

Guide to Participant Observation

Keep in mind the following questions as you observe and participate in musical events you wish to document:

1. What, when and where is the musical performance? Are there markers of the beginning and ending of the event? Is there any explicit conceptual framework shaping the performance that is articulated through an announcement or in a printed program? Are there implicit concepts or information shared by the performers and listeners? (Be aware of what you are assuming.)
2. What are important characteristics of the performance space? (It might be helpful to draw a diagram.) Where were you sitting/standing? How does the musical performance related to or use this space? How do the performers move about this space?
3. Who are the performers? Are they amateurs or professionals? What is their age, gender, and ethnicity? How are they dressed? What information do they provide about themselves through the program, their speech or their behavior?
4. Who is present and/or listening to the music? (Does the audience consist ONLY of students?) Are there any noteworthy aspects of their response? Is it possible to tell what specifically pleases or displeases the listeners?
5. What are the performing forces? Are there musical instruments? Are there singers and/or dancers? How are they arranged? Are there any noteworthy physical characteristics of the instruments (or the performers, for that matter)? Are the performers using any noteworthy playing techniques or postures? If a voice or voices are included how does the vocal style compare with others you have heard? How do the performers communicate with and relate to each other?
6. What are important aspects of the performance practice? Did the musicians use music notation? Did there seem to be improvisation? Did anybody play a "leading" role in the performance, or did the performers play seemingly "equal" roles?
7. Did you speak to anyone during the performance or overhear any comments that might be of interest? Did the performers make formal remarks or spontaneous comments? Can you recall any verbatim remarks?
8. Was there any particularly notable moment or incident that gave you insight into aspects of aesthetics or musical meaning?
9. Were there moments at which your own background or expectations led you to be confused or surprised? Were there things you expected to observe but did *not* encounter?

Your observations will necessarily be selective. Keep in mind that there is no one "natural" or "correct" way to write about an event; different, personal descriptions of the same event are imminent, and important to our overall understanding of the event.

If you take notes discreetly before, during, or after the performance, try to record information that will help you remember key aspects of the musical event. Jot down concrete details and verbatim quotes. These "jottings" will likely be rather sketchy, disjointed and full of abbreviations. Be sure to sit down as soon as possible after the performance and expand upon these sketchy notes, constructing a fuller account.

Warning: If you wait more than twenty-four hours, you may forget important details. As you amend and expand the brief notes you made during the performance, try to remember things you saw or heard that you had not written down. (Some ethnographers refer to these remembered observations as "headnotes.") Be sure to allow enough time to document your observations in detail; it can take more time to write up an event than it does to observe it.

Your field notes from this performance will become the primary source for your essay. Hopefully, they will provide a rich source both for helping you develop your thesis and for providing much (if not all) of your supporting evidence. Thus, it is important that you do as thorough a job as possible in observing and recording what you see, hear and feel before, during, and after the event.

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21M.030 Introduction to World Music
Spring 2013

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