Music In Our World

What this course attempts to convey:

- Music is a cultural phenomena—it cannot be understood on its own. We must learn about the culture from which the music comes before attempting to grasp the meaning and significance of its music.

- Music has different functions in different cultures. For example, music can be used in various cultures for:
  - entertainment
  - religious purposes
  - contact with the supernatural
  - identification with a social group
  - political affiliations
  - curing illness

- In learning about music, we must try to understand it from two perspectives:

  1. **A musical perspective (its structure)**
     - How it's put together; what are the building blocks or basic **elements**
     - What are the principles of **composition**
     - What kinds of **instruments** are used
     - What are the **aesthetics** involved in its performance

  2. **A cultural perspective (its function)**
     - What is a culture's definition of music
     - What are its powers
     - How does it relate to other aspects of personal, social, and cultural life
     - How does it reflect each culture's view of the world, of life, of existence
In our study of world music, we must keep in mind three basic assumptions:

1) **MUSIC IS A RELATIVISTIC PHENOMENA**

Let's listen to a little bit of Johann Sebastian Bach.

**Play sound file: Bach.mp3**

As a "western" trained musician, I have been trained to recognize that Bach's music (and this performance of it) is some of the finest in the European tonal tradition. In his music, I can hear complexity and logic, good internal compositional structure due to a perfect balance of contrapuntal writing and harmonic forward motion, a fine blend of instruments due to his rich orchestration, and a flawless rendition by performers who can recreate this same sound time and again due to their rigorous training. In short, the epitome of excellent classical music.

If I were to use these same musical criteria in judging the music of other cultures of the world, I would have to conclude that Western classical music is the best!

A classical musician from India, however, may not have the same opinion. If they were to judge Bach's music using only Indian aesthetics, they may come to the conclusion that it is a poor piece due to the lack of any improvisation—the performers must follow the written notes precisely, giving them little opportunity to be creative.

Similarly, a musician from Africa would, if judging Bach's music by purely African standards, possibly arrive at the conclusion that it was overly simplistic in its rhythmic structure. They may appreciate the layered compositional structure, but the lack of any rhythmic tension and release would make the music hardly worth listening to.

These are, of course, facetious examples, since many Indian and African musicians sincerely appreciate Bach’s music. But it points to the futility in judging another culture's music based upon criteria outside of that culture. We can compare the structure and function of another culture's music with our own, but we cannot easily judge its quality using standards set forth in our own culture.
2) **MUSIC IS SIMILAR IN BEHAVIOR TO LANGUAGE**

- Each society has its own music
- Each member of that society understands its music, and communicates with it
- Just as languages can borrow and incorporate words from another language, different musics can influence each other
- Language changes over time; music also changes and develops
- Some societies are bilingual (or multi-lingual); some societies also have two or more types of music, from different sub-groups or for different uses

3) **IN ORDER TO STUDY A CULTURE'S MUSIC, WE NEED TO STUDY THAT CULTURE'S IDEAS ABOUT MUSIC**

The values, beliefs, ideas, and aesthetics that a culture holds will often times be reflected in the actual sound of its music. For instance:

- If a culture values **innovation**, then music will change frequently.
- If a culture values **conformity**, then well-disciplined orchestral pieces will be commonly found.
- If **individualism** is important to a society, then you will probably find much solo music performance and a large degree of improvisation.
- If the concepts of artistic masters and **masterworks** are present, then you may find great technical complexity or stylistic uniqueness in the music.

*Again, as we learn about and explore new cultures of music, we must recognize and be aware of these three basic concepts.*

You may have often heard someone say, "music is the universal language" or "music can transcend all cultural barriers". While the intention behind such sayings is good, it is not so simple as that. Let me try to demonstrate.

Try to guess, without looking below, what this singer is singing about:

**Play sound file: Song_1.mp3**
Here's another example.

Try to guess what sort of event or function is going on while this music is being played:

**Play sound file: Song_2.mp3**

Without knowing anything about the cultures these musical examples are from, we can only guess what the music is expressing.

Judging only from criteria in our own culture, we may conclude in listening to Song #1 that the gritty sound, "blues-ey" scale, and long tones is the singer's way of expressing a sad, lonely song, or feelings of hardship, etc. We have no way of knowing that this is actually a love song! Specifically, romantic poetry sung by a professional bard from Abu Dhabi. This Arabic culture has a different set of musical aesthetics than most listeners in our own culture.

Likewise, upon hearing Song #2 we may assume that this is some sort of celebration, perhaps a wedding, a party, a festival, or some similar happy event. But this particular recording is from a political ceremony I attended while in Ghana--the "enthronement" of a chief--a most solemn and officious event, comparable to having the U.S. Marine band playing for a state ceremony! It doesn't mean that we can't enjoy it as dance music, but we cannot assume that it was originally performed for that purpose.

But is there **anything** universal about the world's music? The answer is YES.

According to ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl, there are ten points (agreed upon by many who study multi-cultural music) that all musics of the world share. Briefly, these points are:

1. Music exists in absolutely every culture of the world.

2. Singing also exists in every culture.

3. Likewise, musical instruments are created and used by musicians everywhere.
4. Music is used throughout the world in religious rituals and as a connection to the supernatural.

5. Music everywhere is presented in units, as songs or musical pieces that are considered as artifacts.

6. People everywhere can recognize a tune or melody.

7. The principal melodic interval found in music throughout the world is roughly equivalent to a whole step or major 2nd (see the next lecture on Musical Elements).

8. Music in every culture is used for transforming an ordinary experience.

9. Music is used to reinforce the boundaries between social groups and between the various levels of a society.

10. Music everywhere is used as an emblem of identity—personal, social, cultural, national, economic, and religious.