

TEACHING TRADITIONAL MUSIC

The Experience of the Cité de la musique in Paris

INTRODUCTION

Intercultural dialogue does exist throughout the world and is not purely the vision of institutions issuing a politically correct discourse. In the field of music, the Cité de la musique's educational approach as well as my own experience as a musician and explorer of the world's musical traditions have convinced me of a deep evolution since the 1980s: The West's way of considering traditional repertoires, from being condescending at first, has become admiring and the average knowledge about these musical traditions has increased considerably. Though these musical styles are indeed no longer that 'far-off', it would be naive to think that every human being were/would be likely to understand and practise without difficulty the diverse musical languages of the world. For example, one can see how quickly experiences of musical fusion based on short encounters reach their limits.

With this brief paper, I will show how the Cité de la musique's approach is meant to participate in this general dynamic of enhanced involvement in intercultural exchanges. I will also show how the Cité has built up a programme of initiation to musical diversity based on a constant awareness of what is at stake it on a regional, national, and international level.

The educational programme of the Cité de la musique has been designed for a very large audience, from children and families (often with no basic knowledge of music) to music students, teachers, and professional musicians – some 30 000 people take advantage of it each year. This opening up of musicians' ears and mind to the richness of the world's traditional repertoires is an important complement to musical education. And indeed, measuring its impact is essential because these young people are the ones who will lead tomorrow's musical life in our country, as performers or as teachers.

FOUNDING PRINCIPLES OF THE CITÉ DE LA MUSIQUE'S EDUCATIONAL APPROACH

The acceleration of interaction and interpenetration between the diverse cultures of the world is an objective phenomenon. If this global movement applies differently according to countries, France, which is historically a territory of immigration, can today be considered as a multicultural society. Official statistics show that, in 2004, 8,1 % of France's population (about five million people) was composed of immigrants, that is to say, for that year, the country counted five million foreign people born outside France. Furthermore, Michèle Tribalat (National Institute for Demography) considers that, in France, one person out of four has at least one parent or grandparent of immigrant origin. Considering that immigration, as we define it today, has been developing in France for over one century, it would probably be very easy for any French person to find family links abroad.

Immigration is such a structural phenomenon that it should be viewed as an essential characteristic of French identity (which, by the way, would probably help avoiding certain tensions within the country). Immigrant populations have brought along customs, languages and, of course, artistic practices that are now fully part of France's cultural landscape. The Cité de la musique pays particular attention to the musical styles that immigration has helped to disseminate across the French territory.

However, beyond any socio-historical dimension, the Cité de la musique means to address cultural diversity in general and music as an expression of human civilisation as a whole; consequently, the Cité also includes into its educational programmes the introduction to musical practices that have no link whatsoever with today's French multicultural society; for instance, the teaching of Javanese *gamelan* in Paris (where Javanese immigration is insignificant) allows a discovery of otherness and cultural diversity on an abstract level.

The Cité focuses on musical diversity because it is a mark of human diversity in general, a diversity of expression based on universal principles inherent to mankind; this implies, from an educational viewpoint, a constant movement back and forth between the universal (the essentially human) and the cultural, that is to say particular expressions of universal principles.

This anthropological perspective rests on concepts defined by ethnomusicology; when describing musical instruments, one first focuses on universal models: An Indian sitar, a guitar, a *xalam* or *tidinit* lute from West Africa are variations of an abstract object composed of a sound box prolonged by a handle with parallel strings. If one considers the syllables used for rhythms in learning how to play the Indian *tabla* or Javanese

ciblon drum, one will easily establish a link with the western sol-fa, which, consequently, becomes one form of sol-fa among others.

Another founding principle of the Cité de la musique's educational approach is the systematic valorisation of the music styles it chooses to teach and, more generally, of the cultural contexts to which they are attached. The Cité focuses on highly *refined* music styles, but with a notion of refinement that invites one to go beyond the Western acceptance of the term. For instance, doubtlessly a bow from Central Africa is a less elaborate object than a violin designed by a skilled instrument maker; however, for the peoples who use it, the bow carries in itself a highly symbolic value: It is capable of transcending language and, as such, should be viewed as a highly important part of humanity's artistic heritage. In the same way, classical Ottoman music is a genre that ignores harmony; however, it offers talented musicians an infinity of possibilities in terms of improvisation and creativity.

If the Cité de la musique's educational programme is inspired by traditional models, it cannot and, in any case, does not wish to duplicate them exactly. In that respect, observers often allude to the problem of transmission out of context: On the contrary, I think it advisable to address this issue as transmission in a new context. Indeed, within this new notional framework, it is possible to reinvent the notion of authenticity: remaining true to a tradition while adapting to a new context of execution. It is out of the question for us to ignore our own cultural context, to go against our own moral values: For instance, even though playing the xylophone is forbidden to women in West Africa, clearly the Cité de la musique will not reproduce this separation between genders in the workshops it organises. But we also think it is essential to be aware of such facts, to inform the participants as well as consider the possible impact of such an approach on the context of origin. Thus, following the same example, we know that some musical practices have become accessible to women in traditional societies because Western women had access to them in the first place.

Because they are essentially transmitted orally (with a fundamental role played by cultural imprinting), traditional repertoires are often said to be structurally unsuitable for being taught in the West. How can a student memorise both the repertoire and playing techniques with one weekly lesson when, in the context of origin, pupils are supposed to live with their master day and night so as to understand the essence of music? Western musicians who wish to play traditional music at a high standard must be conscious of that fact and will have to adapt to modes of learning likely to help them achieve that goal; but this does not lessen the value of non traditional approaches: They just do not serve the same purpose.

A young musician from a conservatoire who had the opportunity to follow a one-week course in Transylvanian Gypsy music at the Cité and

learnt a melody in a global way (rather than repeating it phrase after phrase) did experience hands-on – or should I say ‘bow-on’ in this case – some kind of cultural imprinting. This gave him a chance to explore new opportunities in terms of his professional project while it gave the Gypsy master an occasion to meet a musician able to play his traditional repertoire – perhaps imperfectly – even though he had not been steeped in Gypsy tradition since infancy. Through such courses, masters and students are in a situation of intercultural dialogue and one in which the desire to meet the other plays an essential part: One volunteered to teach away from his village while the other made an effort to enter a universe foreign to what he had been learning for years. In this artistic and human encounter, the Cité de la musique’s role is to implement all the necessary conditions to allow real exchange between different beings and different cultures.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE APPROACH

The application of the principles expounded above is defined by the choice of ‘material’ (cultural area, style, and repertoire) and by teaching policy. The teacher’s role is essential and the coherence of the project depends on their adhering to the whole approach and particularity by paying attentions to intercultural mechanisms.

WHAT CAN BE TRANSMITTED?

The Cité’s programme of activities covers the planet’s great cultural areas, covering music from Southeast Asia, West and Central Africa, the Arab world, Europe, etc. The inclusion of a new repertoire to the programme depends on its faculty of adaptation to the Cité’s educational project, bearing in mind that some are not compatible with the objective of rapid learning. Japanese court music for instance (fascinating as it is) is not easily accessible to a beginner, whatever his musical standard.

I have already alluded to the privileged place given by the Cité to music styles attached to cultural groups of extra European origin, in particular those from France’s former colonies. Indeed, this process is most natural in the framework of a project meant to enhance intercultural dialogue. Repertoires from the Arab world, West and Central Africa are therefore very well represented in the Cité’s activities. Other repertoires have been selected because their very nature encourages the collective practice of music; the Javanese gamelan or the Trinidadian steel-drums meet exactly this criterion. Furthermore, since there is hardly any immigration from

Java and Trinidad in France, the teaching of those two countries' musical traditions allows the Cité to address the issues of diversity and otherness on a neutral, abstract level. Musical traditions from the French regions are also represented: Their vitality being largely ignored, their presence in the programme was essential.

For each tradition, it is necessary to select musical pieces adapted to beginners according to two essential criteria: Accessibility, so as to nurture immediate musical pleasure, and exemplarity, to illustrate the chosen musical genre in an appropriate manner. Thus, just by learning one piece, the participants will be able to identify certain features and principles of the repertoire. As far as Arab rhythms are concerned, for instance, one will have to understand that a variation is valid in reference to a cycle and not as a separate musical phrase to be memorised in its linearity. In the same way, the place of the gong in gamelan music must not be perceived as initial or final – though this would be only natural for a Western musician: The gong opens and closes a musical cycle and, somehow, it enfolds the music played by the gamelan.

It is also indispensable for students to be able to place music in its cultural context; learning musical forms without reference to languages, customs, modes of teaching, would simply be meaningless.

WHO CAN TRANSMIT?

Of course, choosing the musicians in charge of the Cité's workshops is a crucial matter: If their standard of competence in a given repertoire is the first criterion, their educational skills are at least as important and often need to be used in a context very different to the one in which they themselves learnt. Workshop leaders might well be musicians who have lived their whole life in a traditional cultural context or may be Western musicians who have studied traditional repertoires during long stays in the relevant country. Both categories have something in common, to different degrees: They belong to two different cultures, which makes them mediators for whom intercultural dialogue has become a 'second nature' and who are prepared to lead inexperienced novices on their chosen path. Some of these musicians have a diploma officially recognised in France and enabling them to teach in conservatoires and others have only their experience as a qualification. We sometimes take on musicians who have very little experience of teaching outside their own culture; in that case, a middle person is needed to solve linguistic problems, to help the pupils to get to know a new cultural universe and help the master to understand the reactions and the difficulties of this new type of students.

A CONCRETE EXAMPLE OF THE CITÉ'S ACTIONS: THE SUMMER ACADEMY FOR YOUNG MUSICIANS TRAINED IN EUROPEAN CONSERVATOIRES

In July 2007, within the framework of the European project *ExTra!* the Cité organised a one-week-academy on orally transmitted music for young musicians trained in conservatoires. Four musical domains were represented: Classical Ottoman music, Arabo-Andalusian music from Morocco, *sabar* drums from Senegal and traditional Gypsy string music from Transylvania. The teachers were all renowned masters of their tradition: Kudsi Erguner for classical Ottoman music, Taoufik Himmiche for Moroccan Andalusian music, Doudou and Tapha N'Diaye Rose for the *sabar* drums, Csányi Sándor 'Cilika' and Francisc Mezei 'Csángáló' for Gypsy music from Transylvania.

Students attended one workshop over the course of the week and, except for the *sabar* drums, they worked on their own instruments. The five days of musical practice were supported by ethnomusicology lectures that had to be attended by all 50 students, whichever tradition they had chosen to study. At the end of the week, a final concert given by both masters and students was held in the Cité de la musique's amphitheatre.

In all four workshops, students had access to certain fundamental notions, acquired some specific instrumental techniques and learnt pieces from the chosen traditional repertoire. Each time, the objectives were the same: Familiarising European students with a musical culture foreign to them, widening their approach to music and enabling them to appreciate differences and likenesses between diverse artistic practices. If, for each workshop, these three main objectives had equally been achieved, the educational methods used by the teachers were specific to the particular requirements of each repertoire. All masters used tradition as a basis for their teaching but each one had to adapt it in their own way so that, in a short time, students could have a satisfying global vision of the repertoire as well as experience pleasure in learning. Thus, Kudsi Erguner did not choose to rely solely on oral transmission: He thought the students had to understand the mechanisms of improvisation scheme within the *makam*'s modal system. So he gave scores to his students to spare them the memorisation effort, to allow them to concentrate on timbre, untempered intervals and the notion of variation. Taoufik Himmiche chose to explore different musical suites, the *nouba*, selecting for both measured and non-measured pieces so as to give his pupils an overview of Andalusian music. According to custom, he based his teaching on the repetition, memorisation, and addition of musical fragments, but he decided to shorten the time devoted to the learning of rhythms and their interaction with melodies. As for Doudou and Tapha

N'Diaye Rose, they chose to shed light on the physical involvement of sabar players and so the two masters picked up pieces from various rhythmic repertoires. Csányi and Csángáló were probably the ones whose teaching technique was closest to tradition; they preferred an imprinting method, rather than fragmenting musical phrases. The students had to pick up what they could from the three-minute piece that the teachers kept repeating until it was memorised. They made only one concession: It was played at a slower tempo than usual.

Before, during, and after the project, we always worked in coordination with the musicians to specify and compare our respective aims. Musical matters were at the core of our exchanges, of course, but the question of intercultural dialogue also occupied an essential place in our discussions. Most teachers obviously expected the Cité to put this objective forward; as musicians who are part of the contemporary scene, they all think that it is necessary to work towards a better mutual understanding. Kudsi Erguner said that this kind of intercultural project should not remain exceptional, that all sorts of institutions should promote them and that they should be part of musicians' everyday experience. The students also expressed their desire to go beyond the purely technical, musical aspect; thus, for all, the Summer Academy was more than a mere workshop to acquire new playing techniques. The technical work was intense, and, in fact, the high standard of competence of both masters and pupils became a tool to go deeper into a system of references rich in cultural values. It was a sort of dialogue between peers in which each participant had to give of his best. Although the Cité had not meant to establish any competition whatsoever between the invited teachers, after the final concert, Csányi and Csángáló said they felt they had 'won': They thought they had led their pupils further into their tradition than the other teachers. They expressed the same idea again, comparing the Academy students to the pupils they usually teach in Rumania (who most likely exercise less than students from European conservatoires or music high schools).

The most intense moment in this Academy was probably the final concert: This cohabitation of different styles of music visited by European students taught in classical Western music, the teachers' charisma, the truly multicultural audience (some of whom came from those cultures represented by the musicians), all gave that moment some kind of ecumenical character. If this type of event has globally positive consequences within voluntary intercultural initiatives, it also has a beneficial influence on the image that the nations of origin have of their own culture. Thus, Taoufik Himmiche insisted on the fact that an invitation to play in Europe is a way of enhancing Arabo-Andalusian music in Morocco and can help local institutions to launch new projects in this domain.

MUSIC: A META-LANGUAGE WORKING FOR AN INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE?

The educational approach of the Cité de la musique is indeed intercultural, the term bearing in itself an idea of movement without which no exchange is possible. However positive it may be, this movement needs to be controlled, and the actions we undertake must be the fact of a voluntary intercultural dialogue and must be backed by adapted tools of analysis. For instance, if the Cité organised workshops on African drums simply because the French population counts many members of African origin and recruited a black teacher – chosen for the colour of their skin as a mark of authenticity –, our intercultural approach would be a voluntary one indeed, but would cruelly lack intellectual depth. Thus, when the Cité starts a new workshop on African drums, its first aim is to present the cultural context in which these instruments are inscribed, insisting on basic theoretical elements such as the presentation of Africa as a rich, complex and culturally diversified continent and not as a national unity (which many people in France tend to ignore). Indeed, we fight any prejudice that participants might have, making an effort to avoid ‘musical tourism’. We recruit a teacher because he/she is identified as a competent musician by renown in his/her own tradition or because he/she has the required degree; his/her competence as a teacher is also assessed, as well as the ability to blend into our institution’s global project.

It is true cultural diversity and the human richness of its musicians and teachers that make the Cité de la musique’s educational project what it is today; indeed, none of them feels he or she belongs to only one cultural sphere, all are products of multiple influences: Whether born in France of Maghrebi immigrant parents with a degree in Cuban percussion, born in Indonesia and with a French degree in ethnomusicology, born in Senegal, touring throughout the world and teaching in France two months a year, or born in Portugal, with a degree in composition from the Paris Conservatoire National Supérieur but specialising in jazz music and Javanese gamelan.

And in fact, reflection on intercultural dialogue should take into account the individual dimension: It has now become difficult to identify homogeneous cultures made up of members who have lived through similar experiences. Systematic studies about interactions should reassure those who fear a shock of cultures.

To conclude, we must pay tribute to music that, if it is neither a universal language nor a sure means of soothing tensions, has nevertheless always been identified as a particular kind of power by most human cultures of the world. Its abstract character as well as its proximity to language turns it into a sort of meta-language able to transcend human behaviour. It is no doubt true to say that the sounds produced by a *ney* flute or by a gong *ageng*

in gamelan music will affect any human being's sensibility; it is also true that, through music, one can communicate beyond linguistic barriers, and true as well that one may be moved by the music produced by this other human being who at first seemed most hostile, and thus one's outlook might begin to change.

References

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