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Music as Expressive Culture

Anthro 138M

Readings

Introduction

What is Music

Music seems to be everywhere and is very important to many of us. Music and language are two elements that appear in all human societies and thus are part of what defines us as human. Music, like language communicates to us, from us and between us, but unlike language, we cannot be certain just what is that music communicates.

All human societies have music. Among some peoples, music is heard only at certain special times, for example, when the entire community is together and all participate in the ceremony or in the performance as a group. In other societies, such as our own, we can each select our own favorite music, something which often changes for us as the time passes, and we tune in and drop out as we lose ourselves in the deep and private world created by a pair of headphones over our ears.

Universal Values

While music may be universal in its prevalence in every civilization known to us and among the cultures of the people known to exist on this planet in rich and complex variety, musical preferences vary from one region to another, from one time to another and from one individual to another. Like culture itself, although music may be ubiquitous, the manner in which it appears in any culture is arbitrary and the result of history, development and cross cultural contact. The existence of music is everywhere, but the aesthetic choices of each culture are so widely different as to make one culture's ideal sound

abhorrent to their neighbors.

Music develops in each society as a result of the historical and cultural events to which the people in that society have been exposed. Music is a reflection of the society which produced it and it then changes to reflect changes in that society. While music may not be a universal language, it is certainly universal. In every society known to us and in every period of history, music has played a very important role. But each music is a complex system of some preferred elements and others rejected. These same rejected elements we may find preferred in another culture.

It shouldn't surprise us, given that people all over the globe live in a wide range of environments, that their ideas of music must be very different as well. People living in the far Northern regions of the globe, live and interact in ways that are very different from those who live and survive in the dense tropical forests of the world. Music for all these peoples is both an expression of the individual as well a consensus of the group ideas about what music should be.

Although travel is much easier today than it was even only thirty or forty years ago, still few of us travel to places that are far off the beaten track. We may have visited London, Paris, Rio de Janeiro, or Tokyo, but even so only a few will have ventured to the Amazon, to Central Kyushu, or the Caucasus. We would be very wrong to assume that in all those hundreds of thousands of communities which lie between the major cities of the world, that because we know little about them, that nothing there exists.

Up until about forty years ago, the cultural isolation of most areas of the world, outside the major cities, was much greater than it is today. In this environment, musical traditions were also isolated from each other to a much greater degree than they are today, and thousands of local, regional and national traditions of musical expression were much more clear and distinct from each other. Media and communication systems have made the world much smaller and it is difficult to find a place where these media systems have not reached nor have had their effect. We, as humans, have quickly moved in a few short generations, to defining our favorites on a local basis to today, when we do so on a global basis. today, a newly defined and accepted style of music quickly spreads over almost the entire globe in a matter of weeks.

It is the ever changing and complex pattern of transmission, variation, modification, creation and adoption in the realm of music which is the subject of this book. To do this we must consider basic questions about music, not as it exists only in one culture, but what the study of the musics of many very different cultures can tell us about music itself.

Music and Culture

The word culture is used in two different ways in our language. It was common for English speakers to use the word as something synonymous with good manners, learning and knowledge particularly in the areas of literature and arts. Although this usage is not so much in vogue as it was until a few years ago it is still sometimes understood in this way. Anthropologists use the term culture in a much more comprehensive way. Culture in this usage means everything we do that has been learned.

What we have learned encompasses quite a lot. Imagine taking a group of newly born humans and setting them in a place where they could grow up without the interference or aid from any adult humans. What would they know how to do? They could not speak to each other without first inventing, then teaching each other and learning a new language. What could they accomplish that they had not first seen done by someone else?

All the things we learn to do are part of our culture. This includes, of course, language and music. Some of the ways humans do things is a result of interaction and awareness of their environment. Most of it, however, is arbitrary. The customs and manners, the particular pattern of social organization, language and the music which has been developed in each human society is mostly arbitrary. Had we been born one hundred years ago our thinking and our tastes would have been as different as they might be were we to be born one hundred years after today.

The language we speak and the way we speak it, the music we listen to like the food which we eat are matters about which we often have very strongly felt preferences. Nonetheless, they are all the result of what we have been exposed to, what we have learned, thus far. Had we been fed since childhood on food with chilis in it, we would most likely prefer that in our food. But learning also plays a strong part in our culture. We

can learn to love Thai food, or Mexican food even though it was not given to us from childhood. In the same way we can learn to love Klezmer, Salsa, Blues, or Mozart, even though we have been born into a society in which this was the preferred tradition.