

Percussive Notes

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World Percussion in the College Curriculum



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Developing Intercultural Understanding

World Music Ensembles in University Percussion Education

A PASIC panel discussion with Jeff Jones (moderator), Michael Bakan, Rob Falvo, Allen Teel and Paschal Yao Youngue.

World music ensembles have become an integral part of university-level percussion education. They often introduce different ways of conceptualizing music, and this potentially opens up new avenues of creativity, expression, and aesthetic appreciation for students.



Paschal Yao Youngue giving a world percussion workshop for the annual Ju Percussion Summer International Percussion Camp in Taipei, Taiwan.

Moreover, some world musics require different kinds of skill sets and technical abilities that serve to further broaden student experiences and diversify their potential professional opportunities. However, beyond this, world music ensembles have the potential to help students develop frameworks that support intercultural understanding—that is, developing critical awareness of one’s own cultural influences and exploring this awareness through dialogue and exchange with other cultural influences in an effort to foster tolerance and appreciation. Given our increasingly globalized, yet still plural world/s, the possibility of educating such understanding is something worth cultivating.

At PASIC 2007 in Columbus, the PAS World Percussion Committee sponsored a panel—featuring Michael Bakan, Robert Falvo, Allen Teel, and Paschal Yao Younge—to stimulate dialogue on this important and timely subject. As the organizer and moderator of that panel, it is my privilege to extend this dialogue to the entire PAS community by sharing some of our discussion.

Jones: *First, what is a world music ensemble?*

Teel: A discussion about what a “world music ensemble” is necessarily begins with a discussion about what “world music” is. According to some, world music is a term that was coined by the late Robert Brown in the early 1960s during his tenure at Wesleyan University. According to Brown, the term was used to distinguish a performance-based approach to studying music of diverse world cultures from established ethnomusicology programs that, in Brown’s opinion at least, emphasized “the ‘-ology’ of ethnomusicology, that is, investigative research with the ultimate goal of writing about music.”¹

The term world music has been the subject of some lively debate during the last couple of decades. Although world music ostensibly could mean “any music from anywhere in the world, from any time period,” that’s not the way it’s generally used. Generally, it means traditional or folk music from around the world—including Euro-American traditional and folk musics—plus classical and popular music outside of Euro-American traditions. In other words, this view of world music includes everything but western art and popular music.

The “West vs. the rest” orientation and power relationships that this term “world

music” implies are problematic for many of us committed to intercultural understanding. However, the term carries currency within the university system and within western society at large, so while it’s problematic, it’s also useful. For the purposes of today’s discussion, it provides a starting place.

Given our tentative definition of world music, world music ensembles, then, are those that feature music not generally categorized as western art or popular music. Spend thirty minutes on the Internet looking at the offerings of university-level ethnomusicology and percussion programs, and you will find a staggering array of world music ensembles. Many of these, though certainly not all, feature percussion instruments: steelband, West African drum ensembles, gamelan, samba, Afro-Cuban folkloric ensembles, marimba ensembles performing the music of southeast Mexico and Central America, taiko drumming—and we’ve barely scratched the surface. There are also ensembles that fuse musics from various cultural sources, and these could conceivably be considered world music ensembles as well.

Jones: *How is a world music ensemble different than other ensembles in the university curriculum that are not generally considered world music?*

Falvo: Well, I suppose that the differences would really depend on the specific ensembles being compared, but I have a couple of observations based on my experiences where I teach. We have four world music ensembles that feature percussion: an African drumming and dance ensemble, a tabla ensemble, a Middle Eastern percussion ensemble, and a steel-

band. We also have the common western ensembles: the orchestra, wind ensemble, percussion ensemble, and various concert bands.

Again, differences depend on which



Jeff Jones teaching a steel pannist in Renegade Ramajay at Florida State University.



Allen Teel with the steelband at Abilene Christian University.

groups are actually being compared, but in general, I observe six common differ-

ences involving repertory, transmission, leadership, ensemble size, personnel, and approach to learning. The first difference involves the repertoire. Wind ensemble and orchestra music is composer oriented, and it is a priority of the ensemble to replicate, as closely as possible, the composers' intent. Our world music groups are often performer oriented and feature an improvisatory element. Compositions are a little more organic and the role of a specific "composer" is less important. Wind ensemble and orchestra music often has highly detailed notation to communicate performance instructions. Our world music groups come from an oral/aural tradition, and with the exception of our steelband, use very little, if any, notation. So the method of transmission is also different.

The third difference concerns leadership. The wind ensemble and orchestra both

rationale for a particular aspect of musical style. However, in our world music groups, so much of what we play is so deeply informed by culture that the music can't be separated. Both must be taught together.

Jones: *What is a world music ensemble's purpose in the university curriculum?*

Younge: Before I answer, I would like to share a short story. When I first came to this country to teach, the first question I was asked was, "How many lions have you killed?" [laughter] I did my first class and students asked, "Did you make all these drums?" and "So who will teach us how to dance?"—maybe looking at my size and comparing me to skinny ballet dancers. [more laughter] I said, "I will teach you to dance, the music, many things." These types of questions during my first year in the U.S. actually helped me formulate some assumptions about my

students' educational needs and shaped the development of my philosophical approach to teaching world music.

Clearly, they [students] lacked basic knowledge about other cultures and would benefit from intercultural exchange. But their understanding of music was also limited—even with simple concepts. For instance, when I asked questions about rhythm,

students could not connect their previous understandings with our new musical context. So it was clear to me that students needed assistance there, too. Therefore, the purpose of world music involved providing students with multiple perspectives and diverse experiences with music and culture. To do this well, you've got to preserve it [world music], transmit it, and develop it.

It is important to respect the culture when you do this; don't generalize too much. What I'm talking about is a kind of preservation. For instance, you have an ensemble that only plays jembe, or only plays Senegalese music, but you call it an African ensemble. That's too general and it isn't true. The students don't really know Africa, they know a little something about jembe or Senegalese music. You teach an

ensemble that only plays music of the Ewes of Ghana? Fine, call it something to do with that and focus on that. Help students be clear about what cultural influences they are dealing with.

So that is what I mean by preservation. Not necessarily, "Well, I learned it in the village by rote, so I've got to teach it that way." It does not always work well. If you have students who are able to read music, you should consider using that [notation] in your teaching, too. Using a variety of approaches to transmission will familiarize students with multiple perspectives about music and culture. This facilitates intercultural exchange by helping them [students] make connections among musical and cultural influences.

Finally, perform the traditional pieces, but also allow for creative performances. You can't play taiko and just want to play taiko as you learned it from your teacher. What would music be if it didn't continue to develop? What if western art music didn't develop past the Baroque period? We never would have known Classical or Romantic music. You've got to develop it. Allow the students to use their experiences with the traditional to create new things. Teach them to use concepts, structures, and other processes of traditional music to create new works.

Falvo: With the tabla ensemble I run, we start out within the tradition of the Benares style as my guru presented it to me. I speak the compositions in bols [mnemonic syllables that indicate drum strokes] and then play the compositions. In turn, the students speak the compositions and then play. After this, I allow the students to write things down if they wish. This is how my guru taught me, and I share this with my students. Once they are ready, we do a concert of tabla music in the Benares style. In the semester after this concert, while they continue to grow in the Benares style, I open things up by encouraging them to also create hybrid compositions—jazz/rock-influenced tabla or tabla-influenced jazz/rock that may include tihai's [a cadenza composed of three identical sections] on the drumset and creating melodies with ragas [Indian melodic modes] on the marimba. This type of fusion is very useful in helping students relate what they have learned with what they know and love as western percussionists.

Younge: Yes. Once you've learned the traditional and given respect to the culture, you can create your own things. But don't play



Rob Falvo teaching the tabla ensemble at Appalachian State University.

utilize a conductor. A master performer leads each of our world music groups. Our wind ensemble and orchestra typically use large groups of musicians. Though this isn't necessarily true for other collegiate world percussion programs, our world music groups are typically much smaller in size. Next, though our wind ensemble and orchestra are open to all students through the audition process, they primarily consist of music majors; we have two other bands to accommodate non-music majors. Our world music groups are more evenly mixed with music and non-music majors.

Finally, culture is almost never talked about in most wind ensemble and orchestra rehearsals. Attention is focused on performance, with perhaps the occasional reference to culture or history as part of a

amandinda on the xylophone or the marimba and still call it amandinda; it is not. These are new creations.

Teel: That's encouraging for those of us performing music outside of our cultural heritage. Sometimes we think we're paying homage to the culture that created a particular music; for instance, teaching West African music without the aid of notation is something that is often held up as respectful because you are transmitting that music the same way it's done in the indigenous culture.

Younge: Use notation *and* rote methods of transmission. It is important that there be a healthy, respectful, balance.

Bakan: This balance is exactly what I struggled with when I wrote my book, *World Music: Traditions and Transformations*, and in the process I came to a provisional solution that may be useful here. Yes, we want to respect these traditions, preserve them, embrace them, and transmit them. But we also have to develop them ourselves, understanding that we are cultural and musical translators of a tradition. This process is useful in helping students understand the relationships between musical sound and the meanings people attach to it within a

given cultural context. These musical traditions are being transformed, wherever they are in the world, as perceptions and cultural contexts change. If we present them as static museum pieces, we kill what is vital about them.

Jones: *How do you conceive of your role as a world music educator relative to the promotion of intercultural understanding?*

Bakan: My foremost priority as a world music educator, and I expect it is for all of us [*gestures to the other panelists*], is to cultivate intercultural tolerance and appreciation through participatory experience and active engagement on the part of students. In all cases—whether I'm directing a gamelan, teaching an introductory world music survey course, creating a textbook or editing a book series that others may use for such courses, or writing scholarly books and articles—realizing this priority relies on creating an environment that combines elements of music making, music listening, and engagement with music through multiple lenses of thought and critical inquiry. Prerequisite to all of this is making the experience enjoyable, musically and intellectually stimulating, and connected and

relevant to students' everyday lives as well.

It's not, "This is the tradition and it must only be done this way." We want to provide opportunities for them to engage creatively, for them to make their own music, for them to create their own kinds of ideas about what world music is, and to constantly challenge assumptions. If you're going to teach a world music course or ensemble, begin by asking students, "What do you think this means?" Start a critical dialogue right away so that the experiential part of what happens with music and thinking is not tied into making assumptions that put people into essentialized roles that preclude us from knowing them as changing, vital, creative human beings—which we all are. Music is a wonderful doorway through which to enter into this understanding and develop deeper and better appreciations of what we all are within this shared human experience.

Jones: *How can what you've said be put into practice in a world music ensemble?*

Bakan: Start with an immediate listening experience; play a recorded example from the music tradition you will be teaching. Follow this with an immediate participatory

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experience. Don't explain it, get them doing it; give them direction with body language and through modeling appropriate musical sounds and behaviors. Next, you might show a video clip to give them a visual connection. Hopefully, by now the students are interested and thinking, "What is this?" "What's going on?"

At this point, I would then give an introductory explanation of the musical tradition. For instance, I direct a Balinese gamelan, so, "The music you have just experienced is part of a vocal gamelan accompaniment to a dance drama called Kecak from the island of Bali." We may then get into some of the interesting issues of tradition and transformation that Kecak has undergone—its roots as an ancient trance ritual known as Sanghyang Dedari, how this tradition was appropriated in the 20th-century to create a tourist dance drama. I may even show a clip from the movie *Ice Age 2* that includes Kecak in the sloth dancing scene. [laughter] It's connected to lots of things.

Next, I break down the participatory experience and explain the rhythms they have just been performing: "All of that 'cak-ce-cak-ce-cak' you were just singing is part of a fundamentally important set of interlocking rhythms known as *kilitan telu*. In Bali, this is a musical symbol of communal interdependence, a profound concept in Balinese culture." From there I can demonstrate how the rhythms they [students] performed in their initial participatory experience are the foundation of many highly complex melodic-rhythmic figurations found in important Balinese gamelan musical traditions like *beleganjur* and *gong kebyar*. In time, as the students grow as performers in these musical traditions, I will go deeper into important Balinese philosophical concepts and how they become manifest in Balinese social, cultural, and musical life by using a variation of the educational process I've just discussed.

Granted, this is only a condensed notion of one way to foster intercultural understanding, but I think it's representative: get students interested, get them critically engaged with the musical and cultural issues, and find ways to make all of this relevant to their everyday lives.²

Endnotes

1. Brown, Robert. May 1992. "World Music: Past, Present, and Future." *College Music Society Newsletter*.
2. At PASIC, Michael's address of this issue included

audiovisual aids, audience participation, and a more detailed explanation of his pedagogical approach. For more, see Bakan, Michael B., "Asian Music," pp. 43–66 of *Making Connections: Multicultural Music and the National Standards*, ed. W.M. Anderson and M. Moore (Reston, VA: Music Educators National Conference, 1998); Bakan, Michael B., *World Music: Traditions and Transformations* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007); and Bakan, Michael B. *Music of Death and New Creation: Experiences in the World of Balinese Gamelan Beleganjur* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

Michael Bakan, Associate Professor of Ethnomusicology and director of the Balinese gamelan program at Florida State University (FSU), studied percussion at the University of Toronto (B.M. 1985) and ethnomusicology at UCLA (Ph.D. 1993). He is the author of the books *World Music: Traditions and Transformations* (McGraw-Hill, 2007) and *Music of Death and New Creation: Experiences in the World of Balinese Gamelan Beleganjur* (Chicago, 1999). He has performed with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, the L.A. Philharmonic Green Umbrella Players, the Marlboro Festival Orchestra, and championship gamelan *beleganjur* groups in Bali. He currently directs the Children's Happiness Integrative Music Project (CHIMP) at FSU and is series editor of Routledge's forthcoming Focus on World Music book series.

Rob Falvo, Associate Professor of Music and director of the percussion department at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina, obtained a B.M. from the State University of New York at Fredonia and an M.M. and D.M.A. in percussion performance from the Manhattan School of Music. He is an international performing and recording artist, appearing with the North Carolina Symphony, Manhattan Chamber Orchestra, Tokyo Symphony Orchestra, Erick Hawkins Dance Company, Masterworks Chorus and Orchestra, Philidor Percussion Group, and the New Music Consort, among others. In addition to his experience in the world of western art music, Falvo performs North Indian classical music on the *tabla* and is a disciple of Pandit Sharda Sahai. His publications include articles in *Percussive Notes*, *Sticks and Mallets*, and *BD Guide Magazine*. In June 2007 Falvo was certified as an Alexander Technique teacher.

Jeff Jones, Visiting Assistant Professor and Ph.D. candidate in ethnomusicology at Florida State University, obtained B.M. and M.M. degrees in percussion performance at Ap-

palachian State University. He has performed throughout the United States and internationally with a broad and diverse group of artists and ensembles, including the Skiffle Bunch Steel Orchestra (Trinidad), the Marine Band, Thomas "Guitar" Gable, the Hickory Choral Society, Dr. Dixon, Steely Pan, The New Paradigm Percussion Quartet, and Pangea. His research involves various musical traditions from around the world and their relationships to culture, health, and healing. He has published articles, encyclopedia entries, and CD liner notes on topics ranging from the steel-band movement in Trinidad, to Okinawan folk dance, to the history of blues.

Allen Teel is Professor of Percussion at Abilene Christian University in Abilene, Texas. He received his BMEd degree from West Texas A&M University, an MM in performance from Texas Tech University, and a DMA in performance from the University of Georgia. His activities as a performer include serving as principal timpanist with the Abilene Philharmonic Orchestra, plus engagements as a percussionist in orchestral, chamber music, musical theatre, jazz, and world music settings. In February 2001, Teel performed as co-soloist with Robert Van Sice on the world premiere of Martin Bresnick's "Grace": Concerto for Two Marimbas and Orchestra, with the Abilene Philharmonic. He has also performed at important musical gatherings such as PASIC, the Texas Music Educators Association Convention, and the Texas Tech University Symposium on World Music.

Paschal Yao Younge is Associate Professor of Multicultural Music Education, director of an annual international summer program in African Interdisciplinary Arts, and co-artistic director of the African Ensemble at Ohio University. He served as chair of the PAS World Percussion Committee from 2004–07 and directs *Azaguno*, a multi-ethnic ensemble that focuses on research, preservation, and the performance of African, African-American, Caribbean, and Latin American music and dance styles. Paschal has presented at national festivals and conferences in the U.S. and internationally. Younge holds a Professional Music Education Diploma from the National Academy of Music, Winneba, Ghana; a Special Advanced Diploma in African Music and Dance with Distinction from the University of Ghana, Legon; and Master of Music in Music Education and Doctor of Education in Curriculum and Instruction degrees from West Virginia University. PN