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“SYNTHESIS” AND “FUSION” AS TWO DISTINCT FORMS OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DIFFERENT MUSICAL CULTURES

My paper concerns an interplay between the traditional (village) and the modern (urban, professional, foreign) forms of music-making. More broadly, it is about the process of interaction and blending between different musical-cultural mediums, the styles that might have existed independently until they met and started to infiltrate each other. This represents a universal process, it could happen anytime and anywhere.

The hypothesis proposed in my paper is that there are two distinct types of mixture between different musical styles: fusion and synthesis. Fusion is sometimes described as “a new scene of musicians, new record labels and events where musicians can meet up and exchange ideas.”¹

Fusion

Originally the term “fusion” in music described a mixture of jazz improvisation and the power and rhythms of rock. Gradually ethnic elements started to infiltrate jazz as well. The origin of ethno-jazz has extensively been ascribed to saxophonist John Coltrane. High quality of musicianship and depth is present in this blend of Indian classical music and jazz. However, the two musical cultures retain their autonomy (audio ex. 1).

“An independent meaning of ethno-jazz emerged around 1990 through the commercial success of ethnic music via globalization, which especially observed a Western focus on Asian musical interpretations”.²

One of the most classic examples of a relatively new ethno-jazz in Georgia is ensemble The Shin. I had an honour to meet some members of The Shin ensemble in Stuttgart in 2008, when I interviewed them for my research.

The example that I am going to play is “Swanny Waltz”, one of the genius renderings of a Georgian folk song and of some other, more general stylistic principles of Georgian folk music in the context of jazz. Based on a Svan three-part song, it starts with the main tune of the song in a waltz rhythm, introduced by solo guitar and vocals, to be explored in a jazz-style improvisation, combined with Gurian/west Georgian contrastive polyphonic style based on fascinating chord progressions and the vocal style known as *tsvrili*. This style of singing from Guria matches jazz scat singing. At the end of the song, at the point of climax, we hear a more traditional arrangement of the Svan song (audio ex. 2).

Common principles shared between jazz and Georgian polyphony include the singing on vowels rather than of meaningful lyrics /improvisation, harmonic-chordal thinking, key changes (audio ex. 3).

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/topics/z3dqhyc/articles/zr4fscw>).

² (https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Ethno_jazz).

Synthesis

It seems to me that at crucial historical moments combination of styles might lead to a deeper blend, which I call “synthesis.” For a synthesis to occur, there must be more than experimentation and musicianship. There should be a significant cultural and historical backdrop, amidst struggles and confrontation, population movements and assimilations, sufferings and oppression associated with our human history. An example of such complex process and the musical synthesis that originated from it, might be early jazz (audio ex. 4).

The open, liquid vocal quality and a flowing melodic style with holds, sliding, melisma, and many wide intervals and blue, bent notes might be the musical principles that connect early jazz to its African roots. On the other hand, budding harmonic progressions clearly point to the European roots. However, it is impossible to point to a specific song, piece or tune from Africa or Europe.

Another very interesting example of synthesis is east Georgian drone polyphony from Kakheti. I dedicated a special article to the origins of the east Georgian drone polyphony (Tsitsishvili, 2010: 195–214; audio ex. 5).

This style is synthesis because, the different cultural elements are organically blended here. Ornamentation and melismas point to the Middle East while the polyphonic and harmonic context clearly situates it in the local, Caucasian polyphonic tradition. Unless we analyse and examine it in an interdisciplinary context, looking at archaeological findings and pre-historic assimilation processes on the territory of Georgia several thousand years ago, we cannot guess that it is a combination of different styles and cultures of different ethnicities and populations. Based on archaeological findings, I proposed that this style must be a result of the influx of a new, presumably Indo-European language-speaking population in the territories of eastern Georgian plains, some 5,000 years ago. I won’t go into the details as they are discussed in the above-mentioned article. The process of blending is so well hidden behind the curtains of the past, that we perceive it as an independent, typically Georgian style, which it certainly is.

To summarise my definition of the fusion and synthesis, the fusion seems to be a combination of tradition and modernity, initiated by adventurous individual artists or bands. However, these merged styles still exist separately from each other. The different cultural sources used in fusion do not give us a blend of a completely new nature, in which a listener will no longer be able to distinguish between the specific constituent ingredients, such as Indian raga mode or the Svan song Qansav Qipiane tune, or the Georgian singing style of *tsvrili*. The boundaries between the different cultural sources are not yet drastically disrupted in the fusion. The fusion also allows a tradition to be maintained in its pristine form. On the other hand, the synthesis takes origin in complex historical processes, and the roots of “synthesis” are in communities and history rather than in purely artistic and professional experimentations. In the process of synthesis the constituent cultural principles are blended so that they give rise to an entirely new, influential and widely spread independent musical style.

Audio examples

1. John Coltrane “My Favourite Things”. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8d9cD_Es9k4&ab_channel=Hassan_Khan
2. “Qansav qipiane”, Svan traditional song. http://www.alazani.ge/base/georgika/Georgika_-_Yansav_Yipiane.mp3
3. Ensemble Shin “Swanny Waltz of *Qansav qipiane*”. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1BLYhc-cpbs&ab_channel=TheShin
4. “No More My Lord” – Religious hymn/gospel, prison blues, a work song, recorded by Alan Lomax. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQ7j4K45DI8>
5. Kakhetian table song “Berikatsi Var”. <https://music.youtube.com/watch?v=XNNa7Q3F63Q&list=R-DAMVMXNNa7Q3F63Q>

References

Tsitsishvili, Nino. (2010). “A Historical Examination of the Links Between Georgian Polyphony and Central Asian-Transcaucasian Monophony.” In: *Echoes from Georgia: Seventeen Arguments on Georgian Polyphony*, Pp. 195-214. Editors: Tsurtsumia, Rusudan and Jordania, Joseph. NY: Nova Science Publishers, Inc. .