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Editor's Note

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EDITOR'S NOTE

About a dozen years ago, in a set of exquisite essays, the South African painter and poet, Breyten Breytenbach, wrote that, "artistic creations do not reflect life, they are life-like...and constitute a life of their own."¹ There is much truth to this perspective. To be sure, artistic work is more than a reflex of our immediate moods. And yet, there is something undeniable about the intimacy of art and the complexity of human life.

The greatness and the indispensability of art, declares Friedrich Nietzsche, lies precisely in its being able to produce the appearance of a simpler world, a shorter solution of the riddle of life. No one who suffers from life can do without this appearance, just as no one can do without sleep. Art exists so that bow shall not break.²

Music, as a major element of artistic creativity, underscores this dialectical role of art as at once a release of the human imagination and, at its best, virtuosity and a response to the pressures of the quotidian moment. "Music," proffers the unforgettable pianist Glenn Gould, "is hewn from negation...It is but very small security against the void of negation that surrounds."³

Akin to other forms of art, then, one might propose that music, among the oldest components of known cultures, makes an appearance in contemporary times in four guises: (a) a continuation of age-old aesthetic personal appeal that strokes private sensibilities; (b) an adhesive that binds a particular community through collective taste and emotions; (c) a mechanism to spread one tradition to another; and (d) a carrier of the law of value through commodification in a historical social system whose logic and its survival are propelled by constant expansion. Though the personal and the communal may not be bereft of materialist value, they nonetheless touch upon passions that trigger and then hold together intense individual and collective sensations. In an original moment of privileging the exceptional power of music, Rousseau asserts:

One of the great advantages the musician enjoys is that he [she] can paint things that cannot be heard, whereas the painter cannot represent things that cannot be seen...The musician's art consists in substituting for the imperceptible image of the object, that of the emotions which that

object's presence excites in the beholder's heart. It will not only churn up the sea, fan the flames of a conflagration...but it will also depict the desolation of dreadful deserts, dusk the walls of a subterranean dungeon, appease the storm, clear and still the air and, from the orchestra, spread renewed freshness through the woodlands. It will not represent these things directly, but it will excite in the soul the very same sentiments which one experiences upon seeing them.⁴

But musical composition and, even more so, performance by their very nature are similar to other creative processes in that both drew and reach for the context and immediate community of cultural reference. Whether one refers to Mozart, whose work simultaneously underscores his genius and his embeddedness in the environment of the court and church of his location and time; Byung-ki Hwang, perhaps the most distinguished among Korea's masters of the *kayagum*, whose training is based on both Korean folk and court music; or Hodeide, Somalia's greatest modern *oud* player and composer, whose production and mesmerizing displays were shaped by the early morning of decolonization, subsequent decay, and now pressed hard by civil war and continuing exile—both the artist and the act are always part of a larger historical reality.⁵ Put another way, the work affects the milieu while, conversely, the circumstances condition the creative performance. Such mutual influences neither turn the artist into a historical superhuman with limitless freedom nor a helpless captive of the surrounding social matrix. Still, the cultural mood, available resources, opportunities, and facilities, among others, do circumscribe the range of action, reward, and legitimation.

In this age of "liquid modernity," in Bauman's marvelous phrase for globalization, musical expression and interpretation have re-energized an old habit of exporting and importing among the world's cultures and civilizations. It is now a widely accepted fact, for instance, that Blues and Jazz are America's most original contributions to music. But it is equally the case that significant components of both types of music are directly attributable to a preceding West African musical tradition brought by African slaves. In the western Mediterranean, particularly Spain, Flamenco was shaped by Arab and Sephardic Jewish music. In many parts of vast Asia, variations of instruments such as the *sitar*, *kayagum*, *oud*, flute, and *Changgo* are to be found in many countries, sometimes played with arresting similarities. Other versions of transcultural music, ones that adopt deliberate creative transgression, are the basis

for certain types of cross-fertilization such as *rai* and East-West performances. The first is usually a commingling of North African and Western sounds created through, among others, *darbuba* (hand drum), *oud*, and electric guitars. Made famous by artists of Algerian descent, such a Rachid Taha, who resides in France, compositions remind us at once of the synthetic dimensions of musical traditions and the specific circumstances of reference—the latter usually pertaining to identity, emigration, and longings for belonging. The East-West musical mix has many examples. A current and popular band among the youth is Dengue Fever, based on the West Coast of the United States. Their lead performer is Chhom Nimol. Here, too, the infusion of Cambodian melodies with electric organ, electric guitar, and saxophone, among other instruments, underlines a degree of ingenuity facilitated by the peculiarities of the age. But if the currents of globalization recharge music as a disruptive inventiveness—that is, an artistic time that animates the accentuation of specific rootedness to push back or deflate imperial domination and yet accelerates the transfusion of localist musical imagination with wider influences—in another, equally paramount and contradictory, sense it has been long colonized by the supreme and systemic urge of the “modern-world system”: private accumulation through the relentless commodification of everything. The downsides of this aspect of globalization include cultural imperialisms bent on the marginalization, if not the disappearance, of musical traditions that are not sustained by wakeful protective and powerful local interests. This is the equivalent of the demise of bio-diversity.

I conclude these brief notes by recalling a poem by the inimitable Andalusian poet, Federico Garcia Lorca. The poem, to my understanding, captures the similarity between the voice of human anguish and the tone of the strings of a guitar in the same mood.

The Guitar

The cry of the guitar
begins.
The wineglasses of dawn
are broken.
The cry of the guitar
begins.
It's useless
to quiet it.
Impossible
to quiet it.
It cries on monotonously
the way water cries,
the way wind
cries over a first snowfall.
It's useless
to quiet it.
It cries
for the distance.
For the sand of the incendiary South
that begs for white camellias.
It cries for an arrow without a target,
an afternoon without a morning,
for the first bird
dead on the branch.
Oh guitar!
Heart sorely wounded
by fine swords.⁶

This International Roundtable is informed by this proposition: despite the variability of composition, instrumentation, tone, and context, musical performance not only speaks to an inner aesthetic of individuals but also has the potential to travel across communities and societies and, therefore, induce a sense of transcivilizational appreciation and meaning. Three broad questions set the parameters of the conversation:

- What is musical imagination?
- What are some of the major relationships between music and cultural diversity?
- Is there a world music emerging?

We begin the Roundtable with the opening address by **Martin Stokes**. After a compressed review of the nature of commentaries on the theme, he focuses on the concept of cosmopolitanism and the contestation of its relevance with regard to the creation of music and belonging. Although he warns about the potential problems with regard to the use of the concept, he affirms its value.

Joseph Lam introduces us to the richness of Chinese music and suggests that music “constitutes a discourse of Chinese globalization.” **Héctor F. Pascual Álvarez** responds by stressing the role of music in weakening the grip of national exclusiveness. **Chuen-Fung Wong** joins the conversation by “contextualizing” the essay and, drawing on his own work, makes a plea for more attention to diversity within the Chinese musical culture.

The next discussion revolves around **Ingrid Monson's** essay. Hers reasserts that African-American music has always had global reach. She brings forth how contemporary music-making in the African-American world continues to be partly a crucial creative focus on the contradictions of social existence. **Miriam Larson** joins the exchange by putting an emphasis on “the dynamics of race and racism” in musical culture. **Jane Rhodes**, though conscious of the power of music, warns about the dangers of “essentialization.” With a very brief reference to her own background, she meditates on jazz to illuminate her thinking.

As the tradition continues, the 2008 Macalester International Roundtable will interrogate the complex and durable concept of development. Our theme will be “Whither Development?: The Struggle for Livelihood in the Time of Globalization.”

Notes

1. Breyten Breytenbach, *The Memory of Birds in Times of Revolution: Essays on Africa* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1996), p. 8.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.T. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 213.
3. *The Glenn Gould Reader* (New York: Knopf, 1984), p. 86.
4. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Essay on the Origins of Language," in *The First and Second Discourses Together with the Replies to Critics and Essay on the Origins of Language*, trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 202.
5. Note this general but relevant point by Paul Griffiths:
Music, so intimately engaged with perception, lights up the mind. Music, being immaterial, touches on the immaterial—on the drift of thought and feeling, on divinity and death. Music, as sound, can represent the auditory world: the moan of wind, the repeated whispers of calm waves, the calls of birds. Music, as idealized voice...can sing or sigh, laugh or weep. Music, as rhythm, can keep pace with our contemplative rest and our racing activity. Music, in proceeding through time, can resemble our lives.
A Concise History of Western Music (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 3–4.
6. Federico Garcia Lorca, *Poem of the Deep Song*, a bilingual edition, trans. Ralph Angel (Louisville: Sarabande Books, 2006), p. 9.