

**Borrowing or Stealing? Celebration or Global Village?  
Interculturalism in Contemporary Music from a Composer's  
Point of View**

by Leigh Landy

**Introduction**

Ethnomusicologists and anthropologists have said that contemporary art music composers gratuitously steal pieces or borrow musical elements from other cultures. Has this always been the case? Why does a composer of a pop or jazz group borrow from other cultures in a given piece? Are these musicians putting "water in the wine", or fighting for the survival of traditions?

To respond to these questions, the author first considers the broader picture before giving a personal account. The goal of the composer is to celebrate musical traditions, many of which are under threat of extinction, whilst, at the same time, creating "good music".

A brief introduction is given, followed by an investigation of the relevancy of Western academic 'traditional' boundaries of folk, popular and art music. The question arises whether we are ready for a new typology or is there an international consumer culture creating a contemporary version of the *status quo*? Then, one will explore why some wish to compose intercultural music.

A personal history is necessary to give a brief view of the place of contemporary art music in society. By confronting questions and issues of Interculturalism, one delves into the personal including the concept of fusion in the arts and music and the traditional notion of 'devising' is introduced. A concluding section ponders questions that remain unanswered.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Speaking of unanswered questions, whilst thinking of the ongoing musicological discussion about which elements of music are universal, is it a

### Why are We Victims of Other People's Musical Typologies?

Many people who study music are introduced to musical categorisation that are culturally defined. In Europe, a trinity of mutually exclusive types is taken for granted; art music, popular music and folk music – the latter, a dying breed in most of Europe. As a student, I recall contradictions from my tutors. For example, folk music's domain was that of oral tradition. And yet I remember how so few of my fellow pop musicians ever bothered notating anything. Whenever a tune was duplicated or rearranged, there was a case to be made of employing the oral tradition. Thus, I remain concerned about the validity of mutual exclusivity.

At the time, the word "fusion" was often used to characterise musicians who failed to reach success in one area of our Western trinity, and therefore was obliged to throw "water in the wine". Currently, fusion is fortunately used with less disrespect, as borders are becoming more fluid. Certainly there are various histories of art or court musics around the globe; however, many are rooted in parallel folk or popular traditions. Although these partitions seem odd, the twentieth-century market packages them as separate entities as exemplified by top ten charts, including the pop music hit parade,<sup>2</sup> an evergreen hit parade,<sup>3</sup> and jazz, classics and light classics. The marginal contemporary and folk have had such poor sales that no chart would do them justice except for the successful artists such as the minimalists, the post-modern romantics and the folk-based 'world music' artists who accept or celebrate fusion as a means to greater appreciation and success.

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wonder that Charles Ives never completed his "Universe Symphony?"

<sup>2</sup> This can be further subdivided into techno charts, mainstream ones, and so on.

<sup>3</sup> With the passing of time, even the word 'hit parade' has had to re-establish which periods it refers to.

Success has been redefined throughout the centuries, in part, by travel and the evolution of product dissemination. Success at the local village level was more acceptable previously. Today, few would be satisfied with such a modest fan club.

By eliminating the local venue, we have allowed a dominant cultural industry to dictate the process of music making worldwide. Debate about this issue is long overdue.

Why did success in local venues lose its status in the late twentieth century? And does the trinity need to be redefined? The latter also concerns making types of music more specific for market and academic purposes. It also concerns the danger of the progressive loss of folk music. Are we allowing current pop music to replace it as the music of the people?

This essay is not meant to prove anything although the present author would be proud to see the celebration of local talent recalled. He would also like 'classism' taken out of the trinity – art music is primarily for the better off, isn't it? Finally, he would hope the world would allow eclecticism to coexist and for community music to bring people with a common interest together for a single type of music making.

Although this may seem contradictory, we are able to be multi-community people in this post-modern world we inhabit. It is the ownership of what communities stand for that is in question. With this in mind, why then "go intercultural"?

### Why Does One make Intercultural Music?

Be it opportunism, idealism, naiveté, thousands of "paths lead to Rome". "Why does one make intercultural music?" I would have to be seen as a moralist if I were to state its pros and cons.

What I have often heard is stealing other people's material is a sin. Peter Brook may have won acclaim from his intercultural theatre work

throughout the years. Purists<sup>4</sup> detest the transplantation of something clearly rooted elsewhere into a Western art context. To cite a second example, the South African composer Kevin Volans has been accused of the theft of Shona *mbira* music in some of his works. In this case, "intercultural" is seen as more national, than international. I doubt Volans thought he was stealing the music which forms the basis of a number of his compositions. The concept of "celebrating the original" might be closer to Volan's views.

Instead of listing reasons why one makes intercultural music and what one would achieve by it, a selection of possibilities could be offered. Before doing so, one question deserves attention. Are there truly universals in music? I was taught that there were, and still I am ambivalent. Not all music has a clear beat. "A 440" is by no means a universal, nor is the well-tempered scale. The concept of 'cadence' is culturally defined so its meaning and intent may not be the same for all cultures. So what is universal? Is it currently Michael Jackson? He represents the "McDonalds" of music, as it is from a few societies dominated by the USA from which worldwide phenomena seem to emanate.

This universality is not individually driven, but industry driven. Thus I believe Jackson to be virtually universally accepted in a musical sense. But this is due to the same commercial packaging as McDonalds hamburger slightly varied in different contexts. This does not reflect those universals alluded to by my former tutors.

Instead of universality, one might want to choose 'inspiration' as a criterion. The ability of attaining greater popularity might be that artist's love for the material, or what the material represents. A means to an end is another aspect which is diametrically opposed to an end in itself, that is, intercultural music as such. Transformation, or the creation of new 'celebrations', might be considered with the denial of

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<sup>4</sup> These are mainly scholars rather than people from the countries in which he finds his actors and inspiration. The matter of something being rooted in a Western art context is something Peter Brook would probably deny.

celebration as its opposite. Modernising versus leaving it "as is" is yet another. And, for better or worse, "borrowing or stealing" is my final way of approaching things.

Many aspects of these parameters seem to leave a bad taste in the mouth. However, they are not meant to facilitate alienation, but to acknowledge interculturalism, other than traditionally allied or neighbouring cultures (i.e., acculturation or assimilation), is an artificial construct. That said, new music that is not reactionary in terms of existent forms could be considered artificial.

Interculturalism in music may be a trend or a fact of life. Whatever the case may be, as long as major music shops have recordings of most of the world's peoples on their shelves, it is a natural by-product – also known as historical inevitability – given available repertoire. In the time of Haydn, for example, most classical music performances featured the works of contemporary composers. There was also some knowledge of other/older music. This is in stark contrast with today's situation where one can have a choice of virtually anything. We have anything from Inuit to Byzantine, to electroacoustic, to country and western music at our disposal. As synthetic as a 'world hamburger culture' may be, it is no more odd than our ability to combine musics like never before. This has to do with the availability of information and product and nothing more.

With that in mind, the question is not only why intercultural music is being made, but also how it is made and for which purposes? As stated in the preamble, the modest goal of making "good music" should be sufficient. Perhaps we ought to get together some day and determine a few measures of quality. Mine would certainly not be economically driven in the first instance. It would be based on the quality, not quantity, of reception.

### Why Does One Make 'Contemporary Music'?

In the next paragraphs, I use the term 'contemporary music' to signify 'contemporary art music' as practised around the globe and promoted by organisations such as the International Society for Contemporary Music (I.S.C.M.), one of the few organisations who seem to have little interest in art appreciation.

There is no point in reviewing the tragic development of twentieth-century art music. I do not want to think of how many times my past students have suggested that Stravinsky was the best composer of the century. He peaked around 1913. Of course, what they meant was 'best art music composer', as many consider Duke Ellington or Miles Davis or The Beatles to be the century's best composer.

It is perhaps extraordinary to consider that contemporary music lives in the first instance on university and conservatoire campuses, at (very) small arts centres and as an add-on at 'art music' concert halls. It also occasionally appears in film, video, drama and dance contexts.

In the twentieth century, there were two attempts to demarginalise contemporary music. The first was partially due to Stravinsky's initiative which was given the name 'neo-classicism'. The term meant the renewal and re-articulation of any music or musical structure within the then contemporary context. It was a reaction to an audience which had trouble keeping up with its *avant-garde*. In the present day, this may be seen by many as a turn to the right. 'Neo' was not that new after all. The formulae those composers used led to easier listening than those of their more adventurous colleagues, but they were formulae rooted in other eras. This did not lead to the types of enduring successes those composers perhaps sought. As will be clarified shortly, this fight for greater reception has changed in recent decades.

The second attempt occupies the second half of the twentieth century and can be found in what may be termed "neo-classicism's cousin", a combination of minimalist or repetitive musics, some new forms of neo-tonality and fusion music. Philip Glass's and Michael Nyman's

income would certainly parallel that of Stravinsky if the latter were alive today, but this is due to the former composers reaching markets outside of the art music market. Stravinsky's borrowing from jazz never led him into the jazz world. Many see the popular contemporary composers as those who have sold out. Others celebrate contemporary music's ability, at long last, to be appreciated. Whatever one's opinion, the level of elitism has been reduced, as well as the difficult appreciation element associated with works of more 'complex' composers. Several of these composers own the post-modern notion of eclecticism, borrowing from other cultures, periods and styles. Many will chose this option, as the music hypermarket offers all types of music on CD to the consumer. Others will have more politically-based motives. At the turn of the twenty-first century, it seems 'contemporary music' will be popular among those patronising popular music styles, similar to the operetta composers of a century ago. Also, the contemporary music of the twenty-first century may allow for more crossover opportunities than a century ago: between art and other kinds of music, between different music cultures and between music of different epochs.

The question arises: "why make contemporary music?" As someone who has enjoyed various forms of emancipation that have taken place during his life – of gender and race in society and sound within music – the question seems nonsensical. 'Contemporary music' should be defined as any type of music created now that belongs to a community. A community can be defined as a group, whether local or otherwise, linked with a common interest. Anyone making music would be considered a maker of contemporary music as long as that music belonged to a community. The community of contemporary music defined originally primarily consists of makers of contemporary music, with the exception of popular composers who have been able to create their own broader communities, or those who join communities that already existed (e.g., Glass's popularity within some pop music circles). If, however, the question, "why make contemporary music?" were to be limited to an inner circle, it might be that the main reason would be the academic goal of increasing knowledge. This for me is insufficient.

One reason I consider this to be insufficient is that I do not desire my art to be of scientific value only. Academic music to me can be classified as being more of science than art, as art needs reception – at least as much as a quantifiable creative process.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, one major development of the twentieth century is I believe that ‘musical immortality’ is dying. This contradictory soundbite is based on the premise that it is absurd to be *avant-garde* these days. It is most difficult to get one’s work performed in the first place. Repeat performances of contemporary music seemed to be rare in the latter half of the century. With the huge volume of contemporary music produced daily, who expects his or her music to be performed often in fifty years’ time? We may continue to produce the occasional Mozart, but the probability of that has dropped significantly in recent years, not due to lack of talent, but instead to an increase of supply. That being the case, making music for individual or academic goals, as opposed to a community one, reaching others than the above-mentioned inner circle, is problematic. As far as pop music is concerned, it is virtually always made with acute ephemerality in mind.

If you can accept the thesis of ‘community’ above ‘immortality’ as a more immediate artistic goal, the most relevant question to be asked is: “Are there in existence communities for intercultural music?” As a composer of intercultural contemporary music, I am still unsure about this, despite my experience of widespread appreciation for this approach. Communities for intercultural music seem to be emerging in popular music areas, but they are normally a packaged trend. I hope such communities will gain more support excitement and vibrancy in the future. It would be a reflection of the effects of living in a world where there is greater travel and media dissemination.

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<sup>5</sup> It would appear that the world of science is populated by people who, as it were, are centred on their ‘minds’; and that in art it is a balance between heart and mind that is sought.

### Why Do I Make Music?

This section serves to illustrate the difficulty some people have today in celebrating the local, a particular focus of mine. As an armchair ethnomusicologist, I am sometimes uncertain as to when I am in an *emic* or an *etic* context. I have lived at length in three countries and possess two nationalities. In my country of birth, the United States, I was told I was living in a melting pot. As a person of Eastern European roots, I was therefore not surprised by my clear preference for black music, as that was a logical product of a melting pot. It was not the Anglo-American traditions that attracted me, nor the Eastern European ones of which I was fairly unaware. No, it was music in which the richness of rhythm made my blood boil.

Later in life, I, like many students of music, was introduced to the wealth of music’s diversity and found myself becoming increasingly eclectic, be it with distinct preferences. Simultaneously, I became increasingly aware of the danger from which a good deal of music is found. With my pop music hat on, I was also aware of the power of the market, the power of the record company, and in particular, the power of the Artist and Repertoire (A & R) man (as most were male). This reflects the evolution of McDonalds music power, be it the ‘universality’ of the Rolling Stones or equivalent or of Beethoven as a worldwide art music figure as opposed to any artist from, say, Pakistan. To prove this point, there is a piano in every practice room at the Central Conservatory of Beijing. Why? Q.E.D.<sup>6</sup>

My passion for music grew with my awareness of its diversity. It grew similarly with the amazing developments of music technology allowing me to become a sonic artist. Finally, it grew as I saw the power of music in cross-arts contexts. The second and third passions may not seem particularly relevant here, but it is the combination of the three which has led to the holism of my work.

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<sup>6</sup> Editor’s note: This means in essence, the point has been demonstrated or proved.

I decided at a young age to fight for music's continued diversity through the power of music making. Art can and should make people more aware of themselves and others. Technology aided me to portray musical diversity in a manner appropriate to my own musical vision. Working with the 'sister' arts was and remains useful for two reasons. First, there is the question of the dissemination of music. I am able to reach many more listeners/viewers and communities through working in collaboration with, primarily, the audio-visual time-based arts. We are, of course, living in the epoch of the "Image Culture" which is part and parcel of contemporary Western society. Secondly, by working with people in the other (community) arts looking towards synergy in these collaborations, I have allowed myself to return to the tradition of the performing arts as being basically a single art form, another type of fusion which I believe is crucial in the present day and in the future.

In fact, my entire vision as a composer: that of a deviser (i.e., an artist creating and workshopping art collectively in a group context) as opposed to an individual creator, that of a performing artist as opposed to a musician, that of a community as opposed to professional artist – all of these points are rooted in tradition, despite the fact that many an arts council will see my work as belonging to the 'cutting edge' (which is itself an ephemeral term). My contemporary music can employ any sound appropriate to a community context. If I have to choose between borrowing and stealing, it is my hope that what I do is to borrow with respect. My attempt, in all cases, is to make clear that I am supporting music's diversity as a fundamental goal, and supporting those musics that I, in particular, incorporate into my own works. The new 'celebrations' my colleagues and I seek are in fact new forms of old community celebrations. Ours can take place in a theatre, in a local school, at a specific site or even on the Internet. It is dealing with people with similar interests to which I am devoted.

With this in mind, my work is moulded by the group with whom I work, the community groups with whom we devise our creations and the circumstances of when, where and for whom performances take place. Allowing for this flexibility is my foundation for an approach to

address community needs. The notion of employing interculturalism does not bite with this concept as all involved can embrace the same notion and heighten it in our art making and art sharing experiences.

I make music because our sonic world offers us so much excitement and diversity to choose from and because I love to see people respond to the warmth, humour, fun and challenges of sound. If, at the same time, more people become aware of the value of music's diversity around the globe, I will have done a good job.

Still, there are a couple of points left unresolved. How do I feel about those ethnomusicologists, right or wrong, who accuse me of theft? In all naiveté and simplicity, my reply is that my stated goal is to treat my material with respect; I have a political agenda which they most likely share, even if they do not like the notion, of recycling music outside of its original context. And I have a second goal that one may secretly share, but rarely articulate, namely that of making 'good music' that can be appreciated in the community in which I am working. When musicians stop making music for the anonymous masses in the first instance and get in touch with their community or communities, perhaps we will no longer have to defend some of our innovative choices, as our community may share those understandings with us.

#### **Why Does the Title Consist of Unanswered Questions?**

We have walked from the general to the specific without a single resolution. Funny thing, the arts, you can never completely get your hands on anything. I suppose that's why we all enjoy it so much.

I shall now attempt to conclude and summarise at the same time. But beware – these are my answers, not *the* answers. Can the global village be stopped? Of course not. Does that mean that we cannot continue to celebrate things local? Again the answer is "of course not". It is the creation of coexistence and the achievement of a better balance than is currently the case that is at the back of my mind. And, what about the question of borrowing or stealing? My answer is, "ideally neither". 'Music' is finding its community and then discovering appropriate

forms of celebration for that community – perhaps this is what it is all about. Hopefully, one day, contemporary forms of acculturation and assimilation might emancipate themselves from accusations of theft and even of borrowing, as music material evolves, is rediscovered and owned by those in the community, irrespective of whether it be “old” or “brand new”. What is of course relevant is sharing the knowledge as to whence the music comes, as it is here that we can best acknowledge that, as with food, forget McDonalds, diversity is the spice of life!

## References

As the above text was presented as a ‘food for thought’ paper, little attention was given to supporting academic literature. This essay contextualises the composer’s relationship with interculturalism in terms of his own work. The references cited below have contributed or are related to the paper’s content.

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