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The Pace of Change in Music

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The Pace of Change in Music

Cultural Isolation and the Pace of Change

Many of the methods and perspectives we use in the study of the world's music are based on conditions of cultural isolation that existed more generally at a time when the world's many cultures were more isolated from each other than they are today. By the time of beginnings of ethnomusicology in the early part of the 20th century, this isolation was far from total but still enough that the various levels of internal development, external stimuli and assimilation could be better examined independently. That situation has radically changed today.

Increased proximity between formerly isolated cultures has resulted in intensified contact and stimuli of such proportions that we need to consider this altered condition when thinking about the nature of change in musical tradition.

Everything we study concerns itself with change, whether we focus on change in a musical tradition or we choose to concentrate on some delineated and "static" moment in history. Musical change is gradual and continuous and is affected by external impulses as well as the natural and regular review of the immediate past by the present. It is virtually impossible to know the exact balance between internal and external influences that lead to musical change. Let us, in any case, look at some aspects of this distinction.

Change, Choice and Isolation

In our own times we are continually bombarded with external stimuli that are designed to make us want to modify the patterns of our daily lives. This affects everything from career and investment choices to the best kind of toothpaste we should use. It is easier to think of change as a result of these stimuli that offer us new choices than it is to understand how we arrive at these choices.

In the process of reviewing the choices before us there are many that we regard as negative. Often we decide against something without knowing why. A girl of sixteen remembered that when she was four she liked Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers, but that Electric Company was frightening to her. Even now she cannot say why. A young man from Japan remembers that as a child the street calls of the rice cake vendor terrified him. Again he could not say why. Choices are made without any real necessity to understand why we make them. Within each musical culture

options are available for rejection or selection. Decisions are made about what is good and bad, about what is new and up to date or out of step with the times.

We can understand that even in the case of music cultures that were in isolation from other cultures and thus free from the external influence of such cultures as they defined as outside their own were also subject to gradual and continuous internal modification. In the ancient Japanese novel of the Tenth Century, *Genji Monogatari*, there is a reference to an informal musical performance that tells us something about the pace of change in those times. In the story an old woman created an embarrassingly humorous situation for all present when insisted on joining a group of young people playing music. She proceeded to perform, with unabashed confidence, in a style that had been out of fashion for some thirty years.¹⁾ The story is set in 11th Century Japan at a time when Japan had isolated itself entirely from all foreign contact of any kind for over three hundred years.

The culture of Japan, from what we know of these very refined inhabitants of the capital, Heian was something of great elegance, The Heian Japanese would have looked with great disdain on anything even from the most nearby provinces. Yet in the short space of thirty years, musical styles had changed, apparently simply as the result of internal stylistic development to such a degree that what seemed to them a very humorous, disynchrony could occur. This is a good example of the degree of change that can occur without stimulus from outside the culture. Most often, we encounter examples of change that are the result of internal development occurring simultaneously with changes that are the result of contacts with other cultures.

The Rate of Change

The advent of mass media communication during this century has all but ended the slow process of internal development in isolated cultures. Now instead there are persistent stimuli that are most often external to the traditional culture. These are now quickly absorbed into the internal system of cultural change. Cultures are now redefined to include all these new elements.

However, not too long ago, diplomatic contacts provided a means for cultural contacts to occur between cultures that were geographically isolated, sometimes by great distances. As political consciousness evolved in the hands of the powerful and persistent, these diplomatic and economic contacts bridged increasingly vast expanses of geographical and cultural distance. At the same time that isolated cultural contacts reached across great distances, regular contacts between neighboring groups resulted in continuing stimulus and assimilation. The stability of this pattern throughout much of the history of man is evident when we consider that the cultural distance traveled by Marco Polo to China in the Thirteenth Century was not significantly more than that traveled by those European travelers who visited

China in the early Nineteenth Century.

In contrast to this cultural distance, for every mile of the way between Venice and Kanbalu, the inhabitants of every village knew much about the language, culture, and politics of the inhabitants of the next village along the road taken by these travelers. While little had occurred to bring Europe and China closer together during the six hundred years that elapsed since Marco Polo's travels, the knowledge based on continuous contact between neighbor and neighbor continued unabated. The nature of culture contact may thus be defined by proximity, be it of the type that occurs only as the outcome of diplomatic contacts between nations separated by great distances, or the simple result of humans knowing the habits of their neighbors. The character of this proximity is defined by the context required for it to occur.

Although the distinction between the two examples just cited is important, this distinction is really only a matter of degree of intensity in the type and number of contacts.

The process of evolution from stimulus to assimilation is dependent on the nurture that can be provided to its growth in the new context. The process is also dependent upon the existence of enough structural and stylistic congruents to permit fusion to occur. A strong political system, for example, can virtually force the acceptance of alien cultural elements to such a degree that even culturally dissimilar musical styles can be adopted. The rate of assimilation that is, the rate of adoption and imitation of the elements of the new stimulus may thus occur slowly or rapidly, depending on the existence of supportive social or intrinsic structural contexts. Nonetheless, even rapid assimilation is something that we observe as measurable in years rather than months.

Choice and Habit

One of the natural inhibitors to smooth assimilation of external stimuli is the natural proclivity of most humans for choosing the familiar over anything but a rare foray into the exotic. It is the task of assimilating the new into that which we are already familiar which causes the greatest difficulty. When there are a significant number of matching structural elements in two traditions, it sometimes makes the assimilation of the remaining few distinctive elements that much more difficult. We can each think of ways in which this happens. Think about trying to cook in a friend's kitchen. As one might imagine, the frustration of not finding the exact utensils with which we are familiar and scrambling around looking for things is frustrating. Think about a cook trained in Western cooking traditions trying to cook in a Japanese or Indonesian kitchen. This experience can no longer be described in simple terms of frustration. All is so unfamiliar that one no longer expects or hopes

to be able to depend on old standbys and instead the task becomes a challenge of survival or a respectful withdrawal.

Politics, Influence and Change

Continued exposure to cultural patterns that show only few dissimilarities might eventually lead to a sufficient level of familiarity which would allow us to function efficiently. The task of assimilating cultural structures that have few parallel elements with our own requires a supportive system which would provide a strong motivation for assimilation, a motivation strong enough to make one work hard to find clues and solutions.

The influence of international diplomacy or political power was often sufficient to provide the supportive structure for the type of acculturation across isolated cultures. The existence of German music in the Russian court, Chinese music in the Japanese court, or Spanish music with the Indians of Mexico are just a few examples of the adoption of musical styles in which there were few congruent structural elements between donor and recipient culture at the time of the adaptation but sufficient political or diplomatic pressure to smooth the path of acceptance.

Rise and Dissemination of Soukous

Throughout Africa, south of the Sahara, there has been during the past twenty five years a steady spread of a new style of popular music generated from the Congo or as it was known earlier, Zaire. Soukous, as this music came to be known, had elements of the Cuban Rumba in it and many of the early Soukous musicians cultivated a connection to early Cuban music. After becoming established in the Congo, Soukous musicians began traveling and playing in other African countries. In other African the easy flow of Soukous rhythm and melody were seen by new in the newly rising African republics, as sounding more African than other forms of more Europeanized or Americanized African pop music and this aided greatly in its spread and popularity.

In Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe, there has been a small band of Congolese musicians who regularly play for Shona-speaking audiences in one of Harare's well-attended drinking houses. The acclaim of these musicians was based on their performances of popular songs in Congo Rumba style. Had they only stayed in Harare for a short time, this style might have come and gone with them. However, in deciding to remain in Harare, they began to modify their repertoire to include in each performance one set of songs in the popular Marabi style from South Africa, which sounds and feels much like Afro American swing of the 1930s and 1940's with some blues admixture. This Marabi style had already been an established favorite with Shona audiences. The elements of the style could be quickly adapted

by the highly polished Congolese musicians. It was, however, only after they had resided in Zimbabwe for some four or five years that the group had assimilated the tone and speech patterns of the Shona language well enough to begin to compose and perform songs in Shona which drew on the linguistic and cultural roots of the audience. Their popularity had already been established but they now became assimilated to such a degree that they could now speak to their audiences in the language of that audience and in a manner which won their approval. The success of the Congo group in Zimbabwe was based not only on their excellence and proficiency in discovering the key which permitted their entry into Shona society, but on the previous acceptance of electric guitar music by the Shona, their familiarity with the Congo style, and certainly the fact that, although mutually unintelligible to each other, the Shona and Luba languages are structurally related. It was the familiarity with the contours of the language which permitted the stimulus to be assimilated.

In this manner Soukous spread and new songs were soon being composed by non Congo musicians until now in the beginning of the 21st Century, much of the new popular music of Africa has a Soukous tinge to it.

Propinquity and the Media

While examples of this kind of musical adoption are common, they are rarer than those in which elements from the music of one culture are exchanged with those of its closest neighbor. This occurs naturally during the process of one country engaging in a cultural exchange with another, or a neighbor borrows from a near neighbor. Today the media has the potential to cover the planet in a matter of hours. Mass media communication systems and the economic and political systems that govern, support and drive them have increased the level of contacts between cultures to such a degree that the process needs to be viewed from a different perspective.

The 1936, "Memorandum for the Study of Acculturation," postulated by Herskovits, Linton and Redfield,²⁾ still applies; however, the increased level of contact means that the intensified rate of acculturation and its effects must be considered differently than was required when these guidelines were drawn. Were it true that man's capability for assimilation of external stimuli was limitless, then the recent developments in media technology would merely represent an increase in intensity of a system already equipped for adaptation. The 1977 UNESCO Statistical Yearbook reported that according to a 1975 survey, there were 953 million radio receivers in use in the world, or 305 receivers for every 1,000 inhabitants. In 1978, it is reported that Japan alone produced 19.9 million radio sets, and the sale of these radios represented a growth rate of 40.4% over 1976.³⁾

If we look at more recent data we note that the trend towards increased cultural

saturation through the media continues. In the years 1993, 1994 and 1995, the shipments of CDs, cassettes and music videos went from 956 million units to 1 billion 123 million units to 1 billion 113 million units in the United States ⁴⁾. Although there was a decline of 0.9% in 1995, the dollar value increased by 2.0% which may or may not have had an effect on sales. Meanwhile the percentage of households in the US with television sets has risen from 95.3 in 1970 to 98.3 in 1994 with an average of 5 television sets per household. 4. Although the United States leads the way in the number of televisions sets per household with 814 per 1000 in 1991, still a look at other countries shows Canada with 639 per 1000, Germany with 556 per 1000, France with 407, Japan with 613, Denmark with 536, Finland with 501 and Great Britain with 434.5. If we keep in mind that these numbers often reflect multiple numbers of sets per household, then the power of this form of cultural dissemination looms large and strong.⁵⁾

Although we have as yet no idea of the potential limits of man's ability to absorb stimuli, it is difficult to be sanguine about his capacity to absorb this level of cultural input.

The intensified degree of contact has had effects in many other areas in addition to music. To cite one parallel example in medicine, the increased attendance of preschool children at day care centers, at ages too young for them to have developed natural immunities, has resulted in the much earlier and more rapid spread of the common childhood diseases. While such diseases as even the common cold continue to be studied as discrete cases, the pattern of their spread has now become an area of concern for epidemiologists. While the comparison of music to epidemics may be an unfortunate one, rapid dissemination of musical styles in our own times suggests that we look particularly at the patterns of this dissemination in addition to our studies of discrete musical styles.

Politics and Control of Choices

Related to recent changes in media communication systems, political and economic systems also show distinctive differences in the manner in which they affect the arts. Until recently, the major portion of the world's musics fell under the sway of one of two dominant political and economic systems: that of the socialist states or that of the state's adhering to the principle of free enterprise. Although neither of these systems operated with total implementation in its own sector of the world, each at its most highly developed state departed significantly from the basis on which most of the traditional music of the world evolved. Each also increased its influence on the arts as the result of improved media communications systems to which it had access. Whereas change occurred slowly during those times when cultures were more isolated from each other, support of the arts came from small

communities of consumers or from the benevolence of a few powerful patrons and not from larger states. With the effective demise of socialism as a major global political force, the world is left with the one dominating system of media dissemination. It is one driven by what sells, rather than by some ideal of what may be best for human culture. Governmental support for music and the other arts is drying up everywhere in the world to be supplanted by a market driven cultural policy.

Such patrons of the arts as the Esterhazys in the 18th Century knew that while you may suggest to an artist the forms which he may employ, the patron should never attempt to dictate the content. In this sense the artist was the expert and the patron was the consumer, one who should not interfere in the artistic process, but only appreciate it and support it.

In Moghul India the noblemen supported artists but respected them as relatively independent. They understood that their duty as lords was to value these musicians who in this one sense were superior to them. Fidel Castro of Cuba suggested a principle that appears to be the inverse of this: that the artist must be free to use whichever medium he chooses but that when the content goes against the principles of state, the state will withdraw its support.⁶⁾

Under the free enterprise principle, the costs of production and distribution must be passed on to the consumer, which has meant that as a general policy only those productions that can guarantee greatest consumption can warrant the risk of investment of costly production and distribution resources. As a concomitant of this, there is a tendency to select for reduced diversity in favor of a safer return of the initial investment. Even in situations in which additional charitable support is sought to supplement the system, such support is usually awarded with a view toward greater dissemination and accessibility.

The attitude in many former socialist states, and one not limited exclusively to them, was one that recognized the importance of a people's music in strengthening an awareness of the state as a community. Here again, although such attitudes were also prevalent in the development of national music in nineteenth-century Europe, the political structures of the Twentieth Century have gained increased effectiveness in being able to enlist the complete cooperation of the media communications systems to implement their policies. Therefore, unlike the movement toward the development of a national music in nineteenth-century Europe which, however powerful or officially endorsed, could only hope to reach a small percentage of their population, the twentieth-century socialist states with control of media could reach virtually every member of their population.

The desire for standardization follows closely upon the establishment of the state. Even before independence, Thomas Jefferson had given much thought to the development of a system of national education. In Russia the Cyrillic alphabet was

adopted as the standard in 1917. Under this system, all the Turkic peoples of the former Soviet Union had to devise means of writing their languages using the Cyrillic alphabet while giving up the use of the Arabic script. With the falling of the former Soviet Union, many of these former satellite nations have become independent and are now turning to the use of the Roman alphabet, because of its use in the Republic of Turkey, in their eyes, the most highly developed of all the nations of Turkic speakers. Although Turkey exercises no political control over these countries, it is seen by these newly liberated nations as the model nation they would like to emulate, one which speaks a closely related language and one with close historic and cultural links.

In defining the parameters of the music of the state along national lines rather than according to the diverse traditional regional ones, the twentieth-century socialist states also followed the tendency of most modern states to define their boundaries and to unify all within those boundaries as much as possible. The Marxist Socialist position most often manifested itself in the attitude that regionalism in the folk arts tends to divide communities rather than unite them and, therefore, the state should promote the development of state or national styles rather than to recognize or highlight any of the existing regional variants.

It is not always a simple matter to impose a single national music style. In Romania, for example, strong traditions, the existence of regional ensembles trained primarily in the village styles, and regional pride meant that the national style is being assimilated gradually. However, regular exposure to the national style on radio and television and the marked tendency to standardize variant forms in the Romanian regional styles clearly indicated a move toward national standardization and away from regional diversity.

Change and Biological and Cultural Diversity

How do we measure the effects of change in the level of diversity on musical systems when we are dealing with such volume?

At the moment, the question presents real difficulties. The question should hinge on the rate at which the consumer population can assimilate new stimuli. This, of course, depends on how we define assimilation. "Assimilation" is a term like the term "culture," which is difficult to define with exactitude and on which there is more general agreement as to what it is not. Studies of the functioning of the human brain have thus far determined that speech production and musical perception are located in different areas of the brain. These studies have, however, focused primarily on the recognition of melodies and not on the little understood process of composition. Creation must depend on memory in some way and memory must draw on some of the same brain functions that were engaged in the actual execution

of the activity or event being remembered. Several areas of the brain may be simultaneously engaged in the execution of what we may perceive of as a single activity. Speech and melodic recognition functions are located in different areas of the brain. In the creation of music the process links these two functions in some way and that by extension the creation of music naturally follows a pattern congruent with the tone and stress patterns already learned for speech.

By extension of this concept, we can further suggest that assimilation of external musical stimuli might be measured in terms of the degree to which the music conforms to the speech contours of the language of the consumers.

To cite just a few examples of this, let us note that the 17th Century English composers, John Jenkins and Henry Purcell wrote music that followed the basic formal patterns set in Italian music of that period. However in the melodic contours of their music the deviations from the Italian pattern took on an unmistakable characteristic of English music drawn from folk music. Similarly, a German musical style was well established and recognized before the establishment of the German political state, because there were numerous German speakers long before there was a single German nation.

Japanese popular music, however, presents an interesting exception to this. Twenty years ago there existed a number of Japanese popular music forms which emphasized their western origins by deliberately distorting the natural stress contours of Japanese speech. The result was a pastiche of East and West. Ten years ago, Japanese audiences had gained considerable familiarity with many forms of Western popular music. Yet, although the melodic and instrumental accompaniment style of these new popular songs was extremely sophisticated, the distortion of Japanese speech contours continued. In 1979, the newest examples of Japanese popular songs in the western style had reached a very sophisticated level of adoption of western style to a new form of Japanese poetry which is suited to the contemporary Japanese concept of today's world. Although these new song texts read like good examples of traditional poetry, in their interpretation on these new recordings there is a distinct and apparently conscious distortion of the natural accent and stress patterns of spoken Japanese. One might suspect that total assimilation of the new popular music to the patterns of Japanese speech is being consciously avoided.

Cultural Uniformity and The Media

Most radio and television programming around the world continues to become increasingly uniform. There are of course cherished exceptions, certainly. This uniformity seems to be a reflection of the comfortable conformity we see in so many Holiday Inns, Starbucks and McDonald's all over the world. Still, there are some

important, if few, channels for diversity. The publishing industry and the record business are two examples that immediately come to mind. The mortality rate for experiment in these industries may be high, but the continued attempts at maintaining diversity are substantial indications of the present health of these two avenues for communication. In spite of continually increasing manufacturing and production costs a great variety of new books and records appear monthly both from the well-established houses as well as from low-budget operations. Is this the signal of the gradual end of cultural diversity, or does this mean that the human species is waging the fight to sustain diversity in order to survive?

Variants and Aberrations

We have today in the western world and primarily in the United States a slowly but steadily increasing minority of musicians who are devoting themselves to the study of the classical music of India. This is a concentrated large-scale study of Indian classical music and it has been going on for almost forty years. Yet in spite of a few noteworthy and significant experiments in the fields of pop music and to a lesser degree in Jazz, there has been little true assimilation of the fundamental musical principles of the Indian tradition nor has the knowledge and appreciation of the depths and inner workings of this music moved much beyond the inner circle of knowledgeable specialists. This is not to deny the importance of the large audiences that continue attend concerts of Indian classical music nor to ignore the increasing frequency of those concerts. However, these events still survive in a context that is strongly tied to the Indian tradition and they have not been significantly modified for easier assimilation into the larger recipient culture nor have they been absorbed. There are many reasons for this, not the least of which may be the fact that as a classical tradition carried on by professional exponents, there is little about Indian classical music which allows for the broad popular dissemination. This is something that might have been more easily accomplished with a popular music. It is also apparent that the study of Indian classical music is much more than a passing fad. The result is then an enclave, a very strong one that exists in the dominant culture of many countries in Europe, Asia and America, but closed and isolated from the main stream. There are many such sub cultures within each dominant culture. However, the case of Indian Classical music is particularly interesting because although it continues to be strong within the overseas Indian communities, it has also incorporated a great of non Indian enthusiasts and cognoscenti.

Although it is certainly pointless to speculate on the future, it is interesting to consider the very solid and substantial growing interest in this music and compare this to the plight of the symphony orchestra in the West. With the increasingly high costs of concert hall bookings, transportation costs, and the rising pay scales for

union musicians, many large cities in the United States are finding it nearly impossible to sustain symphony orchestras. Even fund-raising drives which are mammoth compared to standards of only a few years ago still leave symphony orchestras with deficit budgets and dwindling audiences. Municipal orchestras, as large institutions in a free enterprise system, have had to cope with increased costs imposed upon them by similar institutions, such as labor unions, transportation agencies and publicity organizations. The Indian classical music movement in the West has been able to survive and thrive because it lies largely outside these institutional systems and of course, because the inherent costs of a performance are much less.

The tradition of study of Indian classical music survives in the West because it chooses to function largely independent of the monolithic institutional structures. Symphony orchestras today face difficulties proportionate to this dependence. The contrast between the present condition of these two musical traditions arises from different responses to the pressures of large institutional structures to impose uniformity.

Mimicry, Tradition, Creativity and Freedom

In spite of the pressures economic and political for uniformity, diversity continues. Perhaps the formal imposition of systems of uniformity both emphasizes and encourages continued diversity. Perhaps change is the result of individuation and cannot be prevented. The art of Chinese calligraphy has been practiced carefully and with little change for over a thousand years in Japan. Exactitude in teaching this art requires that the student imitate as precisely as possible the models set before him. As skill is gradually achieved even the most assiduous attempts at careful imitation only reveal to the teacher the clear and irrepressible reflection of the student's own personal traits. It may well be that diversity as a manifestation of the expression of each individual's perception and assimilation of his experiences is a natural and irrepressible aspect of man's response to his environment.

Notes

- 1) Murasaki, Shikibu, Lady, "Writing Practice" in *The Tale of Genji*. trans. by Arthur Waley (New York: Random House, 1960), pp. 110-15.
- 2) Herskovits, Melville J., and Ralph Linton and Robert Redfield "Memorandum for the Study of Acculturation," *American Anthropologist* 38 (1936) 149-152.
- 3) *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1995*. U.S. Department of Commerce. Washington D.C.: Department of Commerce, September 1995.
- 4) Recording Industry Association of America in *Variety*, February 26-March 3, 1996. Page 62.
- 5) (op. cit., page 859.)

- 7) Marcuse, Herbert, "Art in the One-Dimensional Society, *Arts Magazine* 41(1966-67), 26-31, and Susan Sontag in the Introductory Essay to *The Art of the Revolution: Castro's Cuba: 1959-1970*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970.