

10-5-2015

Vincenzo Cambria - Interview with Mark Slobin

Vincenzo Cambria

Follow this and additional works at: http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/grad_oralhist

Recommended Citation

Cambria, Vincenzo. "Interview with Mark Slobin." Wesleyan Graduate Studies in Music - Oral History of International Graduate Students. (October 5, 2015) http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/grad_oralhist/23

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by the World Music Archives at WesScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Wesleyan Graduate Studies in Music – Oral History of International Graduate Students by an authorized administrator of WesScholar. For more information, please contact ljohnson@wesleyan.edu.

Mark Slobin: Ok, yes, it's recording. I got this software that records Skype calls, it's very convenient, so I can save them, right, right, so. Yeah! So we're going to do this interview. I've just started on this, talked to a couple people, it's so enjoyable to talk to people about their Wesleyan experience. Who knows what we'll do with the interviews. We'll put them in the archives and then maybe people can use it for a history, or something like that. So, ok, let's get started. So, you're Vincenzo Cambria, and what were your years at Wesleyan?

Vincenzo Cambria: I've been at Wesleyan from 2005 to 2009.

MS: Ok.

VC: Yeah.

MS: So one of the 21st century people, right! [both laugh] So how did you hear about Wesleyan at all? How did you decide to come there?

VC: It's a quite long story [laughs] I originally was supposed to go to Columbia in NYC. I was invited by Ana Maria Ochoa who works there. She suggested me to apply there. She was interested in my research here in Rio. I applied for a Fulbright grant, I had some problems later with the Ministry of Culture here in Brazil. They missed my deadline.

MS: Oh, no.

VC: Yes, yes! So they proposed me some alternative option. I decided to go to Wesleyan because of the history of the program. I knew, for example, Eric Galm, that was a former grad student there. So it was surely the best choice for me to go there.

MS: So what was your background to go into ethnomusicology there?

VC: My undergraduate studies were at, in Italy, with Tullia Magrini.

MS: Oh, I forgot that!

VC: Yeah, I studied at the University of Bologna, with a course that's called DAMS, Disciplines of Arts, Music and Spectacle [Spettacolo]. A literal translation, yeah! I studied different approaches to music, one was ethnomusicology.

MS: She was a great person, Tullia, she was a friend, I was so sorry she died so young.

VC: Yeah, it was terrible, to miss her. Then I moved to Brazil because my mother is Brazilian and I know Brazil since I was a child.

I decided to move to Brazil where I had already done fieldwork for my research in Bologna.

MS: Oh, ok. Oh, I didn't realize!

VC: I studied the music of candomblé in Salvador, Bahia. I decided to move to Brazil where I met Samuel Araujo at the University of Rio de Janeiro. My MA was with him here in Rio.

MS: Oh, ok, right. So that was sociology, or it was more sociology?

VC: No, it was in ethnomusicology. After a couple of years past my M.A. I decided to go abroad because it was not easy to do a Ph.D. here in Brazil in this field. At that time, Ethnomusicology was not so consolidated as a field like in the US. So it would be interesting for me to go to a place where I could understand better the field, to know better the field. And I think the great part of this experience is that, I think now I can say that I know the field of ethnomusicology.

MS: Yeah, right, that's pretty good. So what was it like coming to this small town in New England? What was surprising about it, probably?

VC: Well, it's an interesting experience [both laugh] because I moved from Rio de Janeiro, a big metropolis with more than 8 million people, to a very small town, and also the weather is very different. My wife had never seen the snow before. It has been interesting, a pleasant experience. Something good.

MS: Yeah, it's kind of a shock in the winter.

VC: Yeah, especially at the beginning.

MS: The first year must be—and the social atmosphere was pretty different, I suppose.

VC: Yeah, Middletown is a quiet place. In Rio, it's almost the opposite, there are lots of things happening. A lot of parties and music, things all the time. It's quite good to spend some time in a quiet environment.

MS: So how did you find the routine of the classes, seminars, you know, all this kind of stuff? It was different maybe than you were used to.

VC: No, it was as I was imagining before going there. I mean, all the classes I took, all of them have been very interesting. I think the ethnomusicology program is a very good program for someone that is interested to understand this field. There are different approaches, different people, with different backgrounds and work experience. So I'm sure I've learned from all of the professors but also with all of the fellow graduate students. It's interesting to have people from different places, from different countries, to talk to. To exchange experiences.

MS: Yeah. Who were the main grad students that you got to know during that period?

VC: That period, Jorge Arevalo Mateus, Fugan Dineen, Po-wei Weng, Amanda Scherbenske, Bill Carbone, Hae Joo Kim, Marzanna Poplawska, Thembela Vokwana and many others.

MS: Right, everybody from a different country, all of them from a different place.

VC: Also Elikem Nyamuame from Ghana. This diversity, it's quite unique, you cannot find something like this in a graduate program in Brazil.

MS: This little town in Connecticut!

VC: Yes, it seems contradictory! [laughs]

MS: So how did you decide on a mentor to work with?

VC: It was not really my decision. Since the beginning I was associated to Eric Charry.

It has been very good to work with him but It was not really a matter of choice.

MS: That's, well, that's pretty good. So the social atmosphere was good among the students, you saw each other a lot.

VC: Yes, sure. We met a lot. [both laugh]

MS: And what about among the faculty, what did you feel about the relations among the faculty, the different types?

VC: It's good, you know, it was good. I mean I had a good relation with all of the professors.

MS: What did you study? What did you take, ensembles and—

VC: Ensembles, I had the African drumming, the West African drumming, and Korean drumming. All the drums!

MS: Oh really! But you're not basically a drummer.

VC: No, I'm not a drummer at all!

MS: I forget what you play. What's your instrument?

VC: It is guitar. But African music is something I have a strong interest in. I studied a lot of Afro-Brazilian music. Taking African drumming classes is something I feel can help a lot.

MS: Yeah, it's a useful background, for Brazil, to study with these guys from Ghana.

VC: Yeah, and the Korean drumming was more—curiosity. [both laugh]

MS: Well that's very interesting. So you thought it was good to be, to be required to do ensembles? Because usually graduate programs don't require that you do these.

VC: Yeah, it was surely an interesting experience. I have some critique on this idea of “world music ensemble,” the way they are done many times. But it is surely something that is helpful, interesting for the students.

MS: What's your critique?

VC: Well, I think there are a lot of problems, ideological problems.

MS: Yeah, the well-known problems!

VC: Some of these problems are discussed in the Ted Solis book, *Performing Ethnomusicology*.

MS: Right.

VC: For example, I remember the West African drum professor, he could add more on the academic side of the dissertation and thesis, et cetera. I mean it's something strange, it seems sometime a way to incorporate difference but according to your own standards.

MS: Yeah.

VC: And then you create some sort of hierarchy.

MS: Yeah, it's a problem. It can definitely be a problem.

VC: But sure, it's very interesting for the student to have the opportunity to—with these people.

MS: Yeah, yeah, these are all interesting problematics. Did you have anything to do with composers?

VC: No, no.

MS: [incredulous] Really? Because we like to think that there's some bridges between ethnomusicology and composition, but you didn't find any.

VC: No, I mean, I met some of the students, but we never worked together or shared something academically together.

MS: Uh huh.

MS: Yeah, that's funny, it comes and goes. Sometimes there are collaborative projects and in some periods it doesn't happen. It's one of those things we're always interested in because theoretically we want everything to be collaborating, working together. Huh. So ok, so what was your sense, eventually, of differences between Wesleyan and other programs, after you saw some other programs?

VC: One of the differences surely is the different performance possibilities, you know, we have just just mentioned. A lot of music from different places, different countries in the world. This is one of maybe the main differences between Wesleyan and other programs, I guess. But it was also interesting to have faculty with a very different focus. It can be enriching. We have Su Zheng working with Asian music and Eric with African music, you with more European Jewish music, this is something that I consider very important for a student to familiarize with different literatures. Not only with the literature on your topics, your original area, I mean, geographical area.

MS: Yeah, that's kind of an American approach I think.

VC: Something you don't have, here in Brazil you usually have one professor, one ethnomusicology professor. You don't really have a program with various ethnomusicology

5 October 2015

professors.

MS: Yeah, in Europe too, for the most part, it's—yeah, that does make it interesting, more interesting. Did you work outside the department with any faculty, take classes outside the department?

VC: I took an anthropology class with a visiting professor, Lisa Breglia.

MS: I don't remember her.

VC: She was George Marcus' student. It was interesting to take these classes with her. To think more, the same issues we were discussing in ethnomusicology from an anthropology point of view.

MS: Yeah, particularly if she was Marcus's student. The critique of anthropology.

VC: Oh, yeah, exactly! [both laugh] In a critical way.

MS: Well that's interesting. Did you take any other classes outside?

VC: I had another class, Music and Social Movements, with Rob Rosenthal. Sociology.

MS: Ok, yeah, that's a good one.

VC: Only these two classes, yeah.

MS: So, huh! That was good. What about the campus life, or the town life? Of course you had your wife so you had a family structure, you weren't on your own.

VC: Middletown is a good place to live [both laugh]. Especially when you have a family. With kids it's very enjoyable to live in a house. Here in Brazil, we live in buildings. It's different. So especially for the kids it was great. My daughter was born there.

MS: Oh, yeah!

VC: So I had also this experience there in the United States, my daughter was born there. It was great. All my friends were very kind and helped us a lot. These situations are difficult when you are alone and your family is far. So it was great. We met a lot of friends there, both at Wesleyan and in Middletown. A lot of Latinos. From Mexico, Puerto Rico, so we had good friends there. We still have good friends.

MS: That's interesting that you got into the Latino community.

VC: Yeah, it was great.

MS: It's pretty big.

VC: Still our— we are not really considered Latino! People from Brazil, they are always different from the rest. Language is the main, how can I say it, the main criteria, to separate

Brazilians from the rest.

MS: Right, yeah. There are not as many Brazilians in the town, right. So the Brazilians—but you were in part of a Brazilian network from, I don't know, New York?

VC: Yeah, there were a few Brazilians there at Wesleyan. There was a professor from Brazil in the theater department.

MS: Oh, Claudia.

VC: Claudia Nascimento. She was from Brazil. There were are few other students from Brazil there. But there is a huge community, a Brazilian community, in Hartford.

MS: In Hartford, yeah.

VC: In Hartford there is Eric Galm, working at Trinity College. He always organizes things there, it's beautiful. Yeah. My wife danced a lot. [laughs]

MS: That's right, your wife is a dancer.

VC: She did a lot of work there with Eric Galm.

MS: That's good.

VC: The Brazilian community in Hartford.

MS: Eric is such a good guy.

VC: Yeah.

MS: He's a great, he makes connections. That's really nice. So how—when you were thinking of going back to Brazil, how did that position you, being somebody from Wesleyan?

VC: Well, surely it's a good background for me to present myself here in Brazil. As I was saying in the beginning of our chat, I'm sure that if you study in a good program in the United States, you are able to have a clearer idea of what ethnomusicology is. Not necessarily to endorse it [laughs]

MS: Ok, right right!

VC: But at least you know what you are saying. The problem that I see many times here in Brazil, is that people critique ethnomusicology as a field without really knowing it. So it's quite strange. But surely it's important for me to have this background.

MS: So people in Brazil know what Wesleyan is?

VC: Not everybody, not—

MS: Of course.

VC: But if you know a little of the history of ethnomusicology, you know that Wesleyan was one of the pioneering programs in the United States. The name of David McAllester is know here but I think it could be more than it is, especially among anthropologists working with native Brazilian music.

MS: Yeah, they know Tony Seeger I suppose, most. He would be the big name.

VC: One of the problems with the field here in Brazil is that you have a clear cut—on one side, you have ethnomusicologists working in music departments, on the other side you have anthropologists working in an anthropology department. Brazilian Indian music is almost exclusively studied by anthropologists. And they know very little about ethnomusicology outside Brazil. And they don't know, for example, that most of the important names in the history of ethnomusicology have studied with American Indians. They know very little.

MS: Wow, yeah, you would think they would know about Tony Seeger because he's been there for 40 years. He worked in Brazil for years.

VC: Yeah, he worked here for a long time so, also he advises a lot of works here.

MS: Yeah.

VC: in anthropology. So there are a lot of former students of him working in anthropology. He is always here in Brazil on different occasions. I met him in May.

MS: Oh yeah, because he comes a lot. Well that's a nice connection. So how were you able to integrate what you learned at Wesleyan with your work in Brazil?

VC: Now I am a professor at Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro. I am working a lot! This semester I am teaching five classes.

MS: Oh gosh.

VC: [laughs] It's very hard work. So I think something in the organization of the courses that I use is, I learned at Wesleyan.

MS: Ok! That's interesting.

VC: The rest, it's difficult to say what comes from Wesleyan exactly. But this experience at Wesleyan is surely something that came with me.

MS: Is there something you wish that we did at Wesleyan that we didn't do for you?

VC: [pause] Not for me, not necessarily for me. Something that I felt problematic there, for example, was the almost exclusive focus on American ethnomusicology. Graduate students sometimes are not presented to different experience from other places.

MS: That's interesting.

VC: So, here in Brazil, in a graduate program, you read authors from different places, also

different language. I read here in French, Spanish—there I was only reading in English and American authors mostly. Or some author from another country but published in the United States. This is something, I think it would be good for the programs, for graduate students to learn something from other experiences around the world.

MS: Yeah, that's an interesting point. Because America is so big, and there's so much literature, and so many ethnomusicologists, it gets a little provincial in its own way, sometimes.

VC: Also, another thing that was interesting for me in my discussion with fellow students is that you read a lot from the American ethnomusicology literature but you are not exposed to readings in anthropology, in social theory. People were wondering, asking me, "When have you read Mikhail Bakhtin?", for example. There is a lot of ethnomusicology. It's also important for students to understand some of the great thinkers of our time. And it doesn't happen. Most choose to build this knowledge on their own.

MS: That's true. People are good at finding critical theory sources but we don't teach a lot of it. Sometimes, yeah, I did that interdisciplinary seminar, the one seminar that's supposed to be interdisciplinary.

VC: Yeah, it was great to have that seminar with you. For me it was the only class where we read and discussed things outside ethnomusicology.

MS: Oh, interesting.

VC: For me it was one of the best things.

MS: That's good. So are you in touch with any Wesleyan people now, at all?

VC: It's quite rare, because I am working a lot and not traveling too much, but some of them, yes.

MS: There's one, oh, I was trying—we decided for this, because we can't interview all the alumni, there's hundreds, but we decided only to do people who come from abroad or who are working abroad. There's one composer working in Brazil, Heather Jennings, I don't know if you know her.

VC: No— An American working here?

MS: Yeah, she's one of the composition students. This is actually her second job in Brazil. I don't know how she got connected to Brazil. The only other Wesleyan person, maybe, working in Brazil. [laughs] So are you continuing the same line of research, in the city, on the dispossessed people?

VC: Yes, yes.

MS: It seems very critical.

VC: My current project has two directions. One is Angolan refugees here in Rio de Janeiro. They

live in the same favelas where I have done my Ph.D. research. They're mostly refugees from the war. I am starting a project, a research project there with Angolans. The other part of my research is related to Angola but in a different way, because a part of the candomblé religion is linked to Angolan culture. They call it "Angola nation." They have "Angola nation" in the candomblé culture that is also part of my research.

MS: Oh that's interesting. Yeah, refugee studies are getting to be more important. We have so many refugees everywhere in the world. Now it's coming up, you know.

VC: Unfortunately.

MS: Unfortunately for these people. And that war was so long, it was like 20 years, 25 years.

VC: Yeah, 20 years of war.

MS: God. And because they're Portuguese speakers, right, so they could come here.

VC: Yeah, there are some interesting reasons for them to come to Brazil. The most obvious is language. But also it's the same climate.

MS: And some religious connections.

VC: And also they know Brazil because of the soap operas!

MS: Ok, ok! [both laugh]

VC: They imagine Brazil, especially Rio de Janeiro, from soap operas that are very popular there, Brazilian soap operas. They come here with a totally wrong glamourized image! And they are now living in a favela.

MS: Oh, god.

VC: With all the problems.

MS: It's terrible, it's getting so bad.

VC: Yes.

MS: What's the other direction of the work?

VC: The candomblé?

MS: Yes, you said there were two directions, the Angolan refugees and the candomblé—

VC: The candomblé religion. In the first case, the link to Angola is direct, there are Angolan refugees here. The second case is more an imagined link, or—you know, constructed idea of what Angola is. Something closer to my previous work on candomblé.

MS: Oh, ok, ok. Wow, yeah, that's all really really interesting. Do you have any other ideas or

thoughts about Wesleyan that you want to share?

VC: It's difficult for me to say. I know that I miss the time I spent there. It was very good, very good experience to live there in Middletown. Things here in Brazil are quite different. Things have always been difficult, within the academic circuit here. To work in the university is difficult here. Now it is more, because we are in a huge—

MS: Recession, right.

VC: Financial crisis. It's all more difficult. So it was good to have a good library, for example. We don't have these kind of libraries. If you go to the library of the university where I work, to find books related to ethnomusicology, you find almost nothing. It's a quite different experience of work.

MS: It's more of a struggle, yeah. Do you have graduate students that you are training?

VC: I currently have one graduate student that is working on the candomblé Angola. One of the themes of my research

MS: Oh, good.

VC: He is just starting.

MS: I think he has a good teacher to work with!

VC: I hope so! [both laugh] The new thing is that I am currently the president of the Brazilian Association for Ethnomusicology. It's kind of an interesting thing. So I have to work in different directions.

MS: How big is the society?

VC: It's difficult to say because we have something like 500 people in our records, but this is not a good picture of the society. Most of these people participated just once in a meeting, so—I think that people that currently participate, take part in the meetings, et cetera, I think you know, something around 100.

MS: Oh, ok, yeah. Well it's enough to run a good conference, right.

VC: Yeah, we had a very interesting conference now in May, it was very good. One of the things that are interesting in these meetings is that since the association has been created, in all our meetings we have the participation of the studied people. So, for example, you have a lot of Indian groups taking part in the conference.

MS: Oh, nice.

VC: People from Afro-Brazilian groups. This is something that is a feature of these meetings. They are not only academic discussion but also discussion with the studied people. In the last conference we had indigenous people from Chile, from Colombia, and from Brazil. They had a

very interesting discussion approaching common problems.

MS: That's good, that's good.

VC: It was very good. Very interesting.

MS: Yeah, we just don't do that in the SEM. There should be more representation.

VC: Yeah, it would be great

MS: Well, it's great to talk to you. It's great to see you so active.

VC: My pleasure to see you.

MS: So yeah, if you think of anything else, let me know. It's really nice to talk and hear about your experience.

VC: Thank you very much.

MS: You take care, it's nice to see you.

VC: If you need something, just let me know!

MS: Ok, I'll do that! Thanks a lot Vincenzo. And say hello to your wife too.

VC: Thank you very much.

MS: Bye bye!

VC: Bye bye!