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THE PLACE OF ASIAN MUSIC IN PHILIPPINE CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY *

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ONE OF THE FIRST reactions of some Philippine listeners to Asian music is that of perplexity or strangeness. Having been used to hearing only Western music, such an audience is apt to label this kind of music as foreign to his thoughts and feelings, or if he accepts it, he may relegate it to some lower musical category in his mind—such as folk music—not to be considered in the same level of appreciation as "art" music, or what is accepted as the music of Bach, Beethoven and other European composers. With some incredulity he may ask, "Why should we revert to Philippine primitive music when we have progressed so much with Western music?"

Views such as these are influenced by values stemming partly from Western musical aesthetics of the nineteenth century. At that time the idea prevailed that "art" music is more lofty than "folk," "primitive," and other forms of Asian music, but today, this notion is no longer accepted by serious scholars who find the most elevating qualities in many kinds of non-European music. In fact, a part of the reason why investigators search to unravel and analyze non-European music, is to understand better the finer elements that capture a listener who hears this music for the first time. A famous pianist, Leopold Godowsky, who visited Manila several years ago once spoke of the Javanese orchestra as follows: "The sonority

* This paper was read on December 2, 1963 in connection with the celebration of ASIA WEEK at the University of the Philippines, and again on Feb. 1, 1964, on the occasion of the Second National Music Conference of the National Music Council. In the former occasion this paper was preceded by a description of different types of music found in remote corners of the Philippines, some resembling the sounds of other Southeast Asian orchestras. Tape and disc recordings of the music were played to illustrate the lecture.

of the gamelan is so weird, fantastic, bewitching; the native music so elusive, vague, shimmering and singular that on listening to this new world of sound I lost my sense of reality, imagining myself in a realm of enchantment."¹ Such music that evokes feelings, images and programmatic sounds, and that has a well-developed theory is far from inferior to European "art" music.

Asian music in the Philippines or the music of the so-called "pagan" and Islamic groups is neither less artistic than European classical music. For example, the *kulintang*, an instrument with eight melodic gongs, employs permutations of tonal patterns whose complexity and variety are comparable to those found in European music. These arrangements vary from one performer to another to such an extent that it is possible to discern the distinctive styles of each player. Furthermore, there are virtuosi whose skill and mastery of their instruments approximate the European masters' command of their own. Rhythms on the gong, the mouth harp and other percussion are not necessarily those encountered in Western music, and they employ minute graduations of distance between sounds that are difficult to execute for one untrained in such rhythms. These examples are but a few among many other qualities that should dispel prejudiced notions against Asian music and that should paint a nobler picture of its role in contemporary Philippine life.

But, exactly how can Asian music be introduced in the Philippine society of today? Perhaps, two ways may be envisaged, namely: its instruction in schools of music and its performance in concerts.

In a music school one can begin the teaching of single Asian instruments such as the flute, the *kudyapi*, the bamboo zither and a variety of gongs with the help of teachers from northern Luzon and Mindanao. These instructors do not read music, but they are expert performers of their instruments; and they know how to impart their knowledge to others in the tradition of their culture, that is, by demonstration and repetition, or methods which are still the core of instruction in a music school. By bringing their teaching into modern surroundings, the music of old Philippine inhabitants will be handed to literate students who can then examine it from a vantage viewpoint—that of musicians trained with the rigorousness of Western music theory.

Larger musical ensembles may be obtained from Java and Bali where they are called *gamelan*. In the city of Surakarta in Central Java, there is a conservatory of music devoted to the teaching of the gamelan. Here, a student undergoes a progressive system of training in all the instruments.

¹ Kunst, Jaap. *Music in Java*. The Hague: Nijhoff, 1949, p. 249.

which number about fifty separate units. In the Philippines the most logical place for a gamelan would be the conservatory of music where the instruments can be housed well, and where there are students—already trained in Western music—who can readily follow the instruction of a Javanese musician. Eventually, as the school gains experience in the performance of these instruments which are those related more closely to a Philippine-Malaysian culture, other Asian instruments from Thailand, Burma, China and Japan can be introduced.

The teaching of Asian music in a conservatory of music would naturally enrich the school's curriculum and produce students with a much wider musical background—one that encompasses both the European and Asian traditions. In addition to an experience in European solo and orchestral playing, a student would acquire a new sense of musical balance in ensemble work. In the Javanese gamelan there is no display of virtuoso skill such as one finds in European orchestras, no conductor that is the cynosure of all eyes, and no notes to read, for each instrumental part has to be memorized. Since a performer is to study and play all the instruments, he becomes thoroughly familiar with all of them. In ensemble performance he listens attentively to the group as a whole, and tries to blend his tones with the sound of the whole orchestra.

European musical theory which consists of subjects called solfeggio, harmony and counterpoint would have to be amended to include Asian musical theory. For example, solfeggio alone would be an inadequate preparation for the singing of Indian *ragas* in which vocal coloring and ornamentation must be taught by live demonstration rather than by written symbols. In Japanese court music, tonal color and balance which differ from a European harmonic or contrapuntal sense would be important elements to be felt by each individual performer. As years go by, an accruing discussion, research and experimentation in the different facets of Asian music would enhance a further development of music into still unknown directions. Aiming at a new theory of an aggregation of sound, we still do not know what musical ensembles could be put together, or what instruments could be changed to conform to aesthetics sought for in these sound-aggregates. For this purpose, European and Asian orchestras need neither follow their usual instrumental composition nor produce their customary sounds. Neither do musical phrasings, effects, forms and textures require for their models classical examples taught in Western-type music schools, for if these examples were to remain the only norms for the cultivation of music, it would not be possible to really appreciate Asian music, much less create a new kind of music.

Indeed, the subjects and instruments taught in a conservatory of music—as they were formulated in Europe many years ago (in Paris, the Conservatoire de Musique was reorganized in 1795 and became a prototype of music schools all over the world), and as this type of instruction follows a similar line of thought in related schools—are out of date with the recent developments of music in the West and with the rise of new musical vocabularies among peoples all over the world. In the Philippines today there is a need to depart from this concept of a conservatory of music. Certainly, the piano, the clarinet and the violin must be taught with all the latest techniques known for these instruments, but the *kudyapi*, the gamelan and the *p'ipa* or Chinese lute may also be taught. A musician who can play Asian as well as European instruments would become less one-sided in his appreciation of music as a whole. It would be less incongruous to see him participate in the rendition of a Tchaikowsky symphony or the performance of a Beethoven sonata, for although in the latter forms he is depicting the emotions and thoughts acquired from a culture not originally his own, in performing a *kulintang* piece he is also producing sounds that are more representative of his cultural environment.

The Philippine experience in Western music is long enough for native thought to reflect on how values learned from this experience can be tied up with Eastern musical values. It is in the creation of a new sense of aesthetics, perhaps in the search for musical expression or a new musical culture, that the performance of Asian music together with European music can be envisaged. Herein lies the second way Asian music may be introduced in Philippine contemporary society.

Today, a new creative consciousness in the arts and in music is in the offing; centers in Europe and America need other complementary sources of creativity in other parts of the world, and a logical place for such a center would be some city in Asia. In the Philippines perhaps more than in Japan, seeds for a nucleus of musical activity—that is, for a meeting or a regular performance, discussion and experimentation of both Asian and European music—are in more fertile soil, for in the Philippines there is a true Latin-European culture that has impregnated Philippine life longer and more intensively than it ever touched Japan. Thus, a European orchestra played by Filipinos is apt to represent Latin thoughts and emotions better than a similar orchestra of equal training played by Japanese musicians. Furthermore, the Filipinos are culturally closer to Indonesia, and are thus better suited to play gamelan music than the Japanese. Again, the Thai, Balinese and Burmese orchestras are more related to the family of gong instruments than they are to the native orchestras of Japan.

In Manila, the pooling of different types of musical ensembles from the Philippines, Indonesia and the Southeast Asia continent would prepare the audience to a new type of concert programming. While concerts of European music would continue as usual, programs displaying both European and Asian instruments would pit their sounds with one another and project listeners into contrasting musical atmospheres. For example, the European classic guitar playing Bach and Albeniz, followed by a rendition of Asian stringed instruments—like the *kudyapi* and the *p'ipa* which are lutes resembling a guitar—would be one way of furnishing such a program. European contemporary music has a special place in these concerts, for the instruments used by avant-gardes and followers of serial music are somewhat akin to the xylophones, sticks and gongs played in Asia. Thus, while a part of the Philippine audience would hear its familiar repertoire in regular symphony concerts and recitals, in a program that is a replica of those offered in Western cities, another audience seeking a new musical experience would listen to old and new European as well as traditional Asian music in the same program. His musical panorama would be much larger and more in keeping with his Asian surroundings.

It is in a center such as this—a place where both Asian and European music are taught with the highest standards, and concerts are planned with musical numbers from a variety of cultures—that the creation of music can find new ideas and materials to develop into even newer sound-forms. The character of this music would be quite different from that emanating today from America, France, Italy and Germany, and it is this difference that would inject a new light in the Western phenomenon that is called music-composition, an art which appears to find a narrowing source of materials in Europe. Music composition as an expression of personal thoughts, as “an aesthetic conception which is fundamentally artificial and abstract,” an “unparalleled process containing qualities that have made music the purest and most precious creation of the human soul,”² has fresh musical sources in Asia where it could acquire a new strength, and at the same time refurbish Asian music, instilling it with a language that is understandable to both the European and Asian traditions.

² Hodeir, André. *Since Debussy: a view of contemporary music*. New York: Grove Press, 1961, p. 225.