Maieutic: a teaching and learning approach. As applied to western music

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Abstract

In this article I discuss some considerations arising from eight years of professional experience in Thailand, as both performer and teacher of music. Working alongside students mainly from Asian countries, I have been led to reconsider deeply how western teaching methodologies can be efficient and valuable in non-western cultures. I have become convinced that music teaching (and learning) must be part of a cultural and artistic approach towards diverse heritage – the western legacy in this specific case – through study of music. The goal of a teacher is to show students the correct learning process, and to create for them the best conditions to facilitate awareness, understanding and appreciation of the music. Considering the undeniable relevance of ancient Greek influence in western arts and philosophy, I demonstrate the effectiveness of the Socratic method known as maieutics, as applied to the learning of music. By this method students are always forced to think-in-music, to understand what they are doing, to make responsible choices. A musical piece is a problem to solve, and classes are often based on dialogue with Q&A sessions, stylistic considerations, reflections on the meaning of the music, and understanding of the underlying meaning of the written notation, following which performance of the score is just a way to verify the validity of our proposed solution. Through this approach students are stimulated to find the truth within themselves, and thus have the opportunity to become artistically independent.

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1. Introduction

In this article I discuss some considerations arising from almost nine years of professional experience in Thailand and other Asian countries. As an Italian piano and harpsichord player, this professional experience in foreign countries alongside colleagues from different parts of the world and students mainly from Asian countries, led me to deeply reconsider how western teaching approach methodologies could be efficient and valuable in such a variegated context.

1.1. Western music in Asia. A brief panorama

Western music - for sociological, historical and aesthetic reasons - benefits from an undeniable preference all over the world; a further chronological selection focuses roughly on the last 500 years with a particular emphasis on 18th and 19th centuries. Western music has been exported to many countries for many years, but this gained significance in the twentieth century as we will see, when regular migration of musicians, sometimes in opposite directions such as Asian students to western countries and western teachers/musicians to Asian countries, became more consistent.

Presently music environment results quite diversified. By one side, undoubtely Asian countries dedicate care and attention to its variegated traditional music; by the other side we assisted at a strong and strong musical westernization. Western art music but also other genres such as jazz, pop and so on are indeniably displayed in almost every corner of these countries: from shopping malls to commercial, from cinema to concert halls, from competitions to music institutions. Practice of a musical instrument, or activitities related to music, are spread at all levels: there is plenty of private music schools with institutionalized programs where beginners may start the study of almost any instrument and join individual or group classes. Some of the modern music methods used to begin the study of the music (Yamaha and Suzuki methods among them) were born in Asia. Almost all public, private and international high schools provide music facilities and run their own chorus and/or orchestra, and universities and conservatories offer music programs acknowledged abroad.

1.2. First musical exchanges between Asian and Western countries

Trying to trace a map of this sort of this Western musical colonization, specific studies (Postiglione, 2007; Anderson & Campbell, 2010) agree in identifying the beginning of the effective westernization of Asian countries during the twentieth century; this process of course affected many disciplines. Limiting our range to Western art music, we may notice that to some extent this process have been started some century before, during colonialism, when Western music has been exported in many countries, without any relevant significance however. In order to integrate and complete our overview, we should contemplate also a kind of “Easternization” occurred at the end of the nineteenth in European and American music. Partly probably caused as a reaction to these sporadic musical colonizations towards the East, partly because of that current well-known as National Trends, we could observe an assimilation of Asian musical elements into Western cultures. Composers like Puccini, Saint-Saëns, and then Sullivan, Holst, Debussy, Ravel have been bewitched by non-western elements like exoticism, sensuality, bizarre, unconventional music scales, and musical instruments unheard in a standard Western orchestra (Burkholder, Grout & Palisca, 2014). Among others, John Cage and Henry Cowell in the twentieth century represent only some examples of how Eastern philosophy and music tendencies have influenced Western composers.

1.3. Diffusion of Western music in Asia in the twentieth century

All these musical exchanges favoured the start of the westernization of Asian countries, that took place in a substantial and relevant way not before the last century, and contributed to a radical redefinition of art music. This process started firstly in Japan, Korea and China, then affected other Asian countries. The novelty that gave this process much more strong, solid and enduring bases was the legitimization of Western music teaching through governmental and/or institutional practice. “Traditional local music was identified primarily for its ritualistic or pragmatic function in various social contexts such as dance, religious and secular ceremonies, entertainment and so forth. […] Furthermore, as pedagogical instruction in traditional music began to adopt Western notational practice, methods of teaching became codified, leading to standardization and homogenization of the musical repertoire and performance
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