

The Concern for the Humanistic Context of Music

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ABSTRACT. *The famous American musical anthropologist, Merriam, mentioned “Music in Culture” from his work entitled Music Anthropology (1960) at the early stage, and proposed a new definition of “the Study of Music as Culture” in 1977. Then in the process of discussing music, should we pay attention to the humanistic context of music? How to define this humanistic context? How to explore the new meaning of music in different cultural contexts? This paper explores the way to the concern for the humanistic context through the listening and appreciation of “Swing Bach”.*

KEYWORDS: *Music, Cultural context*

1. Introduction

The famous American musical anthropologist, Merriam, mentioned “Music in Culture” from his work entitled Music Anthropology (1960) at the early stage, and proposed a new definition of “the Study of Music as Culture” in 1977.

As a new academic concept, it has quite important practical significance to study music. Merriam regarded that art (music) contains four organizational patterns: voice, concept, behavior, and feedback. “Music anthropologists study music as a culture, including the research of sounds, concepts, behaviors, and cultural phenomena associated with music.”

There is no doubt that music and culture are mutually inclusive and not easily divided. Therefore, music should be studied in the context of “culture (environment)” rather than in a separate or disjunctive way. The research of closely combined sounds, behaviors, concepts with cultural backgrounds in the context of different levels, which provides us a methodological basis for the study of music, and is the research direction we should and must adhere to.

2. What Are the Meanings and Values of Classical Music

Take “Swing Bach” for example, a concert held in Leipzig's bazaar square in 2000 to mark the 250th anniversary of his death. The concert featured many of the

world's leading classical and jazz musicians, including jazz musician Bobby McFlynn, known as “The Voice of the Angels”; New violinists Jill Ham and Adele Antony; The Jacques Rousseau trio, which was popular in Europe and excelled at adapting Bach's pieces; The King's Choir, a popular singing group in Europe and America; The famous brass band “German Brass Band”; International top symphony orchestra “Leipzig Gwangtehaus Orchestra” and the Turtle Island String Quartet from the United States.

3. What Are the Meanings and Values of Classical Music When It Incorporates Modern Forms of Jazz, Swing, Funk, Chants, and So on?

Someone may argue that the modern and even wild Swing Bach completely distorts the author's musical ideas, and that these modern things spoil Bach's music. And in the 21st century, the precise, balanced, polyphonic, regular, stable Baroque religious music present to the appearance of improvisation, personality change. At the same time, a new way of music combining classical, jazz and swing makes rigorous and mysterious music more rich and humorous, which makes all people feel frisky.

It is not difficult to understand when we review to the “study of music as a culture” mentioned before. In the 17th century, Bach's music, which as a kind of “sound” and a musical text, is symbolic when convey the meaning directly. Once Bach's music is played, it must have something to do with religion and God, which is the representative of the Baroque period. In addition, we talk about “concepts”, which involve “the structural types of infinite musical types”. From the cultural aspect, it is a diversified derivation of spiritual psychology, embodied in that they are the reflection of emotion and meaning. Indeed, Bach's music is a reflection of his own emotions and meaning, and we are always pursuing what is expressed in his music, what he thought or experienced when he created it. Without “human behavior” or “musical behavior,” the sound of music has no meaning, because music is a component of the complexity of human society's acquired behavior, in which music reflects certain principles of social behavior, political system, economic organization, etc. In Bach's music, we can really feel the “human behavior” and “musical behavior” of the 17th century, thus Bach's creation must also be influenced by the social politics, culture and economy at the same time. From sound to concept to behavior, the art of music is associated with deeper processes of change in human thoughts and behaviors. This is feedback. For Bach's works, this feedback is embodied in the modern swing Bach. The emergence of swing Bach is also influenced by the sound, concept and behavior of modern musical elements, which is inseparable from and even complementary to the contemporary cultural background.

4. To Study Music as a Culture

To study music as a culture, and to use that as a context in which we can talk about music. Just like other forms of culture, there is no difference between good

and bad. The culture of the past is historical, unshakable and unchangeable, and it is an indispensable and key reference context for the contemporary culture, especially for the present. We do not deny the uniqueness and unshakable character of Bach's music. More importantly, the cultural context of the music which we're focusing on has changed. Any kind of musical behavior is meaningless without its cultural context. Therefore, it must be judged based on its position in a certain cultural structure and the value system of this culture, which is the contextual value of music.

The contemporary significance of listening to swing Bach also lies in this. For musicians or listeners in the 21st century, Bach's music has two different meanings. One is the "restoration" of his music sound, concept and behavior, which is appreciation and understanding against the background of the 17th century. With the help of literature and systematic knowledge, the clues left by history are analyzed to piece together the whole picture of Bach and explore the true creative meaning of Bach in those years. The other is "interpretation", that is feedback, which integrates into the understanding of the recipient and the audience -- paying attention to the underlying humanistic context of music and understanding and appreciation in the specific humanistic context of the 21st century. The score of Bach must be an important reference, but it is definitely not an unbreakable iron rule. We can observe the order and emotion of Bach's music with the deepest understanding in our heart, or we can retain the structure and grammar of Bach's music and reinterpret Bach in the application and arrangement of instrumental music in a radical way. We should fully explore the historical significance of Bach's music and its significance and value to us in our current musical context.

Only in the context of different humanities research music, music can reflect his real value, because there is no absolute standard of value. We cannot judge whether the classical Bach of the 17th century is better or the swing Bach of the 21st century is better in the final analysis. Because we understand the existence of music acoustics, in fact, is to understand the overall organization of sound products and processes in the culture. According to the change of humanistic context of music, the value of music also has different standards. The appearance of swing Bach makes more people want to know about the classical Bach music of the past. Swing Bach builds a wider bridge for the classical Bach, which is a beneficial supplement to the classical Bach.

Music develops in the history, the sound, the concept, the behavior load music life. Exploring and thinking about the sounds, concepts, and behaviors of music means regenerating the music of the past and making the soul of the past come alive. Going back in time is not about turning time around, it's about going into a field where time has stopped of its own making and trying to turn time around again. Through the history, the present and the past can become a meaningful whole. Only by paying attention to the cultural context of music can the tradition of the past music provide support for the current music, and the value of the past music can be further explored.

5. Conclusion

Merriam studied music as a culture. He not only studied the sound, concept and behavior of music, but also studied various cultural phenomena related to it. Only by paying attention to the humanistic context of music could he fully, completely and objectively excavate the historical and realistic value of music.

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