**American Music Documentary: Five Case Studies of Ciné-Ethnomusicology**


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*American Music Documentary: Five Case Studies of Ciné-Ethnomusicology* is Benjamin J. Harbert’s stimulating volume on music-centered films made by documentary filmmakers. In contrast to what the title of the book might imply, this work does not refer to films made by ethnomusicologists, anthropologists, folklorists, or other related social researchers. Instead, it deals with five specific examples of music films in order to further elaborate the concept of how we could apply an ethnomusicological approach to the formation and the analysis of films about music and musicians. Harbert is an associate professor in the Department of Performing Arts at Georgetown University specializing in the study of music in nonfictional films, so one could not think of a better expert to carry out this original project.

The detailed presentation of the films *Gimme Shelter* (Albert Maysles, 1970), *Antonia: A Portrait of the Woman* (Jill Godmilow, 1974), *Ornette: Made in America* (Shirley Clarke, 1985), *Depeche Mode: 101* (Donn Alan Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus, 1988), and *Instrument* (Jem Cohen and Fugazi, 1999), as well as the references to other similar films, give Harbert grounds for developing an alternative viewpoint on creating and studying cinematic representations of music. But what is it essentially that Harbert calls “ciné-ethnomusicology”? He investigates an aspect of film that has been underestimated for years, even when studying films with actual musical content. Blending fundamental ethnomusicological and film principles, the author provides an interdisciplinary background for mutual “film-music” knowledge. Besides all these theoretical insights, he also applies the qualitative methodological tools of ethnomusicology in film analyses, such as in-depth interviews with film practitioners, empirical observation, and critical viewing, listening, and “reading” films.

After introducing the book’s main themes, Harbert proceeds with his five case studies through a threefold writing model: presenting the directors’ oral testimonies as straightforward responses to the understanding of the films; explaining them through the examination of specific audiovisual strategies; and reflecting on them as if they were ethnomusicological texts. He claims that “[s]hifting between these three modes of inquiry into the films offers a variety of perspectives on these five exemplary films about music’s relationship to social and cultural phenomena” (16). There have been many scholars arguing the need for researching contemporary film (and multimedia) culture as an audio-visual synthesis, but through his book Harbert affords an applied guide with paradigms on how to make this really possible. In addition, this volume provides an extended music-filmography, a list of the interviews and archival material used, and an extra glossary of filmic terms and techniques.

Harbert prudently borrows from Jean Rouch’s terminology—especially from his intercultural “ciné-ethnographies”–to introduce “ciné-ethnomusicology” as a hybrid discipline for the systematic (theoretical and methodological) research of “film-music” culture in symbolic and semiotic terms. This is a common node connecting ethnomusicology to the groundwork that had been created earlier by the anthropology of visual communication, which had, however, ignored to a great extent the sound elements of film. The author of the book identifies five possible reasons for the restrained linkage between filming and the ethnomusicological discipline. There is hardly anyone who could challenge Harbert’s hypothesis since, if truth be told, cinema is a quite expensive medium of representation; academic scholarship lacks systematic audiovisual literacy; senior university professors stress the supremacy of written as opposed to audiovisual texts; festival- and conference-proceedings rarely include films; and finally, distribution is usually problematic for non-profitmaking artifacts.
Presenting these observations and more, American Music Documentary: Five Case Studies of Ciné-Ethnomusicology is an outstanding book, one that will be of great significance to ethnomusicologists and visual anthropologists interested in cinema, to film directors who are music enthusiasts, and also to the general audiences of music documentaries. This book could also be a useful companion, for both students and professors, in academic courses relating to ethnomusicology and motion pictures. Throughout its pages, readers will discover another way—more essential, more comprehensive, and more productive than the typical procedure—to look at music films. Without a doubt, this volume could become an inspirational motivation for a “ciné-ethnomusicology” that shows special concern for cinematic and other audiovisual media, not only as tools for recording, archiving, and disseminating unique music performances but also as creative channels for critically understanding both music and film.