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How is Music Learned?

メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2015-11-18 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: ロバート, ガルフィアス メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://doi.org/10.15021/00001788

How is Music Learned?

The First Steps

The way in which music is learned tells us much about how it is regarded in that society. In complex societies such those of the Western and Westernized world, the pattern of learning may follow many different routes. Some children are encouraged to study music by taking music lessons when they are quite young. Those that continue may develop skills, proficiency and sensitivity as performing musicians. Not all who continue can or wish to make music a profession. On the other hand, it appears that most successful musicians of the concert stage began studying music around the age of five or six and continued with it. Therefore, beginning the study of music at a very early age appears to a requirement for success as a concert musician in the Western European tradition, but this alone is not a guarantee of success.

In Western society, however, other musicians appear who are quite successful. Rock musicians, for example, who may never have studied music formally with a music teacher and who may not have even begun to sing or play with any serious effort until they were in their teenage years. There is no denying the success of such musicians. The salaries earned from record sales and concerts by many of rock, hip-hop and other popular musicians are clear indication of the esteem in which their society holds them, so in our own culture, how early one should start learning music depends much on the kind of music it is one wishes to learn.

In traditional South India, a young person, even one coming from a traditional family of musicians, may be sent to the home of a master musician to be taught the technique and tradition. For the first several years, the student may be asked to do nothing but sweep the courtyard and run errands for the teacher. Does this sound abusive? In the Indian tradition, it was believed that the student was absorbing the sound of the teacher playing and teaching more advanced students and that this served as the best foundation for the new pupil. When formal lessons began, the student had a clear mental image of what was about to be learned from having heard it for years as he or she toiled around the house. We would all agree that being familiar with the music should be an important part of learning it. In traditional South India, as in some other cultures, the recognition of this as an important element in learning, has been formalized and built into the learning process.

Among the Chopi people of Mozambique and the Shona people of Zimbabwe

traditionally only men perform music and only men who come from traditional families of musicians. Others who might like to learn are not so much forbidden to learn - these restrictions no longer apply in most places - but many are convinced that because they are not from one of these hereditary families they simply cannot learn it. As in the Indian example, part of this story suggests that growing up in the family and hearing the music with great regularity and seeing it performed by individuals who are in close proximity, must make it much easier for the student to learn when the time for that does come.

Learning Steps

In societies in which music and its performance is thought of as belonging to the entire group, the process of learning may be informal, learned in the process of doing it rather than transmitted in a formal one to one manner. Sometimes several individuals are taught as a group. This most often happens in situations like in schools. There is one teacher who teaches a group of students. This method is found in our elementary schools, but it is also used in the beginning stages of teaching in specialized schools of music. More advanced teaching such as in “master classes”, can also be done in this manner. This master class method is also used in traditional India and in many parts of Asia.

In complex musics the process of learning is often formalized. A teacher is engaged and the student goes through a process of learning, being given assignments to work on until the next meeting with the teacher and then, depending on the level of progress, given something a bit more difficult to learn. Thus gradually, more and more of the tradition is absorbed and assimilated. This learning structure is very common in many cultures. The basis is that there is a tradition to be learned and there are people who know it better than others and those who wish to learn it must go to these specialists in order to learn.

There are situations in which, even with complex musics, the learning pattern is different from this because of differences in the social context in which the music functions. In China, among scholars the playing of an instrument called “*ch'in (qin)*” was considered highly appropriate. This very ancient music tradition was almost exclusively for scholars. In ancient China, government officers were also scholars, because they were required to pass examinations in poetry and literature in order to qualify for government work. The chin is an instrument of seven strings that are plucked in a great variety of different styles. The music exists in notation and hundreds of compositions for the chin survive in this notation. Chinese players of the chin share with each other, rather than teach each other. One scholar may wish to learn the chin and so goes to a friend who plays and asks him to teach. After learning the rudiments of chin playing, the player may find some composition that

he has heard or perhaps only whose title is recognized. If the notation is available the player may work at it carefully and step by step reconstruct a playable version that is satisfactory. When chin players meet, they play pieces for each other and may share notation and give advice to each other on possible ways of interpreting the notation.

This is an example of a complex tradition shared among individuals who consider themselves equals. Some may be superior to others in their knowledge of the literature, or the repertoire or in technique and this would place one in a position to share or teach something to another. It is still done in the context of equals sharing something together.

Another example, also from Asia, is to be found among the musicians of Okinawa. There is a vast repertoire of sung Okinawan poetry which is accompanied by the three string *sanshin*, a long necked lute. Formal lessons are not usually given and instead groups of players meet on several evenings a week for three hours or so. At each of these sessions, there is a master player who informally, but clearly directs the music making by deciding which pieces are to be played. The evening session consists typically of playing a number of pieces, almost inevitably beginning with the first composition in the notation book, and then gradually proceeding through the book of some 200 compositions, skipping here or there as the evening goes by until perhaps some 15 pieces have been played.

No formal lessons are given. The entire group plays together. What happens during such evenings is that the beginners can only play the first and easier compositions. They learn to add more compositions to their set of songs by gradually following along with the new compositions as best they can, at first only listening and then gradually attempting to play. The atmosphere is one of encouragement and openness. No one is discouraged from trying to play along. The Okinawan spirit as it is described and in fact in practice, is to welcome all and players who feel too timid to try are encouraged by being told that they all learned in this way.

In this example, it is not so much that all the players are considered equals, but that the performance is something in which all should share, each according to his ability. It is understood that the process of learning takes time and performing and then pausing to listen to more advanced players, is all part of the group performance and of the learning process. It is also worthy of noting that this system works very well in disseminating knowledge of the tradition. The percentage of people who engage in the performance of music in Okinawa is much greater than in Japan and greater than in many different cultures of the world. Even within the United States, the number of Okinawan American musicians playing their own music is greater than that of any other immigrant group.

Jazz performance is also an interesting case in point. It would seem that one

must know how to play before one can begin to play. No lessons are given usually. Musicians listen, remember, practice alone and then gradually try playing with other musicians. In the traditional Jazz world, great importance is given to the musician's ability to improvise personal variations. But no lessons are exchanged between master and beginner. Jazz musicians usually begin playing with others at their same level and when they believe that they are ready they may then try joining in informal sessions with musicians whose talent they regard as greater than their own. This is an example of the learning of a tradition entirely by listening and learning while actually performing.

Preparation for actually performing music requires absorbing the sound and spirit of a music. In some cultures this is done during the first lessons, but in others, a long period of listening may precede actual performance. The learning context is one that develops out of that particular music culture. A musician attempting to learn to play classical music on the piano would be shocked at the suggestion that this could be learned without the aid of a teacher. A Jazz musician might be equally shocked at the suggestion that he would have to find a teacher before attempting to play.

Rote as Memory Aid

Memorizing and learning by rote are methods used frequently in the teaching of music. Even in traditions where the best performances emphasize skillful improvisation, such as in India and the Middle East, much time is spent in first learning and memorizing the repertoire or techniques. It is after having memorized a great deal of the body of the tradition that the musician may begin to emerge. It is only after the memorization of a substantial body of the tradition that the musician can find the basis upon which to create his or her own improvisations.

A Tune Remembered

Many cultures make use of music as an aid to memory. A tune remembered pulls up from memory the needed words that have come to be associated with it. At other times a steady droning pitch lulls one into a relaxed almost hypnotic state in which words long stored in memory begin to flow in a steady chant. We use this mode of remembering in the recitation of prayers or chants.

A group of young girls in Japan sing a song while bouncing a ball. The rhythm of the ball bouncing is incorporated into the song by the use of onomatopoeia for the sound of the ball. The words, "ten, ten, ten" which represent the sound of the ball bouncing also contain the first syllable of the name of the shrine, Tenjin-Sama, at whose festival the ball was purchased.

“Ten, Ten, Ten,
Tenjin-Sama no O-matsuri de,”

‘Ten, ten, ten
At the festival of Tenjin Sama,’

Children’s games are early and very natural uses of text and tone memory patterns. They also conform to the speech tone and accent pattern of the spoken language. Young Black girls in Alabama sang a song, “Ah ha Rosie!” that illustrates the adaptation of speech, tone, and rhythm into a game.

Mnemonic Patterns

Following is a Spanish form which goes back at least to the 16th Century, an old song *jarabe* from the Puebla region of Mexico was for dancing during the late 19th Century. It consists of a series of rhymes in which the melody of the first phrase ends before the final syllable of the last word can be fit in. The second phrase begins in the same way but completes the syllable. Very often, the listener is lead to expect a certain word, but on the second and full statement of the phrase, is often surprised to hear another word inserted. This is a frequently encountered technique even in Spanish songs going back to the time of Columbus. Here, there are two patterns superimposed on each other, a melodic pattern and then the text pattern which is staggered against the melody.

Las Doncell.
Las Doncellas valen oro
Las solteras valen plata,
Las viudas valen cobre,
Las Viejas, hojas de lata.

from an old Mexican jarabe, called Las Doncellas

The Vedas

It is in ancient India that we find some of the most amazing techniques of memorization. The most ancient texts of the early Aryan civilizations of India and those which come to have a central role in Hinduism, are the Vedas, a body of sacred texts probably dating from not later than 1000 B.C.. In order to preserve the pronunciation accurately and precisely, the ancient Aryans devised what is now thought of as the first science of linguistics. In order to preserve the correct word

order and to prevent any variation from being introduced they also devised intricate patterns which could be imposed on the texts and then memorized and recited. These intricate and, in themselves, nonsensical versions of the Vedas served as a kind of backup coded copy of the original which could be unscrambled if ever the authenticity of the current version came into question. The impressive part of this lies in the fact that not only was the original memorized by thousands of Brahmin priests, but also were several coded variants of each text.

These patterns were codified by Brahmin priests in a number of different forms, each consisting of a different ordering of the original syllables of the sacred text. Here are only two of many such variants. In *Jata* variation the syllable order is

1-2, 2-1 1-2,
2-3, 3-2 2-3,
3-4, 4-3 3-4, etc.

The Ghana variation modifies this to

1-2 2-1, 1-2-3 3-2-1 1-2-3,
2-3 3-2, 2-3-4 4-3-2 2-3-4,
3-4 4-3, 3-4-5 etc.

Rote Learning

In our very literate society we find it natural to question the value of rote learning and in our education system we learn to rely less and less upon it. Some say that Asian educational systems, for example, place too much emphasis only on rote learning and that such a system creates unimaginative robots. This is perhaps too simple a response. Those who make this criticism understand little of how creativity continues to be expressed in Asia. Our non-rote education system is producing the lowest academic standards of any industrialized nation, and a low rate of national productivity. Simple memorization of information without understanding is not useful. On the other hand, information is needed if we are to be able to act effectively. We live in the information age and much information is easily accessible to us. How much do we need to have in our own storage banks to access the information we need successfully. Rote memory can serve as an important aid to thought since it provides a source of information upon which to draw. The greatest research resources, dictionaries, encyclopediae, libraries would never be touched if we did not have in our heads already, some idea of what they contained and how to find it.

In the year 213 B.C. the Chinese emperor Li Ssu decided that the ancient

classics were subversive to the aims of the state and ordered all books be burned. Such great classics as the works of Confucius and the old histories along with perhaps one of the most beautiful collections of poetry, the Shih Ching, or Book of Songs, were all burned. These would have been lost forever had it not been for those nameless scholars of the time who had laboriously memorized all of these works and who could be relied upon to commit them to writing when times were better.

All of the ancient history of Japan before the fifth century AD when the Chinese writing system was introduced had been meticulously preserved by a special guild of reciters called *kataribe* to whom we owe the ancient Japanese classics such as the *Kojiki*. In the world of classical Indian music, each professional as well as every established amateur performing musician knows several hundred melodic formulae known as ragas. Within each of these ragas that musician may know several different compositions, melodic patterns and rhythmic patterns making an astounding amount of information required and expected from any accepted artist of any stature in India. This is not mere rote memorization. This vast resource of memorized information serves as the basis for original improvisation, which is at the heart of Indian classical music and is the basis on which the artist quality of a performance is judged.

In the West, our dependence on the literary has often made us assume that literacy is an innate mark of cultural superiority, in and of itself. No one would deny that writing, in all forms, enables us to preserve and restore vast amounts of information, the result of many hours, days, years and lifetimes of experience - the best of what every previous generation judged from their own experience was important to pass on to us. But too literal a dependency on literacy alone may limit our ability to hear — to be sensitive to nuance and tone and to be able to appreciate a good talker when we hear one or to appreciate a good story teller.

People in Western cultures who know a little about music often express amazement that some particularly great performer can “scarcely read a note of music.” Yet the aim of all musicians, and in all the world and in all music traditions may be the only real universal in music, is to make the performance seem spontaneous. In music, the highest quality of performance can only begin after a significant body of musical information has been internalized. Western musicians achieve their best performances after they have completely memorized the written notation and have digested it enough to concentrate only on the sound of that music itself and can completely forget all about the written notes. They all play better without “the music”, that is the written notes.

Learning and Performing

One of the great challenges a performing musician faces is doing that at which

he or she is best, getting closer to their own inner sense of music, but doing this in a very public environment. Some people love music and like singing or playing it. Many of these same people may find that singing or playing on stage produces too much tension. The competition required for getting into the better schools and to have the opportunity to study with the best teachers takes much of the pleasure out of it and they soon give up the idea of pursuing the study.

Each society treats music differently. In the traditional Orient, music was regarded as part of a balanced person's upbringing. Less a sense of competition for professional status, music was regarded as something that everyone must learn to some degree and a few excelled at it. In many African societies music is regarded as a community activity. Everyone is expected to join in. Skill is recognized but it is allowed to develop during the process of performing as a social function.

In Western European and in American society music was for many years a personal refinement, something in which many people strove to achieve a moderate level of proficiency in order to provide pleasure for themselves as well as for others. This was the root of the European Classical music tradition. Gradually, virtuosity and proficiency increased to such a degree that only very seriously devoted and highly proficient individuals pursue a career in music. At the same time, a new popular music, rock, evolved that did not require long years of training to perform and individuals could quickly enter into competition and possibly gain their livelihood.

Music and the Individual

Identifying with Music in One's Own Culture

We are all each of us, individuals as well as members of a group, usually members of several groups. We become conscious of our individuality as we come into contact with others. In the same way our conscious awareness of belonging to a particular musical culture comes about when we confront a musical culture that we find alien. The formation of one personal musical culture may begin as we acquire spoken language. In the process of "imprinting" which occurs in the first weeks after birth, it is evident that the new born infant assimilates the rhythm, tone and stress of the speech patterns of those adult speakers of the language who surround it. In this way not only does a binding take place between the infant and its family but a unique proclivity for the tone and accent patterns of the language is indelibly established. It is in the structure of language, its patterns of stress and accent, syntax and tone that the parallels to a fundamental music language of a culture are to be found. Already in the earliest stages of language development a child is already formulating the foundations of a culturally preferred music language. As we grow, we are also exposed to other music that is a product of the same culture and makes

use of the stress and accent patterns of our spoken language, thus reinforcing the learning of these patterns.

Music and the Individual — The Process of Creation

Thus far the discussion has been about music as it functions in its role as a system of communication between people. It can also be used by individuals to communicate back to themselves. The creation of music as performance or composition, for one's own enjoyment has great significance in many cultures. Particularly in societies in which the creation of music is an idiosyncratic activity which is given over to unique and individual specialists, as sometimes occurs in Asia and Western Europe, it is from the initial process of the individual delving deeply into his own performance that performance for others in the group has its genesis. There may be no real or significant difference between the individual engaging himself in music for his own pleasure and one creating or performing music for others. What is intriguing about the idea of the individual as both creator and consumer is that the music itself becomes a tangible entity separate from the classic performance activity in which one performs and another listens. Now we can conceptualize the music as an event created in one moment and later recreated at will for the enjoyment and reflection of the creator as well as others. Thus the music takes on a potential for communication which is inherent in any particular musical composition or performance itself apart from any particular performance of it.

There are common structural and formal features which exist in Beethoven's Symphony No. 7 which were evolving as Beethoven thought of it and which became formalized as he wrote it out. This formal and structural pattern grew from Beethoven's own idea of what the symphony was about and has remained constant in all of the hundreds of often radically different performances it has received by all of the orchestras in all of the cities and nations in which it has been heard in all of the years since it was composed. What meaning might exist in the structure itself apart from the performance of it? In the Western European tradition we are quite comfortable with the inherent schism which results from having at least two elements to contend with in listening to music; our perception of this music as the Beethoven Seventh as he created it and transmitted it through notation and that symphony as it is being interpreted by the particular orchestra and conductor we are hearing at the moment. It no longer takes a musicologist in the audience to recognize that the seventh symphony as performed under Beethoven's direction must be different in many ways from today's performances, be they by the Hanover Band or the Hong Kong Symphony. It is usual and even expected to hear a performance of the Beethoven Seventh and also be reminded of other performances of the same symphony by other orchestras and conductors, and to recall some of the associations we might have with those other hearings of the Beethoven Seventh and all of the

other layers of experiences and associations with those previous hearings.

Forming Individual Taste

As we grow and are exposed to many different experiences, we begin to form a set of preferences, many of which remain flexible and open to new influences and suggestions from others and from new stimuli. Others may remain more or less fixed in our minds and will remain unchanged over long periods of time. In complex, highly stratified societies like our own, the number of options is great and it is difficult to see the pattern of influences, suggestions from friends, positive experiences, and our own receptivity and openness at the time of the stimulus, all of which play a part in forming and changing our personal musical cultures.

Creation and Improvisation

The composition of new music and the free improvisation during an act of performance are two aspects of the same process. In one the composer works alone and gradually works out piece by piece, the form and pattern of an entire musical statement. The improviser is doing this on the spot as the performance is going on and unless it has been recorded, it is lost beyond what the player can remember after the performance is finished. In both cases the individual is creating something new. In some forms, such as American Jazz, or in Indian classical music, the improvisation is aided and supported by other players and is sometimes therefore called collective improvisation. Nevertheless, the creation of new music, by composition or improvisation, is primarily an activity of the individual.

In this process there is a question about just how much of an individual and independent role the composer plays in the process. Composers in all cultures, although they are much more difficult to identify outside the Western cultures, generally believe that the process of composition involves finding the “right” note, mood, phrase, whatever it may be. The sense is that they must work and find something as though that thing they seek is not within themselves, but something that comes from outside. Some call the ability to create flowingly and evenly, inspiration. The actual process of selecting what is acceptable and what must be rejected during this process suggests that there is something that is thought to be intrinsic to the music itself, which the creator must find. There is a common sense across many cultures that the creator is trying let the music speak for itself.

Such a notion can only be a reflection of an understanding of the pre-existing musical culture. What works and what doesn't can only be defined culturally. The composer/creator of new music is trying to do two things. He or she is working in a

very personal way to find a unique medium of expression, one that represents his or her own sense of what music should be. At the same time following the logic and sense of the music tradition as it has already been previously established and to remain within its boundaries.

Some Ways of Using Memory

We all use memory in order to help in almost everything we do. In modern American society rote memorization is continuously being de-emphasized, however, and people there are learning to find ways of using it less and less. Nevertheless, it continues to be important in many ways. “Thirty days hath September, April, June and November. All the rest have thirty one except February which is a little strange sometimes and requires that you check your calendar”. However freely quoted here, this often used aid to memory serves as illustration of more than one principle. It serves to provide a reference to information which we often require. We remember it because its first line consists of two phrases which rhyme which consequently makes it easy to recall in spite of the fact that the second line leaves the rhyme scheme entirely. Even though the grace of the phrase falls off a bit when we reach February. Even so, the phrase, reminds us of what we need to remember and we remember the formula because its structure lends itself to easy memorization.

