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# Appropriation, Culture and Meaning in Electroacoustic Music: A composer's perspective

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**This paper explores issues related to cultural appropriation in acousmatic electroacoustic music. Through its use of sound recording technology, acousmatic electroacoustic music facilitates a broad range of potential mechanisms for cultural appropriation, from the abstract (idea) to the concrete (sound object). But appropriating culturally identifiable material is not without its hazards, and the composer may face accusations of superficial exoticism, cultural offence, or the violation of personal or legal rights. To complicate matters for the composer, each listener will bring his or her own knowledge to their understanding of the meaning of the material. A similar reception effect occurs with any artistic medium, of course. But in electroacoustic music, the clarity and immediacy of high-fidelity recording and playback can strongly enhance the identifiability of the material, and, by extension, the audience's potential attachment to it. As illustrations, I refer briefly to several works, including three of my own acousmatic pieces, that have made use of appropriation. Through those examples, we consider both the broader issues noted above and some specific concerns about language and voice. The goal is to provide an overview of some of the opportunities and possible pitfalls of cultural appropriation in electroacoustic music, as well as a brief map of one composer's journey through that thorny landscape.**

## 1. OVERVIEW

### 1.1. Perspectives

My point of view in this paper is that of an electroacoustic composer who creates both concert music and functional or media music. In both contexts, my music often incorporates appropriated sound material that can be associated with specific cultures, or with identifiable individuals.

An artist's perspective on appropriated materials will certainly differ from that of an ethnomusicologist or anthropologist – or a lawyer. We tend to be pragmatists, primarily concerned with completing the creative work we envision, and appropriated materials can give that work an immediate richness of associations and ready-made complexity. But venturing beyond pragmatism, there are potentially difficult questions to reflect on, concerning (among other issues) ownership, rights, cultural respect and ethics.

And the advantages conveyed so readily by using appropriated material can also arrive with unexpected baggage.

What follows are some personal reflections on several issues that have caught, and held, my attention during a lengthy period of working with appropriated material.

### 1.2. Terminology and scope

A discussion around 'music' and 'culture' may encounter an entanglement of terminology. For example, the phrase 'world music' has now evolved clear associations with popular music, while 'non-Western music' still carries resonances of colonialism. Electroacoustic composers complicate things further by using sounds that are not conventionally thought of as 'musical'.

The term 'culture' is equally prone to multiple meanings. However, in the context of this paper, we use it simply to mean the expression of ideas, values or practices generally associated with an identifiable group, whether that group is defined by geography, national identity, ethnicity or other self-determined factors.

The most conspicuous examples of sonic cultural expressions, and the focus of our present discussion, are human speech and musical performance. Mechanical or environmental sounds can also convey clear cultural resonances, especially if those sounds have become associated with particular locations and their populations. R. Murray Schafer identifies such locally important sounds as 'soundmarks' (1977: 10), a term that acknowledges their significance within their communities as a sonic parallel to 'landmarks'.

Similarly, biophony, or sound produced by non-human biological sources (Krause 2008), may become associated with specific national identities. For example, in Canada, thanks largely to a long history of use in broadcast media and 'new age' recordings, the evocative cry of the Common Loon has become a popular (and almost clichéd) sonic symbol for the country's wilderness areas (Sound example 1).

However, for the most part, the resonances of both soundmarks and biophony tend to be quite location-specific. Many of these sounds will not be especially meaningful to listeners outside of the communities with which they are normally associated, particularly when compared to cultural expressions such as music and speech, which are more likely to be broadly recognised or identified.

## 2. APPROPRIATION

### 2.1. Worlds in collusion

My own interest in appropriating 'world music' began in the 1980s, while searching for musical ideas to enrich my creative work. After an initial period exploring very basic ethnomusicology, I discovered a workshop, hosted by the Gaudeamus Foundation in Amsterdam, for instrumental composers who wished to incorporate non-European traditional music in their concert works.

The first time I attended, I naively expected that the workshop would be rooted in reverence for that music, and that every act of appropriation would be accompanied by research about its original context. Instead, I found that the music was viewed by most attendees simply as 'material', to be freely incorporated or adapted – and that the musicians giving presentations on music from their own culture not only accepted this, but actually welcomed it. It appeared that I was suddenly being given permission, of a kind, for the conscience-free appropriation of any music, anywhere, with no strings attached.

I did understand that the larger reality was not quite that simple – this was, after all, a gathering of composers specifically interested in cultural appropriation, and the performers were fully aware of that context as well. But I also began to understand that attitudes about musical appropriation can vary quite widely, on both sides of the microphone.

### 2.2. Acoustic memorabilia

Like many electroacoustic composers, I record sound when I travel. I seldom have a prior artistic purpose in mind for that material. One might argue that, unless the composer is collecting material for a particular piece, this process is simply accumulating *acoustic memorabilia*. In 2006–7, writing about some pieces that incorporated early travel recordings, I had even self-consciously characterised myself as a 'sonic souvenir collector' (Naylor 2007).

But my present view is that my original position mistakenly assumed a very linear path towards artistic creation, while the reality is that many artists, in all media, accumulate ideas and materials without necessarily having an application in mind. From that perspective, collecting acoustic memorabilia or sonic souvenirs is certainly a legitimate part of the

electroacoustic composer's creative methodology. At the same time, there are clearly contexts where making a recording is inappropriate (or illegal), and there are ways legitimate recordings could be used that are also arguably wrong.

Manuella Blackburn has explored the use of the sonic souvenir in electroacoustic music in considerable detail (Blackburn 2011). Her discussion extends beyond the notion of personal acoustic memorabilia, and also considers situations where the composer incorporates culturally identifiable materials that they have not personally recorded.

While our focus in this paper is primarily on work made with materials recorded by the composer, Blackburn's extended viewpoint seems particularly applicable now, at a time when sound materials are so readily shared, whether in commercial sound libraries, through open archives, or by composers personally exchanging materials.

### 2.3. Fair game, fair use?

Most modern legal systems try to protect the rights of creators. Legal doctrines such as 'fair use' may cover specific uses of material under copyright, but they do not normally anticipate appropriation into another art work. And much of what happens when composers collect sounds falls under the legal radar, or involves material that is simply not likely to be readily identified – for example, recordings made in public locations, or in countries where copyright is not well enforced. In those cases, the question becomes more about *fair game* than fair use – or 'what can we get away with?'

This raises clear questions about power: we are certainly more likely to record with impunity (and without explicit permission) in contexts where the subjects have little awareness of legal rights, or little recourse to legal remedies for any infringement. Composers can try to rationalise this power imbalance by making it obvious that they are recording, theoretically giving the subjects the opportunity to object. But while this may pre-empt feelings of guilt, it still side-steps the question of power.

For example, musicians performing for tourists in a less developed country are unlikely to object to being recorded by spectators, despite having no idea of the ultimate destination of that material. We could perhaps choose to use only material that we believe does not reveal the identity of the performer. But while that may protect the source's privacy, it still fundamentally skirts any questions of ownership, rights – and fair rewards.

### 2.4. Poles of appropriation

Appropriated musical material can be placed along a continuum between two poles: abstract or symbolic, and concrete or representational. Musical concepts

and structures belong near the abstract pole, while instruments and, of course, recorded sound used in electroacoustic music, fall closer to the concrete one.

But, while there are clearly conceptual and practical differences along that continuum, we might ask ourselves if there is really any *ethical* difference between appropriation at either extreme. For example, is it more acceptable to ‘borrow’ a unique tuning, motif or rhythmic pattern to use in instrumental music than it is to incorporate a recording of a voice or instrumental performance in an electroacoustic work?

Modern technology has certainly made concrete, sonic appropriation both easy and accurate. But before we electroacoustic composers paralyse ourselves with guilt and produce only works of timed silences, we should remember that appropriation, both abstract and concrete, has a long history in the making of art of all kinds. Our methods of capture and use may be relatively direct, and relatively new, but the potential ethical dilemma we may face is certainly not.

### 3. CULTURE

#### 3.1. Appropriating culture

While biophony and mechanical sounds can invoke strong cultural (or at least contextual) inferences, sounds directly identified with human action will normally carry stronger and more direct resonances for the listener. The sound of an important church bell may be a significant ‘soundmark’ for a location (Schafer 1977: 10), but the mental image it generates is more likely to be broadly one of place and purpose than specifically an evocation of human activity.

Appropriated musical performance, on the other hand, can represent both human and ‘cultural’ significance equally well. Any disembodied musical performance may conjure images of performers (particularly if the listener has even a little knowledge of the instrument). But when the listener associates musical material with a particular culture, hearing that material will trigger a much more complex response of the imagination, which may include cultural context and detail well beyond the musical performance itself.

The opening of my piece *Bitter Orchids* (Naylor 2012a) illustrates this phenomenon. The section appropriates a performance of Thai classical music (Sound example 2). Those listeners familiar with the musical culture will likely gain a strong sense both of place and of the performers. Listeners with less specific knowledge may still receive a clear, albeit more general, impression of South East Asia. Other listeners may simply experience a sense of ‘exotic’, with the strength of that sense often varying in inverse proportion to their familiarity with the music and the culture.

Although that performance was at a tourist-centred event, with filming and recording encouraged, as an

application of musical appropriation it still raises most of the questions noted earlier, particularly about rights and rewards, and power imbalance.

Later in the same piece, we hear a brief solo performance on a simple flute, by a *Lisu* hill-tribe musician (Sound example 3). Most listeners, particularly Westerners, will probably not be familiar with this music; its combination of melody and instrumental timbre is more likely to generate a non-specific sense of ‘exotic’ for them, rather than something culturally specific.

The permission to record the material used in that section was far more direct and explicit than with the previous example. In this case, composer and performer had spent considerable time together, over several evenings, and the performer initiated and encouraged the recording of multiple examples of several instruments. Yet we can still reasonably ask ourselves if this invitation to record implicitly extended to the eventual incorporation of the recording in a composition, or was it only intended by the performer to provide me with ‘acoustic memorabilia’ from my visit?

In my composition *Irrashaimase* (Naylor 2012b) instrumental appropriation is considerably less direct than in the previous work. The piece incorporates, among other materials, pre-recorded commercial samples of *koto* (and *biwa*) sounds that are presented and pitched in a deliberately non-idiomatic manner, and of *shakuhachi* gestures that are pitched down several octaves (Sound examples 4 and 5).

The final section of the piece includes a Japanese children’s song, as ‘performed’ by an electronic chip in a traffic light, where it was used as a pedestrian crossing indicator (Sound example 6).

All three examples from *Irrashaimase* include ‘inauthentic’ or non-traditional use of traditional musical materials – yet many listeners will still experience, to varying degrees, a specific sense of place and culture from hearing them. In the first two examples, that sense may be triggered by the perception of timbre or gesture from the instruments, to the extent that it survives after manipulation or non-idiomatic presentation; in the traffic light example, it may simply be the presence of a characteristic mode that transcends the generic synthesised sound.

Given the wide range of understanding or familiarity that listeners may bring to hearing these works, we are unlikely to be able to define exactly where cultural identity ‘resides’ within these passages, but clearly it has remarkable persistence. That persistence highlights the power of incorporating culturally identifiable musical materials in an electroacoustic work – a power that is both a blessing for composers hoping to exploit that very persistence, and a curse for those who had simply intended to use such materials for their purely sonic properties, in a more abstracted manner and context.

### 3.2. Manufacturing culture

Earlier, we established very broad guidelines for what we consider ‘culture’ in the context of this paper. But we also need to recognise that not all representations of ‘culture’ are equally authentic or transparent.

The province of Nova Scotia, Canada, is a well-established centre for diverse contemporary arts and higher education (including an internationally recognised university specialising in fine arts). But a visitor to the provincial tourism department’s web site as of this writing, September 2013, will mostly see promotion for traditional or folk culture. Under ‘Cultural Festivals and Events’, the text begins, ‘Our calendar includes more than 750 festivals and events celebrating tartans, harmonicas, seafood, ukuleles, and blueberries along with traditional powwows and caber-tossing men in kilts’ (*Culture in Nova Scotia/ Nova Scotia’s Culture* n.d.).

Canadian historian Ian McKay (1994) has meticulously shown that much of this visibility and nostalgia for all things simple or traditional – including music – was carefully manufactured, beginning in the post-war years, by provincial tourism bureaucrats, in an effort to attract more visitors and their money. Decades later, this representation not only continues in tourism marketing, it is also often taken at face value locally. The result is the broad acceptance, within the province, of a partially invented view of traditions and histories, as well as the often well-subsidised pursuit of related pseudo-folk cultural industries.

Capitalising on a mythologised view of local culture can be a solid economic strategy, and promoting ‘folk’ culture for tourism is a common practice around the world. But the practice also raises broad questions about ‘authenticity’. More specifically for our present discussion, it serves as a caution for artists: the culturally identifiable material we collect and appropriate may not be as culturally authentic as we think. As composers, we may be primarily interested in the sonic properties of appropriated material, or in artificially re-contextualising it for our own purposes. But our listeners will always bring their own assumptions of cultural authenticity, which will in turn strongly affect their reception of our work.

## 4. MEANING

### 4.1. Authenticity and attribution

The very act of capturing and framing human expression in an electroacoustic composition lends that material an aura of authenticity. And the intimacy and clarity of modern recording and playback technology strongly supports that sensibility.

But recordings made by composers for electroacoustic compositions are not ethnography. Our choices of material and methods of collection are

usually driven by subjective, artistic considerations – or even by pure happenstance. We can layer, process and re-contextualise that material for our creative purposes, but a listener’s instinct to attribute a plausible source to a sound is very strong, even for sound material for which they have no frame of reference. And even if the sound is processed to the point of complete abstraction, we simply cannot reliably anticipate how listeners may respond, and what cultural attributions they might make.

This combination of ambiguity and personalisation is precisely what makes an artistic experience powerful, of course – but it also complicates the communication of meaning and artistic intent, particularly in a work that uses appropriated, culturally identifiable material.

### 4.2. Naming and identification

As part of the source attribution process, listeners will often mentally ‘name’ a sound source they believe they have identified. Naming is a powerful act, and can give us a strong point of attachment to the material we are listening to. But naming may also allow the listener to simply file that material away as familiar or ‘known’.

When sounds are unknown and unidentified, the listener’s imagination is given full rein, and their engagement with the material can be quite strong as they work to understand what they are hearing. But once the source is identified and named, accurately or not, the listener’s imagination may then disengage – an unwelcome event for an art form that relies heavily on the action of the imagination.

Will the kinds of concrete sound materials used affect the likelihood of that disengagement? We do know that culturally identifiable sound materials can invoke complex and diverse responses. And, when confronted with sound that is deeply tied to ‘identity’, it is reasonable to expect that the naming process will be invoked, even if only at the level of broadly trying to identify and name the associated culture.

Whether that naming will lead to attachment, or to disengagement, will still be very much an individual response. But it seems likely that the use of culturally identifiable sound material, as distinct from abstracted or identity-neutral material, will increase the probability of the listener arriving at that important crossroads.

## 5. VOICE

### 5.1. Voice and language

The human voice is a uniquely powerful source of meaning in music, and its effect in acousmatic works is no exception. But the reception of appropriated vocal material by a listener is complex, and will vary

in response to factors such as text content, language recognition, tone, gender and whether spoken or sung.

Some of that response will correspond to cultural or linguistic familiarity. For example, listeners may simply understand the words and their cultural context; or they may not understand the words, but recognise characteristic sounds and inflections of the language – and therefore still assign a cultural context to it. But even in the absence of any linguistic or cultural recognition, a listener will usually still engage with non-linguistic nuances of human vocal expression in a compelling way.

In my own work, I have frequently used appropriated language, with an understanding that its use will be likely to augment the diversity of possible listener responses. A composer who hopes to generate a fairly uniform response from listeners might find this variability unacceptable; however, I welcome it as a further way for listeners to personalise their reception of the work.

By way of illustration, one of the sections in *Irrashaimase* incorporates multiple robotic iterations of the voices of adult female ‘greeters’ who welcome people into large Tokyo department stores (Sound example 7).

A Canadian listener who heard that section without knowing anything about the piece once asked me what ‘the kids’ were saying in that section; she had heard the high-pitched, singsong voices as children. But a listener who speaks Japanese or understands the cultural context would be likely to recognise the source – and that recognition would immediately generate a very specific set of visual and cultural associations, probably quite different from those of the listener who had imagined children speaking.

## 5.2. Voice and identity

In addition to considerations of language and culture, we can also look briefly at how the composer chooses to present appropriated human voice in a work, how that presentation relates to the source’s identity, and the presentation’s impact on the reception of the work.

At one extreme, we find looped but otherwise unprocessed singing in the electroacoustic component of Gavin Bryars’ work, *Jesus’ Blood Never Failed Me Yet* (Bryars n.d.). In contrast, we have the highly deconstructed use of voice as relatively objective musical elements, in Trevor Wishart’s more recent work *Globalalia* (2004).

There are clearly radical differences in the two composers’ handling of voice material, which might be partially attributable to available technologies. But because of the unique power of the human voice

in electroacoustic music (an impact we might describe as more like portraiture than simple ‘framing’), listeners of either work may find themselves wondering about the identities behind the voices, or questioning the circumstances of the recording. Such questions can be a constructive part of the reception of the work, of course, but they can also easily distract from the listener’s engagement with it.

Our final example of appropriating voice and identity is drawn from my own electroacoustic composition, *I wish* (Naylor 2012c). The piece was made from a few words and breaths (plus some instrumental fragments) appropriated from a recording of a song, *Home*, I had composed years before, as sung by Nova Scotian traditional singer Rita Rankin (1997) (Sound examples 8 and 9).

The material in this case was used with clear permission from all concerned. However, we can certainly still question the way the new work appropriates and reshapes the singer’s artistic identity, as expressed through her performance of the original song. An unaffected vocal that originally expressed simple longing has now been transformed into paranoid repetition and furtive whispering, thus casting the singer’s ‘character’ in an entirely new light.

And, as with any fixed medium work that incorporates identifiable material from another musical performance, we might also question the overall creative connection between the appropriated work and the new one: to what extent is *I wish* a new work, and to what extent is it an adaptation of another composition? I believe that similar challenging questions could be asked about every act of sonic appropriation.

## 6. CULTURAL CAPITAL

### 6.1. The drum business

In the 1990s, I again attended the composers’ workshop in Amsterdam that I referred to earlier. One of the guest speakers that year was a respected European ethnomusicologist. In his lecture, he spoke about his identification of a model for the performance of polyrhythmic African percussion music. To illustrate his talk, he brought a trio of expatriate African musicians with him from his home city. He didn’t introduce these musicians by name; they stood silently at one side of the stage while he spoke about his model. When he wanted them to illustrate a point, he waved curtly for them to start, without looking at them.

After his talk, there was a call for questions. I asked him if he would comment on how the knowledge about the music is taught within the culture. He replied, surprisingly impatiently, that I would have to ask the musicians myself, and then added, ‘But good

luck: they don't speak English.' A bit annoyed by the dismissive response, I then asked, provocatively, 'Oh, so they didn't learn it from your model?' There were a few laughs from the audience. He seemed thrown off for just a second, then responded with exaggerated mockery, 'No, of course not – but thank you for such a nice compliment, to think that they could learn this music from my model', or words to that effect. He then immediately called for another question.

When the questions were finished, I went down to the stage where the musicians were packing up. Their leader stepped forward, extended his hand, and thanked me warmly for the perspectives I had raised (which he had understood perfectly well). We then spoke briefly about the situation – that what I had witnessed was their usual relationship with the lecturer, but they accepted it very willingly for the opportunity it gave them to travel and perform.

## 6.2. Culture as capital

This little anecdote encapsulates a great deal about the multiple ways we appropriate cultural expression, turning it into our own 'capital', to be parlayed for our own gain.

For the ethnomusicologist, the drum music was his intellectual capital, and, like any good capitalist, he fought very fiercely to retain his control over it. For me, it was potential creative capital – something that might be used to further my own artistic goals. For the musicians, it was both personal cultural capital, as an expression of their own cultural identity, and personal economic capital – a means to earn money and to travel.

All of us were, in some way, appropriating this music, this cultural expression, for our own purposes and making of it our own cultural capital. Did we all have the right to appropriate this material? To answer that fully is clearly not a simple proposition, and, as we have seen, attempting to do so can invoke a bewildering web of personal, ethical, legal, cultural and context-specific considerations.

At one extreme, as highlighted in section 2.1, composers might view culture-specific music simply as 'material', to be used in our work without further consideration or concern. This is certainly a realistic possibility: with inexpensive, high-quality recording tools, inconsistent international copyright laws and enforcement, a largely open (for now) Internet, and inexpensive global travel options, the palette of sound material available for electroacoustic composers to appropriate is virtually unlimited.

At the other extreme, we could choose to view this music, and other sonic cultural expressions, so cautiously or reverentially that we are unwilling to appropriate anything at all. We might confine ourselves to using only studio recordings of culture-

neutral objects, or synthesised sounds, in the hope that we do not evoke anything culturally identifiable in our results (an unrealistic objective, of course, that would require us to anticipate the response of every listener).

Not surprisingly, as a composer I find both extremes unworkable: one strategy simply tries to ignore, likely at its peril, that bewildering web of considerations we have identified; the other strategy unreasonably limits us creatively.

Is there, then, a workable middle ground – a way to 'appropriate appropriately'?

There is likely no universal answer that will fit every appropriation scenario and every practitioner's goals or methods. But, to return to our original analogy, we can certainly choose to pay a fair rate of interest on the borrowed cultural capital that we use to enhance the impact of our own creative work.

That could mean simply being mindful of matters of personal identity and privacy. Or it may involve recognising legal rights, and making an informed decision about how we use material. Or it may mean understanding and respecting cultural sensitivities and differences before we actually press 'record'.

But underlying all of those actions is one simple perspective: in every cultural expression that we mine for our own purposes – modelling its structure for academic papers, imitating its gesture or tone colour for instrumental compositions, or recording its sound for our electroacoustic compositions – there is already inherent value and meaning.

## Supplementary material

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1355771814000041>

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