

# Multiculturalism: Can We Really Face A Different Music?

By Marcello Sorce Keller

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**A**n increasing number of people nowadays enjoy opportunities to expand their musical horizons and go beyond the borders, so to speak, of their native cultures. They become, in a sense, what the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinovsky once called "cultural argonauts" (1). In order to do that at the most superficial level, one can go to a record store and find there a rich sampling of folk and non-Western musics. A wide variety of vernacular pop-music genres, mostly from the Middle East, Black Africa, and Southeastern Asia, are marketed today under the catch-all label of "world music."

Of course, other opportunities are available to the more daring. One consists of "exploring the city," the larger American cities, for instance, are becoming even more multicultural than ever. European cities seem to be catching up with considerable speed as the nations of Europe begin to receive the massive wave of immigration from Africa and the ex-Socialist countries of eastern Europe. Paris, Frankfurt, Amsterdam, and Rome already offer most of the world musics—gathered sometimes in uneasy cohabitation.

Such cities offer us the opportunity to get in touch not only with the sounds of non-

Western music but also with the people who make it. It is people who are usually carriers of complex forms of culture, expressing idio-

syncratic value systems, and who for such reasons (as well as others totally unrelated to cultural diversity) are often experiencing serious problems of integration and perhaps overt discrimination. The cultures they carry and their systems of values inevitably find in their music symbolic expression and often, still, ritual reinforcement.

Some American music educators have felt the challenge to help their students explore the multicultural soundscape of their cities.

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Music educators in Europe have not yet reached the same degree of alertness to this challenge, but they are getting there. Ethnomusicologists, of course, have accumulated over time a considerable amount of experience in dealing with non-Western music, at home and abroad. Seldom, however, have they made attempts to make their experiences immediately useful for music educators. Even less have they expressed what this familiarity with other forms of music has done to their own native form of musicality. The underlying problem can be expressed more clearly in question form: Does the experience of, say, Chinese or Indian music affect the understanding and appreciation of Mozart and Beethoven? If so, to what extent?

As a European ethnomusicologist, brought

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up in the mainstream of the Western musical tradition, I would like to share some ideas on the subject which, I feel, is much more problematic than it might first appear.

How in-depth, then, can the experience of foreign music be? And what can one expect the result of the experience to be? First of all, I would caution *not* to underestimate the drama that characterizes cross-cultural experiences. We would fail to comprehend it if we only focus on the dichotomy between the so-called "particularist" and the "universalist" point of view (2).

The particularists would assert that cultures (musical or otherwise), based as they are on different interpretations of the world, are essentially incapable of communicating among themselves. Universalists, on the other hand, emphasize what human beings have in common, rather than what sets them apart, and hold cultural differences to be responses to local circumstances (the Dominican missionary Bartolomé de las Casa expressed this view with the famous tautology: "All men are human!"). As such, cultures would have developed religions, skills, laws, and styles (in the realm of art) that are worth knowing for other cultures.

My contention here is that this is not an "either/or" type of choice, but rather a question of degree. While opening ourselves to other cultures, the question is when to stop before reaching the point of no return and getting lost in the endless diversity of things. I believe that such a point exists, and that once it is crossed, we no longer find it comfortable, or even possible, to go back to our native culture. Thus, everyone making a conscious effort to appreciate foreign forms of thought (musical or otherwise) will unavoidably confront both exciting discoveries *and* the insidious perils of losing reassuring points of cultural reference. Unfortunately, there is no easy way out: Cross-cultural traveling is an adventure! I will try to explain a little better where the danger lies by expanding upon the particularist/universalist dilemma.

That the particularist attitude is ultimately untenable can easily be granted: No culture ever lived in total isolation, and no culture ever lived without undergoing continuous transformations. Cultures undergo continu-

ous change, mostly through contact with other cultures; the resulting effects are what anthropologists call syncretism and acculturation. Human cultures, therefore, have grown to share lots of traits, central and peripheral to their value systems. What is central in one culture, of course, may be marginal in another, nonexistent in a third one, and considered an outright abomination in a fourth.

On the other hand, the universalist belief that one can go the other way, assimilating other cultures, nonstop, should be very critically examined because it is largely based on the dubious assumption that all cultures, all languages, and all musics express in various ways the underlying unity of the human species; hence the excitement of verifying just how many variations on the theme are possible. If that were true, at least in principle, all musics could be appreciated by all human beings, given some availability and open-mindedness. But it is not quite that simple—and not only because we do not actually have time enough to invest in this universalist endeavor, or sufficient capacity to assimilate that much.

The problem lies, I believe, in two main flaws with the universalist stand:

1. It relies on essentially metaphysical assumptions about human nature; and
2. it does not take into consideration how musics may relate to value systems that are essentially incompatible.

Concerning the first point, I agree with Clifford Geertz when he says,

The trouble with this kind of view...is that the image of a constant human nature independent of time, place, and circumstance, of studies and professions, transient fashions and temporary opinions, may be an illusion, that what man is may be so entangled with where he is, who he is, and what he believes that it is inseparable from him. It is precisely the consideration of such possibility that led to the rise of the concept of culture and the decline of the uniformitarian view of man. Whatever else modern anthropology asserts...it is firm in the conviction that men unmodified by the customs of particular places do not in fact exist, have never existed, and most important, could not in the very nature of the case exist (3).

One is reminded here of an Egyptian Pha-

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raoh who gave a mute shepherd two babies, hoping they would grow up without ever hearing any language and would, for that reason, start speaking at some point the *Ursprache*—the original, inborn language of mankind. Unsurprisingly, those children grew up to speak no language at all.

Opposite is the case, reported by speech-pathology literature, of children who, following overexposure to several languages, eventually fail to identify with (and therefore speak properly) any one of them. In this case, at least part of the explanation comes from Lawrence of Arabia. He was not a victim of linguistic overexposure; instead, he succeeded in becoming a thoroughly bilingual speaker of English and Arabic. Trying to account for his "divided self," he is reported to have said, "He who thoroughly learns a second language... eventually loses his soul."

Why would this be so? Simply because language is not a neutral vehicle for thoughts liable to be translated and retranslated at pleasure. Language is thought itself. What Hegel could think in German, he could not have thought in Portuguese or Italian. What Confucius conceived in Chinese would not have made much sense (and still does not) in European languages. That is because language mirrors the culture at large in which it was developed.

Much the same, I believe is the case of music. Language and music, in expressing a specific culture (semantically or through symbolic forms), voice idiosyncratic ways of relating to life, people, and one's own self. Ultimately, they express a sense of "good and evil" that other cultures may not share. It is little wonder, therefore, that cultures and societies—just like religions—are often intolerant of each other. It is also no wonder that we do not always like the music from other cultures that we may happen to hear. We may not like it even when we are familiar enough with it to understand the skills and

the talent required for its making—and understandably so. The talent and the musicality of a performer one can always learn to appreciate, but when we sense in the music something that antagonizes our way of being, something telling us that it is not right to be the way we are, then withdrawal is an understandable reaction.

It may not have been apparent so far, but underlying this is an age-old question: Do we really believe, with Dr. Charles Burney, that "music is an innocent luxury, unnecessary, indeed to our existence, but a great improvement and gratification of the sense of hearing"? Do we believe, consequently, that aside from style differences, music is in essence, "always the same music"? On the basis of anthropological experience, I would take a different stand and maintain it is not. That is why I side with Plato, who said that in order to take the spiritual temperature of an individual or a society, one must "mark the music."

Structuralism puts it more generally: Cultures are not a confused and random collection of values, beliefs, patterns of behavior, and other elements. If all these elements must relate to each other in order to make up a "system," then art, mythology, fashion, social manners, and so on are all manifestations of the deep-seated attitudes of the particular society producing them. As a corollary, if a level of human condition exists that is, as some believe, "transcultural," then I strongly doubt that music entirely partakes of that level, for music is much too social both as an activity and as a process to be that way.

To be sure, there probably is something that is "nature" as distinct from "nurture," but it would be silly to overlook that if values are cultural—not for that reason are they "valued" any less by human beings. Indeed, humans are often willing to go so far as to kill each other in defense of those values!

There are also reasons why I resist the notion that musical style might be considered

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the layer where culture-bound differences are imposed upon the stronger foundations of universal human musicality. That layer, superficial as it might seem for its accessibility, is crucially important because style is always very important: *le style est l'homme*, say the French, and style is, after all, the very stuff of music history. Even Schenker, much as he wished to understand the under-the-surface processes taking place in musical creation, was ultimately attracted by the surface. It is in the “foreground” where the difference between Bach and Telemann becomes apparent, not in the *Ursatz*.

What can we do, in practice, to expand our musical experience, or to help our students do likewise—while keeping things in balance? Surely, plain musical tourism will harm no one. It will not endanger our “selfness” and will yield very little in the way of cultural returns; it is just as safe as the more common forms of tourism we all more or less practice. With more serious attempts at multimusicality, on the other hand, we can probably go quite far without experiencing the symptoms of estrangement that were so painful for Lawrence of Arabia. That would require very long exposure indeed to the music of a foreign world. Such a serious plunge into somebody else’s culture is not for everyone. It is for scholars who can intellectualize the experience and keep it under control (although not all scholars could succeed in this) and for those reckless people who like to take risks no matter what.

Quite different is what we can do in a classroom. Through the minimal exposure that time constraints make possible, we can show our students that musical systems different from our own are by no means “primitive,” and that their performers possess as much talent and skill as our own recitalists who play Bach or Chopin. Foreign music seems primitive to us only if we equate complexity in music with just the very same kind of complexity that characterizes Western art-music, and then look for it in other tradi-

tions. We can show the class how intriguingly sophisticated these systems are in their own way, and explain that complexity is not necessarily only intrinsic to the music itself; it is often to be found in the relationship between the intent of the player, the musical performance, and the intelligence of a receptive listener. It is also possible to show how each musical tradition embodies a remarkable intellectual achievement of some kind. But we cannot expect our students to like all the musics we present them, even though they sometimes will like some of them.

Therefore, it is quite possible to understand intellectually the sophistication that goes into the making of a foreign work of art. It is also possible, at the same time, to largely miss its emotional content or even to “misunderstand” it—and to enjoy that very misunderstanding (4).


Bringing students to one or the other of these forms of appreciation would be no little achievement for any teacher; there I would stop and be contented. An educator who makes students aware that other cultures develop forms of thought that are as sophisticated as our own has certainly expanded the students’ world view. This is tantamount to showing students how to avoid making unfair distinctions. For instance, calling somebody’s music “primitive” because it is very different from Beethoven’s surely would be very unfair. At the same time, we should not mistake the need to avoid discrimination based on differences for a need to deny the differences themselves. In other words, while we should always reject unfair distinctions, we also should not pretend that there are no distinctions to be made. A Christian Orthodox monk living in the monastery of Mount Athos in Greece could develop a deep appreciation for the Buddhist chant of Tibet only at the expense of his own selfness, only by restructuring his sense of aesthetics and, implicitly, by restructuring his own ethics.

Moreover, music coming from a very re-

mote culture from our own may require, for a competent appreciation, no less than a different experiencing of "time" and "space." New modes of perceptions that would make harder our return to life in Western society. If it were possible to go that far in the classroom we would leave our students rather "spaced out." It is fortunate that we cannot. But we can help our students to understand the outside world *intellectually*. What they can do with their own emotions is something they will have to decide later, on their own and at their own risk. It is only our duty to tell them that overexposure to "exotic music" should be handled with care.

### Notes

1. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, 1922.
2. These two positions were clearly expressed by Bennett Reimer in his article "Selfness and Otherness in Experiencing Music of Foreign Cultures," *Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning*, II (1991), no. 3, pp. 4-13.
3. *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, Basic Books, 1973, p. 35.
4. I had once the opportunity to express

how, in my view, one not only can but also has a right to seek a "creative misunderstanding" of art, under certain circumstances (M. Sorce Keller, "Some remarks on Musical Aesthetics from the Viewpoint of Ethnomusicology," *The Music Review*, XLIX (1988), no. 2, pp. 138-144. 

"We do not rally around a geometry proof or even a great poem in the same way that we take strength from a hymn or even a school 'fight' song--from 'Take Me Out to the Ball Game,' much less 'We Shall Overcome.'"

— Nancy G. Thomas, "Motivation," in *Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning*, Richard Colwell, Editor. New York: Schirmer Books, 1992.

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