

Conference Report

From Modernism, to Intercultural Exchange, and Transculturalism. New Challenges in Contemporary Music Making and Education

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"Modernism allowed art decades of important psychological self regard that affirmed the individual but unfortunately created a hermeticism that disconnects art from our societies. Contemporary art is evolving not only beyond traditional tools and techniques but also beyond all classes which art is generated by specific people in a specific place. In the meantime, the rest of the world has caught up, and it is telling its stories unapologetically".

It is this paragraph of the call for papers for the ICAPAS 2013 meeting that caught my attention, and I would like to develop some thoughts on the concepts that are outlined in it, from the perspective of a European scholar in music, namely in ethnomusicology, trying to consider new challenges that our academic system must face in coping with such new and meaningful scenario in music education, creation and performance.

It is true that modernism allowed decades of important self-regard, as it is indicated in the quotation above. However, XX Century was also a period of closer cultural contact among various cultures of the world. In the domain of the arts we can detect some movements that arise in the framework of a colonial asset, in which Western culture "discovered" cultures and arts other than its own, and recurred to it in various forms, in order to reach beyond the limits of the XIX century romantic culture, and to develop a new language that could overcome those prevailing in XVII and XVIII century.

In music, Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky, Bartók, among others, turned their attention to sounds and compositions from different parts of the world, encompassing various "exotic" and structural elements in their work, and beginning to create new aesthetics that incorporated elements deriving from non-European cultures in their music, in order to go beyond the language of tonal harmony. It is a well-known process that was analyzed repeatedly in the past century. Among several other studies, I would like to mention here the writings of my Italian professor, Diego Carpitella, on the myth of primitivism in modern music (Carpitella 1961; 1985). Among other things, Carpitella distinguishes exoticism practiced by composers in XIX Century from modernist

primitivism. Writes Carpitella: "Exoticism is the decorative, mechanical use of some exotic elements (scales, melodies, rhythms), in the context of a language, a syntax, a morphology that is traditional Western, European, white" (Carpitella 1961: 167).¹ In this, he sees a difference with a new primitivist attitude found in composers at the beginning of XX Century: "What is determinant, besides lexical elements, is the primitive psychological condition that derives from it, that is the need to recreate, and thus to identify, with a mythical world, in which the choice of the primitive (also that historically determined) it is nothing else than an attempt to retrieve traditional protections (such as myths and rites) while facing an existential and value crisis" (Carpitella 1961: 168).²

It seems to me important to point out these concepts (the "lexical" and the "psychological") because, while they were born at the turn of the previous century, they are still lingering in present times in culture contact and appropriation.

Besides the term primitivism, used by Carpitella, there are other terms employed to describe this movement, that was important around the turn of the XX Century: orientalism, fauvism (in visual arts), a continuing exoticist attitude. In it, there was a construction of the "other" that was totally cultural and Western oriented. Perhaps one can still find the most lucid and comprehensive description of this attitude in Edward Said *Orientalism*: "... all of Orientalism stands forth and away from the Orient: that Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient, and this sense is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation that make the Orient visible, clear, "there" in discourse about it." (Said 1977: 21-22).

It is in this perspective that, at the beginning of XX Century, some European composers wrote their music encompassing non European musical elements. It was a process of appropriation strongly unbalanced in terms of power and still fully embedded in Western musical theory. However, they began creating a new aesthetic and new compositional principles. In time, this approach led the way for a second wave of this movement that started after World War II.

While European composers continued and extended their use of non-European elements in their compositional processes (Boulez, Berio, Ligeti, among others) in the second half of XX Century we can witness a new phenomenon: thanks to the widespread use of mass media, of the developments of ethnomusicological research, and, of course, of the fast economic, social, and cultural development of several Asian, African, and American countries in a post-colonial era, musical cultures of different part of the world became accessible and known worldwide.

Music composers from various nations, not only Euro-American, had access to an international audience, and developed different musical styles that can vary from those that are fully embedded in the aesthetic of the Western tradition to others that, more

1 *L'esotismo non è altro che l'impiego decorativo, meccanico, di alcuni elementi esotici (game, melodie, ritmi) nel contesto di un linguaggio, di una sintassi, di una morfologia tradizionali, europee e bianche.*

2 *Ciò che è determinante, oltre agli elementi del lessico, è la condizione psicologica primitiva che ne deriva, cioè il bisogno di ricreazione e quindi di identificazione con un mondo mitico, in cui la scelta del primitivo (anche quello storicamente determinato) altro non vuol essere che un recupero di protezioni tradizionali (quali sono, ad esempio, i miti e i riti) dinanzi a determinate crisi esistenziali e di valori.*

or less heavily, use in their music elements of their native music.³ Still, in this phase of the XX century, national boundaries and identities continue to be strongly recognized in musicological theory. At the same time, also in musicology, post-colonialist thought finds its place, rethinking ways in which music from non-Western world was narrated. Perhaps, the most representative figure of this line of thinking in music studies is the musicologist Kofi Agawu (Agawu 2003).

Intercultural hybridity finds more room to develop in postmodernism, even though hybridity has always been a driving force of music creation as, for example, states Sumarsam concerning Indonesia in his most recent book: "Encountering foreign cultures has been an inescapable part of life in Asia for many centuries. Indonesians have come into contact with many cultures, three of which -Hindu, Islamic, and Western- have had significant effects on the development of their own. Each encounter has had a different character, and an hybrid culture eventually formed" (Sumarsam 2013: 1).

Having quoted the words of an ethnomusicologist, let me stress that in the same period there is also the great development of ethnomusicology. This field situated between musicology and anthropology, through a number of research and documentation, makes available and known through media, sounds, performing practices, some significant compositional techniques from various areas of the world. Primary aim of ethnomusicology is to document the specificity and diversity of each cultural system in its cultural context, but, in doing so, it makes available to composers and general audience the results of the sound and video documentations of the researchers during their fieldwork. These results have sometime contributed to the widening of the horizons in music education and creativity. Also, specific cooperation was established between ethnomusicologists and composers. One well-known example is the exchange between the Italian composer Luciano Berio and the French ethnomusicologist Simha Arom that took place at IRCAM in Paris in occasion of Berio's work 'Coro' where he incorporates the hoquetus techniques of the Pygmies, documented and analyzed by Arom.

Furthermore, ethnomusicology, since the 1960s contributes to create the concept and the practice of bi-musicality, a term proposed by Mantle Hood (Ki Mantle Hood here in Indonesia) who theorized that if one scholar studies a given musical culture, he (or she) must learn at least rudiments of how to perform that musical culture (Hood 1960). Also bi-musicality sets the tone for a more radical and thorough intercultural exchange implying that one may learn how to play a given music even though he (or she) is not born in that specific place where the music is conceived and performed.

Finally, in the last decades of XX Century, the development, in the domain of popular music, of the so-called "world music" follows and enhances the same trend of hybridity and cultural exchange. While the control of the production process remains firmly in the hand of the major record companies, this phenomenon contributes to the circulation and the knowledge of different music styles and repertoires coming from various areas of the world.

These are all cues that, in the second half of the XX Century, and especially at the beginning of the XXI Century, there is a profound shift in the centrality in the debate

3 For a discussion and several examples of this process, see, among others, Ryker 1991; Born and Hesmondhalgh, eds. 2000; Everett, and Lau, eds. 2004.

on music composition and creativity from the Western world to a wider scenario that encompasses several musicians and composers from various parts of the world. Music becomes an intercultural matter, with a strong exchange among its protagonists coming from various parts of the world and starts developing a new aesthetic paradigm, increasingly distant from the Western modernist approach. And it is by now difficult to characterize National schools and movements, as we can see Chinese-born composers trained in Germany and living in New York, Italian-born musicians trained in India and living in Berlin, while the cosmopolitan circulation of gamelan music is another meaningful example of this trend.

It is, in fact, in the last decades of the XX century and in the first of the XXI that a further shift in the paradigm creates new trends and a new general outlook that forces us to reconsider how we conceive music-making today. It is not just a matter of intercultural exchange, as it was in the past. We are entering a world that is becoming increasingly transcultural. Around this term, and that of hybridity, scholars from different fields, from communication to philosophy, have developed innovative thoughts.

For example, Marwan Kraidy states in his book *Hybridity, or the cultural logic of globalization*: “Unlike cross- or intercultural communication that tends to study contacts between individuals from different cultures that are assumed to be discrete entities, transcultural communication believes all cultures to be inherently mixed. It seeks to understand the depth, scope, and direction of various levels of hybridity at the social -not individual-level” (Kraidy 2005: 14).

Also the philosopher Wolfgang Welsch reflects on this concept: “Transculturality is, in the first place, a consequence of the inner differentiation and complexity of modern cultures ... The old homogenizing and separatist idea of cultures has furthermore been surpassed through cultures’ external networking. Cultures today are extremely interconnected and entangled with each other. Lifestyles no longer end at the borders of national cultures, but go beyond these, are found in the same way in other cultures. The new forms of entanglement are a consequence of migratory processes, as well as of worldwide material and immaterial communications systems and economic interdependencies and dependencies... Cultures today are in general characterized by hybridization. ... Henceforward there is no longer anything absolutely foreign. Everything is within reach. Accordingly, there is no longer anything exclusively ‘own’ either. Authenticity has become folklore, it is ownness simulated for others - to whom the indigene himself belongs. To be sure, there is still a regional-culture rhetoric, but it is largely simulatory and aesthetic; in substance everything is transculturally determined. ... For most of us, multiple cultural connections are decisive in terms of our cultural formation. We are cultural hybrids. Today’s writers, for example, emphasize that they’re shaped not by a single homeland, but by differing reference countries, by Russian, German, South and North American or Japanese literature. Their cultural formation is transcultural (think, for example, of Naipaul or Rushdie) - that of subsequent generations will be even more so” (Welsch 1999: 199).

I have used a rather long quotation from the writings of Welsch, a philosopher, because his line of thinking seems to me emblematic of the new cultural conditions that we are facing today in our global world, which can contribute to shed light on the creative

processes in the arts that we want to understand (and to teach). It seems to me that the same logic can be applied to music. Composers today are hardly defined by one or only cultural background, but express “multiple cultural connections” and cultural hybridity, as Welsch puts it. And so do audiences.

Philosophy can help us interpret what happens in contemporary world of music, but also anthropology may have its say. I can mention here the French anthropologist Jean-Loup Amselle, author of *Mestizo Logics* (1998), a book in which he states how (local or national) identities are often obtained by isolating a social, cultural, and historical continuum, that would be more fruitful to consider in its connections rather than in the distinctions and oppositions. Connections is here the key word. For him, this anthropological concept of identity is strongly influenced by the colonial asset that shaped most of the world in modern times, and still lingers into contemporaneity. In the same line of thought, in his recent *Rétrovolutions* (2010) Amselle criticizes certain primitivist policies of Unesco that tend to create and promote cultural intangible heritage, thus contributing to a process of freezing cultural contact and cultural development.

Turning now to music, one must say that the contemporary music scene is nowadays not only crossing borders and increasingly transcultural, but goes also over consolidated boundaries of genres: contemporary music (avant-garde), jazz, popular music, folk and traditional music, are labels that tend to lose their meaning, yielding to a cosmopolitan attitude that mixes musical individualities according to unprecedented categories. One seminal study on these processes is that of the ethnomusicologist Steven Feld. His recent book *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra* (2012) faces this issue, presenting the complex and interconnected lives of musicians from Ghana that cannot be easily labeled, as they move in their music-making from traditional African music, to African popular music, to jazz, to experimental music, living between Africa, the United States, and Europe. In Feld’s words: “... it is a matter of ethnographic commitment to revealing how histories of global entanglement are shaping contemporary Africa musical life-worlds” (Feld, 2012: 7).

It seems to me that such model could be very fruitfully applied to contemporary music in Indonesia as, for example, gamelan music, is constantly pushed forward by new composers in a style that encompasses typical fusion processes of the World music, combining them in a cultural policy that fosters the development of a pan-Indonesian music, blending Balinese, Sumatran, Javanese, Sundanese, Acehnese, elements, and so on, creating a new style that is clearly recognizable in academies and established cultural institutions.

And we can consider by now gamelan as both an Indonesian heritage, and a music that is known, widespread, performed, taught, and composed in Indonesia as well as in Japan, the United States, Australia, and Europe.

It is in this transcultural and cosmopolitan perspective that we have to rethink our educational approach, accepting new and interdisciplinary teaching methods that reflect the contemporary cultural system increasingly connected across borders of all kinds, not only geographical. Making our students aware of this context in which they will professionally operate seems to me one of our most important tasks. This

does not mean that we should forget who we are, where we are, and where we come from. On the contrary, each individual and collective context could be considered the starting point for relating with the “other” from us, unapologetically (as it is written in the call for paper of ICAPAS), taking advantage of the “multiple cultural connections that are decisive in terms of our cultural formation”, as Welsch states in the quotation mentioned above.

Let me conclude with a remark that addresses more the context of education in the arts in Italy, where one can notice the strong separation between theory (taught in the University) and practice (taught in Conservatories and Academies). It is a legacy of the idealistic movement that shaped Italian education in the first decades of the XX Century, but, it seems to me that this distinction, if ever tenable at all, prevents the art to fully develop in an harmonious combination between theory and practice. From what I have stated above, it should be clear that, in a world increasingly culturally integrated where musical experience takes unprecedented roads, the modernist (or, still, Western medieval) distinction between theorists and performers must be reconsidered in a reconfiguration of our educational system that should be able to fruitfully integrate these two aspects of the musical life.

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