

## Musical Transculturation

In 2009 a Chair of Transcultural Music Studies was established at a renowned musicological institution, the joint Musicology Department of the Franz Liszt University of Music in Weimar and the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, Germany.<sup>1</sup> This was the first musicological Chair with such an epistemological orientation and focus of scholarship on the musicological study of music.

The Transcultural Studies concept arose in the framework of cultural and literary sciences in Latin America, inspired by the writings of Cuban sociologist and musicologist Fernando Ortiz (1881-1969), who, followed by some of his students and followers, brought transcultural studies into the field of musicology.<sup>2</sup> The entry of transcultural studies into musicology has been adopted as a methodological approach of study in the last three decades almost exclusively by Cuban musicologists. The first musicological treatment of this focus outside Cuba was by German musicologist Axel Hesse who, in his dissertation, offered the first detailed definition of “musical transculturation,”<sup>3</sup> based on Fernando Ortiz’s understanding of the idea. Before this took place, Hesse was able to discuss the matter with Ortiz himself.

As a model of cultural theory, transculturation has been almost totally neglected by mainstream academia, especially the Anglo-American, but also by the French.<sup>4</sup> This is clearly due to the ideological dominance of the approach to social and anthropological studies of English-language academics. Undoubtedly the state of isolation imposed on Cuba for over half a century was also to blame, plus the fact that, unfortunately, that Latin American scholarship in general was largely neglected outside of Latin America itself, as it is until our time.

In the early 1990s the philosopher Wolfgang Iser, from the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, brought into discussion the term “transculturality” (*Transkulturalität*) which soon after came into use mainly in German language literary sciences.<sup>5</sup> At the same time literary studies in Europe brought in the

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<sup>1</sup> The Chair was initially endowed by “Marga und Kurt Möllgaard Stiftung”.

<sup>2</sup> After Weimar (2009), points of focus on transcultural musicology and Professorial chairs in the subject came into being in other universities in the German speaking area, among others, in Cologne and Berlin.

<sup>3</sup> Axel Hesse: *Das Transmissions-Singen im kubanischen Spiritismus*, Humboldt University, Berlin, 1971

<sup>4</sup> Since the 1990s it is mainly French philosopher Jacques Poulain who has discussed transcultural studies, influencing French social sciences and aesthetics, as well as Francophone African art and aesthetical thinking.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance Wolfgang Iser, 1999.

term “hybridism” in parallel usage to “transculturality.” It is important to state that both these terms are not connected with the “transculturation” concept coined by Fernando Ortiz. While transculturation denotes processes and the dynamics in manifold cultural encounters, transculturality (“Transkulturalität”) is rather attached to the results of these and certain other cultural developments. It appears rather to stress the fixed and final cultural manifestation or object that results from transculturation.

Some Latin American scholars see Ortiz’s transculturation as a plausible improvement of the term “acculturation.” However, while the term “acculturation” includes in its meaning the loss of culture (practically implying “deculturation”), “transculturation” indicates foremost the addition of what is new to what might have been lost, both in the process of change and the development of something multi-faceted: something gained instead of something new replacing something older. Here one is dealing with events that do not merely reproduce regional traditional practices, but rather generate a process of selection, elimination, recovering, and discovery -- the combination and synthesis of elements brought in from a cultural context and even from social experiences different from one’s own former background.<sup>6</sup>

For music as intangible and living cultural heritage, this discussion suggests that elements may change in some places, implying losses, or that boundaries are overstepped, within and without formal or *ad hoc* imposed restraints. Multiple meanings are possible, while selectivity of content and renewal is brought into the music tradition, and where the knowledge, skills, and creativity of someone acting within the community can start a development that may open paths to culturally unpredicted, although socially foreseen results.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, as a methodological approach the transcultural model tends to question the relevance and the uncontested existence of certain established boundaries, not only from the cultural angle but also within academic disciplines (such as musicology for instance). By applying the transcultural approach to different areas of research a certain tension may emerge, a tension though that in the end shows productive, since it gives room for many new epistemological perceptions and interpretations “by directly confronting the engaged scholar

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<sup>6</sup> See also Angel Rama: *Transculturación Narrativa*, Mexico, 1984, 73.

<sup>7</sup> Rama, *Transculturation* (as in previous footnote); see also Alfredo Duplat: *Hacia una genealogía de la transculturación narrativa de Angel Rama*, Iowa 2013

with the methodological, ideological, and institutional challenges inherent in every field of investigation.”<sup>8</sup>

Here is where a problem with the transculturation paradigm starts: when seeking for secure facts and clear social and cultural correlations, scholars may mistrust transculturation as a concept, since it deals with processes, and it therefore lacks a stable and object-like final and definite result.<sup>9</sup> There is a heavy academic skepticism in our time regarding ambiguity, loss of control, or the predominance of body-driven decision making. Significantly enough, it is exactly this ambiguity of cultural outcome that must be expected when transcultural processes of several kinds take place.

Furthermore, transculturation clearly embraces a non-dichotomized approach in cultural theory. This is why music, as a phenomenon that most outstandingly covers both material and intangible cultural aspects, relates in almost every way to transcultural processes, independently of specific societies or of any time period.

It was the conviction of Fernando Ortiz, that transculturation as a social, cultural, and economic procedure enables us to find a new approach to understand the historical and cultural developments in Latin America in both their historical and their contemporary dynamic. Social dominance (of the European colonizer) failed to shape completely the cultural mainstream of the subcontinent or even of any country in the region.

The study of living musical heritage shows that transculturation processes function in a subversive way, by enabling cultural maintenance and even its imposition to occur the other way around, so that change is influenced from the dominated to the social sphere of the dominator. In post-colonial thinking, transculturation processes and their historically successful subversive tactic still remain one of the most intriguing examples of how social history can develop in unexpected ways, even by the “cultural colonization” of the colonizer by its subdued. Afro-Cuban culture or the role played by Afro-Brazilian religions in Brazilian society as a whole, and not only among people of African ancestry, are just two of a vast number of examples that stand for this phenomenon.

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<sup>8</sup> Daniel König and Katja Rakow: “The Transcultural Approach Within a Disciplinary Framework: An Introduction,” *Transcultural Studies* 2016/2, p. 100

<sup>9</sup> Katrin Bauer & Dagmar Hänsel: “Aktuelle Formen ritualisierter Performanz im urbanen Raum“, Manuela Cimeli (ed.) *Les traditions vivantes dans la société urbaine*. Baden, 2015, 154-161

In South Africa, a similar process was sustained by the church that absorbed indigenous music and successfully redefined it by its renewed use in catholic or protestant services. Paradoxically, this absorption of different forms of local music with the goal to increase Christian worship with local symbols, guaranteed the survival of some musical features, like that of hexatone polyphonic singing, not in spite of, but thanks to the new Christian boundaries.

Reactions in academic research to a process that always includes losses and gains – which, among other things, constitutes the essence of any form of a living transculturation – will recognize what is static in music, while at the same time attempting to discover more, by identifying living and therefore dynamic structures. The main fixed element existing in living heritage is the (silent/tacit) immanent knowledge that is inherited and that gives input to any dynamic musical form of expression. This musical outcome can only be preserved *a posteriori* by notation or audio and video documentation. On the other side, music scores of composers of a previous epoch are documents of a “prescriptive” nature, and as such they determine musical performance and are, simultaneously, the basis for research themselves. The difference between music as living heritage and music as the “art of sound” (*Tonkunst*) becomes very clear with this juxtaposition.<sup>10</sup>

Musical transculturation is thus principally an event – not a state or condition. It is first of all a happening, a musical performance, the living musical artefact. As an accomplished phenomenon, it includes the mix of performance modes that, in the end, assume the character of a “Total Musical Fact.” Musical transculturation therefore is mobile, taking shape in a designed manner, according to impositions of the most diverse kind, social, political, conflictual, commercial, or just within a spontaneous gathering. Transculturation is not built directly on patterns of human beings, since people act in a transcultural manner (but are not transcultural in themselves). Consequently, transculturation is driven by behavior and conscious attitudes that lead to diverse musical systems and practices, almost as an intrinsic part of different manifestations of living cultural heritage.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See also Tiago de Oliveira Pinto: “Musicologia e Transculturação”, in: *Estética transcultural na Universidade Latinoamericana. Novas práticas contemporâneas*, Dinah Guimarães (ed.), Niteroi 2015, pp. 129-144.

<sup>11</sup> Beside the manifestations with direct or indirect relation to music this also counts as a manifestation of culture, which is cared for as an “inter-generational transmission” and whose vitality is evidenced by contemporary creative social understanding.

Musical transculturation occurs within collective practices in musical culture and/or musical performance. Any social group or population, whether ethnically and/or historically heterogeneous or not, gives rise to musical transculturation by critical selection, mutual adaptation, and the common ongoing development of functional, structural, and thematic components of these musical traditions and practices.<sup>12</sup> The use and transformation of musical instruments are vivid examples for these procedures. Although transculturation processes and intangible cultural practices are not interchangeable, they relate to one another in a very specific way. It seems even, that the intangible nature of music opens especially broad possibilities for transcultural processes and developments. While products of transculturation related to a living tradition are visible and can be perceived by outsiders – for instance Brazilian *capoeira*, that emerged as a reaction to social oppression against the African population in the country, to become an official icon of Brazilian culture – they are formed by, and even kept alive through actions based on implicit meanings and orally transmitted tacit knowledge.

In its essence, transcultural musicology encompasses an approach that is indebted to historiography as well as simultaneously to cultural studies (or anthropology). Always current in transculturation as a conceptual scheme is the axis built by (1) historical development<sup>13</sup> and (2) contemporary cultural specificities. This sort of methodological grounding, aimed at musical phenomena, allows transcultural studies to overstep the traditional boundaries of specialist disciplines within musicology. It encompasses mainly a listening to music across cultures, by keeping a focus on one main question or a specific inquiry. It is a transverse reading and exploring of musical actions and artefacts, exposed in the application of approaches and of research methods. A general study design will depend on the focus, the goal, and especially also the mutual benefit of the research project.

Nevertheless, epistemologically, from the point of view of examining the grounds and methods of the relevant knowledge, the difficulty of giving transcultural music studies a definite scope of interest within the academy lies in this: for a transculturally-orientated musicology, no epochal boundaries exist (e.g., medieval, baroque, 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century), no genre specific limitations (jazz, dance music), and no defined methods of transmission (oral, written

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Axel Hesse, 1971

<sup>13</sup> This is an essentially different approach compared to the conventional understanding of “transculturality”, which is mainly understood as a “cultural” concept, which excludes intrinsic relatedness to historical methodology. See Judith Haug, 2017

transmission) limit the range of the field of music research. And in addition and most definitely, the “ethno-“ prefix to musicology is not important any longer.

One significant understanding that arises out of this process is that the classical “researcher arranged” ethnography is losing its significance, giving way to a privileged form of data gathering, that of “collaborative research.” As far as intangible cultural heritage is concerned, to which the UNESCO Convention of 2003 gives the deciding voice to the carriers of culture, the old hierarchical researcher-informant relation is no longer in an advantaged position. It even seems to have become ethically questionable.

By applying a transcultural approach, the focus is directed towards a consensual face-to-face working relationship, where research in the strict sense only represents one aspect of a meticulous procedure of epistemological constructions, which in the end become profitable for all involved, and not mainly and foremost for those representing academia.

Source:  
Tiago de Oliveira Pinto  
*Music as Living Heritage. An Essay on Intangible Culture.*  
Berlin: Emvas, 2018