

Lecture Thursday June 14th, International Gamelan Festival Amsterdam

On the topicality of Ton de Leeuw's concept of 'Acculturation'.

Abstract

Starting with Ton de Leeuw's concept of 'acculturation' we will discuss its tenability in today's Musics of the World. The search in the structuralist tradition for musical universals as basic principles that can unite western- and non-western music and musicians seems to privilege the so-called deep structures, the structural elements in music, neglecting the surface features as being accidental. Recent developments in the study of language competence show however the importance of direct interaction with the environment in acquiring a language, by doing speech-acts rather than by elaborating deep-structures. We will see a recent example of a composition that tries to translate deep structures of 'karawitan' into a western composition for gamelan and we will see an example of a composer who is approaching the gamelan as a pure sound-source. Finally some attention will be given to a composition by Slamet Sjukur written recently for Ensemble Gending in which notational problems were encountered in adapting his score for western use.

Jurrien Sligter

Good afternoon, ladies and gentleman,

As probably several among those present here already know the Dutch composer Ton de Leeuw wrote in 1975 a composition for Javanese gamelan, named "Gending, a homage to the musicians of the gamelan".

He wrote the piece after many years of hesitation: He was afraid to fall into the trap of so called exoticism, the superficial imitation of eastern elements in western music. Already in 1962, more than forty years ago he included in his book on Music of the Twentieth Century¹ a chapter on "Exoticism and Folklore". We can read in it the following statement:

We must bear in mind that the process of acculturation (hybridization) , the fusion and adoption of elements of different cultures, may be counted among the most familiar phenomena of art history. It is not impossible that our own art (today) reveal lines of evolution, free and from within, that in some respects approach certain Eastern concepts more closely than was ever possible within our former and closed cultural pattern.

Ton de Leeuw developed his concept of musical acculturation in modern composition in the circle of UNESCO together with - among others - the Vietnamese scholar Tran Van Khe.

Today the term 'acculturation' seems to be a little out of use and the reason might be the slightly negative connotation of it. We read for example in Wikipedia:

"Despite definitions and evidence that acculturation entails two-way processes of change, ...research and theory have continued with a focus on the adjustments and changes experienced by aboriginal peoples, immigrants, sojourners, and other minorities in response to their contact with the dominant majority. Thus, acculturation can be conceived to be the processes of cultural learning imposed upon minorities by the fact of being minorities."

Ton de Leeuw would never have agreed upon this definition and when we read the original definition by the anthropologists Redfield, Linton and Herskovits (1936, p.149) we see that the definition was originally meant to describe a two-way process:

"Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups".

This is a more positive formulation and for Ton de Leeuw it had an even more positive, let me say humanistic connotation: He strongly believed that cultures will grow by learning from each other the best they have to offer both ways.

¹ Ton de Leeuw, *Music of the Twentieth Century*, Amsterdam University Press 2005
English translation of: *Muziek van de Twintigste Eeuw*, Oosthoek, 1962/69

But how can you learn as a composer from the music of the Other without imitating it?

Ton de Leeuw looked for an answer in respectively French structuralism and the psychology of Carl Gustav Jung next to Indian Philosophy.

Let me try to explain:

Linguistics were strongly influenced by structuralist ideas. Behind the differences of all languages at a superficial level they were looking for common universals at a deep, more structural level. Ultimately they were hoping to find elementary structures of the human brain that we all might have in common.

From the point of view of psychology Ton de Leeuw was inspired by Carl Gustav Jung's idea of a collective unconscious that unites all people and makes a mutual understanding possible. The influence on his thinking of Indian philosophy I set aside at this moment due to lack of time.

One specific aspect of eastern music became more and more central in his own compositions because he considered it such a basic principle at a deep structural level that could be transposed to western music without automatically leading to imitation of the source. It is the principle of cyclicity or isoperiodicity. So the first part of his gamelan-composition Gending is based on a recurring pattern of 8 bars at a structural level, but at the same time using rhythmical motifs that are rather western.

Today there seems to be enough reason to doubt whether the idea of common universals at a deeper structural level is tenable.

Do we learn a language by elaborating basic structures, its grammar or by using a set of rules to generate new well-formed expressions as the American linguist Noam Chomsky believed?

Is the distinction between a deep level of basic structures on the one hand and a foreground level of speechsound on the other hand tenable?

In terms of music:

Is it possible to use basic structures of a type of music without using its foreground elements, its melodic formulas etc.? Formulated differently: Can we separate the two theoretically conceived levels and can they still be a reality on their own?

Allow me a short excursion into the philosophy of language and of meaning: Today cognitive linguists think that direct interaction with the environment plays an enormous role in the way people acquire language competence, in the way children learn their language. Children and even adults do not learn a language by elaborating basic structures or by applying the rules of grammar better and better: They learn a language in direct interaction with the world and people around them. Their bodily experiences of the world seem to be completely interwoven with the development of concepts and of language.

I quote from a recent study by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, "Philosophy in the Flesh: the embodied mind and its challenge to western thought":

"*Perception* has always been accepted as bodily in nature, just as movement is, *conception* as purely mental – the formation and use of concepts, but this picture is false: The body is not merely somehow involved in conceptualization but is shaping its very nature."²

In this current view on knowledge acquisition the conceptual and practical knowledge are closely intertwined. In the words of Lakoff and Johnson: "Meaning has to do with the way in which we function meaningfully in the world and make sense of it via bodily and imaginative structures. This stands in contrast with the view that meaning is only an abstract relation among symbols or between symbols and states of affair in the world."³ Hereby we are handed an epistemological framework which is of particular interest for musicians who habitually combine bodily and mental activity .

So there is enough reason to doubt whether it is possible to separate in language - or in music - deep-structure from surface elements. In this modern view the physical and bodily aspects of music are not of secondary importance: They form the very basis for the way music or language does function in reality.

Now this seems to question Ton de Leeuw's concept of acculturation and even the whole enterprise of world music and a global music culture. And since so many musicians are now traveling all over the world, improvising together, mingling their musics in so-called cross-over the question of acculturation is more topical than ever, and more actual than Ton de Leeuw could have foreseen.

If we learn a language or music in direct, even bodily contact with our environment we should cherish much more the idea of local culture, of community culture and probably worry less about what happens elsewhere.

Does that mean that we should return to provincialism or even isolationism? Should we decide that westerners should stop playing gamelan? Or Korean musicians, should they stop playing Bach and Beethoven on the piano? No, because especially today we cannot deny that cultures do influence each other and that we can and should learn from each other. We cannot reverse the consequences of the world-wide-web on our lives. And, as Ton de Leeuw rightly mentioned in 1962, since ages acculturation in art may be counted among the most familiar phenomena of art history. So if we play gamelan in Holland we should question ourselves why, for whom and with what aims. If we compose a western score meant to be played on the

² George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh, The embodied mind and its challenge to western thought*, Basic Books, New York, 1999, page 37

³ *ibid.*, page 78

wonderful javanese instruments we should ask ourselves why, for whom and with what aim. Ton de Leeuw hesitated for many years to write a composition for gamelan. It was of prime importance to him not to imitate foreground elements of non-western music because it would lead to exoticism or orientalism as it was labeled later by Edward Said.

We see now that we can also learn a lot from each other by studying the way the music is produced, the way the music functions in the society, the way people perform music with their bodies, a project which has been partly undertaken in the past by ethnomusicologists but rather with a scientific sense of distance, and not so much by composers or musicians. In a very recent study of Michael Tenzer on World Music - the well-known American scholar on Balinese music - he is questioning again the problem of the existence of musical universals and he also considers 'isoperiodicity' as probably one of them. But he also questions: "Is it all right to analyse music independent of its political, geographical, or cultural distance from the analyst or reader?"⁴

It seems that today another idea that Ton de Leeuw introduced already in the seventies of the past century is now even more topical than his conception of acculturation: His idea of an ecology of music. Because of globalization local music culture is in danger, all music which cannot be turned into an easy commodity seems to be in danger, western classical music as much as Javanese gamelan music or Japanese traditional music. And as we need each other to prevent ecologic disaster on worldscale so musicians and real music lovers need each other worldwide to prevent music to be downgraded to background sound or pure entertainment.

Let me finally turn to a few examples:

1.

First I will show you part of a recent composition by the Spanish-Dutch composer Jonas Bisquert, who studied composition in Utrecht and studied for three months at STSI-Surakarta. You met him yesterday.

His composition is an example of an enterprise by a western composer to integrate structural elements of karawitan into his composition:

2.

The second example is from Aliona Yurtsevitch; She composed a piece for the workshop for young composers that will be presented this afternoon. She considers the gamelan purely as a wonderful source of sounds, without bothering much about the traditional background of the instruments. The gongs form the central part in the composition, in contrast to their usual 'interpunction' function. She asks the players to explore all kind of sound effects on the gongs that are amplified by microphones.

⁴ Michall Tenzer ed.: *Analytical Studies in World Music*, Oxford University Press, 2006

3.

Finally an interesting problem we met in transcribing a score by Slamet Sjukur in more westernlike notation. When we started to work on a composition written for Ensemble Gending by Slamet Sykur in 2006 we were confronted with coordination problems. We decided to put bar-lines in the score but by doing so we denied the typical additive character of his composition. Let us compare the original score with our transcription and we see that, like in scores of Olivier Messiaen, rhythms that look now like syncopation in an ammetrical conceived score should be in fact performed in an additive way.

Conclusion:

So in several ways the question of identity and finally even of authenticity seems to come up as soon as a western or modern composer starts to write for the gamelan with its strong tradition of Karawitan. And it is not surprising that problems of identity come up in a world in which people seem to be no longer part of a closed culture. The humanistic vision of Ton de Leeuw that cultures should inspire each other in the best they have to offer each other today can still be a source of inspiration for every musician.

Let me close with a citation from Michael Tenzer's recent *Analytical Studies in World Music*:

"People all over are preoccupied in wildly varying degrees by contradictory desires to both fortify and transcend their identities, which music helps equally to define and to destabilize. One thing is clear: musics themselves, steered by human actors, now connect more rapidly and frequently and across greater distances and circumstances than before, and "culture" is by no means the primary force of attraction in all cases. It could be mere accessibility, taste, the internet, individual imagination or creativity, or any of a million factors that confront us with opportunities and pathways for refreshment.

I am far from the first to note that this laboratory is music's destiny for the foreseeable future, just as it is humanity's "⁵

⁵ see note 4, page 235