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## MULTICULTURALISM AS A CREATIVE TRIGGER: A MUSIC COMPOSERS' INSIGHT AND EXPERIENCE

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### **Abstract:**

*In the fields of art, particularly in the modern and post-modern era, the cohabitation of different cultures from various areas of the world and from different historical periods as well as the attempt to connect unrelated languages, has very often defined the framework for triggering the creation of new art and even for shaping the aesthetics of some artists. It is worth then, and even more crucial - primarily for artists - to reflect on the meaning and the value of mixing cultures and/or languages in art.*

*As music composers, the authors have been deepening why the use of materials from distant cultures could be relevant in music composition. In particular, the authors studied how the tension created by the cohabitation between different cultures could offer unique devices for defining aesthetics and for changing perspective on the composition and transcription practice. The examples are from some of the authors' original compositions and arranging for ukulele and for choir. Finally, some reflections on the implication of creating art through the use of different cultures or languages are proposed.*

**Keywords:** *Multiculturalism, composition, ukulele, a cappella choir, pre-existing musical material*

### **Art in a multicultural society**

«The idea of multiculturalism in contemporary political discourse and in political philosophy reflects a debate about how to understand and respond to the challenges associated with cultural diversity based on ethnic, national, and religious differences» [1]. Cultures, and thus people, live side by side. Mixing is inevitable but fundamental characteristics of each culture remain well defined and are not absorbed by another one: the cultural heritage is always something people care about [2]. Such debate naturally applies to the art world, for which the aforesaid concepts seem to be an appropriate lens through which some specific artistic phenomenon can be seen. In the complexity of the contemporary world, several studies about multiculturalism, cultural heritage, the mixture of cultures and cultural appropriation persist, nurturing the debate. As McRobbie pointed out, «the Western literary canon is, in theory, usurped by subaltern and postcolonial discourses. In a similar fashion, binary oppositions like male/female, white/black, and colonizer/colonized are said to collapse during a postmodern era, giving rise to a range of multicultural possibilities» [3].

Furthermore, «people build their identities through their links with individuals or groups with whom they are in direct or indirect contact» [4], and due to the formation of social media, the European community, the Erasmus program and alike, the migration as well as other many phenomenons of the global era, new generations of artists are growing in a multicultural world. Umberto Eco has tried many times to inform Europe that multiculturalism is part and the basis of European culture and the future will be even more multicultural [5]. Staying on Umberto Eco's view, his analysis of the postmodern condition of art makes clear that artists are aware in choosing languages opened to a variety of interpretations [6]. It is fundamental, primarily for artists, to reflect on the meaning and the value of mixing cultures and/or languages in art. While musical composition in the postmodern era often juxtaposes different culture, this does not necessarily mean

we are in the presence of a multicultural composition. Thus, a fundamental question needs to be asked in order to investigate how a composer might manage different languages and cultures: when is it possible to consider a composition as multicultural? The view proposed by the authors is that a musical composition can only be truly multicultural if it supplies the cultures involved the same level of importance by showing new or different aspects of each that are enhanced by their coexistence. Therefore, the artistic consequences of such a view will be tackled by discussing examples of musical compositions and arrangements by the authors involving the choir and the ukulele. In doing so we aim to both demonstrate the underlying value of working with different cultures at the same time and explore how cohabitation is the trigger of the compositional practice.

### **The transcultural ukulele and the pervasive choir**

The ukulele (*ukulele* in Hawaiian) and the choir could represent even themselves possible expressions of multicultural musical instruments and phenomena. The first is a very recent and widespread string instrument born after the crossing – and living on the edge – of distant cultures, while the latter is undoubtedly one of the most common and ancient music ensembles – based on the fundamental music instrument, the voice, involving in most instances the use of textual elements – spanning distant cultures in time and space.

In fact, «the adoption of the ‘ukulele by Hawaiians» is an example of what the Cuban historian Fernando Ortiz called transculturation—the complex interaction between cultures that produce unique offspring, both like and unlike its parents. Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (Durham, nC: Duke University Press, 1995), xxvi, 97–103. For a more extended discussion of syncretic music, see Margaret J. Kartomi, “The Processes and Results of Musical Culture Contact: A Discussion of Terminology and Concepts,” *Ethnomusicology* 25 (May 1981): 227–249» [7][8]. Moreover, the ukulele shares a lot – both from an organological side and from the point of view of performance techniques – with other instruments, from the closer one, the *machete da braga*, to its direct well known cousin, the guitar, and also with more distant relatives, such as the banjo, the mandolin and even the violin. However, it is a very well defined instrument with evident unique features that are the result of the crossing of different cultures and techniques intricately borrowed from other musical instruments. Even just considering its tunings and implied left hand positions we must remember that «ukulele strings share unordered pitch-class intervals with the highest four strings of a guitar (but neither pitch classes nor pitch intervals). This is far from abstract for a guitarist picking up the ukulele for the first time: recognizing it allows a guitarist to use familiar fretboard shapes on the unfamiliar instrument» [9].

Moreover, the repertoire of new scores for solo ukulele in the specific context of contemporary classical music has started to expand in recent times. Due to the initial and fundamental efforts of ukulelist and composer Samantha Muir - who is continuing to commission and premiere new music - other musicians are now giving significant contributions to this cause, among them: Donald Boustead, Elisabeth Pfeiffer and Giovanni Albini. The result is an ever growing collection of scores for ukulele – solo and in an ensemble – composed by international composers with the most diverse background<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, the connection between the ukulele and a classical earlier repertoire seems to be as old as the instrument itself. As John King stated almost two decades ago, «with the recent discovery and publication of a manuscript of duets for *machete* (the ukulele's European, or more precisely, Madeiran, predecessor) and guitar, the argument against the validity of performing classical music on the little four-string instrument has been rendered moot. [...] In addition to providing instructions for accompanying songs and dances, pioneer ukuleleists

<sup>1</sup> Among the many musicians who wrote for ukulele in the context of contemporary classical music, the following are worth of mention: Pulitzer prize winner Julia Wolfe, British composer and guitarist Milton Mermikides, Estonian composer Toivo Tulev, American composer Loretta K. Notereschi, Welsh composer David John Roche, Italian composers Joe Schittino and Virginio Zoccatelli, and Spanish composer and ukulelist Choan Gálvez.

stressed the potential of the instrument for rendering difficult classical pieces. While this aspect of the ukulele's personality has been greatly overshadowed by its reputation as an easily mastered rhythm instrument, succeeding generations of players have consistently striven to raise performance standards and expectations» [10].

As for choral music it is possible to state that it has always been present in music history and has been used by a variety of cultures and by many composers throughout history showing a natural ability to be shaped in many ways for a variety of aims and contexts [11]. In fact, it is possible to identify the presence of multiculturalism in choral music in different historical periods. For instance, the parody mass shows the cohabitation between two cultures, the sacred and the profane, and two languages, the Latin and the folk language. Centuries later, in the music of composers such as Francis Poulenc, Béla Bartók and Veljo Tormis we can notice that two cultural layers, the folk and the established academic classical, find a way to coexist and this is even more evident in the context of their choral music<sup>2</sup>: the main characteristics of each cultural layer remain recognizable and at the same time each culture acquires a different property. Bartók is indeed a perfect example of a composer whose musical language was shaped with folk music not as an embellishment but as a real content. Part of his aesthetic relies on his studies of popular culture, and the same statement can be applied to many composers, starting from all of them addressed in the National school movement. In the Eight Hungarian Folksongs it can be easy to recognize the presence of the folk tune but the music is permeated with Bartók's language creating a unique expression of his aesthetic in which both cultures rise to a new level.

### ***Hommik for Choir***

A first example by the authors' output of music compositions that underline the value of working with different cultures at the same time is the composition *Hommik (In the Morning)* for SATB choir by Fabrizio Nastari. It presents the elaboration and coexistence of two different ways of singing, the Gregorian Chant and the Estonian Regilaul, as well as two different texts, a catholic Latin prayer and an Estonian poem. While many are familiar with the music qualities of Gregorian Chant, its connection to religious practice and the sound of the Latin language, the Estonian Regilaul may need some explanation. Regilaul is a very old, pre-catholic and pagan song that has its own unique features and practices for singing. Specifically, for the composition of *Hommik*, the composer focused on two main characteristics given by Veljo Tormis [12]: the structure of the Regilaul consists of an eight-syllable isochronal melody-line, verse repetition; the Regilaul is a continuous activity, an unbroken flow, a non-stop stream of singing where there is no grammatical phrasing. The composition keeps the general idea of these characteristics while recalling the

Figure 1: *Hommik* bar 19. Female voices sing the Gregorian Chant in a Renaissance style while the regilaul works as a chord of recital preserving its different metronome indication.

2 Namely: *Chansons françaises (France songs)* by Francis Poulenc, *Nyolc magyar népdal (Eight hungarian folksongs)* by Béla Bartók and *Raua needmine (Curse Upon Iron)* by Veljo Tormis.

Gregorian Chant tradition by choosing only one pitch as a chord of recital (figure 1). In contrast, the verses of the Gregorian Chant are divided between two voices as it happens usually in a Regilaul (figure 2).

♩ = 110

Tenori

Bassi

Kuu läks loo-ja kukk on ü-lal vä-est. A-ralt a-stub ü-le kü-la

ü-lal ki-reb ju-ba kõi-gest vä - est\_\_ kü-la

Figure 2: *Hommik* bar 1. Male voices sing an imitation of Regilaul.

Indeed, a reason to compose *Hommik* relies on the search of a meeting point between two very different cultures. Moreover, by provoking a contrast of the two ways of singing and the two languages a slight presence of irony may arise. If at the beginning of the composition such a feeling can be natural, the ironic contrast disappears as the music slowly drives the two cultures toward a match at the end of the composition when the choir sings together and homorhythmically the *Amen*. The chosen texts have characteristics in common: the Estonian poem *Hommik* by Juhan Smuul describes the typical beginning of a day for a fisherman; the Gregorian Chant *Ave Maris Stella* is the prayer of the fishermen in catholic countries. Work, spirituality and nature are all coexisting in the composition. The extra musical content of the lyrics offers a common ground for the two cultural elements involved, and the sounding contrast they create emphasizes their expressive features.

### A new multicultural score and challenging transcriptions for ukulele solo

*Dies Rainbow* is an original composition by Fabrizio Nastari for ukulele solo that was composed looking for a tension between two melodies and between the cultural worlds they evoke. Inspired by the pandemic time we are living in, the music aims to express the desire of joy through the recognizable melody of *Somewhere over the Rainbow*; however, the counterpoint of the *Dies Irae* creates instability and mourning feeling (figure 3). The cohabitation of the Gregorian Chant and the American lighthearted melody recalls suggestions and images different for each listener. The dialogue between the two melodies is a struggle of contrasting feelings. The multiculturalism arises between two communities, the European and the American, between two spheres of human emotion, the joy and the mourning, between two musical cultures, Gregorian and Popular.

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Figure 3: *Dies Rainbow* bar 22. The upper voice presents *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* melody while the lower voice has the *Dies Rainbow* chant.

In *Dies Rainbow* there is not the seek for a common point between the two cultures nor it is the intention of the composition to suggest only one particular feeling; rather, the free interpretation that can arise from the listening is what has nurtured the composition process. Differently from *Hommik*, in this case the aim is to let the listeners make their own multicultural interpretation freely, as far as possible, without any suggestion from the composer.

From another perspective, composer and ukulelelist Giovanni Albini has been fostering the development of a new challenging and cultivated ukulele repertoire, aiming to deepen and evolve the idiomatic unique features of the instrument. He not only has been commissioning and performing new scores, but has been also very active in arranging and playing classical music for the ukulele, trying to be as faithful as possible to the original scores while enduring the challenge of adapting music from very distant aesthetic and cultural settings and written for quite dense and extensive instrumentations. Such activity has resulted in the performance on the ukulele of several arrangements of music originally composed for voices and orchestra (Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* in figure 4, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Stabat Mater* K. 618 and Zbigniew Preisner's *Lacrimosa* from *Requiem for my Friend*), choir (Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *Cherubic Hymn* from the *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* Op. 41), and string orchestra (Samuel Barber's *Adagio* for strings and Karl Jenkins' *Palladio*), just to mention a few.

Figure 4: The incipit of Albini's arrangement for ukulele of Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*. The counterpoint is highlighted by the neat sound of the plucked instrument.

This practice has led to an interesting output under the lens of multiculturalism. On the one hand, as it has been aimed by the arranger/performer, the traditions of Western music have been adapted to the four strings of the ukulele. This has offered several opportunities to test the characteristic idiomatic features of the instrument and to overcome its alleged limits. The necessity to adhere to different aesthetics, styles and musical languages served to highlight the unique instrumental voice and capability, that still incorporates its origins. On the other hand the reduction process imposed a deep reflection of the music undertaken. This exposed the most important and distinctive elements, thus emphasizing the limited range of the ukulele while revealing that it is close to the range of the human voice. Therefore, the mutual highlight of cultures not only produced an enhancement of both, but created something new in artistic and technical terms.

## Conclusion

The descriptions of the authors' musical works show a personal way of understanding a multicultural musical work; the main features of divergent cultures remain evident but at the same time the languages involved obtain new or different qualities. Thus, the newborn music presents a unique expression of both in an organic way. Moreover, music of this kind may encourage the listener to reflect on the meaning of multiculturalism and on the cultures involved in the composition thanks to the juxtaposition, cohabitation, mixture, elaboration of a variety of languages

and instruments. Mirroring the mutual adaptation that would happen in a real community made of people we may say that a similar development of cohabitation creates a new articulation in a musical sense.

Nonetheless, the aim of the authors is to draw attention to the growing interest toward the ukulele in general and even more in a context of multicultural musical studies together with the concept of transculturation. As proposed by Fernando Ortiz the word transculturation can be used when the subject or object is both like and unlike its parents' characteristics. Such a concept as well as the ukulele are worth deepening in future studies. On the one hand to ensure a most frequent utilization of the term transculturation instead of more general word; on the other hand to improve this particular transcultural instrument, the ukulele, its repertoire, its musical qualities, what it represents in modern culture both academic and not.

At last, the authors' experience in working through and for multicultural purposes can be defined as an enriching practice both personally and musically. The uniqueness of undertaking composition or arrangement from this perspective gives the possibility to reflect more not only on concepts such as multiculturalism and others close to it, but also in a broader sense on what is the meaning of using different languages in contemporary art. It is crucial, particularly for artists, to dwell on this kind of problem in order to be more aware of the artistic expression of our time and develop our own language and aesthetic.

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