



At a Fork on the Way — 4



World Music and this thing called "Serious Music."

One of my instructors of ethnomusicology at Columbia University was crazy about describing everything in terms of tautologies. He has come to the conclusion that there were three sorts of music: "classical", "pop", and "folk" and no others. He also claimed that the three were mutually exclusive. That made it easy to classify everything of course. It also turned certain musical corpora into something they were not intended to be. Nevertheless, these three terms can be very useful in trying to look at "The Way".

Our understanding of "folk" music is music throughout the world passed along by oral tradition without prescriptive scores; that is that there can be scores made of this music when already passed down through time, but the "composers" of these works did not notate their own compositions. Ah, these tedious definitions! And if it were all so easy, articles as these would not have to be written. We are living in a time of "free" improvisations." How does this fit in? Or, what about certain Indian and Japanese "eastern classical" musical forms where there exists no tradition of notation; the music is instead passed down from master to student. If these people consider this music as their "classical" music, who are we through our beautiful definitions to challenge this?

The term "serious" music has been conceived of in this century to replace "classical" music. This is blasphemous. "Intellectual" music would perhaps be better, but implies elitism. So does "serious" music for that matter if you consider what that makes all other music! Granted that "classical"/"art"/"Serious" composers intend to create music that is neither "pop" nor "folk", still I sometimes wonder if a Korean music listener regardless of his years of short wave/AM injections would readily separate English balladry and the song settings of Ralph Vaughan Williams. Also, how does "serious jazz" fit in; or the "classical" music written and performed by misguided "pop" musicians who believe that number of records sold

is equal to "Classicalness" (cf. what The Who had to say about their opera, "Tommy")? Confusing, indeed.

>(Inter)Nationalism:

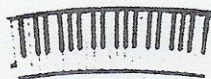
Two of the three sorts of music, "classical" and "pop" have created forms that have transcended national boundaries. There is no such thing as an international folk music style. Nationalism in music is one of the most important ways of keeping all peoples from bland oneness. Media influences especially in pop are trying to take these differences away. The Algerian pianoforte improviser or the Spanish guitar player in Chad cannot be considered guilty of taking their own blood out of their music. It is the Western world's concept that "What we have is good" and that "Everyone has the right to have the same things" that has brought these instruments into these cultures. The current strong resistance to twentieth century "western art" music in several middle-eastern countries is an effort of desperation against a string quartet invasion. Of course, the modern reader is complaining, "Hey, but the DYNAMIC spirit of our time is being strangled." Indeed! There is no choice. Several countries panicked when Germany threatened twice in this century to "Standardize", that is, conquer the world based on their own standards. It was not only disagreement that caused the Allies to defend; it was also the will to save their own. The Cambodian is no more Arian than the Mexican; had the National Socialists taken over, our world would be much greyer now.

Internationalism as articulated in classical music has had an interesting history. This phenomenon reached its apex in alternating periods of music reflecting Newton's law of equal and opposite reactions, where the equal was simultaneous and the opposite needed time to develop. Classical (i.e., late

18th and early 19th century music) and several streams of twentieth century music are the most obvious examples of internationalism. The Church tried to install their own sort of internationalism or sameness in the late Renaissance causing a large European split in writing styles in the early Baroque (cf. early opera in Italy, France and Germany). Romantic music and several countries' contemporary music are filled with nationalism. This nationalism is harder to describe today, for we are too aware of all other forms of music thanks to the mass media. A Japanese composer of modern music may have studied with the likes of a Babbitt or a Boulez and still claim to be articulating a meditative spirit in a seemingly neo-serialist piece. Some composers bring nationalism literally into their music using one of the available media as tape recordings so that environmental sounds and voices underline the desired effect.

>Acculturation:

The key question is therefore not whether internationalism is the devil. It is clear that music dynamically throws itself from one extreme to another with time. Look at the wild reaction of minimal music to early twentieth century music with respect to atonality. The question deals with the increasingly used term, "acculturation." Is it a sickness? a necessary evil? "Acculturation: 1) the process of adopting the cultural traits or social patterns of another group. 2) the result of this process." (Random House.) Who's causing this throughout the world? Why? Is it really better than I make it out to be? We of the western industrial world have been brought up to believe that everyone has the right to complete medical care, abundant food and good lodging conditions. To reach this goal many special chemical compounds and food sorts have had to be created so that the masses can continually be reached with the same products. This has led us to the Machine Age which has led us to our miraculous computers and our disastrous oil problem (see "At a Fork on the Way—5"). In short we



have had to compromise our ecology severely to reach our high industrialization that had to be reached so that we could satisfy our "needs". In spreading this out on a world-wide basis we have just about emptied our world of all its NATURAL resources. It is the less natural (i.e., synthetic) that will keep us going. Not with wind or sun energy but fusion. This leads us to the constant small factor of radical pollution which must be accepted otherwise our high and still climbing standards of "needs" (recently "luxuries" could be substituted for "needs") cannot be reached. This is the foundation of acculturation. The small steady flow of acculturation among the migrant races in history have been what makes the world go round, but since we have been able to circle the globe in minutes instead of months, acculturation has taken over culture-retention. Consider for a moment the fantastic scientific growth in the last 80 years in the U.S. Incredible. The U.S. was however already a country of great "acculturation" for along with the perhaps strong Indian and Anglican roots, American culture was a conglomeration of who lived where. Now think about this same 80 years of growth in Japan, one of the industrial (NB. "western") super-powers. Disgraceful. Surely now that many Japanese have four-car garages it will be impossible to take it away, but was it necessary???

Acculturation in today's music is an exceptional phenomenon. The Flemish sing Country Western tunes. In the Phillipines one hears of blues singers. And the Americans, well, they sing American music. This is an overt attempt to create an international (profitable) music.

Most non-Quebecois consider the current question of Quebec's separation from the rest of Canada nonsense. When one notices how often the French-Canadian is forced to speak English in his own province, it is shocking. Surely knowing two languages is better than knowing one and undoubtedly English should be the second language throughout the non-English-speaking western world, but still to be forced into a second language in one's own area??? This description does not reflect any economic factors of the problem; but historically speaking, most secessions were not primarily economical, they were also territorial/cultural. I have nothing against groups living together, but I do find the overt stealing of tradition outrageous. I applaud all French-Canadian pop singers as well as modern French-Canadian composers who are trying

to retain some sort of separate identity

In the cultures where identity is being stolen as well as in the complicated U.S. cultural mixture one often meets "folk" singers who are simply pop composer/performers trying to actively create a cultural tradition. It is not really harmful that Robert Zimmerman-Dylan considers himself a "folk" singer of his own compositions—what is important is that there is a message of self (here self means personal as well as group or society-wide) identity.

A fascinating reaction to cultural identity or lack thereof is John Cage's, Harry Partch's and other modern composers' leaning towards eastern philosophies for their artistic and perhaps personal life foundations. This all gets involved in political aspects in and around modern music which is a subject in itself. The point here is, however, that nationalistic tendencies can be just like in the internationalism/nationalism question; that is, a question of reacting against something. There is nothing Taoist about American pop or daily culture. The chance for the natural to exist in American culture has been battered by the current system of capitalism at all costs. Cage in not relating to his culture's system had to try to apply what might be considered acculturation in reverse. He is trying to drop certain American social characteristics and instead of throwing another set of demands in the faces of his peers has acculturated himself into another system, perhaps deductively demonstrating that ANother way is also possible. Even a composer as Harry Partch tried to combine the best of everything in his private American world.

In sum, just as in "At a Fork on the Way—3," I put the blame on pop music and the Americanization of everyone as one of the most important elements of the current musical identity crisis of all musical forms. Mass media has harmed more than it has helped. It seems to be turning world music into just music.

leigh landy
october 1978
amsterdam



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