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**A Brave New World Music:
An Ethnographic Study on Music and
Cross-Cultural Communication**

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Abstract

In a world where audio-visual media have become primary sites for cultural exchange, music's presumed ability to communicate meaning universally reveals itself in many circles. From a certain point of view, *World Music can* be defined as an arena where different localities meet musically, while even such an optimistic definition requires the acknowledgement of the centrifugal forces and tendencies that determine musical communication at all levels.

Academic interests on music and communication, in general, seem to concentrate on the circulation of music with regard to economic/political contexts determined by the related cultural spheres within musical circulation occurs. Music, as a substance of research, causes many problems for social sciences: One of these main problems is that; what is "communicated" with music, comes to pass in nonverbal communication. Therefore, as a result, many studies focus on more "verbal" qualities than "musical" ones.

This paper aims to explore some of the communicative contexts that underlie a possible cultural understanding via musical performances by tracing the circulation of an instrument. The case study presented in this paper is derived from a ongoing ethnographic study based on a framework inspired by Dell Hymes' *ethnography of speaking*: Together with a number of professional musicians living/residing in Turkey, who musically produce locality in international venues, we will be examining patterns and practices that characterize multiculturalism in music.

Keywords: World Music, Anthropology of Audio-Visual Communication, Material Culture

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World Music in Private Worlds

We live in a multiplicity of worlds; serving as alternative technologies of transportation, audiovisual media help us reach to many of them. To some degree, we access to, and organize our *private and professional worlds* via audiovisual media. We are surrounded by numerous worlds at our homes; we feel the presence of many distinct worlds of religions, finance, and sports, etc. When frustrated with *world* problems, for instance, we find joy in the *world of entertainment*, either by watching a documentary revealing the hidden secrets of *underwater worlds*, or by listening to some unknown beat coming from a random online *world music* radio station. What is more, one may still feel 'at home' while traveling through all these worlds.

As Gaston Bachelard suggests in *The Production of Space*, a house signifies a body and a soul: Besides all the practical uses a house offers to its inhabitants; from a psychoanalytic view, being the center of an individual's universe; "A house is imagined as a concentrated being. It appeals to our consciousness of centrality." (1994:17) This notion centrality also shows itself in a specific mode of communication, according to Richard Chalfen; a mode different from the mass modes including 'transient messages that have been produced through public symbol systems for mass distribution to large, heterogeneous anonymous audiences. Chalfen defines the *home mode of communication* as a "pattern of interpersonal and small group communication centered around the home" (1987:8). Both of these arguments focus on the notions of 'unity', 'togetherness' by means of familial boundaries. However, as modern individuals, even our private lives are marked with a constant state border crossing. Being at home means being in a familiar environment in where a particular mode of communication is shared between the members, while on the other hand, as Marc Augé remarks in *Non-Places*; " people are always, and never, at home" because of the overabundance of temporal and spatial relations caused by audiovisual media. (1995: 109)

If the production/consumption of music was restricted with small group communications like the home mode, as it was once, there would be no need for a discussion on *world music* category; people would probably be talking about "musics of the world" instead. '*World Music*' is only possible by the alteration of temporal/spatial relations and social contexts that any music is subject to: To put it straightforwardly, world music, as a category, is directly linked to the commodification of cultural products.

The audiovisual media emerge as an interface between the outer worlds and our 'sweet home's. In case of world music, it can be suggested that audiovisual media create virtual neighborhoods, similar to Marie Loise Pratt's contact zones; "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (1991:34) Therefore, since cultural contact involves an encounter between at least two different cultures, world music acts like a contact zone in where cultural interaction occurs; and it is a generalized vocabulary between the

psychological and the social, the private and the public, consequently, the local and the global.

The popular discourse on music seems to support this view; music is frequently considered as one of the few universal languages on the planet earth. People start to talk about universal languages when they confront with forms of nonverbal communication. Marked strongly with a strong metaphor of travel, world music is produced locally (presumably), and marketed globally; therefore, it resembles a generalized vocabulary for the global world. According to a romanticized aesthetic would be that music, the language of angels, which doesn't need words to be understood, is universally, 'vibrant' with resonating whole through the planet, in perfect 'harmony'. From this point of view, world music may be the perfect counterpart for globalization; as Timothy Taylor (2007) puts it: " 'World music' as a category of music...is not simply the soundtrack to globalization; it is a symptom of global capitalism".

Understanding Music

A researcher may take two positions regarding music and globalization:

(1) A top-down perspective in where marketing strategies dominate music of the world, at all scales, and; (2) A bottom-up perspective which takes into account of practitioners' creativities against the global market strategies.

The first can be considered, a pessimistic perspective regarding the culture industry and the forces that manipulate music both at levels of production, distribution and reception. As Peter J. Martin remarks in his book *Music and the Sociological Gaze*, the 'style' of music matters only 'a little' for the critical theorist when it comes to consumption, as long as the consumer buys *something*: "first because in doing so we sustain the culture industry's profitable production of commodities, and second any of these musical 'styles' can form the basis of a symbolic discourse, which, far from illuminating the fundamental economic and political relations of society, in fact obscures and mystifies them." (2006:71) Therefore, it can be asserted that world music, as a 'style', in terms of music, does not mean *anything*; it becomes *something* only in terms of global marketing strategies.

In case of world music, this 'symbolic discourse' as mentioned by Martin, is similar to Johannes Fabian's argument that knowledge of the *Other* is also a temporal act: According to Fabian;

"...the starting point for any attempt to understand evolutionary temporalizing will be achieved with the secularization of Time. It resulted in a conception which contains two elements of particular importance to further developments in the nineteenth century: 1) Time is immanent to, hence coextensive with, the world (or nature, or the universe, depending on the argument); 2) relationships between parts of the world (in the widest sense of both natural and sociological entities) can be understood as temporal relations.

Dispersal in space reflects directly, which is not to say simply or in obvious ways, sequence in Time." (1983:12)

One of the results of this strategy of temporalizing is the 'ethnographic present'; the practice of giving accounts of other cultures and the societies in the present tense. From this point of view, world music, both at its representation and perception stages, would be perfect example of 'ethnographic present', because musical performance, both temporally and spatially, is always in 'present', even when it is recorded.

In his short essay, *Musica Practica*, Roland Barthes makes a distinction between two musics, a *muscular* music which he defines with actual playing of an instrument, and the *sound* music which he defines to be effusive and liquid - basically identified with the act of listening: "There are two musics (at least so I have always thought): the music one listens to, the music one plays. These two musics are two totally different arts, each with its own history, its own sociology, its own aesthetics, its own erotic." 1977:149) The top-down perspective seems to fit in Barthes' second music, sound music. It is about consumption, listening habits and social contexts that lie behind the consumption and categorization of music. Barthes' muscle music, however, belongs to a different category.

As mentioned above, a bottom-up perspective takes into account of practitioner's creativities against the culture industry. Against culture industry's strategic forces, this perspective takes into consideration of musician's tactic forces; expressions, and possibilities. In *Practice of Every Life*, Michel DeCerteau defines a tactic field by Foucault's notion of strategy. He uses his famous metaphor of looking down from a city, and defines strategic force as all-seeing power. The ordinary practitioners, however;

"...live "down below," below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk – an elementary form of this experience in the city; they are walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban "text" they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other's arms. The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility. It is as though the practices organizing a bustling city were characterized by their blindness. The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other. (1988: 93)

Everyday life, for DeCerteau, is a tactic field in where individual creativity occurs. Like DeCerteau's walkers who write urban texts without being able to read it, musicians perform music without being able to hear it as a whole. To put in other words, *music of the world*, (as opposed to World Music, which is identified with the strategic power of the industry), belongs to a tactic field characterized by fluidity, everyday inventions, negotiations and possibilities, that cannot be grasped totally from any particular point of view.

This tactic force is one of the main reasons why musical instruments, even as commodities, cannot be reduced to ideologies that shape them. Produced, reproduced and consumed in many ways, music, as Taylor remarks; "... is not a commodity all the time, or always in the same way, instead undergoing constant periods of commodification and decommodification. (2007:282) The most standardized rhythms or tonal structures, even when they are played with commodified and mass-produced instruments, have the potential of personal/artistic expression.

The Case of Multi-Oud: An Instrument Across Cultures

Writing about the new forms of cultural traffic which started to take place in the 20th century, Arjun Appadurai mentions about a new global cultural economy, which has to be seen " *as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models (even those that might account for multiple centers and peripheries.)*"(1996:32) Therefore, to examine the disjunctures between culture, economy and politics, caused by the complexity of the current global cultural flows, he proposes a materialistic approach to explore five dimensions of these cultural flow, namely; *ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes*. Appadurai's approach is built on material culture analysis, that is, the importance of sociability of objects in different social contexts.

From a materialistic perspective as mentioned above, it can be asserted that a particular instrument embodies:

- 1) A history of that particular instrument, with relation to the repertoire and the styles related in temporal/spatial scales: Every particular instrument holds a place in a family tree of musical instruments; one may speak about an instrument's ancestors, as well as its descendants.
- 2) A social life, related to the instrument's materiality and objecthood: Musical instruments are physical objects that exist in time and space; they are objects of cultural experiences, and they also give shape to cultural experiences, as well. The social life of an instrument is determined by the social contexts it fits into.
- 3) An intimate relation with the musician/s/ playing that particular instrument: Making music involves the personal touch, musical expressions, articulations, and therefore musician's personal sound associated with the use of muscles. This intimacy comes from the unique physical interaction between the musician and the instrument. An example to this kind of communication is the concept of *embouchure*, a term used for the personal positioning of the facial muscles in order to play the wind instruments. Another musical term, *touch*, is used for similar meanings for

stringed or percussive instruments. All these terms refer to a physical contact, an interaction between the instrument and the player, which also address a possibility regarding both the musician's and the instrument's potentials.

Therefore, instruments, themselves can be considered as major characters when it comes to cultural understanding, and music. Regarding the notion of cultural traffic, as suggested by Appadurai, an instrument may well be the direct linkage between the global and local, and what is communicated with music can be traced by following the uses, potentials of an instrument. This paper can be considered an attempt to understand some of the communicational contexts that determine world music, by investigating the social life of a particular instrument, *Multioud*. Therefore, in the following sections, we will focus on this particular instrument, as well as a particular musician.

Godin is a Canadian company which manufactures stringed instruments under several brands (*Godin, Seagull, Simon&Patrick, Norman, LaPatrie and Art&Lutherie*). The company has official dealers in more than 50 countries and its instruments are distributed globally, and played by numerous professional and amateur musicians around the world. In the company's product line, *Godin Multioud* (a modern version of an ancient instrument, oud), comes after *Godin Glisstentar*, an (11 stringed fretless acoustic stage guitar) The following passage is taken from Godin Guitars' web page:

The Godin commitment to new guitar concepts is typified in the Glisstentar which is so much of a variation on the standard guitar that it isn't even a guitar anymore and qualifies as a whole new instrument. The Glisstentar project was not born out of a marketing meeting (i.e.) "Man, I bet if we built an eleven string fretless acoustic/electric we could sell a boatload of them." Instead the Glisstentar was conceived because of the intriguing musical possibilities it promised and hearing some amazing Glisstentar performances from musicians like Michel Cusson, Fareed Haque, and Sylvain Luc (to name a few) that deliver on that promise truly makes the exercise worthwhile.¹

In *Poetics of Music*, stressing the relations between the musician and his/her surrounding social setting, Igor Stravinsky compares music with fashion: Stravinsky suggests that a generation's fashion imposes a particular posture, a particular gesture upon people: "*In a like manner the musical apparel worn by an epoch leaves its stamp upon the language, and, so to speak, upon the gestures of its music, as well as upon the composer's attitude towards tonal materials.*"(2003:70) From this point of view, the invention of an instrument cannot be regarded as a sole consequence of cultural climate only; the new tonal possibilities offered by a particular instrument, might also be considered as a social investment, which potentially demand to redefine social relations. Potentially, every new instrument demands new tonal qualities, new styles, new listeners as well as new communicational contexts. Therefore,

¹<http://www.godinguitars.com/aboutus.htm>

musical instruments, as objects, can be considered as main actors that give shape to the communicative events in musical soundscapes.

Soon after Glissentar was available as a mass-produced instrument, Fatih Ahıskalı, a Turkish multi instrumentalist specialized in *oud* and *cümbüş*, took up glissentar to replace it for some of his stage performances. In 2008, a video of Fatih's Glissentar performance was uploaded to YouTube, in where he performed Tarrega's *Arabe Cappricios*, a piece originally composed for classical guitar.

Image 1. *Video Still: Fatih Ahıskalı Playing the Glissentar. (YouTube Video) January 2008*



Basically trained as a traditional musician at the Istanbul Technical University's Turkish Music State Conservatory, Fatih Ahıskalı was not only a virtuoso of *ud* and *cümbüş*, but also he mastered different repertoires with a number of other stringed instruments, as well. In one of the interviews we made for this study, he told that he not only played Paganini's *Cappricio's* in the entrance exams for the conservatory, but he also graduated from there with a dissertation on flamenco rhythms on guitar. By the time he graduated from the conservatory, he was already in the major World Music and Pop Music arenas with several bands, and orchestras. Mastering different world music styles in a variety of musical settings is crucial for Fatih:

"To be a world -musician, you can either stick to your traditional music, with your instrument or renovate your music after you master the traditional repertoire: I believe the former is more advantageous, it like playing in both offence and defense at the same time in a football game." (Personal Interview, 2014)

As suggested earlier in this paper, musical soundscapes can be considered as cultural contact zones; consequently, like all contact zones, soundscapes too, are built on asymmetrical power relations. Fatih, as a world music musician, clearly uses his mastery of different musical styles as a tactic force in the cultural contact zones. In fact, as Joselyn Guibault remarks, world music musicians, at will, function in and out of " *the system controlled by dominant cultures. Over the juxtaposition of elements from their traditional music, they*

have adapted the musical language of the dominant traditions and play that card commercially to enter the industrialized countries' networks" (2006:141) Upon his outstanding performance on Glissentar, Fatih also participated in the making of Godin MultiOud, and became an endorsed artist of Godin. In the company's web page, MultiOud is presented as an ancient instrument *'now made to be played in the modern age'*:

After developing the Godin A11 Glissentar fretless 11-string many years ago, Robert Godin realized there were a large number of musicians gravitating towards this style of fretless instrument. Most of these musicians were players of an ancient middle-eastern, 11-string fretless instrument called the Oud. In turn, these players have not seen any evolution to their instrument in over 1000 years and were constantly struggling with the issues of tuning and amplifying their instrument of choice. With this in mind, while respecting old world traditions, Robert Godin's idea for the innovative Godin Multi- Oud was born. (...)

The **Godin MultiOud**.... Respecting old world ideals with modern day guitar innovation.¹

Just before MultiOud was released, Fatih, as an endorsed artist of the brand, appeared on another YouTube video, this time with Robert Godin, the owner of the Godin Company.

Image 2. *Video Still: Robert Godin and Fatih Ahıskalı; Demonstrating the MultiOud. (YouTube Video) December 2010*



This video is a demonstration of MultiOud; before Robert Godin starts to introduce the technical specifications of this new instrument, he presents Fatih Ahıskalı to the audience. Throughout the video, Fatih plays several compositions of himself, which also appeared in his first solo-album, *Akide* (2009, Irem Records, World Music Series Vol-I). In our personal interview, speaking of his relation to MultiOud, Fatih made a remark on globalization of local music and instruments:

"Some instruments have more chance in the world music arena: Musicians like Vicente Amigo, or Al DiMeola have thousands of fans

¹http://www.godinguitars.com/hsheet11_multioud_x2eng.pdf

all around the world, who are also amateur guitar players. On the other hand, I don't think a Chinese pipa player can find a ready audience, like these musicians do... Similarly, a musician who plays traditional kemençe apparently has less luck compared to a musician who plays the clarinet, in terms of popularity of the instrument among the amateur musicians." (Personal Interview, 2014)

From this point of view, it can be asserted that every particular instrument's sound resonates within related musicscapes. Upgrades in the instrument are not limited with the playability only, for these upgrades in a straight line influence the soundscapes a musician performs within. Considering a performing musician as a social actor; these alterations not only have effects on the settings or the audiences, but on the music, itself. However, it must be noted that these alterations are not one sided; individual musicians performances are full of small but effective inventions. For example, to name a few in our case, Fatih Ahiskalı uses a *mızrap* (a special pick for oud) when playing the glissentar; he plays with an alternate tuning (*DABEAD* instead of standart *EADGBE* tuning) which effects the hand positions, as well as the tonal qualities. On the MultiOud, he preferably uses *cümbüş* strings -again with alternate tunings- and on the stage, he mostly uses MultiOud for *cümbüş* parts, instead of original oud partitions, which he plays with his traditional instrument.

Image 3. Video Still: Fatih Ahiskalı, playing with a Guitar Pick.(Personal Interview) March 2014



Conclusion

Forms of nonverbal communication typically cause some challenging problems for social sciences. For instance, as David MacDougall states, although anthropology was always interested with the visual, "*its problem has always been what to do with it.*" (1997:276) In many ways, the same is true for music. Anthropology of communication aims to understand human communication through answering four basic questions: " (1) What are the communicative events, and their components in a community? (2) What are the

relationships among them? (3) What capabilities and states do they have, in general, and particular events? (4) How do they work?" (1967: 25)

Dell Hymes' ethnographic approach is a decent starting point for the cultural analysis of musicscapes, not only for its attention the nonverbal , but also the consideration of social behavior in the social contexts it belongs in to. The mnemonic of SPEAKING, (Setting, Participants, Ends, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms and Genre) may well be applicable for the study of soundscapes. However, the academic interest on world music, as earlier suggested in this paper, seems to be concentrated on the sound music (as Roland Barthes uses it), rather than the muscle music, which poses difficult problems, most about legitimacy, at many different levels. Anthropology of music, in this sense, may be considered, as an anthropology of border situations.

In the introduction of *Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel DeCerteau states one of the purposes of his work as "to bring to light the models of action characteristic of users whose status as the dominated element in society (a status that does not mean that they are either passive or docile) is concealed by the euphemistic term 'consumers'. Everyday life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others."(1986, XII) In his work, *poaching* refers to the tactic power of the individual. Consequently, similar to Bourdieu's notion of habitus, every cultural practice takes place in cultural fields, which are characterized by the countless encounters, intersecting intentions, cultural struggles, negotiations and inventions within.

It is important to remember that any piece of music potentially belongs to artistic, industrial, personal worlds simultaneously. However, it also must be noted that, above all, music is a form of communication first.

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