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Part One The Cultural Context : A Beginning

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Part One The Cultural Context

A Beginning

Music is all pervasive and yet we often seem to take it for granted. By this I mean not so much that we sometimes don't listen or even hear it when it's playing in the background, or that we don't often think about it when we mentally tally up the things that are important in our lives. I also think that we usually don't think much about how music intersects our lives and how it affects us and the lives of so many others. Think about how a particular mood is enhanced when we add music. When we feel good the music can make it feel even better. When we feel badly, the music can help to pull us into another frame of mind. At times the wrong music can even make the mood worse, sadder, more morose. Sometimes the sound of it, particularly when it's not what we want to hear, can drive us almost mad. In any case we can all accept that it has a powerful effect on us at times.

If we look at all the societies and cultures known to us and look at all the historical societies of the past to the degree that we can discern, we can deduce with a high degree of certainty that music has always played an important role in human society. If we consider today simply the world of pop music, the manner in which it is effortlessly transcending global barriers and even otherwise extremely difficult linguistic barriers, if we consider the number of people who consume it in some way and millions of economic units consumed in its production and consumption, we are not simply talking about a very big business enterprise. If we ask ourselves what is driving it and we realize that it is largely voluntarily and self willed then we must ask the question, what is it that music does that makes people behave in this manner? The very fact that it is all pervasive and has been so for many cultures through the ages strongly suggests that music in our lives does much more than make us feel good or happy. It must be that music fulfills some important function in what we regard as humanness. It must be linked in some vital way to the health of the species.

But what is it that music does? In this study I cannot hope to answer this question nor can anyone that I know of at this time. What I propose is to look at what we have learned about how music functions in human society and we interact with it, how we change it, pass it on and create new forms of expression. I do not even for this have all the answers, but I drawn on the works and discoveries of many others and my own more than 50 years of study and observation of music, much of it in many different societies all over the world.

In the end I doubt I will see the answer to that question, what does music do,

but I think by looking at the marvelous complexity of forms of expression, at the ingenuity and yet common sense of diffusion and adaptation we may better appreciate that although we each listen to our own muse, what drives us to it is very much the same for those around us.

In order to think about the role that music plays in human life we must do more than only look at it in our own cultural context. Not only is there much that we can learn by looking at other cultures, this broad trans-cultural view will also make aware of things in our own culture that may otherwise miss.

Culture and tradition are intertwined. We do things in a certain way, other take the idea, and still others take it up even modify in the next generation. People remember what is good or useful and share it with next generation and with their neighbors. In this way the most important and useful things we have learned are diffused and carried on.

Traditions are lost and new ones created. In the process sometimes gradual and sometimes sudden changes in these traditions take place. The powerful imprint of the immediate past is impossible to erase and even those deliberate attempts to create entirely new traditions are bounded by what came before them. A new and radical departure from an established tradition even as it attempts to break with tradition reflects it like a positive/negative contrast.

Tradition, habit, and culture bind us all although we think little about the process as we go about our lives. In the world of music we have today forces that seem to be working toward a globalization of musical tastes. At the same time if we look across cultures and even looking within any one, there still exist a great diversity of forms, styles, and traditions of music. Change has always been a factor in culture, but today, with the increasing effectiveness of media and communication, the world is saturated with cultural information and it is rare to find human societies that are even relatively untouched by it. Change brought about by contact between groups is part of the process by which culture evolves, adapts and accommodates. Cultural diffusion is not new and music has been affected by it in the past as in the present. What is new is that the scope and pace of this diffusion and effectiveness of cultural saturation.

Cultures that appear to be steadfastly holding on to local or regional traditions are nonetheless aware of the changes surrounding them. While they may appear to continue in defiance of globalization, they are still affected. While change and diffusion through contact with other groups has always been a factor of culture, what has changed is the diffusion of cultural elements from nearby neighbors to diffusion of cultural elements across great geographic distances and from cultures with that prior to the last 50 years of so, there had been little direct contact.

As we look at human musical activity globally, we depend on various types of information. Living traditions are the most important source of information. We can

study them, interact with them and document them, as well as enjoy them. Sound recordings are a means of preserving some of the very important aspects of living traditions and the past hundred years of sound recording serves as a resource for the study of music that is of great importance. In addition we have other kinds of documentation, both written and graphic, that provide valuable information about music culture. However, written documents, even music notation, and graphic depictions of music practice can give only partial information whose value is limited unless we can link it to some understanding of actual practice. For this reason, sound recordings of music, both from the many European traditions and from the rest of the world become the vital source for our knowledge of human music practice and of the changes that have affected it.

During my lifetime I have been happily engaged in the pursuit of an understanding of the scope of variety and the nature of change in as many of the varied expressions of music in a variety of societies. This pursuit has led me to spend prolonged periods of time in a number of different regions and cultures of the world and in the process to learn a good number of their languages as well. What I have learned is that the variety of manifestations of human musical expression seems virtually endless and in overwhelming proportion variety and uniqueness takes the lead over finding common practices or aesthetics across different cultures.

The question I ask myself after pursuing these many trails is, what does all this tell us about music in human society? This is what I have attempted here in these pages to consider albeit incompletely. One hundred years of recorded music performances supplemented with written and graphic documents are a vast resource into which we have as yet only begun to delve.

