

Time Goes One Way - Against the Classification of Arts

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... [T]he present time ... ourselves ... Chuff, chuff, chuff went the machine. Time was passing ... Change had to come ... or there'd have been yards and yards of Papa's beard, of mama's knitting. (Woolf, 2000, p.107)

I was asked, on the occasion of a conference on the theme of free expression in music¹, as composer and performer of non-commercial/non-traditional music, and as a woman composer, to speak about the following topics: women composers and/or modernity versus tradition in Lebanon. Although both these topics are pertinent, they are mere parts of a broader topic, namely, what makes an individual, and what is the importance of individuality in art. For surely when we speak of freedom we speak of individual freedom.

I will start with a short true story that touched me and that I was never able to forget. It is about a great teacher and friend of mine. Let's call him Smith. Smith is a Jazz and classical composer/pianist, a renowned poet in the Washington D.C. area, a chess player, and speaker of six languages, who happened to be black and who enjoyed reciting Shakespeare sonnets while striding along the streets of the black residential D.C. area. When I met Smith, he was the house pianist at the greatest jam session in D.C., at a pub which has now been torn down. He was an unbelievable musician; all the young musicians I knew dreamed of getting close to him, but an aura of strangeness surrounded him which seemed to chase people away. I was curious about the man and started a little inquiry. I learned that he had spent some time in a psychiatric institution, which made him uncommunicative. Later on, as I got to know him, he told me some of his mishaps: he had supposedly punched some black guy who followed him around very often, bugging

him, calling him "whitey", for no other reason than Smith's admiration for Shakespeare and elegant, Western clothing. To make things worse, later in the court room, the judge got annoyed by Smith's arrogance when the latter replied in Latin when asked if he was guilty. I must add that his white classical piano teachers were also bothered by the fact that he was a black kid who played Beethoven very well. So who is Smith? Who are we? Are we sometimes guilty until proven innocent? Who is the jury and what are the rules?!

I hope this story makes clear that I am not setting up West against East, light against dark-colored skin, popular art against so-called academic music, or new against old. For freedom of expression involves the possibility of using whatever means one wishes to use to express oneself. As Francis Bacon has put it in an interview about contemporary art, "[N]ow that in the art world all is accepted and possible ... that there is no longer any possibilities for art "schools"... art has now become a mere game ... one can only react to certain situations according to one's own nervous system" (Sylvester, 1996, p. 77).

From the moment a human being is born, he/she is exposed to the outside world. The larger and the more varied the outside world is, the more information a person has to process. In our modern world, because of the expanding communication systems, the outside world is becoming larger at an increasingly rapid rate. Let's take the example of an average individual in the city of Beirut.

Let's assume that this person speaks three basic languages, namely, Arabic, French, and English. He/she turns on the television and is instantly exposed to Lebanese drama, Egyptian drama, French series, Indian musicals, CNN, Arts, Mezzo, cowboys, and politicians. S/he goes to school and studies world history and the phoenicians. S/he walks down the street and finds blue jeans, veils and shorts, cigars, cigarettes, and water pipes. He/she turns on the radio and listens to *dabkeh* (i.e. traditional Lebanese dance) and rap, blues and jazz, pop and rock, Jacques Brel, Fairuz, and Umm Kulthum. Some may enjoy reading Albert Camus and Shakespeare, maybe even Khalil Gibran (who had himself read Nietzsche and admired the work of William Blake). He/she goes to the restaurant where the choices may vary between steak and tabbooleh, spaghetti and samboussek, arak and red wine. The example is Lebanese, but it can be universally generalized.

Addressing the question of why we, Lebanese, speak English or French is not what I am here to do. Yet, it amazes me, just as it shocks numerous Lebanese artists I know, when, after displaying their work or as they are seeking help in production, to be sometimes implicitly, and very often explicitly, asked the following: "Why don't you include *dabkeh* in your music or *oud*?² Why do you quote Virginia Woolf or Albert Einstein? How come your films are inspired by Fellini? Shouldn't your photographs include more veiled women or villagers riding donkeys or details of the Lebanese war? The list goes on, but the message is the same. It was once crudely, yet maybe innocently put to me, "Why not deal with your own heritage ... (and leave Goethe alone!)."

Roots exist, we can't deny it, but so do we. "... [T]he present time ... ourselves ... Chuff, chuff, chuff went the machine. Time was passing ... Change had to come ... or there'd have been yards and yards of Papa's beard, of mama's knitting" (Woolf, 2000, p. 107). Art is not a dusty archive register, and a portrait signed Rubens is not a passport photo. The greatness of Velazquez' painting *Les Menines* (1956/1957 - representing Philippe IV's royal family) does not lie in the resemblance with the real characters. The artistic statement is an expression

of one's freedom. It uses reality as a spring-board but it transcends it. All means of expression are permitted, including the use of tradition. Living in an era of openness, one is exposed to a multitude of aesthetics. Our present is openness. Blues music is becoming as natural to the Lebanese as reggae is to Europeans. Soon there will be as many British women doing the belly dance as there are Lebanese. One of the greatest interpreters of Jean Sebastian Bach, Gould, was Canadian. A work of art belongs to anyone who wishes to experiment with it, to be transported by it, even "... if the thing transporting you doesn't come from your neighbourhood!" (Byrne, 1999, ¶ 9).

You cannot teach Shakespeare to Indians and later forbid them to understand and appreciate him. The assimilation of the "other", of what is supposedly different from oneself is deep and real; it is not confined to ridiculous mimicking. As we all know, some of us might get along better with a friend than with a close relative. It is like having a preference for a color or a smell or a taste. Freedom entails choice. Don't many Americans eat Chinese food now? The world has become more diversified, offering us more choices. A world of "selective affinities", as Goethe would put it. Each according to his/her own "nervous system", echoes Bacon. "All means are sacred when the goal is right," affirms Kandinsky (1989, p. 61).

There are numerous reasons why an artist may decide, consciously or unconsciously, to use particular means of expression. These means are all considered legitimate, except the ones aiming at financial gain and/or popularity. The idea of commercial art is in itself "an oxymoron". If we believe that art is nurtured by and seeks freedom, how can that freedom survive if a certain market dictates at the outset what the artist must express and how to express it? Rules and art do not go together. Art feeds on inner necessity.

What does the market demand today? That a certain "type" of artist stick to a certain "type" of music or style. What is this thing about types and categories, anyway? For what is really interesting about a work of art lies in its singularity and not generality. Saying something that is general is like

saying nothing at all. Generalities (in everyday talk they might amount to nice weather today, or hey! how is it going? without listening to the answer) are usually fillers when one wants to avoid serious discussion or has nothing to say. By pushing artists to produce commercial art, companies and individuals who run artistic industries create a world of disguised or false statements about personal as well as social identity. They castrate the artist as well as the public whose salvation lies in the artist's hand, since most people are practically too busy to delve into and explore their own being.

In my experience, the use of the term world music is a way of dismissing artists or their music as irrelevant to one's own life. It's a way of relegating this 'thing' into the realm of something exotic and therefore cute, weird but safe, because exotica is beautiful but irrelevant. (Byrne, 1999, ¶ 4)

Art becomes a mere form of entertainment. Although fun is sometimes necessary, some of us believe art has a deeper message. "The artist is the one in charge of pulling the heavy human chariot forward and up ... if art runs away from its task, this void cannot be filled. For no other power can replace art" (Kandinsky, 1989, pp. 61-62).

Some of us non-Western artists, who happen to have chosen not to make a display of our folk art on every public occasion, tend to be misjudged. What are we being accused of here? Why should we just meddle with our own heritage and leave Western culture alone?!

Some may object: "But you are forgetting your roots, your traditions". My answer is, "What once was never ceases to be, one way or the other". Also, the task of many scholars is researching, documenting, classifying, and saving our traditions. Let us not rob them of their task. My second answer is that traditions are not a set of fixed ideas; they are living practices which are subject to change. What is fixed is called history. An artist is no historian. I must add that artists may freely make use of tradition when they feel the inner urge to do so. Bela Bartok is one great example. He was able to

capture the essence of folk music yet bring it to life by breathing into it something personal and new. Misuse and artificial use of tradition amount to prostituting and killing it.

Are we implicitly being accused of theft? (The same could be said about Westerners incorporating Oriental music in their work). Aren't culture, information, or education out there for grabs? Again, I believe it is now too late for any one group to claim exclusive ownership of one tradition, concept, or style. Knowledge is out there to be used by anyone who feels the urge to do so, hopefully for the sake of advancement and progress!

Identification with the winner?

In psychoanalysis, they call it identification with the aggressor, but we are trying to be friendly and positive here. So let us imagine that some Oriental artists unconsciously or consciously want to act Western, for the West has taken over right now. Again we are not here to judge anyone, just to defend freedom of expression. Many say Beethoven was a great composer because he hated his father, that Billie Holiday was a moving singer because her life had been miserable, and that Virginia Woolf was such a creative writer because her childhood was very awkward. I should remind you all that we are surrounded by very many miserable people. Some end up mentally ill, yet they do not give birth to a single work of art. So if the artist happens to suffer from some kind of identity crisis, we wish him/her a quick recovery, but let us not evaluate the quality of his/her work based on his/her personal life.

In conclusion, I ask myself the following: Does a style or manner of expression refer to a specific thing? Can we express the same effect using any style? Do certain ideas fit more logically with certain traditions? Do certain traditions reflect specific points of view while other styles see the world from a different angle? Can we use the vocabulary of the past without falling into the obsolete? The relationship between form and content in art is a complex relationship which has long been debated. Some modern scholars argue that art has no content at all. For example, Hanslick, a famous musicologist, believes that "there exists no universal,

determinable relationship between a given feeling and a musical form" (Braun, 1987, p. 102). We, the general public, however, seem to basically agree on whether a musical piece is "sad" or "joyful". The term basically is here meant literally, since emotions and ideas are each a unique entity. Terms, such as sad or joyful, simply reflect the fact that most humans can recognize general kinds of emotions in some art works, something they can relate to, to a certain extent. Another issue complicates matters a little further, namely, the question of whether feelings are a fixed thing. Technology has become more and more sophisticated over the years. How about feelings and ideas? Thinkers, such as Bergson and Kandinsky, believe that, if time is not an empty container – and therefore useless, and if life has a specific goal, then new emotions are continuously being born, leading to greater subtlety of vision. Life is not a series of morbid repetitions. Does this mean that there can be no repetition? That history and traditions are dead and must be discarded? That we can no longer enjoy Beethoven's Ninth Symphony or relate to it? Not really. For what once was never ceases to be; it lives within us and drives us forward. It is armed with the knowledge we already have and which we try to advance. So how does this function, this marriage, when it does occur – and it always does since memory exists – between past and present occur?

In his article, "Vers une metapsychologie de la création", psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu distinguishes between artistic creation, and what he calls simple creativity. While the act of creating involves

breaking rules and opening up new horizons, creativity implies a mere re-arrangement of existing elements. For the purpose of meeting market demands, numerous artists have had to give up the sublime and stick to shallow forms of prettiness, elegantly (and sometimes less elegantly) re-arranging elements familiar to the ear or eye. Who is to blame? Is it true that demand reflects the real desire of the public – who's often accused by producers as well as artists of being ignorant or unable to appreciate quality artistic content? If that is the case, aren't we artists responsible for producing better artistic quality? This task can become virtually impossible since a true artist has to survive ... by eating, sleeping, keeping warm and healthy...

The situation described above is a vicious circle. It would be useless and unfair to point fingers at any specific group and blame it for all our problems. Nonetheless, becoming aware of a problem is a positive step towards improvement.

So we'll let each do his/her thing, each according to his/her own "nervous system", keeping in mind that where we are born, who we are, who we believe ourselves to be, who we want to be and how we want to be perceived by others are questions not easily answered. Yet we all love this thing called ART! So as my friend Smith used to enjoy saying, "To the integrity of each and the unity of all"!

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ENDNOTES

1. Paper originally presented during the conference entitled "Freedom of Expression in Music in the Middle East" organized by the Middle East Office of Heinrich Böll Foundation in cooperation with Freemuse and the Arab Association for Arabic Music.
2. Walid Gholmieh, composer, conductor and President of the Lebanese National Conservatory was once invited to perform one of his symphonies abroad. He was ironically asked why he didn't include *Oud* in his orchestration. His answer was: I will when you include the balalaika (not in the intention of lacking respect to either instrument).

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