Charles Seeger and Twenty-First-Century Musicologies: 
A Critical Assessment of his Meta-Musicological Thinking 

Ph.D.-Proposal 

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Few people will doubt that Charles Louis Seeger (1886-1979) was a highly fascinating character, be it as a composer, as a musicologist of various trades, as a philosopher, as a critic, as a social activist, or even as an inventor. He is often recognised as one of the main influences on ethnomusicology as it developed after World War II and is commemorated by the SEM’s Charles Seeger Lectures and the Charles Seeger Prize. Bell Yung and Helen Rees call him “one of the most original thinkers in musical studies in the twentieth century” (Yung and Rees 1999a:4). His colleague Mantle Hood once even warned all those active in music research: “read all Charles Seeger has had to say before claiming to have a new idea” (Hood 1979:79). Even today, one can find references to Charles Seeger not only in ethnomusicology but also in other fields of music research. Yet often it seems that his name is rather invoked in passing, as reference to a revered figure, instead of engaging in a substantial and critical discussion of his ideas. Seeger’s prose is criticised as being obscure (though at the same time inspiring) by similarly influential figures like Bruno Nettl (1991:268) or Joseph Kerman (1985:158). Nevertheless, there has been some serious in-depth engagement with Seeger’s thinking during the last twenty years. Especially notable publications are Ann M. Pescatello’s (1992) biography of Seeger, a collection of essays edited by Bell Yung and Helen Rees (1999b) addressing selected topics of Seeger’s life and thinking, and finally Taylor Aitken Greer’s (1998) monograph on Seeger’s philosophy of music, its historical roots and its bearing on various areas of his work.

My thesis is intended as a contribution to this discourse on Seeger’s thinking. But it is not primarily intended to be a historiographical account, neither regarding Seeger’s intellectual history nor the history of the field of musicology. Instead, I will take a systematic approach to his work from the point of view of twenty-first-century musicological research. Drawing on his publications and other sources, I will reconstruct his ideas on several key issues that are of interest in contemporary musicological discourse (see below). Next, I will critically evaluate them in relation to other author’s writings. And finally, drawing on this discussion, I will try to develop Seeger’s ideas further as a contribution to contemporary discourse. That I call my approach systematic does not mean that such an approach could be free of historical depth: many topics reappeared in Seeger’s publications over the years and he often revised his ideas.

1 Additionally, there has been some research on Seeger’s second wife and collaborator Ruth Crawford Seeger (see, for example, Tick 1997). Seeger’s musical compositions and compositional techniques have also attracted some analytical interest (see, for example, Slottow 2008), but these issues are of ephemeral concern to this thesis.

2 I use “musicology” in the broadest sense possible, that is, as an umbrella term for all varieties of scholarly or scientific music research (or: for all musicologies). This use is in line with Seeger’s application of the term.
on these topics. Thus, it is necessary to account for the historical development of his thinking, since it is not said that his latest ideas on a certain issue were his best. What he said in the 1920s on a given topic may potentially (though maybe not probably) be more interesting to us today than what he said fifty years later. There is another reason why my thesis cannot be completely ahistorical in its approach: due to Seeger’s sometimes dense or even obscure prose a good deal of interpretive work will have to be done, including contextualising Seeger’s writings on music and musicology with those by other thinkers on the same or more general issues who had an impact on him at the time he wrote the text that is subject to interpretation. One can borrow a notion from philosophical historiography and regard this thesis to be a kind of “philosophising history of (musical/musicological) philosophy”. Yet, the emphasis will be much more on active and new philosophising than on historiography. This does not exclude the possibility that I will see need to revise certain historical assessments found in earlier literature on Seeger while proceeding with my project. However, such historical revision is not my main goal.

Seeger’s work is extremely rich and many of the issues he dealt with are in one way or another still of interest today. For example, Seeger did research on shape note singing (Seeger 1940), and seventy years later there is still research on this practice (see, for example, Miller 2008, in which Seeger is quoted). But among Seeger’s research is a subset of recurring topics – some more explicitly dealt with than others – that are of quasi-timeless interest to musicologists. These are not so much questions that musicologists address in their everyday research on, say, popular music in Egypt or the operas of Olga Neuwirth, but rather meta-musicological issues that concern the foundations of musicological research. A possible categorisation of these issues looks like this:

1) **Ontology**: What is music (in general)? What are special musical entities (songs or tunes like “Barbara Allen”, for example)? What is the nature and status of music’s properties, especially of music’s value?

2) **Epistemology and methodology**: What can we know about music? What kinds of knowledge are there about music? How can we get to know something about music? How can we trade and teach such knowledge?

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3 Seeger discusses such issues in numerous publications (see Seeger 1924 and 1970, to mention just two prominent and obvious example from the beginning and end of his career). At the end of his life and encouraged by Mantle Hood, he even envisioned a book titled *Principia Musicologica*, a project that remained – mostly – a vision (see Pescatello 1992:251-252).
3) **The ethos of musicological research**: What is the objective/ are the objectives of musicological research? Why should we do research on/in music and to what end (two kinds of aims: aims relatively intrinsic to music research; aims relatively extrinsic to – or transcending – the immediate concerns of music research)?

4) **The disciplinarity of musicological research** (uni-, multi-, inter-, trans-, post-, etc.): What is the object/ are the objects of musicological research? Is there one musicological discipline or are there several? If several, how are they interrelated and what possibilities exist for joint research endeavours? Is any disciplinary talk about music research maybe historically bound and will there be a time of post-disciplinary research; or is there even already such research? How will musicological research develop? (It is important to note that all these questions have both a descriptive and a normative aspect: How is/was the state of musicological research? How should it be/develop? The normative aspect is tied to the question of ethos.)

Given the diversified state of musicological research at the beginning of the twenty-first century, these foundational issues are not only in principle relevant, but they are actually a recurrent and contested issue in publications from various areas of music research (see, among others, Korsyn 2003, Parncutt 2007, Cook 2008, Born 2010, Walter 2012, Sharif 2013). The participants in these debates rarely take on Seeger’s ideas on these issues, but a fresh and serious look at his inspiring writings promises new impulses for the future development of musicological research.

The work for this thesis will ideally proceed in three stages, though in reality the stages will most probably overlap: In the first stage, I will review Seeger’s writings in respect of the topics listed above. I will do the same with literature on Seeger and literature that otherwise substantially discusses his ideas. In the second stage, I will systematically reconstruct his thoughts and their development. In the third and final stage, I will evaluate his opinions and develop them further from a modern point of view and in a critical dialogue with contemporary writing on the same issues.
References cited

A comprehensive bibliography of Charles Seeger’s publications as well as of other primary sources can be found in Pescatello (1992:317-329).

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