

Laurent Aubert. 2007. *The Music of The Other: New Challenges for Ethnomusicology in a Global Age*. Foreword by Anthony Seeger. Translated by Carla Ribeiro. Burlington, VT, and Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing.

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I first read this book when it came out in French in 2001. Back then I used to think that a progressive expansion of the musical horizon of any individual or society could only be considered positive among ethnomusicologists. Not surprisingly, this was the fundamental tenet of the Kodály method of music education: a child naturally learns the mother tongue before learning foreign ones. So he/she should learn his musical mother tongue first, that is, the folk music of his native country, and then move on (according to Kodály) to Western classical music. Ethnomusicologists, of course, recommend going much further—in other words, musical explorations, unlike travelling across unfamiliar places, would entail no dangers—only pleasant discoveries. But then, as I read the book for the first time, I realized I was reading an articulated narrative showing, from various angles, how musical contacts and exchanges among music cultures are not an idyllic and harmonious process but, on the contrary, rather problematic ones. However, this should come as no surprise, since the “musical other” or the “other” *tout court* is, after all, no less than the witness of our own existence. Witnesses who see things from a standpoint we seldom share can easily get us into trouble. In a Kafkaesque manner, we may at some point find ourselves to be sentenced, even before we know we were, on trial. That is because music-making always manifests an uncanny ability to pick up symbolic meanings of one kind or another, right and left, in a magnet-like fashion, meanings that are often charged with connotations about identity. Identities, interpreted by differences rather than on common traits, may well clash with one another. This is why musical contacts and exchanges may be problematic; entailing reactions of “marginal survival,” “emphasized memory and mannerism,” “revival and reconstruction,” “fusion and hybridizing,” “substitution/replacement,” “imitation/innovation,” “compartmentalization,” “modernization,” etc.

But let me now start explaining what this book is about. In order to do so, it may help to remember how at the very beginning of one of his most influential works Bruno Nettl tells the amusing story of how difficult it was, in his younger years, to persuade most people (“normal” people who may not have even heard the word “ethnomusicology”) that “music” exists well beyond the cultural borders of Western society (Nettl 1983:15). At

the time, many could not believe that Native Americans had any kind of “real” music. Likewise, Western society found it hard to perceive the sound of an Australian didgeridoo, or the Inuit “throat games” as music. Laurent Aubert, with his provocative book, explains how the situation has become quite antithetical. Today an incredible flood of music from the four corners of the world is easily accessible in the West—so much so that many people have developed an aural familiarity with it and habitually enjoy it, albeit in their own particular manner, which is precisely the point. In fact, the original significance of music coming to us, like a meteorite, from a totally unfamiliar cultural universe, be it the European Middle Ages, Mongolia, or a tribal culture in Papua New Guinea, can hardly be accessible and convey—to most of us, at least—its original import. To put it differently, the musics of the world have become part and parcel of the sound bubble in which our daily lives unfold and, somehow, we make them fit. How that affects our relation to the written music of the West, to popular styles and genres, how that may alter our sense of aesthetics, and what ultimately all this does to our perception of the world and of our place in it—that is a cluster of inter-related questions waiting to be studied and understood. Another complex aspect also worth considering is the effect of dissemination across Western societies to the musical traditions that continue to exist and develop in their place of origin. As Aubert points out, it can be flattering for a group of people to know that their music has become appreciated worldwide; indeed traditions that were at one time not especially valued where they originated may become identity symbols once they begin to circulate abroad (one is reminded here of the case of Tango in Argentina, of Rebetiko in Greece, and of their transformation from low-brow to high-brow musical genres).

Aubert appropriately observes how the body of research devoted to the musics of the world, mostly developed throughout the twentieth century (at first within the field of “comparative musicology” and, later, in that of “ethnomusicology”), was not the main factor in bringing about today’s many-layered and kaleidoscopic scenario. The main causes at play have been, rather, globalization, large-scale migration from Africa and Asia to the Western countries, and the spread of communication technology. So it has happened that ethnomusicologists have been almost caught by surprise. Once they were simply accustomed to studying the music of distant cultures and places in its original contexts (and of course, still continue to do so), but now they face the additional challenge of having to gauge and assess what is the role, the meaning, the import of, say, African or Pakistani music that has become part of the everyday life of people who live in Melbourne, Los Angeles, Amsterdam, or, as in the case of our author, Geneva. Aubert clearly believes that it should be the primary concern of musical scholarship to understand what impact “the music of the Other” is having on all

of us denizens of Western society. I would find it hard to disagree with this point, because our exposure to the “music of the Other” is probably the most fascinating musical phenomenon of our time. Most intriguing of all is how so many people today, while missing the original import of much of the music they listen to, nonetheless “misunderstand” it in such a creative and successful way, as to make it compatible to their own lives. My reading is that, if so many people can indeed enjoy the sound of alien musics, that must be thanks to a new attitude capable of “producing meaning” for foreign musical styles and genres, an attitude of which Westerners were incapable one hundred years ago (when educated Germans could not relate to Verdi and educated Italians had problems with Wagner).

The point Aubert makes is even more dramatic when one considers the very short time span, historically speaking, over which this drastic change we now need to come to terms with has occurred. It was at the debut of Bruno Nettl’s *The Western Impact on World Music* (1985), when scattered contributions to comparative musical aesthetics were also beginning to appear (Marshall 1981; Loza 1994). A little more than fifteen years later, as the French edition of this book signalled in 2001 (drawing upon articles that appeared between 1991 and 2000), it has become essential to consider the opposite situation: what impact world music is having on Western society, what happens to our sense of aesthetics when we listen to musics which were not meant to coexist with each other on a daily basis. The author sees this as a veritable opportunity because, as he puts it, “. . . consciously or not, the quest for the other in its difference is always also a quest for oneself by way of the other” (xi). No doubt, it would be a gain for us as individuals, as well as for our culture at large, if the quest for oneself “by way of the other” was made conscious and part of our current discourse on music. Here the trouble is possibly that we are not confronted with just “one Other,” but, more often than not, with various “Others” whose individuality is juxtaposed and blended according to recipes that largely escape any obvious logic. But that only makes his point stronger; that comprehending all of this should be the primary task of musical studies today. Laurent Aubert’s musings, nourished as they are by first-hand experiences and contacts with musicians representing most of the musical styles and genres circulating across the planet today, are probably the best orientations available. They provide us with a wide range of possible interpretations, views and, of course, raise just as many questions.

It may help to better gauge the nature of the book if I mention that Laurent Aubert is curator of the “Département d’Ethnomusicologie” at the Musée d’Ethnographie in Geneva (Switzerland), and the founder and director of the Ateliers d’Ethnomusicologie. The latter is an Institute devoted to the study of all music, where concerts and seminars are regularly

organized, and where—taking advantage of the immigrant population present in the city itself—social work and scholarship intertwine like possibly nowhere else. Aubert is also the founder, as well as the editor, of the *Cahiers d'ethnomusicologie* (formerly *Cahiers de musiques traditionnelles*), a yearly publication started in 1988 which since 1994 has become the official publication of the French Society for Ethnomusicology. The reason that this is significant in approaching *The Music of The Other* becomes apparent when one considers the role the French-speaking world and, of course, Paris in particular, has played in the world-music phenomenon. For decades musicians from North, West, and Central Africa have used the French territories as a springboard to gain international recognition. So it is not surprising that such musings about the impact of world music on Western society should come from a scholar who occupies a central role in French-language ethnomusicology.

One does not need to read too many pages of the book to understand how its author, much as he is specifically interested and active in the field of Indian music, still he devotes a considerable part of his intellectual energy to keeping aware and abreast of all major events taking place in the world today—that is, in developing and maintaining a wide-angle view. To keep up to speed with musical diversity as it progresses by leaps and bounds is no easy endeavour. The result of this effort is expressed in a writing style and a way of articulating ideas that is quite personal, often inclined to be, if not outright aphoristic, at least lapidary. Examples include captivating statements such as: “Music is indeed never insignificant” (1); “World music is hybridization elevated to dogma” (55); “The role and function of a genre determines to a large measure its mode of acquisition” (70). There is no shortage of keen observations either; for instance that “Some genres export better than others because they correspond to the expectations of their new audiences” (5), or that, although the colonial age established the premises for large-scale musical phenomena, “. . . paradoxically, colonial powers remained on the whole rather indifferent to matters of art and culture” (3). This is obviously more true in some cases than in others. Italy, a locale familiar to this writer, instantly comes to mind where the late colonial experience in East Africa only yielded a handful of semi-scholarly articles on the music of Abyssinia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea, and a few popular songs celebrating the conquest of those African territories.

Aubert casts a wide net over the colorful musical landscape in which our daily lives unfold. The book's eleven chapters cover a wide range of topics: 1. The elsewhere of music: paradoxes of a multicultural society; 2. Shared listening, an ethnomusicological perspective; 3. Tradition in question: a problem of boundaries; 4. The paradox of the concert, or the evocation of

tradition; 5. An artist's life, or the challenge of representation; 6. The art of hearing well: a sketch of a listener's typology; 7. The invention of folklore, or the nostalgia of origins; 8. World-music, or the last temptation of the West; 9. The large bazaar: from the meeting of cultures to the appropriation of the exotic; 10. Learning the music of the other: a transcultural itinerary; 11. The fascination of India: lessons from personal experience.

All these chapters still speak very well to the contemporary situation, although musical exchanges have increased even more since the book came out. In addition, a few other publications have appeared addressing similar questions, albeit from different angles, among them Philip Bohlman's *World Music: A Very Short Introduction* (2002), Franco Fabbri's, *L'ascolto tabù: Le musiche nello scontro globale* (2005), and Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner's *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* (2006). It is fortunate that the book is just as topical today as it was seven years ago, since the usual trouble with translations is that, like the stars we see on a clear night sky, they give us a view of the past, and a view that the author may have in the meantime further developed. Translations also result from a very selective and serendipitous process, and do not inform the reader about the cultural environment where the book was written.¹ Tony Seeger is therefore probably right when he says in his witty and perceptive Foreword that ethnomusicologists working in English-speaking areas will probably find quite a few unfamiliar titles in the bibliography of this book.

Quite refreshing is Aubert's ability to recognize the inevitability of musical change, how seldom it is in conflict with the tradition in which it occurs, and how, sometimes, even the adoption of Western technology (for instance, electronic amplification) may actually help in bringing out aspects of a tradition that could not be made quite as visible without it (37). Also important is to be reminded, like in the case of the Andalusian flamenco, how recent some traditions really are (21); sociologist Claude Passeron puts it very well when he explains there is a phenomenon of "lost memory," which makes it seem that what is has always been (1986). Not surprisingly, following such premises, Aubert has little use for concepts such as "purity" and, which is just the other side of the same coin, "authenticity.": a favourite statement of his, he often uses in conversation is that "every music is authentic, because it authentically is what it is"! And yet he explains the importance of considering how authenticity is perceived in our culture (see, for instance, the section "Categories of the Authentic," 24–29), and in the cultures that entertain a dialogue with our own. Aubert also recognizes the high degree of hybridism that is practically everywhere we look and listen while making the point that cultures—more specifically musical cultures—are not like scrambled eggs at all; because processes of hybridization are the result of peoples' needs, and tell us about such needs by making them tangible and audible.

Up to this point one would say that between Heraclites (who describes reality as a constant state of flux) and Parmenides (for whom all change is mere illusion), Aubert is definitely and wholeheartedly on the side of the former, in that he accepts the inevitability of constant change while – by and large – recognizing its positive effects. But then when one considers titles and subtitles such as “The Great Bazaar” and “The Trivialization of the Exotic,” and how the author expands on them, one finds in them overtones that are reminiscent of Adorno and his dislike for the mass-media-oriented popular culture of the time. While Aubert does not identify a disruptive force in the mass media, without which, developments would probably take a different course—one still gets the impression that he does not like their intervention too much either—as if to say that change is inevitable but should not be entirely allowed to occur without guidance. One is reminded here of Umberto Eco who once called the cultural elites who fear the destruction of their world by mass communication and popular entertainment “apocalyptic” (one could see in that echoes of the Frankfurt School), and those who wish to believe it is all to the better “integrates,” for example, to some extent, Marshall McLuhan (Eco 1964). Finding a middle ground between the two extremes, as Aubert attempts, implies the juggling of nuances and is much more difficult than just to embrace one or the other. This is where the reader may have to struggle a bit in order to assess the author’s position, that of his mind and of his heart, since they do not necessarily coincide all the time. Nevertheless, Aubert must be lauded for the undeniable accomplishment of someone who, like all ethnomusicologists, comes from a scholarly tradition that long refused to make musical change a serious subject of investigation. In considering the tradition and current evolution of the field of ethnomusicology (in my view, one of the most stimulating aspects of this book), Aubert manifests a nuanced, if not downright ambivalent stand *vis-à-vis* cultural relativism (without ever mentioning the term) and, therefore, in the continuum of “particularist” vs. “universalist” view of human cultures. The cultural relativistic dogma of the Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson lineage postulated such a fundamental psychic difference among peoples, a “particularist” view, as to basically discourage comparison. Today, cultural relativism no longer needs to be a flag against racism as it used to be, and it becomes natural and logical to discuss what cultures may have in common, the negotiations taking place among them, what one may give to another, and whether the exchange may hurt or not. One may also ask, as Aubert does, “. . . if, as one hears, music is a universal language, of what music do we speak, wherein lies its universality and under which conditions does it emerge?” (xii)

In sum, many of us who are active in the field of ethnomusicology will find most of Aubert's positions easy to agree with, but effectively highlighted, argued, and explained with fascinating examples. Once all those single points are put together, they make up a picture that is more than the sum of its parts. The reaction of music scholars active in other areas of musical scholarship may be quite different, especially among those who focus on the written music of the West. Reading this book should hopefully entice scholars to consider the orientation problems of soundscapes where Hildegard von Bingen, Machaut, and Josquin have become, for all practical purposes, contemporaries of Vivaldi, Verdi, Bartók, Stockhausen, and Philip Glass. These musics cannot refuse to coexist with Miles Davis, Astor Piazzolla, Chick Corea and, of course, the music of Umm Kulthum, Cheb Khaled, Genesis, and Nusrat Fateh Ali Kahn as well.

English-speaking readers may have recently run across a book whose title is misleadingly similar to Aubert's: *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation and Appropriation in Music* (Born and Hesmondangh 2000). While both publications bear witness to the topical question of the ways in which the West relates musically to the rest of the World, the two are not comparable, and not just because the American book is a collective product. One fundamental difference is that *Western Music and Its Others* focuses on how the West "constructed" musical exoticism by oversimplifying, distorting, and absorbing what other musical worlds had to offer, by and large in the line Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). While Aubert is obviously interested in these issues, as I have tried to explain, he goes far beyond. Another fundamental difference is the constant reference to post-colonial studies in the cluster of contributions put together by Born and Hesmondangh, and the total absence of them in Aubert's. The simple explanation is that post-colonial studies is a field of great relevance in Anglo-American academia, whereas it has not gained a foothold in Europe.

In conclusion, most of the books we read, as much as they increase our knowledge are really not dangerous reading at all. This one may be. This is a book to be approached with full awareness that, unless you already are an Heraclites-oriented music scholar, then you are taking chances of putting in question some of your strongly held beliefs and may have a hard time in reconciling what is left of them with this new picture. This is where Aubert, better than most of his colleagues, is capable of making the new picture come alive, and communicate how difficult it is for most of us, the author included, to fully grasp its implications. *The Music of The Other: New Challenges for Ethnomusicology in a Global Age* is, at the time of this writing, a contribution unique in its kind.

Current Musicology

Notes

1. For example, few of those who read the early English translations of Dahlhaus's books could recognize how such works were part of an unofficial dialog between him and East German musicologist Georg Knepler.

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