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Folk Music, Art Music, Popular Music: What do these categories mean today?

Not so long ago music research seemed to be neatly divided amongst three main fields: historical musicology, that focused primarily upon western art music; ethnomusicology, that dealt with the traditional musics of the world; and popular music studies, that investigated musical styles produced and promoted by the music industry. Today, however, the boundaries dividing these fields have become progressively more fluid, such that the arguments for abolishing them altogether are stronger than ever. If what distinguished these spheres in the past were the musical repertoires they focused upon, what is now leading to their unification is a common concern with musical processes and the ways people conceptualise and use music in their daily lives. Whilst certain processes may have been linked primarily to either art, popular, or folk music, today these specificities appeared to be disappearing. 'Folk music' can be heard on the stage, recorded, and sold as a commodity, thus mobilizing the music industry; 'popular music' hits may be sung communally around a campfire to the accompaniment of an acoustic guitar in a manner reminiscent to 'folk music'; major stars of the 'art music' world now perform in ways that mimic the stars of pop or rock, commanding equally high fees. In light of this, can we still distinguish between 'folk music', 'popular music' and indeed 'art music'? If these classifications are no longer valid, what other ways might there be of understanding contemporary musical universes and the dynamic forces through which they are articulated?

Looking Back

To approach these issues it could be useful to begin by looking at how the distinctions between art, popular and folk music came to crystallise as they did, reminding ourselves of the intellectual legacy from which they emerged.

The concept of the 'folk' surfaced with the raise in nationalist sentiments in the late 18th century, and it gained momentum throughout the 19th century. One of the major intellectuals to develop a discourse linking 'the folk' to 'the nation' was Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803). As a consequence of the Reformation, Counter Reformation, and the Thirty Years War, by the early 18th century, Germany had become fragmented into around 1800 district courts with only tenuous links to one another. In an effort to establish a common cultural terrain capable of conferring some unity upon the region, Herder led a movement to re-awaken the lost legacy of the 'nation'. He contended that the Germanic could only be recovered through the investigation of the expressive forms – especially the poetic forms – that still survived amongst those who embodied the 'national soul': that is, 'the folk', or the peasantry. He placed peasants in this role because he perceived their behaviour and their expressive forms to display an 'emotional' (or irrational?) dimension, in a marked opposition to those of the privileged, aristocratic classes; this had occurred because, living – as they did – in isolation from the developments of 'civilization', the peasantry had not been contaminated by the 'rational' values of the Enlightenment, as had the elites. It was amongst the peasantry, therefore, that the unique historical and ecological legacy of Germany had been retained.

One of Herder's primary concerns was the disappearance of the German language amongst the elites, who were progressively turning to French. Only if Germans could be once again united by one language and confident in their sense of a common heritage could the country re-establish its place in relation to the rest of Europe. To convince the elites of the value of the German language Herder aimed to re-present it to them by demonstrating its aesthetic potential. Goethe, one of Herder's most successful followers, led the way in showing a sceptical elite how a great German legacy could be recovered. This model of nation-building was followed by other artists in a wide range

of aesthetic fields, both in Germany and the rest of Europe as well many other parts of the world. Indeed, Herder's project came to acquire global dimensions.

In effect, Herder's model inspired artist to draw upon the (local) national heritage held by 'the folk', and to reshape it to generate a national art. In other words, the local, irrational motifs of 'the folk' were to be transformed by the artist according to universal (rational) aesthetic principles. However, if, on one hand, the 'irrationality' of the expressive forms of 'the folk' constituted the elements that distinguished one nation from other nations, they also distinguished the peasants - all peasants - from (all) the elites, regardless of nationality. Thus, the very concept of 'art' could only emerge in contra-distinction to another body of expressive forms, 'folklore', the one of universal validity, the other of purely local relevance and intelligibility. From this opposition one of the enduring tenets distinguishing art music and other forms of 'high art' from folk music (and folklore generally) would evolve: art constituted that which was generated for its own sake, and was thus to be contemplated solely for its aesthetic qualities; the expressive forms of the folk, on the other hand, would always be subordinated to some immediate function, aesthetics being only of secondary concern. Folklore, therefore, could never be more than a lesser form of art, just as its creators were perceived as cultural inferiors and under-civilized.

As for the category popular music, it emerged toward the late 19th century as a way of identifying the various musical forms taking shape in urban centres. These styles seemed to fall somewhere between folk and art music, drawing in equal measure from both: more cosmopolitan than folk music, but lacking the aesthetic sophistication of art music. As urban populations grew, these styles became progressively more visible, and with the emergence of the recording technology and the radio, popular music became closely associated with the music industry. Indeed, it was its very construction as 'commodity' that gave popular music a negative aura. Whilst the value of folk music could be seen to reside in its 'authenticity', that of art music in its detachment for any commitments other than its own integrity, popular music had to be content with vulgarity if it was to gain any headway in the market.

These categories – it is worth remembering – developed in western Europe in relation to the ways in which the European musical and artistic spheres were perceived by the intelligentsia. However, there have been radical global changes that have transformed the social world and redefined economic relations throughout the region. Without doubt, in Europe the peasantry has all but disappeared; indeed, even the distinction between the rural and the urban has become increasingly meaningless, given the ease of transport and the accessibility of technological advances even in the most remote of areas. The power of the aristocracy and the oligarchy has been progressively eroded, as industry and business based in urban centres have become the primary sources of wealth. Access to education and the cost of labour have provided unprecedented opportunities for social ascent amongst rural agricultural and urban working classes, radically altering the general standard of living of the population. Thus, the clear class differences that promoted marked forms of cultural segregation have been reduced, and access to a wide range of musical universes is now possible for ever larger numbers of people.

Yet, however much the world has changed, it must not be forgotten that access to economic and technological developments have been extremely unequal across the globe. If in Europe there are no longer large sectors of the population that could be classed as peasants, people whose livelihoods are linked to subsistence agricultural economies still persist in many parts of the world, particularly in the poorest regions of the world. Similarly, in such places feudal style oligarchies have also not disappeared. And western style capitalism and the individualist ideologies that support it are far from dominant throughout the globe. Thus, while the boundaries between musical universes conceptualised in class terms have been blurring in Europe, America and other prosperous regions of the world, the modes of classifying distinct musical spheres in other parts of the world may still be informed by the distribution of economic power and potential.

Critically, while in the deprived regions of the globe, many people have only limited control over their lives, in more privileged parts of the world the spheres for choices and opportunities are markedly more varied. In the western world one can *choose* which musical universes one wishes to

participate in, and often choices are made in relation to the associations that are invoked by such seemingly out-dated categories as folk, art, and popular music. Indeed, many people continue to conceive of the world of art music (and the high arts generally) as elitist. Their prestige is certainly sustained through the heavy institutional backing they receive, with considerable funds going into supporting state orchestras, conservatories, concert halls, museums etc. The state takes on this role, seeing the high arts as vehicles to further the 'civilizing process', progressively elevating the 'culture' of the population as a whole.

As any 'classical' musician knows, many years of training are required of those who make art music performance their profession. Even to undertake such an endeavour requires 'talent', a concept, which, as John Blacking repeated noted, limits access to the performance realm. For Bourdieu, these mechanisms of exclusion ensure that the high arts continue to serve as markers of social distinction. Nonetheless, today, the world of art music is no longer the exclusive preserve of the elites, if ever it really was. Today it is possible for members of the middle and working classes to choose to engage in this aesthetic universe, and they too can display discerning tastes. Indeed, the driver of a taxi I regularly employed in Belfast spent the day driving about town listening only to 'classical' music; his preferred genre was opera. After discovering this musical universe somewhat late in life, he joined a community choir and started to regularly secure season tickets to the Opera House.

People can also choose to engage in musical forms commonly identified as folk music - or 'new folk music', as it is referred to by some. Clearly the legions of European performers of these genres are not peasants and the performances they are involved in are not 'functionally' linked to a peasant life style. However, in this sphere, participants can invoke the memory of a past era in which life was simpler and more communally oriented than it is in the modern world of today. Importantly, this was an era that somehow 'we' - our nation - lost. Thus, folk musics might be viewed as focal points for the expression of national sentiments and nostalgia for 'our' past, and the revival movements emerging from them have led to the invention of countless traditions aimed at restoring a sense of community in

the highly competitive, commoditized and undifferentiated cosmopolitan world that we now live in.

The huge range of styles encompassed by the umbrella term 'popular music' provide countless alternatives through which people of all social classes and ages can construct identities and present themselves to others. There is perhaps no other musical sphere in which the forces of hybridity and differentiation are more marked than in contemporary popular music. Styles develop by drawing on other forms, in processes that fuse the meanings and associations linked to the forms from which they borrow to generate new possibilities and choices for the presentation of self, ranging, for instance, from the more democratic and egalitarian orientations of punk to the discerning and technical artistry of metal and its countless derivatives. Ideas about what it means to be a man, a woman, a teenager, a gay person, an Anglo-Indian, a Caribbean in London, and so on, can all be articulated through creative bricolage in popular idioms. And for those with concerns over the environment or the plight of people in far away places, there's 'world music'.

In the contemporary western world, we are not only at liberty to construct and represent ourselves through the commodities we surround ourselves with, music being for many a central element in the definition of one's persona, we are practically compelled to do so. Our individuality – or our own personal style – is defined by the aesthetic choices we make. Our choices give us access to different sets of social circles and voluntary associations where we hope to encounter like-minded people. We have the potential, perhaps more than ever before, to be in control of who we are and how we represent ourselves to others. And we can choose simultaneously to display a discerning taste for art music in one sphere, engage in a session of traditional Irish music in other moments, and listen to a range of popular music styles from anywhere in the world on our iPods at other times. And the more cosmopolitan we become, the wider in range our musical choices are likely to become.

While the increased possibility of choice has led to an effective erosion in traditional musical categories, the conceptual associations they evoke have remained critical to the ways in which many musical choices are made. Thus, it is clearly no longer of academic interest to classify different music using

these categories; instead, they might best be treated as 'folk categories', and as such investigated in terms of the ways in which they are informing the musical choices people are making. And remarkably, the 'folk' use of these categories is truly global. Indeed, they were fully operative in the ways in which people in Campanha, a small former mining town in southern Minas Gerais, Brazil, discussed the musical universe of the town. This is where, for the past decade, I have been conducting research on the town's musical life.

Folk categories in Campanha

Since colonial times, Campanha has prided itself in its musical heritage, and one version of this story is told by the celebrated local musician, Marcello Pompeu (1885-1988), in a small booklet entitled *Subsídios para a história da música da Campanha* (1977). It is important to note, however, that this document makes no mention of and of the genres associated with the town's lower classes; it focuses exclusively upon the musical activities of the local elites, describing the processional bands, church choirs, orchestras, pianos, serenades and parlour dances that entertained the more prosperous sectors of Campanha during his long life.

This omission is entirely coherent with the dominant attitudes of the local elites toward the expressive forms of the town's subaltern classes. Indeed, the social space in Campanha is marked by a strong class divide. The local elites represent themselves as 'enlightened' (*esclarecidos*) and 'cultured' (*gente de cultura*) in opposition to the lower classes, who are seen as 'simple' (*simples*) and 'uncultured' (*gente de pouca cultura*). The lower classes, on the other hand, define themselves as 'poor' (*pobres*) in opposition to the 'rich' (*ricos*) and 'refined' (*gente fina*). Viewed in terms of the criteria used in the national census, however, most members of the local elite would hardly be classed as rich, fitting more comfortably within the category of middle class, or even lower middle or upper lower class. They live primarily around the central core of the town, while the lower classes, many of whom verge on the destitute, are concentrated in peripheral neighbourhoods around the centre.

Musically this divide is made especially visible during the two major religious festivals that mark the local annual calendar: Holy Week and the Festival of Our Lady of the Rosary (October). Holy Week, as in other towns throughout Minas Gerais, is Campanha's most prestigious festival, a legacy of the 'baroque culture' that developed in Minas Gerais during the 18th century as a consequence of the wealth generated by gold. Traditionally the celebrations feature the church choir, a small orchestra and the town band, but given the constraints on space, I will restrict this discussion to the choir. The choir's repertoire for the occasion includes pieces in the '*barroco mineiro*' style (baroque of Minas Gerais) by such eminent composers as Manoel Dias de Oliveira (c. 1735–1813 in São José del Rey [now Tiradentes]) and Joaquim José Emerico Lobo de Mesquita (Diamantina, 1746–1805). The most prized pieces performed during Holy Week are the two sets of motets known as the Motets of the Stations [of the Cross] (*Motetos de Passos*) and the Motets of [Our Lady] of Pains (*Motetos de Dores*), both by Manoel Dias de Oliveira. In their original form, they were set to two four-part choirs, two flutes, two French horns and bass, but in Campanha one of the choirs has been suppressed, as have the French horns, and the flute parts are played by violins.

As currently constituted, the choir, known as the *Coral Campanhense* (Campanha Choir), was formed in the late 1950s in an effort to ensure that the repertoire associated with Holy Week would be performed competently; since then membership has fluctuated as some members have left and others recruited to replace them. The choir members are drawn primarily from amongst the local elites, the vast majority of lighter skin colour. Furthermore, the ratio of women to men is in the region of three to one. All choir members participate on a voluntary basis, and they are involved primarily for the enjoyment they get out of singing. Even though very few of them can read music, they use sheet music, as it provides a melodic and rhythmic '*aide-memoire*' and it helps them keep up with the texts, most of which are in Latin. The choir's full Holy Week repertoire, if sung continuously omitting repeats, would last around six hours, all of which has been memorised over years of performance.

The population of Campanha, especially those belonging to the local elites, are proud to claim that the town was the cultural centre of the region during the gold era, and the baroque nature

of the Holy Week celebrations is viewed as a testament to this. The festival, therefore, is a central marker of local identity, highlighting the town's cultural achievements. To use Bourdieu's terminology, the choir and its repertoire are markers of distinction circumscribing the discerning tastes of those involved.

Holy Week in Campanha is, however, now under threat due to shifts in the church's orientation from a paternalistic stance to a preferential option for the poor. Musically, this has meant the encouragement of 'popular' congregational singing, giving preference to a 'modern' repertoire that is 'easy' to sing, as well as its efforts to ban the use of Latin, precisely the language used in the choir's repertoire. The shift reached Campanha in 1999, when the priest who had been in the town for over twenty years, was substituted by a new priest aligned with the so-called 'liturgical renovation'. It was re-invigorated by the next priest, whose crusade against 'elitisms' within the church has been even greater. The past eight years, then, have been marked by considerable tension and debate within the parish, since many locals feel that what is at issue is nothing less than a threat to the town's major emblems of local identity. But it is not just any identity: the musical repertoire they are now being offered by the church is seen as an offence to their aesthetic sensibilities, and understandably, such feelings are strongest amongst choir members and their families. Most of them have flatly refused to lead congregational singing at mass within the current aesthetic environment.

In effect, the modes of religiosity that have sustained the baroque experiences are now being challenged by a 'modern' and 'popular' church, headed by a clergy intent on redefining the role of the church. Consequently, some lay communities are seeing their parish roles erode. Indeed, in Campanha the *Coral Campanhense* is losing control over their performances, and given that they are so functionally related to the celebrations of Holy Week, the extended repertoire that was so painstakingly memorised over decades may be left with no other context in which to be performed. At least not by this choir: more and more, the main arenas in which *barroco mineiro* is being heard are universities and concert halls. Thus, a distinctly community-based musical universe, functionally linked to its locality, the source of considerable aesthetic satisfaction, may

buckle under the onslaught of the 'popular' that is arriving from the outside, as dictated by a central and global ecclesiastical authority.

While Holy Week has been dominated by ensembles whose membership belong primarily to the local privileged sectors, during the Festival of the Rosary music is provided by several African-Brazilian dance and percussion ensembles known as *congados*, whose members come almost exclusively from the subaltern classes. As in other parts of Brazil, the troupes are associated with blacks, and a black presence is evident in most of the groups. None of them, however, exclude people on the basis of skin colour. In Campanha, blackness is as much a social as a racial category; as a social category, it is constructed through an identification of the experience of poverty with the historic subjugation of blacks in the country.

The festival is a legacy of the black confraternities of the colonial period, which served as acceptable spheres for social activities amongst slaves. The members of the confraternities elected their leaders each year, one of whom would be crowned, and to celebrate the occasion, percussion ensembles paraded through the streets. The legacy of these black courts is still evident in contemporary festivals in honour of Our lady of the Rosary, as in Campanha, where royal symbolism, in the form of crowns, sceptres and capes, is still very much a part of the *congado* tradition. These insignia have persisted because they ennoble those who wear them and dignify the group they represent. Furthermore, ritualized inversions call attention to social hierarchies.

In the last few years there have been from three to five active *congados* in Campanha at any given time, ranging in size from around twenty to fifty people or more. The groups are dominated by drums, including several large bass drums known locally as *treme-terras* (literally earth-quakes), various *caixas* (cylindrical double-headed drums) of different sizes, and a few snare drums (*tarois*). Other percussion instruments used include tambourines (*pandeiros*), *reco-recos* (cylindrical scrapers) and shakers. *Congados* are not exclusively percussion ensembles; they also employ string instruments, such as *violas* (five double-coursed instruments slightly smaller than guitars), guitars, *bandolins* (mandolin-type instruments with four double courses) and violins, as well as an accordion or two and a pair of

brass instruments, such as cornets, trombones or tenor saxophones. Over the instruments short verses, rarely more than four phrases in length, are sung responsorially by two duos, firstly in parallel thirds, then in parallel sixths.

Among the local elites *congados* are viewed with some disdain. Indeed, I was repeatedly warned to be cautious during my research, because the social space was considered to be dangerous, a notion premised on the perception that violence and fighting occurs frequently amongst *congadeiros*, instigated by excessive drinking and rivalries between the groups. But they are especially feared as spaces marked by the practice of black magic, or *macumba*. Even during the main procession of the festival, in which the *congados* process through the town bearing Our Lady of the Rosary on their way to the church, the sound of their drums completely dominating the soundscape, the ensembles attract limited attention outside their own communities.

Congados have frequently been the target of suppression. Indeed, they were systematically persecuted by the church, and only the oldest members of the ensembles in Campanha can still recall being allowed to enter the church building with their instruments to salute the saint. Despite what one might expect, the 'popular' church seems to have chosen to ignore the *congados*, as their projects can't be easily reconciled with the 'unorthodoxies' of 'folk' catholicism. Thus, as long as they remain in the streets, church authorities are happy enough to leave them to their own devices. Nonetheless, the *congado's* public performance retain a carnivalesque ethos as a means of communicating to the dominant sectors that they are there solely to have some fun; they need not be feared.

The disparaging attitudes held toward *congados* are off-set by yet another set of local discourses. Here the ensembles are placed in the category of local folklore, which represents them as valuable repositories of local heritage and potential tourist attractions. Respected voices in Campanha claimed that 'their' *congados* should receive local support, but because they are represented as local heritage - that is, collective town property - the responsibility for supporting them is made a matter for the state, exempting the individual citizen. Although the dispensation of municipal funds is mediated by individuals through clientelistic networks, state representatives can - and

do - invoke the complexities of government to distance themselves from any direct link to the funds held by government, and can thereby keep donations to a minimum. Nonetheless, in recent years the municipal government have become the major patron of the *congados*, taking on some of the financial responsibilities associated with the Festival of Our Lady of the Rosary: it now serves meals to the *congadeiros* during the festival; it provides transport for the ensembles from their neighbourhoods to the church yard; and it supplies each group with a few instruments each year.

When I asked one of the local leaders of a *congado* whether his activities in the ensemble could be considered folklore, he responded: *Eles fala que é froclore (sic), mas pra nós é religião* (“They say it’s folklore, but to us it’s religion”). This exchange took place at a ‘folklore demonstration’ organised by the local culture secretary at one of the town’s secondary school. So I pushed the issue further, and asked, if that was the case, why had he agreed to participate in the event, which clearly classed the *congado* as folklore. The response: *Veio convidar nós pra gente poder mostrar o congado, então a gente não pode negar. O santo é de todos* (“They invited us so we could show the *congado*, so we couldn’t refuse. The saint belongs to everyone”). This episode highlights a dilemma facing the *congados*: that of finding ways of securing support for their associations, which is being achieved to some extent through folklorization, and yet ensure they preserve autonomy and control over their activities.

Concluding remarks

Now that the musicological research emphasis has shifted from ‘the music’ to musical processes and the ways in which music is conceptualised, the division of labour circumscribed by the categories ‘historical musicology’, ‘ethnomusicology’, and ‘popular music studies’ seems redundant. Yet the perceptions of the musical sphere that originally established these divisions are still current in many parts of the world, informing people’s ideas about music as well as their musical choices. Although they may now appear to be little more than ‘folk’ labels, which, along with others, are scattered around music stores to assist

consumers in their musical choices, their deployment can also be far more sinister, as the very legacy from which they emerged was premised on conceptions linked to the inherent value of different modes of musical expression.

While it may be self-evident to some that the complexity and sophistication of western art music is the source of its inherent value, to others its elitism and exclusiveness constitute signs of a non-democratic social orientation that needs to be resisted. While subaltern modes of musical expression might be easily romanticised and conceived as 'the soul of the nation' by those whose experiences are removed, be it temporarily or geographically, from the original producers, these same groups appear quite differently to those living near them, such that marks of distinctions and prejudice can be all too visible and entrenched in the modes of interaction across the divide. Popular music too can be conceived as the 'easy' sounds that hinder critical thinking and a 'true' aesthetic experience, or the sphere in which one can experience modernity and construct a sense of 'the true self'.

In the western world, such forces as commoditisation, individualism, and cosmopolitanism may have created a social sphere in which people have a wide range of musical styles to choose from to provide a soundtrack to their lives. But in poorer parts of the world, local modes of musical life may not be strong enough to resist the onslaught of external and global forces. In such cases people may only have the choice of accepting or rejecting the choices made for them by powerful others, and their notions about what should reach people's ears will dictate what prevails in the sound spaces under their control. How such categories as 'art music', 'folk music' and 'popular music' are conceptualised may strongly impact upon how control of the public soundscape is exercised.