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Musical Style

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Musical Style

Style as a Cultural Factor

We use the Western term style in different ways. Most often when people talk about style they use the word to describe something much like a tangible commodity, most often in fact, like an asset. “He or she really has style!”, or perhaps “doesn’t have any style at all”. The general use of the term style in music is somewhat related in that it refers to a collection of selected integrated musical practices that are associated with and which come to identify an interpreter, a composer, a composition or a group of compositions, or even a period of musical practice.

Style is not only a positive and inductive process but also a negative concept in a very important way, Creating a style not only requires accepting elements for inclusion, but in order to produce resultant integrity it must also reject much, much more than it accepts. While it represents choice - the selection of musical techniques or formal elements which together make up the characteristic set - style nonetheless assumes the conscious rejection of those elements which do not seem to fit in effectively with the rest.

When someone undertakes a musical improvisation, whether say in a cadenza in the Classical tradition, or in Jazz or in Indian classical music, the creator must reject musical ideas which are alien to the particular structure which he is attempting to create. Not long ago there was considerable criticism of the violinist, Gidon Kremer’s use of cadenzas written by the modern Russian composer, Schnittke, in his recording of a Mozart violin concerto, not so much because it was a modern addition, but because it “sounded” modern and therefore did not fit into the general conception of the style of Mozart’s time.

Quite logically then style and the recognition of it must be based on certain assumed criteria. These criteria are defined by tradition and this holds true even when a consciously new style is created, because the creation of something that is different from the tradition takes into account that same tradition albeit negatively. In this same manner the audience for this new style must assume the cultural tradition in order to be able to recognize that this new style is new.

Style: Improvisation and Interpretation

Delimiting or defining a style is a requirement not only for the composer or improviser but also for any interpreter. There is no real hard line between free improvisation and the kind of adjustment of interpretation and expression that is required in the performance of any music. Phrasing, attack, stress, vibrato, emphasis, tone quality, etc. are all musical elements that come together in a performance but that are minutely adjusted by every performer. It is the uniquely balanced proportion of these elements that identifies every performer or interpreter as effectively as if it were his own voice print.

Much of this process is unconscious and some of it may be uncontrollable. In the Chinese and Japanese tradition of brush painting, the student is taught to follow each stroke of the master to the smallest detail and to the highest degree possible. This affects the holding of the brush, the motion of the arm, the amount of ink taken on the brush, and the precise details of the strokes. Yet the end result of this careful rote training is that although the teacher's influence can be clearly recognized in the work of the student, it is the student's own unrepressable personal characteristics which show through unmistakably to the trained eye.

Those distinctive elements that every human adds to all motor activity become imprinted as perceivable elements of that individual's style. While the amplitude and frequency of an individual musician's vibrato may be controlled, in part, by unique physical elements related to heart beat, metabolism, nervous system, the matters of where and when to use that vibrato are dictated by more conscious activity. One must train oneself to remember that one's teacher recommended "a little vibrato here but not too much here". With experience one is eventually confident enough to make these judgments independently of the master. These are conscious actions and decisions about style. This is not to suggest that a clear line of demarcation can be drawn between these two aspects of style and interpretation. The degree to which training gives way to habit and eventually becomes spontaneous is impossible to define and perhaps, not worth pursuing.

Cultural Effects on Style

Some American Jazz musicians have said that it is possible to tell from the way a musician plays if he was raised in the city or in the country. It is noticeable in the more complex sense of harmony that the musician uses and is the result of having been accustomed to hearing more complex music in the city than what was popularly heard in the rural areas. With the internal globalization occurring in the United States, this kind of observation may become increasingly difficult to sense. But when this was true even not too long ago is that the popular music that rural

musicians heard even indirectly had an influence on their Jazz style.

In Jazz, improvisation has usually been the main factor in determining a musician's status and it is natural to assume that in free improvisation, what the musician has heard previously will have an important effect on what his or her style. What is also interesting about this is the implication that there is or was a city culture and a rural culture and that these have an influence on style. There is nothing in the geographic location itself that could influence this. Instead it is that large cities having greater populations, offer a greater number of choices in order to satisfy the preferences of those populations. It is not that city dwellers have more refined taste, but that that taste is based upon a greater number of choices. Thus is the influence caused by living either in a rural area or in the city is one that consists both of individually learned choices and the involuntary control exercised upon them by factors effecting the environment.

Individual Style and Imitation

Even the conscious learning of a musical style is very complex. A young aspiring musician who dreams of playing "just like" some one whom he respects may attempt to study personally with the master. When this is not possible he must learn to listen carefully and remember.

Recordings have done much to facilitate this type of learning of style. Many music teachers remark on the incredible increase in technical virtuosity of young musicians today. It is apparently the result of easy access to clear, detailed and yet relatively inexpensive recordings. Being able to listen to a recording of the master often enough might almost come to compensate for the absence of private lessons. Jazz musicians, almost since the inception of the idiom have worked in this way. In fact, stories are told of some of the early greats such as Freddie Keppard of New Orleans who refused the opportunity to be the first recorded Jazz musician, because he saw in the recordings the potential for others to copy his style characteristics.

Jazz musicians have relied heavily on the ability to learn from the best of recordings. Many become so skillful that they can learn to pick out particular favorite musicians out of a group recording as a result of a developed familiarity with that musician's particular combination of tone quality, phrasing and favorite nuances of expression. Just as there are some who become adept at doing imitations of the speech and mannerisms of famous people, there are musicians who can become very adept at doing capturing many of the identifying style characteristics of their favorite musicians.

Dr. Michael White is a clarinet soloist with the famous old New Orleans marching band, the Young Tuxedo Brass Band. His playing sounds amazingly like the great Omer Simion, an old classic New Orleans musician who has now been



Fig.60 Ashih Khan, son of Ali Akbar Khan and grandson of Al'Uddin Khan whose playing shows influences from his father and grandfather as well as from his uncle, Ravi Shankar.



Fig.61 The Korean composer and *kayagum* master, Huang, Byung-gi. As well as mastering the *Sanjo* versions of several *kayagum* players, he composes both in the Korean style as well as in the modern international idiom. He maintains the purity of the tradition in his Korean music performances but his compositions in the Western music idiom show the distinctive qualities of Asian music.



Fig.62 An instrument of great refinement, the ancient 7 string *qin* of China. Ideally, the player should only perform this music in conditions of thoughtful quiet and with an ideal audience on only one knowledgeable listener.



Fig.63 The late Amir Khan in concert in New Delhi. Amir Khan was a master of the *Khyal* style of North Indian classical form. During a performance he often took as much as twenty to thirty minutes during the *alap*, articulating the character of only the notes in the first lower octave before moving on to the rest of the notes and the rhythmic sections of the performance.

dead for many years. Yet the similarity is almost uncanny. Michael White admits that Omer Simion was one of his favorite clarinetists. It is improbable that he had ever heard Omer Simion in a live performance, and there are only a few short solos on 78rpm records he had made with Jelly Roll Morton in 1926. Yet the sound of that clarinet on these few moments of recorded sound from the 1920s was enough for Dr. White to grasp and on which to build his own style. However, what is astounding is that it was not merely an imitation of a few recorded “licks” from a few old records, but that he has brought it to life and created an entire living Omer Simion style from those short bits on record and was now making new music in this old style.

Typically, Jazz musicians did not talk much about such matters as posture and breathing nor, in fact, about most of the sort of matters transmitted in the course of formal music lessons in the Western classical tradition. Had Michael White actually taken lessons from the living Omer Simion, the method of holding the clarinet and of breathing and moving the body while playing would likely never have been discussed. Yet even many of these elements of performance, many of which have important bearing on the resultant style are learned from the master without conscious effort.

Natural Evolution of Style

Ali Akbar Khan, master musician of India, son and disciple of the great Allad-din Khan, manifests in his playing the deep influence of his father and still bears his own stamp of individuality. His own son, Ashish Khan, follows in the tradition of his father that is noted clearly in his style. At the same time one can hear in the playing of Ashish, the distinctive influence of the playing of his father’s fellow student, the famous master, Ravi Shankar. In all of this there are layers and layers of influences from within the family tradition as well as without, to the massive body of Indian music in general and all superimposed on the base of the physical and psychological makeup of each individual.

Perhaps what we think of as style may be one of the most important qualities of music. In a real sense it is our awareness of style, of this being different from that, which moves to recognize and select the music to which we listen. In describing the predicament of contemporary music, the composer Lukas Foss once said that it is not enough to recognize that one is hearing a modern composition. If the listener cannot distinguish between one composer and another when hearing a particular work through recognition of the characteristics of his manner of treatment or style then all remains uniform and unfathomable.

Style as a Complex

What we think of as musical style can refer to a number of different aspects of the creation and interpretation of music. In certain ways music style is similar to the process by which we note differences in natural language. Spoken languages can be grouped into broad divisions according to common characteristics, then further into separate mutually unintelligible languages, then further into generally intelligible dialects, regional accents and finally down to personal idiolects.

The classification into these divisions makes discussion of the comparative features of different modes of speech easier. However while the distinctions between such language categories may also be largely an arbitrary matter of convenience, in music it is even more difficult to say where local and personal styles end and national styles and those of an entire epoch can be divided. Any composer's entire output can be grouped into one large set of common characteristics - albeit that the range of variation might be great. Meanwhile the body of a composer's work can also be looked at more closely in terms of the style of a particular period in his creative life. Eventually however we can look more closely and recognize a set of common characteristics in each individual composition and such a complex of common features could be thought of as a style. We do not usually pursue this avenue further down to the differences in styles between sections and phrases of a single piece since this takes us into the realm of activity usually defined as formal analysis, or the analysis of form, which is to say, the detailed formal analysis of a particular piece of music.

The analogy with spoken language gives a good broad parallel to style in music. Pushing it down to the level of style of an individual composition, as with the speaking style of an individual is taking it too far. Nonetheless, it becomes useful when we look outside the Western tradition. If we consider current practice in the classical music system of North India, strict application of the distinction between style and individual composition becomes fuzzy. Is each raga the equivalent of a single composition or is each performance, each interpretation of that raga a better equivalent?

Obviously, audiences and musicians in India need not worry about where such lines might be drawn. The application has meaning only in our search for a delineation of the parameters of style. In India one can also go from a broad national style, to regional and local styles and on down to personal individual styles and to variations within each of them. It is also possible, by making use of the availability of some 60 years of Indian Classical music on records, to speak of style changes according to historical periods. Ali Akbar Khan, a widely acclaimed master of the form, is unmistakably the same artist we hear in his *jugalbandi* duets with Ravi Shankar recorded in the 1940s, as in his numerous Lps recorded in the 50s, 60s, and

70s. As we hear him today, he is still unmistakably the same artist. Still, in each of these periods we can note his personal style changing.

If for a moment we consider the North Indian raga and its place on this style continuum we can separate the common characteristics which all performances of any particular raga has, separate from the individual style of the performer and his time and place. In this sense we can almost think of the theoretical concept of the raga as the set of common stylistic qualities which all performances of it share in common. Thus in a sense, each raga is a highly articulated style which serves as the basis for individual improvisations. Raga is the abstracted matrix of a melodic style from which endless variations can be created.

Style as Continuum and Similarities in Style

It is helpful to think of musical style in terms of a continuum that can be viewed in large or small segments and as the result of varying mixtures of geographic, temporal and personal affects. In this multi-faceted, multi-layered view it becomes easier to see how in a given performance the performer might concentrate on emphasizing a certain set of qualities available to him and rejecting others which might also be possible. Given this possibility it then becomes possible to abstract certain elements and transport them across traditionally defined stylistic lines.

A few years ago the pianist Van Cliburn was scheduled to record the complete Chopin Nocturnes. He was apparently not satisfied with his ability to create the mood in these pieces that he felt he wanted. After a few false starts, he asked that the tape recorders be turned off and he began improvising on the piano trying to establish the proper mood for the Nocturnes. After a few moments his improvisation drifted into the popular Dietz and Schwartz song, “You and the Night and the Music” and soon had Cliburn humming along immersing himself in the mood of the piece. He stopped and asked that the recording begin again and went right into the next Chopin Nocturne. There must have been for Cliburn, something in the 1930s popular song that was akin to what he wished to express in the Chopin Nocturne. It is possible for musicians to find parallels, rough broad ones at least, between music from different traditions and then to emphasize these parallels. Such drawn parallels may be very personal ones and may be useful only to that one individual.

The American composer, Tom Ross, formerly a Jazz guitarist spent many years in India studying thoroughly the performance styles of both North and South India. When hearing the South Indian dance composition, the *Jatiswaram* in *Raga Hemavati*, it impressed him as having a quality somewhat like a blues. Here the fact that he had studied Indian music for many years points out that this was not a superficial first impression, nor should it suggest that anyone who studied this piece

carefully might come to the same conclusion. Instead it was his personal feeling about the piece. He then reset or composed his own version, which he simply titled the “Hemavati Jatiswaram Blues” in which he clarified the parallel that he heard between the Indian piece and the blues for others to enjoy as well.

Style, Taste and Popularity

It often happens that someone makes something or does something or devises some unique way of dressing that seems unique. It seems to work well and it catches another’s fancy. The other decides to have one too, or to make one like it but in the process it naturally changes it a bit. If it is imitated further, further modification will occur. This continuous process seems to motivate a great deal of creative or recreative activity. The process of duplicating styles helps to define the style of a period. There is also a leveling tendency, what we might think of as the “quick job”. For example a top interior designer comes up with a new idea — Jack Lennor Larsen begins using blended desert tones setting off textiles with a few objects all of which establish the general style. Clearly it is good and others begin reflecting the new trend. Before long as the trend continues, it begins to look as though someone sat down and made a list of the elements which were required in the new style. The producers now go down this list and pull out one of each - one desert plant, one pale gray rug (maybe it will be sandy gray, maybe not) one sunset rust, or orange plastic covered chair (heavy cotton will make it too expensive). As the popularity of the new style becomes established, it becomes more widely imitated. Many only adopt it because it is the style of the moment, without any idea of the aesthetic of the original. Gradually we are inundated with quick and cheap imitations that only bear a superficial resemblance to the carefully planned integrity of the original.

All this happens with music in popular culture too. Those high points in the evolution of style during which the elements of that style come together in a cohesive whole are the high points of a culture. It is from these periods that the long time influence on later styles is generated. There is often a great deal of chance involved. The Indian Classical musician who practices for hours, day after day, year after year, to develop his skill and sensitivity, still depends on the chance that he and his audience will be able to click together and turn the performance into a truly inspiring experience. As often happens in India, after a few such inspired performances the artist usually finds that his style has become the focus of respectful followers. In order for this following of supportive listeners to occur, the masterful performance quality would have to occur with some regularity.

Chance, Improvisation and Accidents of History

Particularly in music performances in which improvisation plays a part, the documentation, on tape or film, of an excellent performance may be an accident or fortuitous chance. What many Javanese musicians consider one of the best examples of inspired gamelan playing on records occurred by chance. Before World War II a number of recording companies, mostly German, went to various parts of Asia to get into the business of providing local people with recordings of their own music. On one occasion four or five of the best musicians in the area around the city of Solo in Central Java were in the studio and for some today unknown reason, a small group of musicians sat down and recorded rather than the usual entire ensemble of twenty five or thirty musicians. This old 78rpm record was reproduced on the old Folkways Music of Indonesia Lp, in which it is called simply Gamelan Slendro. The performance consists of only *suling*, *gambang* and with the gender barely audible because of the limitations of 78rpm recording quality. Nevertheless, the performance literally flies with grace and fire and like no other among the hundreds of recordings which were made at that time.

What we are talking about here under the name, style, is a recognizable complex of elements - discrete in themselves, perhaps, but when integrated into a whole performance, create an unmistakable cohesive unit. Thus, the concept of style in music implies both integrity and cohesiveness. The idea of shifting from one set of practices to another - a switching of styles - is something that does not ordinarily appear to be valued highly in any music culture other than for parody.

The Integrity of Style

It is in the nature of our dynamic and rapidly changing modern society to value of the seeking of what is new. Changing of styles too frequently, however, emphasizes more concern with form than with content. In the traditions of much of the world outside the West, styles were changed rarely and while the Western view was to say that such societies were simply static. There was in these "static" societies, more concern with content than with the creation of new forms. We could well use a refocusing on the content of a music or of a musical style and less overt attention paid to collecting of newer and newer styles with little time to appreciate their significance.

Mozart wrote in the prevalent style of the late 18th century and wrote so much and so effectively that he came to define that period. It would not have been conceivable for a composer like Mozart in his time to have changed styles in the manner that Igor Stravinsky did in the mid 20th century. The significance of Stravinsky's music was not diminished by his forays into various musical styles

during his lifetime anymore than Mozart was handicapped by remaining close to one central style for his entire creative output. Each composer was a reflection and response to the limitations and stimuli of his own time and place. Admittedly if one focuses on the music of Mozart one finds that the contrast in style between, say, the works for the theater, the string quartets, and massive number of minuets and other social dances he wrote there certainly is great variety in his work. This having been said, the uniformity - contrasted with Stravinsky - is distinct.

That which we recognize today as the music of Mozart is a highly integrated style, one that allowed Mozart freedom to concentrate on the particular setting for which he was composing. Those who appreciated his genius could look forward to hearing his newest creation and could concentrate on the content of the new work without wondering about a new style. Mozart's own particular and clear definition of the late 18th century style was so clear to him that much of his music must have come to him in dreams, with such grace and ease does he integrate even the most complex of devices and surprising innovations.

The late Miles Davis, an American Jazz musician who played for many years and was a pioneering innovator, changed styles from time to time. His own personal and individual style was always clear, however. A jazz musician who had played with Miles Davis for some years once said that one of the things that most impressed him about Miles was the integration of all aspects of Miles' personal taste into a cohesive style. According to him everything Miles liked reflected a single sense of style, from the way he played, his painting style, to the clothes he wore, the cars he preferred and even to the kind of girls he went for. He reflected that for most of us, lesser mortal, our lives represent a disarray of disparate tastes and tendencies. Certainly, it is the cohesiveness and integrity of Miles' playing at any given time which accounts for his strong and solid status as a leading innovator for many years.

Style and the Individual

Style, when considered at the level of the individual characteristics of performance which set one interpreter or composer apart from another resembles the type of uniqueness of pattern that we tend to associate with the qualities of human personality. The complex of behaviors is what we conceptualize as personality. This can be observed and described but is something too complex to document completely or accurately. Likewise there is no satisfactory objectively measurable means available that could be useful in defining all of the parameters of style. Existing discussions of musical style deal with the perception of differences viewed from within a particular tradition and rely on limitations of language and on the predefined mode of describing them.

In the highlands of Scotland, the bagpipe tradition includes one form known as

the *Pibroch* or *Piobaireachd*. These are regarded as the most difficult and challenging pieces in the highland repertoire and pipers are judged on their ability to play them. The Pibroch is a slow and very expressive form of music and makes use of complex but fixed patterns of rapid ornaments. Since the bagpipes cannot make use of changes in volume, nor of expressive alterations of pitch, it is in the very precise execution of these fingered ornaments that a Pibroch player is judged. It is the minute variations in duration in the execution of these ornaments that defines the expressiveness of the performance and it is by their execution that the player is judged. Howard Weiss in his study of the Pibroch or Piobaireachd technique of Scots Highland bagpipers made use of precise mathematical measurements of the proportional differences in duration of fingered ornaments.¹⁾ Weiss' detailed measurements of differences between one piper and another showed a tangible means of objectively measuring an element of style which could be perceived by the expert judges but which in cases of dispute was difficult to discuss because of the extreme rapidity of their execution.

How to Measure Differences in Style

If more research in music could take the direction of precisely measuring differences of touch, of accent pattern, proportional delay and acceleration in the interpretation of a melodic or rhythmic unit, we might begin to have a body of information relating to style with which to work. Such measurements in themselves cannot define style anymore than measuring of galvanic skin temperature defines personality. Such systems of measurement can, however, begin to take us away from an entirely subjective and culture based means of talking about style and towards a means of recognizing the appearance of combined characteristics, not easily perceived consciously, by which means we might begin to talk about the existence of these differences from a more global perspective. We could begin to talk about the existence of musical style as a human phenomenon, rather than about what best describes Mozart, the Baroque, Thomas Dolby or Ravi Shankar.

Recently with the appearance of digital recording a number of new developments have taken place. Many musicians decry the introduction of digital sound recording because they believe that the result sounds unnatural. The sampling rate was devised to operate at a rate far higher than the ability of humans to detect it. Nevertheless, many musicians insist that it still doesn't sound right. However, the ability to convert audio sound into digital data has opened the path for numerous processes of analysis. Digital recording with the aid of MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) has allowed the precise recording of minute fluctuations of tempo, velocity (the speed at which a note is sounded, or its volume) and clear articulation of high-speed ornaments. This has permitted the precise notation and analysis of

stylistic factors that heretofore could only be discussed subjectively. Having a musician play through a MIDI device has allowed precise data analysis about details of style that would have been impossible or impractical only a few years ago.²⁾

Our perception of that which we have here been calling musical style is probably what makes us recognize that, “this is different from that, and I like it”. Recognition of style is what makes pursue our interest in music. When we find something that we like we want to hear it again. Eventually we may want next to hear something like it. This might be the underlying force that makes us to go to performances, to buy CDs, or perhaps for a few, to study with the creator.

Gradually both by choice and by chance the creators of that which gave us pleasure change the style of our favorites in their repetitions and imitations of them. We either find that we change with them or try to hang on to that which we have already discovered. These are the tendencies that create the complexities of music as it lives in most societies. Although our perception of it may vary because of differences in the rate of change, in any society music exists in an atmosphere of incessant activity of influence, creation, acceptance, change, and resistance that results in an ever renewing balance between focus and uniformity as against change and diversity.

Notes

- 1) Weiss ,Howard. Piobaireachd: Some New Perspectives. Master’s Thesis. University of Washington. 1979. 198pp.
- 2) Garfias, Robert, “Tonal Structure in Burmese Music as Exemplified in the Piano Music of U Ko Ko,” *Ethnomusicology Online*. <http://research.umbc.edu/eol/>.

