

Call and Response—Revisited

TYLER BICKFORD / Columbia University

I read and enjoyed Judith Becker's article, "Ethnomusicology and Empiricism in the Twenty-First Century," in the Fall issue of *Ethnomusicology* (vol. 53, no. 3, pp. 478–501). While it makes an important contribution to all of our shared interest in placing ethnomusicological knowledge on a rigorous basis, I question the use of the term "empiricism" to stand only for experimental, systematic, or quantitative methods. This is a term that has much wider importance to ethnomusicology as a whole.

The historical investment of ethnomusicology in ethnographic fieldwork is rightly termed "empirical," and a central contribution of ethnographic disciplines to the humanities is to demonstrate that knowledge can and should be based on experience and observation.

Becker's comment that "empirical research fell out of favor in the discipline" (478) does not reflect how ethnomusicologists I know think about or present their own research. As someone who is explicitly committed to what I think of as "empiricism" (but not to experimental methods), it is disheartening to see the term used prominently in our flagship journal as though it excludes ethnographic and interpretive methods. Of course, "experimental" is one commonly accepted, if narrow, sense of "empirical," but I think we have an interest in preserving the wider meaning of the term.

Becker's argument that ethnomusicological and humanistic questions can and should be asked by cognitive scientists and psychologists is appealing, not least for its suggestion that a larger audience might find ethnomusicology valuable. My concern is that by defining ethnomusicological empiricism through reference to those disciplines—to suggest that the work many of us do is not empirical—neglects a defining element of ethnomusicology throughout its history, and risks pulling the rug out from under our whole enterprise. That said, the main thrust of Becker's article involves "reductionism" and "experimentation." Since she and Jeff Todd Titon both use those terms throughout their Call and Response much more than they use "empiricism,"

I think her argument would remain intact if we were to reclaim the broad sense of empiricism for ethnomusicology as a whole.

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In his response to my article, "Ethnomusicology and Empiricism in the Twenty-First Century," Tyler Bickford challenged my use of the term "empiricism," by pointing out that much of the work that ethnomusicologists do is empirical in the sense that it is based upon direct observation. Historically, Bickford is correct. I should have made clear that I was using the term in the more recent, narrower sense, to mean knowledge gained by scientific experimental methods. The historical definition of empiricism arose in protest against those who believed in innate ideas or in the power of reason to gain knowledge. David Hume (1711-1776) and John Locke (1632-1704) are among those philosophers most closely associated with the broader usage of the term who insisted upon actual experience, not thought or introspection, as the means to knowing. As Bickford has pointed out, nearly all ethnomusicologists are empiricists in this sense.