

A "BLACK BOX" OF MUSIC USE: ON FOLK AND POPULAR MUSIC

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There is no simple answer to the question of the relationship between folk and popular music. If we discuss folk and popular music from the point of view of the active participants in the musical activities, and especially if we analyse the ways of music use in the particular life contexts of individuals and groups of people, it becomes clear that almost all the characteristics of the old folk music appear in modern popular music, although in changed circumstances. Popular music is not universal and it cannot be a means of homogenisation, for it is more democratic than totalitarian.

In a case study of the "autochthonisation" (indigenisation) of punk rock music in the village of Trate in north-east Slovenia between 1979 and 1992, the author emphasises the essential characteristics of the local popular music scene, with the same (or at least a similar) meaning and purpose in the life of the local subculture, and that it is being used by individuals and groups in the same (or a similar) way as was the old folk music. This becomes clear in the context of dance - the function of dance is essential to both. The ethnography of music use is, as the author suggests, one of the essential steps toward a better understanding of any music.

The argument I would like to set forth in the paper is apparently paradoxical. Contrary to common opinion, popular music is not universal, not only

because there is no universal music, but because of the type of impact it has on the society as a whole. It may be global, its products may be sold in millions of copies of LPs, CDs and cassettes, it may be transmitted world-wide, broadcast by satellite and local radio and TV networks, but still, none of the pop hits is accepted or even known to every person in the "global village".

It seems that this was not the case within the traditional context. Music (vocal and instrumental) was shared by virtually all the members of small and non-anonymous local communities. It belonged to all the individuals who were participating in any social activity that included music. Furthermore, and this is essential: either they did not have a choice or they had a very limited choice.

Both of the views I have presented (on popular and folk music) are somewhat idealised and artificial. Of course, there were large individual differences concerning musical practices within traditional music contexts, for instance dance, playing instruments, singing, listening, differences concerning age and gender etc. Besides, we must not overlook the enormous differences in the impact of particular popular music songs, tunes and genres. There are some widely known tunes and songs, but even Michael Jackson or Madonna, or let us say, The Beatles or Frank Sinatra, had a fairly limited world-wide audience that accepted their music as its own.

Nevertheless, considering the premises presented above, it is worth discussing the difference between folk and popular music not only with regard to their function or the way(s) of their transmission and distribution, but also with regard to the way they are used (and how they are perceived). If not the only difference, the possibility of popular music being used by choice is the most important difference between the two. It is even possible to suggest that popular music is inherently incapable of becoming totalitarian.

Towards an ethnography of music use

The starting point for discussion on music use may lie in the question of the ability of anthropology "to ascertain the actual significance of cultural productions and norms on the lives of persons and communities" (Miller 1995a:156) and in the answer of studying consumption (Miller 1995b). In modern society, everybody is a consumer, but scholars have not put much emphasis on the consumers themselves. So, the ethnography of music use in the various sociocultural contexts (cf. Merriam 1964:209–227) seems to be a supplement to the ethnographies of music performances and practices, "detailed musico-linguistic ethnographies" (Feld and Fox

1994:43), sociological studies of the "ways of musical behaviour" (Blaukopf 1993:14), etc. The ethnographic approach reveals to us the essential human dimensions of production, reproduction and use of music.

The question I discuss in the present paper evolved from ethnographic work on the rock group CZD (Centre for Dehumanisation) and the local subculture scene in the village of Trate in Slovenia from 1993 on (cf. Muršič 1995).¹ If we take a rock group and life context of its members, i.e. a local subculture, as the subject of ethnographic study, we suppose that the ethnological methodology of studying folk music is of use in the study of a rock group.

"Autochthonisation"² may be proposed to denote the process of the interactive evolution of local popular music scenes. Ethnology cannot analyse musical aspects or criticise the aesthetic dimensions of the observed phenomena; its aim is to try to reveal the "insiders' point of view", their life stance, to describe the life experience of the actors and protagonists, and to compare and analyse the dynamics of the lifestyles within a given social context.

Such was the ethnological study of punk rock in the *Slovenske gorice*, an area in north-east Slovenia (at the border with Austria, 25 km from the town of Maribor). There has been a local punk scene in the village of Trate (with 350 inhabitants and five punk bands rehearsing in the local club at the beginning of the eighties) that has developed all the activities that characterise an autonomous and autochthonous subculture scene (a rock club, publishing of a fanzine, establishing of an independent record label...). The rock club was open regularly (at the weekends) from 1979 to 1992 and became a symbol of freedom and the emerging civil society, and was the only constantly operating rock club in Slovenia at the time. The participants, more than 50 boys and girls from Trate and the nearby villages, were not only fans, but active punks who had developed all the attributes of the subculture as described and analysed by Hebdige (1980). In fact, they had to invent some of the essential attributes of their punk life-style: clothing and image, argot, subcultural provocative stance, and music. For them, the punk music was an essential agent of "being together". It had more than symbolic meaning: it was the constitutive element of their identity.

The history of the scene, fights of boys and girls for the rock club and for their subcultural life-style with their parents and the local

¹ In the context of the present article it is impossible to present all the dimensions of ethnographic work in Trate, presented in the monograph, especially the important political and social aspects of subcultural music-making and using.

² I propose a term "autochthonisation" as more neutral than "indigenisation".

community, the use of music to create and maintain their identity, and the development and creativity of the CZD rock band has been reconstructed on the basis of interviews with the actors between 1993 and 1995, and other written sources.³

The CZD group is a (local) underground or alternative rock band. It made records, videos, it performed not only in the nearby villages, but throughout Slovenia, the former Yugoslavia and some European countries. But still, its production (the members of CZD perform only their own music) does not obscure the fact that its music is being used by their audience in a very similar way as is supposed for folk music. In the first place, it is music shared by a particular community (listeners and performers). It is an expression of a certain life stance and life experience. And it has its social "meaning".

During the study of the rock group and the local subculture it became more and more apparent that punk rock music was important not only because of its stylistic characteristics and content but also because it was possible to use it in a very different ways and contexts. Some individuals from the scene were almost obsessed with music. Their choice of music began to determine their life. And it was not a product of a market or a mass consumption.

Consumption of music - the role of consumers

The essential function of music is that it co-creates/establishes and co-maintains human worlds.⁴ The most important "meaning" of music is that it is used by individuals and groups for their intimate and social purposes. In that sense the assessments of its quality are not important. The aesthetic judgement does not have much in common with the social functioning of music. The aesthetic discourse is either philosophical or critical

³ Six issues of the fanzine *Bla bla bla*, were published in Trate between 1982 and 1988; the CZD group published their lyrics (CZD 1992); there were many interviews with members of the band in newspapers, and other material from the local scene (including manuscripts of the earlier lyrics of other bands). Interviews were conducted only with the actors of the punk rock scene.

⁴ According to Merriam (1964:219–227) music has the following functions: the function of emotional expression, the function of aesthetic enjoyment, the function of entertainment, the function of communication, the function of symbolic representation, the function of physical response, the function of enforcing conformity to social norms, the function of validation of social institutions and religious rituals, the function of contribution to the continuity and stability of culture, and the function of contribution to the integration of society. The functions of music may thus be divided into the individual and collective. Although individuals perceive music intimately, their "emotional expression", "aesthetic enjoyment", "entertainment" and "physical response" in fact make the collective functions of music possible.

(concerning values and taste) and it should not interfere with the analytic approach.

The standard distinctions between authenticity and industry, art and business, or between truth and falsehood, seem now to be out of date. Not only because of the post-modern shift from content toward context, but mainly because of the development of popular music itself. Its "genres" are nowadays becoming increasingly representative of arbitrarily determined social partitions, according to the interests and the life stances of the individuals who make up the different social strata. Popular music crosses class, gender, race, professional and other boundaries. However, it does not have such a universal effect as has so much concerned Adorno (1986).

Consumption, the modern manner of music use, cannot be limited merely to the effects of the fetishised market. Music consumption and music (re)production are dependent on each other. Every single act of music consumption produces a loop between the needs of the individual(s) (Tomc 1989:31) and the (re)production of music (as a commodity).

Although it may seem that popular music products are imposed on people, there is no way to force the audience to buy or even to accept a particular tune, song or style/genre. In fact, the consumer is always in a position to reject it. His/her role is an active one, the audience is an active user. In the ethnography of music use, we study both music-makers and music-takers (on audience see e.g. Blaukopf 1993:256–265; Longhurst 1995:195–225; Frith 1986:202–215). Indeed, the audience is the starting and the ending point of the circulation. The audience decides who will become a star. Not *the* audience, but particular interested individuals. As individuals, we do need particular commodities in our everyday life, but music is not exactly the same commodity as, let us say, washing powders. To accept or to reject any particular music is both an intimate individual decision and social act. There is a complex feedback process going on, a loop in which every consumer participates, for "sound structures are perceived and selected by individuals interacting in social contexts" (Blacking 1995:156–157).

The advertising, media, and record distribution companies are not as powerful as they seemed decades ago (cf. Rosenberg and White 1965; Adorno 1986; Frith 1986, 1987). Even in spite of the centralisation of the popular music industry in several major international corporations, there is a plenty of room for endless diversity of musical styles and options within the more or less limited range of distribution.

For the punks from the villages from north-eastern Slovenia, the decision to accept an imported musical (and life) style was an individual decision. They were able to choose. Once they had made a decision, the

process started in an unpredictable way. And that is the essential point. If culture (or history) is not only the accumulation of knowledge, but also (or in the first place) the accumulation of experience (cf. the famous criticism of historicism in Popper 1991; on culture see Goodenough 1994), and its agents are individuals, then the only way for that knowledge/experience to be effective is for it to be constantly reinvented. And that was what happened in Trate. The essential part of the new life style (or, more precisely, life stance) had to be invented. How? By using the "local cultural capital". This is in fact what we are used to comprehending as tradition, but its components are much wider.

Without "local cultural capital" the local subculture scene would not be possible. The observation of the very process of development of the local subculture scene reveals some important aspects of contemporary society. It may be analysed in terms of interpellation (Althusser 1980).

The power of music

As human beings we are trapped in ideology at the very moment we are able to use our speech abilities. Discourse is always ideological and through the speech acts we are - as individuals - always involved in the wider dimensions of the social reality. But speech ability is not enough. If there is any possibility of creating a common reality, then it may not be achieved without our active participation. Without the use of our body in "public discourse", we may never become members of any segment of human society. Manipulation with our bodies is in general the essential vehicle for producing any social effect at all. Every individual is a social being not only by using language (or, more generally, a symbolic communication system), but also by using his/her body (cf. Blacking 1995:153). Music activities are the perfect means to put our body in the field of resonance or synchronisation with others.

There lies the enormous power of music "that involves certain unique characteristics at the level of intentional social action, if not at the level of motor behavior" (Blacking 1995:149). Exactly on the strength of non-representational activities (music, dance, rituals) the human world is being created, recreated and maintained, irrespective of the contents of those activities.

Captured in cognitive paradigms, western scholars predominately underestimate the role of our body as the basic element of social phenomena and, at the same time, overestimate the power of symbolic interaction. We are not aware enough that there would be no symbolic interaction without use of the body. Music is a crucial phenomenon for becoming aware of that dimension.

In modern society, there are a variety of ways of becoming a full-scale human being. Any embodiment process originates in the essential effects of *Gemeinschaft* within *Gesellschaft* (on modern mass ritual see Benjamin 1986). Fortunately, there is no overall, dominant or absolute way of doing so. The totalitarian regimes have tried to use the bodies of the youth in that way (disciplinary marching, singing of patriotic songs, dressing in uniforms; like the *pionirji* - pioneers, children between 7 and 14 years - in the former Yugoslavia, etc.), but they failed, because the nature of the process of becoming a human being is too complex to reduce it to the grand totalitarian patterns. On the contrary, individuality can be developed only within primordial groups. Why? Because individuality means idiosyncrasy, i.e. fulfillment of the variety of roles he/she is supposed to play in the community. For every role we are engaged in, we must achieve the necessary level of skill by participatory learning.

The local punk subculture may be seen as such a *Gemeinschaft* phenomenon, but it does not appear in a vacuum. No one can build the world completely anew, not even radical punks. The reflection of tradition is essential for any creative activity. The life experience and inherited habitus are undoubtedly factors that have marked the contemporary rock activities in *Slovenske gorice* (the area where Trate is located). There is no easy or trivial way to draw the line between the similarities and the differences between the new (rock) and old (folk) (sub)cultures. Although the understanding of folk music as both "an aesthetic ideal" and "a functional accompaniment to basic social activity" (Bohlman 1988) is of use for the study of any music in the modern context, the question of the methodological differences in the study of popular and folk music remains. In the research of punk rock in *Slovenske gorice*, we must take into account the prevalent treatment of folk music by Slovene scholars.

Folk and popular music through the looking glass of capital and practice

Folk music is supposed to be plain, old, authentic, mediated by life experience. It is supposed to exist (or to have existed) among the lowest, uneducated strata, shaped by musical-aesthetic feelings and notions of the wide circle of people (Kumer 1988:20; Vodušek 1980:40). Therefore, there are very few studies of contemporary mixed forms of popular and folk music in Slovenia (*narodnozabavna glasba*, folk-popular music, or literally: national-entertaining music) (e.g. Kumer 1978; Terseglav 1980; Omerzel-Terlep 1991). In Slovenia, neither ethnomusicologists nor musicologists have done any significant research of popular music. The

same goes for ethnologists, with the exception of punk subculture (Potokar 1985). However, there have been a few sociological studies on music (rock) subcultures (Tomc 1989, 1994) and collections of essays from the scene (Malečkar and Mastnak 1985; Beranič et al. 1994).

There is no doubt that every music has its true meaning within a particular community and in the way of its use. Even classical music may be studied as the communal expression of the élite: in the way of its use and with its communal background it may have some folk connotations. This is much more obvious for rock music, because rock music is inherently connected with the way of life of the listeners. There are negative opinions about understanding of rock music as modern folk music (e.g. Frith 1986:58–61; Cutler 1985:15; Močnik 1985:67; Brednich 1973:243), positive (e.g. up to the seventies for Glavan 1980:10), and somewhere in between (Street 1986:39).

If we take in account the criterion of the manner of music consumption, then there are some important differences. Like any other goods, music has always been accessible through capital. Nowadays, to consume popular music, the consumer needs economic capital; to consume classical music, he also needs cultural capital, to consume traditional music (practically non-existent in the primordial context) he needs educational capital (in the past, folk music was beyond any capital, unless we may call it "primordial life capital", which has rapidly changed in our century).

If "primordial life capital" is the accumulated experience of past generations, then we have to ask what would be the contemporary form(s) of that capital. The accumulated experience (and knowledge) is not a relic from the past or an unchangeable heritage, but, on the contrary, it is a living practice. It is always instantaneously improvised according to the presupposed rules. The process of getting any "capital" is nowadays split into different learning practices. One of the important aspects of the socialisation (or enculturation) processes in the modern world is the way of obtaining the "primordial life capital". And one of the possibilities for acquiring genuine modern primordial capital is to choose the subculture life-stance during the very process of socialisation (enculturation). That's why music experience is so important.

Listening to music from records or the radio is quite a different experience from non-mediated live performance. Music is essentially a performing art. Written music is not actual music and its information is not equal to the information of live performance. However, recorded (and broadcast) music has a similar effect on the listener as live music. The effect it has in the specific way of its individual use is comparable to the effects of the print media (see Anderson 1990). Technically reproducible

music is being used as one of important bonds to create "imagined communities" of different types and sizes.

Furthermore, the distribution of popular music by the mass media is from a certain point of view very close to oral transmission. Besides, the oral spreading of information about music is essential for the forming of groups of listeners with similar taste, and that process (talking, discussing, evaluating...) is a very important factor in the forming of youth music subcultures. In rock music we can trace a continuity that connects the present with the past, variations which are derived from individual or group innovation, and selection, conducted by society which accepts or rejects one or more forms in which music is preserved (these are the criteria of folk/traditional music, accepted by the International Folk Music Council in Sao Paolo in 1954; cited in Kumer 1988:15). The truth is that, for the most part, popular music is not transformed by a process that would give it "folklore character" (Kumer 1988:15). However, a great part of music-making and performing of popular music is not directly mediated by the mass media or distributed within the dominant music market.

We must not overlook the home *bricolage* works of mostly anonymous popular music groups. The distribution of home-made music on cassettes is far from a massive production and distribution of popular music. Even for the local popular music scenes it is very difficult to claim that their production is massive and strictly market-oriented. In many cases, as for example in Slovenia, the music markets are too small to develop true mass production.

Only a few percent of all the active popular music groups ever enter the "record industry" (Frith 1987:96; Sculatti and Seay 1990) and an even lower percentage of them become widely known and popular. The majority of musicians remains anonymous beyond a very limited range (audience and places), similar to folk musicians in the past. Even the functional context is similar: playing for dance and entertainment, within the local context and also at the public and private festivities. Traditional and club musicians are supposed to play the music according to the choice of the audience. It always depends on habits and expectations.

The response of the audience within the performing context is immediate (as in folk music). In the context of music consumption, the magnitude of feedback of response is wider but the effect of the audience is more mediated. The public effect of any music is inherently circular. The cycle of mutual interaction between the music industry and the masses is in the actual and functional terms equal - or at least similar - to the context of the (re)production of pre-modern folk music. In both cases the criteria of "right" music-making depends on the users and makers.

Popular music has two opposite ways of reception and use among people. On one hand, it is a commodity, consumed by individuals, but on the other hand, its actual appearance is often associated with the performing context, be it concert or dance (or both). The latter aspect is crucial to understanding the social power of popular music.

This does not mean that performing practice and context of use (dance) is a crucial argument for dismissing the difference between folk and popular music, but simply that the life context and view from below reveals a more complicated and multi-dimensional picture of the events and processes in popular music.

Popular or people's music

Is the transfer of musical practices from generation to generation typical only of folk musicians? The answer is that in popular music we can also find a common heritage and evergreens, and a variety of "cover versions" of popular songs. For old songs and tunes, the writers are nowadays more or less anonymous. And there are more and more "anonymous" popular songs. Music is a common heritage of humankind, although the questions of authorship and copyright are of great importance (see Keil and Feld 1994).

Every time we imagine our world as new, we must be aware that there would be no world at all if there were no accumulated experience from the past. There are two important consequences of this fact. Our subjectivity is inherently grounded on collective experiences from the past (and we are justified in believing that the other individuals we live with have at least similar experiences). So, any creativity is as much an individual as it is a collective product. The other consequence is that it is impossible even to think about *creatio ex nihilo*. The necessary condition for innovation is tradition. And *vice versa*: tradition is possible only through innovation.

The popular music idioms have to change over time, as times and people change, but at the same time they must maintain contact with the successful solutions from the past. In connection with their own tradition, popular musicians have to be as innovative as possible. The same holds for folk musicians. They had to know the old repertoire and be able to perform it with supposedly appropriate feeling, but if they were capable of doing something more, they became famous within the local milieu. We have to consider the very important fact that the users of folk music, at least of its instrumental part that was performed in festivities, were young people.

The history of instrumental folk music in Europe is mostly the history of the diffusion of various dance modes. In a general sense, popular music forms and styles (including rock 'n' roll) may be understood as contemporary dance modes in an unfinished series. The way of use of folk and popular music within the dance context is in fact very similar. Why is dance so important? The perception of any music is dependent on the use of body. Even the norm of motionlessness while listening to live classical music is a variant of a "negative dance".

The deeper we dig into the content of music, the more clear it is that music does not speak, it does not even communicate in the strict sense of the term. It "is in itself non-referential" (Blacking 1995:151). There are some ways of obtaining some idea about what is going on in music, but these are conventions of authors (writers of "programmes" etc.) and listeners (or critics). The principal way to experience something common in music is dance (or codified bodily responses to music). Every form of music has ritual dimensions (if we define ritual as performance/participation activities in general).

Popular music is only a segment of mass culture (cf. Muršič 1994). There are very few mass culture theorists who ask themselves about the consumption and use of products instead of production. We may suppose that the users of mass culture products are the masses, although it is obvious that a mass is an empty notion without its particular context of appearance. The masses are groups of people temporarily assembled according to common interest. Does the fact that a few million people buy a certain record implicate the existence of a mass? It is doubtful. The individuals encounter these imagined masses (groups, strata, classes, etc.) in the common sphere of the mass culture. Despite the fact that a particular product of mass culture does not reach the entire living population in any regional or social range, there are effects produced by products of mass culture that function as reproductive forces of the society. The product of mass culture - in the way of their utilisation - have similar impact on the society as products of folk culture have had. And not within a much larger scale. We must be aware of the initial remark that no popular song or any mass culture product reaches all the people. Things are extremely complex nowadays, but nevertheless, it is possible to detect some irreducible categories of mass culture very similar to the characteristics of old folk culture. The problem is in the precise definition of the actual context.

The only way to try to understand a particular music is to develop multifactoral and contextual analysis through a certain kind of phenomenological reduction. More precisely we stress the context, a more clear picture of the actual music-making and music-taking we get.

Does it make any sense to claim, like Adorno (1968), that contemporary music is twofoldly alienated: in the first place as a market commodity, and, secondly, as avant-garde art? Isn't it obvious that the majority of popular music production is not as alienating as social critics have claimed? People always have their own music. And music is infinitely pluralistic. Music that is a part of life of the majority of the population may be alienated only if the individuals are alienated. They are, but if the music of alienated people would itself be alienated, then it would be in fact authentic.

The question of authenticity was stressed during the starting period of the study of mass culture phenomena (Rosenberg and White 1965; During 1993). The starting point of that criticism was that popular music (and mass culture in general) is not authentic, but fabricated, alienated and mediated by the mass media. The answer to that kind of criticism is very clear. If there is culture, if there is music, then, *per definitionem*, there cannot be inauthentic culture and music. The unauthentic music would be that which no person and no group of people would use. In fact, any and every kind of music finds its users. Every music is "people's music" (Keil's term; in Keil and Feld 1994:197ff.). Unauthentic music (and culture) is *contradictio in adiecto*. The criterion of authenticity is thus of no use.

The dimensions of music performance and music use in terms of the embodiment of social reality are still too underestimated. If the key problem of human beings is the split of the "speaking animal" experience into abstract signifiers and irreducible signifieds, then it is music with its irreducible ritual dimensions which provides the opportunity to transcend the symbolic gap.

Finale

Should I sound the final note at this point? Absolutely not. With the shift of the analysis toward music use it becomes obvious that it is an extremely complex process. If we try to locate people to whom particular popular music products have any meaning, we have to abandon many sociological approaches as inappropriate, because the segments of population that use certain kinds of popular music styles (or even particular products), in general, have very little in common with known social distinctions.

At the end of the 20th century (a century essentially shaped by the rise of mass culture) it is very difficult to define the boundaries between élite and mass, "high" and "low", classical and modern art. Living folk culture has almost disappeared (at least in Europe), unless it is being mixed together with élite and mass culture. The very myth of art as the representative of the "spirit of the age" has become meaningless.

Folk music (or at least the phenomena we imagine under that term) has had two important social roles. It confirmed the division of serfs and landowners (the ruled and the ruling class), and, later, it served as the raw material for the confirmation of national culture (again within the discourse of domination). We must not underestimate the emancipatory dimensions of popular music (especially considering the role of the invented culture of the Afro-Americans; see Cutler 1985). For the first time in recorded history, the same culture - i.e. mass culture - is accessible to literally all the individuals within society. Mass culture transcends the traditional social limits. In that sense it is the most "people's" of all cultures.

I will not put any definitive answer(s) to the question(s) posed in the paper. To look for the answers means to discuss all the possible contexts of music activities in terms of music performance and ways of its use. We always discuss ideal forms. In fact, as it is in popular music, so should it have been with folk music: There are a lot of different contexts of its performance and use, there are and there were individuals with different levels of engagement in musical activities, and there were different groups of people that shared common music. In popular music, there is an important difference between the use of performed music and the consumption of recorded music, be it from records or media.

If we are supposed to study any kind of music, we must transcend the artificial divisions of "folk", "popular" and "art" music. There is a variety of actual music activities, both in the past and in the present. The variety is its richness and the variety makes its sense. Variety is the reality of the complex strings that keep people together in common actions, activities and ideas.

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