

Panayiotis Demopoulos - Composer / Performer

THE DELUSIONAL STATE OF GLOBAL FOLKLORE

[Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

Before I begin, my apologies: I do hope that my paper, written as an opinion more than a researched article, will not be noticeably or significantly deficient in terms of academic merit and musicological depth; furthermore I will deliver my paper reading from my text, for reasons pertaining to time, clarity and sensible elocution.]

The work of a composer is both conceptual and perceptual; this is an important matter not only of identity but also of scope – all that follows in this paper relates with perception through a conceptual or creative prism. Subsequently this talk will touch, briefly, on the challenges and questions which the current state of musical folklore poses to creative people. It should be noted that the application of a neo-Marxist hermeneutic here is in its essence incorrect; the creative *raison d'être* is not political, but purely musical – the importance of this statement cannot be emphasised sufficiently. As first proof of the argument's authenticity, a confession is in place: the author lacks any true folklore other than a conglomeration of commercial imagery, and he also discounts – empirically – any true understanding of music as anonymous practice in the absence of remuneration. This is a terribly debilitating musical predicament, if a pleasant political condition; far from an oxymoron or ethical dichotomy, this duality is historically familiar. As no further introductory elucidation is required, let us move on to expand on the theme of anonymity as it is of paramount importance in folk traditions.

The composition or creation of any new music is an activity which has changed significantly over the past two centuries. It may be no coincidence that the idea of identifiable folk traditions and national identities and the emergence of the theoretical study of these traditions have occurred in the same period of time. If, as a non-ethnomusicologist, one were to construct a hasty definition of what one considered as folklore, one would be careful to describe it as an idiom or an activity which is compact in terms of cause and effect and which expresses or reflects a collective creative consciousness; in other words, an activity which no single individual can

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claim authorship (in a legally binding sense!) over. What then of a culture which is dependent on the veneration of the individual – what of the civilisation which has based its musical culture on the ideal of the hero, from Orpheus to Ligeti and, in its literatures, from Homer to the Grove dictionaries and venue pamphlets?

Musical folklore – at least in its above definition – is not a possibility amongst people who demand rewards for any creative input. At any rate it is not a possibility, if we adhere to the prototype of folklore as that impulsive creative faculty which groups of people exercise with no extra-musical purposes. And surely, it is no purism for any other than the cynic to suggest that the birth of communal tradition is and has been always autonomous of external instruction. An arising question then is: are all 21st century Western people unable to be part of a folk tradition? Is all musical activity, taking place in the global (the term is used here in its contemporary political sense) community, mercenary in nature? As far as one can see and as far as a musician can be concerned, the question is pragmatically rhetorical. But to speak of catastrophe without good sense is not necessary, nor advisable. What, if any, are the true repercussions of a lack of conventional folklore?

For example to understand how the culture industry operates in the 21st century, it is important to fully comprehend the way in which copyright law and recording practice have influenced our relationship with music. This in its turn is a gruelling task; the music consumer/sceptic may wish to attribute the obfuscated design of the industrial mechanism to profit-making conspiracy and perhaps rightly so. But this insight may not allow one clarity other than that required to redirect one's consuming tendencies elsewhere. In any case, such is the might of retail that music remains a peripheral subject, whether one protests or not at the sight of poetic ruin.

Still, we may wish to investigate how terms are coined, musical currents manufactured and “folk” traditions directed. For instance, the very term “folk music” is widespread in Europe and America; elsewhere the distinction between types of music is felt less strongly, least of all in Africa – this is no accident. Geographical areas which had industrial procedure impinged on them are far more likely to label everyday practice for commercial reasons: these vary from CD shop display layouts to mass production and distribution research.

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To go back to the question of what – if anything – is criminal with folklore being transformed into commodity: a paradigm can be found in musical cultures which have suddenly undergone conversion from non-industrial, anonymous, orally transmitted, custom-based traditions to full-scale profitable enterprises. A good example can be found here in the Balkans, a group of countries, ethnicities and cultures which share a similar history with Western Europe. The fundamental difference between the countries of the enlightenment and those that were only born as states in the 19th century was not political but ethical. The Balkans never experienced an Industrial Revolution, but are now living under an Industrial Establishment. They are thus a case in point here: the musical life of such communities is condemned to follow instruction. In their rich musical cultures, the very same idioms which until very recently were part of every-day life and alive musical organisms have been abruptly modified and mummified to serve on marketable foundations and economic operations. Voluntarily, the positivist will argue, yet such an argument is clearly erroneous in that it does not consider the delusional character of the notion of freedom of choice in marketplace ethics.

As the above may appear extremely moralistic or politicised let us reach the main point of this short and freely speculative polemic: the musical problem within the condition of externally transformed cultures is that whereby a folk culture replaces a more academic culture as formal music (i.e. scholarly music making or religious music making being replaced by populist music), what ensues is the disappearance of both folk culture and formal culture because of the concurrent misplacement of both. The result is a void which any product whose objective is to coerce the masses of musically non-conversant consumers fills uncaringly. In short, music suffers as much as any language – the parallel is obvious: when a vernacular replaces a formal language in official public life, it is language and literature which suffer injury, both their colloquial and official forms; likewise when musical folklore is promoted as professional art then no true liberty is allowed for either folklore or professional music.

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In the case of a tradition which is either deceased and embalmed, or the creation of industrial artifice and trickery, any brand of research whether dubbed ethnomusicology, comparative musicology or ethnology is itself artifice and the instrument of coercion. On the contrary, in the case of a tradition which exists in itself and in absence of transactional requirements, research of and on it is only inevitable, apposite and fundamentally crucial. In effect, music making reflects on the study of music: the work of the analyst or theoretician is an indication of the state of music. But as has happened time and time again in our history, the iniquitous investigation of vulnerable phenomena can annihilate them.

In this light, ethnomusicology might have been the study of living cultural phenomena; but it may also be reduced to being the market research study of a small segment of the culture industry. It is always a revelation to read Bruno Nettl's opening statement on what constitutes ethnomusicology; the following keywords are mentioned in the first few paragraphs: "musical product, process, fieldwork, performance, produce and consume music" – finally a truism: that "we must study the music of all people". In the case of research which views music and sound as fieldwork and produce, or in the case of research which needs to remind itself that music belongs to all people indeed, one is unable to favour it as anything more than barbarous cultural imperialism whereby the life of one is the experiment and inspection of another, the aspiring "biggest of all brothers"; these tendencies are in fact nothing other than extreme expressions of cultural solipsism or even autism under an audaciously deceptive banner of egalitarian colours. And this very acidic evaluation of them is not at all the exaggerated articulation of reactionary ideology, but an attempt to describe evident aesthetic violence accurately.

Folklore is the voice of humanity – whether we choose to honour and value that voice or not is perhaps a deeper question for the ontological or the moral philosopher to ponder upon. For the creative man, it is a given, a resounding yes. Our high art has always been nothing more than a technically minded crystallisation of that sacred anonymous voice and our past teaches us that our culture, folklore and humanity are not to be displayed in windows for sale but held sacrosanct – it is clear, however, that in the 21st century little exists outside of displayed labels. If ethnomusicologists, the "last defenders" of musical folklore accept that the notion of a readily attainable

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global culture is anything beyond delusion and deceit, if they accept that music is a quantifiable commodity, then that commodity is all we merit and folk music will gradually become what a prayer is to an atheist: parody at best and anathema at worst.

Ending on a high note and concluding on opinion for the sake of perverse consistency, and since reason and art would sooner seek substance than substantiation, it is fair to suggest that lamenting the end of folklore is not a rational act; it is the author's belief, faith and immovable conviction that humanity is a creature which prevails and guides us through documented and anonymous history alike – however vulgar our vandalisms. In parallel, music exists whether we are listening to it or not; it occurs when we recognise that it governs supreme in the realm of aesthetic experience and that we are not its masters. Folk music is good proof of that hierarchy and any effort to earn its absence through taming it economically is a peculiar form of spiritual suicide.

It may appear that all authored music will be part of the marketplace in the near future – we are then deluded enough to believe in a global folklore based on the mnemonics of sale statistics. People of progress may view any opposing ideal as primitivism, but people of progress believe in progress as a virtue – pure music does not consider progress, for it is itself the progression of a continuum in time. It is not within the scope of this paper nor is here the place to instigate radical dogma, but it must be concluded that, only through seeking anonymity can we tread the path back to the normalcy that is music as the outcome of impulse and plain, autonomous want to hear successive sounds. In the great music of the past one finds abundant the conviction that, sooner or later, we, the specimens of bourgeois pseudo-individualism, will agree to a deep, indecipherable yet infinitely known call to abandon the temporary realm of commercial gratification that has been forcefully imposed upon us, for the interminable poetry of gratis sound. Perhaps the 21st century, unable as it seems to hear that call will order and witness a musical pause and muffle our true voice, but one hopes that better judgment will abound before long.