

Culture: From Spurious to Genuine

"Fewer and fewer people in this country entertain each other with verbal games, recitations, charades, singing, playing on instruments, doing anything as amateurs – people who are good at something because they enjoy it."

Adrienne Rich

Edward Sapir gave us his best thinking about the differences between culture and civilization back in the 1920s (see Appendix A) and since much of what is wrong with schools comes from worship of civilization and ignorance of culture, we need to learn the differences and keep them fresh in our minds at all times. "Civilization, as a whole, moves on; culture comes and goes." "While art lives, it belongs to culture; in the degree that it takes on the frigidity of death, it becomes of interest only to the study of civilization." I have added a few aphorisms to these definitions (in *Music Grooves* 1994:228) and I'm sure you can add some more of your own.

"Civilization is the crap that culture leaves behind.

Civilization as a whole, piles up; culture gets smothered.

Being more civilized means having more museums and libraries; culture is giving yourself to prime and present time.

Conversation is cultural; writing is civilized.

Culture is yeasty, fermenting, a single germ or seed generating a growth process; civilization is the wine bottled, labeled and corked.

Improvising is cultural; following the letter of the law and the law of the letter is civilized.

Civilization is all grasp; culture is reach.

What I really want is a bumper-sticker-length message:

SNIVELIZATION REIFIES!

SIEVELIZATION LACKS JUICE!

Civilization has always been the enemy of culture. We cannot reach and grasp at the same time. Capitalist civilization with its capacities for mechanical reproduction and commodification of everything may eliminate culture once and for all. It delivers more goods than we can consume, plastics that won't biodegrade, fixed musics and big arts that refuse to die and decay. Beethoven impersonators and Elvis impersonators may never go away!"

Could civilization really eliminate culture? I don't think so, but bioengineering *and* cloning *and* the commodification of our genetic material *and* nanotechnology all point in that direction. We can modify and commodify our very bodies to require less and less cultural creation. Ever tighter corporate control of media, ever more effective advertising, more infotainment, ever more drugs that modify behavior, deeper loyalty to flags and flag waving, increasing belief in symbols and denial of reality, all point in that direction. We can be manipulated into needing less and less cultural creation to be, if not happy, at least content within a teeny tiny comfort zone.

A ray of hope. Sapir made another important distinction between genuine culture and spurious. "Genuine culture is not of necessity either high or low; it is merely inherently harmonious, balanced, self-satisfactory. . . . a culture in which nothing is spiritually meaningless. . . . The genuine culture is internal, it works from the individual to ends".

Spurious culture is external, it works from the ends or goals of people who control media and hire producers, directors, composers and arrangers of products for sale to individuals who do or do not "buy in" to the vision of the controllers, producers, directors. Sapir noticed a rising tide of external, spiritually meaningless stuff suffusing American society in the era after World War I as radio, movies and then "talking movies", pulp fiction, magazines, etc. began to replace telling each other stories, making our own music together, all the face to face primary communication we find in local communities.

Where's the hope? The minute we take something from radio or television or Disneyland and make it our own by playing it, singing it or dancing to it or telling a story about it to someone, or doing a parody of it with a group – presto! Genuine culture.

This is why Thomas Lux's poem is so important (Sec. 6, Ch 3 "The Voice You Hear"). The minute we read something carefully a voice in our head comes on, and inflects those words, gives them life in our mind, and that voice in my head is my voice. "The genuine culture is internal." All the books on the shelves are spurious culture packages in a civilized library until someone takes a book, opens it, reads, and the voice goes on inside your head giving it tone, inflection, degrees and kinds of passion, a certain level of conviction. Read it aloud to someone else and genuine culture is becoming genuine sociability, conviviality, community.

When the Black Lodge Singers sing "Mickey mouse, Minnie mouse, Pluto toooo, They all work at Disneyland, Disneyland, Disneyland" in their plains Indian pow-wow style, or when they adapt the Flintstones "yabba dabba dooo, yabba dabba dooooo" as vocables in their traditional way of singing, they are creating a genuine culture as they do that in the studio. Put it on a cassette tape and it is spurious product, spiritually meaningless. I buy the tape and listen, but when I sing their Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse song with the children at Salisbury Central School it is becoming genuine again because we are making believe we are Indians who sing about Disneyland and it feels good, it's funny, we can jump in the air and do a split when we come to "Pluto toooooo" in the lyric. That's not "plains Indian style" but what the hell, it is certainly primary communication and a genuine local culture or tradition in the making.

Another example comes to mind. About 20 years ago I was in the middle of a drumming class and looking for short, easy to learn songs or "coros" to use for singing along with samba or salsa drumming and I asked Martin Delmasi, a friend and drum teacher from Dominican Republic who was assisting me in the class, to come up with something short and sweet that we could sing. For salsa he came up with a Cafe Bustelo commercial he'd heard on the radio. And for samba, "no, no, diga arroz, diga siempre VitaArroz" i.e. 'no, no, don't say rice, always say VitaRice.' They work well with the rhythms. Easy to sing as you drum at the same time – a crucial skill to learn. We're making a "commercial" song communitarian. Most gringos don't know the meaning; could be a sacred chant for them. And we're making spurious culture genuine.

SIEVELIZATION LACKS JUICE!

Pat Campbell:

Prior to the multicultural movement that took hold in music education, teachers were frequently seen sitting at pianos playing the traditional songs of African and Asian peoples for all of their children to sing along to. Little voices sang English translations of “Ochimbo”, “Sakura”, “Arirang”, and “Wimoweh” (“Mbube”) and dozens of other songs with great enthusiasm, all to the clinking of piano keys. By the 1980s, there was a recognition that there were no pianos in the bush and that the songs of many cultures were to be sung in languages other than English. Teachers hunkered down, moved their pianos into the corners and closets of their classrooms, explored new instrumentations, and became more conscious of articulating new phonemes for the important nuances they brought to the song styles. Authenticity was “the big A” to which teachers began to turn their attention, many of them working overtime to either “get it right” (the “right” authentic instruments, authentic languages, authentic song styles) or to not feature that music at all. A fear grew in the hearts of many music teachers that unless authenticity was adhered to—to the max—the music should not be included in the curriculum at all.

There are two stances on the topic today. Some hold firm to the belief that any performance should follow the model, the original source, with music sounding as closely approximate to the source as it possibly can. That’s quite the leap to celebrate, judging from where the practice once was. However, a second stance is a modification of the first (rather than a regression), in which teachers are featuring recordings of “the real thing”, the source of the music, and then nurture students to learn and play with the possibilities for the creative development of this music. Since all the non-Western people's music models are unwritten, often improvised, a "way" rather than a fixed form, it is "in the tradition" to adapt the "way" to circumstances of time and place. Rather than precisely re-creating a song, these teachers acknowledge their own limited resources, perhaps, but also the needs of students to make the music their own through playful manipulation of its elements. There is a return to the recording, and a comparison of “them” with “us” as students can be guided to recognize the overlapping features of the source music with the music they have creatively developed anew. These teachers who believe in the importance of music as an expressive form are confident in the belief that all music is worthy of study for what it is, as well as for how it inspires new ideas in their students.

In an interview on the use of world music in schools, Anthony Seeger differentiated between the terms “traditional” and "authentic”. He suggested that one could distinguish between music that is “historically identified with a community (traditional) and music that has been introduced (nontraditional) yet became "authentic” within the culture. Among the Suyu of the Brazilian Amazon region, this was clearly evident in the manner in which the songs he and his wife shared on banjo and guitar were taken into the repertoire. Traditional American tunes like “Pretty Polly”, “Long Black Veil”, and “Michael, Row the Boat Ashore” were among the songs the Suyu were singing twenty years later, long after they were introduced. These were not traditional to the Suyu people, whose long-standing genres were low unison songs and individual shout-songs sung by men and boys, but they were genuine. The older men with their long hair, large wooden lip disks in their lower lips, and young men in Indian bowl-style haircuts, continue to develop their repertoire, taking in the music that appeals to them and which they can make their very own.

See for yourself the interview with Anthony Seeger (“Anthony Seeger on Music of Amazonian Indians” in Music in Cultural Context, 1996, Reston, VA: Music Educators National Conference). Further discussion of the process of “creating world music” can be found in Teaching Music Globally (Patricia Shehan Campbell, 2004, New York: Oxford University Press).