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CULTURAL IDENTITY AND COMPOSITIONAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract
The following paper considers some problems of intercultural composition in relation to concepts of originality/authenticity, basic differences between traditional musics and comtemporary art composition, cultural identity of the used elements, compositional strategies of intercultural work and consistency of the musical language. Theoretical considerations and short discussions of the topic by works of György Ligeti and Isang Yun point out some of the complexity and diversity of intercultural composition and also try to locate potential contradictions and discrepancies.

Intercultural art composition, György Ligeti, Isang Yun, Christian Utz.

Situation

The history of 20th century composition is marked considerably by various forms of intercultural interaction. Aspects that delineate these developments might include the extension of the percussion instrumentarium and its structural implications for the art of composing (as in the music of Stravinsky and Varèse), the integration and amalgamation of elements or principles drawn from other musical cultures (Messiaen, Ligeti), the appropriation of traditional musics and their "intermodulation" (Stockhausen), the negation of European traditions of musical discourse through contact with Asian philosophy and music (Scelsi, Cage), the expansion of Western art composition outside Europe and North America (Yun, Takemitsu, Hosokawa etc.).

Intercultural exchange is further reinforced through the enormous accessibility of cultural production in a globalized world with the internet being the most obvious medium of communication, the increasing facility of travel and also the great amount of ethnological and musicological research.

In this context there are several questions to be posed: Which is the relationship between elements of different cultures that interact within a composition? Which concepts of authenticity/originality seem to be adequate in such cases? Is the term "authenticity" a helpful construct when dealing with intercultural situations? Should the *cultural identities* of different elements remain clear, or should these in some way be resolved to provide a *unified identity of the composition?* Do answers to these questions have a local/particular or a general validity?

This paper will discuss some theoretical problems of this field and some examples from compositional practice.

Authenticity/Originality

Christian Utz extensive and thorough study "New Music and Interculturality" is based on a strong emphasis on the reception process within intercultural compositional approaches. In his theory he points out the aspect of *authenticity* in relation to received materials as an important criterion of the reception process [1] whereby the "received original" [2] takes a very central place. From this standpoint he formulates the requirement of a "deeper philological understanding" of the interculturally received music [3] and criticizes composers that in his view do not fulfill this requirement (Stockhausen, Yun and others). Utz further requires a "new definition of the westerly

dominated global musical discourse" [4], and an art of composing that considers the "original" character of the used elements and their context without trying to hide the resulting contradictions. This argumentation forms the basis of Utz' evaluation of the intercultural work of many composers.

This partial emphasis on the originality of the *reception* of traditional music cultures clearly remains in conflict with the concept of originality/novelty that dominated a great part of the Western art composition in the 20th century, correlating with a certain homogeneity or stylistic unity of the musical "language" within a composition. Both concepts focus on "originality" but they prioritize different issues, on the one hand the *traditional music(s)* that they have been reflected during the compositional process and on the other hand the *composition* itself. The conflict between these attitudes is a very crucial one, so it is important to consider some of its principal aspects.

Traditional musics have already (historically) achieved their definite formation; the main purpose hereby is to cultivate these traditions and in this way maintain the richness of musical experience and expression throughout the world. The aim is not *evolution* but *authenticity* in regard to a music tradition, which is technically and aesthetically strictly regulated and has achieved a certain closure [5].

Western art composition in contrast focuses on "individual fantasy" and is strongly exposed with regard to "evolution"; the "criterion of quality" is not "preservation" and "assurance of the achievements" but "development or even destruction according to an individual volition" [6]. Every "successful" compositional style offers in some way a renewed view of musical elements, and to do so, it must in some way re-contextualize those elements or create new ones.

Consequently a strong contradiction exists between the worlds of traditional music and contemporary composing; this contradiction may only be resolved by interacting with the different materials, by "composing" relations between them. The more a composer attempts to strictly reconstruct a traditional music, respecting its context and cultural identity, the more inconsistent it is to place this reconstruction in a frame of contemporary composition, since the reconstruction itself attains a representative proximity that contradicts the interaction with other materials or processes. If this contradiction remains unresolved within a composition, a collision between different systems and ideas is inevitable and a kind of collage will be the resulting form; in this situation it is doubtful if the term "interaction" in fact describes the situation. In the best case it will be a shifting within the layers of interaction: a musical discourse is not situated in the compositional layer, because the different materials cannot really interact, they are simply put together without being able to "communicate" with each other. A potential interaction may take place in the perceptual layer: it is possible that the listener/receiver will "compose" certain kinds of relationships, which are not immanently present in the composition.

This dilemma, which results from the attempt to "reconstruct" a certain tradition within a contemporary composition, is rooted in confusing the view of the ethnomusicologist with the view of the composer [7]: an ethnomusicologist seeks to understand and describe the socio-cultural background and the musical structure/functioning of a certain tradition as precisely as possible. The composer must have the freedom to choose those elements that excite his or her imagination and to elaborate them within compositional discourse. The evaluation of this work—by contrast to that of the ethnomusicologist—will be based on its inherent aesthetic and compositional qualities, not on the degree of "originality" with which the different elements and traditions are (re)presented in the piece.

Possibilities

Very different aspects of interacting with materials from several cultures can be found in the work of György Ligeti. In *Concert Românesc* (1951) he uses Romanian folk melodies and additionally composes some material in the manner of "village bands" [8]. The alternation of "originality" and "stylization" of the traditional music expresses Ligeti's love of this music as well as a light ironic distance. In *Musica ricercata* (1953) the folkloric character is omnipresent and multifaceted; melodic and rhythmic elements which evoke traditional music are integrated in a

constructionist manner of composing with very strict regulations. Melodic material from *Musica ricercata* builds the framework of the second movement of the Violin Concerto (1990/rev. 1992), which is permanently re-contextualized by very different harmonic and contrapuntal backgrounds with shifting, iridescent intonation. The second movement of the *Horn Trio* (1982) is a virtual synthesis inspired by "not existing peoples, as if Hungary, Romania and the whole Balkan were somewhere between Africa and Caribbean" [9].

This kind of synthesis is exponentiated in the *Piano Etudes* (1985-2001), which combine a great number of different influences within a very individualized, highly elaborated musical language. Here the cultural identity of individual elements is completely subordinated, only very partially recognizable if at all. Their "originality" is suspended with the purpose of creating an "originality" of the composition's musical language. In other words, to obtain a higher order synthesis one cannot use surface elements that are directly identifiable; only a conjunction of different principles of organization with a certain degree of abstraction can lead to a "synthetic" language. The use of elements in their "original" form and context has a centrifugal tendency, which does not really enable a synthesis (how else could a juxtaposition of Schumann/Chopin with African music in a concrete layer of the musical surface function?). The first movement of the Sonata for viola (1994), on the other hand, has nothing to do with a synthesis: there is an impression of (imagined?) folklore, although Ligeti speaks of an allusion [10].

As we have seen here, Ligeti uses a great variety of strategies in working interculturally: nearly "original" reconstruction of traditional idioms; allusion; a characteristic "Ductus" which transcends a very constructive principle; a set of variations with permanent re-contextualization and finally a somehow abstract synthesis of multiple elements/principles. This richness corresponds to a variety of compositional idioms and demonstrates how multifaceted intercultural work can be. The complexity of intercultural reception is very clearly demonstrated in the work of Isang Yun, one of the most important Asian composers of the 20th century. Yun's appropriation of different music cultures was as complex as his own life: he studied western art music and composition at first in Japan (at that time an occupying power in Korea); a deepened study of the traditional music of his native land Korea took place in Germany. Typical here is the approach to the object of study through the perspective of a different culture, through distance.

Within the limits of this short paper I would like to discuss some aspects of harmony and musical language in the *Symphony No.1* (1983). Yun's harmony (specifically in his late works) often had an irritating effect on listeners/receivers of his music [11]. Heinz Holliger "warned" the musicians about the numerous "added sixths", to not receive these chords as phenomena of functional harmony [12]. Gesine Schröder describes the harmonic processing of Yun as "indefinite and quasi atmospheric" and denies the possibility of avoiding functional hearing for those listeners who are familiar with the traditional use of these phenomena [13].

At the beginning of his *Symphony No.1* Yun composes a unison line for horns that, after a certain "bifurcation", leads to a dominant seventh chord in first inversion (B^7). The cadential tension that follows resolves to a Bb major with a sixth, which is attained through an extended dominant chord with a leading note approach, a moment of clear functionality in the harmony. There are numerous similar examples: historically connoted harmonic elements (dominant seventh, half-diminished chords, chords with "added sixth", [quasi] cadential moments, conventional ending formulas, etc.), provoking an impression of a somehow accidental, random, non-systematic formulation of the harmony [14]. On the whole, the first movement of this symphony presents a lot of connoted material, often in a pure (i.e. non "re-contextualized") form, as well as several allusions (Mahler, Wagner, Bruckner, R. Strauss). This evocation of historical moments creates a very complex situation, though it is not only referencing neutral musical material but also different *contexts* with inherently complex analytical, semantic and historical implications. These elements, identified with and belonging to several different musical languages, have a contradictory, centrifugal effect that partially destroys the unity of musical language so important for Yun [15].

This discrepancy between local elements and overall consistency is potentially and to a certain degree caused by a point of conflict between two different approaches to music. In Korean tradition, music material is in a certain way "timeless", ahistorical and thus not necessarily "loaded" with historical significance. The tradition of Western art music (and of art in general), on the other hand, is characterised by reading unique connections between a work and its historical time period, with all the potential musical/structural, aesthetical/cultural, social and political implications, i.e. its specific field of "connotations". It is possible that Yun is composing here with a rather timeless, ahistorical perspective and also with a principally anti-systematic harmonic approach [16], a fact that generally causes the somehow irritating consequences of his evocations [17].

Some conclusions

As Utz requires, intercultural reception in a compositional discourse presupposes a deep examination of the received elements and their contexts. This examination should on the other hand include all layers: if a composer uses Western instruments and establishes a frame of contemporary composition, then the examination of these contexts is just as important as the examination of traditional elements.

The way that the composer integrates the results of his intercultural reception in the compositional discourse should remain deeply individual and cannot be equated with reconstruction of the "received originals". As we have seen in Ligeti (and as is the case in the work of numerous other composers), diverging strategies can produce very different compositional results, so that the cultural identity of elements used *may* or *may not* be identifiable. Consequently a "one-way" process does not correspond to the compositional reality.

Moreover, intercultural composition itself aims in part to comprehend the "difference" between elements, to compose their relationships and in this way to enable various connections and projections; at the same time it also bears an increased risk of "misunderstandings", of discrepancies between local details and the composition as a whole. One should not overestimate this risk: working on the implications and relationships of the different elements can afford a closeness and originality of the language; creative misunderstandings, on the other hand, may sometimes be equally fruitful and help to attain the new. Either way, it is always a matter of the compositional discourse.

1. „Neue Musik und Interkulturalität", Utz 2002, 66.
2. Rezipiertes Original", ibid., 44.
3. Ibid., 142.
4. Ibid., 68.
5. We should not neglect those cases in which composers—especially when they use traditional instruments—attain a strong proximity to a certain traditional idiom so that they are sometimes situated at the threshold between individual composition and music tradition (see Takemitsu [*Eclipse* for Shakuhachi and Biwa, 1966], Hosokawa [*New Seeds for Contemplation. Mandala* for Shômyô and Gagaku, 1986/1995], some composers in the surroundings of AsianArt Ensemble [http://www.asianart-ensemble.com] and many others). Nevertheless retain the main characteristica—*authenticity* for the traditional music and *evolution* for the art composition—their validity as immanent and determining tendencies.
6. See Boulez (1989) 2000, 316-317.
7. See also Utz's criticism with regard to Isang Yun: he reproaches Yun's intercultural reception to be aimed not so much at concrete historical and ethnologically comprehensible models but rather at general musical principles, to build from these principles paradigmata of Korean music (Utz 2002, 241). This criticism, which flows also in Utz's evaluation of Yun's work, is based on a crucial reversal of the hierarchies: the process of reception of another culture is positioned at the center of the consideration while the compositional process is subordinate and evaluated in the degree that it reflects precisely a "correct" reception. This position leads to a normative argumentation in regard to what an intercultural composition should be and confers a somehow tendentious "taste" to the argumentation of Utz, who otherwise offers in his book an enormous richness of material and a very thorough examination of the topic.
8. Ligeti 2007, Volume 2, 151.
9. Ibid., 283.
10. Ibid., 309.

11. Walter-Wolfgang Sparrer attests some arbitrariness in the harmonic progressions („Denn so kohärent seine Musiksprache einerseits in sich erscheint, so individuell und willkürlich wirken die Klangfortschreitungen andererseits."; (Sparrer (1987) 1997, 160).
12. Holliger 1999, cited by Schröder 2010, 9.
13. Schröder 2010, 10.
14. Yun speaks often of a somehow accidental "sounding together" („Zusammenklingen") in the Asian traditional music, see for example his remarks to his composition *Réak* (1966; Yun (1994) 1997, 312).
15. See Yun's commentary to this first symphony: "All [instruments] contribute to the unity of the language." („Alle tragen dazu bei, daß die Sprache eine Einheit bildet." (Yun (1994) 1997, 307).
16. Christian Martin Schmidt mentions Yun's reference to "potentially the whole European music history" regarding his late work (Schmidt 2007, 1274). He also refers to the discourse of postmodernism. Nonetheless the conflict between the "European" and the "Asian" cultural identity of Yun seems to be a relevant aspect concerning his symphonies. Paradoxically, in these late symphonic works considered by the composer to bring an "integration of east and west traditions" (Yun 1985, 10), one may find a certain discrepancy: the treatment of historical traditions of the western symphony with a latent Asian attitude as well as the subordination of Asian elements within the frame of these historical traditions seem to let both traditions—at least locally—diverge.
17. Schröder describes her ambiguous impression of hearing Yun's music in this way: "As though I should feel what I am listening to somehow differently." („Als sollte ich irgendwie anders fühlen, was ich höre."; Schröder 2010, 2).

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