Part One    The Cultural Context

A Beginning

Music is all pervasive and yet we often seem to take it for granted. By this I mean not so much that we sometimes don’t listen or even hear it when it’s playing in the background, or that we don’t often think about it when we mentally tally up the things that are important in our lives. I also think that we usually don’t think much about how music intersects our lives and how it affects us and the lives of so many others. Think about how a particular mood is enhanced when we add music. When we feel good the music can make it feel even better. When we feel badly, the music can help to pull us into another frame of mind. At times the wrong music can even make the mood worse, sadder, more morose. Sometimes the sound of it, particularly when it’s not what we want to hear, can drive us almost mad. In any case we can all accept that it has a powerful effect on us at times.

If we look at all the societies and cultures known to us and look at all the historical societies of the past to the degree that we can discern, we can deduce with a high degree of certainty that music has always played an important role in human society. If we consider today simply the world of pop music, the manner in which it is effortlessly transcending global barriers and even otherwise extremely difficult linguistic barriers, if we consider the number of people who consume it in some way and millions of economic units consumed in its production and consumption, we are not simply talking about a very big business enterprise. If we ask ourselves what is driving it and we realize that it is largely voluntarily and self willed then we must ask the question, what is it that music does that makes people behave in this manner? The very fact that it is all pervasive and has been so for many cultures through the ages strongly suggests that music in our lives does much more than make us feel good or happy. It must be that music fulfills some important function in what we regard as humanness. It must be linked in some vital way to the health of the species.

But what is it that music does? In this study I cannot hope to answer this question nor can anyone that I know of at this time. What I propose is to look at what we have learned about how music functions in human society and we interact with it, how we change it, pass it on and create new forms of expression. I do not even for this have all the answers, but I drawn on the works and discoveries of many others and my own more than 50 years of study and observation of music, much of it in many different societies all over the world.

In the end I doubt I will see the answer to that question, what does music do,
but I think by looking at the marvelous complexity of forms of expression, at the ingenuity and yet common sense of diffusion and adaptation we may better appreciate that although we each listen to our own muse, what drives us to it is very much the same for those around us.

In order to think about the role that music plays in human life we must do more than only look at it in our own cultural context. Not only is there much that we can learn by looking at other cultures, this broad trans-cultural view will also make aware of things in our own culture that may otherwise miss.

Culture and tradition are intertwined. We do things in a certain way, other take the idea, and still others take it up even modify in the next generation. People remember what is good or useful and share it with next generation and with their neighbors. In this way the most important and useful things we have learned are diffused and carried on.

Traditions are lost and new ones created. In the process sometimes gradual and sometimes sudden changes in these traditions take place. The powerful imprint of the immediate past is impossible to erase and even those deliberate attempts to create entirely new traditions are bounded by what came before them. A new and radical departure from an established tradition even as it attempts to break with tradition reflects it like a positive/negative contrast.

Tradition, habit, and culture bind us all although we think little about the process as we go about our lives. In the world of music we have today forces that seem to be working toward a globalization of musical tastes. At the same time if we look across cultures and even looking within any one, there still exist a great diversity of forms, styles, and traditions of music. Change has always been a factor in culture, but today, with the increasing effectiveness of media and communication, the world is saturated with cultural information and it is rare to find human societies that are even relatively untouched by it. Change brought about by contact between groups is part of the process by which culture evolves, adapts and accommodates. Cultural diffusion is not new and music has been affected by it in the past as in the present. What is new is that the scope and pace of this diffusion and effectiveness of cultural saturation.

Cultures that appear to be steadfastly holding on to local or regional traditions are nonetheless aware of the changes surrounding them. While they may appear to continue in defiance of globalization, they are still affected. While change and diffusion through contact with other groups has always been a factor of culture, what has changed is the diffusion of cultural elements from nearby neighbors to diffusion of cultural elements across great geographic distances and from cultures with that prior to the last 50 years of so, there had been little direct contact.

As we look at human musical activity globally, we depend on various types of information. Living traditions are the most important source of information. We can
study them, interact with them and document them, as well as enjoy them. Sound recordings are a means of preserving some of the very important aspects of living traditions and the past hundred years of sound recording serves as a resource for the study of music that is of great importance. In addition we have other kinds of documentation, both written and graphic, that provide valuable information about music culture. However, written documents, even music notation, and graphic depictions of music practice can give only partial information whose value is limited unless we can link it to some understanding of actual practice. For this reason, sound recordings of music, both from the many European traditions and from the rest of the world become the vital source for our knowledge of human music practice and of the changes that have affected it.

During my lifetime I have been happily engaged in the pursuit of an understanding of the scope of variety and the nature of change in as many of the varied expressions of music in a variety of societies. This pursuit has led me to spend prolonged periods of time in a number of different regions and cultures of the world and in the process to learn a good number of their languages as well. What I have learned is that the variety of manifestations of human musical expression seems virtually endless and in overwhelming proportion variety and uniqueness takes the lead over finding common practices or aesthetics across different cultures.

The question I ask myself after pursuing these many trails is, what does all this tell us about music in human society? This is what I have attempted here in these pages to consider albeit incompletely. One hundred years of recorded music performances supplemented with written and graphic documents are a vast resource into which we have as yet only begun to delve.
How Did It All Start

We can doubtless never know exactly how or when music first entered human life. Seeking such an answer will in part depend both on where we choose to draw the line between music and self satisfied grunts or howls — the distinction between what is music and what is noise is even now not widely agreed upon — and at which point in the human evolutionary schema we choose to pinpoint what we will call humans. This may all sound like a ruse set up to avoid a precise answer but these boundaries are at once both arbitrary and important.

Let us consider each of these in turn. I think we are cutting things too narrowly if we point to the first time a complete song was created, appreciated and passed on as the beginning of music. There are other possible scenarios. Early hunters while making a great noise to chase game into a trap may later have recreated these sounds as a kind of magic retelling of the story of their success. Humming and even moaning to oneself as a form of self soothing or soothing of some one else could be thought of as a kind of proto music. In fact, there are many song types today, Flamenco singing, old country Blues, Romanian Bocet funeral songs, to name just a very few, consist often of pathogenic expressions that cannot be considered melodic but lie much closer to what may have been a very early use of music to sooth, to heal and to aid in seeking balance.

At some point even before this, an observation must have been made that making some sort of sound was effective, felt good, or yielded the right results and it went into the bag of tricks to be used again and again gradually becoming formalized.

When did this start? Just as it is more than likely impossible to know how the first event that we might think of as music began, it is equally difficult to say when it might have begun. Some argue that music is an activity known to many animals, birds and whales to name those that come most readily to mind. Others may prefer to argue that these are not like human music. Recently however, clear evidence has appeared in Slovenia showing that Neanderthals made flutes from animal bones 53,000 years ago. This predates current estimates of the first modern Homo sapiens coming into Europe by 10 to 15,000 years. These flutes were made from bear and deer bone, had finger holes and produced sounds that are remarkably clear and sweet in sound. While this tells us little about neither how Neanderthal man may have used music nor what he used it for, the appearance of these flutes is unmistakable evidence of a clear and deliberate use of music.¹)

¹)
We have recognized the ability of certain primates such as chimpanzees, to communicate with humans, albeit without the capacity for human language. This does not preclude that chimpanzees may have some means, as yet not understood by us, of communicating amongst themselves. Such a means of communication could be transmitted by gesture, expression, or sound. In whatever form such communication would not be about words as in human speech, but would more directly be an expression of the inner state of being of the individual sending the message. This in essence is what music is at heart after all, the communication of the inner state of being from one individual to another. It is entirely possible in my view that this could have been going with the earliest humanoids.

This is an important beginning point at which to pinpoint what we choose to call music, because whether it is used for self nurture or for communication with others it is based on an expression of an inner state of feeling, something which in no way guarantees that it will be understood by those hearing, but that is another matter. What is important is that this view of music allows us to encompass the vast spectrum of human musical expression through history.

Notes
The Cultural Context

If culture is the sum of the things we do and we know and what we pass on for adoption and modification then it naturally follows that music is a part of all this. It grows out of culture, based on whatever tradition has been inherited along with all the modifications that have taken place. Nothing really new here, except that this means innovations, brilliant new ideas of any particular age must also be seen as a part and outgrowth of the same culture. The resistance to an old established idea and the creation of something consciously different from the past is in itself recognition of that past.

We can understand that music must grow out of its own cultural context. People in each culture create music from what they have learned and from what they have heard. Even when they create something entirely new, it is still based on what existed in previous experience. Music adds to the culture and is an important form and avenue for personal and group expression in it. It is also very much a product of that culture and of all the influences, historical, political, economic as well as aesthetic which have played upon it.

At the same time music has a place, a role, a function, in each culture. That is to say that in addition to being an outgrowth of the culture as well as a reflection of it, music has a status and function in each culture. There is a way that people use it, practice it, continue it and think about it which is unique to each culture. If in some society music begins as the formalizing of sounds used during the corralling and hunting of game and it continues to be performed in a symbolic or religious association with hunting, this is one kind of cultural context for music. If in another society every individual in the community is expected to perform in some way, by singing or dancing whenever the group holds a musical event, then this is another context. In another society, the religious leaders may tell the community that music is not good for them and even so the people go to places where music can be enjoyed and devote themselves deeply and passionately to it. In other societies, most of the people may not engage in the performance of music themselves and will instead pay others to serve this function for them. All of these examples are from cultures that exist today. The differences between them are differences in the cultures and are differences which have, in turn, had an effect on the music itself.

Before going any further it is important to note that in creating labels and categories for what we observe we are merely making use of helpful labels and descriptions to help us as we wade through the depths of myriad of different cultures.
doing things their own way. The creation and application of these labels and categories does not in the slightest take away the importance of the concept as it is viewed in the particular cultural context in which it is found. If the musicians of Java and Bali had no traditional word for music and yet seemed to be making it all the time, they in that cultural context had no particular need for the generalized term. However as well look across many different cultures, we do.

**Music and Ritual and Religion**

In some societies music serves as an important accompaniment to ritual and may have little other function. In such cultures, music is performed only when certain ceremonies are performed. In our own culture we have few rituals anymore. There are a few, however. There are still times when it is expected that we will all sing the national anthem. In the United States, at official government functions, whenever the president appears, the old Revolutionary War march, “Hail to the Chief” is still played. In Great Britain “God Save the Queen”, is played at the end of every theatrical performance, even for the showing of motion pictures. The military still use, in addition to marches, specific bugle calls which are both symbolic and at the same time clear messages to the troops. On ships the boatswain’s whistle is used to make similar announcements and commands to all on board. We do not often think of these ritualized and symbolic ways that music is still used in our society because, in truth, this kind of ritual and symbolism is not really characteristic of modern Western and Westernized cultures anymore.

Music is often associated with ceremony and ritual. In the ancient courts of Asia, music was part of the emblem of the king, emperor or sultan. Certain music when played announced the presence of the ruler and some musics when played indicated that even when the ruler was not present, the performance had royal authority. Music is often used in religious ceremonies. In Japan one of the important annual religious festivals is the *kagura*, which means “music of the gods”. In this ceremony, the performance of the music itself is the ceremony, the songs and dances being intended as entertainment for the gods. In Islam music cannot be associated with religion in any way. Even the reciting of the sacred Koran, which we would regard as singing, is never referred to as singing but as a special form of recitation because music of any kind is strictly forbidden in connection with any religious observation.

The tradition of religious music in the West until the Middle Ages was essentially the intoning of the sacred scriptures. It is likely that rather than actually singing the scriptures as we think of singing today, the text may have been intoned, that is recited as though speaking in tone. Many examples of this use of the human voice made divine by the addition of tone and yet not actually singing exist in many
Fig.1  An old woodblock print of a Japanese Noh performance. Some members of the audience are listening, one seems to be asleep and another yawning, while a group in the back is busy conversing. (Sarugakuzushiki, 1907)

Fig.2  Woodblock prints were used as announcements of performances by famous Kabuki actors of 19th Century Japan. Even the style of the woodblock prints, their colors and design, reflect the flamboyant and exaggerated movement and speech style of the Kabuki theater. Music, dance and design are all integrated to reflect the style of Kabuki and to set it apart from the more refined and older Noh theater style (From ‘Kabukinotate’ edited by Masakatu Gunji and Yaenosuke Bando. Tokyo: Kodansha. 1984. pg. 113).
Fig. 3 The *Kangen* ensemble of the Japanese Imperial Household. Even the formal spacing of the musicians seated on the floor reflects the Japanese concern for space and order.

Fig. 4 The ancient ensemble of instruments used of the Confucian Ritual, or the Ceremony of the Sun and the Moon, includes a formal arrangement of instruments made of the eight important elements of ancient Chinese culture, played in a precise and very formal and exact musical pattern. The photo is of the Confucian ensemble as it survives today in Korea.
cultures. These are usually situations in which the sacred or magic character of the text is most important and it suggests that early Christian and Jewish liturgy may have been performed in such a manner.

Gradually increasingly complex settings of the scriptures were introduced that were intended to serve as expressions of supplication and of thanks but also inspire the congregation towards deeper religious feelings and to make them feel uplifted. Gradually, the cultural context of religious music in many of the churches of the Western world changed from being music to enhance worship and inspire religious fervor or respect came to be music which was intended to please the congregation and to encourage them to feel welcome and to return. Thus in our own ritual music we have changed from using music to enhance the power of the sacred texts, to using music as a means of enticing people to come to church.

Music in connection with religious ceremonies, as with any of use of music in the culture, can tell us much about how music is regarded and how it functions in that culture. In Zimbabwe among the Shona people, music is used to create an atmosphere which induces the individual to become one with the spirit and thus it serves as a connection to the spirit. But with Shona music, this is not just a created mood that is conducive to the mystic experience. The deep structure of the music has intricate repeated pattern that the listener can hear in many way and in the process creates his or her own perceived mental patterns out of the music by played. Entering deeply into this pattern-seeking while listening does indeed enhance the Shona’s ability to attain the desired mystic experience.

The use of music in the high culture of the traditional world, both East and West shows both the use of complex forms of music expression for the sake of enhanced religious experience as well as offering the opportunity of proclaiming the wealth and status of the institution or even it’s patron. In Western Europe for hundreds of years, the most skilled composers were employed to compose music for the ritual. This was also true in the Ottoman Empire where many of the great composers of the classical music of Turkey were also composers for the sacred dervish ceremonies, the Mevlevi ayin. Many of the most highly acclaimed compositions in this genre were composed for the ceremonies by Sufi mystics, but many were also composed by lay musicians and many even by famous sultans themselves. So music is used in connection with religion as an offering and entertainment to the gods, as in the Ancient Japanese Kagura, as an inducement to union with the spirit as with the Shone of Zimbabwe and as an expression of devotion and inspiration to the devotees as in the West and in Ottoman Turkey.

**Music as Music**

Music is the most complete, complex and fully articulated means by which
humans communicate with their fellows. It expresses the inner states of one individual to another, or that of a group to another group. While it is being performed, performer and listener share in this expression of feelings. We usually attempt to define what we call music in terms of the way it is manifested in our own particular culture. Much of what we to say about music is based on our own knowledge and familiarity with the music of the Western tradition. It is reasonable to be influenced strongly by what we know. However, we need to be mindful that we do not assume universal value systems for music where they do not exist.

When you think about it, we are virtually always in communication with each other. Even when we drop out, most of us need to stay in touch with the sounds of other humans, in some way, by radio, TV or listening to music. Music is one manifestation of the human’s incessant need to communicate with his fellows. Much of his energy is spent in chattering, gesticulating and signaling to other humans, a process with which he has been passionately preoccupied since his first appearance on this planet. We find great comfort in this almost ceaseless and noisy communication with our fellows. Most of us are unwilling to ever stray very far away from it. Once in a while we may hear ourselves declare that we have a deep need to get away “from it all”. Yet many usually find some means of taking it with us or seeking out more of it where ever we choose to go.

Music is one of those links with our fellow beings which most of us prefer not to be without. As a system of communication we know it works although we cannot yet be certain of just what it communicates to us. Given the natural tendency for humans to want to keep in contact with each other, of all the forms of contact available to us, there are many who, when given a choice, would prefer to hear another’s human’s music.

Early humans may have at first made music as a re-creation of the activities of a hunt, or as appeasement to the powerful spirits, or as way of healing for the sick. But at some point humans began to enjoy the sound of music for its own sake. In doing this and in performing music for the pleasure it gave and for the expression of feelings which it allowed, they had redefined music and its role in their culture. It is a different way of thinking about music, an almost self conscious way if we compare it to what must have been its early ritual and mystic origins. Now we can have humans entering a situation in which one might say, ‘let’s have a little music”. Much of, in fact, probably most of what we think of as music fits into this category. But this as little more than a broad functional category for what falls within it encompasses most of the recorded human activity we know of music.

While it is certainly of a later date that what we have been talking about at this point, there is at least a reliable source describing the practice of using music as part of the hunt by the indigenous peoples of the Andes written by one of the early Spanish explorers, a botanist, Hipolito Ruiz. He describes the building of a fence in
the hills and then beating drums, snapping whips and blowing whistles until they have herded all the animals in the enclosure.1)

The conscious creation of a category of music as music is also defined culturally. There is of course, nothing inherent in the sound itself to elucidate such a category. It is the function, context and shared culture that say, this is music to be listened to. This, on the other hand, is music that goes with something else. This distinction is useful because it enables the acceptance of, just to take the example of religious music, the fact that Christians have and refer to music in their religion whereas Muslims do not use the word music in any form to describe the recitation of sacred texts. Yet this same recitation of the Koran were it to be described in any way, would have to be labeled religious and then if not music, some circumlocution to avoid the word, but it would clearly fall into the functional category into which we have placed the Shona spirit music, the Japanese Kagura, the Turkish Ayin and the church music of the West.

Think about the status of music in modern Westernized cultures. Although many popular musicians make substantial incomes, many parents would prefer their children to seek other channels of livelihood. Music is often relegated to a secondary role in our society. It is thought of as something which enriches or entertains us but is regarded by many as a frill, something extra, nice, but not necessary. Yet music is all pervasive. In every society known to us and in every period in history it has been there. Its very persistence and ever present existence suggests that it is more than an enrichment and a refinement to our lives. It, like language is a vital element of our very humanness. If humans everywhere appear unable to get along without music, then music is doing something much more than providing entertainment and even meaningful enrichment to this life. So in each society it takes an important role, even if one must look at the economics of it instead of what culture would have us believe about it.

But there is something else about the way music functions in our culture that is noteworthy. The British psychologist of music, John A. Sloboda has noted:

Through a long social and historical process contemporary Western art culture has become characterized by functional specialism. In the case of music, as with most other art forms, a gulf has emerged between producer and consumer. Adult producers are typically large in number, usually untrained, and often unskilled in most forms of musical production. With the advent of sound recording it has become possible for the various functions to be completely separated in time and space. Consider, for instance, a Beethoven symphony. A group of performers construct their interpretation in necessary isolation from the composer, and also from the audience for whom the performance is intended (for example, in a recording studio). A member of the audience may then ‘receive’ the interpretation in social isolation from both composer and performer as a disembodied aural experience. This is particularly true of the domestic listener who
may, through use of headphones and darkened room create the impression of being totally and exclusively enfolded by sound. Even at the concert there are usually strong social and geographical factors which separate listeners from performers. Performers and listeners go in and out by separate doors; they do not interact with one another. Any form of audience interruption is usually violently resisted. Such constraints tend to reinforce an ‘illusion’ which projects the sound of the music away from the realities of its origins in human work, both physical and mental. As in the puppet theatre, the modes of production become veiled in mystery, and we may have no particular wish to venture behind the proscenium arch.2)

Art Music, Specialized, Complex and Challenging

The words and thoughts which we use to describe the concept and ideal of music as “art” are strong in Western and Westernized society. We enjoy music but we remain removed from it. We hear much talk about just how important we believe the art of music to be. Although we generally agree that it is important, in our own culture we tend to think of music as an enrichment - something which makes our lives fuller but something we could manage without if we had to. We enjoy music, but only a few of us actually make it ourselves. This is often the way the subject of music goes whenever there is talk about the need to improve the quality and amount of teaching of music in our society or about the potential expense of better and more fully integrating it into our basic education system. It becomes something desirable but not necessary.

The manner in which music and, in fact, all the arts, are treated in modern society gives little indication of the more important role which it actually plays. In trying to look at some of the ways in which music is considered by humans, we must look beyond our own cultural definitions, beyond our own preconceptions and assumptions.

Even in societies in which there is no conscious verbalization supporting the notion that music is art, it may still be very important. There are cultures, for example, which have no word for music, or in which there is a word, but it is used to refer to only some forms and types in the culture but not to others, but for which we, even as outsiders, would have no difficulty calling music. The lack of verbalized system of terms for music, and its aesthetics does not preclude a recognition of its importance to the group. The stratification of values, whether is it articulated or not, forms a pattern which is unique in each society and never precisely reflected in the same way in any two. Although each may describe it differently it is impossible to find a society anywhere in which music does not play a role which is substantively parallel in importance to the manner in which we describe music as art.

In addition to being a system of communication in and of itself, music in most societies functions as an effective means of defining and delimiting the group and of
helping it to maintain a sense of cohesiveness. We may find that in some societies music is treated with the same sense of awe which is usually reserved for powerful and incomprehensible displays of magic. We do not usually think of ourselves as a society which places great trust in the power of magic. Magicians and sorcerers might not seem an appropriate parallel, yet, when we try to fathom the reasons by which the income of any of the top fifty current US Rock groups goes well up into the highest 5% income bracket of the country, it does seem that if not the awe of something like magic, something akin to it seems to be at work. Our notions of what we imagine to be primitive man’s superstitious awe of his art may not, in fact, be so different from our own. The high ticket prices paid for performances and substantial income from the sale of recordings of the most popular artists around the world is a true indication of the role music actually plays for in modern society, in spite of what we may think. The amount of money used in support of popular music groups is parallel in level to the support which many in Western society give to religious organizations.

The Status of Musicians

In many societies, including those of the West and those that are Westernized, those who provide music are regarded as special people. Sometimes by certain segments of the society, they may be regarded with disdain and yet by others, they may be respected, sometimes even held in awe. Regardless many are often well-paid. In Westernized cultures, as in some others as well, musicians are paid by us to sound off and express feelings and thoughts which we believe are like ours. We pay them because we like the way they express how we feel. In such a society they are often outrageous, mad visionaries who help us articulate our subllest feelings and dreams. Our songs may be the most effective means we have of defining ourselves as a group, of refining our emotions and perhaps of helping us to clarify even our thoughts. Certainly music articulates shades of mood and feeling which are impossible for us to describe in words and even the words to the songs have greater meaning for us because of the music in which they are engulfed.

In Western culture, many young children are given the opportunity to study music. Only a few continue to pursue this are a career or even as an avocation. Instead like many other stratified societies most of the population prefers to pay professionals to provide their music instead of playing it themselves. Thus the purchase of tickets for concerts or the purchase of CDs of music satisfies our need for music without having to learn to play it ourselves. Increasingly in many parts of the world the separation into music consumer and music producer is becoming more common. It may be a factor in increasingly diversified societies to rely on specialists even for music. In Europe during the last three hundred years a well educated person
was expected to perform music himself. Music perform at home among even middle class families was something which continued for many years in Europe and even in America until recently this was not an uncommon practice. Nevertheless, even among the nobles of Europe, many of whom were very adept musicians, they also had a great appreciation for the talent of others and employed the best musicians they could obtain in order to enjoy their performance, sometimes to play together with them and even to learn from them.

For about perhaps three or perhaps four hundred years in Eastern Europe a similar practice existed. Throughout much of Eastern Europe, Roma, or Gypsies had been entering and traveling about. Their reception was mixed at best. In some places they were welcome at other times and in other places the were feared and despised, in part because many thought they were connected to the Turks who were invading Europe at the time. Many times they were singled out merely because they were darker than the Europeans and had black eyes and black hair. The one area in which the Roma were allowed to establish themselves was as musicians. The Eastern Europeans quickly noted that the Roma were excellent musicians, learning the local music and performing to the pleasure and satisfaction of all very quickly. This is a case in which an exogamous group entered the society and one branch of it became valued because they fulfilled a function that was valued and important.

In some cultures, professional musicians, that is those who make a living from it, are less highly regarded than amateurs. This is the case in traditional Iran, Turkey and Okinawa. In these cultures special individuals who have devoted their time to the pursuit of classical music are regarded as the greatest interpreters and carriers of the music traditions. These musicians are people who have other means of employment; generally they are well educated people who have the leisure time to study music for many years. Many in reality spend little time at anything else but the sense that they do not play for sustenance is clearly part of the picture. But what is important is that it is these amateur musicians who know more about the old traditions in these countries then do the paid professional musicians and it is they who have preserved it in its present form.

In some cultures musicians are those who were born into special families of musicians and outsiders are not permitted to join their ranks. The musicians of the Imperial Household Music Department of Japan can trace their lineage back to the musicians who were in service to the court back to the 9th Century and sometimes even earlier. Until the 1950s no one who was not already a member of one of these guild families would be allowed to join the ranks of the palace musicians, although today this has changed. Even today all the court musicians are men. It has been documented from time to time when the family had no male heir, one of the daughters could be married to perhaps the third son of another family and this young man would then take the family name of the hereditary guild family and the tradition
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could thus go on.

There are cultures in Africa in which it is believed that only those from families of musicians can ever master music. There is no formal restriction preventing others from learning the music. They simply believe that not being born into one of the families of musicians makes it impossible for them to learn the music.

In most traditional cultures of the world, music was exclusively a profession for men. Often reflecting a system of segregation which was in place in other areas of the society, in some cases, there could be women musicians but then, as in the case of the women’s orchestras of ancient China, the orchestra would be made up of women alone and men would not be permitted to join them. Since the segregation into men’s and women’s quarters was the practice in much of the ancient old world, the segregation of female musicians from male musicians was an outgrowth of the general practice. Women wanted to have music in their own quarters just as the men did and pressure to allow that gave way to the establishment of women’s ensembles and orchestras.

In 16 and 17th century Europe, women were encouraged to take up the study of music because it was thought to add refinement to young women. Men did also take up music and it was not uncommon to have them do so and to do so was considered a refinement. In the case of women, however, it was thought to make a young woman of good family more desirable for marriage since the study of music showed a refinement, something which did not hold true in the same manner for men.

In England, France and in Spain on until even the early 20th century the study of music among women was encouraged by polite society. In the Northern Philippines where the playing of the old Spanish harp continues even today, many women in their youth were encouraged to learn to sing and play the harp, although most did not play again very often after marriage. In Japan the study of the thirteen string koto and the three string shamisen in a repertoire in which they were both used, were thought appropriate for women whereas other forms of music, even other kinds of shamisen music, were often not considered appropriate. It is curious that in this same genre, only blind men could play, whereas in other forms of Japanese music, only men were allowed to learn and to perform. Many of these ideas have slowly and steadily changed, particularly under the purview of changes in government policy. In China, Korea and Japan, many forms of music in which formerly only men were allowed to perform, now have women musicians in their ranks.

One of the areas in which the strictrues against women performing music were not always strictly enforced was in singing. Throughout history and in many cultures women were noted as singers in situations in which otherwise music was not considered seemly for them. Nonetheless, in many traditional societies the same restrictions still apply. In some countries of the Muslim Middle East, for example,
even recordings of male and female voices together cannot be played on the radio.

**Music as Cultural Delineator**

The music we listen to identifies us and explains something about us to others. When you meet someone as you get to know them, the kind of music they listen to may tell you something about them. At times it is through meeting others and learning about the kind of music that they like that we learn about new kinds of music and expand our own collection of favorites. In our fluid and open society, we define our subcultures most clearly with music. Although in more cohesive and less highly stratified societies the same diversity of tastes may not occur, in most industrialized societies there are many options and choices available in the kind of music one can listen to and in this way these subcultures can develop. Although the music may be sometimes different, this same diversity of options occurs for example, in Japan and in most of the countries of Europe and in some countries in Latin America.

Music plays an important role in each of our daily lives. We are accustomed to thinking of music and the arts in general, as valuable to us because of the refinement and depth which they add to our lives. Yet, music has much to do with our balance and sense of well being affecting and enhancing even the pattern and nuances of meaning in our speech and thoughts.

To the best of our knowledge there has never been a society in which music did not play a vital and integral role. Claude Levi-Strauss in the Raw and The Cooked after describing music as a metaphor for myth and then drawing several parallels between them says ‘music has its being in me, and I listen to myself through it’\(^3\). The use and function of music in all societies known to us suggests that such a contention or something parallel to may exist for all of us. But such a statement logically draws us to consider some of the distinct roles of music and speech.

**Music and Language**

The parallels between music and language are significant. Both require sound and music, in its most simple form is the utterance of sound from the human voice. If we note that in the earliest leaning of language, the infant learns words through association and repetition. Invariably an emotional tone of emphasis or approbation is enunciated along with the word so that the infant is learning an associated emotional tone along with the word. It appears to me that the infant is first learning an emotional vocabulary and then associating it with words, or may even be leaning to focus and express an already nascent emotional vocabulary through association with sound.
At what point did humans begin to use sound as a means of communication? It will never be possible, most likely, to know this. The evidence is intangible and lost. If it is safe to guess that an emotional outburst with sound came before words and that from there the path from sound to signal must have followed. But here again we are faced with the question of pinpointing the line between a sound of surprise or sudden emotion and the production of sound for the purpose of expressing inner states of being. My bet is that what I will music, as a means of codifying emotions, came before the forming of what we think of as words.

Whether this is true or not, music and speech have moved together. The tone and accent pattern of speech have had a guiding influence on the creation of music. This is as evident in what we know of the past as it is in the present. To give just a few examples, the instrumental compositions of Hungarian composers such as Bartok and Kodaly show the same unmistakable accent patterns as found in Hungarian folk music and both are strongly related to patterns in spoken language. In contemporary pop music, the influence of both British English and American vernacular speech have had a strong and defining influence on the patterns of the music. In Japan, where normal speech pattern is more unaccented and unstressed, perhaps parallel to French as opposed to English, the contemporary Japan pop music, sung in colloquial Japanese, deliberately distorts the stress and accent patterns of spoken Japanese to make is sound more like the American and British models it is imitating.

Music, like other aspects of culture including speech, is aided in its dissemination by contiguity. Thus it is easy to find patterns of cultural diffusion among neighboring cultures also showing patterns of musical adoption. This begins to change in 19th century with colonialism and travel across greater geographic and cultural differences. Then we see the sudden transplantation of radically different cultural elements under the support of political sway. For example this is the case with the introduction brass band music suddenly into 19th Century Japan.

The pattern of dissemination of music styles and practices often parallels spread of language and speech patterns, adopted words and structures. However, there are significant instances where music jumps across language barriers with ease. In the present day, the manner in which audiences and performers in the Far East, Japan, Korea and China have adapted European and American popular music styles scarcely impeded by the considerable distance of the spoken language. In addition Chinese, Japanese and Korean popular singers and musicians are also imitating each others imitations of the Western pop music and again unmindful of the considerable language differences.

In spite of the ease with which musical styles and practices can jump borders, a unique music idiom is often felt by those in the culture to represent and parallel their own sense of national or regional identity. This has often been used to subvert
political ambitions as well. At the moment China is working energetically to absorb the peoples of Mongolia. Including the territories of Mongolia under Chinese control is one thing, but they have begun control cultural dissemination to such a degree that much of the recent music of Mongolia is losing its Mongolian identity and is sounding more and more like the idealized Chinese models. Like the loss of languages, if this continues long enough there may soon be only few who remember and perform the old native Mongolian music.

**Language and Music as Human Traits**

The biologist Lewis Thomas has stated that speech and especially, music, are dominant aspects of human biology. Recent brain research also suggests the notion that the capacity for speech and music are among the unique specialized functions found only in the human brain. We are also learning more about how the brain reacts to sensual stimuli and that its responses are not single and direct, as is characteristic of even the most complex artificial intelligence computer system, but rather that for each stimulus there is a complex of multiple and simultaneous neural responses. Biologists also tell us that the health of any species is reflected in the degree of variant forms in which it appears. In addition to their importance as biological indicators, diversity of choice and variety appear to be closely linked to the best functioning of the human brain and in this way may also be important factors in observing culture. The combination of these ideas suggests that the study of changes in the patterns of accessibility and, in particular, the potential loss of diversity in music for large percentages of the world population should be a matter of serious concern. These changes will have possible far-reaching effects on the human condition.

**Notes**


How Culture Determines Structure

How Culture Defines the Elements of a Music

Finding Meaningful Segments

When we listen to music, we both seek to hear something familiar and at the same time something new in it. In order to do this we must find our way thought it. We must “follow it”. If we find no recognizable guideposts, we must then try to make sense out of what we hear from scratch. Our culture, that is, our past experience and exposure has established these guideposts for us. These guideposts mark off areas or periods of the music into meaningful segments. One step towards understanding a new music is by trying to isolate what may be significant units or subsections. In a situation in which we are faced with a music style with which we have no familiarity, we naturally try to first make sense of it using our previous experience with music with which we are already familiar. Should this not yield a key, and should we decide to continue, we must then try to make sense of the music in its own terms. Until we can figure out something about how the music was put together, attempting to identify the meaningful segments of that music may be difficult. The key to finding these segments lies in the culture.

We might think that the major cultural differences in music would show themselves in a number of variations of the length or shape of perceivable units. What we find, however, are that the vast differences of cultural and historical context in combination with human imagination and creativity have resulted in an endless number of possible variants. The manner in which time is conceived in the general culture, the way human relationships are delineated, and the manner in which adjustments are made to the environment, in a culture have an effect on the way music is structured in that culture. The physical nature of the region determines what materials are naturally available for the construction of instruments. The economic system of the society and the ideas defining religion and mythology will also contribute to the manner in which music will be defined in any culture. It is the combination of all these elements which establishes the parameters within which the music can develop.

Lets us look at some ways in which culture creates contrasting structure and practices in music.
Repetition as a Cultural Value

The mbira music of the Shona of Zimbabwe, like much of the music of sub-Saharan Africa, is based on a principle of a steadily repeated basic or ground pattern on which variations are superimposed. Although the description of this system of organization may suggest similarity to the use of a repeated background or accompaniment as in some forms of Western Classical music, the African system is different. There is a technique in Western music called a ground in which a bass line repeated many times over which a series of variations are played. There is also the principle of variation in European music, but in fact the Shona ideal is quite something else.

For the sake of drawing a sharper distinction between the Western and this particular African approach, let us first say something about what the Shona music is not. For one, there is no sharp or clear distinction between what we would consider the ground or background and the “melody”. That which we might, from a Western vantage point, consider the melody, is a rather illusive suggestion of a melodic line which rises up from the ground but which, once again from the Western perspective, does not seem to stay there. The melody seems to be heard in Shona music and then it seems to blend into the background. Most of the time it is doing both of these things simultaneously.

The principle of variation as it is understood in Western music does not fit exactly either, since there is no theme on which the variations are based. In the Western concept of variation, there is a theme upon which variations are developed. In Shona music the distinction between a theme and its variations is not so clear cut. It is better to think of the variations in any composition as a great number of possibilities, some of which are simpler and can serve as teaching examples.

It is interesting that, for example, in Japanese, the words and concepts of “wrong” and “different” are close in meaning. In English, so strongly does the culture affect and color the meanings of words that it is difficult to describe the basic underlying principle of the Shona music of Zimbabwe without allowing an amount of pejorative coloring to enter into the description. Simply said, repetitiveness is a positive factor in this music. This is not to suggest that the music goes on endlessly without change, but rather that the repetition of a basic unit is and of itself a positive and unifying factor in the music. The principle of variation in this music serves to enhance the sense of repetition. Repetition is that element in the music which binds the musicians together and which creates the bond between listener and musician drawing the listener more and more closely in order to sense the minute and detailed variations. From a position of some aural distance, that is, from an untrained Westerner’s perception, or when not listening carefully, nothing seems to be happening in the music and it appears only to be repeating itself without any variation at all. In fact, repeating something again and again emphasizes the subtle
and minute differences between each occurrence. Listening carefully and in more
detail, one finds that there are numerous minute variations going on all the time. It is
something like focusing a lens more sharply on the small details.

**Repetition and Variation in Shona Culture**

In fact, the Shona musicians are creating the music on the basis of a principle
which the African musicologist, Andrew Tracey, aptly referred to as
“kaleidophonic”. As the musicians repeat the basic structure of a composition, they
listen carefully, yet effortlessly and gradually some particular regrouping of the
notes they have been playing leaps into the mind. That is to say that, as yet, nothing
has changed in what is being played but only in the player’s perception of it. Since
this music consists of several superimposed layers of sound, the musician may be
hearing one or two of the notes he is playing suddenly combined with a note which
someone else in the group is playing to form a new pattern in his mind. He might
then add a note or two to better establish the pattern and by this means enable others
to hear the new pattern also. At the same time, the principle of unity and repetition is
too important in this music to allow constant variations to take over or to destroy the
basic structure of the performance. So the principle of variation is exercised with
great restraint. Gradually and over the years certain variations come to be associated
with one musician, and then his group and eventually they can become the standard
form used in one village or area.

The variation principle in the *mbira* music of the Shona is thus an outgrowth of
the principle of unity and repetition. The basic form of each composition contains
the seeds of several different possible variations and any one performance of the
composition, even of the basic ground pattern is already one of the countless
different possible variations. Therefore one can understand how in the world of this
music with its minute and subtle variations uniquely occurring at each performance,
no two performances can ever be exactly alike. In addition as the listener hears
different patterns arising out of the music, he is encouraged to contribute to the
performance by either singing out a short repeated pattern based on what he hears, or
to get up and dance out the rhythmic pattern of what he has heard. The repetitive
basic pattern of the music helps to cement the relationship between the listener and
the players so that this type of participation is facilitated and is important. The
distinction between player and listener is in Shona performance is blurred. The
repeated pattern of the music bonds the players and audience into one.

In order to perform and to listen to this music audience and players alike begin
with a common basis of expectation. When the music begins performer and audience
expect to recognize the pattern, or construct in their minds the range of possible
common factors that would define the performance and composition. All expect that
the beginning pattern will be repeated in recognizable form until the end of the
performance. Listener and performer both will expect to listen actively and creatively, not only to what they are actually hearing, but to what they might contribute with their own imaginations as well.

**Variation in North India**

The classical music of North India presents another very different type of mental imaging required when listening to music. In the tradition of North India today, improvisation plays a prominent role. As a consequence each performance is valued as a demonstration of the musician’s skill and mastery of the principles underlying the music and not just in the interpretation of an existing repertoire. The main components of this system, *raga* and *tala* require a bit of explanation. The term *raga* is used to refer to the melodic system of India music. The *raga* is a group of notes, usually conceptualized in scale order, but with specific and fixed relationships between them. In this system certain pitches are always grouped with certain others, other notes might only be approached only after certain others, some notes might only be heard in ascending passages and would be replaced by others or perhaps omitted in descent. Thus the *raga* is a matrix or complex of tonal relationships and is much like a nuclear melody or an abstracted version of a melody. It is clearly much more than a scale in the Western European sense.

*Tala* refers to the underlying rhythmic structure of the music and is a system of complex rhythmic patterns or structures that are multiplied, divided, regrouped into new patterns, etc. An instrumental performance begins with an improvised exposition of the *raga* in an opening section in free rhythm called *alap*. The *alap* can be of varying length depending on the mood and preference of the soloist. After the *alap*, a fixed melody in a fixed rhythm known as a gat is introduced. This gat also establishes the particular *tala* for the performance. After the statement of the gat the improvisation in the *raga* continues now against the matrix of the *tala* and alternately weaving in and out of statements of the gat.

At performances of Indian music today it is not uncommon for the name of the *raga* and the *tala* to be printed in a program or to be announced and nothing else in the way of a title for the particular piece to be performed. However the performance of Indian classical music is structured in expectation that the audience be conversant with the requirements of the style and to therefore be in a position to appreciate the unique contribution which this particular performer is to make. The audience does not really need to be informed as to which *raga* is to be played because the performance itself begins by explaining, without words and entirely in sound, the structure of that *raga*. The musician has two responsibilities in performance: he or she must clearly etch out the contours of the *raga* in order that the audience will recognize its pattern, its accented pitches and characteristic melodic turns. Then in addition the musician must show in the performance a unique aspect of the *raga*
with skill and interpretation, and giving it new and heightened meaning while at the same time not destroying the expected norm of that raga. To recognize the raga, the audience need not necessarily know its name but by the careful manner in which the musician states the structure during the alap section, the audience should be able to grasp the general shape of the raga and the rules which govern movement within it. Then the player expands on this, without departing at all in the slightest from the structural pattern established by long tradition for that raga, but by delving deeply into the mood created by that structure and then attempting to surpass previous performances by expressing the rage with more grace and subtlety than ever before.

The main exposition of the raga occurs in the opening section of the alap. Instruments which provide a continuous drone on the fundamental pitch of the raga and, usually, also the fifth, are sounding before the soloist begins. The performance of the alap by the soloist almost invariably begins in the lower register and on the lower notes of the raga, that is, beginning on the low fundamental pitch of the raga and then gradually working up the scale. As each new note is touched upon the player carefully shows how it will be characterized in the raga, how it will be stressed or ornamented, how it will be related to those notes surrounding it, and thus he will gradually show the characteristic patterns which identify that raga.

This process of exposition of the opening alap, followed by the gat and then the improvisations can and frequently does last for as much as three quarters of an hour and longer is also common. Beginning from the lowest fundamental of the raga, the opening can with some musicians require as much as twenty minutes or more to gradually work up to completing the exposition of the first octave. As the listener perceives each note, he is to remember how the note is played, what sort of ornament or inflection it is given, how it is related to other notes. Then he adds to that his impression of other notes, one by one and to the characteristic phrases of the raga. Thus step by step the listener scans quickly back over what he has just heard and adds to it that which he is hearing at the moment. In this manner the listener is being prepared to recognize an entire musical structure of complex interrelationships, without which it would not be possible to appreciate the excellence of the that particular performance.

Variations Defining a performance: The music of the Tzeltal peoples of Chipas, Mexico

To cite just one more example of the use of variation of another very different type let us consider the music of the indigenous peoples of the highlands of Chiapas in Mexico. Among the numerous groups of peoples living in this area, one large group are the speakers of the Tzeltal group of languages. The Tzeltal peoples, like their neighbors, the Tzotzil speakers were converted to Catholicism by early Jesuit missionaries. The Jesuits also introduced Spanish instruments current in the early
17th Century, the harp, violin and guitar. These the indigenous people learned to make themselves. While the outward structure of this music may sound like European music, it also appears to have many important characteristics that are indigenous and in fact may only be superficially European at all.

Here the principle of variation is applied to an entire performance in a very unusual manner. The performance consists of several repetitions of the composition. The repetitions do appear to be endless repetitions of the same thing. In the Tzeltal culture, the leader of the ensemble begins playing the already known composition, but in the initial statement, there may be a slight emphasis of one note over another, a slight delay at some point, or perhaps even an added new tone. In any case, once the leader has established this variant of the composition, this becomes the variant that all the group will play during that performance. Thus each performance in its entirety becomes a new and very subtle variant on the already know composition. Each performance would consist of a number of compositions and each would be a unique variation on the know composition.

Social Structure and Music

Parallels Between Social Structure and Music Structure

It is easy to see and also quite inescapable that music is an outcome of its cultural context, a reflection of the culture which produced it. Still, the ways in which this can happen may not be obvious to us, particularly if we consider only our own culture. However, the manner in which groups of people organize themselves socially is often reflected in the way they organize themselves in their music.

In some societies there is a cohesive communal structure in which all members are regarded as equal, having equal rights and responsibilities. In other societies there is a high degree of stratification, distinct social levels ranging from rulers, enforcers, artisans and craftsmen, to workers and peasants.

In communal societies, the interdependence of members of the community is often reflected in the structure of the music. Many communal societies share common musical characteristics. One such characteristic shared between some communal societies in Central and South West Africa and with the Hill Peoples of South East Asia and the Philippines is the use of interlocking melodic and rhythmic patterns. In such cases each player plays a note or set of notes while another player plays another note or set of notes which interlock with the first set. The notes of the second player fit in the spaces left by the first player’s pattern. The combination of these two or more independent patterns fit together to create a whole pattern, much like the pieces of jigsaw puzzle. In this way the interdependence of the members of the community is reflected in its music. The role of each individual is important. The whole could not be created without each part. Furthermore, each part must be
executed with great precision in order to maintain the spaces in each part clearly so that they can indeed fit together. These performances require cooperation and precise rhythmic synchrony and reflect the existence of these values in the daily lives of people in these communities.

These are cultures in which the entire community consists of one unified group. All of the members of the group do essentially the same work as the others and many members of the community working together share most of the work. In such communal societies people are accustomed to close cooperation and sharing. The Bushmen of Southwest Africa, the Pygmies of Central Africa and many of the Hill peoples of South East Asia and the Philippines live in communities like this. Among the Tinguian people of Northern Luzon in the Philippines their music reflects this social structure. There are basically two kinds of music, singing, both solo or in groups, and dance music, which is provided by an ensemble of gongs. There are some other instrumental musics, such as the bamboo tube zither, *kolibit*, which also plays the dance music in imitation of the gongs. The technique for playing the gongs requires that each player hold a single gong. Each gong has a different pitch or tone and each plays a special pattern. There are five or six such gong players and each has his own pattern that he or she plays and on which slight variations can be imposed. The sound of the music when heard blends all of the individual gong patterns into one single pattern. In this way the communal structure of the society is reflected in the way the music is organized.

Further South in the Philippines, among the Muslims of the Sulu Islands, they also play the gongs, but here we have a more highly stratified society with special roles for Sultans, Imams, or holy men and soldiers. In these cultures the music is also more complex and stratified. Instead of a set of single gongs, here we have one set of gongs to play the melody, drums to play and ornament the rhythm, larger gongs to punctuate the phrase patterns and a smaller gong to keep the basic beat. The group is divided up into separate discrete but complimentary functions just as the society itself have different unique and interdependent strata. Most of the cultures with which we come into contact are stratified cultures and this social stratification is reflected in their music. Societies like those of Western Europe had music for the upper classes that was used at private functions like dances and concerts. They also had civic music, like the bands that announced the hours from the city towers. There was also the popular music of the city dwellers and the folk music of the countryside. In addition there was music especially dedicated to religious ceremonies and observations. Like the cultures of Europe, traditional Japan, Korea and China, for example had ceremonial and court music. These musics were rarely if ever heard or seen performed by the common people. There was also classical chamber music for the upper classes, theater music which had its own semi cultured following and then urban and rural folk music as well as the special music
for religious ceremonies and village festivals which could be enjoyed by everyone.

In more highly stratified societies in which there are specialized roles and professions, the music usually reflects this stratification. In complex and multilayered societies one finds multi layered music. Some examples are the symphony orchestra with its special instruments whose duty it usually is to provide bass lines, and others to provide harmonic accompaniment and still others to play the melodic lines. Similar specialized functions can be found in Rock bands as well as in the gamelan orchestras of Indonesia, Chinese, Japanese and Korean court orchestras, numerous drum ensembles of West Africa and Western and Eastern European folk dance ensembles to name just a few. Such manifestations of social order in music structure are merely the result of the way people in each culture see order and this same vision is reflected in music and in society. We organize our music in just the way we naturally organize other things in our culture.

Definitions Defined by Culture

Generic Classifications of Music

In today’s contemporary popular music, one encounters many labels and ways of applying them that are new and innovative. Still, it is difficult to find agreement and consensus among several people about these descriptions. This may mean that the categories are still unclear and are slowly developing, that people are looking and perhaps willing to force similarities between different musical styles in order to make sense and organize them in their own minds. In the process of selling popular music, performers, producers CD manufacturers attempt to place other recordings that they have produced into a category similar to another in which they or a competitor has hits. By this means gradually a consensus of descriptive labels arises and comes into current usage. Categories are redefined to suit the needs and perspective of the times.

Most often we do not think much about labels and yet they are used freely and sometimes carelessly, which does create difficulties. Certain broad categories that are applied to music would seem to be self evident. Folk music, religious music, popular music, jazz and blues might at first seem to be such clear descriptive terms that we would not question their validity and their applicability. They are, in fact, our own cultural view of the matter and even there, we will find difficulties in applying these labels to our own music. There are, understandably ever greater difficulties when we attempt to apply these labels to the music of other cultures. Nevertheless, it is useful to have some broad labels and categories by which to measure man’s musical activities that can then be changed, refined or amplified as we understand each particular cultural context better.

What fits into then category of Pop today, may soon be reclassified as nostalgia
which may cause some chagrin to those who are still engaged in listening to it. This is an example of the passing of time, dictating what is current and what is not. In Japan today we can see another variant of this, but one that tells as much about changes in the culture as about the simple passing of time. Japanese record stores even as recently as the 90s had classifications of popular, classical (meaning Western European Music) Jazz, World Music, etc. If we were to look for Japanese traditional music in our record stores we would likely find it filed under world music, Japan. This seems logical. However, in Japan, while Japanese traditional music is as much a part of the world of music as anything else, putting it under the heading of World Music, while European and American Pop, Jazz and Classical were not under world music did not make sense. So there was another category in Japanese called “Hogaku” which means local music. The understanding was that this category included all traditional Japanese music, folk, religious and classical, but not music by Japanese composers in the Western European idiom. In the beginning of the 21st Century the term Hogaku has been re-appropriated. Many of the big record stores in Japan carry virtually no more traditional Japanese music and if they do, it is likely to be classified under World Music. Few of the majority of CD record consumers in Japan ever listen to traditional Japanese music anymore and even the number who listen to Western Classical music, although much, much greater than the number who listen to traditional Japanese, are also far eclipsed by those who listen to and buy pop music and rock. In the new record store, a huge sea of pop and rock music is categorized as “yogaku”, Western Music, however meaning only pop and rock, and “Hogaku” which now instead of meaning traditional Japanese music, now means pop and rock by Japanese artists.

In general labels as classical, popular, folk and religious divide music into broad functional categories that are somewhat useful. Nevertheless, we can encounter difficulties if we attempt to classify other kinds of music, that is music from other cultures under this system. For example in the Islamic world, the musically intoned recitation of the sacred Koran is not regarded as music at all, but part of a religious observance and practice. To label this “religious music” would be offensive to the adherents of Islam, and to describe this musical practice in that culture by the label, ‘religious music’ for this practice is therefore inaccurate. Yet it remains true that such labels imposed from outside the definitions developed within the culture help us to see patterns across cultures and to better understand the larger pattern of music in human existence.

Let us look at the broadest and easiest categories used to describe different kinds of music.

**Folk Music**

Folk music as a term was first used to refer to the music of peasant societies and for the
basic traditional music in societies that had already other kinds of music like classical or professional (see below) music and perhaps religious music. The term is better used for Europe and The Americas, especially European America, where this specific kind of stratification exists. It can also be applied to the village or peasant music of India and the Far East.

By implication the term means that the music comes out of a broad social tradition and that the specific composers or creators of the music are anonymous or forgotten and that the music has been absorbed into the collective memory of the community. It is incorrect to think of the musics of sub Saharan Africa as folk music, nor the musics of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. There are several types of music in the many societies that comprise these areas. Also, particularly in Sub Saharan Africa, the composer and performer may very often be one and the same. Neither does the term primitive music, in the sense of it being rudimentary or preliminary to later developments, apply to these regions since those musics may posses aspects which are highly sophisticated and complex when viewed and understood in their own context and have had as much time to develop and change as any other music existing on the planet.

As a broad and general category, the many musics of Asia should not be labeled collectively as folk music. Asia is comprised of many often highly stratified, societies and possesses many kinds of music. There are many musics in Asia which could more appropriately fall under the label of folk music, but that description does not apply to all. It is best to apply the label folk music to those musics that are collective and anonymous and are the shared tradition of a single group, like a village or region. It is also best applied to this type of music in stratified societies in which are also other types of music.

**Popular Music**

In complex and multilayered societies there often evolve forms of music, usually drawn from folk traditions that are then elaborated upon with an eye to making them more immediately accessible to large groups. Popular music is enjoyed by large segments of the society and very often, starts among the dwellers in dense urban environments and spreads from there. We refer to as popular music, that music which seems deliberately intended and created for the purpose of broadest dissemination and to achieve great popularity most often using mass media distribution systems to aid in that broad dissemination. In popular music, the particular composers are usually known and very often it is particular performers who come to be associated with it as well. It is not that creators and performers in other types of music do not which to be popular or that they do not seek to please their audiences. It is that popular music as a genre has the immediate goal of seeking broad popularity and dissemination. It also follows that popular music is generally not expected to remain consistently so for a long period of time. The hope is that a new popular music will appear to take the place of the recently popular and now dated older stuff.

In the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe, the term “Popular” was used to mean that the music was something “of the people” and therefore had more the sense of the kind of music we have described as folk music here. It is also true that in the socialist republics of Eastern Europe, the state supported and encouraged the dissemination of this music to such a degree that this folk music did eventually become a kind of popular music in the sense that we use the term here, but it was a popular music that had to
maintain clear roots to its folk origins to be accepted and disseminated. In large modern Urbanized societies in which there is a great variety of different popular music, there is another sense of the term popular music. It can come to refer to a style of music as well as its social function. This means that although we use the term popular to describe music that is intended for broad dissemination, a contextually defined use of the term popular, the musical elements, melody, form, harmony and rhythm might also identify a musical style that could then be called popular. In some sense the two uses of the term can be synonymous. It is possible, however, and this does happen, that music is created and performed using the style of the contemporary popular music but that the music is intended not to be enjoyed by the largest number of people in that society, but by a smaller segment of it. Thus in contemporary popular music there are some artists whose work would not ordinarily be considered popular music but because of the genre in which the music is set, they may find themselves classified there. Such contemporary artists as Laurie Anderson, John Zorn and Faust and many other such artists are examples of this. During the 1940s when the older form of American popular song was current, songs like *Lush Life* by the African American composer, Billy Strayhorn were clearly too difficult as well as too dark and serious in content to be considered popular in the functional sense. Nevertheless Lush Life and a few other songs like this at that time belonged to the popular music genre because of general stylistic characteristics. They sounded like popular music but seemed to be doing a poor job of going about trying to be popular.

**Classical or Art Music**

Like the two previous terms, the idea of a classical or art music fits better in some cultures than others. Classical music, is a term that is most appropriately applied to the Western European tradition of the late 18th Century. More broadly the term classical music has come to be applied to all of the musics of the European art music tradition and not only to the one specific period within it. Most often in our culture we use the term classical music to describe all that music handed down in the tradition from the Renaissance down to the music of contemporary composers in that same tradition. It is therefore, most often described in reference to a long tradition of music in Western society, rather than in the sense of a social or functional quality as we have been using terms above. In our culture we usually use the term classical music to broadly separate it from Jazz, Rock, or religious music.

We still need a term to describe this music as a type of music based on its function rather than as a stylistic tradition. Let us consider that certain kinds of contemporary rock are very challenging in their content and are appreciated only by a smaller subset of even the younger music listeners. We may not want to think of this as “classical” rock because it bears so little similarity to the music usually described by this term. However, it does bear certain similarities to it, in that it is intended to be challenging to listen to and not to be appreciated by the mass audience. In this more general sense of music categories, art music may be a better term to describe it. Usually these elitist forms require long years of training for the artists and composers to reach a level of proficiency adequate to achieve status. This is a condition that requires wealth, patronage or state or community support, certainly at least a sufficient audience to support it.
There are many music traditions in Asia that fit this description on all counts. There are also musics in Africa that fit these prerequisites. In the Western tradition the particular associations with terms such as classical music or art music imply refinement and a high cultural and social level, much like many use the word culture itself. In Asia and Africa where highly developed and complex music forms may also be found, the Western elitist connotation may not apply because the music is associated with a high state or civic function but accessible to the entire population. For example, ensembles playing complex music may provide such music for the entire community but the musicians and often the instruments themselves, may belong to a ruling nobleman, monarch or the state itself. It is the length of the training period and the technical mastery required for it performance that suggest for this music be described in terms similar to those use for classical music in the West.

Professional Music

Sometimes a distinction is made when music is played by professional musicians rather than by amateurs. The implication is that professional musicians would as a matter of course, spend more time learning the trade and practicing their music, thus being more proficient than those who took it up only now and again or when a community function required it. This would separate into a different class, musicians who were paid for their performances or were compensated in some other way, from those who were more or less randomly selected from the group and asked to perform. As we look closer at this distinction we would have to separate musicians who performances provided the means of their livelihood from those who, although they might be compensated for their playing, might do so only occasionally, and who would need others avenues to provide their livelihood. Sometimes musicians are born into families of musicians and are expected to continue in the family tradition. Sometimes long periods of apprenticeship, sometime even from childhood determine future professional status.

In some cultures, amateur musicians may more highly esteemed than professionals, that is those who are paid to perform. In cultures like Turkey and Iran and also in Okinawa and in the Chin music of China, the most highly acclaimed and valued musicians had other means of livelihood and devoted their free time to playing music as an avocation. Some, as many in Turkey, for example, may eventually have given up their professions almost entirely to devote themselves to music and thus cross over into professional status. Although this kind of amateur master is quickly disappearing in many cultures, being replaced by musicians who have been trained in conservatories they were in existence in many cultures until very recent times. They were musicians would preferred to have another means of earning a living in order to devote their spare time to music and did not wish to be seen as a person who accepted money for playing. This is an example in which the professional musician might not have had as high an artistic status as an amateur as defined within that culture.

Culturally Derived Classifications of Music

New forms of music are continually developing. Some are accepted, imitated by others and survive while others fall from popularity or acceptance and gradually fade from collective memory. The process of acceptance begins with a single piece
of music or with a single performer or innovator and is followed by imitations and repetitions. Very often the role of this innovator may be hidden in the slow and anonymous process of collective evolution. Gradually, as the distinctive form is recognized as such, its distinctiveness from other forms in the culture is noticed. A unique label may be applied in order to establish in that society’s consciousness an awareness of the distinction. These labels are quite different from those that a scientist who studies many musics, an ethnomusicologist, might use. These terms described above such as folk music and popular are terms used to explain how music works in many different cultures. By contrast terms that have evolved from within the culture and that describe music as it is seen from within the culture are very valuable in helping us to understand the structure of that musical culture. We need both kinds of terms, those that are applied from outside the culture, “emic” terms, and those that have developed from within the culture, “etic” culture. These “etic” labels are derived and accepted by members of the culture itself in order to help them define and distinguish new forms. As a case in point, the recent evolution in American popular music of styles such as “Hip-hop” out of “Rap” is an example of this kind of creation of new terms. In this same way, not too many years ago the term “Jazz” came into use to distinguish that music from the earlier “Ragtime” style. Later “Rock” was accepted as a term to define the distinctively new popular music of the late 1960s.

In many other societies, particularly in highly stratified ones, the coinage of terms to distinguish different musical forms and practices serves an important function in each culture. Even in less highly stratified societies, labels may be applied to distinguish different musical types in order to allow for more efficient function. In some cultures, new or distinct labels indicate different dance types. In the case of social dancing the labeling helps the dancers know which dance type and consequently which steps will be required. Labels are frequently used to distinguish distinct melodic and formal types of music, as well.

In flamenco, for example, the various labels, Granaina, Malagueña, Sevillana, or Bulerias, indicate specific formal musical patterns in particular rhythms. To those who know the repertoire, the labels also indicate something of the place that a performance of one of these pieces might have in the performance of a larger set as well as giving an indication of its origin.

The use of labels to define culturally important functions and distinctions can be found in numerous cultures, throughout Asia, Africa, Oceania, Europe and the Americas. Sometimes these labels are a recognition of an important musical function. What is common to all these “emic” terms is that they are useful labels for distinctions that are important in the culture. They may function to aid audiences in understanding the music that is being played, or to tell dancers how they should dance. They may also function to tell the musicians something about how the piece
should be played or about the social function in which it is to be used.

Among the Are-Are peoples of the Solomon Islands, there is a practice of playing a great number of fixed and remembered compositions on various ensembles of pan pipes. Each of the compositions represents sounds, natural or humanly produced and is labeled as such.1) Performances are set into groups of ten compositions each. Several such sets of ten different compositions may be played at important festivals more or less continuously. In order that the musicians be able to keep track of the number of compositions played at any festival, after every tenth piece played a special “marker” or “counter” piece is played. This eleventh piece is thus repeated after every ten pieces and it is much easier for the musicians to keep track of how many times they played the “counter” piece than to remember how many pieces they have played in total. Thus in this case the label, “Toto ‘au” in the ‘Au Tahana ensemble indicates the special 11th composition played after any sequence of ten other pieces. Although it is the sound of “Toto ‘au” that the musicians count during a festival, the label allows them to talk about it without having to refer to its function each time.

It is certainly possible to enjoy or to use music without attaching labels to it. It does happen most often, however, that as peoples recognize and make use of distinctions between musical types and forms, the application of specific labels aids in the efficient functioning of the music in fitting within the context of that culture.

Notes

A Note on the Terms Etic and Emic

Anthropologists use the terms etic and emic in a number of different ways. The concept is useful in the study of music in its cultural context because it enables us to view music in culture, both from within and from the outside.

Simply stated, emic is the internal, culturally defined use of the idea, while etic, think of synthetic, is a constructed view of that aspect of the culture from an objective point of view. Although it is easy to slip into thinking that etic is the true, or inside view of the culture and etic is the outsiders view, this is not quite correct. Actually, even some anthropologists have been known to avow that etic is the more pure and scientific view of the culture whereas, emic is “what the natives think.” Actually, neither etic nor emic is more right or wrong. They are just different ways of viewing.

To further clarify this let us consider a few examples. In the study of music we find it useful to consider the basic music types, folk, classical or art music and popular. Let’s just say that folk music usually means a body of music that belongs to
an entire community and for which the composers are no longer known. It seems to exist as something that belongs to the entire community.

Classical or art music is a little more complicated to define. It is played by professionals, but so is popular music, and even many kinds of folk music. Sometimes the best classical music is played by amateurs, as in Turkey, old Iran and Okinawa. The best definition of art music or what we call in the West, “Classical” music is that it was intentionally composed to be challenging and perhaps, not even completely understood on the first hearing. It is supposed to get better, deeper, more profoundly understood, the more one hears it.

Let’s leave that for the moment and talk about popular music. In some sense, everything is supposed to be popular, that is you or someone is supposed to like it. Why else would the performer or composer bother? But popular music, unlike art or classical music is not usually intended to be popular forever. No one is really against the idea, but its real purpose is to make it big in the short run and hope that it lasts as long as possible, at least until the group or the composer can create another hit to take its place. Economics is behind it. It is a way of making a living. So do the adherents of the other two categories of music, but in the case of popular music, the objective is more short term. Popular music is designed to be broadly disseminated, to use mass media system of communication and distribution and to become popular right away. It is more important to make it big now than to make it big later, like Beethoven or Mozart.

This sort of works as an etic definition of pop music. It has to be popular, to be widely disseminated, to make it economically in order to support the performers and the delivery system, and, very important and because of all the above, the performers and composers associated with this music, have to be known and advertised. That works as an etic definition.

This works fine for *In Sync* and *Madonna*, however, what about Tori Amos, Bjork and ATB? Will ATB ever be nominated for a Grammy award? Do you think they expect it? Maybe they do and maybe they will get one someday, but it doesn’t look like they are headed in the right direction if that’s what they want to do, does it? What’s going on? Is this pop music? Probably not by the narrow etic definition we have created. But ask yourself, where would the young woman being paid minimum wage at Borders or Wherehouse file it in the record bin? Alternative? Trance? Pop-Rock? In the sense of the way we use this music today it can all be filed under the broad category of pop rock or just pop. It certainly wouldn’t fit next to Beethoven or Mozart, not Nusrat Ali Khan or Compay Segundo. Now here we have an emic definition of pop music. Many groups and artists we consider pop because they “sound” like pop to us even though they may not fit our dictionary, or etic definition of popular music in the strictest sense.

Consider another kind of example. We have an idea about what we consider and
recognize as music. If we hear a group of musicians from the island of Bali banging away on bronze gongs and metallophones, we can recognize from the concentration and coordination of the performers that this is music. But they have no particular word for music in their culture. So “etic”ly it is music but “emic”ly, we may have to go a little deeper into the culture to get at the truth.

Take another example. A choir in a Christian church is singing hymns. We hear it as music and they probably think of it as such as well. However, if we go to a Muslim mosque and hear the azan, or call to prayer or a recitation from the Holy Koran, we would recognize this activity as music, but in Islamic culture it is not considered music at all and in fact music of any kind in connection with religious observance is frowned upon. This is another clear case of the usefulness of use etic and emic concepts in considering how music functions in a culture.

We sometimes can learn much about how cultures work by taking an emic concept and testing it across a number of different cultures, The famous Encyclopedia Cinematographica of Göttingen, Germany has thousands of ethnographic and scientific films and has been making them for many, many years. They began this enormous compendium of cinematography by filming the way bread was made in different cultures, primarily in Europe. From this they expanded to the filming of virtually all human activity.

Looking at a particular human activity, like eating, for example, across many cultures, can tell us much about the culture. In the same way, even considering music, for which not all cultures have their own term is in itself a kind of “etic” activity. More specifically however, we can take “etic” concepts such as the role of music in gender roles in a number of societies to see hat it tells us about the larger society.