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# *Music in the United States:* Community of cultures

by Robert Garfias

The arts in America face a future that is clouded with uncertainties. A number of factors are involved: lean government support for arts programs and institutions; inflation and the consequent high cost of mounting productions and procuring materials; and a general shift away from the classical liberal arts toward a more practical and professional focus in higher education with its concomitant ripple effect in secondary and elementary education. Apart from and yet a part of this is the misconception that the arts are a frill; important and valuable, but nonetheless a frill.

If we in the arts are to take the helm of our own future, I believe there are certain perceptions that need to be reexamined. I would like to identify two perceptions that, in my opinion, lie at the crux of the difficulties facing music in America. One of these is the old idea that music is a universal language. The other may be described as the perception of America as a "cultural melting pot."

Music exists in every human society. It is fundamental to the nature of man. But it functions in the context of the personal and world view of each culture—of each society.

Information accessibility and media saturation have reached levels few could have imagined forty years ago. As a result, the post-World War II generation no longer can take seriously the idea of music as a universal language. Most recognize that even within the traditional delineation of American music there are several distinct languages or idioms: jazz, rock, country and western, and the European fine art tradition, to name only the most obvious. Yet, ironically, in spite of the general acceptance of the existence of a multiplicity of musical languages, our teaching perpetuates the concept that there is only one universal musical language, and that language is Western European. Inevitably, this must alienate a large segment of society.

We have not yet separated our participation in a particular stream of our own culture from our understanding of culture itself. We define culture as a whole by means of the principles and aesthetics of only one tradition out of many. While many of us are aware of this discrepancy, we continue to perpetuate it. We find it difficult to put aside the notion that what moves us could or should move the rest of the world.

It was significant that, a little over twenty years ago, Donald J. Grout entitled his new book *A History of Western Music*, rather than simply *A History of Music*. Today it is clear the title could have been even more

narrowly defined, since the book fails to consider many Western musics: the folk musics of Europe and popular music, to name only two categories. Nonetheless, Grout's use of the word "western" in his title was a needed attempt to accurately define his subject. He shunned inferences that the specific should define the general. While the redefinition that took place with Grout's titling of his book continues to be a part of our thinking, we have not taken this step much farther. On the contrary, by continuing to talk about only one stream of the tradition we are guilty of suggesting that we believe this one part of the tradition defines all and is superior to all. In reality, there is no reason to assume that the music valued by a technologically oriented society rates any higher in the aesthetic sense than that of a culture that has not developed along similar lines.

The perception that one music tradition defines all is inaccurate. Institutions and organizations that uphold such a perception invite a gradual erosion of confidence. For example, what other disciplines, outside of the fine arts, define their entire fields purely in terms of Western history, practice, theory, and terminology? Because of this difference in fundamental approach, there is a tendency for the fine arts to find themselves disenfranchised in the context of our society. While the artistic product is valued, the vantage

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point from which arts institutions present themselves is too narrow to inspire the confidence of all I do not mean to suggest that all fine arts institutions should strive to become multicultural and multiethnic. Although there should be more multicultural institutions than presently exist, the mainstream of activities in America will naturally continue to retain a Western focus. What I would prefer to argue is that this Western focus must be set in a global context and that such a focus must not be construed as a definition for the whole.

By allowing the specific to define the whole, we as Americans have, in large measure, been taught to view the American culture as one homogeneous tradition. Upon reflection, we all realize that there are a number of different cultures that we consider American. Those that usually come to mind may be salient only because large segments of the population are engaged in them. In addition, however, there are an almost limitless number and variety of cultures in America. In many, music may be the culture's strongest or most widely perceived manifestation.

It is, perhaps, a natural human tendency to try to reduce a great number of separate but relatively unknown, unfamiliar entities to a few large, all-inclusive categories. In fact, the scope and variety of different music traditions thriving in America is nearly overwhelming. Above and beyond such major delineations as jazz, soul, rock, new wave, punk, and pop, there are also such major ethnic traditions as Chinese, Japanese, and Mexican. These categories must be further refined, since each of these ethnic traditions contains many style differences. There are several types of Chinese music flourishing in America, as there are Japanese and Mexican. There is no more reason to group them together than the music products of the New York Philharmonic and Pink Floyd. It is our ignorance of the content of these traditions that allows us to think of them as one unit.

Furthermore, when we look more broadly at the ethnic traditions in America, we discover many more that are strong, though perhaps isolated. There is a healthy complex of Appalachian traditions and of country music styles; a great variety of Hawaiian songs in the Hawaiian language; a thriving Okinawan tradition

in Hawaii and in Los Angeles; while there are Basque traditions in the mountain states and Ukrainian musical groups, as well as many types of Greek, Macedonian, and Yugoslavian, flourishing on the east coast. There are French-speaking Cajun traditions in Louisiana, as well as old Spanish traditions there, and Cuban traditions in the eastern states. These diverse musical styles are further augmented by the rich traditions we find when we include Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Alaska, Micronesia, and American Samoa. And one must include all the hundreds of native American traditions flourishing throughout the country.

To speak of an American musical tradition, or to behave as though we were, in fact, one big happy musical family, is to completely ignore the nature of music in our society. We only perpetuate a kind of cultural neocolonialism that serves us ill. Until we address the discrepancy between the reality around us and our practice as teachers, scholars, and performers of art, we will continue to find ourselves edged further toward the periphery of life in America. Unless we learn to speak about the arts as credibly and convincingly as we create and perform the arts, we may find ourselves moving from the periphery to the edge. ☐

