

**Julia Byl. *Antiphonal Histories: Resonant Pasts in the Toba Batak Musical Present*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014. 336 pp.**

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In *Antiphonal Histories*, Julia Byl articulates how North Sumatra's Toba Batak people invoke a complicated history of local, national, and global cultural influences to give meaning to their contemporary musical lives. The book encompasses a vast historical and musical terrain in which indigenous ensembles blend with the music of merchants, missionaries, and migrants, who left traces of music from South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe over the past fifteen hundred years. Traditional beliefs and customs coexist side-by-side with Indic, Islamic, colonial, and national pasts. The book, based on Byl's 2006 dissertation (University of Michigan), shows how Toba musical performances sonically activate the "back and forth" (antiphonal) relationship between past and present.

Byl presents contemporary Toba Batak musical life as a multifaceted blend of seven genres that includes traditional, popular, and religious musical expressions. Byl emphasizes the totality of Toba musical life, rather than focusing on a particular genre or genres in depth (in terms of, for example, ensembles, relationship between parts, instrument functions, musical forms, and dance, among others). Genre boundaries are incredibly porous, Byl argues, and singular genres themselves reflect multiple influences of distant histories, places, and cultures. Her fieldwork choices mirror the interlocking histories of Toba Batak music: Byl is equally comfortable studying the intricate patterns of the *taganing* drum and *hasapi* lute, as she is singing pop songs at palm wine stands on Saturday nights.

Byl is critical of ethnographies of music that relegate history to a "dense background chapter near the beginning of a text" (5). Yet, *Antiphonal Histories* is not a broad comprehensive history of Toba Batak music, either. Rather, it is "a music history that leans hard on background and arcane scholarship ... [and] also a performance ethnography rooted in the stories of the people one researcher has met over the course of her fieldwork" (21). Reflecting her "antiphonal history" approach, the narrative is not unilinear, but moves freely between past and present.

The performative dynamics of Byl's own embodied experience—"knowing by doing"—are at the heart of her performance ethnography. Byl experienced Toba Batak musical life through the shifting roles of student, performer, ethnographer, archival researcher, daughter, wife, and mother. *Antiphonal Histories* reflects these multiple perspectives, as well as the integrated processes of experience and interpretation. She states, "I do not try to measure the value of my explanations, or marshal the authority of a sharp, relentless argument. Rather, I mean to offer shifting frames, to be picked up and put down at will, until what is framed becomes a little clearer" (22).

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Modulating these shifting frames of perspective required a deft hand, and, by the end of the book, there were tremendous insights to be found.

The book covers a relatively long duration of fieldwork conducted over a span of almost two decades. Byl spent twenty-five months in North Sumatra from 1996 to 2004, including a long stint in Medan in 2002. She returned six times between 2004 and 2013 for follow-up research and fact-checking. Byl worked closely with master drummer and instrument maker Guntur Sitohang and was formally adopted into the Sitohang family in 2002. Sitohang, who passed away in June 2017, was a sought-after Toba Batak musician and teacher and the patriarch of a distinguished musical family. He became Byl's father when she married his son Maska. Byl herself figures prominently in the narrative of *Antiphonal Histories*. She is honest about the ways in which her position in the family shaped her access to knowledge, in both positive and negative ways. For example, her status as a family member opened the door to attending Toba spirit possession ceremonies, but her gendered position closed the door to hanging out at palm wine stands at night. Family obligations sometimes took precedence over fieldwork duties. In one particularly striking passage, Byl admits that writing about historical traces of Hinduism and Islam in contemporary Toba (Christian) musical life "would be found totally unacceptable to the people [I] aimed to represent" (169). These and other vexing questions about fieldwork and representation are central to the book's appeal.

The book consists of four parts: Introduction (*Bindu*), Genealogy (*Tarombo*), Positioning (*Partuturan*), and Afterword. The introduction lays the groundwork for the format of the book and establishes Byl's approach of using songs to mine deeper cultural meanings. In one of the sharpest analytical sections of the book, Byl traces the musical pedigree of one song, "Jamila," from its origins as a late 1950s Toba Batak song of protest against the nascent Indonesian government to a reggae song performed nightly on the Toba pub circuit. Originally titled "Oh, this World," "Jamila" eventually morphed into a song about an Indian film star with an Arabic name who has Christian and Muslim family connections (and, on closer inspection, is actually a Toba woman). However, "Jamila" is not a person at all, but rather "a symbolic composite of Toba interlocking histories" (30). Byl is at her best when unpacking the complicated roots and routes of Toba songs as they are revealed by historical and ethnographic research.

Byl uses a fascinating technique of modeling *Antiphonal Histories* on the format of Toba *pustaka*, which unfold in an accordion-like manner and have two main sections (front and back, verso and recto). Byl's first *pustaka*-like section, *tarombo*, engages with the pasts of Hindu-Buddhist, Islamic, and European ancestors. These ancestral legacies are performed, debated, and transformed in the present, as described in the other section, *partuturan*. The two sections may be conceived as historical legacies and contemporary practices, but Byl views them as two versions of the same thing. Toba legacies must be activated, or "positioned," in the present; indeed, the whole first section is told from the ethnographic present. Similarly, the second section looks back to interpret the present—for example, genealogies are not simply described, but they are created in performance. This technique provides coherence to a dizzying display of genres, characters, musical practices, historical references, and ethnographic data.

Part II of the book, the “Genealogy” segment, consists of an orientation followed by three chapters. In this part, Byl explores the indigenous (“traditional”) and Indic roots of *gondang*, a set of tuned drums. The term “*gondang*” can also refer to the ensemble, the musical compositions, and customary (*adat*) ceremonies that the drums accompany.

I found the analysis of the single *gondang* musical example confusing to follow because the terms of analysis were not established at the outset. A very basic description of the *gondang* ensemble and its instruments would have been helpful. Thus, as a supplement to Byl’s book, I recommend Artur Simon, Mauly Purba, and Philip Yampolsky.<sup>1</sup> In this segment’s second chapter, Byl postulates a probable historical connection between the coastal Islamicate Malay *nobat* ensemble and the inland Toba *gondang* that may have occurred during the early sixteenth and late eighteenth centuries. In the last chapter of this section, Byl looks at music of palm wine stands and national radio to describe the movement of Toba from their homes to urban centers (and beyond), and what it means to be both Toba and Indonesian.

“Positioning” (Part III) consists of an orientation followed by four chapters. Chapter six describes popular music played in palm wine stands and city pubs in Medan. In these modern contexts, traditional sensibilities are still alive. Chapter seven focuses on church and community choir music of the Toba Batak Protestant Church, one of the largest Christian denominations in Southeast Asia with almost two million registered members. Traditional Toba musical instruments and possible links to Islam point to a hidden history of music used in the church, despite the fact that contemporary Toba Christians may not admit it. In chapter eight, Byl describes the links between Toba in Medan and Jakarta to exemplify the strength of Toba ethnicity in the nation-state of Indonesia. In addition to cultural influences flowing in, Batak migrate away from their homeland. (Indeed, most members of the Sitohang family live away from home.) In an emotionally heartfelt closing chapter, Byl reflects on the grief she experienced after the death of one of her closest friends and describes the funerary rites that followed her passing. Despite the absence of the rarely sung vocal laments called *andung*, Byl identifies many of the same traits in the mourning rites sung by women at the funeral ritual she attended.

Eight recordings accompany the book and are easily accessible and downloadable through the Wesleyan University Press website.<sup>2</sup> The recordings provide a sense of the soundscape of modern Toba musical life, and help in the analysis of some songs. However, I would have liked to hear more illustrative sound examples to accompany the text. A recording of “Jamila” (chapter 2) and *gondang* (chapter 3) would have helped tremendously to illustrate Byl’s points. Further, I wanted to know the sources

<sup>1</sup> Artur Simon, ed., *Instrumentalmusik der Toba- und Karo-Batak, Nordsumatra/Indonesien*, Museum Collection Berlin 24–25 (Berlin: Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 1999; first issued as LPs in 1984 and 1987); Mauly Purba, “Review of Research into the Gondang Sabangunan Musical Genre in Batak Toba Society of North Sumatra,” *Etnomusikologi* 1,1 (2005): 38–64; and Philip Yampolsky, comp., *Music of Nias and North Sumatra: Hoho, Gendang Karo, Gondang Toba*; Music of Indonesia 4, Smithsonian Folkways SF 40420 (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> [http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/wespress\\_music/2/](http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/wespress_music/2/), accessed October 2, 2017.

for the transcriptions, which are not listed. Thankfully, there are excellent ethnographic recordings and notes of Toba Batak music available elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

Given the dizzying array of global cultural and historical influences that have traversed the region of north Sumatra over the course of centuries, this was a daunting project. Using myths, historical documents, conversations, observations, and songs, Byl manages to weave together a rich and fascinating history of Toba Batak musical life. Her writing is sophisticated, well crafted, and sometimes humorous. Byl's narrative style does not move in a linear trajectory, and she does not always announce the points she is about to make. Arguments are hinted at rather than sutured together. Nearly every chapter begins with a story to which we enter *in media res*. These narrative techniques create slippage and instability and keep the reader interested in what lies ahead. *Antiphonal Histories* increased my knowledge of Toba Batak music history as an entangled web of local practices informed by cultural historical flows that all find their way into contemporary practice. The book is a valuable contribution to the study of Indonesian music, reflexive ethnography, and historical ethnomusicology.

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Simon, *Instrumentalmusik der Toba- und Karo-Bata*.