

Cultivating Diversity Sensitivities

As ethnomusicologists, we have worked hard to introduce cultural and musical diversity to our schools. Yet, much more needs to be done, and cultivation of diversity sensitivities is more urgent and critical than ever before. This is because diversity is a complicated and multivalent concept; it can easily be exclusively defined, accidentally misunderstood, and even strategically abused. For example, promoting any one type of music, be it labeled as American, African, Asian and so forth, at the expense of others, hardly expands musical horizons; it merely shifts musical channels. By the same token, explaining non-Western musics with essentially Western theories and practices not only continues colonial heritages but also creates illusions of musical diversity. It only justifies the self's disciplining of the other, or appropriation of their culture!

To promote sincere and comprehensive acceptance of musical diversity, ethnomusicologists need to broadly conceptualize diversity. Such a diversity would involve more than legal and strategic definitions, and would require more than academic interests to understand and theorize musics from exotic lands. I propose that we view diversity as both a humanistic ideal and a pragmatic goal of our learning and teaching. When conceptualized as an humanistic ideal, diversity encourages people to accept different peoples and cultures as equal and in native terms; accepting human diversity allows people to become who they want to be, living the lives they choose, and practicing/expressing what musics they cherish in their hearts and minds. As a pragmatic goal, diversity reminds people that the more they know about diverse others and their practices, the more peoples can learn to co-exist. Homogeneity does not prepare people for the artistic, cultural and economic challenges of the rapidly transforming world.

To implement such an ideal, we need to cultivate diversity sensitivities, so that we can transcend our human instincts to resist, control, or appropriate differences. As scholars, we can, for example, embrace more musical knowledge that is less cerebral and "objective", but more kinetic and subjective. We can teach our students with not only established theories and proven facts, but also with transcendental performances and personal feelings. We can help them, and ourselves, develop sensitivities to genuinely and comprehensively embrace all kinds of differences.

Exploring ways to experience such an ideal, I recently co-taught an experimental class of *kunqu*, the classical opera of China, with Madame Zhang Xunpeng, a master performer from Shanghai China. I structured the class of 15 weeks into two parts: in the first part of eight weeks, the students learned histories, theories and repertory of the genre; in the second part, they learned *kunqu* acting, dancing, singing and speaking from the master. At the

end of the class, the students, Madame Zhang and invited artists from China and New York performed a *kunqu* program. The students did not speak Chinese, and Madame Zhang spoke little English. Communication was through translations, bodily gestures, and non-verbal “dialogues.” Without receiving any letter grades from their teachers, the students knew what they learned well, and when they made mistakes. In that *kunqu* classroom, every little smile or knitting of eyebrows by the teacher or the students meant something intellectual and practical.

Throughout the processes, the students knew that they did not take the class to become professional performers of *kunqu*, or even connoisseurs. They only learned to experience *kunqu* as a performance arts, and as an opportunity to encounter Chinese culture as Chinese would know and practice. Through hard work and through Madame Zhang’s dedicated teaching, the students learned something more than what they could grasp from academic texts. By learning to move their bodies like “talented scholars and charming beauties” of 16th century China, they experienced traditional Chinese subjectivities and practices. By singing *kunqu* arias in classical Chinese, they sampled Chinese language and literature.

In the post-performance discussion of the class, one student revealed her heightened awareness to cultural and musical differences. Graciously, she told the class that she had mastered the histories and theories that I had explained to them, but she could neither feel nor accept that *kunqu* was really that “beautiful, and meaningful.” Only after she had learned to do *kunqu* singing, acting, and dancing in Chinese, she could grasp the artistic merits and pleasures of the genre. What was more important, she declared, she had developed new sensitivities to unfamiliar sounds and sights! She has, I believe, confirmed the need to cultivate diversity sensitivities. Otherwise, we could hear different tones and styles, but not their humanistic messages. Embracing musical diversity means more than the beating of exotic gongs and drums, does it not?