

**Traditional Performing Arts and Globalisation : Ethnic, Ethic and Aesthetic Choices.**

Leonardo D’AMICO  
*Ethnomusicologist*  
*Art Director of Festival Musica dei Popoli*  
*Centro Flog Tradizioni Popolari (Florence, Italy)*

In recent years characterised by the dialectic between globalisation and localisation we have been witness to the phenomenon of commercialisation of all that is “ethnic”. As a social and commercial phenomenon which has pervaded music, art, cinema, fashion, gastronomy, interior design, publicity and in general, every aspect of our day to day lives, “ETHNO” has become a fashion label, a logo which has become a trend “ethno-chic”. In the music world, during the 80’s (until nowadays) we saw the birth and evolution of *World Music* which in the majority of cases is manifest in the fusion or “*metissage*” of diverse musical languages of the world together with western rock & pop music. This phenomenon is a reflection of the changes in our society in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies. It also takes merit for awakening interest and curiosity in an apathetic, withdrawn, narrow-minded, little and badly informed audience, as well as broadening the musical horizons until bordering on Western classical or popular music. However, in many cases it has had the effect of manipulating and distorting the traditional music for commercial gain rendering it more appealing to the buying public by using dulcifying techniques and interfering at different levels (instrumentally, stylistically, formally, etc.) to make the product more acceptable to the western audience’s ear. All of this is justified as poetic license and the need to renew the traditional criteria, searching for a new language without frontiers, in the shaker of globalisation.

The traditional musical expressions of these peoples has become an object of interest to the world’s recording industry (and some independent labels) and has become a part of the global market. Within our present system of neo-consumism and neo-colonialism based on the exploitation of the artistic resources of local cultures, an artistic or cultural product is and remains just a product, which is presented to the public and therefore, is subject to the laws of the marketplace, supply and demand, competition. That is to say, traditional music performance and the recordings thereof are subject to the process of marketing in the same way as any other consumer product and likewise, subject to the logic of profit. A trend which began as far back as the 1950s with the development of the fledgling recording industry but, which due to technological progress and the media, today has assumed worldwide dimensions.

In Italy during the 80s & 90s the number of traditional music and dance performances and festivals of ethnic and/or world music increased dramatically; additionally those already established festivals of only classical, jazz or rock music have opened a “window” on this world and even small town administrations throughout the country are tending to look further afield and are adding performances of “world music” to their usual summer programmes. We are referring to a phenomena already widespread in response to a rising interest by the general public for non-European traditional music or maybe just a fascination for the exotic but, underlying all this, they are open to different cultures. The commercial world has taken advantage of this rise in interest in world culture by generating a disproportionate increase of offers of performances (and recordings) labelled “ethnic”, often of poor quality, misinforming and disorientating the public. It has never been more appropriate than now to prioritise the questions of correct information for the public and the artistic quality of the performers.

Multicultural festivals, especially those receiving public money, cannot divorce themselves from their moral duty to the public who expect a “service”, one which presents cultural and artistic products of quality, correctly verifying the authenticity of tradition and the artistic quality. The responsible for programming and promoting performances of traditional arts must be driven by a professional ethic and be availed of a scientific competence, indispensable tools which will permit them to pay particular attention to the level of quality of the proposed performance, preservation of the cultural identity of the populations, the promotion and presentation of their traditional cultural and artistic heritage, correct information for the public about the performance (festive, ritual, ceremonial etc.) and to its social, cultural, and environmental relevance, also the use of correct instruments for the interpretation from the original culture.

Some cultural centres, whose activity as festival organizers started in the ‘70s (among whom *La Maison des Cultures du Monde* of Paris, *l’Atelier’s d’Ethnomusicologie* of Geneva and the *Centro Flog* of Florence) are still “avant-garde” in presenting performances of ethnic music and dance to the general public and are able to constitute a role model; due to their experience and abilities accrued over more than 20 years, for the programming of “authentic ethnic performing arts”: they in fact continue to evolve remaining true to their original spirit in respect of maintaining intact, entire and free of manipulation or alteration, the expression of traditional culture in their presentation to the public. The artistic director in these cases, apart from having an ethno-musical background and experience “in the field” acquired by travelling the world and having direct contact with various realities, normally avails of a scientific advisory board, competent people and experts in the geo-cultural area of provenance of the artists which constitutes a “quality control” in the choice of artists to participate in the programme. An ethno-musical festival is not to be seen as an ethno-graphic museum where one attempts to exhume mummies or where an attempt at music archaeology is being made but, as an activity whose contribution is fundamental in bringing to life certain musical realities belonging to the traditions of a population which otherwise would have disappeared.

We are aware of the fact that the concepts of “authenticity” and “tradition” are somewhat subjective and do not have a well defined “borderline” (in fact they are a central theme in the international scientific debate) from the philological purists point of view a too rigid concept of authenticity of a tradition risks oppressing any creative process or innovation, in fact no form of traditional art has ever been conserved “unchanged” in time but, has always undergone modifications sometimes substantial, -for political, economical, social, cultural reasons or as the consequence of having contact with other cultures- which have left a sign on the traditional cultures of these peoples. On the other hand a point of view too general under the banner of the *panta rei* philosophy and the culture of the ephemeral, every performance connected to the traditional practice would lose its meaning and with it would disappear from the memory of a population together with its historical, social, cultural and spiritual baggage.

Very generalized, it is supposed that a tradition is as authentic as it is deeply rooted in its own culture and, besides, the artists considered guardians of this tradition become recognised as such by their own society. In reality the choice of an artist in a festival’s selection is not just a rational procedure under the banner of “ethnomusicologically correct”, but also includes an emotional aspect: the emotion which a traditional performance may offer certainly constitutes an important element in the aesthetic evaluation (the “good vibrations”).

Previously we touched on the fragmentation of ethnic music in Italy (and Europe) with a myriad of festivals of traditional performances never seen before but, every one of which is

afflicted with the same problems of programming. A way out of this isolation which will surely reach an impasse is that of coordination with other institutions, cultural centres, organisations working in similar areas (traditional music & dance) which are following the same path (the preservation and diffusion of traditional cultures). The construction of a network of festivals would facilitate the exchange of information and circulation of groups/troupes, the co-production of performances, problems of management, the information and the education of the audience.<sup>1</sup>

European festival directors who put the preservation and appreciation of the traditions of the world's peoples to the fore, are aware of problems and challenges concerning globalisation and its method of producing and distributing the merchandise.

An international group of entrepreneurs (such as WOMAD) promotes the supremacy of the artist and artistic model which acquire an economic and cultural value because of their capacity to penetrate and assimilate. Individual artists strive to become part of this system (from which they undoubtedly receive economic advantages) outside of which they risk remaining locked within their own territory. At this point we can add the problem of intermediaries which can be private societies (promoters) proper agencies which are in the business of organizing international tours for traditional artists. In some cases they are government bodies, the authorities of the country of origin who carry out this function but, also acting as a form of filter, proposing and imposing their own official or "national" troupe with no guarantees of the quality of interpretation or the level of authenticity as requested.

For the festival organizers though it is absolutely essential to have direct [personal] contact with the artist without any form of mediation; something which is becoming more and more difficult nowadays as in most cases one is forced to go through a promotional agency. Even when one has direct contact with the artist they will often send one to the agent they have hired to represent them, sometimes exclusively, in exchange for a guarantee of a European tour. On the other hand it is sometimes more convenient for organizers of concerts/performances to hire artists from an already organized tour via a third party (by which the production costs including the cost of travel is divided between several organisations); this can be distinctly advantageous not only economically but, also for organizational, administrative and bureaucratic reasons too. Up to this point everything works well except for the question of ethic and aesthetic character: the former because the artists' repertoires are often manipulated to "adapt" to the expectations of the western audience; the latter concerns the fact that many artistic agencies in circulation grind out huge profits to the detriment of the artists which are taken advantage of.

It is because of this that it becomes necessary to create a network (international, European or worldwide) which allows communication, collaboration and coordination between those festivals with the similar philosophies (aesthetically and ethically) in the programming and execution of these multicultural activities.

Paradoxically one of the obstacles to a European organization like the ENWC is, in my opinion, the European political culture which carries a clear European stamp, adopted from the European Union. The European community adopts protectionist policy both economically and culturally in such a way that it privileges projects designed to promote European culture (

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<sup>1</sup> In the 1980s there was a cooperation between the major European festival organizers of traditional performing arts which collapsed some years ago (due mainly to a temporary rearrangement of their enterprises) but, which today is being rebuilt under the name of European Network for World Cultures (ENWC) with the intention of creating a European festival circuit with an emphasis on interculturality to consolidate forms of coordination and collaboration between its partners.

through funding ) whereas it excludes projects open to extra-european cultures. The political strategy of the European Parliament is that of creating a new international identity and of cementing the relationship between its citizens but, in so doing its underlying message is that the european citizen must limit its cultural formation to that which is to be found within the confines of Europe; thus, eliminating the rest of the world. This behaviour consisting of fixing boundaries and rigid distinctions between Europeans and non-Europeans, is definitely a worrying trend of Europeanism which risks becoming eurocentrism.

I therefore believe that the final frontier to beat back is that of eurocentrism and we must strive for the equal dignity of the cultural expression of all the peoples in the world. When the first festival “Music of the People” in Florence was born it was organised by the Centro Flog and promoted by the Florence Municipality, the aim was to present the traditional music from all over the world performed by their best and most appreciated original interpreters - of whom the quality was guaranteed by the Italian Society of Ethnomusicology (SIE) – on a level with western music: parity of artistic dignity without alterations or concessions to the western tastes or aesthetics. To this day an ever greater number of people have enjoyed in its purest form the art which populations have autonomously learned to express over a long period of their history.

#### *Outlook and Conclusions:*

Globalisation is a phenomena which affects economy, technology, media communication, politics, religion and culture. It has a double effect on the artistic and cultural heritage of traditional societies; on the one hand the dissolution of local culture and traditions and on the other their transformation in both form and content. It is well known that globalisation acts like a steam-roller threatening the survival of popular traditions in their most authentic forms. Where these traditions have not been completely erased, they have been influenced by the west which has made them become more commercial.

In the multi-cultural and trans-national reality in which we live, fusion movements have formed or – as we say in Italy – “contamination” of styles, genres, different languages (like the World Music phenomenon) which mirror the social changes we are experiencing but, also the creative crisis which is assailing western culture, ever more withdrawn and introvert.

In the dialectic tension between “**global**” and “**local**”, traditional performing arts festivals should make the most of the advantages (above all technological and medial) of the “global village” to reward those artists who protect the local ethno-cultural identity and to promote cultural diversity of all the people of the world.