

The Power of Rhythm - excerpts from the Late Starters Handbook:

‘Music Engagement at mid-life on the Guitar’ by Bruce Stewart

Introduction

So much emphasis in the West focuses upon the tonality of music - the kind of scale in use and the kind of chords resulting from combinations of those notes. Our responses to music are largely due to such criteria (Sloboda, 2005)[p233]. To bring together large numbers of musicians, Western music had to be written. The music of indigenous cultures on the other hand, was memorized and then improvised upon. These two distinctly different approaches to music reveal much about the kind of responses we might expect to see. Music participation in the West has largely become music appreciation (Palmer, 1996)[p52].

Western music

Brief history of Western music

In early Greek culture, the primary role of music was to build character and health (Menuhin, 1980)[p39]. Devotion to music reached its height at Apollo’s temple where known musical contests took place in 586 BC (Menuhin, 1980)[p39]. Plato declared that music should accompany gymnastic events as the perfection of state went hand in hand with supervised musical education – the word *nomos* for music meaning logic or moral, social and political laws of the state (Menuhin, 1980)[p39].

When Rome defeated Greece, it took with it Greek culture – architecture, sculpture and music (Menuhin, 1980)[p43]. As Rome was oriented to conquering and governing, the importance of music diminished. When recording Nero’s reign from AD54 – 68, Tacitus, the Roman imperial historian and vehement Christian-hater reported that Christians were not only fastened to crosses, but when daylight failed they were burned to serve as torches - Nero offering his garden for such a spectacle (Wilson-Dickson, 1992)[p26]. It is little wonder that the early Christians distanced themselves from obvious reminders of the corruption of Rome (Wilson-Dickson, 1992)[p28].

It was Emperor Constantine’s conversion to Christianity in the third century, making Christianity the official faith of Rome, that eventually led to the monastic tradition and the development of Christian music falling to the hands of monks through the dark ages (Menuhin, 1980)[p34]. By the end of the fifth century, plainsong or Gregorian chant – a single line of melody untainted by accompaniment – dominated Christian worship – a tradition maintained for a thousand years (Wilson-Dickson, 1992)[p49]. Instrumental music was no longer a part of the life of the church, it had too many associations with the corruption of Rome (Menuhin, 1980)[p47]. Even the

organ was initially rejected for its association with Roman combat and for its common use in outdoor arenas (Menuhin, 1980)[p47].

By the 15th century artistic endeavour was influenced by new fascination in the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome. Ancient manuscripts of the ‘classical’ era were discovered, translated and circulated (Wilson-Dickson, 1992)[p59]. During the Renaissance music was more associated with learning, power and wealth – instrumental groups thrived and composers, were taken into residence by rich patrons requiring their services (Menuhin, 1980)[p76]. By the seventeenth century, the rules of harmony were stretched to the limit with the formulation of new rhythmic and harmonic allegiances. (Menuhin, 1980)[p87]. Harmony and counterpoint were the focus of the new polyphonic music – a legacy lasting to present day (Menuhin, 1980)[p87].

The focus upon pitch

As can be seen, Western European music was very much under the authority of the church from the 1st century to the 16th century. Dancing was banished and any polyphonic music that may have existed in Greek or Roman music was destroyed. Music had been reduced to a single line of melody with no accompaniment as instruments were rejected for their pagan association (Wilson-Dickson, 1992)[p28]. For one thousand years Gregorian chant was the dominant musical form (Wilson-Dickson, 1992)[p49]. Further musical development incorporated the use of multiple voices and the development of harmony - underlining the ongoing fascination and preoccupation with pitch (Wilson-Dickson, 1992)[p51](Rastall, 1983)[p1].

The Power of Rhythm

Muscular Rhythm - the forgotten phenomenon

Prolonged rhythmic movement is at the centre of this euphoric phenomenon. McNeil’s book ‘Keeping together in time’, asks questions about contemporary society, claiming that through the decline of community dancing, society is losing its most powerful means of social cohesion (McNeill, 1995)[p2,73]. McNeil, who became aware of the phenomenon through his experience with army drill in 1941, points to pivotal moments in history, profoundly altered by muscular rhythm. The emotions aroused by prolonged unison movement create a sense of personal enlargement and satisfaction, and for the group, solidarity and strength. Chanting, shouting, singing or music usually accompanies muscular rhythm (McNeill, 1995)[p2].

Nature of muscular rhythm

Believed to be older than language itself and vital to the development of mankind, muscular rhythm results in a subtle state of excitement, both noticeable and

pleasurable. As a basis for social cohesion, it strengthened and stabilized isolated communities through festival dances. Muscular rhythm also facilitated repetitive tasks, expanding the capabilities of human muscle power (McNeill, 1995)[p38].

Origin of muscular rhythm

Muscular rhythm is more than just an inheritance from our prehistoric ancestors – McNeil believes it to be a prerequisite for the emergence of humanity (McNeill, 1995)[p13]. Through rhythmic coordination, muscular efforts have achieved the ‘impossible’- the building of the pyramids and other great monuments (McNeill, 1995)[p50]. Through social unity, hunting became more efficient and hunters, more brave. As a consequence, powerful new cultural levels were introduced to the earth with the emergence of primary community. With more precise cooperation, the food supply began to expand (McNeill, 1995)[p48].

Evidence of muscular rhythm

The comradeship and solidarity of muscular rhythm can be readily identified through enthusiastic football crowds, parades and the muscular exercises employed by Japanese factory workers to begin their day (McNeill, 1995)[p5]. Claiming over eight million members, the Japanese sect Soka Gakkai assemble as many as 80,000 participants in a stadium, where they engage in mass callisthenics holding up coloured placards to be viewed from the far side of the field (McNeill, 1995)[p98].

Historical impact of muscular rhythm

The Greek, the Roman and modern European armies exploited the psychological effects of keeping in time together, so much so, that Maurice de Saxe, Marshal of France [d. 1750] advocated marching in cadence as the solution for fatigue – the secret he believed was in the military step of the Romans (McNeill, 1995)[p9]. Sociologists studying World War II, have discovered that what kept men fighting, was not so much their patriotic beliefs, but ‘intense fellow-feeling for those close at hand’ sharing the imminent danger (McNeill, 1995)[p9].

Within the Moslem community, believers assemble five times a day and rhythmically bow before God touching their foreheads on the ground while uttering the words ‘God is good’ – arousing identity and solidarity (McNeill, 1995)[p90]. Whirling dervishes, sought to have direct communion with God through strenuous dance – whirling around and chanting for hours inducing trance (McNeill, 1995)[p92].

Only when threatened by Germany, did Britain make a conscious effort to nationalize physical training – they had not previously made the connection. Hitler had found the perfect means for the National Socialist German Worker’s Party to capture the interests of the German people – his rallies in Nuremberg utilized mass callisthenics (McNeill, 1995)[p149].

Purpose of muscular rhythm

Heightened emotion for the individual helps build self esteem and positive attitude. Shared emotion is a means for binding communities together increasing the ability to perform cooperative efforts (McNeill, 1995)[p2]. Everyday routines are made more enjoyable and disputes are more readily dissolved through a positive outlook. Shared tasks benefit from the extra exertion gained through rhythmic and unison participation increasing productivity. Rhythmic approaches meant that the work would not only be done faster, the pace could be maintained longer. Normally the efforts generated through muscular rhythm were directed toward labour - more often leaders like Mao Tse-tung identified their importance with military heroism (McNeill, 1995)[p146].

African Music – culture sustained by music

Musician as healer

Yaya Diallo is the author of ‘The Healing Drum’ – his personal account of village life in the West African country of Mali during the 50’s and 60’s. His community, the Minianka, use music with dance to restore emotional and psychological disturbances within the community (Diallo, 1989)[p4]. The word musician is synonymous in Minianke culture with healer. Nangape Kone, the chief musician, embodied the tribal ideal – the musician as the healer (Diallo, 1989)[p4].

Music to accompany work

Musicians are responsible for motivating villagers through music as they work. Music accompanies all work – from the slapping of clothes by the riverbank, to the rhythmic pounding of grain with giant pestles (Diallo, 1989)[p105]. Chores are made more purposeful and effective through the inspirational playing and dedication of highly trained, musicians (Diallo, 1989)[p80]. By day, the musician is required to move along behind the labourers in the field, exhorting each one with appropriate rhythms and praises for the worker’s ancestral lineage (Diallo, 1989)[p101,107]. Thus encouraged, the worker increases his effort inspiring other workers (Diallo, 1989)[p107].

Musicians responding to dance

Unlike western dance, where dancers respond to the music, Miniánka musicians are required to read the movements of the dancers and interpret them on their instruments (Diallo, 1989)[p70].

In this way, the musicians have been trained to closely observe the dancers and to identify depression or other psychological disorder (Diallo, 1989)[p150]. The musicians will eventually be asked to give account of those believed to be ill. Once their condition is confirmed, the musicians must spend the necessary time nursing these individuals to health by playing appropriate rhythms (Diallo, 1989)[p98, 145].

Musical training

All spiritual or psychological problems are dealt with in the village through music – the musicians are permanently on call (Diallo, 1989)[p47]. Their lengthy training emphasizes humility and service, as their function is to maintain spiritual balance to the community (Diallo, 1989)[p98]. They are selected and trained by the head musician Nangape Kone. Musical training cultivates compassion, patience and psychological insight as well as an in-depth understanding of rhythm and sound (Diallo, 1989)[p95].

The Impact of African Culture

According to Robert Palmer, author of ‘Dancing in the Street’, – black rhythms, at the heart of popular music, have come from specific African cultures using trance. According to the research, individuals from certain African villages were sold into slavery because they knew too much magic. By way of slave trading ships, they were taken to the Caribbean and from there, eventually into the black churches of the south (Palmer, 1996)[p53]. Parishioners in the south danced and sang in the expectation of receiving the promised presence of God. While some twirled around effortlessly, prophetic words would abound and people would be healed (Palmer, 1996)[p48]. From the black churches in the south this new spirited music spilled out into secular dance halls and beyond, into every corner of popular music culture (Palmer, 1996, Murray, 1991)[p53/p79].

Our condition

Western music lacks the heritage in rhythm handed down in African music – rather we are focused more so upon melody and harmony and thus give little priority to rhythm. The African American influence of gospel, soul and blues is relatively new and although we may appreciate rhythm, we very rarely handle it or respond to it. Community dancing as a means of communication and social interaction, although once widespread among human society has gradually been replaced by linguistic communication (McNeill, 1995)[p13]. As a result, the average Australian, despite

hearing an abundance of rhythm, remains rhythmically unconnected until such times, as they become participants, responding with body movement (Dillon, 1995)[piii].

Conclusion – the power of rhythm

Comparing the musical cultures of East and West we find a number of contrasts and similarities. The use of trance appears to be universal although more often associated with ritual. The invention of notation no doubt played an important role in the construction of the complex repertoire of Western classical music (Rastall, 1983, Gaare, 1997)[p2]. In contrast, complex African music had to be memorised, so that rhythms and melodies could be accessed for spontaneous interplay (Diallo, 1989)[p96]. Where the use of notation often restricted movement during performance, improvisation and spontaneity freed both musician and villager to express their appreciation through dance – characteristics also common to community dancing in European life (Diallo, 1989)[p98].

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