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Music a pathway to cultural understanding

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Regional

Music a pathway to cultural understanding

Music, of course, is not just about playing an instrument, or even performing. Music can tell us a lot about culture and history – about the human condition itself.

Experts who work in the study of music from a scholarly viewpoint are called musicologists and Andrew Greenwood, an assistant professor of musicology in the department of music at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, is one of them. He said that he decided to become a musicologist because of his love for music.

“I considered going into keyboard performance in university studies,” he said. “At the time I was also very passionate about the sciences and math. I kind of started questioning the route of learning music and not looking at the larger historical contexts of the pieces I was learning, which sort of troubled me. So when I went to college that was something I became more and more curious about.” He started to ask questions such as why we perform certain pieces and not others, and where do these music traditions come from?”

A native from Canberra, Australia, he obtained his bachelor’s degree in music from the Australian National University in Canberra, his master’s, also in music, from The University of Sydney, and his doctorate in history and theory of music from the University of Chicago.

Greenwood recognizes that the term musicologist is kind of vague. “I would say the main thing a musicologist does is study the historical and social contexts of works,” he said. “That’s one thing that we do. And also we collect music.”

Musicology started as a field from the collection of works from great composers such as Johann Sebastian Bach. Universities began to take seriously the study of music and make it useful for performers.

Although he grew up in Australia and part of his university education was in the United States, he decided to study Scottish music. He said that this choice would not be the most obvious. “Perhaps something on 20th century German composers, or perhaps something on 18th century opera, but the Scottish topic came completely out of left field,” he said. It was during a seminar he took that he heard about Scottish songs and his interest in that type of music was born.



Photo by Michael Nathe

Dr. Greenwood studying some music scores at the Lovejoy Library at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

“It started to bring together a lot of issues and interests that I had for a long time,” Greenwood said. “And I just got more and more interested in it. I had a wonderful experience doing my graduate research, and not everyone does. It has just been a real joy to be involved in.” As an Australian he said that he thinks that Australian music owes a lot to the British tradition.

“I have studied some of the early colonial manuscripts in the National Library of Australia and most of the music was

coming in the form of sheet music in that early period,” he explained. “English piano music was very popular and owning a piano became a huge status symbol for some of the early settlers.” Some estimate that the number of pianos in Australia in the early 19th century was in the hundreds of thousands.

“And then what we see is an attempt to sort of ‘Australianize’ British music,” he added. “So you’ll see beautiful printed music for piano and voice that will be

accompanied with imagery like kangaroos and other fauna.” The way Scottish music evolved was rather different and more complicated.

“The earliest I would say is Gregorian chant. Some of the best manuscripts come out of Scotland for chant music,” he said. “So before the Reformation there was a great tradition of music in the Catholic Church. And that continued on through the Renaissance. Scottish kings were able to play music and compose music and it was

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a very important part of the social and cultural life in certainly the 16th and leading into the 17th century.” There was also some influence from the folk side that is harder to document in certain ways because it was transmitted through oral tradition.

“We do have folk music that was eventually distributed through printed text and then ultimately notated and melodies were set to that. I think that the longer history of Scottish music is basically a story of a nexus and mixing of musical traditions from the west and non-west traditions,” said Greenwood, who added that like other forms of music, Scottish music is a reflection of the society from which it developed.

“I think this music sheds a great deal of light on some of the larger history of Scotland and some of the issues that were brought about in the debate about whether to become independent or not,” he said. “I think one of the biggest issues is this inter-relationship between different traditions – the indigenous folk tradition of Scotland and also the larger British context.”

Interestingly, Edinburgh, the capital of Scotland, has a very famous jazz and blues festival. Jazz is very popular in Scotland, as it is in many parts of Europe, even more popular than in the United States. But why do the Scots have such an intense interest in jazz?

“I can’t really say,” said Greenwood. “You may have heard of the Edinburgh Festival and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. They attract tens of thousands of people every year. I can’t say why this particular interest in jazz, but I think that Scots have always been a people that have absorbed and been influenced by and been interested in other traditions that aren’t necessarily their own

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, “Segue,” can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.