

## ETHNOCENTRICITY IN MUSIC

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Music is universal. Just as people everywhere have a language for communicating facts with one another, they also have music as an expression of their emotive life. Every society has some form of musical expression; however, there is no music which serves as a universal language.

This can be shown best perhaps by considering music as analogous to language. What are some of the similarities between speech and music? Both are transmitted acoustically, and can be received as meaningful communication. Two questions now arise, namely: Who receives music as meaningful? and What does music communicate? Those who speak the same language are able to communicate with each other; likewise, those who communicate musically must have musical language in common. They must be within the same musical culture and the same music system, for - like speech - music has structural ~~complex~~ complexities and diversities which vary from system to system. Both speech and music convey meaning to every individual in a given society, while allowing for degrees of receptivity.

If there are degrees of receptivity, does music ~~then~~ communicate more to some than to others? Yes, it does, because meaning in music can be responded to through various channels and by a multiplicity of channels as well. At the outset we assume that no one is so naive as to think that tones - in and of themselves - carry lexical meaning, for if music duplicated what speech already does, there would be no need for music.

What kind of meaning does music convey? There are four channels of meaning which come to mind. The first is associative meaning. People responding to music through this channel of meaning may say something like, "That was played at our high school dance" or "The first time I heard that song was in church." It is also associative meaning when one recognizes, according to the music, that a certain event is taking place. Hearing the music of a bridal procession, a football game, a social dance or a church service plainly signals an event to those within the culture. But notice that in responding ~~to~~ through this most common channel of ~~musical~~ meaning, we are responding not to music as a work of art but to an activity or event with which the music is associated. All peoples respond to music through this channel of associative meaning.

Music also convey<sup>s</sup> meaning through a biological channel. Unless we are indoctrinated otherwise, this response is natural to all. Rhythm is the dominant factor in this type of response. Because we are rhythmic creatures whose bodily functions are rhythmic, we identify with and respond to rhythm and tempo. Rhythm's regularities signal well-being, and its irregularities <sup>arrest</sup> ~~attract~~ our attention. Changes in voice quality or any manner of performance which is a deviation from what is expected as the norm is ~~responded~~ reacted to. It is this biological response that precipitates the dance, and the body's impulse to respond to music can be seen in very young children. Of all the categories of <sup>musical</sup> ~~meaning~~, a biological response to music perhaps comes closest to being a universal response.



When a composer employs a text, he wants to declaim a meaning by means of music. Declamatory meaning then is the meaning of the song text, which the composer hopes to emphasize by his musical setting of it. Anyone in the culture is capable of responding to the three kinds of meaning presented thus far, but there is a fourth and more specialized meaning conveyed to the trained musician, and that is ~~skinner~~ structural meaning. True understanding of music is possible only through comprehension ~~of the structure of music's structure~~ of music's structure. This meaning is the musical embodiment of an idea, and music's profundity or profanity lies within it. For the most part, the comprehension of structure is consciously acquired.

The general listener, therefore, responds to music through the channels of associative and biological meanings, and sometimes through declamatory meaning as well; the trained musician responds likewise but he has another channel of meaning open to him, that of structural meaning.

Music and speech are similar still in other ways. Though they are established systems, they allow for personal creativity. Neither is so inflexible that it can become exhausted of ideas, for music - like language - is ever changing and expanding.

A final point in comparing the similarities between speech and music is this: Both fields may be barriers to cross-cultural communications, and behind this fact lies the ~~MX~~ cause of ethnocentricity, for just as a particular language or a particular music system can bind a culture together, it can bar the door to those outside that culture.

There is a music barrier. It exists between cultures whose music systems are unlike, though it sometimes encompasses several ~~nk~~ languages. In other words, there are more linguistic barriers than music barriers. Several language groups may have the same music system, as in Europe, where nearly all the Caucasian world has adopted Bach's well-tempered major and minor scales and the harmony rules which were an outgrowth of that tempering. Having said that, we are not forgetting some smaller cultures who retain their oral traditions quite apart from European ones, such as some folk musics of Spain, Yugoslavia, and so forth.

In the past, some have chosen to disregard the music barrier. ~~Supposing~~ Suppose that we should find ourselves at such a barrier. How should we react to it? The first and most essential step is to recognize that there is one, and that we are the ones outside it. Second, we have the same alternatives open to us that a linguist has in making an approach to a speech barrier. Let's examine how a linguist would approach the problem.

The linguist prepares himself for meeting a language barrier. He learns a phonetic alphabet through which he can identify and mimic what sounds he hears. He is prepared to meet grammatical constructions and idioms different from those of his own language. In other words, he meets the language barrier prepared to cope with it psychologically and scientifically. In facing a music barrier, one must be ~~equipped~~ similarly ~~and~~ equipped to identify and mimic new sounds, to analyze unfamiliar rhythmic, melodic and harmonic structures, with a view toward mastering them.



There are other ways to approach a speech or music barrier. Instead of overcoming it, one could tear it down, as has been done many times in the past. The solution in this case would be to ~~discredit~~ discredit the existing language or music system by replacing it with one's own. This is the end result of ethnocentricity. The outcry against this kind of approach today is everywhere. It is finally realized that a people's language is a vital part of their identity and cannot be tampered with without ~~serious~~ serious damage to the individual and his place in society, ~~individual~~ and to the society as a whole. Music, too, is a vital part of a people's identity, and it cannot be replaced without damage to the individual and to his society.

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Despite the fact that music's boundaries are wider than linguistic boundaries, music is more ~~vulnerable~~ easily erased in an oral tradition than language. Are we aware of how easily this can happen? If music-making in an oral tradition ceases for only one generation, the heritage is gone forever.

When a larger society begins to overlay its culture on a smaller society, creativity is stifled. The young, lured by the new and different, seize the latest instrumental or song fads while the indigenous composer is abandoned. Overwhelmed by the new trend, he gives up. This is how a vital ethnic music can be eclipsed within just a few years. What follows next? The supplanting music system cannot fill the place of what was destroyed, nor can individuals compose naturally in the new, foreign system. When the indigenous population realizes its traditional music is gone, it is too late. The loss is irrecoverable. All that is left to them

is music from outside, and this is a change of culture, a supplanting of music systems. Structural meaning is lost, and music becomes, so to speak, an ornament. Only two superficial aspects of musical meaning remain, the associative and the biological.

In summary, we see that the most effective way of overcoming a music barrier is to learn to participate in it. Only then can we communicate. For one steeped in a single music tradition, especially one as highly developed as our Western tradition, it is very difficult to accept the fact that a simpler music tradition can fulfill the needs of an indigenous people. It seems even more difficult for Christians who are steeped in a single body of religious music to recognize that other cultures, though they may be taught to mimic them and even though they may speak English as a second language, can ~~only~~ respond to foreign music only biologically, and then only if that really is a universal meaning. Associative meaning may be constructed over the years, but again, we find that only the superficial aspects of meaning are tenable.

Any music system is capable of expressing a given people's inmost response to all about them and to their Creator. This does not mean that music already in existence and outside the Christian context is adequate for worship and praise, for as we have seen, all music has associative meaning. What it does mean is that the music system or theory which underlies indigenous composition can be utilized to express any concept. One does not need new languages to express new ideas and concepts; rather, one relates a new idea in the same language he speaks. He merely says something in his language that he has never said before. It is the same with musical composition. A composer converted to the Christian faith can use the



talent and craft he already possesses to compose works of praise and worship. He need not learn a foreign music system in order to express his new ideas. By combining new music with new words he can dynamically give testimony to his faith using his own music system.

Music's office is to communicate attitude and emotion rather than information, and such expression is often more powerful and more effective than speech. However, like language, music must be domestic to be understood. Christianity expressed in the musical idiom of a people reinforces the spoken message at greater depth.

To know their music is to know the people who make it. To participate in the music of another culture is a means of understanding that culture and of better reception into it. Musical participation is in every way comparable to participation in the vernacular language. When music systems conflict, the burden of learning a new musical idiom seems justifiably to belong to the outsider.