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Asian Musics in the American Classroom: Definition, Challenges, Pedagogical Imperatives

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Abstract

Defining the Asian diaspora presents difficulties not only because of the changing nature of diaspora studies (Appadurai, 2003), but also because of the divergence between perception and the complex reality of Asia's geographical nature. Furthermore, the lack of commonalities and the significant differences within the Asian diaspora need close examination. For example, the South Asian diaspora is vastly different to the Chinese and Japanese diasporas in the East, and to the West and North Asian diasporas. Several scholars, including Lowe (2003) do not consider Asian Americans as a distinct group and use concepts such as heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity to study these communities.

These complexities and the following issues make the teaching of Asian musics in our schools and colleges challenging: the understanding of the continent of Asia in geographical terms, the difference between regional diversity and class/socio-economic variation within a country, and the artificiality of borders. A genuine teaching of music of the Asian diaspora must be based on the encouragement of critical thinking, and a subtle but deep engagement with the context of the musical material, without which any attempt to teach or perform these musics will result in cultural misrepresentation. This paper will frame the following questions within a music education paradigm: How is the Asian diaspora connected to nationalism, transnationalism or transmigration? How is diaspora connected to identity? How does national identity connect to nationhood in Asia? Can the experiences of different generations of Asian Americans be enriched by understanding the changing realities of both home and host societies? In all of diaspora studies, the Asian diaspora, because of the disparate reasons for global dispersion, provoke consideration of gender, religious and ethnic identity, all of which are context-specific.

Susan Hume's work Teaching about Africa provides a generic structure through which the teaching of Asian musics can be conceptualized; this paper transfers Hume's guidelines to this area of enquiry and extends it to be more Asia-specific.

Definition and Challenge

In order to define the Asian diaspora, we have to unpack its two complex terms: “Asian” and “diaspora”. In the former, there continues to be divergence between perception and reality of Asia’s geographical nature, and in the latter, difficulties exist because of the changing nature of diaspora studies (Appadurai, 2003). The third area of complexity is caused by the lack of commonality and the significant differences within the Asian diasporas. The South Asian diaspora, for example, is vastly different to the Chinese and Japanese diasporas in the East, and to the West and North Asian diasporas. Several scholars, including Lowe (2003) do not even consider Asian Americans as a distinct group and use concepts such as heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity to study these communities. By far, the largest challenge lies in attempting to achieve an understanding not only in the classroom, but also in the community and the media of what and where Asia is, and who Asians are.

The first question we have to ask in a discussion such as this is: “What or where is Asia?” Conventional physical geography defines Asia as the land masses stretching from the west including the Middle East, the Levant and what used to be known as Asia Minor to the East: the Indonesian archipelago and in the north from the Arctic Circle part of Asiatic Russia to the Indian sub-continent in the south. This geographical definition has tended to be replaced by more recent geological analysis which tends to consider Europe and Asia as connected landmasses. Confusion has been created by various Western usages of the term “Asian” to refer to particular sub-group of Asians. For example, in America and Australia, “Asian” refers to south-east Asians, whereas in

Britain “Asian” is used to describe Indians and Pakistanis. The Asia Society in New York does not include the Middle East but does include Australia. The United Nations, on the other hand, describes West Asia as the region encompassing most of the Middle East. When Asia is referred to, even in educational environments, we need to be aware of the confusion surrounding the term. In this paper, my use of the term “Asian” takes the broadest possible area into account including the Middle East as West Asia, North and Central Asia and South Asia – the Indian subcontinent.

Diaspora continues to be a contested term and a simplistic view of diaspora can therefore no longer be taken. No more can we see the diaspora as a collection of scattered, largely expatriate communities living out their lives with a strong connection to the motherland having fused with or absorbed aspects of the host culture. Increasingly, the global and local forces are connected and mutually influential. As Cvetkovich and Kellner say,

Our challenge is to think through the relationship between the global and the local by observing how global forces influence and even structure ever more local situations and ever more strikingly. One should also see how local forces and situations mediate the global, inflecting global forces to diverse ends and conditions and producing unique configurations for thought and action in the contemporary world. (pp. 1-2)

The scope of this paper does not permit a detailed discussion of diaspora and how we may structure an examination of the Asian diasporas, but the model proposed by Appadurai (2003) forces us to examine the increasingly complex nature of this term. He uses five “–scapes” for this purpose:

(a) ethnoscape...the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live...

(b) technoscape...the global configuration, also ever fluid, of technology, and of the fact that technology, both high and low, both mechanical and informational, now moves at high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious borders...

(c) financescape...[involving] the disposition of global capital...as currency markets, national stock exchanges, and commodity speculations move megamonies through national turnstiles at blinding speed...

(d) mediascape...the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information and to the images of the world created by these media.

(e) ideoscape...often directly political and frequently have to do with the ideologies of states and the counter-ideologies of movements explicitly oriented to capturing state power or a piece of it. (pp. 25-45)

In accepting Appadurai's model, we admit that diasporas are multi-dimensional, that these dimensions exist in almost all diasporas to a lesser or greater extent. I suggest, furthermore, that in discussing the Asian diasporas, we are dealing with not one, but several diasporas. In order to understand the complexity of the Asian diasporas in general and the Indian diaspora in particular, one needs first to recognize that recent dynamics in globalization have created an even more complex environment, one which defies traditional models of physical geography and demographics. Commingling them does little to assist in understanding them: after all, what do the Arabs in the western part of the continent have to do with the Japanese from the West either on the Asian continent or in America as immigrant communities? However, the ethno-scape is the locus in which the themes of this paper can best be examined with reference to the other "scapes". In a world in which global travel is becoming the norm, and one in which fragmentation is a social and political reality, most people inhabit a variety of identity categories. In this regard, Myers' work (1998)¹ offers valuable material, since it points to genres of music, which survived and were transformed in the Indian community of

Trinidad completely distinct from the parent culture. Several other examples can illustrate this, but none better than the following which shows how an immigrant South Asian community can construct a distinct, syncretic musical culture which can influence the local in its country of origin.

Bhangra started approximately thirty years ago by South Asian youth in some of the English industrial cities and is the predominant popular music for Indian festive occasions in Britain. So successful is this phenomenon that it defines much of what is diasporic about the Indian community. Bhangra cellular telephone ring tones can now be downloaded; Bhangra has entered the fitness culture where it coexists comfortably with aerobic classes. An Indian graduate student in Melbourne, Australia typifies this extraordinary phenomenon and, in his own way, describes the issues of identity and hybridity in bhangra.

Bhangra permeates my family. In a Los Angeles childhood, at home and through birthdays, sweet sixteens, twenty-firsts, weddings, and graduations my brother, sister, and I learned the intricacies of the 'balle, balle' head-shake. Though often preferring Bollywood movies and filmic Hindi songs, my parents teach us the legacy of our blood, of their homeland. My father's parents still live in Punjab. My mother's now live in the neighboring Indian state of Rajasthan. When we visit our cousins, we exchange mp3s of the latest bhangra music from our respective homes. Indian bhangra. US bhangra.

We are Punjabi, though we mostly speak Hindi. We are Hindu, though we have many Sikh friends. My two siblings and I all attended a Catholic high school. We are American, born and raised. We share brown skin.

Bhangra unites my family simultaneously, years later. In Australia, I find Karma, a bi-weekly South Asian party with heavy bhangra sampling, similar to the New York desi club scene. I find first and second generation desis in Melbourne at Karma. Waves of bhangra reach my ears. I dance. My brother finds a South Asian party in Germany, as he lives the adventures of a traveller. He explores, communicating understanding with motion. He nods his head. He dances. My sister, attending university in Los Angeles, joins one of the many bhangra teams

the school has to offer. She practises for hours each day. She wears colorful costumes and her male partner wears an ornamental turban. On a stage at the latest interstate competition, she waits for the curtain to rise. The overflowing audience watches. She dances. (Assisi, 1995)

The teaching of Asian musics in our schools and colleges encounters all of these challenges arising from lack of clarity and disambiguation: the understanding of the continent of Asia in geographical terms, the difference between regional diversity and class/socio-economic variation within a country, and the artificiality of borders.

Asians who visit the United States are usually shocked by how little Americans know about them and their countries and cultures. Most Americans lack even rudimentary knowledge about Asia, despite the region's strategic, economic, and cultural importance to the U.S., says a report released by the National Commission on Asia in the Schools. Increasingly, the United States has trading, corporate and military ties to Asian countries. Now, more than ever, our students need a basic understanding of Asia.

For example, according to the Commission,

Nearly a quarter of college-bound students and a third of adults cannot name the ocean that separates the United States from Asia; 70% of college-bound students know that Winston Churchill was Great Britain's prime minister during World War II, but only 30% know that India and Pakistan won their independence from Great Britain after the war; and while Indonesia's political turmoil has captured headlines this year, only 33% of adults and 22% of students know that Jakarta is that country's capital. By comparison, 59% of adults and 55% of students know that Vienna is the capital of Austria. (Asia Society, n.d.)

The Asia Society² has conducted numerous surveys to determine the level of understanding of Asia in America and the extent and nature of teaching about Asia in American institutions. The Society found that most Americans – 80% of adults and 70%

of students - feel strongly that studies in Asia need to be strongly represented in curricula at all levels, although it was clear that the current state of Asian studies was not only inadequate but largely inappropriate.

...too much of what passes for legitimate curriculum on Asia are dated and superficial, or worse, distorted and inaccurate. Most textbooks also portray Asia as frozen in time (or frozen until the time of European contact). For example, one widely used textbook writes, "the customs and traditions developed in the East in ancient India remain a part of Indian life today. Hindu priests still recite the same prayers that their ancestors did. Cows are still sacred, and people continue to practice the specialized crafts common 4000 years ago. (Asia Society, n.d.)

Finally, the challenge is that American public school teachers are unprepared to deal with Asia as it relates to the grade level and subject they teach. It is difficult to expect teachers to have experience, perspective, knowledge and insight about Asia when their college education renders them virtually Asia-illiterate. In their article "International Knowledge: Let's Close the Gap" (2003), Sanders & Stewart assert that most teachers are not prepared to teach about Asia. For example, they state of the top 50 U.S. colleges and universities that train teachers, only a handful required any coursework on Asian history for their students preparing to teach history.

Pedagogical imperatives

A genuine teaching of music of the Asian diasporas must be based on the encouragement of critical thinking, and a subtle but deep engagement with the context of the musical material, without which any attempt to teach or perform these musics will result in cultural misrepresentation. The questions for concerned music educators must be: How are the Asian diasporas connected to nationalism, transnationalism or

transmigration? How is diaspora connected to identity? How does national identity connect to nationhood in Asia? Can the experiences of different generations of Asian Americans be enriched by understanding the changing realities of both home and host societies? Music educators need to be aware that global dispersion provokes consideration of all of the above and of gender, religious and ethnic identity.

America's classrooms, facing an increasing diversity with rapidly increasing populations from many different parts of Asia and the rest of the world, are forcing teachers to seek ways in which the school population can be represented in the curriculum and a greater understanding of the myriad cultures and histories students bring to the classroom can be fostered. However, due to the staggering diversity of Asian cultures, developing a pedagogical model that will propose how one might go about teaching Asian musics in the American classroom is almost an insurmountable challenge. This paper looks at certain imperatives and broad principles which arise from the difficulties outlined above.

In consideration of the preceding material, how will second generation diasporans have their ancestral identities enriched and enhanced? Since American schools have failed to provide a constructivist environment where Asian students would be able to refer to their cultural background to make the necessary transfers of skills and knowledge and non-Asians could have their knowledge enhanced, a useful framework for the teaching of Asian music in American classrooms must be found. Hume's suggestions (1996) for teaching about Africa can be used as a starting point: "Confront myths and

stereotypes, avoid faulty generalizations, present a balanced view, and limit the scope of the study” (Hume, 1996, pp.2-3).

1. Confront myths and stereotypes

Many teachers in America and in other countries outside of Asia have expressed their lack of readiness to teach about Asia and its culture. Teachers in Queensland, Australia interviewed by Henderson think it is important to focus on such a divergent and rapidly developing region as Asia but feel inadequate about their own skills and knowledge to step into this venture. Frequently what students and even many teachers know about the Asia-Pacific region is based upon what they have read in newspapers and observed on television – which mainly reflects biased myths and stereotypes.

Indeed, such knowledge is not enough. If it is important for American students to learn about Asian music and culture, music teachers must be equipped to teach about them. Beyond myths and stereotypes, music teachers need to teach from materials that are primary-source based and that reflect the various local entities. Music educators now are faced with the fundamental question of how to select repertoire, structure courses and design learning experiences that rebut our American-centric and traditional views of Asian peoples and foster an Asia-literate generation.

2. Avoid faulty generalizations:

Many music teachers tackle teaching about Asian music from a simplified viewpoint. The generalization becoming more current in today’s globalized world is the axiom that music is a truly universal language. Particularly in Asia, but also in Africa, this is simply not true. As Malm (2001) rightly points out, “The fundamental rule that

needs to be memorized by twentyfirst-century musicians says“ Music is not an international language. It consists of a series of equally logical but different systems” (p. 45). He also suggests that we examine the context of any given music in order to arrive at an accurate understanding of its broader cultural implications. The generalization about a country’s music which derives from an assumption that all music of that country belongs to a single musical system may not make sense; teachers should consider cross-regional, multi-area studies such as the material in the Silk Road Project.³

3. Present a balanced view:

In 2001, the National Commission on Asia in the Schools, released the report "Asia in the Schools: Preparing Young Americans for Today's Interconnected World" concluding that “young Americans are dangerously uninformed about ... Asia, home to more than 60 percent of the world's population” (Asia Society, 2005).⁴ Common problems in teaching about Asian music in American classrooms consist in what Wilson & Wilson termed in the 1960s "overemphasis of the sentimental and exotic and unusual” (Shaffer, 2001, p.12). At the same time, however, the authors argue that Asian societies should not be considered similar to American society, and educators should therefore not view Asian music and society through Western eyes and ears. Rather, educators "should present the distinguishing characteristics of Asian cultures as remarkable achievements in themselves” (Shaffer, 2001, p.12).

4. Limit the scope of the study:

I do not need to emphasize the size and complexity of Asia and the difficulty in doing justice to it. Limiting the scope does not call for restriction to specific countries. I

know only too well the “Let’s “do” India” curricular model, which would succeed in limiting the scope of the study but would also result in presenting a simplistic picture of the music of India. The meaning and function of music in different musical cultures in India alone make the teaching of Indian music challenging. The commodification of Indian popular music in particular and its widespread consumption could argue for its place in the curriculum juxtaposed with classical Indian music.

5. Develop a unique pedagogy for Asian musics.

We have moved away from teaching orally transmitted music via staff notation. Recently, our concern for cultural appropriateness has led us as music educators to replicate, in the Western classroom, the way in which Asian music (or any other non-Western music) is learnt or acquired in its traditional setting. Both the literacy model and the cultural replication have strategic shortcomings. Staff notation simply cannot convey the complex inflection, intonation, color and style of non-Western traditions. On the other hand, traditional transmission works in its traditional settings but not in the American classroom. What is called for here is adventurous and imaginative pedagogical strategies which can combine and indeed limit both of the above.

A salient, almost common feature of all music from this continent is improvisation. The improvisational element can be a unique source of self-knowledge. As students would be constructing musical works and developing their musicianship, the degree of achieving self-knowledge may therefore increase as musicianship improves.

The teaching strategies for the teacher introducing an Asian musical culture are a mixture of several described by Elliott (1998). "Modelling", that is, copying, by students of

the teacher is an essential part of most Asian musics. Echo play and the whole range of imitative and responsory music making can be used as part of student modelling.

Regardless, Asian musics' use of a variety of non-diatonic musics is an effective form of multicultural education, for it may challenge students to examine their own musical cultures and contexts. The lack of Asian instruments should not prevent its teaching. Conventional classroom instruments can be used; for example, Campbell uses the Cambodian music tradition for its orality, its use of xylophones, recorders, drums and finger cymbals, and the Orff-Schulwerk style of its playing techniques such as alternating hands, octave doubling and tremolo (Campbell, 2000). Similar transformations can be made to other Asian musics.

6. Avoid canonic categorization of Asian musics:

The classification of Asian musics into rural/urban, classical/folk, etc. has come about as a result of Western ethnocentric views that apply to all non-Western cultures, paradigms that are foreign to these cultures. Recently, I did a random survey of series books and of other materials on Indian and South Asian music and, not surprisingly, I found the orientation to be almost exclusively towards Hindustani "classical" music. This may well be because the popularity of this music began in the 1960s with the emergence on the world stage of some of India's greatest musicians: Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan et. al. However, there may be another more logical explanation for this orientation which could be found in the covert preference for high art music in all spheres of music education. As Geertz (1996) writes:

There is a long tradition in the West of distinguishing between "high" and "low" art. All of us who have been formed in that tradition first absorb this grand dichotomy as an obvious bit of common sense, and then when we go off to study aesthetical matters in an Asian society, we take one or another

version of it with us... We discover both how inadequate and uncommonsensical the distinction is, and how inevitable and unsuppressible it is. (p.245)

Elliott (1995) argues that musical practices establish, define, delineate and preserve a sense of community and a sense of self within groups. Furthermore, musical practices constitute and are constituted by their cultural contexts. Teaching Asian music innovatively can, therefore, constitute its own musical context outside our usual Western musical contexts. If one accepts Elliott's position that the essentials of music making and musicianship are self-growth, self-knowledge, musical enjoyment and self-esteem, then an Asian-inclusive curriculum will go a long way towards cultivating these essentials.

Conclusion

In conclusion, music teachers need more than the simple opportunity or freedom to use or to teach about Asian music in their classrooms. They need specific guidelines to help them structure child-centered, process-driven learning experiences so that the value-laden implications of teaching about very different cultures is handled sensitively and constructively. Consequently, a special emphasis should be put on the quality of the music teacher training curriculum to incorporate not only appropriate material, but also the understanding of music in differing Asian societies and contexts. Thus, we need a philosophy which provides, in its precepts, the flexibility needed for including Asian music into the curriculum in depth. If the essentials of music making and musicianship contain within them aspects of self-growth, self-knowledge, musical enjoyment and self-

esteem, then Asian musics deserve a place. Asia's unique contributions to human life and its mirror to some of the oldest civilizations and vibrant contemporary societies demand its inclusion.

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¹ She investigated north Indian genres including the traditional Bhojpuri folk songs and drumming styles brought by the first indentured laborers in 1845 as well as the fate of Indian classical music and new popular styles such as Hindi calypso, soca, and chutney.

² Asia Society. (2009). Retrieved March 10, 2006, from www.asiasociety.org

³ The Silk Road Project. (n.d.). Retrieved March 15, 2006, from www.silkroadproject.com

⁴ Asia Society. (2005). Retrieved April 27, 2009, from <http://www.globenewswire.com/newsroom/news.html?d=73627>