

Cultural pluralism and the ethics of teaching world music

1. What is world music?

In the world of popular music, 'world music' was a commercial construction, coined in a London pub in 1987 at a meeting of international music industry executives who wanted to promote a boom in African music. It rapidly became a successful marketing label that brought together the old categories of folk and international musics with more recent 'roots' and 'fusion' categories. In 1990 a new Billboard chart for world music ensured this new genre's continued growth.

This 'world music' includes Western popular music stars' collaborations with non-Western musicians and any other non-Western or non-rock popular musics distributed (and often produced) in the West. It also includes music 'collected' by ethnomusicologists and folklorists in the past, harvested by the big recording companies and released on CD together with documentation guaranteeing authenticity.

The term also gained popularity as a more attractive branding of the formidably named academic discipline of Ethnomusicology. It refers to the discipline's study of traditional or indigenous musics of the world and includes some non-Western art musics. It identifies each separate music-culture as exclusive to a particular place and group of people.

In Australia, the term 'world music' applies both to the music circulated by the music industry and to these allegedly intact musical traditions in their imagined faraway places studied in our schools and universities.

During the 1980s, just as 'world music' recordings were becoming popular, so was the academic field of popular music studies, from which emerged critiques informed by new developments in cultural theory. Musical traditions are not enclosed within fixed cultures but are always in dialogue with the wider world. Colonial contact, migration, urbanization, and mass communications all produce changes in musical practices.

2. Ethical debates around 'popular' world music

In the discourse of world music, Steven Feld identifies two divergent perspectives.

Anxious narratives derive from a view of culture as fixed. They focus on the commodification of allegedly 'pure' or 'authentic' musical traditions, the appropriation of music from its traditional 'owners', and the exploitation of their labour.

Celebratory narratives derive from a view of culture as fluid. They point to the reappropriation of Western pop in the production of hybrid musics that break down fixed identities to become truly global music (implying a kind of equality) or alternatively, work towards the creation of new political and cultural identities. From this perspective, 'world music means the joy of playing any kind of

music, anywhere in the world, with anyone (live or virtual)'. Consumers imagine that so much choice implies some kind of democracy: that every voice can be heard as every musical style shared in this 'best of all global communities'.

But this feel-good promotion of diversity masks the reality that this is all about sales, and profits sales are unlikely to benefit the musicians or their communities. So the economic exploitation of musicians has been one concern, as has the musical tokenism that wants world music always to be an array, a smorgasbord, with one of every musical flavour (and ethnicity, and region) on display – for it's the concept of diversity that is being celebrated as much as the music produced.

The production and circulation of world music, both in the music industry and in the academy, reproduces a kind of primitivism in its representations of musicians and their cultural identities as less highly developed than our own. Value is attributed to authenticity, a slippery notion that in world music slides towards exoticism in its preference for allegedly intact cultural traditions, unique instruments and sounds, geographical isolation, colourful dress and preferably dark skin, unfamiliar languages...in sum, world music and its cultural contexts are Other to the Western consumer.

There is also a distinct whiff of neo-colonialism in the power differential that allows the Western record producer or consumer to retain 'the power and privilege to contact and know, to take away and use'.

3. Ethical debates around 'traditional' musics

These insights have been taken up only partially by those who teach world music in universities. Ethnomusicology's mission is to celebrate cultural pluralism by promoting understanding of the 'musics of the world' in opposition to the music academy's identification of 'music' with Western European art music. Ironically, this division of musical territory institutionalises the split between 'our' music and 'Other' music. In this way, ethnomusicology is Eurocentric.

The ethical questions that most often arise in researching, teaching and performing 'world music' focus on issues of authenticity, change and representation. Because of its emphasis on music as culture and the importance to it of place and social meaning, ethnomusicologists tend to focus on musical traditions that are tied to specific geographical locations and identifiable cultural groups and kinds of social organisation.

Implicit in these choices is an exoticism, an excitement in cultural novelty which increases with geographical and cultural distance, as well as a concern with authenticity in the musical culture, especially in relation to change. There is an assumption of cultural integrity and fear of contamination that is reminiscent of romantic nationalism's adoration of cultural purity in folklore and folk music.

Texts for university students generally present world music as armchair travel or an international smorgasbord, or a mixture of both, appealing to their desire to consume one of everything, to experience a sonic feast, a tour of exotic locations.

4. World music in Australian schools

In Australian schools, world music is taught in both the general primary curriculum and in secondary music classes. In the past, schools taught multicultural music and before *that*, it was called folk music. As a child in the 1960s, I learned folk songs of the British Isles and a few from foreign places. We sang the Volga Boat Song and learned that life in Russia was cold and dark and difficult and there seemed to be a shortage of wind (or maybe sails) because men had to pull the boats along with ropes. We never learned anything more about Russia.

In the 1980s, when I played in bush bands in regional Australia, teachers asked us to include 'multicultural' music and dances in our programs. Schools and festivals hired bands that were not limited to a single ethnicity, preferring them to be a one-stop shop for cultural diversity. For teaching multiculturalism through music was about celebrating diversity through fancy dress, foreign foods, exciting dances, exotic music. Ethnicity was commodified, something that could be consumed and reproduced as a style or flavour, in much the same way as you might learn salsa dancing or Thai cooking. In terms of the 9th 'Value for Australian Schooling' in the moral education framework, this approach taught students 'to be aware of others and their cultures' and to 'accept diversity within a democratic society' but not the more important goal, of 'being included and including others'.

In teaching cultural diversity, the pluralism of our world is represented by Others who are distant geographically and whose cultural differences are emphasised. Would a child from one of these multicultural backgrounds feel included, 'feel special about their culture'? This is the claim of a local producer of world music texts, yet it is even more unlikely to be justified than in the heyday of multiculturalism. For the aim today is not to teach cultural pluralism through music, but to teach music using the diverse musical traditions that have come to represent that ideal. So teachers dissect 'world music', in ways quite alien to these music systems, isolating rhythms or pitch changes, for example, to achieve the 'learning outcomes' determined by Western music educationists, whose default musical system and analytical method is that of European art music.

In using world music to teach cultural pluralism or simply to teach music, the centre of knowledge, the location of authority and the power to represent are all in an assumed 'neutral' position that is actually that of Western high culture.

5. Alternative approaches

This list suggests that if you record, consume, perform or teach world music, you will go straight to hell. Music educationists who want to avoid this fate advocate that:

- we teach more cultural context
(but curriculum does not allow time for this)
- teachers should be sincere, caring and sensitive in representing others (but good intentions can't counter the kinds of misrepresentation I have identified)
- we train student teachers in ethnomusicology fieldwork methods
(this will bring them but not their pupils closer to source musicians)
- we adopt texts that use recordings and websites to allow a real musician to introduce the music and culture of their home place virtual community (but why not simply)
- use local musicians to create communities of practice in schools?

For today's students, 'music' is what they listen to on their mp3 players or through other media. It's a commodity that's produced elsewhere and for them it's about individual consumption and individual choice. In raising these issues and sketching the debates as they apply to music education, I want to insist that music is a modality through which we all live: through which we perceive and communicate with the world through our bodies, our imaginations, and our emotions. We all have the capacity to do this actively rather than solely as consumers and for this reason, I advocate that real musicians, wherever they were born and whatever their musical genre, become the respected resource from which our students learn.

reference:

Steven Feld (2001) 'A sweet lullaby for world music' in Arjun Appadurai (ed.) *Globalization*. Durham, CT and London: Duke University Press.