

Response to Richard Widdess: Music, Meaning and Culture

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ABSTRACT: This commentary discusses the anthropological implications of Richard Widdess' paper by summarizing some anthropological approaches to music, especially focusing on the way musical participation inculcates and transmits an aesthetic orientation that guides action across cultural domains such as politics, economics and religion. The paper ends by suggesting that the heart of human culture is more likely to be an aesthetic orientation than a script or set of rules, and traces out some reasons why music does this so well.

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RICHARD Widdess' excellent article makes an important contribution to understanding the locus of meaning in music, to bridging the gap between ethnomusicology and anthropology, and by emphasizing the way that music generates meaning for participants both contextually and structurally.

By situating musical meaning in the diverse cultural domains that its performance and experience elicit for participants, ethnomusicological analysis can offer deep insight into the way that culture is likely to be organized in the minds, bodies and production of members of a particular society. I think that Widdess is right to argue that music embodies in its structure and in its performance a wide range of cultural schema that make it a privileged window onto what cognitive anthropologists hypothesize to be at the core of cultural knowledge and skill – *foundational cultural schemas*.

This has a number of interesting implications that clearly require further research: in particular it suggests that it may be more useful to think about culture as organized in people's minds not as scripts or sets of rules pertaining to different domains, but as an aesthetic tendency to organize action, group activities, collective representations and material production (from musical organization in performance to cosmology or architectural style) across different domains in culturally distinctive and identifiable ways. It may be because of its aesthetic qualities that music offers such privileged insight into how foundational cultural schemas may be organized. If the role of aesthetics is so central to culture, this may offer important clues to explain the universality of music among human social groups.

Intuitions about the centrality of music to culture and society are not new. Herbert Spencer in the "Origins and Function of Dance" (1857) suggested that, in addition to the verbal understandings and representations of the ideals of a society, the highest ideals of a society are non-verbal, and that their expression is the basis of the non-verbal arts. Radcliffe-Brown developed this insight in his ethnography of the Andaman Islanders by arguing that an orderly social existence requires the transmission and maintenance of culturally desirable sentiments. Each generation is inculcated with these sentiments, and they are regularly revitalized in adults, through participation in music and dance (1922, pp. 233-234). By demonstrating the connection between cognitive anthropological theories and music so explicitly, Widdess contributes substantially to explaining why these intuitions have been so appealing.

Widdess ends his piece wondering why anthropologists so rarely use music to illustrate their cultural analyses. This is an interesting question that I cannot fully answer. However it is worth noting that the study of musical meaning to the depth which the examples Widdess uses demonstrate, is only possible by a researcher with considerable musical talent – so they are able to learn to play the instruments of the music they study and also perform the music appropriately. While this may be a considerable obstacle for some anthropologists (myself included), it does not justify music's more general neglect.

A less obvious reason could be music's association with leisure and pleasure in western society, which, like children's play, led to neglect by many researchers. Music and play, considered as non-utilitarian activities, seem to have been less interesting than more 'serious' activities such as economy, kinship or politics. The popular psychologist Steven Pinker (1997) claimed that music is just 'auditory cheesecake', an accidental by-product of adaptive mechanisms that evolved for other

purposes. However, as Widdess's article so persuasively demonstrates, this is profoundly mistaken. Music may be at the heart of what constitutes and organizes 'culture', the central human adaptation that distinguishes us so profoundly from other species.

As Ian Cross has pointed out, most westerners view music as complex patterns of sound that we listen to for enjoyment rather than perform. The experience of passive listening to music has overly influenced academic thinking, leading to the sound's reification from music's many other functions: in child socialisation and learning; in keeping dangerous wild animals away; as a means of group communication; for individual and group display; as a framing for rituals, or a means to mark episodes or changes of status in ceremonies, or the suspension of normal social behaviours as in carnival; or in less obviously musical behaviours such as formalised political oratory, story-telling or lament.

More recent work in anthropology asks not what is music's meaning, but what do we mean by music? The concepts associated with what westerners recognise as music and dance differ from society to society. Seeger (1994) describes how the Suyá of the Amazon forest do not distinguish movement from sound since they are both required for a correct performance. A single word – *ngere* means 'to dance' and 'to sing', because as the Suyá say 'They are one'. In Papua New Guinea anthropologists have struggled to talk about dance independently of music with their informants. As in most local languages, *Tok Pisin* (the Lingua Franca) has one term '*singsing*' which is used interchangeably to refer to singing or dancing, or both.

Another area of anthropological enquiry examines where linguistic communication ends and music begins, and how they mix. Like language, music combines gestural and sonic elements. These connections are exploited in certain communicative styles that mix language and music in order to capitalize on the range of expressive possibilities offered. For example, formalized political oratory, such as the Maori *haka*, can combine speech, chant, gesture and dance to reinforce the statement; or traditional forms of lamentation in many societies mix distinctive gestures, dance, song and speech in formulaic ways (Feld, 1982; Feld & Fox, 1994, pp. 39-43), and song and speech combine in many storytelling traditions from around the world. So while there are many occasions in which it is difficult to separate out musical expression from language, there are of course differences between them.

Music tends to *formulaicness* (Richman 2000, p. 304), as pre-existing formulae – rhythms, riffs, themes or motifs – are cyclically repeated, often with slight variation or embellishment. Thus music tends to repeat the same utterances over and over, reinforcing the meanings encoded therein without boring the listener as such repetition in speech would. Alan Lomax insightfully expressed the cultural inculcation aspect of musical performance:

"The art of music ... lies in its capacity to repeat these main messages again and again in slightly disguised and subtly different ways. Here, at the level of musical conversation, we enter a limitless realm of nuance, where reinforcement never brings surfeit or fatigue, where the ear delights in playing with a scale of tiny differences, and the restatement of the familiar is not a command but an invitation to return home." (Lomax, 1962, p. 450).

Where language is based on units with fairly restricted shared meanings, music is constructed from units with multi-layered, expansive, fluctuating or no meaning. While both combine implicit embodied meanings (dance and gesture) and explicit sung or spoken meanings, music does tend to prioritize the implicit and non-verbal, whereas language the explicit and the verbal. Victor Grauer takes this further by suggesting that

"Music ... seems to exist in a realm of its own, a highly ritualised realm, filled far more with redundancies than explicit messages. Unlike language, in which [novel] utterances are continually being produced, music tends to repeat the same utterances over and over ... Language may be seen as ... a force for change, while music seems to operate as a conservative force, continually reaffirming the individual's connection to the group, their common ancestors, and their collective origins in a mythic past." (2007, p. 4).

Many westerners will think of the meaning of a piece of music as expressed in a song's words. The examples that Widdess presents show different facets of how musical meaning making is located beyond the words of the songs – in the choice of music for a particular audience or situation, of the juxtaposition of rhythms and words, of timing, of resonance with mythical scripts, or religious archetypes, and culturally appropriate sentiments, to the way that the musical structure serves to generate specific experiences among participants that have profound resonance with aesthetic principles governing a range of cultural domains.

Widdess's description of the Nepalese stick dance exemplifies this multi-level approach to musical meaning, clearly showing how musical structure synaesthetically resonates with other culturally determined aesthetic forms such as architectural style, representational styles in religious art, in the cosmological imagination and in religious practices. In particular the way that the local cosmology is made concrete in the participants' experience of the eternal rhythm - from A to B to A to B ... - as they circumnavigate the town in a circular motion that embodies ideas of the cycle of birth

and death central to reincarnation. By this process they emulate temple worship practices that in effect treat the town as a deity, thereby making it sacred and thus worshipping it and its inhabitants.

My own research among BaYaka Pygmies in Congo examines three related aspects of BaYaka musical performance: the way it creates a sense of shared identity, how it ensures the transmission of key cultural orientations crucial for a successful hunting and gathering economy, and how it mirrors and thus reinforces social structure and political order (Lewis, 2002, 2006, and forthcoming). My analyses would not have been possible without the work of a range of ethnomusicologists: in particular Simha Arom, Susanne F urniss, Victor Grauer, Michelle Kisliuk, Alan Lomax, Herbert Pepper and Gilbert Rouget.

Their interest in the distinctive Pygmy style of vocal interlocked hocketing polyphonic music, and work analyzing and deconstructing the structure of the songs, the mechanics of performance, the variety of styles and genres, and their comparisons with other groups, has, in conjunction with my own anthropological investigations since 1994, surprised me because of the extent to which musical participation organizes diverse cultural activities from hunting and gathering to politics or the rhythm of aggregation and dispersal between people.

There is, for instance, no hierarchy among singers, anyone can stop and start the song, no authority organizes participation. If too many sing the same part the polyphony dissolves. Each singer has to hold their own, while being in harmony with those around them. Singing like this teaches each to implicitly seek to do something different to others: if everyone went for honey there might be nothing to eat. This unspoken grammar of interaction is the dynamic of daily life in this egalitarian society.

The aggregation and dispersal of people is mostly organized and motivated by the social opportunities afforded by musical participation. Whether it is the children of the camp communicating through their songs to the adults of the camp, the men to the women or women to men, the camp to game animals, or the camp to the forest. BaYaka use their singing to enchant those who hear it. They say it makes them ‘go soft’ so that they will give what is demanded from them.

Ritual is often marked, bounded and organised by and through music. Music enables a special type of historical consciousness by establishing a frame for people to re-experience the contemplations of their ancestors, aspects of their cultural history, and mythical past. This is most striking during *Ejengi* spirit play performances that re-enact key mythical events and so collapse time, enabling participants to enter a sacred, timeless ‘everywhen’.

Musical performance forms BaYaka persons in very particular ways. Bodies successfully performing in the dense polyphony experience what BaYaka consider to be desirable emotions, ideal relationships and they participate in an optimal learning environment that promotes life-long learning based on peer-to-peer mimicry rather than instructed learning with its concomitant implication of authority and hierarchy.

It is also a ritual system capable of communicating with the forest as a whole, of bringing people together in greater numbers than any other event, of enabling different groups in society (men, women, children, elephant hunters, etc) to explore their particular qualities and strengths while also enabling them to communicate as a group with the rest of society, or between camps, and with non-BaYaka – with outsiders such as forest spirits, or farmers or Europeans. Music serves as a major avenue for cultural transmission; for structuring society; for inculcating characteristic economic, political and religious ways of interacting, key values such as sharing and egalitarianism; to establish a special arena for groups within society to express themselves as a distinctive group rather than as individuals; and a special or sacred time zone in which living people can connect with the deep mythical past and relive the creation of society for themselves, thus re-establishing it for each new generation.

When my BaYaka friends listened to recordings of Mbuti Pygmy music made by Colin Turnbull in the 1950s on the eastern border of the Congo Basin over a thousand miles to the west, they immediately exclaimed ‘They must be BaYaka since they sing just like us!’ BaYaka explicitly recognize that performing this music has pedagogic, political, economic, social and cosmological ramifications that serve to reproduce key cultural orientations they consider central to BaYaka personhood and cultural identity.

CONCLUSION

Music provides a special window on the collective tacit knowledge we call culture. As such it suggests that foundational cultural schemas are organized in ways that are not explicitly concerned with accurate transmission, but rather can be understood as depending on cultivating aesthetic propensities to engage with your surroundings in a particular way. This flexibility is crucial for foundational cultural schema to be relevant over long periods of time, to be able to adapt to changing circumstances, to encompass new situations flexibly, providing continuity at the same time as a means of ordering and making sense out of novelty.

Music's role in the cultural transmission of enduring aesthetic, economic, social and political orientations is remarkable. The dense interlocked hocketing of the Mbendjele's vocal polyphony is probably many thousands of years old. The Mbendjele hearing Mbuti music immediately recognise that they are 'real forest people' like themselves, despite living 1500 miles apart, speaking different languages, and with some different technology (net hunters, spear hunters, and bow hunters) and material culture and which genetic studies suggest last lived together around 18-20 thousand years ago. Victor Grauer (2007) takes this even further. He argues that this unusual and distinctive style only sung by San Bushman and Central African Pygmies probably goes back to the time when they were both the same people. According to genetic studies this was between 75-100,000 years ago.

If these studies stand up to scrutiny they suggest that musical foundational schemas have extraordinary resilience, and that this resilience is likely due to their special aesthetic, adaptive and stylistic qualities that ensure continuity despite change.

END NOTES

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