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# MUSICAL CHAIRS: CHANGING VIEWS OF MUSIC

Huib Schippers

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The author offers ten personal reflections on his musical growth and development over many years – as a student, teacher, administrator, and observer. Based on these reflections, he offers viewpoints and suggestions for teaching both Western and “world musics.”

Over the past several decades, it has become common practice among music educators to speak of all “musics” as being of equal value. I have no doubt that “political correctness” motivates some of this talk. At the same time, however, I see concrete evidence of a growing openness to all types of music in the form of eclectic concert programming, new “world music” teaching-learning materials, new journal and magazine publications, and the birth and development of actual musical practices.

I will not attempt a scholarly investigation of this phenomenon here. My aim is very modest: I wish to describe ten musical encounters and experiences that have irreparably changed my prior views about music and music education. Perhaps someone you know has changed their ideas about, or their relationships with, music through similar experiences?

My first clear musical memories are the goose bumps I felt as a four- or five-year-old when my parents played their opera recordings. I had a particular distaste for the sopranos; to this day, opera remains one of my least favorite forms of music. Inevitably, however, I was immersed in Western classical music (my father worked for a large classical record company). I began to appreciate it, and I eventually developed a predilection for works before 1750. At a later stage, I became well acquainted with the most current systems of Western music teaching -- an attractively systematic approach based on one-to-one teaching. Step by step, this system steered me toward achieving the ability to reproduce the “classical” masterworks in a way that was technically correct and, if possible, demonstrative of some kind of feeling. This was the musical world I never questioned until I was about sixteen years old.

My second and most decisive musical experience began around the age of sixteen, too. In the aftermath of the hippie-era, when the clouds of incense and ganja had largely evaporated, I began to feel attracted to Indian classical music. My attraction was not based on any association between music, drugs, or “free sex” (which, by the way, was non-existent in India: Indian musicians drink whiskey!). I was fascinated by the sounds and structures of this music, and/or my inability to understand the structures.

In order to fathom this elusive music, I embarked on what turned out to be a twenty-year association with the Indian system of guru-shishya-parampara: the time-honored relationship between teacher and student that leads to a mastery of Indian music (at least, it is supposed to lead to mastery). During the first years of my apprenticeship, I visited my teacher’s house a few times every week: once for a lesson; the other times to see him practice, or teach others. In spite of these frequent visits, I learned nothing about how the music was put together. I was given pieces of music – mostly at a level far beyond me – without any explanation of their place in the structure of a raga performance. This went on for about five years; it caused me a considerable amount of confusion and frustration.

Were these circumstances evidence of superior Indian guruship? Did the guru, in his infinite wisdom, sense that this arrogant youth had to be taught a lesson in humility before he could be initiated in the secrets of the art? It sounds wonderful, but I doubt it. Most of what I experienced was just “teaching-without-thinking.” Unfortunately (and in my

view), this is a common phenomenon in India. It goes along with the arrogance of the guru-teacher who is never required to question his own teaching, and who (probably) learned music as a boy in ways that he can't remember. The result is a slow, frustrating learning process, and a high dropout rate among students. But for me (I was too stupid, or stubborn, to stop), it became the source of a new way of learning, which I profited from very much in my advanced studies.

Let me explain. In my first, "Western learning, period," I learned to use my analytical mind to "chunk" the knowledge that had been prepared for me. In my second, "Indian learning phase," I learned to process a vast quantity of unstructured information, and I devised mechanisms to digest this information myself. This process takes more time than learning in well-conceived steps. But it also stimulates another kind of musical intelligence, and it seems to assure that musical knowledge -- including aspects that are difficult to grasp, such as subtle variations in timing, timbre, and intonation -- sink in deeply. Although I would not argue for a music education based completely on this process, I do think we underestimate "confusion" as an educational tool.

As I became more experienced, I began teaching in a school of Indian music and dance. Indirectly, this led to my third experience, which was of considerable magnitude: the task of organizing a "world music" school in Amsterdam. I say "indirectly" because, during a speech about integrating Indian music into the Western public music school in Amsterdam, I mentioned that a multicultural city like Amsterdam should have a school where a large number of musics from different cultures could be taught. I was subsequently asked to build a world music department.

I gathered 23 teachers from 12 different cultural areas to teach in this music school. Not surprisingly, this project presented me the challenge of working with teachers who displayed a diversity of teaching styles: for example, teachers who insisted on using notation, and teachers who did not; teachers who made certain to teach the cultural and musical contexts of their music, and those who did not; teachers who insisted on one-to-one teaching, and those who insisted on a group-teaching style.

It took me two years to make sense of this diversity. By then, we had a department where most teachers were teaching in ways that preserved the vitality of their musical traditions, "made sense" in relation to their students' needs, and worked within this new institutional context. Nevertheless, some teaching styles led to partial breaches (at least) with the teaching methods used by in a given music's country of origin: for example, a jungle of microphone wires in the African percussion classes; the use of staff notation for the repertoire of Turkish bards; and group sitar classes where analysis and confusion alternated. Overall, though, the co-existence of these musical, cultural, and pedagogical differences worked effectively, thanks to the creativity of the teachers, and their openness to challenges.

My fourth experience was part of my preparations for activating this world music school. Amsterdam has a large population from Surinam. A popular Surinam music form is *kawina* -- songs with polyrhythmic accompaniment on drums of African descent. This music was generally played in garages, without any teachers. Participants brought bits of information to the rehearsals, which were pieced together into more or less coherent wholes.

Quite naively, I decided it was time to improve this practice. I hired a great expert in this field, advertised for students, and then, . . . no students came. The "perfectionism" of my idea -- to locate *kawina*-teaching in my institution --, which seemed so logical to me (based on my Western and Indian backgrounds), did not match the aims and values of these musicians. They had meetings that were musical, creative, and enjoyable; there was no need for a formal music education. Although it was painful for me to have organized a course without students, I am grateful for the intelligence

these musicians showed by not coming to our classes. This taught me a great deal.

Another system of music teaching formed my fifth experience. I met Andreas Gutzwiller, the first Western black-belt shakuhachi player, who described to me how students learn to play this flute in Japan. This is how I remember his account: the student enters the room where his teacher sits in front of a low table with the score of the musical piece in front of him; the student kneels down on the other side of the table and picks up his instrument; the teacher starts playing the piece; the student follows as well as s/he can. After the piece is finished, the process repeats itself. The teacher does not say what the student has done wrong, because that would be considered an insult to his intelligence (surely the student already knows!). Exercises, or repetitions of a difficult passage, do not have a prominent role in this learning process. Neither does public performance. The core of the music is the teaching process described above. If there are performances, there are no “reviews.” There is no need for reviews. When you know the player’s ranking in the strict hierarchy of the *shakuhachi* schools, then you already know how well s/he plays. Someone with a higher level will be a bit better; someone lower, slightly less proficient. What can you write about that?

A sixth experience was my visit to the California Institute for the Arts in Los Angeles. This visit confirmed my belief that music from “other cultures” can be recontextualized and taught quite successfully in a Western institute. CalArts has long-standing programs in Indian music, Gamelan, and African percussion. Its campus-style set-up (and funding from the Disney corporation) makes it quite suitable for “intensive exposure learning.” I was impressed with the dedication and the level of the students.

One of the Ghanaian teachers at Cal Arts, Alfred Ladzekpo, told me an anecdote about the beginning of his classes in Ewe-percussion at Wesleyan, which illustrates the clash of concepts one encounters in cross-cultural teaching. Ladzekpo explained to me that he had just come from Africa whereupon he was asked to teach a group of students one of his traditional rhythms.

So, I just started, showing how the different patterns went, and how they interrelated. I thought things were going quite well. But then the students started to ask questions. At one point, I had to run out and ask my brother, Kobla (who was more experienced): ‘What do these students mean?’ They are asking me where the ‘one’ is in this rhythm.” There is no concept called “one” in our music: we see the rhythm as an organic whole. But, in the end, we decided the ‘one’ was on a particular beat in the bell pattern, and everybody was happy.

In Ghana (my seventh experience), I visited several institutes for music teaching. At the University of Cape Coast, the head of the music department entertained my colleague, Trevor Wiggins, and myself. Outside his office, a student was playing parts of the Well-tempered Clavier on a seriously out-of-tune piano (a unique musical experience!). The student assured us that, in addition to his “serious” classes in Wagner and Bach, he also left room for African music. Some of the cleaners on the campus were Ewe, and they occasionally got an afternoon off work to teach the students. Clearly, and unfortunately, this colonial assumption about the superiority of Western classical music has outlived colonial rule by decades in many parts of the world.

Luckily, I found a completely different approach at Agoro, a community arts centre located in an old cinema in central Cape Town. Children and youngsters were involved in all kinds of musical activity; a few were practicing traditional drumming outside; in the studio, a high-life band rehearsed; on the stage, three teenagers were choreographing a rap song.

This place was alive with music and dance.

The latter experience differed considerably from the eighth experience I would like to share with you. While I was on a trip in northern Bali, a village elder told me about large funeral festivities in a village in the hills. A long trip on the back of a motorcycle took me to this place. The entire village was watching a shadow puppet play on the central square. As I was watching, I heard Gamelan music from another part of the village. I walked over and saw a full orchestra playing virtuoso pieces. At the end of every piece, there was no applause. The “audience” consisted of a hundred urns of the deceased who were being accompanied into the next life with these ceremonies. I immediately thought of the contrast with African musicians who can tell they are playing well when the women in their “audience” are beginning to dance. How do the Gamelan musicians evaluate their own playing?

My ninth experience is a “pure” community music episode. During the Liverpool conference (1998) of the Community Music commission of ISME (International Society for Music Education), my colleagues and I were taken to Morecambe on Sea, a British seaside resort that seemed to have been in decline for more than a century. As part of a community music-making experiment, Pete Moser was hired to stimulate musical activity in Morecambe (toward economic gains for the city, among other benefits). In a tour he arranged for us, Pete showed the results of his project, which he called “More Music in Morecambe.” Pete led us through the back streets of the town to see the people and places that had inspired lyrics by its inhabitants, which he then set to music.

Also, Pete demonstrated to our group how he got into the Guinness Book of Records as the “fastest one man band.” Indeed, he organized and hosted the world’s only one-man-band festival. In addition, he organized choirs, and a samba band, that livened up the boulevard on dull Sunday mornings.

My tenth experience took place at another (radically different) seaside city – the “Golden Mile” of Durban, South Africa. In May 1997, sixty music educators from all over South Africa gathered to: discuss the future of music education in post-apartheid South Africa; discuss possibilities for building bridges between South Africa and the rest of the world; and to prepare for the ISME World Conference in Pretoria (1998).

The small overseas delegation I was part of was bowled over by the strength, persistence, intelligence, insight, and the quality of the vision presented by our South African colleagues. These colleagues gave us accounts of impressive practices in adverse circumstances that put most European and American music educators to shame. This was a truly humbling experience that continued to reverberate in our ISME-Community Music Commission meetings, which took place in Durban in July 1998.

Obviously, these experiences are very different in character and caliber. Although some have been very positive, others have not. It should be clear, then, that I am not idealizing other musical cultures and their practices. My aim has been straightforward: to communicate my *personal* musical journey through different musical cultures and concepts during twenty-five years, which I view as a process of developing a growing awareness (and, sometimes, a growing confusion) about diverse approaches to music making and learning. It has been a journey of immense value for me because it has led me to question and broaden my thinking about music. It has given me the opportunity to “sit in the chairs” of different musical perspectives.

Can we conclude anything from this? I think so. During the last twenty-five years, there has been a gradual decline in the

influence of Western claims concerning the absolute values and superiority of Western music. Simultaneously, there has been an important development in music education: music educators of the world are now looking in wonder at musics “outside” their own cultures and considering how musics are taught and learned in “other” cultures. Given these broader perspectives, and increased possibilities for travel and communication, we are no longer limited to advice from our Western colleagues; we can also learn about music teaching and learning from an Indian guru, a *salsero*, or a community musician in Africa.

Traveling from musical culture-to-culture (as some of us have been doing for decades) inspires wonder and humility. Those of us who have been raised in Western thinking start out believing in the superiority of our sensible, analytical, well-documented approach to music teaching. However, as we progress, we find that many of the “essences” of music cannot be taught effectively or enjoyably by means of well mapped, “systematic” learning sequences. Also, while some ways of teaching may seem unstructured and irrational at first, closer examination and added experience teaches us that these “organic” approaches turn out to include “intangibles” that work well for some students. For example: African drummers will not show the “one” in a rhythm they teach, but their students will “get” the “weight of the rhythm” from the dances of their listeners; an Indian sitarist may not tell his students that particular notes in a *raga* should be stressed, or played a little below natural intonation, but students will assimilate these qualities by absorbing the music through years of close association with their teacher; and, an Azerbaijani singer may never refer to “timbre,” yet his students will come to understand the value of this specific quality of his tradition through music making and listening in this authentic context.

In conclusion, I suggest that, if any of my reflections are worthwhile, then they may prove useful for both Western and “world” music education because Western music educators are looking for new sources of inspiration to make music teaching more vibrant, and many non-Western musicians are looking for ways of restructuring their methods of transmission, which are becoming anachronistic in rapidly changing societies. In this “game of musical chairs” there are only winners.

*This paper is based on an earlier presentation I made to the Community Music Commission of the International Society for Music Education in Durban, South Africa (July, 1998).*

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