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**Wolfgang Welsch**

**Music – the True Lingua Franca**

Today the international music business knows no borders. Everything, from low to high, pop to esoteric, gamelan to serialism, is played everywhere, from the Seychelles to Alaska and probably soon in outer space. But is this true only for music? Isn’t it the case for everything we consume, from electronic gadgets to clothing fashions to sports’ events to social media? And is this internationalism not just a superficial phenomenon that is not really able to contribute to genuine understanding – which is why it can neither influence nor mollify the gigantic political troubles and conflicts of our present day?

In order to explore music’s potential to create community, we have to go a bit deeper. And we have to address not just what everyone approves of, but also matters that are of ill repute. When it comes to creating community, music has been able and still can support both nationalism and its transcultural transcendence.

In the early **Stone Age**, the main function of music seems to have been to keep groups together. Shared rhythms and melodies created togetherness. Music initially had an integrating function. It served to bind groups together, like all rituals it was collective glue.

In recent times this function returned. Music was understood and used for national cohesion. In the early days of conceptual nation building, in the late eighteenth century, Herder had declared that music, like poetry, was the expression of a specific national spirit. This opened up the way to see music as the engine of nation building. The Germans made ample use of this opportunity during their long journey to empire.[[1]](#footnote-1) As overt propaganda for national unity was still prohibited, singing clubs became the representatives of the idea of the nation. In 1865, for example, 200,000 people came to the great festival of the German Singers Association in Dresden and proudly sang national slogans and songs. This striving for national identity made use of pretty well everything that was available. Weber’s *Freischütz* was celebrated as the first German national opera, although Weber himself had little time for nationalist **p**athos, was open to the world and called for national forms of music to mutually enrich each other. Wagner was a different **case**. As a music critic he disapproved of the lack of content and the cheap tricks in Italian and French opera. And as a composer he supported the German national movement with *Lohengrin* and the *Master Singers*. Wagner was not just received as nationalist (already during his lifetime and not just in the Third Reich), he himself thought and composed as a nationalist – in the *Master Singers* the word “German” is repeatedly emphasized with chords in C major.

In other European countries too music was a proven means to support national identity. There are examples in Italy and France, and also in many eastern European countries that were striving for national unity in the sense of Herder’s idea of the nation and used music – from folk songs to opera – as a guide and amplifier. This includes the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary, and Lithuania, Georgia and Ukraine. Also the Austro-Slavs and members of the Russian Empire used music as a medium of national emancipation.

But this musical chauvinism was full of contradictions. Many of the composers celebrated as national heroes were in fact less nationalist and more European or even cosmopolitan in their thinking, and this was impossible to overhear in their music. Often, it led to bitter critique. Smetana, for example, was attacked for being too German, Dvořák too little Czech, and Tchaikovsky for his internationalism. In the long term i**t** was clear that it was too simplistic to attribute music to one nation, as the language of music had long become European (Monteverdi would not have understood the question if he composes in Italian manner), and it was European again, and beyond that also cosmopolitan and transcultural.

The extent to which Western music was able to incorporate other cultures and make them the source of its own development can be seen by means of the example of the musical consequences of the Turkish wars of three hundred years ago.[[2]](#footnote-2) In 1716 the Turks threatened the Habsburg Empire, as they had done previously in 1529 and 1683. Prince Eugen repelled the danger in devastating defeats of the Turks at Peterwardein (1716) and Belgrade (1717). But what were the consequences of this political conflict for music?

From War in Politics to Peace in Art

The result was the incorporation of elements of Turkish music into European music. The best-known examples are found in Viennese classicism. In Mozart’s opera *The Abduction from the Seraglio* (1782) the overture and the Janissaries chorus are inspired by Turkish music. In a letter to his father, Mozart noted: “The Janissaries chorus has everything one might ask of a Janissaries chorus: short and witty and written entirely for the Viennese.” Further examples are Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 11 in A major (K 331), which ends with the famous *Rondo alla Turca* (“in the Turkish style”) or the finale of the Violin Concerto No. 5 in A major (K 219), which is sometimes called the “Turkish concerto.” There are also elements of Turkish music in the work of Haydn and Beethoven and Rameau and Salieri. And the music of the Janissaries was popular. From the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, people attend**ed** “Turkish music” on Sunday mornings, as the open-air military concerts were called. This began with military conflict and war, and was then transformed to peaceful enjoyment in music. From war in politics peace in art had emerged. Classical music was a transcultural elixir, and people generally enjoyed it.

Let us come to a very different example of the transcultural in music – the great popularity of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony in Japan, where it is performed around two hundred times each year. In Osaka, 10,000 amateur singers perform the Ninth each year, although this is quite a challenge for applicants, who have to be able to sing lines like “Freude, schöner Götterfunken” in a way that can be understood – very difficult for a Japanese tongue and requiring tough training. But the singers undertake this effort. Why? Why has a key piece of Viennese classical music become a transcultural treasure?

In the First World War Japan and Germany were enemies. German soldiers were taken to Japan as prisoners in 1917 and housed in camps. One of these was the Bandôcamp in the town of Naruto on the island of Shikoku. The German soldiers were treated very humanely there and allowed a good deal of freedom. They were permitted to make music, and on 1 June 1918 the first performance of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony in Japan took place in a hut at this camp. The prisoners did this to bolster their own souls, of course, but there followed joint performances with Japanese participants. Still today, Beethoven’s Ninth is **still** performed every year on the first Sunday in June **at Naruto**. From this point, enthusiasm for Beethoven spread all around Japan. A key piece of German-Austrian and European music was accepted by an adversary in war and made into a highlight of their own identity – an impressive example of transculturalism. The music of the enemy became a treasured element of **one own's** identity.

Generally, transculturalism in music significantly increased in the late nineteenth and then in the twentieth centuries. Maurice Ravel used Hungarian influences and elements of American blues, and he also opened up to the sounds of Asia. Igor Stravinsky was a true master of transculturalism. He composed pieces in many different musical languages, because he appreciated their different tones and linguistic rhythms (“from a musical point of view, Babel was a blessing”). In his work he combined light music, neoclassicism, folk songs, and twelve-tone music. And Olivier Messiaen did not just use birdsong in his compositions (“I chose the birds, others chose the synthesizer”)**,** he also integrated Gregorian song and Indian raga rhythms. John Cage combined European and eastern Asian patterns. With his harsh words, that Cage lacked a sense of harmony and thus would always come up against an impenetrable wall, Schönberg launched a painful attack, but Cage just answered that he would have to spend his whole life hitting his head against this wall. It was his encounter with eastern Asian spirituality that opened up a **completely** new musical world for Cage. It is interesting that Cage was not inspired by eastern Asian music itself, but that it was non-musical thinking that influenced him – Japanese Zen Buddhism and the Chinese *I Ching*, **they** led him to a new path in music. There is also the example of Frank Zappa, whose compositions draw on a plethora of musical styles. His work with Pierre Boulez and the Ensemble **I**ntercontemporain was exemplary. Boulez conducted pieces that he had animated Zappa to write for this ensemble, so that two very different musical cultures (and fan cultures) came together and met with great resonance. Or the contemporary Silk Road Ensemble, which began by combining musical styles and instruments from along the Silk Road, and now combines musical ideas from all over the world. Even for sub-genres like heavy metal and the many variations of jazz, transcultural merging of diverse cultural ingredients to form something new is very typical.

**The Special Status of Music**

What do all these examples show? Firstly, that music can overcome borders and enmities. Secondly, that it can be inspired by something unfamiliar but yet somehow related, and bring forth new forms that unite the self and the other on equal terms. And thirdly, that music can do this more powerfully and successfully than any other form of culture. When painting, literature, theatre or dance also operate transculturally in progressive modernism or in postmodernism, then they do not achieve anything like the resonance that music can create with people all over the world.

Why does music have this special capacity to unite people of all cultures and origins? The commonplace answer is that it is not restricted to the language of words, which has been the foundation of so much human progress but has also entailed so much misunderstanding. It seems that music refers to a dimension that comes before words. **But one does not have to interpret** this in terms of something archaic (in that music preceded language in human evolution), **but should see it in terms of universality**. Music touches something that all people have in common, irrespective of specific cultural contents: the structure of subjectivity, or put more clearly, the fact that we have an inner life, which is spiritual, emotional, intellectual and psychological. This is eminently important for the human species. And this inner life (a thought of Hegel) resonates with nothing more directly and comprehensively than it does with music. It is music’s unique potential that it can touch this core of human existence very directly, independently of specific cultural determinisms and right across cultures.

People have searched for a lingua franca (a shared language for all) in many different ways. Latin **was supposed to serve this purpose**, but it was **obviously limited to the sphere of Europe at most**. Today English is **favored**, but how impoverished and sad it often sounds around the world! Music by contrast has long been our true lingua franca*.* If it is understood differently in different places and by different people, this is not a loss in quality. It is an enrichment. **When it becomes polyphonic music is fully developed**.

1. See Philipp Ther, *Center Stage: Operatic Culture and Nation Building in 19th Century Central Europe* (West Lafayette 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See **for** the following Wolfgang Welsch, *Transkulturalität: Realität – Geschichte – Aufgabe* (Vienna 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)