

Sources of Musical Thought in Southeast Asia

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Perhaps, a fundamental source of musical thought in Southeast Asia may be found in nature itself—in its abundance and in its density. And man's role in that tropical wealth is to accommodate with nature and not to fight it, a lesson worthwhile remembering in today's flagrant waste of material products of the environment. Almost all musical instruments found in Southeast Asia are products of nature. The bamboo plant in particular is an important source of diverse sounds with different applications to life, from protecting ripening rice-grain to rituals honouring the dead. With the introduction of European thought, these instruments were classified according to types of musical instruments initially found in the European orchestra—winds, strings and percussions, which has been broken to another division, that is, drums or membranophones. This classification has no bearing with their use in Asia, but it is an accepted categorization in scholarly work.

Some musical instruments which come from the bamboo plant are flutes of many variations, poly-cordal zithers, parallel stringed zithers, raft zithers, stamping tubes, percussion tubes, xylophones, panpipes, whistles, buzzers, Jew's harps, clappers, reed instruments, slit drums and scrapers. Many of these instruments appear in several varieties. Other plant and natural products make up other instruments. These are coconut and shell rattles, percussion beams, slit drums, bean-pod percussion, carabao horn, shell horns, mouth organ, coconut leaf clarinet, papaya clarinet, rice-stalk reed, rattan spring clapper, bronze gongs and cymbals, crow-claw rattle and others. These musical instruments are a common usage in rural areas and were at one time widely used. They are a product relatively easy to make, not for the exclusive use of specialists. Many are simple to play, hence the sound they produce are sounds heard frequently, and not only at specific times—as in concerts or in a celebration at court. These sounds may be heard in the open air almost anywhere, and even when played within places of abode, their sounds travel beyond their confines. The diversity in number and use of these instruments is only a very small part of a dense flora, fauna and a rich environment from where the instruments were made. Some of the sound from these instruments are so fine, they can be heard at close range (nose flutes, Jew's harps), but others may be heard at long distance (log-drums and gongs). There is less interest in refining or perfecting the make of a few musical instruments. A musical interest lies in a diversity of sounds which allow for a freer use of musical elements. In much of music in rural Southeast Asia, there is a free meter, rather than a measured meter, many scales in lieu of one or two scales. Furthermore, there are many types of drones and repetitions of sound, rather than one continuous sound or drone as in India. Singing styles vary more than a particular national styles characteristic for example of Japan or Italy.

Related to an accommodation with nature is a concept of time, and how time is used in music. In many parts of Southeast Asia, the time of day is not measure in hours, and solar years, though known, are not added one after another. Apart from the movements of planets and the stars, time is measured through natural events, such as the migration of birds, flowering of plants or the murmuring of insects in the dry season. These measures of time are independent of each other and do not rely on one common clock. Time is regarded in separate entities related to man's work and social activities. It is as if time is considered immaterial and infinite, one which may be divided only for temporal convenience and not as a record of man's achievements. This concept of time is reflected in the music of Southeast Asia—in the use of rhythm, repetition, duration of musical forms and closing and ending of these forms. Much of vocal music is not dependent on a fixed meter. The passage of time depends on the song text or the rhythmic cadence of the language, and not on a regular rhythmic beat. In the Philippines, what may be called a psalmodic style of singing among several groups of people has many varieties, and all songs of this style are not measured by a regular beat. In another vocal form, the epic, a singing style without metric beats takes several nights to sing. It is the quietness of night time which sets the atmosphere for singing epics, and it is a lack of rhythmic time divisions that allows for more time to sing the epics. This passage of time is achieved through various technics, by prolonging vowel sounds, repeating syllables, staying on certain tones, repeating phrases, and making use of nonsense syllables.

In contrast to vocal music, instrumental music, especially those of percussion, employ regular beats. This occurs, for example, with pairs of sticks, buzzers, log-drums and stamping tubes. However, these beats are without stresses, showing a concept of time without marking time. The manner of avoiding stresses is similar to the vocal technic of not having a rhythmic beat. In both cases sound is used as if, without marking time, and without having a marker for the beginning or the end of the music, sound could go on indefinitely. In the long-drum, for example there are two performers. One plays a drone or a repetition of fast beats with two sticks, without any accents, resulting in a continuous sound without any indication of an ending. And since its beginning starts with the same beat that one hears at the middle of the music, there is no distinction in time between beginning, middle-portion and ending of the music. The other performer on the log-drum employs a long stick and pounds its end on the other end of the log-drum. In this playing, within a constant repetition of pounding the same sounds, there are rests, permutations, alterations and some dancing or some improvisation. Time here is used in irregular lengths of beats in contrast to the regularity of beats in the two-stick drone. This opposition between improvisation and repetition, between discontinuity and continuity of sound, is found in many instrumental forms in Southeast Asia.

A similar opposition lies between melody and repetition or what may be called drone. In the Philippines six types of combinations of drone and melody occur in the most musical instruments. These are: drone alone; two or more drones sounding simultaneously; drone and melody are consecutive and not simultaneous; drone accompanies melody; several drones make one melody; and several people each play a drone to make a melody* An important element in the music of these solo or group instruments is the element of continuity or repetition. For in this element, the concept of continuity of sound is directly related to a view of time. A constant repetition or a continuity of sound connotes a concept of infinity, an idea that is expressed in different usages of the drone in many musical ensembles, including the gamelan of Java and Bali and other orchestral forms in China and Japan.

One other source of musical thought in Southeast Asia are rituals. In many rural societies, music is heard principally in connection with important events related to agricultural festivities, worship of ancestors, cure of the sick, and in celebration of weddings, peace-pacts and other events. In rituals, music becomes an integral part of the ritual. The performers, dancers and the whole audience make up the whole musical event. All members of the society are participants. Rituals become a vehicle of man to cope with nature. Without rituals, it is impossible to communicate with nature, and without rituals there is no music. Nature, rituals and music go together. They are inseparable. In recreating a musical thought of Southeast Asia, it is difficult not to have recourse to a unity of these elements. The aspect of rituals is understood in the music of Bali, Java and other centers of culture in Southeast Asia, but the multi-faceted aspects of nature are not exhausted in the existing musical ensemble of the region.

In rural areas, the varieties of what are simply termed “percussion” music in a natural world are much richer than what an existing urban or court music of Southeast Asia conveys. In other words, the mystery of a tropical life in the villages of Asia is unexhausted. Words cannot satisfactorily describe the experience of this life. An existing music mirrors this life in one dimension, but a re-creation of this music can give this life still another dimension. A density of nature in the tropics can be conveyed in musical concepts in a similar manner that a transparency of sounds describes a clarity of thought in an old southern Chinese musical ensemble, or that a particular use of timbre results in evoking a sensuousness of a 19th century life in Debussy’s entourage. A music in the tropical belt—in Southeast Asia and around the world—has a philosophy to offer. It resides in a constant balance of life with nature which accounts for a profound sense of well being, and depicts an instinct much wiser and more secure than a reasoned thought of modern man.

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