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Commentary on Presentations

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Commentary on Presentations

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There is a common thread running through these three presentations. All are concerned with tradition, the process of maintaining it and passing it on as well as being concerned with the condition under which these traditions must survive in modern times. All have touched in some way on the question of authenticity and how that is defined. Each presenter has illustrated the challenges and difficulties unique to his particular case. At the same time all continually underlined the broader common context that covers all of them.

Endo Suanda in his presentation tells about the impact of two important systems, government and religion, on the music of Indonesia. In defining what lies within and without the canon he talks about the role that the public education system plays in sustaining those views. He talks about what must be done in order to have influence on the public education system in Indonesia in order to bring about a more viable view of the arts as they actually exist today in Indonesia.

Sam-Ang Sam tells of the hardships endured in Cambodia because of the recent reign of terror under the Khmer Rouge. In particular he tells us how this upheaval has devastated many of the oldest surviving dance and music traditions of Cambodia. We learn how these artists, established and aspiring, are now piecing their lives together and how they are faced with new challenges; having to find a means of survival in an economically depressed condition that allows most Cambodians little beyond bare essentials. At the same time these artists are being bombarded by mass media driven Western pop culture that offers an easier and quicker means of economic gain and recognition than does the pursuit of the older traditions of Cambodia.

Usopay Cadar gives us a unique and valuable view of what it means to be put in the position of representing a cultural tradition in a foreign land. He describes going from the Philippines where, as a Southern Muslim Filipino, he is regarded as a minority, often with some suspicion. Going abroad he finds himself to be asked to represent his entire nation. He also finds that in presenting the tradition he knows when abroad, the interest and enthusiasm of non Filipinos for the music, causes Filipinos themselves to begin to accept this as a part of their culture in a way that might never have happened in the Philippines.

Each of the three papers discusses the challenges that are being faced by traditional music and dance in Asia in recent times. Each of the papers in some way looks at how we are passing our traditions compared to how we were doing so a few

short years ago. They also ask us to consider what it is that we are actually passing on and to whom. Listening to these presentations forces me to reflect on my view of the past 50 years as I watched the changing nature of traditions in Asia and observed the constant challenges of rapid change that have been effected on them.

My first visit to Asia was in 1951, a time when all of Asia was still grappling with the recovery from World War II. When I returned to Japan just a few years later in 1958 to study Gagaku, it was very clear that Japan was not only picking up and returning to where they were before the war, but were making rapid changes in the light of new technologies. It was not surprising that Western culture dominated life in Japan. The older Japanese traditions were recognized and supported but only in small percentages compared to the Western arts. Japan was returning after the war to the clear cultural pattern laid down in the Meiji Period one hundred years before. Western models were adhered to in almost everything. While they were not losing the old traditions, the old forms did not have mass support or the important benefit of being included in the public education system. The traditional Japanese arts remained for most, something archaic and isolated, and in some way, associated in the minds of many Japanese, with the old feudal system of Japan. Nevertheless, many serious individuals devoted themselves to the study of the Japanese traditions and thus they have survived.

When in 1960 I first visited Korea I was shocked by the contrast. Hundreds of young people were learning traditional Korean music, court music and many other forms. There were conservatory type schools devoted to the teaching of these traditions. Thus instead of a few master teachers instructing a few students as in Japan, in Korea there were master teachers passing on instruction to hundreds of students. In turn many of these students were themselves going out and teaching in the public education system. What I saw in Korea, it seemed to me, was the ideal reached at last, an enlightened public arts policy put into action by enlightened government support.

While I believed and still do believe that the kind of support I found in Korea in the 1960s was of great value, it is not without its possible dangers. For example, during the 1960s in Korea it was possible to find many players of Kayagum Sanjo who still entirely improvised their performances in the old tradition. As the demand to teach large groups increased, learning the Sanjo tradition in sufficient depth to absorb the principles of improvisation became difficult. Gradually only a few chosen versions were standardized and these were then memorized and learned by all. Thus today after so many years of the conservatory method of teaching only one or two standardized version virtually no one improvises Sanjo any longer. In the process of passing on the tradition and disseminating it, the tradition changed and, I believe, was weakened.

In Japan today the overwhelming influence and prestige awarded to the performance of Western music has influenced the playing of traditional koto music. Today, most koto players now perform with the assistance of notation, a small music stand sitting in front of the player. This is something that was unheard of before World War II. It is not because they can no longer memorize the music they are playing; it is that they do not want to give the impression that they are untrained musicians who cannot read notation, an idea that comes clearly from the West. Eventually, one hopes that these musicians will notice that the best Western concert soloists play without music and attempt to make the performance sound as though they have created the music at that moment. In fact the notation is really only a memory aid and only puts up a barrier to a fluid moving performance.

This is not only true in Korea. All over Asia conservatory type institutions, with their reliance on notation and instruction in large groups, are becoming the most common media for transmitting the traditions. But these were forms of performance that up until only a few years ago had been taught through the old master apprentice method, the *gurukula* method. Even in Turkey where there are hundreds of good musicians maintaining the practice of the repertoire of the old Ottoman Court Music, most of these musicians have been trained in the conservatory. It may be a small thing about which to quibble, but in my view, there are subtleties and nuances of performance that are gradually lost in the conservatory method of teaching large groups of students. Like rare species of birds or butterflies, once these practices are lost they are impossible to reclaim.

The old *gurukula* system by which many of the last great musicians of our times learned has been almost everywhere disappeared. It has been replaced by broader and more standardized methods of dissemination. Change like this is impossible to prevent and many have said this during the symposium. But what underlines the importance of a tradition is the process of transmission itself. We understand tradition to be that which we have actually learned ourselves from those before us. It is not what we might have inferred from reading books or from hearing recordings. It is the teacher to pupil continuity that is the tradition. As long as that continuity is there, even in the face of change, some of the inherent logic of each tradition may survive.

Today in these discussions I was reminded of something else that I observed while I was in Korea. One of the directors of the Kugnip Kugak Won, that institution responsible for the transmission of the old Korean Court music, was a man named Kim Gi-su. He was a member of the old Korean Court orchestra and had met Japanese musicologists like Tanabe Hisao and Kishibe Shigeo during the last days of the Japanese occupation of Korea. He was a man of great knowledge and mastery of the court music performance tradition. He was also a warm and sympathetic teacher and was much admired by the hundreds of young students studying court

music at the National Institute. What dismayed me was that Kim Gi-su sang the court music repertoire with a distinctly Western style vibrato in his voice. Because of his prestige and influence the younger people were sang just like him. I thought to myself that getting this Western music influence out of the Korean Court Music tradition would now be entrenched and then be something virtually impossible to reverse. When I returned to Korea 20 years later, I was amazed to find that the newer generation of singers of the court music had returned to an older more traditional Korean style of singing as I had heard in the 60s by some of the best of the older and more traditional singers. What I believed was important was that through all this tradition was kept alive in order that when the return to the older style of singing occurred it could be blended back into the tradition.

Thus what I would like to think is that if we can keep traditions alive by any means, even the damage caused by change and outside influence can be mitigated by re-examining that tradition and seeking within it to find its logic. We hope that the economic hardships being faced by musicians in Cambodia will soon pass so that it will not be so much of a personal sacrifice for those who choose to continue the older traditions of the country. Likewise, let us hope that in Indonesia, the public education system will begin to talk about the richness that exists there in Indonesia and reassess the type of support that is needed.

One very moving example was what Usopay Cadar related about how perhaps we needed to teach kulintang to Americans and Europeans in order for some Filipinos to be enabled to recognize its value. The same holds true for many of the traditions we are talking about. In Japan many are confused or skeptical of the interest that many foreigners, in particular, composers have in Gagaku, a form of music that many of them find baffling.

I do believe that the prestige of many of the traditions of Asia has been enhanced in the eyes of the people of those cultures by the fact that so many foreigners are deeply interested in them. I remain hopeful that with the large number of practitioners of the important musics of Asia, combined with all the interest that non-Asians are showing in these traditions, some of the negative effects of neglect and the powerful and inescapable influence of mass media supported popular forms, may be lessened and the logic and integrity of these long preserved arts will transcend and thrive.