

Appendix IV

Culture, Music and Collaborative Learning

What does an anthropologist or ethnomusicologist have to say to literary people?
How do musical styles in cultural contexts model collaborative learning?

As I try to summarize my answers to these questions, I'd like to review two of my favorite authors on culture, Stanley Diamond and Edward Sapir, since it is the problem of culture, more specifically, cultural creation, that literary and music people surely have in common.

What brought me to a collaborative learning conference** was a shared concern with creating classless society and culture in at least one classroom, a common search for what Stanley Diamond called prime or primitive culture (Diamond, 1974). I think we're also after a subtle variant of prime culture that Sapir defined in 1924 as "genuine culture," in opposition to the "spurious culture" that was already engulfing the United States and every other industrial society as the electricity-powered mass media tidal wave swamped us (Sapir, *Selected Essays* [1924] 1949).

You want to empower people verbally as skilled readers and writers. And I want to empower them musically, to help them reclaim their gifts as singers, drummers, dancers, and instrumentalists. To do this sort of work we all require a clearer sense of primary and genuine culture.

Stanley Diamond, in his book *In Search of the Primitive* (1974), defines and abstracts various aspects, or prismatic pieces, of one holistic, primitive gathering and hunting society that took a few million years to evolve. His description and Colin Turnbull's more concrete portrait of *The Forest People* (1961) often sound like collaborative learning heavens. In primitive society economies are communal, property is unknown, and equal access to tools is taken for granted. Leadership roles are situational, rotational, validated by consensus, and symbolic. No laws, lawyers, or cops; lots of customs and plenty of open conflicts facilitate the airing of grievances and differences with the aim of restoring equilibrium. Participation is full and direct in actions that are physically, emotionally, and intellectually integrated; building or sailing a canoe or spreading a hunting net can be religious-social-economic-magical-technological-musical-aesthetic experiences. Which is another way of saying that people in primitive societies don't abstract concepts from lived experience and reify them the way post-Platonic literate people do. They don't insist that each person become a madman or a specialist. Who you are and what you know are not separable.

Let me say again that this sort of society took a few million years to evolve, according to the past decade's archaeological work in East Africa, and, once evolved, kept us well adapted to a broad variety of environments, from tropical to arctic, as *Homo Ludens collaboratus*, for tens of thousands of years. We became fully sapient in this society, with brains as big or bigger than at present, but were not knowledge-driven and work-oriented; hunting and gathering peoples put one to three hours a day per person, on the average, into solving food and shelter problems. I'll say it a third time for emphasis; as leisurely, curious, playful collaborators we evolved for millions of years and then stayed adapted to our ecological niches for tens of thousands of years.

This prime society, in its limitless cultural diversity, first came under attack from *Homo Laborious hierarchicus* (who was also a patriarchal cuss) just a few millenia ago, in a few small corners of the world. Up until a few centuries ago, primitive society was the preferred mode of production (see Marxism), reproduction (see feminism) and pre-

production (have-fun-ism) for the vast majority of the earth's peoples, and none of these societies gave up this way of life voluntarily. My Hessian peasant grandparents still knew about the spirits in trees. My grandmother told me so, and I'm telling you. If any society and culture reveals our species being, our human nature, primitive society is it.

I hold the view, then, along with that staunch antievolutionist Kenneth Burke, that the agricultural, industrial, and electric-atomic revolutions did not abolish this primary human nature of ours. They just distorted, repressed, oppressed, and depressed it. And alienated it. From this perspective, Descartes and Newton (the physicist, not the alchemist) are just an interruption in the flow of human consciousness, a mere ripple in the stream, and the latest French thinkers the froth on the ripple. Collaborative learning, as I understand it, is not a new epistemology but an old ontology, a search for our natural sociability, playfulness, and ability to cooperate. Some may consider it a new support system for prime and genuine culture building, a fresh attack on the inherently isolating and alienating processes of phonetic literacy and linear thinking, but it is also an attempt to recover the oldest forms of humanness that were stolen from our ancestors just a few generations ago.

In his early attempts to define "genuine culture," Sapir tried to fuse notions of "national character" with "high culture" -- the "specific manifestations of civilization that give a particular people its distinctive place in the world," mixed with "the conventional ideal of individual refinement" in the arts and letters sanctioned by a dominant class (Sapir [1924] 1949). The ideas of "national character" and "high culture" are dangerous enough taken single, potentially deadly in combination, and often actively genocidal when backed by delusions of empire. Sapir knew this, I think, yet he desperately wanted to salvage a qualitative aspect of culture from the threat of mass media homogenization of culture, on the one hand, and the scientific values of ethnographic neutrality/relativism, on the other, both of which can blindly reinforce the truism that everyone is equally cultured. (An open-eyed awareness of this truth is, of course, a prerequisite for working effectively with people from different cultures, usually labeled with racist epithets like "deprived," "disadvantaged," "underdeveloped," as if people who don't share our supposedly universal values are naturally prefixable as de-, dis-, under-, sub-, etc.) Sapir tried to guard against these dangerous nationalist and elitist sources synthesized as "genuine" by insisting that "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" ([1924] 1949:308-31). Sapir is especially careful to distinguish between civilization and culture: "It is easier, generally speaking, for genuine culture to subsist on a lower level of civilization. . . . 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" (308-31) (see Keil and Feld, *Music Grooves*, Ch. 7 for some more riffs on civilization vs. culture).

As Sapir develops this theme, it becomes ever clearer that nation-states and their ruling classes can nurture poor substitutes for genuine culture at best. Only small, localized, autonomously face-to-face groups can really create it. So-called French literature has usually been the product of interaction and friendship networks in certain neighborhoods of Paris. Shakespeare's plays came down to us as monuments of early British civilization but were actually an accidental by-product of the Globe Theatre's genuine culture. Socrates strolled around Athens, a small town of 30,000 citizens, discussing things with small groups without ever freezing group process by writing it

down. His most dogged followers didn't write anything down either (see "The Absolute Dog" at dontbuyin.org website).

I hope that any length of time spent with these Diamond and Sapir essays will further convince you that "collaborative learning" is just another name for our prime species being in the process of creating genuine culture.

What about music in diverse cultures as models for collaborative learning? I found that difficult to talk about with taped examples and a generous amount of time to develop ideas during the conference. All the world's music is inspirational. And a growing shelf of books describes the way people collaborate to make it. Perhaps a short outline of the phases of musical collaboration observable through time and across cultures will clarify somewhat the ways in which being and knowing reinforce each other in musical creation.

Music is a collaborative mode of communication in all societies. Much bourgeois art seems to be individualistically produced and consumed – novels, paintings, sculpture – though even here we underestimate the degrees and kinds of collaboration involved. More obviously symphonies, operas, ballets, and dramas require many people to prepare, rehearse and perform together. The collaborative essence of music is not immediately obvious to all literate Westerners only because we have gotten into the habit of trying to fix or freeze music by writing it down. Say "music" to most of us, and we think of a composer or songwriter who creates it in his (hardly ever "her" in the imagination) head, writes it down, takes it to a conductor or interpreter. It is performed, and a passive audience appreciates it with applause at the end. Anywhere outside hierarchical civilizations, however, music is more obviously a collective creation: composers and performers are the same people, and active participation, usually by dancing, is the norm.

Among the BaMbuti and other "pygmy" groups, each person sings his/her own melody in ways that both link and overlap all the other ongoing melodies (Turnbull 1961). Each person may contribute something unique to the mix that is meant to be audible to all other participants and to the environment. Each person is singing and dancing for self, with the group, to the forest. This kind of singing-dancing-instrument playing event before a honey-gathering, after a hunt, night after night, or for weeks at a time when someone has died, seems to be about creating and maintaining social equilibrium and ecological balance. Continuous and simultaneous expression of individual parts is a way of both being together and knowing each other, sending and receiving information and sensations at the same time, ontology and epistemology as one process (Chernoff *African Rhythm & African Sensibility* 1979). Note that both literary and electronic media of communication are more channeled, directional, limited, and simpler than BaMbuti ceremonial. Create a collaborative learning process to match it, if you can.

The layered effect, densification, the hocketing and counterpoint of many individual voices heard simultaneously but not in unison are often but not always heard in the other classless societies of the world. A recent effort to compare the musics of egalitarian peoples reveals once again the marvelous diversity of musical and cultural solutions to the question of what to do with so much free time (see Feld 1984 and Roseman 1984 *Jr. of Ethnomusicology*). Unique environmental factors and culture area niches and the sounds of local birds and neighboring peoples seem to shape each people's music toward a precious distillation of *Local Knowledge* (Geertz 1983).

There are many settled farming societies around the world where obvious social classes do not exist but where some social inequalities do exist between men and women as well as between senior men and junior men. These societies on the brink of class often

have call and response, leader/chorus song styles that reflect constant dialogues and dialectics within the society over precisely the issues of inequality (see *Tiv Song*, Keil 1979). Men and women compose songs about each other; young men protest the abuses of older men; elders complain about the lack of respect and the new practices that undermine tradition. While some people compose new songs, most do not. But it is assumed that everyone can and will do so if they need to confront an issue or solve a particular problem by appealing to the wider kin community. While social inequalities exist and indeed are the generative force behind much of the song-and-dance music activity in such a society, they are not fixed but always being negotiated in a plural universe (politically polycentric, religiously pantheistic or polytheistic, musically polymetric, polyrhythmic, polyphonal).

These open processes of both collaborative and competitive learning do not really assume a “knowledge” in any way separable from life. It is probably only with the advent of feudal society that concepts like “knowledge” and “music” are invented to name the stuff that emerging specialists will try to fix, monopolize, and control for the interests of an aristocracy. Scribal literacy certainly makes this effort easier for written knowledge. Sound patterned knowledge is harder to control, but modes are codified, certain notes are declared off limits (e.g. the flatted fifth), cyclical structures are established, patterns preset to reflect the “natural” hierarchical (in space), repetitious (in time) order of society and nature (J. Becker and A. Becker, "A Musical Icon" 1981).

If feudalism invents and fixes “knowledge” and “music” in a singular or united way that is open to infinite shading but very little basic reinterpretation or change, capitalism has presented us with *two* monocultures that both compete with and reinforce each other in imposing still more “knowledge” and “music” upon us. Many of us have become so transfixed by the powerful high culture and mass culture Scylla and Charybdis that we forget the vital currents of people’s music and culture that still flow between them. “Polka,” “salsa,” and “country,” for example, in their local ethnic and class contexts, all deserve books of affirmation as styles that make possible collaborative learning and reinterpretation of both being and knowing.

This is a difficult point to make briefly and in conclusion, but I believe it helps us to think about cultural styles in music, dance, gesture, conversation, work, courtship, clothes, etc. – the whole range of expression – as an accelerator of collaborative learning wherever they are present or can be borrowed to fit. People collaborate best within flexible pretested frameworks. The twelve-bar blues has been dull dishwater as a structure ever since it was invented at the turn of the century; it requires verbal and instrumental phrasings to keep it alive for each generation. Human rites and ceremonies can bring language skills into a more holistic context. Tea ceremonies. Haiku contests on set themes. Chain poems. Hyperbole bouts. Slogan chanting. Playing the dozens. Party hearty lyrics. Psychodramas. Mock weddings. Naming ceremonies. And so forth. Can you write like you talk like you sing like you drum like you dance your life?

** The conference was on Collaborative Learning and the Reinterpretation of Knowledge. Organized by John Trimbur, Yale University. May 1984.

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