

The Impact of Computer Technology on World Music

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Abstract:

Almost every facet of modern day life is somehow influenced by technology. Historically, world music has been a thing reminiscent of cultures and traditions. The answer to what occurs when modern technology and world music are combined is explored here, and the impact technology has had is found to be unmistakable. World music itself has indeed changed, as well as how it is heard and if it is even heard at all: this is all due to technological evolution.

Technology advances directly correlate with the development and perception of music through time. The sound of 'world music' and how it is heard throughout the world has been transformed through technology's ability to record, distribute and playback a particular song. The actual definition of world music varies among sources. World music can be used to describe a genre, a marketing category, or as Bohlman remarks, "There's ample justification to call just about anything world music" (2002, p. 8). For the purpose of analysing technology's impact on world music, a genre-specific description will be used. Hence, world music can be described as traditional, folk or roots music that incorporates some indigenous characteristics of its origin (Nidel, 2004, p. 2). Prior to the creation of sound recording technology, and more recently the internet and portable music playing devices, world music was largely confined to its native countries. This text identifies why this is no longer the case and how in essence, these entities have each changed world music and how we hear it.

Perhaps the most dramatic impact of technology on world music is the ability to record sound. World music has arguably existed since the beginning of civilisation, yet a global knowledge of all world music was hardly attained until after Edison's invention of the phonograph in 1877 (Chanan, 1995, p. 1). One of the first to capture and record world music was Hungarian composer, Béla Bartók. Gillies notes, "His collecting trip to the Transylvanian province of Csík during July and August 1907, with a local assistant and two phonographs, proved a revelation" (2009, p. 2). This was the beginning of an evolution that would allow any person to hear native music from almost every country in the world as one can do today. Such an innovation has not only changed the way we listen to world music, but also changed world music itself. Where world music was once entirely heard live, technology in the form of recording studios has created an environment unlike anywhere world music has been played before.

This effect of recording technology on the sound of world music can be examined through the song, 'Begadang II', performed by Rhoma Irama and the Soneta Group. This particular example is a modern form of world music in the style of 'Dangdut' – a lowbrow, Hindu-influenced Malaysian pop genre (Stone, 2001). The song relies heavily on a platter of studio effects and electrified instruments, none of which are characteristic of any indigenous influence to the style. Despite this, the song still maintains distinct traits of this kind of world music such as heterophony, and obscure tuning as Nicholas Ng explained in his lecture on world music (April 27, 2010). This is to say that

recording technology has had influence over the sound of world music without ignoring the historic and ethnocentric nature inherent in the music.

Technology has not only incurred sway on the musical virtues of world music, but has become the predominant means of how we hear it. In this case, the internet is one of the biggest delineators of how and why the largely ethnocentric (by definition) style of world music has become a globally integrated art form. The internet's role in the dissemination of world music has meant, "People in just about every music-culture are likely to have heard some of the same music" (Titon, 2009, p. 5). This phenomenon has resulted in a globalization of world music where the spread of the music has led the innovation rather than the technology itself. Lomax notes in his book *Folk Song Style and Culture* that this spread caused speculation of a "cultural grey-out" (as cited in Manual & Middleton), but on the contrary, Nercessian says that the "brigeability" of different cultures is a positive movement (2002, p. 8). Nevertheless, it is clear that the internet has transformed how we hear world music in terms of *what we hear* of it.

When examining how and what we hear of world music, it is important to remember that before the advent of technology, the only means of distribution of music was in the form of live performance, or less-commonly in this context, musical notation. An example of how the internet has allowed for the spread of otherwise unknown forms of music is 'Fāng Jí Gě Dě Qí Dǎo' performed by Chinese Catholic Pastoral Centre Choir. The secular nature of such a piece would mean that without recording technology, and distribution resources such as the internet, we would not be able to hear this song without witnessing the choir themselves. Furthermore, it is because of the abilities of the internet that stylistic elements of this piece can now be interpreted and used as influences to further compositions of world music. Although a major contributor to changes in how we hear world music, the internet is not the only factor here attributed to technology.

The recent advances in internet technology have been coupled by developments in playback technology. This has gradually led to today's realm of portable playback technology, a change that has also revolutionised the way we hear world music. In essence, the newfound mobility of music has taken the venue away from this previously 'live' music form, meaning the music is not only spreading globally, but is *moving* in the process. The most recent of such devices is the portable mp3 player, and along with the television, radio and CD player, this has become the "disembodied

voice” of world music (Titon, 2009, p. 20). Frascogna goes as far as to say that “CD’s are becoming obsolete”, and in turn, “[Perhaps] music globalization is the principal game changer within the industry” (2010). It is this globalisation due to portable playback technology (as well as the internet as previously discussed) that is alternating how we hear world music.

‘Al Shaghal’ performed by Jihad Racy and the Arabic Retreat Ensemble demonstrates how the ‘live’ format of world music has become transportable and in effect: globalized. Upon listening to this track, it becomes apparent that a live audience is present. The audience is actively involved in the music by clapping or shouting at certain times, which enforces a traditional setting. Yet this ‘traditional setting’ can be experienced from anywhere in the world, at any time, thanks to technology. The song has been recorded using technology, disseminated around the world using the internet, and finally can be transferred to portable playback devices for a virtual world music experience. There is some irony in the concept that technology has effectively globalised all forms of world music, yet it has also confined the listeners to their own private headspaces. With this in mind, there is no doubt that technology has changed how we hear world music.

In conclusion, the advents of sound recording, internet, and portable playback devices have combined to change world music, and the way we hear it. Furthermore, these technologies have become catalysts in the globalization of world music, where music from any part of the world can be heard from any other location. The fact that one can download a recorded piece of world music and listen to it wherever they please is a clear sign that technology has revolutionized world music and how it is heard.

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