

Cultural Piracy

Here, I will tackle one of the thorniest topics concerning contemporary music: culture and race.

I know that the predominant musical cultural force in this century is Black American. There is no doubt about this! Yet this fact is almost never acknowledged amongst the white dominated cultural elite.

Although the sources were rarely acknowledged, almost from "day one", Ragtime, Jazz and the Blues were appropriated by white composers and musicians. These composers and musicians laid claim to these and subsequent (African American) genres as part of their own heritage. A culture rooted in suffering, born of the unquenchable spirit of black people was hijacked.

When this was done out of wonderment, as was the case with Debussy and Ravel, all well and good. (After all, these two great composers, through their influence on the great songwriters of the 30s, 40s, and 50s, amply repaid their debt via the "standards" that became a staple for Jazz musicians.)

When this is done "on the street" by the youth of today, fair enough. "On the street", in the big cities, many young people have, long since, become colour blind.

When it was, and is, done to bolster and pep-up an artistically and commercially failing culture, without any heed being given to its different underlying cultural values, this represents a cynical type of cultural colonialism. It was, and is, immoral! It is somewhat akin to theft.

When children are taught that perennial favourite "The Golliwog's Cakewalk" by Debussy, are they educated about the culture that gave birth to this style; a culture who's musical and compositional ideals so captivated the imagination of Debussy and Ravel, that their music was forever changed by their exposure to it? NO THEY ARE NOT!

When we rhapsodise (sic) about Gershwin's genius and Bernstein's brilliance, are we ever made aware of the fundamental debt they owe to black culture? NO!

Does the "Rock and Pop" generation in the white suburbs have any idea where this music all started? AGAIN NO!

Real art, comes from one's own experience, or from some kind of profound spiritual empathy with someone else's experience, an empathy so strong that it fundamentally changes one and the way one thinks! It is not enough to simply : wear the clothes, affect the style, walk the walk and talk the talk.

The real artist lives the real life. To play like John Coltrane, one must BE LIKE John Coltrane. Some white jazz musicians, a very few, have achieved the life and therefore the right to play the music, but only a few : Bill Evans and Art Pepper are among this small group.

Some "serious" composers (Terry Riley for example) have embraced the ideals and philosophy of African/American musical thought, and left the values of the classical world, with all the associated career prospects, behind, but not many. Most who draw from this well, are mere opportunists, ersatz dabblers, with an eye to the main chance : the type of people who need the comfort of the "safety net" that academic based European culture provides but who enjoy the odd vicarious thrill. They never, metaphorically speaking, stray far from home. At best, their's is a sentimental attachment, a middle class, self deluding romance.

BE WARNED!

What you are witnessing in today's classical music scene is nothing less than the most blatant type of cultural fraud: an easily attained, quickly applied veneer, with the affectation of comprehension. It is acquired after taking a superficial, educational "package tour" of various stylistic locations : If its Monday it must be African Drumming, Tuesday - it is Throat Singing and Wednesday is Gamelan Time. Thus, by taking a few short steps, an essentially uncomprehending mind clothes itself in another tradition's vernacular. The results are crude pastiche.

Naturally, financial reward, and artistic credibility goes to these "Cultural Magpies". The originators, almost always, remain largely unknown and unrewarded.

Who remembers Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup, the man who recorded "That's Alright Mama" in 1947!?

Nothing changes!

So called World Music is no more than another scam; designed to shift product and confer "coolness" onto both its audience and its practitioners. They would switch to Martian music, if there was money to be made, a trend to be followed, or a career to be furthered.

Its all showbiz, it is all phoney "flavour of the month stuff" .*

HOW TO SPOT THE PHONEYS

This is easy, they dilute the form to taste. They have no stomach for the real thing, and nor do their audiences! Their's is a processed, pureed music, easily digested and easily forgotten. Good music is hard! Hard to play and hard to listen to.

It takes many years to become a proficient classical musician, but apparently only one term/semester to master African Music!

Remember- Nobody ever went broke overestimating the public's taste.

European culture has had its day, but white political and cultural power is still in place, supported by its educational infrastructure and its subsidised "Arts Professionals".

So we'll all have to put up with cultural racism and exploitation for a little while yet!

BUT

DIG DEEP ENOUGH, AND YOU WILL STILL BE ABLE TO FIND "THE REAL THING", PLAYED BY REAL PEOPLE!

*This month's flavour is:- wishy washy religious music with nice chords and meaningful titles. Deeply spiritual (of course), and usually accompanied by a video (soft focus - naturally)