

THE CHALLENGE OF "BI-MUSICALITY"

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In the world of music one occasionally hears of the highly-skilled mechanic who fancies himself a performer, the clever inventor who passes himself off as a composer, the diligent historian who believes he is a musicologist and the professional educator who confuses method with music. At the risk of oversimplification let us say at least that all of these diverse representatives of the field of music would seem to have one trait in common—a lack of musicality. And what do we mean by "musicality?" First let us note that the Harvard Dictionary of Music wisely skips from "Musical glasses" to "Musical offering," and then—again at the risk of oversimplification—let us pass on to Webster's Unabridged Dictionary where "musicality" is defined as "musicalness," a noun form of the adjective "musical" under which, at long last, definition number three may be quoted: "Fond of, or intelligently appreciative of, music; as, a musical coterie; having a natural aptitude for music."

Although at this point we may see some wisdom in the policy followed by the Harvard Dictionary, let us assume that a natural aptitude for music is essential to the musician.

The basic study and training which develops musicality is known by several names: musicianship, fundamentals of music, solfeggio. I have never heard a musician suggest that this *sine qua non* might be bypassed, that the beginner should start with musical analysis or criticism. The training of ears, eyes, hands and voice and fluency gained in these skills assure a real comprehension of theoretical studies, which in turn prepares the way for the professional activities of the performer, the composer, the musicologist and the music educator.

Perhaps it is not necessary to remind the reader that we are speaking of the world of music, that training in basic musicianship of one order or another is characteristic of cultivated music wherever it is found and to some extent is unconsciously present in the practice of indigenous music. It may be of some comfort to the music student of the West to realize that the Chinese, Japanese or Indian student also must jump through a series of musical hoops. But if this kind of training is indeed essential, the Western musician who wishes to study Eastern music or the Eastern musician who is interested in Western music faces the challenge of "bi-musicality."

A considerable interest in the performance and composition of Western music in some Oriental countries indicates that the East has made more progress in facing this challenge than the West. In fact, in some instances, we might point to an "alternative musicality," i.e., an interest in Western music which has developed at the expense of the indigenous music. However, in Japan the musicians of the Imperial Household in Tokyo would seem to be truly "bi-musical." If they have undergone rigid training since childhood, not only in the Gagaku dances and instrumental techniques, but also in the performance of Western music of the Classical period. In their capacity as official court musicians, they are required to perform both Gagaku and Western classical music.

Occidentals, on the other hand, have usually limited their interest in non-Western music to passive observation, working with informants and museum studies. There may well be a multiplicity of reasons why in this instance basic musicianship or the fundamentals of music have been bypassed; but keeping in mind the court musician of Tokyo we should eliminate the argument that an alien musical expression has cultural or racial characteristics which make it inaccessible. Rather than labor the point of what has not been done in the past, let us consider some of the specific problems which confront the student who is learning a foreign music. After understanding the nature of these problems we shall be in a better position to evaluate the realistic goals to which the student might aspire.

The following observations are based on personal experience and a constant association with the performance study groups at the University of

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California at Los Angeles which currently include: Javanese gamelan, Balinese gamelan, Balinese gender wajang, Japanese gagaku, Japanese nagauta, Persian music and South Indian music.

The initial challenge, of course, is the development of an ability to hear. The tendency of Westerners to "correct" unfamiliar intervals, usually without being aware of doing so, can itself be corrected only by repeated exposure to listening and by singing. This beginning stage of training is directed at aural perception rather than vocal production, the latter involving special problems to be considered presently. In liberalizing his aural perception the student who has had no previous musical training may have a slight advantage over the advanced music major; but the most important factor in this connection is probably Webster's minimal definition of "musicality"—a natural aptitude for music. The most difficult conditioned prejudice to overcome among Western musicians is the sense of perfect pitch. Such an individual must come to realize that in the world of microtonal inflections his sense of pitch is actually imperfect, and unless he manages to set aside this prejudiced standard, he will have to relinquish the field to those who can manage a more democratic approach to the world of sound.

In the early phase of training, traditional methods of imitation and rote learning are far more rewarding in both time and retention than the usage of notation. Even in Japanese gagaku where rather detailed part books are followed by the musicians a new piece is first learned by singing the instrumental parts. Javanese and Balinese gamelan is never performed from notation; the student sings and plays simultaneously as he learns a piece—phrase by phrase. The person with no previous musical training again has an advantage over the music student who misses the printed page and who, in the beginning, finds it frustrating not to be able to "see" where he is going. In order to avoid psychological blocks in the acceptance of imitative learning, students new to these studies are given ample opportunity to demonstrate for themselves the validity of traditional methods. For example, at the beginning of the academic year when fifty per cent or more of the group is made up of newcomers, a piece is given to everyone in cipher notation. After an entire evening of rehearsal on this one piece, everybody (except the seasoned player) is satisfied that he knows it well. At the next rehearsal the notation is withheld, and then the fun begins. Characteristically, everyone makes a strong start, but after a few phrases memory fails and finally the piece falters and dies. At this point traditional methods are suggested. If a majority still prefers to use notation, the experiment is repeated. At the next rehearsal a confident beginning, a look of confusion when the tune suddenly develops variations, and finally everyone agrees that some other approach is worth trying. We musicians in the West are deficient in tonal memory and also unpracticed in memorizing parts from the printed page. By imitative methods a fairly complex and lengthy melody can be learned in one evening and retained for an indefinite number of years. Recently a former member of the Javanese gamelan returned after an absence of three years. To his amazement the old melodies were still fresh in his mind.

This type of training sharpens aural perception, develops tonal memory and begins to release the conditioned Western musician from his dependence on a visible conductor. Arm and hand movements are not used by the teacher but only the sound of metrical handclapping or basic drumming, so that from the beginning the student must rely entirely on his ears for a guide. Later when the single Javanese melody becomes only one thread in a polyphonic tapestry of fifteen to twenty different strata of sound, the student must be able to follow the basic pulsations which govern the entire ensemble.

The element of rhythm in non-Western music presents another challenge to the newcomer. In Balinese gamelan the ear must follow interlocking rhythms played by a pair of male and female drums, while the hand executes one part of a different pair of interlocking rhythms. The student must be able to perceive brief drum signals for abrupt changes in tempo or dynamics as well as follow a riatto executed by an ensemble of thirty players. In Javanese gamelan the principle of stratification produces many layers of cross rhythms; and when the dance drum and the *kepatik* (a kind of wood block) are accompanying the dance, they produce a *Tand, Tand* and at times unmeasured rhythm against the regular pulsations of the rest of the

ensemble. In Japanese gagaku the long time-spans of the taiko (a deep-toned drum) subdivided by the kaku (a small hour-glass drum) and the shoko (a small gong) will seem to the beginner like random sounds in the ensemble. An LP record of gagaku speeded up to 78 rpm will convince the novice that these instruments follow a regular metric structure. Persian music requires a good intuitive ear to register the traditional spirit of its free meter. In the study of Indian music the student finds that he must learn a complex vocabulary of drum sounds, called *bol*, which forms the basis of improvisation on the *lala*.

The technical demands of oral or manual articulation vary in degree from one instrument to another, but even the simplest requires a surprising amount of study. It usually takes the beginner a few months to believe the experienced player when he says that it is no easy matter to learn to hit a gong or a single bronze slab in just the right way. The following account will illustrate this point. A Chinese-Indonesian friend of mine told me that before the Japanese occupation her family owned a beautiful, large gamelan. A member of her family most devoted to the evening gamelan performances was her blind grandfather, who could always tell at the first stroke of the big gong who, among several musicians, was playing it.

One of the most difficult instruments to master among the Javanese or Balinese idiophones is the *gender*. The Javanese *gender* has thirteen or fourteen thin bronze keys mounted over bamboo resonators and is played with two *tabuh* or beaters which have padded discs on the striking end. The right and left hands execute completely independent melodic lines, and in a refined style of playing the left hand sometimes carries two melodies. The keys increase in size from left to right, and the degree of melodic activity is greater in the right hand than in the left. For these reasons the two hands use different positions in holding the *tabuh*. In striking any idiophone the player soon learns that a blow which is strictly perpendicular to the sounding surface tends to damp immediately. Therefore, the slightest possible arc or "V" with a rounded vortex produces the best result. As the *tabuh* are swinging along in these almost imperceptible tight arcs or "V's", the same hand that delivers the blow must damp the key as the next key is struck or, in refined playing, a moment later. The Balinese *gender* uses two *panggul* or beaters with long handles and hard wooden discs on the striking end. In the large gamelan gong the two-handed *gender* has been replaced, except in a few of the older pieces like *legong*, by a slightly larger instrument which uses only one hammer-shaped *panggul*. However, the Balinese *gender wajang*, the two or four instruments which accompany the all-night puppet plays, are still very much in usage. The instruments have 10 keys and are tuned in male and female pairs which occur in two sizes an octave apart. The *panggul* used for this instrument has a small grommet mounted behind the wooden disc, and this little ring made of horn has just enough play so that it slides back and forth to produce a lovely "clicking" sound as the *panggul* rises and falls on the keys. The long handles on these beaters, unlike those of the Javanese, require similar positions for both hands. In my opinion, the music played by the *gender wajang* quartet is perhaps the most satisfying musical expression in Bali. The right hand tends to establish permutations on an ostinato often divided among three pitches while the left hand carries one or two independent melodies. In the course of one piece the parts played by the male and female instruments are sometimes interlocking, sometimes independent and occasionally the same.

One of the best illustrations of the challenge of mastering Oriental instruments of the aerophone family is Japanese gagaku. The choral responsibilities of the *sho* (a kind of mouth organ), and the microtonal inflections of the *ryuteki* (the flute) and the *heichiriki* (a short oboe) demand an extremely sensitive ear and finely coordinated action between fingers and breath control. Accurate performance of these subtle embellishments can only be achieved through intense imitative practice and of course an aural perception that has been entirely freed from the twelve-tone tempered scale. In the family of membranophones the challenge of hand drumming requires not only flexible fingers and hands but also a keen ear for discerning thirty or more different sounds which may be the vocabulary of one double-headed drum. The usage of mnemonics in teaching hand drumming may be taken as evidence that the proper sound is emphasized rather than the precise direction of finger and hand position. Both are important, of

course, but the physical difference between one person's hands and another's makes it necessary for each individual to experiment until he has found the proper adjustment of a given position that for him produces the correct sound. In Bali the pair of drums which leads the large gamelan in the accompaniment of the warrior dance called "Baris" uses a panggal or beater on the right head and only the hand on the left head.

The challenge of the chordophones may involve plucking, rubbing, striking or depressing in a particular way to produce microtonal inflections or ornaments. Among the bowed lutes the Javanese rebab is a good example of the kind of adaptability which may be required of the student. The rebab has two metal strings tuned a siéndro or pélog fifth apart in the approximate range of the D and A strings of the cello. It has a parchment head, a high thin bridge, a long slender neck but no fingerboard. Therefore too much or too little pressure from the fingers or the bow will produce the wrong intonation. The bow is loose-haired and must be tightened by the ring finger, which coordinates its movement with the hand and wrist to effect a slight "bite" at the beginning of each stroke. The rebab is the leader's instrument in the gamelan and must give directions for changes in tempo and dynamics as well as guide the instrumentalists and the singers in their improvisation.

In learning to sing in the traditional style the student faces a number of problems beyond the challenge of correct pitch. The sounds peculiar to the foreign language involved must be mastered, and related to this aspect of the study but more difficult is the appropriate quality of the singing voice. The quality of the Eastern singing voice varies in a marked degree from one musical culture to another. In the limited geographic area of Java and Bali there are three principal languages and three distinct qualities of singing voice: Sundanese in West Java, Javanese in Central and East Java and Balinese in Bali. Even the layman has no difficulty in recognizing that these are quite different. Not only the melodic line, the style of ornaments, the use of vibrato and nonvibrato but also the very quality of sound itself set them apart. The student must initiate the proper shape of the mouth, the position of the tongue, the attitude of the head, the tension in neck muscles and even to a degree the revealing facial expressions which are an open window to the singer's unconscious muscular control. He must set aside Western notions of the bel canto voice and experiment with his own vocal production until he is able to perform feats in the control of intonation that a Western singer would have difficulty in bearing, not to mention singing.

The crowning achievement in the study of Oriental music is fluency in the art of improvisation. This is only possible after the student has become proficient in the technical demands of the art, so that he is free to follow the musical inventions of his own imagination. Needless to say, his inventions must be guided through the maze of traditional rules that govern improvisation. These can be consciously learned but can be artistically used only when the whole tradition has been assimilated. This means an understanding of and an insight into not only music and the related arts but also language, religion, customs, history—in other words, the whole identity of the society of which music is only one, but one very important, part.

At this point we might ask just how far a Western musician can go along the road of Oriental musical studies. My answer to this question is: "Just as far as his objective takes him." If his desire is to comprehend a particular Oriental musical expression so that his observations and analyses as a musicologist do not prove to be embarrassing, he will have to persist in practical studies until his basic musicianship is secure. If he chooses to become a professional instrumentalist or singer competing with others in the country of his chosen study (and this possibility seems to me remote), he will have to persist in practical studies considerably beyond the requirements of basic musicianship until he attains professional status. Perhaps the best answer to the question "How far can he go?" is "How much time does he have?" The performance-study groups at U.C. L.A. are an extra-curricular activity. Considering the relatively small amount of time actually devoted to these practical studies, their understanding and performance is such that it would seem safe to say that the American student has a real potential in the study of non-Western music.

One question which seems to me implicit in the title assigned for this paper rises in connection with the term "bi-musicality." Earlier I mentioned

Western music which has displaced indigenous music as evidence of "alternative musicality." At UCLA there are several advanced graduate students who manage themselves quite capably in several different musical cultures. Here then are we to speak of "tri-musicality" or "quadri-musicality?" Perhaps we shall come close to the heart of the matter if we return to Webster's basic definition and retitile this paper simply to read: "The Challenge of Musicality."

NOTES

1. Robert Garfias, Gagaku, the Music and Dance of the Japanese Imperial Household, New York City: Theatre Arts Books, 1959, (not numbered) see second page under "Historical Development."