

THOUGHTS ABOUT WRITING FOR THE ATLAS ENSEMBLE

(followed by an evaluation of the course "Intercultural Music: the other as an inspiration")

by Manuel J. Sánchez García

I've happily found myself in the situation of writing a piece for the Atlas Ensemble to be premiered the 19th of December 2013 at Muziekgebouw, in Amsterdam. For whoever who doesn't know this amazing ensemble, consisting mainly on instrumentalists from different Eastern countries (it, of course, depends on which part of the planet are you looking from) who play their traditional instruments, I suggest them to visit their website (<http://www.atlasensemble.nl>).

We've been often told to take into account, as composers, the instruments of Atlas Ensemble not as sonic producers, but more as a character reflecting the culture from where it comes.

What if the approach to this ensemble as "people whose culture we must observe and protect" isn't but a neo-colonial approach, regarding them as the "others" instead of trying to make an inclusion in our best way? The contact is done, we can't change that. The very first aim of having people from different cultural contexts playing together some composed music (I stress here the presence of the term "composed") is, in my opinion, what makes the huge difference.

At the same time, the "interculture", in a deep level, is already in my very own compositional behaviors, whether it comes to be a piece for a "standard" ensemble or one with ethnics instruments. Why should, then, the music be different?

Could we, maybe, do the mix by "aculturizing", in the sense of digesting? Having those instruments as merely found sounding objects? Making a separation between the instrument and the music "culturally" played on them, (with all the physical and musical behaviors implied), and then using both categories together could be an option; we'd take into account then, for example, the way of vibrating when playing the zheng, relate it to the vibrato of the duduk, and play with them together applying all of it to the rest of the ensemble. Or we could use the melodic way of development of Persian music and translate to the whole ensemble in a totally different modal context... Even the invention of totally new approaches to the instrument as an object could come just from the "other" that we are toward that instrument.

The number of options unfolds very fast, and the inclusion starts to be a really blended mix. Whether we use this approach or not, for me is that friction between the “culturally idiomatic” and the “strange” what makes also a nice tension curve.

The same kind of friction appears between the “soloism” and the music group, and I think it can be faced in the same way, somehow.

The concerns about ethics can be also faced by looking at the immediate pre-atlas history. I mean the point where the NIEUW Ensemble invited a group of young Chinese composers to write for them. According to what his artistic director, Joël Bons told us, they made an European ensemble sound very Chinese. The Japanese composer Toshio Hosokawa also recognizes that he uses to “Japanise” European instruments in his music. Thus, if this creative approach can validly work in that East-to-West direction, why shouldn’t it work the other way around?

Even so, with the abovementioned ideas we’re only erasing cultural connections to arrive to a kind of musical *tabula rasa* from where to build up something new. The cultural shock (of beauty and terror) would come by putting all those musicians from all over Asia to play some Bach-like really abstract and deeply European counterpoint. It would suppose, in my opinion, a higher level of cultural tension. A rather high-impact and almost sacrilegial experience from some perspectives, (maybe from any perspective I’d say even). But that’s a different story...

About the course “Intercultural Music: the other as an inspiration”

I took the subject of “Intercultural Music”, even if I know about my own interest in the matter, only after listening to the presentation that Joël gave us the first day of Masters Students. When choosing my electives I didn’t really want to fill my schedule with theoretical and very time-consuming subjects. But the perspective he was posing sounded flexible, and more oriented to the reflections than to any kind of solutions. And that attracted to me so much.

I’ve appreciated so much that the whole program of the subject has been built up according to the interests of everyone involved. Fifteen meetings of two and a half hours are not enough to cover a full spectrum of matters, and the way we did allowed to take glimpses of many different occurrences of the intercultural phenomenon concerning (mainly) music. We’ve gone through notational aspects (thanks to Amit and Andy) performative ones, some analytics and some philosophical and aesthetical ones, that, I think would be the core of all the course.

I've also found very advantageous the flexibility of the lessons that made possible to find a room for discussion and exchange in the middle of any subject. What was a need for a break in the first meetings ended up in a need for more time in most of the rest of them. I think this fact perfectly shows how interesting and involving was the subject. And the abovementioned experience with the Atlas Ensemble has been both an incredible testing environment as well as an amazing colophon for the course.

We've been faced with a huge number of possibilities regarding the intercultural connection, reviewing the points of view of several composers, such as Stockhausen, Ton de Leeuw, Steve Reich, Toru Takemitsu and some others. After comparing myself and my approach to "the music of the other" with those of these great composers, I came to the conclusion that, in my case, the listening to "the other's" music acts often as a kind of triggering impulse, and normally (except when the impact is so strong that I really want to discover how it really works) I don't consider any further analysis. Steve Reich didn't want to sound African... I sometimes don't want to think African, either.

There is still a lot to read, a lot to listen to, a lot of debate and, of course a lot to experience ourselves. I hope we can go on, time to time, with these discussion meetings that have proved to be so fruitful. Who knows, maybe even a permanent study group could be set, as it was done with the whole "Carnatic" program started by Rafael Reina. I'd totally recommend the subject to any interested student (even if it's minimally interested!!).