

Worlds of Music

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE MUSIC OF THE WORLD'S PEOPLES

FIFTH EDITION

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The Music-Culture as a World of Music

JEFF TODD TITON

The Soundscape

CHAPTER

1

The world around us is full of sounds. All of them are meaningful in some way. Some are sounds you make. You might sing in the shower, talk to yourself, shout to a friend, whistle a tune, sing along with a song on your mp3 player, practice a piece on your instrument, play in a band or orchestra, or sing in a chorus or an informal group on a street corner. Some are sounds from sources outside yourself. If you live in the city, you hear a lot of sounds made by people. You might be startled by the sound of a truck beeping as it backs up, or by a car alarm. The noise of the garbage and recycling trucks on an early morning pickup or the drone of a diesel engine in a parked truck nearby might irritate you. In the country you can more easily hear the sounds of nature. In the spring and summer you might hear birds singing and calling to each other, the snorting of deer in the woods, or the excited barks of a distant dog. By a river or the ocean you might hear the sounds of surf or boats loading and unloading or the deep bass of foghorns. Stop for a moment and listen to the sounds around you. What do you hear? A computer hard drive? A refrigerator motor? Wind outside? Footsteps in the hallway? A car going by? Why didn't you hear those sounds a moment ago? We usually filter out "background noise" for good reason, but in doing so we deaden our sense of hearing. For a moment, stop reading and become alive to the soundscape. What do you hear? Try doing that at different times of the day, in various places: Listen to the soundscape and pick out all the different sounds you may have taken for granted until now.

Just as landscape refers to land, **soundscape** refers to sound: the characteristic sounds of a particular place, both human and nonhuman. (The Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer developed this term; see Schafer 1980.) The examples so far offer present-day soundscapes, but what were they like in the past? What kinds of sounds might dinosaurs have made? With our wristwatches we can always find out what time it is, but in medieval Europe people told time by listening to the bells of the local clock tower. Today we take the sounds of a passing railroad train for granted, but people found its sounds arresting when first heard.

The American naturalist Henry David Thoreau was alive to the soundscape when he lived by himself in a cabin in the woods at Walden Pond 160 years ago. As

he wrote in *Walden*, “The whistle of the steam engine penetrated my woods summer and winter—sounding like the scream of a hawk sailing over some farmer’s yard.” After this ominous comparison—the hawk is a bird of prey—Thoreau describes the train as an iron horse (a common comparison at the time) and then a dragon, a threatening symbol of chaos rather than industrial progress: “When I hear the iron horse make the hills echo with his snort like thunder—shaking the earth with his feet, and breathing fire and smoke from his nostrils, what kind of winged horse or fiery dragon they will put into the new mythology I don’t know.” Writing about his wilderness soundscape, Thoreau first made sure his readers knew what he did *not* hear: the crowing of the rooster, the sounds of animals—dogs, cats, cows, pigs—the butter churn, the spinning wheel, children crying, the “singing of the kettle, the hissing of the urn”: This was the soundscape of a farm in 1850, quite familiar to Thoreau’s readers. (We might stop to notice which of these sounds have disappeared from the soundscape altogether, for who today hears a butter churn or spinning wheel?) What Thoreau heard instead in his wilderness soundscape were “squirrels on the roof and under the floor; a whippoorwill on the ridge-pole, a blue jay screaming in the yard, a hare or woodchuck under the house, a screech-owl or a cat-owl behind it, a flock of wild geese or a laughing loon in the pond, a fox to bark in the night”; but no rooster “to crow nor hens to cackle in the yard—no yard!” In Thoreau’s America you could tell, blindfolded, just by hearing, whether you were in the wilderness, on a farm, or in a town or city. How have those soundscapes changed since 1850? What might Thoreau have written about automobiles in the countryside, tractors on the farms, trucks on the interstate highways, and jet planes everywhere?

In Thoreau’s “wild soundscape” at Walden in 1850 each living thing that made a sound had its own niche in what we might think of as an acoustic **ecology** or what the aural environmentalist Bernie Krause calls a *biophony*, the combined voices of living things. Krause points out that “non-industrial cultures,” particularly those that live in the more-remote regions of the planet, like the BaAka of central Africa we will learn about in Chapter 3, “depend on the integrity of undisturbed natural sound for a sense of place,” of where they are as well as who they are (Krause 2002:25). Every nonhuman species has its own acoustic niche in the soundscape, whether it is a bird singing or an insect making noise by rubbing its legs together. Dolphins, whales, and bats navigate largely by means of sound. But as we have learned, humans make their own acoustic niches and interact sonically with nonhuman sounds in whatever soundscape they encounter, whatever place they happen to be.

Listen now to CD 1, Track 1. The soundscape is a post office, but it is unlike any post office you will likely encounter in North America. You are hearing men canceling stamps at the University of Accra, in Ghana, Africa. Two of the men whistle a tune while three make percussive sounds. A stamp gets canceled several times for the sake of the rhythm. You will learn more about this example shortly. For now, think of it as yet another example of a soundscape: the acoustic environment where sounds, including music, occur.


CD 1:1

Postal workers canceling stamps at the University of Ghana post office (2:59). The whistled tune is the hymn “Bompata,” by the Ghanaian composer W. J. Akyeampong (b. 1900). Field recording by James Koetting. Legon, Ghana, 1975.

The Music-Culture

Every human society has music. Although music is universal, its meaning is not. For example, a famous musician from Asia attended a European symphony concert approximately 150 years ago. He had never heard Western music

before. The story goes that after the concert, his hosts asked him how he had liked it. "Very well," he replied. Not satisfied with this answer, his hosts asked (through an interpreter) what part he liked best. "The first part," he said. "Oh, you enjoyed the first movement?" "No, before that." To the stranger, the best part of the performance was the tuning-up period. His hosts had a different opinion. Who was right? They both were. Music is not a universal language in the sense that everyone understands what music means. People in different cultures give music different meanings. Recall from the Preface that **culture** means the way of life of a people, learned and transmitted from one generation to the next. The word *learned* is stressed to differentiate a people's cultural inheritance from what is passed along biologically in their genes: nurture, rather than nature. From birth, people all over the world absorb the cultural inheritance of family, community, schoolmates, and other larger social institutions such as the mass media—books, newspapers, video games, movies, television, and computers. This cultural inheritance tells people how to understand the situations they are in (what the situations mean) and how they might behave in those situations. It works so automatically that they are aware of it only when it breaks down, as it does on occasion when people misunderstand a particular situation. Like the people who carry them, cultures do not function perfectly all the time.

Musical situations and the very concept of music mean different things and involve different activities around the globe. Because music and all the beliefs and activities associated with it are a part of culture, we use the term **music-culture** to mean a group's total involvement with music: ideas, actions, institutions, material objects—everything that has to do with music. A music-culture can be as small as a single human's personal music-culture, or as large as one carried by a transnational group. We can speak of the music-culture of a family, a community, a region, a nation. We can identify music-cultures with musical genres: there is a hip-hop music-culture, a classical music-culture, a jazz music-culture. We can identify subcultures within music-cultures: Atlanta hip-hop, for example, within the hip-hop music culture, or early music within classical music, or progressive bluegrass within bluegrass. In our example of concert music, the European American music-culture dictates that the sound made by symphony musicians tuning up is not music. But to the listener from Asia, it was music. That we can say so shows our ability to understand (and empathize with) each music-culture context from the inside, and then to move to an intellectual position outside of them. We can then compare them and arrive at the conclusion that, considered from their points of view, both the stranger and his hosts were correct. Contrasting the music of one culture with the music of another after stepping outside of both is a good way to learn about how music is made and what music is thought to be and do.

People may be perplexed by music outside their own music-culture. They may grant that it is music but find it difficult to hear and enjoy. In Victorian England, for example, people said they had a hard time listening to the strange music of the native peoples within the British Colonial Empire. The expansive and exciting improvisations of India's classical music were ridiculed because the music was not written down "as proper music should be." The subtle tuning of Indian *raga* scales was considered "indicative of a bad ear" because it did not match the tuning of a piano (see Chapter 6). What the British were really saying was that they did not know how to understand Indian music on its own cultural terms. Any

music sounds “out of tune” when its tuning system is judged by the standards of another.

A person who had grown up listening only to Armenian music in his family and community wrote about hearing European classical music for the first time:

I found that most European music sounds either like “mush” or “foamy,” without a solid base. The classical music seemed to make the least sense, with a kind of schizophrenic melody—one moment it’s calm, then the next moment it’s crazy. Of course there always seemed to be “mush” (harmony) which made all the songs seem kind of similar. (posted to SEM-L public listserver July 9, 1998)

Because this listener had learned what makes a good melody in the Armenian music-culture, he found European classical melodies lacking because they changed mood too quickly. Unused to harmony in his own music, the listener responded negatively to it in Western classical music. Further, popular music in the United States lacked interesting rhythms and melodies:

The rock and other pop styles then and now sound like music produced by machinery, and rarely have I heard a melody worth repeating. The same with “country” and “folk” and other more traditional styles. These musics, while making more sense with their melody (of the most undeveloped type), have killed off any sense of gracefulness with their monotonous droning and machine-like sense of rhythm. (Ibid.)

You might find these remarks offensive or amusing—or you might agree with them. Like the other examples, they illustrate that listeners throughout the world have prejudices based on the music they know and like. Listening to music all over the planet, though, fosters an open ear and an open mind. Learning to hear a strange music from the viewpoint of the people who make that music enlarges our understanding and increases our pleasure.

What Is Music?

Sound is anything that can be heard, but what is music? In the Preface I emphasized that music isn’t something found in the natural world, like air or sand; rather, music is something that people make. And they make it in two ways: They make or produce the sounds they call music, and they also make music into a cultural domain, forming the ideas and activities they consider music. As we have seen, not all music-cultures have the same idea of music; some music-cultures have no word for it, while others have a word that roughly translates into English as “music-dance” because to them music is inconceivable without movement. Writing about Rosa, the Macedonian village she lived in, Nahoma Sachs points out that “traditional Rosans have no general equivalent to the English ‘music.’ They divide the range of sound which might be termed music into two categories: *pesni*, songs, and *muzika*, instrumental music” (Sachs 1975:27). Of course, this distinction between songs and music is found in many parts of the world. Anne Rasmussen, when chatting with her taxi driver on the way to a conference at the Opera House in Cairo, Egypt, was told by her taxi driver that he liked “both kinds of music: