

Transcultural Music Improvisation & Embodied Musical Intelligence

von Alan Bern, Berlin

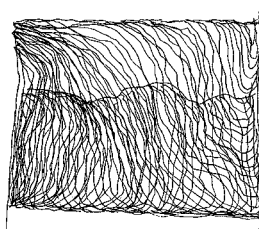


The vision of transcultural music improvisation aims at a give-and-take, a sharing of important musical values, equal empowerment of the musicians participating, and genuine musical communication, not an exchange dominated by one side that privileges its own musical culture, consciously or unconsciously. Is this possible?

A musician trained exclusively in Western European Art Music will find, when first encountering West African music, for example, that its rhythms are not just very difficult, they're completely incomprehensible and impossible to play. This is not a matter of learning to "do" something, but of developing a new *intelligence*, which means *re-making oneself*. The re-made self thinks, feels, hears, moves, imagines and acts differently than its former self, it is a different *embodiment*.¹ For each of the world's musical cultures, I believe, there is a different embodiment of self.

Here's a very short list of just a few musical cultures and parameters that represent not just a specific skill, but an entire embodied intelligence: asymmetric meter in Balkan music, intonation in *maqam*, the logic of melodic development in Ashkenazi Jewish music, rhythmic/melodic cycles and additive rhythm in *raga*, harmony and counterpoint in Western European Art music.

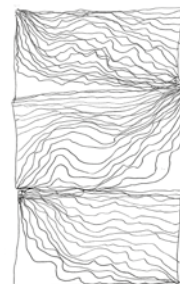
The point is, these are not minor features, they are essential to what music *is* in each culture. They are entire musical dimensions; to inhabit them, we have to develop and embody the specific intelligence(s) that each one demands.



¹ Starting in 1959, Alan Lomax tried to systematically and scientifically analyze these different embodiments with his theory of Cantometrics. Although the system was considered a failure, the idea that each musical culture encodes a unique set of cultural norms, including religion, sexuality, gender relations and more, is widely accepted. For further details: *Cantometrics: An Approach to the Anthropology of Music: Audiocassettes and a Handbook*. University of California Media Extension Center, Berkeley 1976

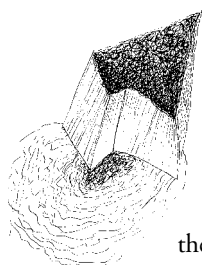
I assume that we would like transcultural music improvisation to appreciate and indeed *make music* with the essential and different dimensions of different musical cultures, not to ignore them. That would require true competence in the different cultures involved in the encounter to discover what could be a fruitful exchange and what is not. For example, West African rhythm might have a fruitful exchange with Western European harmony, but not with Baroque-era counterpoint. *Maqam* might be compatible with Western European rhythm, but not 20th-century atonal practice. Ashkenazic Jewish music might be compatible with jazz song-form, but not with swing rhythm. There are countless more possible examples.

At this point, someone might object that the meeting point of different musical cultures lies deeper than such "stylistic" features. My reply would be, true, all music is made of sound, and all sound has frequencies, amplitudes and durations. But these parameters are just the building blocks of music, not yet music. They are sound without musical syntax, semantics and pragmatics, sound stripped of culture.



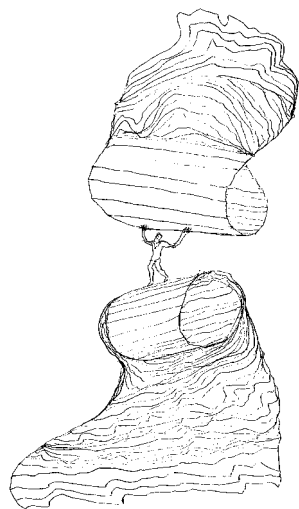
Nevertheless, might it be possible to make transcultural music that is "deeper" than cultural differences, music that relies only on distinctions such as louder/softer, higher/lower, denser/less dense, longer/shorter and timbral difference?

For me, there are two problems with this suggestion. First, it would require ignoring entire worlds of highly developed, nuanced musical meaning because they are culturally specific. That would be, however, the very opposite of validating and making music with cultural diversity. Second, the moment we begin to make even basic aesthetic judgments – What sounds good? Why? What is playing loud enough or too loud? Long enough or too long? What is listening and reacting? What is playing enough or too much? – we sneak all of our specific cultural values through the back door. Aesthetic choices don't exist on the level of sound itself, they exist on the level of culture.



So is transcultural music improvisation hopeless? In a minor but not trivial sense, every improvisation with another musician is a kind of transcultural music improvisation, because no two people embody exactly the same cultures and musical intelligences.

In a larger and more important sense, when the cultural differences between two musicians are greater than their shared musical discourse, the process must be one of self-reinvention: I can come to recognize my own embodied musical intelligence, with both its potentials and its limits, through a serious encounter with another musician who embodies a different musical intelligence than mine. I can also begin to enter into a different musical intelligence and perhaps learn to embody it. Along the way, there will be many moments in which transcultural music improvisation can play a pedagogical role, and possibly achieve aesthetic success as well. This process is neither a musical encounter that “transcends” cultural differences, nor one that only exchanges “surface” features of different musical languages. It is instead a deep and long-term process of self-recognition and transformation through a profound encounter with musical otherness.



Alan Bern is a composer/arrangeur, pianist, accordionist, educator, cultural activist and philosopher. He is the creator of *Present-Time Composition PTC*®, an innovative approach to improvisation and real-time group composition informed by insights from cognitive science. He is the founding director of *Yiddish Summer Weimar* and the *Other Music Academy (OMA)*. He performs with *Brave Old World*, *The Other Europeans*, *Diaspora Redux*, the *Semer Ensemble* and the *Engel Ensemble*, among others. He has recorded on *Winter & Winter*, *EMI*, *Jazzwerkstatt* and *Piranha* and other labels. His teachers have included Paul Badura-Skoda, Leonard Shure, Karl Berger, the *Art Ensemble of Chicago*, Anthony Braxton, John Cage, Frederic Rzewski, Joel Hoffman and Daniel Dennett. He received his master's degree in philosophy and his doctorate degree in music composition. In 2016, he was awarded the Weimar Prize and in 2017, the *Thuringia Order of Merit*.