

Musimarch 2002. Causeries and Round Table Discussion **Chronicle of a Partially Imagined Event**

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Article abstract

This article is at once a chronicle of the *Musimarch* festival and a reflection on certain aspects of the problematic of transcultural music, subject of the round table and *causeries* sessions that took place between composers and musicologists.

Musimarch 2002: Causeries and Round Table Discussion

Chronicle of a Partially Imagined Event

Jonathan Goldman

Programming: China/Canada?

The *Musimarch* festival 2002, which took place from March 4-8 at McGill University, featured both a series of concerts by the SMCQ, the Montreal Symphony Orchestra and the McGill Contemporary Music Ensemble, as well as a series of lectures, master classes and a round table discussion. These lectures and discussions all took place in an environment of informality and free exchange. The participants ranged from local composers and musicologists like John Rea, Walter Boudreau, Lloyd Whitesell and Denis Gougeon, to composers (mostly of Chinese descent) from other parts of Canada, like Alexina Louie and Melissa Hui, in addition to the guest of honour, New York-based Chinese composer Tan Dun.

The participation of four composers of Chinese descent (Tan Dun, Melissa Hui, Alexina Louie and Xiaogang Ye), as well as the Chinese characters which appear on the cover of the program tended to give the public an expectation of a festival on the theme of Chinese music. Curiously, this was never specifically stated in the introductory words from the festival's organizer, Denys Bouliane. What Bouliane did affirm, however, is that the festival would deal with an "area that is particularly rich in possibilities for the music of today: the potential inter-relation between different modes of syntax, genres, styles and cultures, and their inter-penetration with each other."

This was the theme of the round table discussion on March 4, *Le métissage musical/Transcultural Music*. Bouliane explained in private that the reason he did not go into detail about the Chinese-transcultural theme of the festival in the program was that he expected it to be amply discussed at the round table discussion.

He was disappointed to find that many of the important issues surrounding the issue of cross-cultural music, East-West borrowings and the possibility of cultural appropriation were only summarily broached at the round table discussion. The failure to deal with this theme was as true of the round table discussions as of the *Causeries*, the informal lectures given throughout the *Musimarch* with composers Alexina Louie, Melissa Hui, Tan Dun, Denis Gougeon and John Rea on their own works, as well as one with Andriy Talpash on a work by Mauricio Kagel (cf. this issue p. 57). In what follows I will only mention these *causeries* inasmuch as they touch the *métissage* theme of the festival. What follows then should be taken as a chronicle of a missed encounter: a virtual debate which only partly took place, and whose silences are filled in by "voices in my own head" which attempt to reconstruct a debate which ought to have happened, and still might one day.

Of course, as we shall see, any discussion of transculturalism, musical borrowings, "ethnic music" etc., is burdened with a whole network of hidden meanings, and ultimately depends on the meaning we ascribe to the word **culture**. That the notion of cross-cultural mixing was in the air is undeniable, given the concerts of *Musimarch* which featured, to name but two, Tan Dun, conducting his own *Orchestral Theatre I: Xun*, which incorporates many Chinese elements readily identifiable by the Western listener as such (in particular, the spectre of the martial arts), and Hong Kong born Canadian composer Melissa Hui, presenting a piece (*Come as you are*) which incorporates a traditional Chinese instrument, the pipa, into a Western ensemble. It was somewhat disappointing, then, that much of the encounter with these "hot" issues, so problematic and controversial, remained on the level of innuendo.

Position Paper: Transculture, Hybridization, *Métissage* music at a cross-road, music as cross-over, or musical cross-pollination (poly-nation)?

Two speakers at the round table discussion who for their part did confront headlong the question of East-West musical exchange and all that it implies in terms of power relationships, colonialistic mentalities and the very possibility of cross-cultural exchange, were composer John Rea and musicologist Lloyd Whitesell.

As Rea was moderator of this round table discussion, he headed it off with a position paper that was designed to provoke, and designed to set the bait for defenders of all sides of the so-called "culture-wars". The advocates of stylistic and

cultural purity, for example, were thrown the following buoy, invited to latch onto Jean Cocteau, whom Rea quoted as saying:

“The more a poet sings within his genealogical tree, the more he sings in tune”¹.

Rea went on to elaborate:

Exhorting his composer friends of *Le Groupe des Six*, in a number of journalistic essays in the years following the Great War, Cocteau urged them to accentuate the positive elements in French music, [and to] eliminate the negative influences of German music [...] — an injunction if there ever was one **not** to have a dilettante’s interest in mixing things together, of confusing or conflating expressions. In short, **not** to speak in equivocal discourses.

This leads Rea to ask the following question:

Are the composers of our time singing in tune? Are they at some kind of cross-road? On the other hand, musicologists have always argued, for example, that in his mixing of ethnically discernible sonic elements, Mozart offered the world a resilient, a resistant hybrid strain of music whose complex amalgam of diverse national styles and idioms produced a sort of *métissage*, perhaps even a transcultural art, albeit on the scale of the geopolitical and economic realities of the Europe of his day. To deny that his music is more current, is more ingrained in the world’s collective consciousness than ever before, would seem to be a foolish enterprise today. Is this to say then that no less a figure than Mozart was... singing out of tune? Were his compositions the first GMMs (genetically modified music)?

It is, of course, rather unlikely that Rea, the mask-wearer, actually subscribes to a “Cocteau-ian” philosophy, which “scorns equivocal discourses...” If so, he and his friend José Evangelista, who also participated in the round table discussion, would no doubt be condemning as musical “discord” their own work which delights in stylistic mixture.

Rea then characteristically delved into the archeology of the terms of the discussion, studying the roots of the words which we have inherited, and which necessarily shape any present day discussion:

The term “*Métissage*” is used to refer to the process of creating a new ethnicity based on the coming together of two other ethnicities, specifically used for the creation of the Metis people in Western Canada. It usually indicates the mix of French Canadian with Ojibwa or Cree. The etymology of both the French word, *métis*, and the Spanish word, *mestizo*, has its source in the Indo-European root, *meik*, which after passing through Greek and Latin has also given us the following English words: meddle, medley, melange, melee, mesclun, miscellaneous, miscible, mix, mixture, mustang, admix, commix, immix, miscegenation, pell-mell, promiscuous.

The term “Hybridization” owes its origins to the Latin word, *hibrida*, which simply put means bastard, the offspring of a domesticated sow and a wild boar. The term

1. « Plus un poète chante dans son arbre généalogique, plus il chante juste »

enjoys an honourific status in the fields of plant and animal sciences. “Transculture” is both a more recent and a more ambiguous term since it can verge on two distinct concepts for its comprehension: **acculturation** and **assimilation**. “Acculturation” is the transfer of culture from one ethnic group to another, whereas, “assimilation” is the act of bringing or coming to resemblance, a merging of diverse cultural elements. But for those who employ the term “Transculturation” a significant set of conditions must obtain: (1) patterns of influence are never unidirectional but rather mutual, reciprocal; (2) a process of cultural intercourse and exchange (a circulation of practices) creates a constant interweaving of symbolic forms and empirical activities among the cultures interacting with one another; (3) no single element imposes or superimposes itself on another; rather, each one changes into the other so that both be transformed into a third. (Some of you may recall that there is a music called “Third Stream”).

Thus, the concept of cross- or transculturation proves useful, say, for cultural anthropology. The prefix *trans-* refers to the act of traversing, traveling over and through existing cultural territories. Its spatial connotations delimit a type of movement — across cultural hot spots and real physical topographies — that corresponds more closely to the notion of “mutual appropriation”, a more promising concept than those of acculturation and assimilation, and one that implies a lively intervention rather than victimization.

The terms of the debate are already, from this position paper, delineated in a lively way: Cross-cultural music: appropriation? Western influences on indigenous music: assimilation? Pipa playing with the SMCQ: hybridization? World Music: transculturation? Musicologist Lloyd Whitesell then reframed the discussion in other equally promising terms, and which turned out to be, in terms of the debate, no less abortive.

Whitesell on Cultural Appropriation: the Economic Model

Whitesell discerned six issues which are the basis for much of the debate on so-called “World Music”. His musical reference was the 1986 best-selling album *Graceland* by the American singer-songwriter Paul Simon, which incorporated elements of South African traditional and pop music, and employed musicians from that country on many of the tracks. At the time of its release, Simon received criticism for having “stolen” the music of an already marginalized people, and for treating them as nothing more than wage labourers. This opened a hot debate, particularly on American college campuses about the issue of cultural appropriation. Whitesell reduces this debate to a number of issues as follows:

1. **Ownership:** Who, if anyone, owns the music? This is often brought up in the case of jazz, which is often described or presumed to be the property of African-American culture. Does this then mean that other people who

employ a jazz idiom are borrowing, or stealing, or is it rather a sort of space in which people from diverse backgrounds can interact?

This is the issue which John Rea expressed in the following manner:

Although we might agree that, in the proliferation of the phenomenon commonly known as World Music (occasionally, World Beat), we recognize the presence of *métissage* and musical cross-pollination, do we also agree that we are in the presence of a genuine transculture? Or, are we simply witnessing cultural interactions linked to the ancient principles of colonialism but where, now, corporations readily assimilate world musical traditions as if they were voraciously consuming other people's possessions?

2. **Authenticity:** How authentic can you be in borrowing music of other cultures? Does it degenerate into a sort of musical tourism which superficially visits the music of other cultures?
3. **Competence:** How much time are you willing to spend to learn the structure of the musical language? Are you only interested in surface phenomena or in deeper properties of the music?
4. **Symmetry:** How symmetrical can the interaction be? When European-American cultures make contact with the cultures of the developing world, the relationship is necessarily asymmetrical, due to the differential of economic power.
5. **Identity:** What is the notion of national identity? The idea of ethnic origin is somewhat blurred, and out of date; are we not more interested in multiple identities (as Charles Taylor calls them) rather than in tracing people back to one source?

The paradigm of cultural appropriation is the basis of the usual critique levelled by the Left in the culture wars. But clearly some way must be found to get past the model of cultural appropriation, this "econo-centric" model, in order to broaden the terms of the debate, without thereby softening the critique. This critique analyzes cultural borrowings such as the World Music phenomenon as a form of cultural colonialism: the Western culture machine, powered by huge electronic media corporations, steals "content" from indigenous cultures and then sells it, mostly to Western consumers, but also, to a lesser extent, back to the indigenous peoples. In this way, it functions a little like the British Empire which used to sell garments to the West, but also back to India, the colony which produced most of their textiles.

Interesting then is Whitesell's alternative model, which he brought up in connection with Jazz. Jazz, as we saw, becomes a musical **space** in which different groups can interact, and express multiple identities. This has the advantage of getting us out of the "vicious circle of commerce", *i.e.*, a critique which uses economic terms such as supply, demand, market, product, consumer, producer etc., and is the sort of cri-

tique which ends by condemning the “capitalistic modernists” as Rea calls them. The drawback of these economic critiques, like those levelled against Paul Simon, is that they too, like the “exploiter”, base themselves on an economic, commercial model: music, even while the “capitalists” are criticized, remains a commodity, that can be bought, borrowed and yes, stolen, like any other negotiable good. This is reminiscent of Karl Marx’s critique of earlier forms of socialism, such as the philosophy of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who coined the famous slogan “property is theft”. For Marx, this type of slogan is muddle-headed: one cannot criticize the concept of property by labelling it “theft”, which is itself a term which only makes sense in a society which already accepts the notion of property². The same could be said of those who cry “cultural theft” at the producers of World Music, while at the same time decrying the commodification of music which the “culture industry” has effected. The critique presupposes or implies the very cultural commodification which it criticizes.

2. In Marx’s book *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), a response to Proudhon’s work, *The Philosophy of Poverty* (1846).

As far as appropriation goes, Whitesell is right to expose the familiar logic of Western (or Northern as we often say today) markets buying (usually on the cheap) the cultural products of the East (or South). But other “economic” phenomena also obtain; for example, what of the opposite schema? Consider Tan Dun: the Chinese composer uses techniques of Western music, and a Western idiom (Hollywood-style film scoring) to sell a product to the West, which is so seamlessly wrought that it appears, to the general public anyway, as a relatively authentic product of the East? There are other schema. What of the Eastern composer who borrows Western music in order to sell it in the East? This is very common in Asia, where it is common to produce “cover” versions of Western pop songs, sometimes using traditional instruments in a folkloric style. When considering the entirety of social relations made possible by this cultural exchange, and the flow of “culture” and capital in all directions that it implies, one feels justified in using the term “transculturation”, that is cultural flow in all directions, as it is defined in Rea’s position paper.

From an Economic Model to a Psychological and a Political One

Rea, again in the mode of the *provocateur*, advanced an appealing theory which moves us once again away from this economic model of exploiter and exploited. Once again, the goal is to explain the West’s appetite for cross-cultural products, and in particular, for the musical products of non-Western culture. He appeals to a kind of group psychology of the citizen of late-capitalism and post-industrialism:

If, however, we agree that the phenomenon is **not** to be considered as yet another protracted instance of colonialism, might it then be useful to view World Music as a symptom of a psychological condition, perhaps even a pathological one? A form of

projection where voracious consumption points back to an involuntary type of melancholia, a type of morbidity that owes its origin to our dynamic — and modernist — capitalist societies: in order to move forward and to progress one must discard things, one must accept their ineluctable obsolescence, a behaviour that musically sensitive people experience with obvious difficulty. And so, to slow things down, one associates oneself with all sorts of strategies that link up with the “eternal” and pre-modern features found in the numerous cultures of Asia, South America, Micronesia, and also of Europe. Please note that in addition to providing a marketplace for compact discs, the World Music phenomenon also encourages people to join groups trying to revitalize lost or dying musical traditions, or groups that, straight out, do non-Western music, like being in a “living” museum, but for ethnomusicology. Paradoxically, in most of the non-Western societies that have been subjected to examination and subsequent harvesting for artistic, scientific or commercial purposes, music itself is not condemned to the Manichean distinctions so dear to us in the West, such as between old and new, or past and present. People there have learned to live in an uneasy co-existence with the surfeit of possible musics. There are no cross-roads.

What is essential here, I believe, over and above the seductive “psychological” theory is the fact that World Music derives from a need, a desire. What’s more, that desire does not spring from the Orient, but is located squarely in the West. It is a Western desire which is projected onto the East. The unstated premise in this logic is one which comes from that most Western of phenomena: Identity politics. Music, like all other forms of expression, is taken, by the (more or less deracinated) Westerner, to be a way to assert the cultural identity of the music maker: the seeming obviousness of this observation should not hide the fact that it is an extremely recent idea: one imagines a modern day Dahlhaus undertaking an archeology of musical ideas, like his study of the concept of “absolute music”, which would uncover the historical moment in which the West began to view music, and more generally, cultural production, in this politicized manner.

Tan Dun evoked this idea when he brought up, in his *causerie*, the case of Claude Debussy. Before him, whole-tone scales, *chinoiseries*, gamelan style, etc. were not considered typically *French* music; *post facto*, and this belongs to the domain of Debussy reception, he is taken to be the paragon of French music. Debussy can certainly be *used* in our day, as a vehicle of national aspirations, but that is not to say that the music was conceived with this purpose in mind, nor understood as such by Debussy’s contemporaries. In fact, the history of the use of composers in the service of political identity could probably be traced to the year 1802, when J.N. Forkel published his biography of Bach, *Über Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben, Kunst, und Kunstwerke*. In it, he proclaims Bach a *German* hero and *German* symbol, whereas Bach himself had said that every note he composed was in the service of God alone.

That it is a peculiarly Western and modern concept (Eurocentric, if one likes) is neatly demonstrated by an observation about the *Musimarch* festival itself: first,

consider Melissa Hui, the Hong Kong born but Vancouver-raised and educated composer, who discussed her work for pipa, a Chinese lute, and ensemble, commissioned by the SMCQ. Hui admits in her lecture that Walter Boudreau, Musical Director of the SMCQ, had asked her to write a piece for pipa; the idea of using a traditional Chinese instrument came from Boudreau! What better allegory of the way in which the West imposes identity politics on the children of the East?

Similarly, Alexina Louie, a *canadienne de souche* if ever there was one, having had ancestors in Canada for several generations, admits that she grew up listening essentially to Frank Sinatra, and never heard Chinese music in her home. This does not then imply in any way that her recently composed opera, *The Scarlet Princess*, the concert version of which was premiered on 23 April 2002, and which is based on an Asian theme (actually it is a story taken from a Japanese Kabuki drama) is somehow inauthentic. On the contrary. The seriousness with which the theme is approached is the sole basis of criticism of the work, just as the same can be said when, for example, a Montreal composer adopts a Balinese idiom. To expect that Louie has some privileged access to the cultural heritage of the Orient through some sort of genetic mechanism, is of course, to indulge in the most heinous form of racial stereotyping, which is sometimes the hidden core of the endless Western discourse on cultures. The obvious conclusion is that music is fundamentally about illusion, and if a composer wishes to create the illusion of being Balinese or Chinese, he must work hard at it; it can succeed or it can fail. At times, the products of the past that attempt this cultural crossover seem almost quaint in their *naïveté* (Mozart writing in a Turkish idiom in his Rondo), and sometimes the products of our own time can seem just as unconvincing and stereotyped, regardless of the unassailable cultural credentials of the composer (Tan Dun's soundtrack?). It is instructive to go back to Bartók's own views on the use of themes culled from folklore:

It's possible that popular music can only be a source of inspiration when a creative mind is at play in transplanting its motivic material. In the hands of an inept composer, neither popular music nor any other musical material has been meaningful. If a composer lacks this talent, it serves little purpose whether that composer builds the music on folk themes or any other theme. Either way the result will be nil³. (Bartók, 1981, p. 92)

3. On peut donc dire que la musique populaire ne peut être source d'inspiration pour la musique d'un pays que dans le cas où la transplantation de son matériau motivique est l'œuvre d'un esprit créateur. Dans les mains d'un compositeur incapable, ni la musique populaire ni quelque autre matériau musical que ce soit n'ont jamais acquis de signification. S'il manque ce talent à un compositeur, il lui servira aussi peu de construire sa musique sur des motifs folkloriques que sur n'importe quel autre motif. Dans chaque cas, le résultat sera également nul. (Bartók, 1981, p. 92)

World Music: the Embrace of the Other?

If we return to the idea of the psychology of identity, we observe that an important part of World Music appreciation involves the psychological labelling of the non-Western cultural product as "other": it is a form of exotic distancing. Accepting the other as distant allows for a subsequent "reunion" — an embrace of the other that we could term "xenophilia".

I would argue that a psychological trope along these lines is at work in the success of Tan Dun's *Crouching Tiger Concerto*. It derives from a feeling in the listener that he is consuming an authentic product of distant Chinese culture: he congratulates himself for being able to step beyond his culture and embrace the musical Other. In point of fact, what he is responding to for the most part is not this otherness, but actually what is essentially familiar and comforting in the music. He is unconsciously attracted to the cloying Hollywoodisms, to which a cultured connoisseur would never normally allow himself to succumb, were it not given an exotic veneer. It is the supposed otherness which allows the consumer of this music to embrace it with a clean conscious, or even with a feeling of pride in possessing a soul big enough to assimilate the other. It is a logic in which we are under the impression that we are embracing the other, but in which the other turns out to be a reflection of ourselves. We are embracing the girl next door, while priding ourselves on our xenophilia. It is kitsch, if we define kitsch following Kundera as "the need to look at itself in the mirror of lies which makes beautiful, and to encounter oneself with emotional satisfaction" (Kundera, 1988, p. 135)

This situation is reminiscent of what one writer said about the role played by the tango in Europe:

Tango expresses, performs, and produces Otherness erotically through exoticism, and in doing so, it plays seductively into the game of identification — an attempt at "selving" by creating anti-selves (Savigliano, 1995, p. 73, cited in Pelinski, 2001, p. 1139).

Listening to World Music then, by extension, would be another exercise in "selving", and the Tango would become the model for all World Music that followed it!

It is no coincidence that the West, or more specifically Quebec, expects composers of non-Western heritage to feel the need to assert their cultural identity through their music: the Canadian and Quebecois composer, as well as his listener, is searching for a national music, for a cultural identity, and more generally for a plausible construction of selfhood. It would be dangerous to assume that the composers of other civilizations, or those from our own country but of different cultural heritage, have the same motivation when they compose music.

Tan Dun: a Case Study

That the "music as expression of cultural identity" thesis is a Eurocentric invention was nowhere better exemplified at *Musimarch* than by listening to Tan Dun himself. This disarmingly charming speaker takes on the persona of the child in a toy store when speaking of the European orchestra and its possibilities. He describes how

he had never heard Western music of any kind before the age of 18 or 19: when he first saw a Western orchestra play he was amazed by two things: how the musicians held the same pitch over extremely long durations, Chinese music being in near constant fluctuation of pitch in the manner of their Calligraphy. What struck him next was how shiny the instruments were! His music still retains a keen sense of this wonder, and bears the stamp of the curious explorations of a non-jaded artist: his *Orchestral Theatre I: Xun* unquestionably transmits the idea of ritual which he explained in his lecture as being his goal. The orchestration contains effects which would surely not have been imagined by a purely "Western" composer (including, not surprisingly, an obvious delight in long sustained notes!) Tan Dun went on to describe his travels collecting folk-music in distant regions of his native Hunan Province, as well as describing the idea behind his upcoming opera on the theme of tea. To this, one adds the Academy Award he earned for best film score for the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and one cannot avoid the feeling that Tan Dun is a very happy man indeed, and that in a certain sense, one can't argue with that!

Also hard to argue with was the warm reception his music received, when performed by the Montreal Symphony on March 7th and 8th at Pollack Hall. Tan Dun received standing ovations for both his *Orchestral Theatre I: Xun*, and for the suite he derived from his film score, the *Crouching Tiger Concerto*.

In contrast, a month earlier, another one of Tan Dun's pieces was presented alongside the *Crouching Tiger Concerto*, in Paris at the *Présences* festival. There, the second of his *Orchestral Theatre* pieces was performed (*Re*). However, in the purest Parisian style, rather than being greeted with a standing ovation, the piece was received with boos and hisses, and led the music critic of *Le Monde*, Pierre Gervasoni, to write the rather snide headline: "*Présences* sort de l'hermétisme, au risque de la démagogie" (*Le Monde*, February 1st, 2002). Apparently, this piece calls upon the audience to chant in Chinese and to sing, which Gervasoni apparently found rather unconvincing:

... to accommodate the concept of this incongruous happening, its conductor, Myung-Whun Chung, induced the audience to sing, with the composer's complicity. Compliant, most of the audience responded at the right time, intoning the "Re" announced by the title as well as the phrase "*Hong mi la ga yi go*". This kind of demagogic effort purported to dispel the abstruse nature of contemporary music is akin to a daycare activity for children⁴.

In fact, Gervasoni discerned but one redeeming quality in the *Crouching Tiger Concerto*:

... this alarming polyptych has only one merit: to restore the notion of scandal in contemporary music. Medleys of boos and bravos punctuated the piece even before it ended⁵.

4. ... son chef Myung-Whun Chung, contraint de faire chanter le public avec la complicité du compositeur pour les besoins conceptuels de ce happening incongru. Dociles, la plupart des auditeurs entonnent au bon moment le ré annoncé par le titre ainsi que la phrase "*Hong mi la ga yi go*". Démagogique, ce type d'entreprise censé battre en brèche l'hermétisme proclamé de la musique contemporaine relève tout simplement de l'animation pour jardin d'enfants.

5. ... cet effarant polyptyque n'a qu'un mérite : restaurer la notion de scandale en musique contemporaine. Huées et bravos s'opposent ainsi à plusieurs reprises avant même la fin du morceau.

It is perhaps surprising that Tan Dun's music could provoke such a scandal. But scandal is a typically Western reaction to a symbolic form, in the same way as the "selving" that was discussed above. The contrast between the reaction of Montreal and that of Parisian audiences would certainly be an interesting object of study.

Conclusions

It is a difficult task to cover an event which didn't really take place: a true discussion on the theoretical premises of transcultural music/*métissage musical* would certainly have been highly revealing. It could serve to bring out the economic, sociological and psychological mechanisms which account for the fascination in the West with these sorts of hybrid cultural products. The importance of such a debate is clear, even if it were to reveal an unsavoury underbelly hiding behind even the most basic notions, such as **culture**, **ethnicity** and **assimilation**. The round table discussion then had the merit of asking the right questions, even if we were left waiting for answers which failed to materialize.

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