

Classical / Popular / Folk

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How do we define each of these categories? Can we in fact separate them or does each merge into the other? Let us try and also let us try to define the characteristics of each, including the societal, the musical and the organological aspects of each, and let us begin with the Classical that we know so well in our own culture.

Classical

Well to start with, we know what we mean by that word in our own 'Western' society, now disseminated almost worldwide. Or do we? Bach is Classical, so is Bartok or how much was he folk? Was Gershwin Classical? Was Bernstein? Or were they Popular as well as Folk? Today we tend to separate these genres, but did Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven? Handel wrote the Harmonious Blacksmith, Mozart wrote his German Dances, and his Rondo alla Turca, Schubert his Marche Militaire, Haydn set popular folk songs, and Beethoven wrote his Scottish folk songs. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Classical composers were never frightened to write music that we would call Popular, whether dances or the serenades in which they transcribed their favourite tunes for the bandstands. By the nineteenth century, attitudes were beginning to change, and Johann Strauss and his progeny would be regarded as lesser composers than Brahms and Wagner, and this despite their usage of all the resources of the Classical orchestra and the structure of its music. Today, attitudes are far stricter. Can one imagine Harry Birtwhistle or Michael Tippett writing for the Beatles? Some would not even deign to write film music lest they were *déclassé*, and certainly not for video game music even though that's where the big money is today, and as for television advertising jingles...! Some were barred from the airwaves for years just for writing good tunes, Malcolm Arnold for example.

What about aleatoric music? Is that Classical? Or does that become an orchestral players' Folk music when they can play it any order, upside down, back to front, or anything else? And musique concrète – does slamming a door and streaming the sound it made count as Classical?

Yes, Classical composers were willing to embrace Folk elements into their music when it would be effective. We can rebar some of Brahms's music and, lo and behold, there we can see Hungarian aksak rhythms in his music, and in the finale of his First Symphony, there is the alphorn melody which he transcribed on a postcard to Clara Schumann, very slightly changed in its rhythm in the symphony. I could cite many more examples from Berlioz (*Carnaval Romain*), Tchaikovsky (the 5/4 movement in the *Pathétique* is a folk music theme) through Rimsky-Korsakov (*Capriccio Espagnol*) to others, and these also brought traditional Folk instruments into the orchestra with them, which, once exotica, such as tambourines and castanets, are now standard.

Where else in the world do we find Classical music? In India certainly, in Japan with gagaku and the Noh theatre. In China with Chinese opera, or is that Popular? In Java with the court gamelan, and its offshoots in mainland South-East Asia. Is that a criterion, the fact that gagaku and gamelan are court music and court instruments? In that case so are the Mozambique timbila orchestras, where the king's chief timbila player insisted that all the timbilas must be tuned to the king's timbila tuning. So are the Uganda royal drum ensembles. So are at least some of the Central and West African ivory horn bands, such as the royal ivory horn bands of the Asante kings of Ghana, and elements in Ethiopian music with the baganna. Certainly the elephant's tusk is a status symbol, but it is also a common (Folk) signal instrument, partly for ecological reasons. Maybe one finds elephants more often in forested areas and antelopes more often in more open savannah areas.

Is Classical music a literate tradition? It certainly is with us, and in China, Japan, Tibet, and Central Java – they, like us, have written transcriptions of their music, but on the whole the Indians do not; their tradition is by memory and one-to-one transition. They can speak a notation – many of us have heard the

tabla player reciting his patterns, but to what extent are ragas written down? So that may be an indication but musical literacy cannot be a criterion.

What about the griots of the Manding area of the bulge of West Africa? They were not literate but they held in their memory the whole history of their people which they could recite at will. This is surely not a Folk matter, but nor does it seem Popular, so is this also not a form of Classical music? And this brings in the whole subject of the bard. The itinerant in the market place may be Folk, but what about Homer? Bardic narrative has always been sung, never just spoken. Homer was accompanied by lyra or kithara, for bards in later princely houses, with for example the Arthurian Romances, by lyre or harp, for the Yugoslav street musician the gusla, and so on. Do we separate these according to their status in society, the street to Folk and the court to Classical – we do not even know what Homer's status was nor whether he was one or several. And what about the religious narratives? We know that the Indian Vedas were recited for centuries before they were ever written down.

One possible criterion based on literacy or one-to-one apprenticeship teaching, is that the music cannot be played unless the player can read music (with the exception that blind players and one-to-one apprentices can be taught it and memorise it, though they'd never be able to sit in an orchestra and sight-read it). And another point is that Classical instrumentalists have to go through many years of training and acquire enough skill to be able to play that sort of music. This is not to say that many Popular instrumentalists are not equally skilled and trained, but there are also many in Popular music who have not acquired such skills. Is this reflected by some of the instruments? The French horn has always required particular skills, so has the oboe. Is this why neither often appears in Popular or Folk music? Or is just something about their smell that immures them in the Classical world?

Is the basis of a court, ritual (as in Tibet), or 'establishment' tradition a criterion? Perhaps – we shall see, but very certainly in Europe court, and ritual (i.e. church music) and 'establishment' were the very heart of what we call Classical music today. But beware – in Central Java the gamelan is certainly a court tradition, but it is also a Folk tradition, there are Folk and Popular gamelans and the

shadow, puppet, and human plays for which they are the accompaniment, and gamelan equivalents all over Indonesia, often with bamboo rather than metal instruments. In West Africa, among the Hausa and allied peoples, the Emirs have their court musicians who ‘shout’ the Emirs’ praises on the long trumpets. They also have their court ensembles with a master drummer in control; he, while playing, will also ‘shout’ the Emir’s praises on the elbow-tensioned talking drum.

What about the instruments? In Europe, *viola da gamba* and *viola da braccia* certainly began as Classical instruments in the local princes’ courts, but while the *da gamba* remained a Classical instrument whereas the *da braccia*, our violin and its family are embedded in Classical music, but are also now widespread worldwide as Popular and Folk instruments. Even the *gamba* was transmuted, as Ian Woodfield has told us, into the Popular *vihuela*. And the Folk shawm became a Classical instrument in the Renaissance and was transmuted into the oboe in the Early Baroque, that period from Monteverdi to Purcell that has no name of its own.

Like the violin, we see other Classical instruments moving from one music to another. The Indian *sitar* is an example – this is par excellence a Classical instrument, but it is also played in Indian film music (Popular) and it has appeared with the Beatles (also Popular). The transverse flute, Classical in India and in our music where it was central in the court of Louis XIV, appears too in all sorts of music, from Popular to Irish Folk music. Others have been more static, King Edward IV had a royal *nakkerer* and its successor the horse- and camel-backed kettledrums have ever been royal and ceremonial instruments, and their successors, our *timpani*, have seldom strayed from Classical music. Our trumpets, on the other hand, which once were in a like position to our royal kettledrums, now appear in all types of music, though perhaps less often with Folk than Popular. The Japanese *shakuhachi* was initially an instrument belonging to a priestly cult but now appears in Popular music.

Some instruments of Classical music have often spawned a Popular equivalent. Our trumpet is one; the Classical trumpet, especially in its slide or early valve forms, could be difficult to play, and the result was the Popular cornet.

The lute was the Classical accompaniment of the Elizabethan lute song, but its Popular equivalent was the cittern. The harpsichord was always a Classical instrument, but it had domestic equivalents such as what today we call the virginal and the spinet. Similarly, the piano was invented by Cristofori for Classical music, but the grand, the concert form, also had its domestic equivalents, the square, the upright, and the cottage size. So did the organ. But church organs are expensive and reed organs are cheap enough for any chapel or even a family to buy. Even church organs need a player, and in a village this was not always available, but almost anyone could churn the handle of a barrel organ. The recorder was always a Classical instrument (before the days when it became a children's first approach) but the flageolet and the penny whistle both preceded it from Neolithic times onwards, and replaced and succeeded it in Popular and Folk music. The Ethiopian baganna is an establishment instrument, but there are other smaller and less elaborate lyres in that culture, and this was true in ancient Greece as well: the kithara was the lyre for the praise singer and the state occasions, but the chelys, the small tortoiseshell lyre such as the Elgin lyre that we can see in the British Museum, was the instrument for the skolion and the symposium and for everyone to learn on. The jews harp or trump has always been a Folk instrument, but even that has spawned a substitute. You need two hands to play a trump, one to hold it to the mouth and the other to pluck the tongue. On horseback this can be difficult, so perhaps this was the origin of Mongolian throat singing, which uses a hummed drone to elicit the same overtones (as is done with a buzzing beetle in Papua New Guinea).

But some instruments reversed that process. For example the key bugle was a military or Popular instrument, but once Halari had created a family of key bugles, the bass, the ophicléide, became the first brass bass of the Classical orchestra, migrating there from the Popular military band.

Is it another criterion that the instruments of Classical music are almost always professionally made? That is not to say that many of those of Popular and Folk are not professionally made, but in both those classes of music it is equally open to a player to make and indeed invent his own, just as Jimmy Blades and I made a tubular bell for my first pantomime, a Cinderella for which a bell is a sine qua non, whereas it is difficult to think of a Classical instrumentalist who

would not prefer to go to a professional to get higher quality than home-made, even though a few professional Classical violinists have built their own violins. OK, I made my own mediaeval percussion instruments, but I went quickly enough to Paul Williamson, a professional maker, as soon as he learned to make them under my supervision. What is more, professional makers were, at various periods and places, often enrolled in guilds, as were players too. However, this was usually in the interests of restricting the trade to members, rather than ensuring high standards.

Are the materials from which instruments are made significant indicators? We've seen that ivory horns have higher status than horn. Are the use of precious materials such as gold and tortoise-shell indicators of Classical musicians' fiddle bows more than Popular or Folk fiddlers? Or the ivory backs of Thai court rebabs more Classical than the village Folk and Popular ensembles? I'd have thought it's equally the wealth of what the individual player can afford rather than the sort of music he or she plays – most musicians opt for the best or most beautiful instrument that they can get. Anyway, today musicians are denied some of these materials due to draconian conservation laws – no more good bows of pernambuco, no more clarinets or oboes of the Dalbergia family, nor good xylophones and marimbas, and certainly no more ivory trims.

In the earlier European courtly life the troubadour and Meistersinger serenaded the ladies of the princes' and barons' courts with their songs, just as had the ancient Greeks' praise singers, but all those singers travelled from court to court and many, no doubt, while on their way, may well also have been willing to sing their lays to the local people as well, even if just for a meal or a night's lodging. Or would that have demeaned them? Were there even then class distinctions between the Classical troubadours, and the Popular balladeers, and the Folk street singers, just like the narrative bards?

Ritual music, church, temple, monastery worldwide, again we should regard as Classical, for it has always had a set form, accompanying chant and ritual. We have evidence from our Bible of music in King Solomon's Temple, of David and his musicians, a tradition that was taken over by the Christian church. Many of us must have heard groups of Tibetan monks performing their ritual music

on their world tours. Ritual everywhere is accompanied with chant, whether by choirs or just the shaman, but can we always regard that as Classical when it is just the shaman casting his spell for good or ill? Can we class that with the B minor Mass? Or is the choir in the Cathedral Classical, the vicar in the local church with its guitar and pop group Popular, and the shaman in the back street Folk?

Folk

Folk music is never static. It transmutes from Classical to Popular and back again. It evolves, and indeed it is a Darwinian evolution, for songs and genres survive when they are successful and dwindle away when they are not. They evolve, too, into other genres. What we know as Folk music today is very different from what it was even fifty years ago when Bert Lloyd used to sing to us, at IFMCIUK conferences, the songs that he had collected around the world. Folk music today is a genre both of Popular music and of World Music, neither of which bear any great relation to true Folk music, the music emanating from and belonging to the folk themselves – the modern genre of rap is far closer to true Folk than either of the others. Folk instruments have gone through Darwinian evolution too, just as Classical instruments have done. Pipe and tabor was the accompaniment of the Morris from long before Will Kemp morrised from London to Norwich and it was still the standard accompaniment towards the end of the nineteenth century. Then the fiddle and the concertina took over and pipe and tabor became extinct; today it is more usually piano accordion.

In Morocco, for example, the rebab andaluz, the ancestor of our rebec, was the standard bowed instrument but by the mid-twentieth century the violin was seen more and more often. As in Burma, where a violin simulacrum was widely made, looking like a Burmese instrument but combining all the features of a violin, the instruments were played *da gamba*, or perhaps sometimes more accurately, *da player's lap*. In the Arabic world, the *naqqere*, small paired kettle-drums, were commonly used as Folk instruments, but in one photograph from the report of the Pan-Arabic congress of 1936 there is a pair, carried at the belt, that had full Dresden tram-handle timpani mechanism in miniature. And while

the goblet shaped darabukke is common as a folk instrument, the more elaborate versions such as the zarb are played in Persian Classical music.

Here again, the question of self-making instruments arises, against the professionally made. Undoubtedly many folk musicians made their own instruments, but I am equally certain that there would often have been professional makers. In almost any community or district of any size there would be someone who made better instruments than others did, and it would be surprising if he or she did not sell some off to others, whether for cash or for kind. You can clip the hairs off the tail of your own horse or, by permission or not, your neighbour's, but making gut strings is a very messy business, so maybe the local butcher had a side line in that trade and in skins. There are today many firms around Europe who make folk instruments for folk musicians (I have examples), and I would be surprised if that were not a long practice. Two of the tabor pipes found in the Mary Rose have a maker's name, so that practice certainly goes back to the mid-1500s. And once when I was wandering in the Old City of Jerusalem, I saw a man sitting in an open shop with, behind his back, what looked like a wall of drainpipes. Then I saw that he was stitching round a small piece of goatskin, and I realised that the 'drainpipes' were the bodies of darabukkes and that he was making the heads. Here was a professional darabukke maker, probably buying in the drum shells, perhaps from one of the many potteries in Bethlehem, and making up the drums, one of which I bought from him and played in many of Maurice Jarre's film scores.

In the mid-twentieth century England, the idea of composing a folk song (and, yes, folk songs have always been composed by one singer; they may change as they pass from ear to mouth, but always they have begun somewhere by someone) or a narrative ballad had all-but vanished. When I was asked to show, and lend, some appropriate instruments for those ordinary folk who had volunteered to live an Iron Age life for BBC television for a year, although by then they had already lived for some months with adventures and in an Iron Age life-style, it had never occurred to any of them to make their own music, songs, or ballads – music was something that came from the tranny, the then ubiquitous transistor radio, and it was something that professionals had composed and

played, and that had been commercially recorded and sold. It was nothing for the likes of them to make for themselves.

And yet so many musics began as Folk music. Think of New Orleans jazz back in the early twentieth century. Some of it started as funeral music, a few musicians playing for the funeral procession of a friend or acquaintance. Maybe a known tune was the basis, just like the mediæval tenor of a motet, but what happened to that tune was true Folk music. It went on to Chicago where it began to get commercialised, as it did, too, later in New Orleans, and then when it got to New York it began to become Popular music, and after Gershwin, Duke Ellington and Lenny Bernstein got at it, it became all-but Classical.

Around the world, music has always been central to all forms of people's lives. You cannot dance without music, you cannot have life-cycle events without music, you cannot herd or watch over animals without music, and so long as people were isolated they had to make their own music. As people conglomerated, farms becoming villages, villages becoming towns, then Folk music can become Popular or even Classical. The shaman by himself is a Folk musician; when he becomes the priest of a temple he becomes a Classical musician. When the shepherd or the cowboy sings to his herd as it moves and grazes across the prairie, he is a Folk musician, but once he gets filmed by Hollywood, he becomes a Popular musician.

African Folk musics were once local genres of their own, but after radio and the cassette recorder were invented, then the sounds and the instruments of Western musics crept in, Folk music merged into Highlife and became Popular music.

Popular

Certainly at first sight, Popular music is so varied and so widely dispersed that it would seem almost impossible to define. We all know what it is, but can we define it, how can we distinguish it from Classical or Folk musics? Can one define it as commercial music? No, for all music save for what one plays at home, is inevitably commercial. Folk musicians pass the hat or sing for a pint in the pub, no symphony orchestra, no opera can exist without money, and few

music venues have ever been without a box office. Certainly Popular music is normally a literate music, but so is Classical, though many Popular musicians play by ear what they've heard from their betters, as do many Folk musicians.

One could almost define Popular music by negatives. It's never Classical, it never *sounds* Classical, even if classical musicians are playing it in Light music orchestras. And although what is now called Folk music is one of the genres of Popular music, it's nothing like any real Folk music, even when a genuine Folk song is sung by a singer to a piano accompaniment, something which as we've seen above, has been going on for centuries.

Could we define Popular music as an accumulative or an absorbent music? It absorbs music of all kinds, whether it's chasing rainbows or turning original jazz into swing.

Why is Popular music so popular? Is it because it's easy listening? And is 'easy-listening' the polite equivalent of dumbing down? Not really – dumbing down is a steady diet of Vivaldi's Seasons, Mozart's Eine Kleine, and Beethoven's Für Elise. Perhaps the real definition is that more people like it than any other sort of music, and this could be, too, because it subsumes so many types of Popular music into the one name, from Garage through Heavy Metal right on to World Music.

World Music is Popular because it smoothes out the unfamiliar aspects and jagged edges of Folk music. The combination of original music and instruments with Western instruments forces tunings into equal temperament and familiar tone qualities. In the same way, the staged 'Folk' groups that tour the world, purporting to display the real Folk musics of one or two musicians and the village dancers and/or singers, these charm the eye with their balletic displays, and they are accompanied by orchestras of local instruments filled out with the newly invented, and professionally made, extra forms of treble, alto, tenor, and bass, and with arrangements of carefully crafted vocal and instrumental harmonies, professionally arranged, and they thus morph into Popular.

Classical music, too, slides down into Popular. Opera was once a court entertainment, but the cost of staging it is horrendous. Monteverdi's L'Orfeo is

clearly a Classical style. Is Puccini's *La Bohème*? Or has that become Popular? Can we say that *Don Giovanni* is Classical and that *Die Zauberflöte* is Popular? Is opera Classical and Singspiel Popular? Certainly the modern musical is Popular, but where does operetta fit in? Arthur Sullivan has never been taken seriously as a composer, despite his Classical works, simply because he collaborated with Gilbert in his operettas. Wagner said that Offenbach was another Mozart, but nevertheless he is regarded as a lesser composer than, for example, Ambroise Thomas, just because he wrote Popular operettas.

The whole genre of operetta and musicals, as well as the popularity of opera and even symphony concerts arose due to the rise of the bourgeoisie following the Industrial Revolution, something that is much further elaborated by another series on this website. It was these people, who migrated from the farms and fields into the towns with their factories, mills, and mines that created both the audiences and the musicians for the Popular bands and choral societies of the nineteenth century that are still with us today.

How about the instruments for Popular music? Here the field is wide open, everything goes, including a lot of self-invented oddities. Almost all the instruments of Classical music appear in Popular music, and certainly so in what's often called Light music, though other than in that area, oboes, bassoons and timpani are rare. A fair number of Folk instruments slide into Popular music as well, especially through World music and collectivism music, and the West Indian steel bands, which began as Folk music, quite rapidly moved into Popular. Ubiquitous are drums and pianos, without which Popular music could hardly exist, and today electronics of all sorts. Brass instruments are common, indeed the whole brass band movement along with the symphonic and military wind bands were important movements of the peoples in Popular music. Another aspect is exotic musics, the introduction of Latin American dance music for example, with its own musical styles and its own instruments, many of which have passed into the Classical orchestra.

Quite a number of our Classical orchestral instruments began their lives in Popular music. The clarinet for example was commonly a bandstand instrument long before it became a regular in the orchestra, and so were a number

of percussion instruments. A common route was through the opera, where new instruments were used for effect, brass basses for example as well as bass drum and cymbals, long before they were grudgingly allowed into the orchestra. The bandstand was one of the great early places where people could hear music of any sort, as was the military band. One forgets how few places there were, before the days of local concert halls, where people could hear any music that they did not produce for themselves. The church, of course, in those places where music was sung rather than cantillated; soldiers marching through the town or the country side, whether with bands or just fifes and drums, the dance hall, and, as soon as these were invented, the bandstands, these were the places where people could hear music. And all these forms, except the church, were Popular music. Even the church band, a common phenomenon in Britain after the Puritans had destroyed the organs in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, which arose in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when hymns and anthems were once again sung, and composed psalm tunes, rather than the metrical psalter, were also sung again, these church musicians also had a life as the local Popular dance band, playing for both the village hop and also for the local gentry's balls.

Popular music in all its forms is popular with the majority of the population, and this is why it is called Popular.

As we have seen again and again here, all these forms of music are fluid, one merging into another and indeed emerging out again as Playford's and Prætorius's dance tunes did. Musicians are often less concerned with these categories, especially with percussion players like me. I've played for Beecham or the BBC Symphony one week, for a pantomime the next, and a month later a variety show, and then a stint in the gypsy band in the basement of a Lyons Corner House. Today it is getting harder and harder to separate these three forms, Classical, Popular, and Folk, and yet there are still local Folk singing in the pub or at a ceilidh, there is still division in the BBC's radio programmes between Radio 2, with Popular music firmly ensconced there, and Radio 3 with its Classical concerts every night at 7.30 and its Opera on Three almost every Saturday evening. And despite all that separation, the Proms, from their start by Henry Wood, always included then an element of Popular music, one that vanished in

the days of the Third Programme, but has now returned once again with its Film Music nights, its Harry Potter evenings, and one that has ever been present, its Last Night of the Proms.

Merging is ever present and will never go away.

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