

World Music - Historical Dimensions

Ethnomusicology has encouraged us to understand world music – that is to say, all music – as a process of human social behaviour, a complex process that frequently transcends such familiar dichotomies as text and performance, composition and improvisation, individual and group creativity, written and oral transmission. It is consequently challenging to rethink the notion of “historical performance” in a global context, implying as it does some disjunction between a “work” and its performance, between the present and an unspecified past. Most music in the world is not written. It may be more or less memorised, more or less improvised, more or less susceptible to change at every performance, more or less dependent on individual initiative, oral instruction or group interaction. Its pasts may be captured in sound recordings, documented in written records or archaeological artefacts, known through oral history, or distant beyond recall. Where tangible evidence for music history exists, it portrays both continuity and change, though ideology may emphasise one at the expense of the other. The only safe generalisation is that performance of music is constantly in dialogue with the past, however that dialogue is conducted or conceived.

For the sake of clarity we might wish to confine the notion of “historical performance” to repertoires where documentary evidence allows scope for the reconstruction of pre-modern repertoires, styles of performance, instruments or ensembles. In principle this is possible for some of the historical repertoires of Asia, where notations, historical documentation of performance practice, iconography and instruments survive from pre-modern periods. Across Asia, prestigious musical repertoires have been recorded in indigenous notation-systems, either through the influence of Western music, as in the case of Turkish, Iranian and Central Asian art-musics, or independently of Western models, as in the traditional tablature notations of Chinese, Korean and Japanese court musics, the graphic neumes of Tibetan and Japanese Buddhist chant, or the syllabic oral notations of South Asia. The realisation of such notations depends on knowledge of performance style that is learned implicitly through acculturation, or explicitly through oral instruction, and may be embellished with interpretive or improvisatory variation and expansion. For example, the Chinese 7-stringed long zither *qin* has a repertoire notated in tablature dating from the 3rd century onwards; the notation explicitly determines playing techniques, sonorities, and ornamental detail as well as pitch, but is indeterminate as to rhythm, with the result that learning any piece requires a teacher's instruction and example. Compositions of Indian classical vocal music have been collected in didactic anthologies with notation, but performers learn them through oral transmission, often without reference to written versions, and render them with unwritten ornamentation and with extensive improvisatory expansion based on the underlying mode and metre. Notations can be taken as a guide to musical content but not to performance style.

The pace of change is often assumed, rightly or wrongly, to be slower in Eastern than in Western cultures, and traditional music is often believed to be “ancient”, in which case its performance style might be thought of as intrinsically “historical”. The North Indian vocal tradition of *dhrupad* is popularly associated with the oldest traditions of Hindu religion; while such remote ancestry would be hard to document, some features of the genre can be recognised in theoretical texts from as far back as the 13th century, and in descriptions of performance at the 17th century Mughal court. Documentary evidence shows that the *Gagaku* repertoire of Japan, performed at the Imperial Court and in temples today, was transmitted from the courts of Tang China, Korea and Central Asia in the 7th-9th centuries AD, and is believed to be performed “unchanged for a thousand years” by the current bearers of the tradition. Notated records of Korean court and ritual music survive from the 15th century onwards, and parts of the historic repertoire survive in

performance today. Compositions notated in the 17th to 19th centuries by musicians at the Ottoman court are still performed in the Turkish classical tradition. National ideologies sometimes encourage the re-construction of historic practices, instruments or repertoires, and typically resist the notion that ancient musical traditions may have changed over time. Apparently common to several such ideologies is the belief that “old”, prestigious music is necessarily slower in tempo than “new”.

Evidence for continuity in some aspects of music, however, has to be balanced with evidence for change in others. Music that has apparently survived over long periods of time has usually undergone not only gradual change but also interruption, expansion, contraction, re-organization, standardisation or reconstruction at particular historical junctures, whether in response to political events, social requirements, or artistic preferences. In contradiction to the nationalistic myth of continuity over millennia, some scholars have suggested that Indian classical music in general was “invented”, i.e. standardised, only in the 19th and early 20th centuries, as a response to colonialism and modernisation; but others have argued that such processes had already occurred at the Mughal court in the 17th century, and at other places and times throughout history. Similarly conscious processes of reconstruction, appealing to ancient texts and temple sculptures rather than to hereditary exponents, underlie the “classical” traditions of Indian dance, especially Bharatanāṭyam and Oḍissī. In Japan, lively entertainment music from Tang Court of China (7th – 9th centuries) was transformed into august ceremonial music (*Gagaku*); further transformations of this tradition included loss of repertoire during the civil wars of the 15th and 16th centuries, and reconstruction of performance in the late 19th century, as an emblem of nationalism under the newly restored Meiji dynasty. Occasional attempts to reconstruct instruments, pieces and performance styles of the Nara and Heian periods, and the view of some scholars that this music would originally have been played (and danced) much faster than today, contrast with the “traditional”, largely 19th-century performance style, in very slow tempi, associated with the Imperial Court.

Further examples abound of historically-rooted traditions where the relationship between contemporary and historical performance styles is contested, uncertain, or unknowable. That does not necessarily prevent explicit attempts to revive or reconstruct instruments, repertoires and performance styles of the pre-recording era. Such attempts may reflect evolving geo-political perspectives. In parts of the Middle East, where the use of large ensembles including Western instruments became prevalent during the 20th century, there is now a post-colonial trend towards smaller ensembles, using indigenous instruments only, and hence a more historically “authentic” sound. The revival of Central Asian *makam* repertoires can be linked to the emergence of post-Soviet national identities in search of historical roots and artistic expression. In Iran, a conscious, modernising standardisation of the classical music repertoire (*radif*) in the mid-20th century is challenged through exploration of earlier performance styles, and creative experimentation with modes and rhythmic cycles defined in mediaeval music-theory texts. In Turkey, performers of the Ottoman classical repertoire increasingly turn to 17th, 18th and 19th-century notated collections. Having suffered nationalist disapproval in 20th century Turkey, Ottoman musical culture (like that of the Chinese Tang dynasty) is now seen as a cosmopolitan heritage, with compositions by musicians of Turkish, Greek, Armenian, Jewish, European and other ethnic origins, some of which now feature on CD recordings by Turkish and European “early music” ensembles. This trend reflects the growing awareness of a rich trans-national musical culture circulating throughout the Eastern Mediterranean in the 19th century and earlier.

Meanwhile, groups such as Fong Naam in Thailand and Reigakusha in Japan combine historical reconstructions and new compositions in their programmes; the Silk Road Ensemble’s pipa player Wu Man breathes new life into melodies transcribed from mediaeval Japanese scores; and in Mali,

Bassekou Kouyate's group Ngoniba - modelled on the pre-colonial ensemble of the Bamana Segu empire (1712-1867) - secures a Grammy nomination for exploring old repertoires and possible connections with the roots of the blues. Creative engagement with the past, sustained by whatever ideals and ideologies, remains a meaningful and richly variable facet of the global human social behaviour we call music.

Bibliography (a small selection of books addressing historical aspects of world music)

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