How Music Becomes Classical

Like related scholarly fields, ethnomusicology in the 1980s and 1990s began critically re-evaluating a series of concepts central to the field, from culture, tradition, and identity, to modernization and westernization. The disciplinary framework increasingly recognized the historical contingency and cultural construction of the very phenomena we hoped to understand. In the wake of abundant scholarship in a variety of related fields, it has become clear that ethnomusicology was as much a mirage as the classical music that it aimed to interpret.

The concepts of the canonical and the classical have been re-evaluated in recent years, in the European musical context as well as elsewhere, yet the term classical continues to be applied to certain music in Asia without a great deal of critical reflection. Whereas most contemporary ethnomusicologists would reject the notion that classical music is simply qualitatively superior to other repertoires, attempts to define the classical with regard to South and Southeast Asian music range widely. This revitalization took place through efforts to classicize, in China in the 1980s and 1990s for example by foundering academies, inventing systems of notation (a topic of great controversy), crafting modern music scholarship and historiography (based on the study of Sanskrit treatises, intended to establish norms for performance), organizing music conferences, and instituting the public concert. The classicization of music was one of a number of movements aimed at fostering Indian culture, both national and regional, by a new, self-aware, British-educated middle class.

In Indonesia, as in India, music had a key place in the visions of nationalists, from the very beginnings of the movement towards independence in the early years of the twentieth century. However, in contrast to the solid embrace of classicized musical traditions by the Indian nationalist movement and middle class, court-associated forms of performance from the region that came to be known as Indonesia have been subjects of heated debate. Despite the profound musical diversity of the region, central Javanese music alone has been the subject of most intense classicization, as well as that of controversy regarding its place in twentieth century national culture. Java’s centrality in conceptions of a national classical music is, of course, a microcosm of a much larger issue: the status of Javanese and other regional cultures within the nation. While Indian court music was to pass from the old ruling class to a new, urban middle class – relatively little tinkering by the British – in Indonesia the transfer in question was from Java to the whole, new nation, with the Javanese elite at least attempting to hold on to its position as gatekeeper of the arts by opening schools and training academies for the arts. The strong interest of colonial scholars in documenting and promoting certain forms of music in the Dutch East Indies has played a role in the image of central Javanese gamelan after independence, as have attitudes towards the elite Javanese of the colonial period. Post-independence, the traditional performing arts have continued to be a focal point for top-down efforts at cultural engineering, from the extension of Java-focused arts curricula in the conservatories to New Order attempts to upgrade and normalize performance standards.

High culture and the court

Since the late nineteenth century, India has offered the clearest and best documented example of classical music in the service of nationalism. Music that had been fostered by the princely courts (and, in southern India, the temples) was embraced by nationalists from the very beginning of the movement in the late nineteenth century. Court-flavored music – as well as new compositional forms intended specifically to arouse patriotism – was one among several aspects of culture which could contribute to a new identity, one in which a political and international vision towards nationalism abounded. But the operative goals of such nationalism were to change over time, and the music had to be reshaped somewhat before it was suitable for such a project. A number of prominent music scholars and writers of the late nineteenth century set out to revitalize what they felt had become a neglected and tarnished musical tradition. At fault were not the British – who were only marginally interested in South Asian music – but a growing sense that a Hindu classical music, a Hindu Golden Age of Spirituality, leading to negative valuation of Muslim contributions to music during the long period of Mogul patronage and support for the performing arts.

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