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Music across Cultures

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Comparisons across Cultures

Using the value system of one culture to evaluate another does not work very well. It still happens and often because having no other recourse when presented with something we don't know we must draw on the cultural resources we have, lacking any others. Rapid globalization and exposure even to diluted versions of the music of other cultures has meant that some of the worst of these errors of not too long ago have diminished. I recall that a colleague of mine was teaching a music appreciation course for general university students. He told me that he would begin his course with a discussion of primitive music and usually played some examples of Watusi drumming. I didn't want to be too forceful about but I suggested that maybe that was a rather complex example to use for that purpose. But no, he heard it as very primordial. Without being pejorative about this, I wonder about how a person could hear something and with any thought realize that he himself could not master it in even ten years of hard study and still consider it insignificant or barbaric.

Walking into another culture it is easy to get things wrong. The natural reaction of most people who hear *Gagaku*, the music of the Japanese Imperial court is that it is amazingly slow, almost unmoving. However slow it is most of what is played by the court musicians and others in the same genre and almost everything that has been recorded of this music is only in the third and fastest category of the repertoire. The two slower types are hardly played and I should not wonder if before too long even the younger court musicians themselves will find themselves unable to play this repertoire, because now the music is played more for public performance, and for people who are not familiar with it, rather than for ritual, the performance is responding to the preferences of an unfamiliar audience. And so while the music sounds very slow in reality it can be much slower yet.

The theory and practice of rhythm in India, as well as the scope of melodic variation made possible by the ability to conceptualize and work with much finer interval divisions than those used in Western music have made this music quite different from that of the West. Indian music also makes use of a much more complex and more highly subdivided rhythmic scope than used in Western music. It is pointless, however, to think that the Western practice of playing the drums has remained primitive because they are still beaten brutally with sticks because the West has not yet discovered the higher degree of rhythmic control and touch

achieved by playing with the bare hands and fingers. Likewise, it would be foolish to say that Indian music remains primitive because it has not yet developed the Western usage of harmony. These both, the playing of drums with the fingers and the development of harmony are the result of nurtured paths in each of these cultures. No culture is likely to discover something they are not looking for.

There are many people outside of India who enjoy the classical music of India and the number increases steadily. It took many, many years of exposure for those not born into Indian culture to be able to distinguish however, between the performance of an Ali Akbar Khan, a Ravi Shankar, or a Vilayat Khan and other lesser known musicians, or even between what each of these musicians might regard as their good and outstanding performances? Fortunately, today there are many outside of India who have attained this level of appreciation. In India, on the other hand, there are many who exposed primarily to Indian music, express dismay and pained confusion at listening to Western art music. To many of them the music seems to wander up and down aimlessly and without meaning. This sentiment can be heard not only from India, but from many parts of the world in which exposure to Western traditions has been limited. Colin McPhee recounts that a Balinese musician once said, "Your music sounds like a child crying without knowing what it is crying about."

The very rapid pace at which modern technology has aided in the development of communication systems is making it extremely difficult to find societies which are culturally isolated from each other any longer. Still and in spite of the proximity into which modern media has placed us, vast gaps in cultural communication exist even within any one society. The desire to learn and imitate is strong. Increased contact between societies now made possible with increased technology means that borrowing and learning become increasingly possible. The prestige associated with the high technological growth of the Westernized cultures has added incentive to those who would emulate those cultures.

Cultural Diversity: Diffusion and Resistance within a Culture

Societies like those of Western Europe had music for the upper classes which was used at private functions like dances and concerts. They also had civic music, like the bands that announced the hours from the city towers. There was also the popular music of the city dwellers and the folk music of the countryside. In addition there was music especially dedicated to religious ceremonies and observations. Like those cultures of Europe, traditional Japan, Korea and China, for example had ceremonial and court music, rarely if ever seen by the common people, classical chamber music for the upper classes, theater music which had its own semi cultured following and then urban and rural folk music as well as the special music for



Fig.32 Concepts of simplicity and purity in Japanese Shintoism are carried over into the Kagura dance of the shrine maidens at Kasuga Jinja in Nara.



Fig.33 Elegance, color, and formality are combined in the tradition of Korean Court dance. Here, complimentary contrasting groups dance in a flowing graceful rhythm.



Fig.34 By contrast, in the dance of the Japanese Imperial Court, Bugaku, slow and refined movements are carefully followed in strictest conformity.

religious ceremonies and village festivals.

In addition to social stratification, it is also possible to have several different cultures within the borders or boundaries of a single large culture. In the United States today there exist several distinct and virtually unconnected musical cultures. The European Classical music tradition has within it several areas which can certainly be regarded as sub-cultures; orchestral music, opera, chamber music, the “avant-garde”, electronic and computer music, the “minimalists”. But these interest groups are all generally on speaking terms with each other. There are the larger divisions between popular music, for example and religious music and the very sharp divisions within each of those in terms of Black American and White American popular and religious music. Furthermore there are the many cultures of folk and ethnic musics in American and the separate popular music traditions, like for example, Country-Western and modern Hawaiian popular music, Salsa and Norteño music. These are all related by virtue of the cultural contact which comes about from being within a single political boundary. Many also share the use of the same recording technology, for one. Still, the distinctions between these musical cultures are so often vast that the music of one such group may be uninteresting and sometimes unfathomable to another.

This kind of cultural diversity is quite common and exists in many cultures. In Turkey, for example, even today there flourishes a strong Roma, or Gypsy sub-culture as well as large numbers of Armenian, Greeks and Jews, all of whom maintain their own cultural traditions while being a part of the larger Turkish cultural ambience. There are large ethnic Chinese groups in Indonesia which maintain their culture and identity there. There is the clear and strong French cultural presence in Canada and like this there are numerous examples. Many national boundaries have been drawn up only in relatively recent times. As a result many nations contain within their national border numerous diverse peoples. If we look closely at Europe we see vestiges of old cultural and linguistic ties, such as the Flemish and French in Belgium, the Dutch and Frisians in Holland, the French, Italian and German speakers in Switzerland, the German and French cultural influences in Alsace-Lorraine. In Eastern Europe there are pockets of cultural Hungarians, Saxons, Swabians and Slavs living in Romania just as there are cultural and linguistic Romanians in Bulgaria and in Yugoslavia. In the United States we cannot so clearly notice the Canadian culture which spills across the border, however in both the Eastern and Mid-Western US there are clear traces of old French Canadian, Arcadian and Metis culture does trace back to Canada. This serves to illustrate that national borders tend to disguise the historical cultural divisions that existed before they were drawn up and to hide the waves of migration that continue afterwards.

In large countries there is also the possibility of finding regional diversity. Such

regional diversity is not so strong in the United States any longer because of the effective media system we have in place and the natural leveling off that occurs with regular and continued contact. Still, the existence of Hawaiian music in the US is one strong example of a regional form which survives. Country Western when it was associated as the popular music of the South Western states was another, but one which has now grown to popularity throughout the nation and now functions more as a reflection of social stratification rather than regional. Countries in which communication between regions continued to be difficult also reflect this kind of regional diversity. Mexico, for example, has strong music traditions from the Northern regions of the country, from the Coastal region of Veracruz, from the Inland region of Veracruz, from Michoacan and Jalisco from Oaxaca, Tabasco and Chiapas and from Yucatan, to name only the most prominent and well known regional styles. This does not include all of the traditions of the indigenous Mexicans, whose music, might like in the US be better considered an example of cultural diversity, since they represent separate ethnic as well as cultural traditions.

Culture not only delimits the boundaries within which we define music as music, and thereby, permits us if we choose to relegate everything else to the category of non-music, or noise, but also affects and controls the manner in which we perceive music once we have accepted it as such, within what limits we can accept what is new, and where we begin to reject other musics as falling too far outside these boundaries. Our culture delineates how we think about music, how we think in music and even how we decide who also thinks in and about music in ways which are similar to our own. We are often drawn to find parallels between music and language and in the late 19th Century and on into this century, many thought of music as that one language which transcended the problems of comprehensibility posed by all spoken languages. With the new global popularity of Rock related musical forms, it may be possible that we are coming close to the old 19th century idea of music as a global system of communication.

And yet in spite of belonging to and sharing the same culture, the personal experiences of any two individuals in it are apt to be quite distinct. So different are the contexts which each individual brings to the act of listening to music that it seems certain even when two people from the same culture hear a piece of music together that they cannot be receiving the same message from it. The idea that any music can communicate the same meaning across cultural lines becomes impossible to defend, even though it seems certain that some sort of message does manage to be communicated across certain, particularly close, cultural barriers. Even within the United States, itself, one does not find the same audiences enjoying Rap, Jazz, Country Western, Soul, Gospel and Classical music. The spheres of musical preference are sharply divided even within its own borders.