

Hopeful for change

Having followed the large number of “intercultural” musical happenings nowadays, I cannot help not witnessing ignorance, cultural alienation and business interests taking over knowledge, curiosity and culture. The selection of the composers and pieces is mostly done by artistic directors who have almost no knowledge of the other culture(s) they are willing to present in their “intercultural” festivals (needless to mention the silly exotically-intoxicating journalism surrounding those “great” concerts). If one asks an artistic director simple questions about some of the differences between Arabic, Turkish or Persian musics (when a composer or more from those cultures is programmed), one will be stunned (may be not!) by the director’s grand level of ignorance of the basics of that Other he/she is trying to feature. Obviously and sadly the selection of the programmed compositions in such concerts is usually done on the basis of the biographies of the composers involved (i.e. their nationalities or places of birth) as if a nationality would replace music quality! I wonder, when an artistic director is ignorant of the other culture(s) he/she is willing to program, how could he/she evaluate the intercultural relevance of the composition in question vis-à-vis its cultural origin which is unknown to him/her?

I am not sure whether I should bother touching on some of the business aspects of these très-à-la-mode projects such as assuring the financing from “bigger” establishments by selling cheaply slogans such as “multiculturalism” and “openness towards the Other”; or assuring the exchange of “interests” between concert organizers who are “thoughtful about the Other”, yet who are often motivated by exoticism and economic calculations!

Putting the extra-musical aspects aside, one must eventually listen to the music of those “intercultural” pieces. A knowledgeable listener would understand not only that the artistic directors (who often select poor pieces) are taken by an ignorant orientalism, but also that the “other” composers who are programmed are mostly occidentalized and have nothing essential of their cultures of origin to share, therefore the contemporary music they write is without any “other” identity; juxtaposed badly to Western vocabulary; touristic, trivial and superficial in its appearance/existence/expression. I assure our respective artistic directors that there is no guarantee for a native composer of a certain culture to be knowledgeable of his/her own culture of origin unless he is able to prove it musically! However again, when the artistic director is ignorant of the original culture in question, how could he/she then judge the transfiguration (or not) of that culture in the contemporary composition? I applaud the musicologist who once said: “natives are often as guilty of betrayal as foreigners are”. Indeed, composers and artistic directors alike may not defend programming and making music except on the basis of sound: Program notes, biographical references and pre-concert talks about the other cultural heritage and its political, geographical and religious dimensions are not the piece of music. When talking about the Other in musical “intercultural” context, the very hearing of a correct and true *other* sound-identity is what matters. Like it or not, I definitely regret the present scenery of *my* Western culture, where the hope of enrichment through the possibility of openness to other cultures is often resulting in further cultural impoverishment, ignorance and alienation of the self and of the Other.

I am not interested in defining some aspects of the problem without suggesting some possible humble solutions. A first possibility for achieving hopefully savant interculturalism would be the creation of interdisciplinary education combining ethnomusicology, cultural studies and contemporary composition which would give composers and artistic directors deeper knowledge of the Other they are interested in, thus helping them organizing perhaps “healthy” intercultural events on the basis of true and correct knowledge. This must be planned over a sufficient period of time, thus preparing gradually the Western perception via intensive workshops, lectures and ethno-music concerts (obviously this kind of long term education must precede any aspiration of organising intercultural concerts)! A further step would be the organisation of concerts which juxtapose contemporary compositions with the ethnic music in question; something which could help the Western listener to comprehend/perceive better the relationship between the other cultures in question and their transfiguration in contemporary musical practice.