

### Cultural appropriation in western music

Cultural appropriation in western music as a cultural/economic phenomenon is inextricably linked with the invention of sound recording and the development of the international recording industry, but the background to its emergence covers the whole span of modern Western musical history, and what some analysts have deemed the digital revolution. This is particularly evident among indigenous peoples and their musical genres, such as the Urarina of Peruvian Amazonia who face many challenges in the face of globalization and the forces propelling cultural appropriation.

Since at least the Renaissance, musicians, composers, music publishers (and, in the 20th century, radio stations and recording companies) have been part of a wide-ranging and continuous process of cultural appropriation that developed in the wake of the European colonialization of America, Africa, Asia and Oceania. In this process, styles, forms and influences from non-Western music—especially novel melodies, rhythmic patterns or harmonic structures—were discovered, appropriated, adapted and incorporated into mainstream Western popular music.

This appropriation process has a long history in European art music, which bears numerous traces of the adoption of fashionable European popular and folk dances into the classical genre. Dance styles like the minuet, the gavotte—the galliard and the gavotte—of ton derived from popular folk dances—were just four among

scores of “dance crazes” that swept the courts of Europe during the Renaissance and early Baroque.

However, by the time Bach and Handel were writing their great instrumental works during the late Baroque, the rhythms and tunings of these dances had already been appropriated, formalized and incorporated into the structure of elite European “art” music. This trend continued in 18th and 19th century with folk-dance crazes like the mazurka, the waltz and the polka.

One well-known example of cultural appropriation into the European classical music genre arose from the 18th century, known as “Orientalism,” in which music, architecture, costume and visual arts from “Oriental” cultures (including the Ottoman empire, India, China and Japan) became highly fashionable. One of the most enduring artifacts of this fad is the third movement of Mozart’s

popular Piano Sonata No. 11 in A major, K. 311, known as the Rondo alla turca (“rondo in the Turkish style”).

One of the earliest examples of crossover music is the music of French composer Claude Debussy, in 1889 the French government staged the great Paris Exposition, an event that was to have profound effects on many areas of western art and music. Debussy visited the exposition and it was here that he first heard gamelan music performed by Sundanese musicians. He was transfixed by the hypnotic, layered sound of the gamelan orchestra and reportedly returned to the Dutch East Indies pavilion over several days to listen to the Indonesian musicians perform and to study the structure and tuning of this novel musical form. His exposure to gamelan music had a direct influence on the composition of his famous Nocturnes for orchestra.

The Didgeridoo instrument of the Indigenous Australians is another collection activity took on some aspects of a crusade, as musicologists raced to preserve vanishing musical artefacts before they were lost to history. This view was a key motivation for

the ethnologists who collected and preserved examples of Australian Aboriginal music, since it was widely believed at the time that the Aboriginal “Taps” and music from other countries and continents, and as Eurocentric cultural and social biases began to be broken down during the 1960s, music from other cultures gained increasingly broad acceptance.

The key factor in this transition was the invention of sound recording, but it was also greatly influenced by the wide-ranging program of collection of European traditional folk music by 19th and early 20th century European classical composers and musicologists. This process was, at first, simply one facet of the multifaceted 19th century passion for collection and classification, but it was given greater impetus by the growing awareness that the devastating impact of Western urban-industrial culture was decimating traditional cultures.

During the 19th century this collection program was necessarily restricted to the written notation of melodies, lyrics and arrangements, but it was transformed in the early 20th century by the invention of sound recording and the development of portable cylinder and disc recording equipment, enabling musicologists for the first time to capture this music in actual performance, and the new technology was eagerly adopted by musicologists in Europe and America.

This growing archive of “folkloric” recordings remained

largely within the confines of academia until after World War II. But in America, these collection programs— notably those sponsored by the Library of Congress—were to have an immense influence on the development of the international popular music industry.

Folk-music collectors like the great Alan Lomax worked assiduously for decades to find and record examples of almost every facet of native American, African American and European-American folk music, and the work of these many scholars, enthusiasts and collectors preserved the sound of many legendary “folk” performers and thousands of hours of priceless song and music from the American folk music tradition.

This musicological program was again revolutionized in the early 1950s by the new technology of magnetic tape recording, which for the first time allowed music collectors to make very stable, long-duration, high-fidelity studio and field recordings. The concurrent introduction of the LP audio disc format, which could hold as much as thirty minutes of continuous music per side, allowed many such “folk music” recordings to be released into the consumer market for the first time.

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