

Beyond the Folksong:
Aesthetic Concepts in World Music and their Implications for Music Educators.

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Introduction

World music has become an important component of the curriculum in many states and school districts. Even when it is not mandated, music educators often include world music in their materials because they envision the value to the students. However, the use and implementation is often challenging to teachers due to a lack of knowledge and/or experience with the music of various cultures. Teachers struggle with choosing materials and how to effectively implement them in a way that develops cultural and musical understanding.

A common approach for music teachers is to select a folksong or two as “representative” of a culture. They often teach the song(s) either in the native language and/or English then enhance the experience with some background on the culture and possibly even a listening example. Debates and philosophical discussions on the usefulness of this approach are discussed in professional journals and at professional development events. These discussions generally involve topics like authenticity, music universals, and pluralism. Teachers also discuss the difficulties and resistance they encounter with their students when they attempt to expose them to the music of various cultures.

In a 1975 article in the *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Schwadron ponders the value of including aesthetics conceptualizations when approaching the music of other cultures. He asks, “how can we get children to understand empirically that music can be organized and responded to in different but equally logical ways?” (p. 106). He suggests that “the music educator’s view should be on music in cultural perspectives, with the musico-aesthetic as a primary focus and the extra-musical secondary” (p. 105). The article discusses a fusion of ethnomusicology and music education that is centered on value objects, perceptive capacities, and philosophical purpose. It

is, therefore, the purpose of this paper to attempt to describe some examples of these types of aesthetic phenomenon and make useful and usable suggestions for implementation in music education.

Aesthetics in World Music

Every culture is comprised of its own musical traditions, genres, histories, practices, and conceptions of beauty. These components make up and influence the aesthetics of each culture in what Immanuel Kant labeled “aesthetic community” (Erlmann, 1998). Though these aesthetic communities are continuously being modified, developed, and influenced, there are still aesthetic conceptions that have been engrained in the cultures and that can be appreciated through the traditional music and arts.

Aesthetic concepts may be encountered in the visual arts, dance forms, theater, and musical practices. Often, the aesthetic sensibilities manifest similarly, yet uniquely, in more than one art form and may be better understood to an outsider through multiple sensory experiences. Musically, aesthetic conceptions often appear in timbral nuances in voices and instruments, rhythmic practices, processes of creation/composition, relationships to movement, and structural components. Following is a discussion of significant aesthetic concepts from four Asian countries, then an elaboration upon how they may be implemented in music education.

Japan

Japanese culture is alive with rich and varied aesthetic sensibilities in all of its art forms. Some of these aesthetic concepts are apparent in more than one of the forms and are often even associated with spiritual or religious philosophies. Japanese culture appears to have a heightened awareness of aesthetic sensibilities which present themselves through concrete terminology and elaborate philosophical traditions. These aesthetic concepts are often especially apparent in the music, dance, and theatrical elements.

Ma

The aesthetic concept of *ma* is often defined as “space” and refers to space in terms of time and physical space (Pilgrim, 1986). In visual art, *ma* is similar to the Western art concept of the “use of negative space”. It can be seen in the Zen paintings that are so embedded in Japanese culture. In literary arts, *ma* is found in reference to *renga* (poetry), which influenced *haiku* (Miner, 1979), and manifests as the space between the linked verses. Musically, *ma* is conceptualized as space between musical events and can extend to the space between notes, between phrases, how a note is approached, and the length of a note. It is not necessarily to the concept of “rest” in Western music because rests are precisely measured and represent a specific amount of space. *Ma* is a type of “rhythmic elasticity” (Malm, 1986). It is an appreciation of the space or silence and how it affects the perception of the music. *Ma* is not related to a specific musical genre, but in the performance of a work. One might hear comments such as, “*ma ga warui*” which translates as “the *ma* is bad” in reference to situations or artistic works (Pilgrim,

1986). Performers must develop an intuitive sense of *ma* in order to be an effective and artistic musician.

A strong sense of *ma* is especially imperative in the theater form called *noh*. Not only do the musicians have to understand the aesthetic of *ma*, but the actors must also have sense of *ma*. The instrumental musicians, who are responsible for the percussive patterns and the vocalizations that are tightly interwoven with the action and storyline, must have an impeccable sense of *ma* in order to artistically place the prescribed patterns. They must also place the spaces (*ma*) carefully in preparation for vocal entrances (Malm, 1986). The actors are responsible for the use of *ma* both vocally and through movement (or the cessation of movement) to create the dramatic effect that characterizes *noh* drama. The performer may pause (add a *ma*) at an imperative movement in the action to let the moment or drama of an event set in.

Appreciation of *ma* in the various arts forms in Japan requires an informed connoisseur. Being aware of the concept and how it is manifested in each form allows a person to experience the aesthetics of Japanese arts and culture on a higher level. Awareness can be especially enlightening in Japanese music, allowing the listener to appreciate a performer's use of *ma* as a tool for portraying musical nuances or artistry.

Timbre

Appreciation for musical timbre is another aesthetic that is critical in Japanese music. Though there are a variety of distinct timbres in Japanese music, two are of special interest in terms of musical aesthetics – the timbre of a single sound and *sawari*.

Single sound. The idea of appreciating the timbre of a single sound is a fascinating aesthetic concept. One of the best example of this timbral experience can be heard through the

single ring of a bell. Instead of hearing that ring as a single sound, it can be aesthetically perceived as three different sounds: the attack, body, and decay (Trimillos, 1983). This can also be conceptualized as an “aftersound” or “aftertone” which is characteristic of many of the Japanese instruments, especially strings.

Sawari. The term, *sawari*, is used as a description of a “twangy” sound heard on the *biwa* and the *shamisen*. This *sawari* is a rattling sound (or “aftersound”) produced by the strings, which have much elasticity, and is amplified by the resonating body of the instruments. The strings are not close to the necks of the instruments and, therefore, have much room in which to vibrate (Malm, 2000). On the *biwa*, all of the strings produce *sawari* while only the first string (the lowest) on the *shamisen* produces *sawari* (Sakata, 1966). However, the other strings will sometimes cause the *sawari* string of the *shamisen* to vibrate sympathetically. Each instrument is carefully crafted to produce the right amount of *sawari* and meet the timbral aesthetic expectation.

Jo ha kyu

Jo ha kyu is a structural aesthetic that is found in many Japanese musical genres including: *noh*, *gagaku*, *kabuki*, Buddhist chant (*shomyo*), *jiuta*, *nagatu*, and *shamisen* (Malm, 2000). It is also common in the art of flower arranging and the martial art form named *kendo*. This structure involves three parts – introduction, scattering, and rushing. Musically, they transition seamlessly and could be conceived as a through-composed composition. It can be used to structure individual phrases of a piece or an entire composition (Malm, 2000), but serves as a tool for creating tension and release no matter the manifestation. *Jo ha kyu* may be most

easily understood through dance in *gagaku*. The *jo* section consists of the dancers entering the stage with musical accompaniment. The next section – *ha* – becomes an exposition of the musical material with the dancers performing the essential movements or steps. *Kyu* acts as a climactic tool in which the ensemble increases in speed and the dancing increases in intensity. However, the piece usually ends with a return to a slower, freer musical structure.

In *noh*, the three terms, *jo ha kyu*, can be found as sectional headings such as *jo no dan*, *ha no dan*, or *kyu no dan*. *Jo ha kyu* can also be used as a structural element in terms of movement in *noh*. It is characterized mostly by tempo and energy (Berberich, 1984). The initial steps of the movement are slow and deliberate and correspond with *jo*. Those steps move into the *ha* section and gradually increase in speed and seamlessly transition to the fastest movements in the *kyu* where it stops suddenly at the height of the energy. The *kyu* then transitions into a new *jo* section/pattern and the process repeats. This structural guide dominates the movements in *noh* and can often be seen in the forward or backward locomotor movements. As a phrase structure, *jo ha kyu* manifests in the percussion of *noh* and *kabuki* theater (Malm, 1963). In the pattern below (Figure 1), the first two beats are considered the *jo*, the next two beats are the *ha*, and the last four beats are the *kyu* (Malm, 1963, p.79).

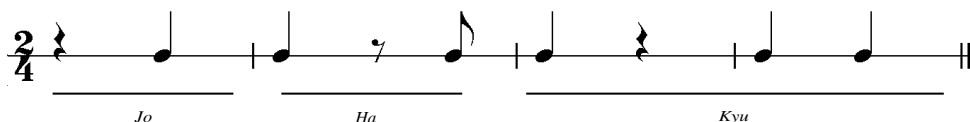


Figure 1 – *Jo ha kyu* structure of a phrase.

China

Many aesthetic sensibilities in Japan have been influenced by Chinese music, philosophy, and other arts. Confucianism and Buddhism have had tremendous impact on the cultural aspects of both countries. Though the two cultures share similar aesthetics and entwined histories, those connections are not necessarily the purpose of this discussion. Therefore, the Chinese aesthetic sensibilities discussed in the following section are distinctly found in Chinese musical genres.

Fangman jiahua

Many musical genres in China are heterophonic in texture, where the same musical line is played or sung with slight variations simultaneously. One genre in which this is especially apparent and characteristic is in *jiangnan sizhu* music (silk and bamboo music) (Lau, 2008). This amateur, or *literati*, instrumental ensemble music has traditionally been heard in tea houses and involves varying combinations of instruments that may include: *dizi*, *xiao*, *erhu*, *pipa*, *yangqin*, *sheng*, and *sanxian*. The instruments will play similar versions of a single melody while taking turns “adding flowers”, which are melodic embellishments. The phrase that is often used in reference to this aesthetic technique is *fangman jiahua* which translates to “making slow and adding flowers” (Witzleben, 1995). These embellishments serve to develop the music through subtle differences. Each participant has their own personal style and performs different types of embellishments depending on the instrument they are playing. Though they take turns adding more elaborate embellishments, the other instruments that are maintaining the simple version of the melody are still playing with some slight variations. The simple version is often referred to as “*jian*” and the complex or denser version is called “*fan*” (Witzleben, 1995).

Yuanxing

An aesthetic property that is prevalent in Beijing Opera is called *yuanxing* (roundness) (Wichmann, 1991). Though there is an aural component to *yuanxing*, it is most recognizable through the movements of the performers. The implementation of roundness can be observed in the general posture of the performers. It is also apparent in the movement of the body or specific body parts. It is common to see circles, arcs, and rounded pathways taken to the next spot on the stage. Performers' eyes will often even perform a rounded path to the object they intend to focus upon, emphasizing the importance of the object.

Korea

Han

Vocal timbre can serve as a very distinctive aesthetic component of the music of any culture. Outsiders often assume that the vocal timbre of all Asian countries, especially Japan and Korea, are similar to the commonly high and strident timbres found in many Chinese vocal genres. However, this is a misconception, especially for Korean vocal music. Korea has a distinct vocal timbre that is extremely evident in the narrative musical genre known as *p'ansori*. This vocal aesthetic is referred to as having “*han*”, or a sense of suffering that comes from a tragic life (Willoughby, 2000).

A voice with *han* can typically be characterized as being harsh, raspy, and rough. The speech and singing use very emotional and dynamic vocalizations. Other timbral and performance nuances that affect the aesthetic perception of *han* in *p'ansori* are harsh attacks, the use of vibrato, pronunciation, and microtonal melodic contours (Willoughby, 2000). The use of *han* in *p'ansori* helps to portray the emotion of the story and evoke those emotions in the audience.

Him and sigimsae

An aesthetic concept closely related to *han* is called *him*. This principle dominates Korean preferred timbres in a general way, rather than specifically in relation to vocal music. *Him* is a tone color that is powerful with vibrancy and vitality as opposed to a clear and sweet sound (Byang-ki, 2002). It must portray timbral nuances in terms of pitch and volume that are referred to as *sigimsae*. Byang-ki (2002) states that *sigimsae* “indicates something that

‘ferments’ a sound in order to make it flavorful” (p. 815). *Him* and the *sigimsae* are expected in performances on melodic instruments as expressive tools.

Youm

Another timbral aesthetic important in Korean string music and instruments is called *youm*. This refers to the sound that occurs after the initial plucking of a note, or an “aftersound” (Byong-ki, 2002). *Youm* is sometimes compared to a ripple in the water after a stone breaks the surface. This timbre is so important in Korean that string instruments that do not produce that aesthetic sound are not considered to “string” instruments in Korea (Byong-ki, 2002).

Mot

A non-timbral aesthetic found in Korea is called “*mot*”. This occurs when something attractive deviates slightly from the norm (Byong-ki, 2002). *Mot* is found in many aspects of Korean arts and life and is an inherent trait in an object. Sometimes things will be referred to negatively in terms of *mot*. Byong-ki (1978) provides an example as when something is considered cheap or inferior and someone refers to it as *sinmot* (sour *mot*).

Musically, *mot* is often used in reference to the genre called *sanjo*, which is an instrumental genre where a solo instrument is accompanied by a *janggo* drum. The featured instruments may be the *geomungo*, *gayageum*, *daegeum*, *haegeum*, or *ajaeng* (Kwon, n.d.). The way in which *mot* is manifested in this genre is through the use of improvisation by the performer. As they deviate from the melody, they can evoke a sense of *mot*.

India

Rasa

The Indian theory of aesthetics is called *rasa* and can be traced back to the ancient Sanskrit document, *Natyasastra* (Dace, 1963). It is still the dominant concept in Indian arts, especially the performing arts. *Rasa* is aligned with emotions in that there are essentially nine main *rasas* or emotions. These are love, heroism, disgust, anger, laughter, terror, pity, wonder, and tranquility. These *rasas* are also aligned with colors and deities. In theatrical forms, such as *kathakali*, *rasas* are subtly expressed through prescribed expression (*natyam*) and gestures (*nrithyam* and *mudras*) in the dance movements (Zarilli, 2000). The costumes and make-up are also aligned with *rasas*, especially through color.

Mudras

In the Indian book, *Hashtalakshana Deepika*, the prescribed *mudras* (hand gestures) and their meanings are laid out. There are 24 basic *mudras*, each associated with multiple sub-gestures for a total of 470 (Zarilli, 2000). These hand gestures are important components of various dance art forms, especially *kathakali*. The hand gestures are used to communicate emotion (*rasa*) and action to the audience and are embedded aspects of the dance movements.

Following is a chart (figure 2) depicting the basic *madras*.

Asamyutha hastas



Figure 2 – Mudras

Implications for Music Education

Music educators trying to teach the music of different cultures face many challenges, including the choice of materials, authenticity, cultural connections, and their own understanding of the music of other cultures. By focusing on aesthetic concepts that govern music and the arts in other cultures, teachers can help students to gain a deeper understanding of the other cultures and of their own culture. Seymour H. Fersh illuminates that point by saying, “the ‘glass’ through which other cultures are viewed serves not only as a window; it serves also as a mirror in which each can see a reflection of his own way of life” (Schwarden, 1975, p. 108). Taking the aesthetic concepts covered in this document and applying them directly to the classroom may be approached in various ways including: performing, listening, composition/arranging, improvisation, and movement.

The concept of heterophony and “adding flowers” to Chinese *jiangnan sizhu* music is an exciting opportunity to expose students to a variety of musical concepts already embedded in school curriculums through an aesthetic of another culture. By allowing students to learn a simple traditional folksong on Orff instruments and/or recorder, a teacher can allow them to “add flowers” to the melody. From this type of activity students get to experience the typical musical standards of performing on instruments and improvisation. Conceptually, the teacher can introduce heterophony/texture and embellishment. Culturally, a teacher can introduce students to a traditional Chinese genre of music (*jiangnan sizhu*), an aesthetic awareness of the culture, traditional Chinese instruments, and other cultural elements. A similar experience can be structured using the Korean concept of *mot* and how it is used in *sanjo*.

Exploring the concepts of *ma* and *jo ha kyu* can be done through composition and or arranging pieces in the classroom. A teacher could allow the students to either compose their

own pentatonic melody or arrange an existing tune utilizing *ma* or *jo ha kyu*. Again, this would fulfill the common content standards of performing on instruments and composition while extending their cultural understanding. This activity could be paired with listening to examples of Japanese *koto* music or viewing a Japanese theatre excerpt and discussing various aspects of the culture.

Movement activities could be introduced based on the concepts of roundness in Beijing Opera and the *mudras* of India. Often music teachers automatically integrate movement activities into their general music classrooms and discuss dance/movement concepts such as pathways, space, and levels. Bringing in these movement elements from other cultures can enhance the standards already being addressed and help develop cultural understanding.

Many of the aesthetic concepts addressed in this document center on timbre. Though it may appear to be a little excessive, it is important for children to get exposure to, and a better understanding of timbral differences and preferences. Research into the preferences of children in terms of world music shows that timbre is often one of the aspects that people respond to most and affects their preference for a piece both positively and negatively (Fung, 1996). Therefore, it is extremely important to expose students to different concepts of timbre and aesthetics and explore their own aesthetic preference.

The concept of a single sound as aesthetically pleasing can be a nice way to open any lesson on timbre. A teacher could make a single ring on a bell and ask students how many sounds they hear. From there, they can discuss the idea of the three sounds and identify other instruments in the classroom or in Western music that may have additional sounds students do not typically notice. Korean concepts of timbre can help explore vocal and instrumental aesthetics. Comparisons can be made within Korean music and between Korea and other

cultures, especially with Western instruments. Some comparisons that can be explored include Japanese *sawari* and Korean *youm*; Western instruments that have a *youm*-like or *sawari*-like aftersound; and *han*-like vocal timbres in Western pop music.

Conclusion

The use of these aesthetic concepts in a classroom can serve as a tool for enhancing students understanding on multiple levels. They gain a deeper, more far-reaching understanding of musical principles; they explore and expand perceptions of beauty around the world; they enhance their understanding of their own perceptions of beauty and those of their culture; and they learn about new musical principles they might not normally encounter in a music class which relies only on Western music. These basic aesthetic principles in musical and cultural context can be used as a starting point for music teachers interested in using world music in their classrooms. As they implement these concept and approaches, they can expand their own understanding of world music and the values of other cultures.

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