

World Music: a transcultural phenomenon

Paulina Tendera, Wojciech Rubiś

Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations, Jagiellonian University

paulina.tendera@gmail.com,
w.rubis@gmail.com

Abstract. Our aim is to describe the trend of World Music as an example of modern transculturalism in terms of artistic creativity and philosophy. Our hypothesis is that World Music is the best contemporary example available in the creative field illustrating the process of transculturalism. We will base our research on the juxtaposition of, **on one hand**, aesthetically diverse exemplifications (mainstream jazz, swing, bebop, Latin, world fusion, global fusion, worldbeat, neo-traditional, and the influences of Indian, ethnic Arabic, Jewish, Gypsy, African folk and European music) with, **on the other hand**, the versatility of the creative process, improvisation and musical expression. Not only will the studies show the specific qualities of World Music, but they are also expected to indicate what, exactly, transculturalism is.

Keywords. World Music, transculturalism, art, philosophy

1 Introduction

World Music is a contemporary trend known for invoking traditional/ethnic music and applying **improvisation**, as well as for its uninhibited attitude towards the concept of an original work.¹ World Music encompasses jazz (swing, bebop, Latin), world fusion, global fusion, ethnic fusion, worldbeat, and neo-traditional. By combining traditional, folk and ethnic music with classical Western culture, musicians create a fusion of many traditions. They incorporate folk instrumentation such as Welsh and Celtic harps and African drums; diverse kinds of composition (in addition to Western classical music major and minor tonal harmony,² modal harmony based on a single tonal centre³ is used); the complex polytonal and polyrhythmic systems of the musically advanced ethnic cultures of India, the Balkan and Iberian Peninsulas (flamenco),

¹Fixing a work of art, e.g. a musical piece, as a kind of monument performed in an inalterable form, with an inalterable arrangement and instrumentation and rigidly recorded in a score, is of secondary importance; it may be practised but has little significance. In this aspect World Music definitely differs from the masterpieces of classical music.

²The tonal (major and minor) harmony of Western classical music is an invention of Latin culture (Western civilisation).

³Modal harmony is typical of folk music.

and Gypsy (manouche) and Jewish (klezmer music) communities scattered all over the world; and eclectically selected components of Tibetan chant, Chinese *koto* music, Indian ragas, etc. Immigration is a significant influence here. For example, in Paris, World Music demonstrates the strong cultural influences of Morocco, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali and Senegal, while on the American continent (South America), immigrants from Europe have contributed to creating types of music such as Argentine tango and bossa nova. The richest mix of cultures, also known as Creole, in the Caribbean has greatly contributed to the development of Latin American music and such styles as salsa, guancanco, and cha-cha. Finally, from the encounter of the descendants of black slaves with Christian culture (the USA), blues, soul, gospel, ragtime, and swing evolved, culminating in mainstream jazz. And finally with the rapid development of technology employed in musical creation, which facilitates new arrangements, mutual exchange and inspiration, and transcendence of genre boundaries. This is the sense in which World Music will be analysed in this article.

2 Short History

World Music as a phenomenon was first described in 1960 by Robert E. Brown, but only entered the main discourse on art in 1980 thanks to Chris Nickson's book *The NPR Curious Listener's Guide to World Music* (Grand Central Press). The circumstances surrounding World Music's development were also described by Timothy Rice:

By 1987, the term world music was in use by some ethnomusicologists to describe their objects of study, all the world's music, not just its neo-traditional, mass-mediated popular forms. Independently of developments in the music business, these scholars had used the term world music to replace the term non-Western music...⁴

It should be clearly stated that the term has never been fully assimilated into the musical tradition and environment, and many critics and musicians still think that its use results in the classification of the music of many different cultures via the uniform and not always accurate language of Western globalising culture (Compare: <http://www.npr.org/2014/01/16/263081652/what-makes-global-fest-so-interesting> (accessed: 5 October 2015)) This categorisation would thus necessarily rely on the introduction of Eurocentric notions incongruent with the understanding of art and, in our case, with the music of foreign cultures. There would be no such problem if we wished to analyse the phenomenon of World Music as multicultural or global; however, transculturalism demands of the listener a broadening of cultural competence to a point enabling at least a partial understanding of the content of a work of art. The critical reader will, of course, notice a number of imprecise expressions in this formulation: what, in fact, 'broadening of cultural competence to (a particular) point ...' and 'at least a partial understanding of a work' mean. Unfortunately, theory does not come

⁴T. Rice, "World music in Europe," in: *The Garland Encyclopedia of Music*, vol. 8: Europe, eds. T. Rice, J. Porter and C. Goertzen (New York and London). Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, vol. 1169, p. 224.

to our aid here. Much depends on our awareness of the field and of the ‘foreignness’ of exotic culture, as well as on competence and cultural – and, above all, artistic – experience. A good educator, an experienced musician, and, equally, a professional philosopher possess such knowledge through experience (an issue to which we will return later).

World Music has been analysed relatively rarely within the fields of philosophy and cultural studies. It might be worthwhile to mention papers regarding the teaching of such music: we note here the work of Arnold B. Bieber,⁵ ‘Arranging World Music for Instrumentalists’,⁶ in which we find several valid remarks on teaching and arranging music within the World Music style. Bieber analyses examples of exotic musical pieces pointing to troublesome issues regarding dissimilarities in scales, dynamics, instrumentalisation and musical expression. Moreover, he poses the question of an efficient method of teaching non-Western music (‘non-Western’ being a frequently used term in English-language references): in other words, how to introduce the Indian sitar, the Jamaican steel drum, or the Chinese *erhu*, and how to teach the students how to perceive the music played on these instruments and the tonal system, rhythmic, complex structures, and rules of the musical language. Bieber remarks:

Having arranged works from China, Bali, Bolivia, and Central Africa for solo flute, percussion ensemble, concert band, and string orchestra, I can testify that creating such arrangements is challenging but feasible. Although such music may sound strange at first, students soon begin to hear its beauty and depth as they perform it. Moreover, simple guidelines can help directors create reasonably ‘authentic’ world music arrangements for their students in band, orchestra, or other instrumental ensembles.⁷

Bieber himself highlights the intercultural essence of music. He stresses that his classes give students the opportunity to broaden their knowledge of the religious, cultural, historical and philosophical context within which the pieces were created. Thus, it is mainly a question of calling attention to the social and geographical role music plays in various cultures. Awareness of such relationships facilitates appropriate musical interpretation of an arranged piece. We agree with Bieber that the concept of World Music is limited when perceived strictly as a way of learning about different cultures: ‘Students should clearly understand that an arrangement of a piece of world music is not the same thing as an authentic performance by indigenous musicians on indigenous instruments. Never attempt to represent it as such’.⁸

Let us note that, thanks to the World Music trend, one could, in the twentieth century, pose the question of the role of music in intercultural and international understanding (communication). Here the significance of the new kind of art as a hybrid of diverse cultural elements must be emphasised. In the article and our research, we do not employ the concept of hybrids, but it might be worthwhile to quote the words of Dale Craig: ‘No matter what we would like to happen, what is going to happen in all the

⁵Arnold B. Bieber, music director and head of the Fine Arts Department at the Colegio Internacional de Caracas in Caracas, Venezuela.

⁶cf. A. B. Bieber, “Arranging World Music for Instrumentalists,” *Music Educators Journal*, vol. 85, no. 5, pp. 17–20, 38, March 1999 (see: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3399542>).

⁷Bieber, p. 17.

⁸Bieber, p. 38.

arts and sciences and in our life-styles is that they all going to be hybrids. Our choice lies in what kinds of hybrids we decide to use'.⁹ The use of the concept of hybrids in the field of artistic creation is similar, though not identical, to the concept of transculturalism; like Bieber, Craig struggles with the problem of understanding art affected by hybridisation and transculturalism: 'This is the attitude that a culture loses its most valuable qualities when mixed with another culture, and cannot be fully understood by members of another culture. In short, separatism'.¹⁰ Craig writes about hybrid art; meanwhile, the question, thus formulated, shows one of the senses of the transculturalism, and not of the hybridity, of art: the philosophical question of the essence of music and the issue of understanding it. ('What happens if we expand our horizons as far as is possible, if we push musical hybridisation as far as it will go? [...] "The whole round world of musics and instruments lives around us. I am interested in 'transethnic', a planetary music". In this music elements from a number of musical languages have coalesced; the composer speaks for humanity').¹¹ In our research we clearly distinguish between the concepts of transculturalism, globalisation and multiculturalism, in order to emphasise the important and substantive difference between them (we presented comments on this topic during the First International Conference on New Music Concepts, in the paper 'Understanding Processuality in Music').

Transculturalism is a new area of research, developing fairly rapidly within the disciplines of sociology, cultural and literary studies, etc. The discipline of music lacks competent theorists capable of tackling the problem of transculturalism from the perspective of musical language. It is worth emphasising within the concept of transculturalism that, even when the mixed components result in a new compositional and aesthetic quality, they remain nonetheless recognisable as pieces borrowed from different identifiable cultures. In this way, transculturalism characterises the process of injecting an alien element into a culture, but at the same time preserving it within this culture as a foreign element. Thus, in transcultural art, it is important to know the context, philosophy and, often, history which enable us to distinguish this foreign element, and consequently aesthetically appreciate its presence. The intellectual aspect of transculturalism is of great importance. From this point of view, transcultural art differs from global art within which we cannot distinguish any alien components. Globalisation is a separate contemporary culture and does not refer to traditional cultures, even though they also – to however small a degree – contributed to its origins. This can be compared to the claim that elements of traditional culture still reside in the attitude of 21st-century consumer society (in other words it may refer to the obvious, i.e. that every newer culture results from the interaction of cultures older than itself, assuming even minimal continuity in cultural changes). As for the concept of multiculturalism, it is opposed to transculturalism in terms of the quality of its components (the form, content, symbols of the work), because, while multiculturalism constitutes a mixture of foreign elements, it creates a structure characterised by entropy and a lack of order, in which the area of elements unidentifiable in terms of cultural background is expanded. From this point of view, in our research the field of World Music is identified exclusively with the phenomenon of transculturalism.

⁹D. A. Craig, "Transcendental World Music," *Asian Music*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 4–5, 1971.

¹⁰Craig, p. 5.

¹¹Craig, p. 6.

Thanks to this, it is possible to extract its cultural structure and content. Our remarks about transculturalism were formulated, inter alia, in the article 'Trans-global-multi? Contemporary art in the lecture room' (cf. http://www.iises.net/international-journal-of-teaching-education/publication-detail-86?view=mod3&search-result=true&query=Trans-global-¤t-scope=&rpp=10&sort_by=score&order=desc, accessed 5 October 2015).

3 Problems of Methodology

The concept proposed by our research is based on the analysis of two phenomena related to World Music: (1) **transculturalism** and (2) **processuality** (cf. P. Tendera, W. Rubiś, 'Understanding Processuality in Music', *New Music Concepts*, ABEditore s.r.l. – Milano, p. 5). These two closely linked words capture the essence of the current of World Music. Our aim is to review the scope of these concepts and to determine their significance in music. We have already indicated our understanding of transculturalism above; as for processuality, it is important for us to identify jazz as a basis for the creation of World Music.

Exotic music, in addition to the form comprising its elements, is made up of content, which constitutes its universal and timeless element. Above all, form comprises the physical data flowing from the work, interpreted by the listener's perception. Within the term 'form' we include all external manifestations of acoustic material. It is precisely at the level of philosophical form that we can talk about the diverse aesthetic styles, genres, and colours encompassed by the compositions of World Music. Even the untrained ear of modern 'global' man can catch the nuances of differences in cultural traditions, i.e. whether a work contains elements of Latin, Arabic or Hindu styles. However, this has only moderate, external and aesthetic importance for the phenomenon of transculturalism of form itself. The other and seemingly more important element is philosophical content. In this is contained the universality of musical language, e.g. method of improvisation (jazz musicians, regardless of the nature of a given example of World Music, apply elements of technique borrowed from mainstream jazz: the construction of melodic phrases typical of bebop and classic marches, compositional techniques, and ornamentation, or, in the case of rhythm, the use of the 'swing' feeling). The content of music is its proprietary language. By means of elements as important for jazz as improvisation and processual understanding of a musical piece (so-called performance, conversation), elements of form remain connected with the universal language of music. Transculturalism can be shown only if we explicitly point out the process of migration of content and its nature (e.g. degree of assimilation, potential):

- 1) translation with the use of the instruments and the art of arrangement (form) of Western culture,
- 2) understanding and perception of a given culture,
- 3) adaptation (application) of the universal language of music (expressed e.g. in the art of improvisation [content], etc.)

One outstanding representative of the musical current we have defined is John McLaughlin, the British jazz musician. And it is precisely jazz which serves as his point of departure, which determines the universality of the content of most of his projects. Jazz is meant here more as a kind of philosophy of music-making, rather than as an example of the cultural tradition of the same name, though the manner of improvisation, the system of harmonic and rhythmic grammar, etc., derives from this tradition. And while McLaughlin once accepted the challenge of measuring himself against the tradition of Indian national music (at the level of content we have mentioned), it turns out – according to Ravi Shankar – that the complexity of the principles themselves prevent a full grasp of the conventions of this complex culture. On the other hand, it is no problem to create a group (here: Shakti) which fuses the European tradition of musical language with the principles of Hindu musical practice. Such fusion requires, of course, great talent and hard work in the translation and reconciliation of musical elements of both traditions in such a way that the final effect is not merely an aesthetic imitation, but a genuine accord on the level of content and form, thus creating a transcultural exemplification of World Music. In his career, John McLaughlin has created many more of these new qualities, such as the marriage of jazz, funk, and blues with flamenco (the celebrated Trio McLaughlin, Paco De Lucia, Al Di Meola). McLaughlin is also interested in Mongolian, Chinese, and Tibetan music, Zen culture, and the Latin American tradition as well. He takes each of these projects very seriously. The borrowed elements incorporated into his music are not superficial tricks, offering only the ostensible atmospheres or moods of different parts of the world. Each composition contains authentic samples of the civilisation in question as well as the anthropocentric universality of communication manifesting itself in the non-verbal language of music.

4 Conclusion

In our research we aim at presenting a new cultural and philosophical understanding of transculturalism and processuality in music, at suggesting tools for the interpretation of music (a new range of concepts: form, content) and, finally, at presenting a cultural and philosophical description of the World Music phenomenon which will popularise and expand existing knowledge on its philosophy and practices.

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