

**The Concept of 'World Music':  
A Brief Introduction and Personal Perspective**

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'World Music' is a term broadly used to describe music representative of traditions and styles other than Western art or popular music. As this encompasses everything from North Indian classical music to Cuban rhumba, and from Paul Simon's *Graceland* album to Australian Aboriginal music, this is an impossibly broad topic to cover in one paper. As this seminar is dedicated to the performance practice of Western art music, I will attempt to limit the scope of this writing to the following topics: an introduction to the term and its origins, examples of means through which Western audiences have been introduced to the genre (mostly through pop music), examples of global influences on Western art music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and, perhaps most relevantly, issues regarding the performance of music from non-Western cultures by Western musicians.

### **Origin of the Term**

Since its introduction approximately forty years ago, the term 'World Music' has evolved (some might say devolved) from its original use in the academic world as a less-intimidating synonym for 'ethnomusicology' to its current state as a catch-all phrase to describe virtually any music which incorporates instruments and/or tonal structures of non-Western cultures, without regard to the authenticity with which these elements are used. In his essay "A Sweet Lullaby for World Music," Steven Feld describes the early usage of the term:

Circulated first by academics in the early 1960s to celebrate and promote the study of musical diversity, the phrase *world music* began largely as a benign and hopeful term. In those days, nostalgically remembered by many for their innocence and optimism, the phrase *world music* had a clear populist ring. It was a friendly phrase, a less cumbersome

alternative to *ethnomusicology*... Like *ethnomusicology*, *world music* had an academically liberal mission, to oppose the dominant tendency of music institutions and publics to assume the synonymy of *music* with Western European art music. And in practical terms, the world music idea was meant to have a pluralizing effect on Western conservatories, by promoting the hiring of non-Western performers and the study of non-Western performance practices and repertoires.<sup>1</sup>

## **Western Audiences Discover World Music**

When the phrase was coined, recordings featuring 'world music' were not widely available (or sought after). In the 1950s, Folkways Records (later Smithsonian Folkways) and UNESCO produced invaluable documentary recordings of a wide array of folk musics, but they made little impact on the commercial market. However, thanks to some influential pop musicians, public awareness of world music grew significantly beginning in the late 1960s. The Beatles' *Rubber Soul*, released in 1965, featured George Harrison playing a sitar on the John Lennon song "Norwegian Wood." Although Harrison's use of the instrument was obviously non-traditional, his iconic status and devotion to the sitar sparked widespread interest in Indian music and world music in general.

Nonesuch commercially released a field recording of Balinese Gamelan music in 1967, the same year that the Monterey International Pop Festival featured Indian sitar master (and George Harrison's teacher) Ravi Shankar. Shankar's performance was filmed and recorded, bringing North Indian classical music to a worldwide audience for the first time. Shortly before his death in 1969, Rolling Stones guitarist Brian Jones recorded Moroccan musicians in the village of Jajouka for an album which would eventually be released worldwide in 1971 by Rolling Stones Records.

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<sup>1</sup> Feld, Steven. "A Sweet Lullaby for World Music." *Public Culture*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2000): 146-7

Collaborations between world musicians and western pop or jazz artists became commonplace in the 1970s (notable examples include Miles Davis with tabla player Badal Roy and, more strangely, Joni Mitchell with the Warrior Drums of Burundi), and the trend reached its zenith in 1986 with Paul Simon's *Graceland*. The grammy-winning album drew heavily from South African township music and featured Ladysmith Black Mambazo, a vocal group highly revered in South Africa and virtually unknown until then in the West.

In the 1990s, world music to many became almost synonymous with the offerings of the Putumayo record label. Founded by Dan Storper in 1991, the label became as widely known for its non-traditional marketing strategies--selling cd's in coffee houses and nature stores--as for its compilation albums. While Putumayo releases have unquestionably delivered deserving world music and musicians to a large and appreciative audience, the label's one-dimensional aesthetic ("guaranteed to make you feel good!") and emphasis on brand identity instead of artist identity have done much to link the genre of world music to WTO-era commodification of cultures and workers in service to global capitalism. In 1999, frustration over such banal commodification of artistic expression led musician David Byrne to write an op-ed for the *New York Times* entitled, "I Hate World Music."

### **Western Art Music and World Music**

In "Sitar and Bossas: World Music Influences," Pedro Van der Lee gives some historical context to the influence of world music on European art music:

Folk and traditional music have long been an inspiration for composers of art music – Western, Indian or Arabic. In Europe, we could mention the

use of 'folk' material in Renaissance part books, Spanish court *villancincos*, and Baroque dances. Several composers, including Vivaldi, Haydn and Mozart, wrote works for ensembles including the hurdy-gurdy and bagpipe, and Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven created works influenced by the Turkish military bands, the Janissaries. Chopin's Polish and Liszt and Brahms' 'Hungarian' inspiration were forerunners to the whole current known as Nationalism. Bizet and Saint-Saëns were inspired by Spanish music, Debussy by Spain and Indonesia, and later Satie, Stravinsky, Ravel and Milhaud used influences from jazz.<sup>2</sup>

For many composers these influences led simply to the long-established practice of 'borrowing,' or to Eurocentric cultural appropriation (entirely in keeping with social mores of the times). However, starting in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century many notable composers, including Percy Grainger and Béla Bartók, devoted much of their careers to the study and preservation of folk music.

In the early 1930s the American composer Henry Cowell taught a course at the University of California at San Francisco called 'Music of the World's Peoples.' Having studied Indian classical music and Indonesian gamelan, Cowell developed a musical aesthetic which called for incorporating "those materials common to the music of the peoples of the world, [in order] to build a new music particularly related to our own century."<sup>3</sup> It is important to stress the context in which these sentiments were expressed: this was 1930s academia, not a Putumayo CD insert, and Cowell was only a day's drive away from where Arnold Schoenberg was holding court at USC. Cowell's ideas were quite revolutionary (though unfortunately referred to as "neo-primitivism"), and they were embraced by many of his prominent students and colleagues.

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<sup>2</sup> Van der Lee, Pedro. "Sitar and Bossas: World Music Influences." *Popular Music*, vol.17, no. 1 (Jan., 1998): 47

<sup>3</sup> Nicholls, David. "Henry Cowell." *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie. 2001. The New Grove Dictionary Online. CUNY Graduate Center Library. 20 Feb. 2007 <http://www.grovemusic.com>

Two of Cowell's most successful students were Lou Harrison and John Cage. Raised in northern California, Harrison was somewhat familiar with many forms of Asian music before studying with Cowell; after his studies these influences were further developed and combined with his unique instrumental textures. Cage had earlier studied with Cowell in New York City, and Cowell's influence led to his conviction at the time that rhythm should be the dominant element in music. An excellent example of their writing of this period is *Double Music*, a collaborative composition for percussion written in 1941. A subtly melodic, gamelan-like work, *Double Music's* gently insistent rhythms and resonant metallic textures exemplify the globally inspired aesthetic which Cowell championed. Harrison formally studied gamelan much later in life, and in 1971 he and his partner William Colvig created an "American Gamelan" which incorporated just intonation and found objects such as garbage cans and oxygen tanks.

By the 1960s, gamelan ensembles could be found in a few American universities, as could ensembles dedicated to West African music, particularly that of Ghana. Proximity to these traditions influenced many major composers of the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century, with varying degrees of obviousness. No one would be surprised to hear that the cyclical nature of time in gamelan and Ghanaian drumming inspired minimalists such as Steve Reich. However, few might suspect that serialists such as Charles Wuorinen would also draw inspiration from world music. His New York-based Group for Contemporary Music presented concerts in 1968 and 1970 which featured Ewe music of Ghana and Javanese gamelan, and his *Percussion Quartet* from 1994 even includes borrowed rhythms from Ewe drumming (the most startling of which is a traditional lead drummer's call to stop which is followed, appropriately, by a brief silence).

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, world influences in Western art music had also begun to reverse direction; composers from other cultures were writing in Western style with their distinctively non-Western dialects. Chinese composers such as Chen Yi and Zhou Long wrote chamber pieces based on Chinese classical music for Western instruments. The Kronos Quartet's *Pieces of Africa* featured works for string quartet written by African composers (and sadly reinforced cultural stereotypes with the use of drums on almost every track). Palestinian oud virtuoso Simon Shaheen created the Qantara ensemble to perform his original works, which draw liberally from Western classical and jazz traditions. Today this trend continues in the symphonic and opera worlds, with the LA Philharmonic performing the music of Brazilian guitarist Guinga and the Metropolitan Opera premiering Tan Dun's *The First Emperor* (with Placido Domingo in the lead role and portions sung in Mandarin by a Chinese opera singer).

### **Presentation Issues**

While each piece which incorporates elements of non-Western music will present its own particular technical and analytical challenges, there are broader, extra-musical performance practice issues which are unique to the genre of world music as a whole. Performers in this style must be particularly sensitive to concerns involving proper source accreditation and cultural exploitation; these subjects may not be separated from the presentation of world music, and each performer must at some point reconcile his or her musical ambitions with these related social concerns. The following anecdote illustrates how performers who choose to play world music with the best of intentions may find themselves caught up in matters larger than any one concert or recording.

As a member of Ethos Percussion Group I have commissioned over twenty works for percussion quartet. A majority of these were by composers from non-Western cultures or by Western musicians who have studied non-Western music extensively. In the fall of 2004, a patron approached Ethos after a performance at Bowling Green State University. The man, a native of Ghana, had been upset by the program, which included two African-influenced commissions by American composers. One of these pieces was Robert Levin's *Break It Down*, a work that explores the parallel familial relationships between the Ewe drums of Ghana and the American drum set. While obviously not a traditional piece and clearly not presented by Ethos as such, the music incorporates rhythms and instruments which are central to the cultural identity of the Ewe people.

The patron politely but firmly expressed his dismay at the fact that these musical traits of his people were being performed by four white men with no direct connection to Ghana for an audience without enough understanding of African culture to distinguish the music performed that evening from actual Ewe music. He also noted that the presenting organization, while seeking a multicultural dimension to their series, had apparently not even considered bringing actual African musicians to perform. In one sense, he saw our concert as a continuation of the profiteering of white artists from African and African-American culture which began when Elvis Presley gave black music a friendly white face in the 1950s.

The issues he raised are serious ones, and certainly not without merit. Although Ethos has assiduously avoided any references to the group as a 'world music' or 'African' ensemble, issues of cultural appropriation and colonialism should not be



ignored in a world where masterful djembe players from Africa play for change on subway platforms while my limited skills are welcome in concert halls. At the end of our discussion, the best I could offer our antagonist was a sincere assurance that Ethos' only intent was to introduce audiences to music for which we have a deep respect and affection, much as George Harrison did forty years ago. This encounter put a personal face on issues which had previously been abstract, and served as an eloquent counterpoint to the unanimous support our efforts had to that point elicited from colleagues and patrons.

## **Summary**

While world music as a genre has not quite met the lofty expectations of the academics who originated the phrase, composers and performers of Western art and popular music are integrating elements of non-Western cultures into their art forms with an unprecedented level of understanding and respect. As Western musical conventions become appropriated by non-Westerners on an equally unprecedented scale, and with global classical and folk traditions gaining long-deserved recognition for their artistic merit, it will be interesting to see if we in the West can some day join the rest of the world and refer to it all as, simply, 'music.'

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