewise well positioned to model and inspire a world of better listeners, and in so doing have the potential to meet our responsibility of advancing the causes of social justice and compassion wherever and whenever we are able.

Acknowledgments

An abridged, earlier version of this paper was read at the 2013 annual meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology in Indianapolis. I would like to express my appreciation to the two anonymous readers who reviewed the manuscript for Ethnomusicology and to Ellen Koskoff and her editorial staff at the journal for their insightful feedback and wonderful editorial suggestions and assistance. Research for this project was sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Florida Department of State’s Division of Cultural Affairs, the Florida Council on the Arts and Culture, Remo Inc., the Council on Culture and Arts for Tallahassee/Leon County (COCA), Temple Israel of Tallahassee, the Society for Disability Studies, the Tallahassee Youth Orchestras, and the Florida State University’s College of Music, College of Medicine, Center for Autism and Related Disabilities, and Autism Institute. My sincere thanks to Jennifer Hoesing, Leo Welch, Bethany Atwell, Rebecca Hurd, John Fitzgerald, Peggy Brady and the COCA staff, Michelle Jones, Alexandria Carrico, Carrie Danielson, Elyse Marrero, Lindee Morgan, Amy Wetherby, Mia Gormandy, Brian Hall, Channing Griggs, Vietanne Asturiza, Ramin Yazdpanah, Haiqiong Deng, Carlos Ondria, and Carlos Silva. I am most especially grateful to the children who have played in the group—Mara, E.S., Zolabean, NICKster, and Coffeebot—and to their wonderful parents and families. Their commitment, passion, and creativity have been a constant source of inspiration and I look forward to making more great music with them in the future. Finally, special thanks also to Dr. Elizabeth J. Grace, Zachary Richter, Allegra Stout, and the other panelists and participants who were involved in the "Intersectionalities in Autistic Culture(s)" session at the 2013 Society for Disability Studies Conference. Their criticisms and suggestions, as well as recommendations of autistic self-advocacy literature and resources, have shaped my work and thinking profoundly.

Notes


3. Since the children who have played in the Artism Ensemble, with the exception of one (i.e., Mara, who figures prominently in this article), have not to date self-identified as Autistics per se,
at least in their interactions with me, I have elected in this and related instances to use person-first language designations such as "children diagnosed with ASCs" rather than "Autistic children" in reference to them. Elsewhere, following the model of Silberman (2012), I capitalize "Autistic" when referring to a specific individual or group of individuals (e.g., "the Autistic author Nick Walker," "Autistic self-advocates") but use lowercase in other, more generic references to words like autistic and autism (e.g., "autistic symptoms," "behaviors associated with autism").

4. In actuality, the grant was initially awarded for just the first year, 2011, but the original grant proposal outlined a three-year plan and the renewal proposals for both 2012 and 2013 were successful. At all phases, the project was reviewed and approved by the Human Subjects Committee of the Institutional Review Board at Florida State University.

5. With the exception of Mara, who specifically requested that she be referred to by her real name, all of the children and parents who participated in the Artism Ensemble are represented in this article by pseudonyms. Note also that one of these children, Zolabean, is only briefly mentioned in the article, though she figures prominently in other, forthcoming publications stemming from this research.

6. "Joobai!" by E.S., may be accessed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2YVHidQjLLo; "Steel Percussion," by Nickatr, at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8/JKr5HlQcSI. Both performances were recorded during an Artism Ensemble concert at the Florida State University Museum of Fine Arts in the spring of 2013.

7. Compare to the following passage from Hood’s 1996 article in World Music Reports, "Voices of Excellence": "Only those who have performed the music have earned the right to talk about it" (Hood 1996:3).

8. In the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (i.e., DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association 2013a), the various separate "disorders" of the autism spectrum, including Asperger’s syndrome (Asperger’s disorder), have essentially been collapsed into a single diagnostic category of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

9. The rehearsal video of Maran’s "Purple Eggs and Ham" may be accessed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjQpaA96-E. Note that this video commences with an incomplete take. The full performance corresponding to the written description and text transcription provided in this article starts at 0:40 of the video, immediately after the point at which one of the children (Coffeebot) is heard saying "Take two."

10. While discussions of autism and ASCs have been at the forefront of the neurodiversity movement, the movement’s broader rubric encompasses a range of other conditions, such as ADHD, dyslexia, and Down syndrome.

11. I should note that my choice of Balinese gamelan as the comparative reference in this section is not reflective of a belief on my part that gamelan is any more or less well suited to the example than would be any other musicultural tradition (Bakan 2012). It is simply a product of the fact that much of my own work as an ethnomusicologist has focused on Balinese music (see, for example, Bakan 1999).

12. Of the many potentially relevant examples, a number of which are cited elsewhere in this article, one especially important publication is the book The Culture of AIDS in Africa: Hope and Healing through Music and the Arts, co-edited by Gregory Barz and Judals M. Cohen (2011). Reviewing that work and preparing a response to it for the President’s Roundtable at the 2011 Society for Ethnomusicology meeting in Philadelphia (Balan 2011) influenced my thinking and work in ways that continue to resonate in my current research on ethnomusicology and autism.


15. Examples include Koen 2009 and Barz and Cohen 2011. Also significant in this regard is the work of Theresa Allison, who is both a medical doctor specializing in geriatrics and a Ph.D. in ethnomusicology. Her insightful ethnomusicological work on music and aging (Allison 2010) is uniquely informed by this dual perspective and her concomitant professional training and experience.

References


