The Recontextualization of “World Music” in Ethnomusicology

Music as an Intercultural, Global Language

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Introduction

When one takes a moment to intently analyze the sheer size and vastness of the human race on earth, it could be deemed fascinating and equally disturbing. So many different cultures, customs, traditions, languages, and outlooks make up what Marshall McLuhan (1967) termed our “global village” of intercultural exchange. This vastness of race can make us feel as though we are all a part of something so robust and beautiful, and yet, it can also make one feel incredibly small and insignificant. So, what if there was something that connected every single one of us here on earth…a language we all understand? Would you be impressed? Well, there is, and that thing is music. When viewed in several different perspectives, music is so much more than just sound waves entering the human ear. Music is everywhere and it is part of our cultural makeup. Music can be seen as a sound wave, art form, commodity, language, identity, pastime, career path, area of study, hobby, and so much more. When understanding the magnitude of the presence of music (both physical and non-physical), it is with great excitement and eagerness that I conduct this literature review to further analyze the intercultural aspects of music, the effects they have on, and are used as, human communication, and how we can view music as a global, intercultural language.

The analysis of music as intercultural communication is a wide-ranging topic, so it is best to narrow down our focus and concentrate on the premise of music in and as culture and communication, and the field of study in which these factors and ideals are closely examined. This leads us to the field of ethnomusicology, and the term “world music” that is often cited and utilized within the field to describe the global, cultural communicative powers of music. Interestingly enough, the term “world music,” as it is used in ethnomusicological pedagogy, has
The Recontextualization of “World Music” in Ethnomusicology

been defined in multiple ways and has been used in several differing contexts since the advent of ethnomusicology in the mid-1950s. It is in the process of examining the recontextualization of the term “world music” in ethnomusicology that one can understand the communicative powers of music and perceive it as an intercultural, global language. This process allows one to look beyond the easily-identified surface layers of music (genres) and begin to see how music breaks down cultural barriers, deafens the cultural power struggles of “us and them,” mitigates cultural stereotyping, and so much more.

It is through the analysis of numerous articles on ethnomusicological pedagogy, hermeneutics in intercultural communication, psychophysical aspects of music, human emotion in music, and modern technological advancements in media that this literature review seeks to prove that the recontextualization of the term “world music” is a positive, beneficial shift from a multicultural to intercultural vantage on music. This newly contextualized vantage point on music proves that “world music” is not a genre, but rather a processual adding of our own cultural and musical identities atop musical structures (psychophysical elements), and in doing so, we assign these structures new meanings that make sense to us. As described by Vorderwinkler (2010), “experience shows that shared musical experiences can generate strong emotions and an increasing number of cross-cultural musical projects would seem to indicate that people are seeking this shared experience across cultures in order to reach out to each other and achieve a better understanding” (p.2). It is important, then, to ask a single question to help guide our analysis: Can world music be considered an intercultural, global language that we all know and understand?

Ethnomusicology & the Term “World Music”
It is important in this review to understand what ethnomusicology is, when it came to prominence, and why it is still a staple in pedagogy in universities around the world today. “The discipline ethnomusicology deals with the study of music from a social and cultural perspective and aims to survey and analyze the music traditions of various cultures. Ethnomusicology also emphasizes the study of music of one’s own and other cultures which promotes the intercultural perspective of music” (Goswami, 2014, p.489). Although there is much debate as to when exactly the field of ethnomusicology came to prominence, many sources point the early musicological research being done in the Netherlands in the 1940s and 1950s as the beginnings of the discipline. In regards to the term, “Jaap Kunst, a Dutch musicologist, introduced the term ‘ethnomusicology’ in 1950. Kunst put the prefix ‘ethno’ in front of the word musicology with a hyphen to indicate that the study would be on the music of ethnic groups” (Goswami, 2014, p.490). So, it is understood that ethnomusicology is an academic discipline that observes the music of ethnic groups, but it is important to further understand what the area of study entails and how it differs from musicology.

“Frequently marginalized in academic circles as the study of “exotic”, “non-Western”, or Third World musics, it (ethnomusicology) has finally begun to overtake and surpass its sister field (historical musicology) in two ways: ideologically, in grappling with cultural and musical realities as global rather than delimited phenomena; and methodologically, in the range of techniques available to it from cross-disciplinary fertilization” (Porter, 1995, p.1). It could be deemed incredibly beneficial to a field of study and academic discipline to be open and vulnerable, because of its methodological processes, to new insights and extended research from nearly-related fields (such as cultural and historical musicology). It is because of this vulnerability to cross-disciplinary fertilization that the field is subject to “many variations in its
conceptual thought patterns, interpretations and applications” (Goswami, 2014, p.490). In recent years, the discipline has slowly progressed from maintaining an interdisciplinary approach to music to putting “special emphasis on social and cultural perspectives in the context of the study of world music cultures” (Goswami, 2014, p.490). It is here that the term “world music” finally comes to the forefront.

So often, the first thing that a person thinks of when hearing the term “world music” is that of a musical genre that listeners and consumers rarely flip through in a local music shop or come across for sale on the History Channel as a compilation album of “exotic” music of faraway places. Of course, this genre does indeed exist, but that is not the true definition of the term. “‘World music’ does not refer to a musical genre, [but rather as] a marketing term describing the products of musical cross-fertilization between the north – the US and Western Europe – and south – primarily African and the Caribbean Basin, which began appearing on the popular music landscape in the early 1980s (Pacini, 1993, p. 48). From 1985, the expanding ‘world music’ umbrella has come to include practically any musics of cultures of non-European origin” (Guilbault, 1997, p.31). So, it is without any doubt, that this term “world music” casts a very wide net in order to handle, examine, include, exclude, and analyze cultural music of the world. In order to understand and trace the eventual recontextualization of this term, we have to have a stringent understanding of the term culture, and how it relates back to the field of ethnomusicology. It is from this linkage of music, culture, and communication that we can begin to move forward with the recontextualization process.

The Multiple Perspectives of Culture

What exactly is culture? Unfortunately, this is a terribly difficult question to answer, but it is one we need to work towards in order to see the communicative powers of music (as a
global language) in a new light. Roy Shuker, an adjunct professor in Media Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, author, and avid music collector, “writes that culture is ‘one of the most difficult words in the English language’ (p.86). [It could be said that] the values, beliefs, and attitudes held by a group of people cultivate both an identity for themselves as well as an orderliness to everyday life” (Santos, 2012, p.6). So, if culture has to do with the stories of our everyday lives and the identities that we both maintain and place upon others, it is crucial that we look at the term in such a way that helps us better understand how culture influences us and our way of life. Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama (2013) state that “a dialectical perspective emphasizes the relational aspect of intercultural communication study. It highlights the relationship among various aspects of intercultural communication and the importance of viewing these holistically rather than in isolation. The key question becomes, can we really understand culture without understanding communication, and vice versa? [Additionally,] the dialectical perspective involves holding contradictory ideas simultaneously” (p.75). In understanding that this way of thinking (dialectical approach) may be in sharp contrast to that of the United States’ formal education sector, which tends to be much more dichotomous in nature, it is interesting to note here the beginnings of the recontextualization process we are in search for. Moving from a dichotomous and divided perspective on culture to a more holistic and inclusive one, we can now clearly identify two separate perspectives on culture and the way music fits in and functions as an intercultural language. These two perspectives are the anthropological perspective and the Marx, Heidegger, and Gadamer inspired hermeneutic paradigm.

**Music In & As Culture**
At the core of understanding culture and developing a perspective on it that makes sense to one’s own experiences, it is crucial that we look at the aspect of identity. When we create our own unique identity, it makes us different than the next person. But, does that mean that it divides us, or does it mean that it allows us to contribute to a larger, holistic global network? Yet again, maybe determining how we fit into culture (and culture itself, for that matter) is a mix of both, and it is up to us to determine how we approach our life and generate our own perspectives on it. It is here that music fits into the cultural identity picture perfectly. Getting back to ethnomusicology and the two cultural perspectives mentioned earlier (anthropological and hermeneutical), it can be said that “ethnomusicology observes and studies a particular music form ‘in’ and ‘as’ culture” (Goswami, 2014, p.492). From the two distinct perspectives on culture and the role that identity plays within it, it can be said that the communicative powers of music can have both positive and negative effects on people’s lives, depending on which perspective they choose to view culture.

Music is not immune to power struggles, stereotyping, conflict, segregation, and other negative occurrences common in an intercultural context. Also true is the fact that music, as a communicative medium that strikes human emotions, has the intense capability to bring people together around the world in a peaceful, loving manner. This idea of music ‘in’ and ‘as’ culture is crucial because it allows one to imagine the type of synergy that is produced (especially around a cultural catalyst like “world music”) when cultures clash into each other, or in another light, blend together. The way that the term “world music” is contextualized in ethnomusicology has very much to do with an individual’s maintained perspective on their cultural identity and the identity of others. Whereas one perspective (the anthropological) tends to view the world more as a “clashing of cultures,” the hermeneutical paradigm of culture tends to view the world as
more of a constant, processual “blending” of cultural identities. This “clashing” or “blending” of cultures is an interesting phenomenon, especially as it relates to music, because it can present an outcome that maintains an idea of “us vs. them” or “us and the others,” or, it can also present an outcome of harmony, togetherness, and a space where new ideas are generated and accepted. In fact, intercultural research conducted in the early 1990s helped to develop new terminology to describe this phenomenon. “At the basis of postcolonial discourse on intercultural collaboration is the notion of a contact zone, a term coined by Mary Louis Pratt to describe ‘social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination’ (Pratt, 1992/2008, p.7). Margaret Somerville and Tony Perkins (2003) reframed the contact zone in intercultural research collaborations as a ‘discomfort zone – a space where new and hybrid knowledge can be produced when difference brings opportunity for creativity’” (p.257) (Treloyn, 2016, p.6).

On one hand, “ethnomusicology involves new discourses that are attentive to race, gender, power and privilege that cast not just the musical other, but also the gazing ethnomusicologist, at the center of the study” (Treloyn, 2016, p.3). This anthropological (clashing / contact zone) perspective on world music somewhat took hold in the Western world a bit more prominently than expected in the 1980’s. “We (western cultures) romanticized the primitive and authentic cultures of the world – possible with a Western touch, to make them acceptable. We created a distinction between ‘us’ and ‘the others’” (Fock, 2000, p.57). Additionally, in terms of the limited view of world music as a genre, “the political discourse not only influences the creation of world music as a phenomenon, but it also defines (implicitly) what is ‘in’ and what is ‘out’. The lack of musically defined genre distinctions supplements this, as there is no other common characteristic on World Music other than its ‘otherness’ to Western
The Recontextualization of “World Music” in Ethnomusicology

In this way, it becomes easier to reject many genres as ‘exotic’ or irrelevant” (Fock, 2000, p.57).

But, what if we reframe our perspective on intercultural collaboration and look instead at world music in and as culture in a way where our identities are “blended” together in a processual, harmonious fashion; where our differences are rejoiced instead of neglected? What if music can be viewed as a global, intercultural language? It is this mentality (where music is communicated, enacted upon, and listened to in order to bring people together) where the hermeneutical paradigm of culture makes its mark on ethnomusicological pedagogy.

Recontextualization: The Hermeneutical Paradigm of Culture

“Hermeneutics in its earliest Greek form is to be understood as ‘[…] translating something unintelligible into the language everybody speaks and understands.’ It brings something out of the world of the gods (its etymological origin comes from Hermes, the messenger of the gods), not the world of humans, or out of another world into one’s own (Palmer, 2007: 44)” (Vorderwinkler, 2010, p.6). The beginnings of hermeneutics can be traced back to the work of philosopher Martin Heidegger and his acclaimed 1927 work Sein und Zeit (Being and Time). In this work, Heidegger grapples with the most basic and fundamental philosophical question; what it means for something to be. Heidegger opposed the ideals of ancient Greek thinking which deduced and limited the existence of things to their actual presence in the world. Instead, he believed that being-in-the-world was dictated and dependent on our context, and that, (in laymen’s terms) things could be and exist, on the same level as human life, without us actually witnessing their presence. When thinking in this regard, language, music, and (even more simply) sound have a presence and sense of realness that is of equal relevance to that of human life. So, a connection to music in and as culture, and more specifically, world music as
a global, intercultural language makes adequate sense in this perspective. What is most important and relevant to this review, though, is the exploration of “the hermeneutical quality of music in relation to intercultural dialogue, and so, it seems important to look at Jürgen Habermas’ theory on the hermeneutics of intercultural communication” (Vorderwinkler, 2010, p.6).

A follower of Martin Heidegger and other predominant hermeneutical philosophers like Karl Marx, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Fredric Jameson, Jürgen Habermas is influential because of his hermeneutical perspectives on communication and intercultural relationships. Versus viewing intercultural communication and cultural relationships in a light where they occur in conflicting contact zones or discomfort zones, as mentioned earlier, Habermas instead reasoned that culture, and the relationships formed and broken within it, can only be viewed and understood through the human precondition he termed ‘intact intersubjectivity.’ “Habermas draws from the precondition of ‘intact intersubjectivity’ (unversehrte Intersubjektivität) which creates symmetrical conditions of free reciprocal recognition. […] His idea focuses on universalism and the symmetry of dialogue partners, on their willingness to learn and change their perspectives, uncontaminated by power structures and pure strategic action (Solter, 1993: 37, 38). In A Berlin Republic, he further argues that intercultural understanding can not only be achieved through complete symmetry, which allows for empathic understanding and therefore intercultural communication to take place” (ibid.: 38) (Vorderwinkler, 2010, p.7).

Habermas’ ideals on intact intersubjectivity, human symmetry, and universalism tend to point towards the held perspective on culture where multiple identities are continually “blended” together; where culture is forever-evolving into something new and distinct all its own. Of course, this hermeneutical paradigm is in heavy contrast to the anthropological perspective on culture, where identities collide erratically in contact zones, but how does this perspective move
forward from intercultural communication to deal directly with world music? A closer look at performers, composers, and audiences can provide many clues as to how this paradigm greatly affects music on both a physical and emotional level. Firstly, when analyzing music and the role that intercultural communication plays in it, the perspective from a performer or artist can be much different than the perspective of a listener or audience member. When it comes to looking back at specific styles and genres of music, it was jazz that first made a giant leap towards the inclusion of multiple ethnic identities to form bands that produced music that included multiple stylistic tones and progressions from different parts of the world. “Until after WWII, it [jazz] was denigrated by a white, Eurocentric culture, until jazz musicians started to revolutionize the Western notion of culture. As opposed to the existing culture of music, jazz was openly and interactive, and it assigned the audience an important and inclusive role, often obscuring its separation from the performers (Levine, 1989: 6,7)” (Vorderwinkler, 2010, p.8). An excellent example of a band that not only engaged in music that crossed genre-based borders but also included members of multiple unique cultural identities was that of the jazz-fusion band *Weather Report*. Comprised of Austrian (European Caucasian), African American, Latino, and Pacific Islander musicians, the band, whom was most prolific in the mid to late 1970s, “picked musicians from different ethnic backgrounds and nationalities [choosing to] consciously ignore linguistic barriers and base their collaboration on musical excellence and intuitive understanding (ibid.: 99-112)” (Vorderwinkler, 2010, p.9).

It is evident that the audience and the performer, at least in a live setting, have a strong relationship founded upon the making of and listening to music. This music-based relationship can break down cultural barriers and bring people together to enjoy and appreciate an emotionally resonating, artistic experience. It is on this basis of emotion that this review will now
help reveal the benefits of the reframing and recontextualization of the term world music. Seeing how the hermeneutical paradigm of culture has allowed us to view and appreciate this shift in perspective, it is vital to now look at emotion, and the psychophysical aspects in music that trigger certain emotions, in order to better understand how phonetically, as a language, music breaks down cultural barriers and resonates with humans of any ethnic background.

**Emotion in Music of the World: The Psychophysical Dimension**

When it comes to identity, which is something I have already covered in this review, so much of who we perceive ourselves to be and how we act and communicate can be traced to biological and cognitive processes that delve into the realm of study of human emotion. Recent research in relatively new branches of ethnomusicology “are focusing more on the social and ecological perspectives of music in the shared and cultural context. Tia DeNora’s (2000, 2003) sociology of music is heralding on the idea of how social life is penetrated by music at different levels, and the so-called ‘new musicology’ is looking at biological and sociological conceptions of musical events (Pavlicevic and Andsell, 2009: 360, 372)” (Vorderwinkler, 2010, p.14). The biological aspect of emotion is something that every single person on earth shares, and since music of the world (world music), no matter what it sounds like or how different or similar it may be, strikes human emotion very deeply at a communicative and linguistic level. Hence, it could be said that world music is a global language we all understand. But, what is it in music that strikes human emotion so severely? And, how do we use music, and for what purpose, at this emotional level?

“In her book, *Music in Everyday Life*, Tia DeNora supports the purposeful use of music to improve our lives and emotional states. […] DeNora states that music is a conscious means for individuals to engage in emotional self-regulation and the ‘construction and maintenance of’
mood’ (DeNora, 47)” (Santos, 2012, p.12). Further in her text, DeNora describes how music can be used as a ‘tool’ with which we can improve our lives, lift our moods, increase our energy levels, and enhance our attention spans and engagement with the world. Music can have such an immense emotional effect on someone’s life that it can even take on the role as a “friend” or companion to someone. Although this phenomenon may seem weird and a bit irrational to some, people have a tendency to ‘befriend’ their music much more often than we realize. DeNora goes on to explain that “because we each orient to music in a personal way, we interpret it and place it in our lives in different ways. ‘Achieving this regulation requires a high degree of reflexivity,’ she writes, asserting that we act upon music and that music acts upon us as well. We assess each new circumstance and respond to each exigency with a particular song or genre to become the change agent for our emotions” (Santos, 2012, p.14).

‘Befriending’ or using music as a ‘tool’ to improve our emotional well-being and outlook on life is a fairly well-established area of study, as proven above by Tia DeNora’s research and others in the ‘new musicology’ field such as Thomas Chamorro-Premuzic and Adrian Furnham. It is then important to move ahead and observe the actual sound in music and how the phonetical alterations of music have an effect on human identity and emotion. By completely removing culture from music and beginning to instead focus on music in its actualized state as a variance of soundwave patterns, we can gain yet another perspective as to how music can be seen and used as an intercultural, global language.

When one addresses and analyzes music in more of a lingual and structural fashion, absent of cultural conventions, they are focusing on psychophysical dimensions in music. “A psychophysical dimension can be defined as any property of sound that can be perceived independent of musical experience, knowledge, or enculturation. For example, speed of pulse, or
tempo, is a psychophysical dimension, whereas a perfect cadence is not” (Balkwill & Thompson, 2014, p.44). When we remove the cultural conventions of music to study it as an emotional trigger and “emotional language,” it is easy to understand how music has the undeniable capability of making people feel, which is a factor of human behavior completely non-dependent on cultural background or cultural identity.

The 2014 study, *A Cross-Cultural Investigation of the Perception of Emotion in Music: Psychophysical and Cultural Cues* by Laura-Lee Balkwill and William Forde Thompson goes into deep analysis as to how and why psychophysical dimensions in music, such as tempo, rhythmic complexity, melodic complexity, pitch range, and timbre effect human emotions such as joy, sadness, anger, and peace. I found this study to be very enlightening and educational because it did indeed prove that the foundational, psychophysical characteristics of music have a direct effect on human emotions, regardless of cultural context. The study states that “tempo has been most consistently associated with emotional content [and that] in the absence of relevant culture-specific knowledge regarding the conventional associations of emotion and music […] listeners relied upon the only resource at their disposal: psychophysical cues. This strategy succeeded for the perception of joy, sadness, and anger but not for the perception of peacefulness. This indicates that the psychophysical cues for joy, sadness, and anger were salient enough to make an accurate assessment of the intended emotion” (Balkwill & Thompson, 2014, p.49, 58).

**Technology’s Effect on World Music**

We now know that music of the world has a strong effect on human emotion and cultural identity, which can be attributed to both cultural conventions and psychophysical dimensions. This fact can now be perceived and tested in today’s digitally-driven world, where modern
technologies are changing the way people meet, come together, connect, and communicate. Is world music as a global, intercultural language being enhanced or diminished due to modern technologies? Taking a deeper look at modern music technologies such as internet radio and e-communication technologies such as on-line chat rooms and webcams, we can analyze how both music and technology are shaping and altering the foundations of intercultural communication.

E-communication technologies such as webcams and on-line chat rooms have enhanced the ability to access people from all parts of the globe, which allows for almost instantaneous intercultural communication. An example of technology helping to share and transport music as a ‘language’ to different parts of the world is that of the Orff-Tswana intercultural music-making initiative, where “intercultural music-making traditions were shared and experienced transnationally by utilizing digital technologies (chat rooms and webcams) for communication between trans-national higher education institutions” (Klopper, 2010, p.48). Modern recording technologies allow us to ‘gift’ music as a commodity, which in and of itself helps to spread music of the world and add new identities to the ever-growing ‘blending’ process of culture. Some feel, though, that new technologies, such as web radio, may be spreading cultural bias instead of the true characteristics of the many unique identities and cultural patterns apparent in world music. Kaksalan, Guney, and Rizvanoglu (2010) states that “the impact of an overarching global web culture based on an individualistic and customizable use seems to eliminate the cultural differences in radio listening experience. However, as a customizable ‘music box’, which offers a multi-choice music database to the listeners all over the world, web radio causes today an illusion of diversity. […] Therefore, web radio moves towards a globalized pattern of production while increasingly serving fragmented and individual aspirations” (p.15).
Whether one believes that world music as a global, intercultural language is being enhanced or diminished by digital technologies is up for debate, but what is certain is that the direct connection and relationship between music and intercultural communication is still as strong and evident as it has ever been.

Conclusion

Throughout this literature review, there has been one critical question at hand; can world music, if framed in a new context in the study of Ethnomusicology, be considered an intercultural, global language? By traversing through the history and aspects of ethnomusicological pedagogy, the anthropological perspective and hermeneutical paradigm of culture, cultural identity, human emotion, psychophysical dimensions of music, and the effects of modern technologies on music and intercultural communication, it is safe to say that world music, indeed, can be considered an intercultural, global language that we all know and understand.

Music has the ability to bring people from all parts of the world together in harmonious celebration. Music is an ingredient/catalyst in culture, and it can be termed as culture, where it shapes and defines our ever-changing cultural identities. Music pulls at, effects, and can dictate human behavior at a deep, emotional level. All humans, regardless of their cultural makeup, assign their own meanings to the linguistic, psychophysical aspects of music in order to make sense of their own interpretations of music. This proves that our own cultural identities are ingredients to a processual, global, musical language. World music, as an intercultural, global language has the ability to break down cultural communicative barriers and allow for world-wide communication to exist.
References


