IV Cultural Contact and the Dissemination of Music

Learning and Borrowing

The first things we learn about are as infants and are the result of contact with adults and the environment around us. Humans learn at an amazing rate during the earliest years of childhood, so much, that we are unaware of many of the ways we learn things and of the sources from which we learn. We learn from hearing, touching, smelling and feeling. We are and have been since infancy bombarded by experiences from which we learn.

Our preferences change. Sometimes the first time we experience something we do not like it but familiarity and positive associations may gradually change this. We are constantly experiencing new things, evaluating them, selecting them and revising our selections. This happens to us as individuals and the same thing can be observed as we watch entire cultures come into contact with each other. Every time we come into contact with others we are exposed to different ideas and different ways of doing things. Some of these new things are agreeable to us and thus we change.

First Contacts with New Cultures

Our cultural contacts expand almost like our circles of friends. As children we begin within our families. Through our families or in our neighborhood we may begin to make friends outside the family. When we go to school we meet new people, learn new things and make new friends. Each level of school takes into circles of possible friendships which are further steps away from our families.

If you think about it, it is natural that much the same happens with whole cultures. The people living in one village are prone to knowing the people in the next village over better than they do those who live at a
greater distance. Proximate villages may be bound by common culture and language. They understand each other because they are similar. What if one village is in the lowlands, near the river and the other in the hills within the forests. One village survives by fishing and farming, the other by a different kind of farming together with hunting. They are different but come together for exchange or barter of goods and thus also learn from each other.

Learning from the familiar

This process of borrowing and adapting as the result of personal and cultural contact happens so often that we take it for granted and usually do not even think about it. We become so accustomed to practices and ideas around us that we do not think of their origins. For most Westerners, it is easy to think of the Far East as a place where most people eat with, what we call “chopsticks”. It is also easy to think of the cultures as all very similar culturally, beginning with the fact that they all eat with “chopsticks”. However, we do not think very often about the fact that all Europeans eat with knives and forks, nor that it was only at the time of the arrival of Catherine de Medici from Italy in the 16th Century that the use of the fork and fine cuisine was introduced into France. We most often associate the high art of European cuisine as something from France, but its Italian roots and the fact that it only really developed from the 16th century onward, very recent times in terms of the history of the Far East, are matters that we do not often think about.

Internationalism

The most frequently exchanges between cultures occur when peoples borrow from their closest neighbors, often in a process that has gone on so long that both borrower and borrowee are not aware of who borrowed from whom. Another kind of cultural exchange occurs when the borrowers are concussion of the place and the people from which they have borrowed something. This happens very often in music. Among the Muslim cultures of Mindanao, both the Maranao and Maguindanao people have a rhythmic and melodic pattern which
The Marimba from Africa to America

The marimba is an instrument which traditionally was performed exclusively in the Southeastern region of Mexico, in the states of Oaxaca, Tabasco, and Chiapas and on into Guatemala, Eastern Belize, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica and has functioned as a musical and cultural link between all these countries in Central America and Mexico. The instrument is a xylophone with wooden keys which are struck by a pair of mallets in the player’s hands. Often and usually, a single large marimba covers the range of several octaves and is played on by three or even four men. Sometimes two of these large marimbas are paired in an ensemble and played by a group of seven musicians. The deep resonating throbbing and buzzing sound of the marimba playing the local ‘sones’ has come to be associated with the Southern region of Mexico and with Central America.

The marimba, however, is actually African in origin, having been brought by slaves from Africa who probably served as part of the labor force in the Pacific and Gulf Coastal regions of Central America. In the older simple marimbas still played by the indigenous peoples of the highlands of Guatemala and among the indigenous peoples of Nicaragua, the instrument has a strip of rattan around one side which serves both as a handle and a brace on which the player can sit while playing the instrument. Each key is suspended over an individual resonator, traditionally made of a dried hollow calabash or squash shell in which a small hole has been cut out and this hole covered over with a thin membrane which vibrates when the key is struck. These two elements, the rattan strip and the vibrating membrane along with the name, marimba, all point to the African origin of the instrument. Although in the more popular instrument the rattan carrying strip is not longer used, the vibrating membrane and the name marimba remain to link it to its African origins. Instruments of this type and with all these structural elements are common in Africa, from Senegal and Guinea to Northern Ghana, and all across Central Africa to Mozambique on the Eastern Coast.

The marimba was apparently an instrument which was taken up by the Indians who learned about it and its techniques from the African slaves with whom they were forced to serve as a common labor force. The instrument was quickly taken up by the Indians and used in connection with their religious rituals, practices which on the surface purported to be Christian but which also retained strong pre-Hispanics elements. From this ritual use of the marimba, the Indians began to use the marimba music for village fiestas and gradually from this came a new mestizo or lowland style of music in which the sound of marimba was perfectly suited to the regional style.

The sound of the marimba is considered in the traditional culture of Southern Mexico and Central America something of great importance and the sound of which forms a cultural link between these otherwise quite separate nations. The haunting sounding of the vibrating membranes of the marimba resonators and the frequently used tremolo of the keys has inspired the phrase, ‘maderas que cantan con voz de mujer’, “wood that sings with the voice of a woman”. Although increasingly replaced by electronic instruments for local festivals, the marimba continues to serve as a symbol of the southern region. During the 1930s and 1940s a group of musicians from Guatemala, the Hurtado Brothers, carried the sound of the marimba to large audiences in the United States where they eventually took up permanent residence. Their performances became a rallying point for the Southern Mexicans and Central Americans living in the United States during that time.
they call sinulug, which means that it is in the style of the Muslim people of the Sulu Islands.

The manner in which the ancient Chinese at first began collecting the songs from outlying provinces as symbols of their suzerainty and then from foreign neighbors is another example. Gradually, the Chinese began to enjoy these foreign musics so much so that by the time of the T'ang dynasty (6th-9th C. AD), Chinese had become very fond of Indian and Persian art and music and these were particularly popular at court and had an influence on the development of music and the other arts at that time.

In the Ottoman Empire of Turkey there was a vast repertoire of compositions played at court and in the homes of the upper classes and this practice has survived long after the abolishment of the Ottoman Sultanates. Within the vast Turkish classical music repertoire of some 5,000 composition, there are a great number of compositions by Armenian, Romanian, Greek, Jewish and Gypsy composers. These compositions by non Turks, however, are in the Turkish style and are appreciated as Turkish music. There are two forms, however, which are thought of and enjoyed as foreign. These are the sirto, which is Greek in origin and the longa which is thought to be Romanian in origin.

In mid 19th Century Vienna, the life of the city revolved around the splendor and power of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. However, even in the music of the great Vienna balls, conscious foreign elements were incorporated into the repertoire and became a standard part of it. The mazurka was an old Polish court dance, the schotish was of Scots origin and the polka of Czech, Bohemian, or Polish origin.

In the late 18th and early 19th Century, the approach of the Ottoman armies was repelled but they did leave the practice of drinking coffee as a permanent contribution to the West, as well as the model for the future military bands which were later adopted by almost all countries of the world.

If we look at what is distinctively American about the music in the United States, as something distinct from the earliest Anglo-American tradition, we can note the strong presence and continued influence of African musical forms and style. From this rises what we now know as American music, from popular to folk, and even music composed in the classical tradition reflects this African influence, going back even to the influence of ragtime on such distinctively
The Marimba and Its Diffusion

Timbila of the Chopi People of Mozambique

West African Balafon

Marimba from the Highlands of Guatemala

Presentday Marimba from the Highlands of Guatemala

Modern Marimba Doble from Belize
American composers as Victor Herbert and John Philip Sousa. Within this distinctive American musical language we note even from the earliest examples, that the influence of Latin music has been strong.

The oldest examples we have of the blues tradition are in the written compositions of W. C. Handy In these we find the use of the 'tango' rhythm frequent and made memorable in the 'St. Louis Woman' section of his most famous St. Louis Blues. Eubie Blake, a musician who was playing piano in the Northeastern cities of the United States during the 'teens' and the 20s, tells us that the 'Tango' was frequently included in the course of many compositions. This 'tango,' had nothing to do with the Argentine tango which became famous in the United States later. This older form of the tango that was popular in the United States was really an 'habanera' introduced directly from Cuba or through the popular music of Mexico. In New Orleans through the compositions as well as descriptions of Ferdinand Jelly Roll Morton we learn of the important spice provided by the 'Spanish Tinge,' once again the habanera, in the music of New Orleans.

The first orchestra of Black musicians to be recorded in the US, the famous Syncopated Orchestra of James Reece Europe, re-known for providing the dance music for Irene and Vernon Castle who introduced 'Cheek to cheek' dancing in the years around World War I, chose on their first recording date in 1914, to play a 'samba' and a 'maxixe,' two popular dances from Brazil. Shortly after World War I and through the early years of the Great Depression, the tango became a rage, but this time it was from Argentina, a musical form completely different from the tango of the preceding twenty years in American music. In response to the growing influence and prestige of Cuban music throughout Latin America, during the early 1930s and on until well after World War II, Cuban dance forms again became the rage in the US, starting with the Rumba and Conga, continuing in the late 40s and early 50s with the mambo, followed by the cha-cha-cha, pachanga and charanga and the establishment of several Latin musicians in the popular mainstream. During the late 1940s Latin music reappeared in a new fusion with Jazz. The leaders in this development were Dizzy Gillespie, Miguelito Valdez and Perez Prado.

The isolation of Cuba from the United States in the late 1950s meant that the influence on music in the US coming from Cuba dwindled to nothing. Gradually new music arrived from Brazil, in particular, Bossa Nova. A number of songs composed in Portuguese were popular in
the United States. The most famous of these was, ‘The Girl From Ipanema’, by the Brazilian composer, Antonio Carlos Jobim, in the early 1960s. The influence of the Bossa Nova beat continued to be strong and well into the 1970s. It was the standard rhythm to accompany the singing of popular ballads just about the time when this form of American Popular music was giving way to the advance of rock. The now displaced Cuban music became the domain of a variety of musicians, from all over Latin America and under the generic name of ‘Salsa’ continues today to be an important element in the general popular framework of American Music. The various influences from Latin America have always been very strong in the popular music of the United States. They have never been so powerful as to entirely dominate it but they have never been very far from what many Americans were hearing.

The Brazilian Composer, Antonio Carlos Jobim

Diasporas

Large movements of groups of people also entail powerful bases for potential cultural diffusion. The great waves of immigration into the United States are what has made the country unique. Underlying the popular culture, a number of strong cultural traditions survive among the immigrants who in other respects share the common American culture. For example, there are some 500,000 Ukrainian Americans living in the New York metropolitan area alone, not to mention those in the mid-west and far west. Among then the study of the Ukrainian language and culture is considered very important even for third and fourth generation American Ukrainians. The performance of traditional Ukrainian music is very strong among them. Similar examples could be drawn for the Puertorican Americans, Chinese-Americans, Polish Americans, Polynesian Americans, Basque Americans, Korean Americans, etc. Under the surface of McDonalds, Soaps and MTV there flourishes a rich diversity of cultural traditions in the United States, that are the result of the years and years of open immigration policy.
One of the strongest cultural influences in the United States has been the influence of Africa on America through the importation of slaves during its early history. Slaves and former slaves saw the performance of music as an opportunity for even limited mobility and along with it and in great measure because of it, were able to implant new African musical concepts into our music. Many Americans are so accustomed to thinking of these form as All-American that the contribution of Black musicians is often overlooked. The development of Ragtime, then Jazz and later rhythm and blues which gave rise to Rock and Soul were all in origin and in aesthetic principle, basically African. Certainly non African Americans have made great contributions to all of these genres of music, often so much that they became separated from their Black originators. Nevertheless, the popular forms of music of the United States today, from Rhythm and Blues, to Rock, Rap and Hip-Hop all owe their existence to the persistence of African Americans in retaining and transmitting elements of African music to the new world, often under extremely adverse conditions.

Many diasporas have occurred and been historically documented. The travels of the Jews throughout Europe has continued to mean a diffusion of cultures and cultural influences, often stemming mostly from the last place of their residence. Likewise the movement of the Gypsies since the 13th Century beginning in Eastern Europe and eventually reaching France, Germany, the British Isles and finally Spain have been a case in which they retained among themselves their own traditional culture, but for survival learned the local music and became so adept at it that they were often acknowledged as the favorite interpreters of the national music.