

Music among asian cultures essays examples

[Parts of the World](#), [Asia](#)



Introduction

Asia is a continent distinguished by a significant variety of societies, nationalities, and ethnic groups that feature several kinds of cultural heritage. Music, alongside art, literature, and cuisine, have always been important and undivided parts of the Asian culture throughout the years. In ancient China, music was closely linked to the cosmological and state order, which prompted the Chinese to incorporate music offices in their government, so to preserve harmony between the state government, nature, and ritual. That music was symmetrical and was based on correct performance and balanced sound and is now represented in the court music traditions of Japan and Korea. Although court music is no longer much appreciated by many contemporary Asians, its significance is undeniable, as it represents cultural continuity (Wong, 1992 p. 79). The purpose of this paper is to bring to light the Asian contribution to the world's music culture, and demonstrate the differences and influences found in Asian music.

Asian Music and Western Music

First and foremost, from the many kinds of music in the world, there are three terms that are most commonly used: popular, folk, and art music. The first two (popular and folk) have their mixed and indigenous forms in Asia, and, although the same terms can be found all over the globe today, any musical distinctions can be clearer in the Asian literate art forms (Malm, n. d). The East-Asian music is the outcome of efforts of both Chinese astrologers and musicologists that have tried to make the music in perfect tune with the universe. This perception towards music can be matched with

the ancient Indians, who used the power of vibrations in their music, as well as the medieval-European and Assyrians that have also tried to match the music with other elements of the universe.

The Asian music, or Eastern music, as some people like to call it nowadays, is very widespread and seems to be appealing to many people around the globe. Although it deviates from the sounds Western cultures are used to, it bears many resemblances, as well as differences, with European music. For example, a remarkable difference between East Asian and European traditions is how the musical lines interact, or in other words, texture (Prescott, 2012 p. 1). In western music, harmony is created with the use of chords (homophonic texture) is the most predominant. In East Asia, there is a different type of texture, according to which, a single melody has simultaneous variations, which is called heterophony and is also found in Irish instrumental music (Prescott, 2012 p. 1). In heterophony, there is no actual harmony and the musicians play the same melody while adding their own variations and ornaments to it as they play it. This is particularly noticeable in Chinese Jiangnan sizhu ensemble music (Prescott, 2012 p. 1). Also, Middle-East and European music produce pitches by dividing a string's length, and while string acoustics was not something China was unfamiliar with, East Asian writings portray music produced with the use of bamboo tubes that were end-blown (Malm, n. d). To an uncultivated ear, or someone from an entirely different music background and culture, this might sound like many people talking simultaneously; however, with practice, one can adopt this way of listening to music.

Another difference between the Asian and Western music is how it sounds.

For instance, East Asian music shows a clear preference for chamber-music sound ideal and regardless of the size of the ensemble, all individual instruments should be heard. It is not the same as in orchestra-sound ideal that culminated during the 19th century in Western music, where individual instruments were meant to be merged into the musical color (Malm, n. d). Also, abstract instrumental music was somewhat scarce in the 20th century. This means that it was not very common to hear a concerto or a beautiful sonata, in the East Asian regions, and a music piece has either a title or text that could elicit an image, and produce a sonorous result (Malm, n. d). This could be attributed to the fact that East Asian culture has showcased an overall sensitivity towards nature

Common musical traits between East Asian Cultures

Taking a look into the common musical traits as found in all East Asian cultures, one can definitely include the cycle of fifths that generate the 12-tone tonal vocabulary. The total number of notes vary from scales of five to scales of seven notes, which is the same as in West Asia (Malm, n. d).

However, each scale is most likely to have a pentatonic core, which means a five-tone core. What most people make a mistake on, is what they describe as oriental music. They listen to a one-scale music, with a complete absence of half steps, which is called anhemitonic pentatonic music, and think it is East Asian music. However, it takes much more than a piano's five black notes to describe the Asian music resources. Some East Asian musics are indigenous, while others are historically related.

Characteristic musical instruments of the Asian Music

The capital of Ch'ang-an, now renamed as Xi'an, was home to many international musicians coming from Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Persia, and India, that would come to perform or live there. This flow of international musicians occurred during the famous Tang Dynasty of China, through a 4,000-mile trade route that was known as Silk Route or Silk Road and connected East and West Asia, as well as the West with China. These musicians influenced the musical tastes of the then ruling classes (Schafer, 1963 p. 50-57).

The first newly-introduced instrument was the Persian barbat, which is an oud-like, string instrument. The barbat has developed into many other instruments and is considered one of the oldest instruments in the world. The Chinese have known the barbat's development into the pipa; the Japanese into the biwa; and the Vietnamese know its later version in the form of the ty-ba. The modification of the western guitar is considered a ty-ba variation, known as six-stringed instrument (luc huyen cam), and was introduced in early 1900s in South Vietnam; it is now an instrument commonly seen among other chamber ensembles in the Vietnamese music (Nguyen and Miller, 1993). Going back to the barbat, it has also developed into the European lute and the Arabic 'ud (Kishibe, 1940 p. 261-304).

The Hindu Kingships and the spread of Buddhism both played an important role in shaping the Asian cultural life, and power and wealth used to be symbolized by the bronze gongs that are most commonly seen within Southeast Asia. Perhaps this is the reason its music culture has been described as a gong culture, due to the large number of large, traditional

ensembles that consist of tuned metal gongs in their majority. Each South Asian region has a different name for the gong ensembles and the production of the first gong-ancestors were ritual bronze drums that looked much like inverted kettles. They date back to the fourth century B. C., when they were used as melodic and signaling instruments. Moreover, they were most commonly played in sets of up to sixteen bronze drums (Hood, 1984 p. 274). Nowadays, the gong traditions of South Asia can be mostly tracked down in the southern coastal and northern hill areas of the Philippines, where people refer to the gong ensemble as the kulintang (Nguyen and Miller, 1993).

Conclusion

Music had significant contributions to the Asian culture throughout the years. With some differences compared to the Western music, such as the European music, in texture and sound, it also has many similarities with the music heard on other parts of the planet. With no intention to categorize the Asian music as universal, or better, than other musics of the globe, it becomes somewhat obvious that the Asians had both influenced many cultures around the world, and also embraced musical influences from the Western world, as well. As illustrated throughout this paper, though music varies among different cultures, it unites people from different cultural backgrounds and becomes a fascinating gateway to other cultures. Also, what initially might sound as something strange to someone not familiar with the Asian music, it is just a matter of time before they begun to comprehend the deeper messages passed on to them through music. To many people

music is indeed a bridge that links people with the universe, or what some others want to believe, with the divine up above.

References:

Hood, Mantle (1984), *Bronze Drum*. New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments, London: Macmillan, 1984, 274.

Kishibe, Shigeo (1940), *The Origin of the P'i P'a*. The Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan, Second Series, Vol. XIX, 1940, 261-304.

Malm, William (n. d), *East Asian Arts*. Encyclopaedia Britannica. Retrieved June 4, 2014 from: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/176529/East-Asian-arts/283185/Concepts-of-music>

Nguyen, Phong and Miller, Terry (1993), *Eternal Voices: Traditional Vietnamese Music in the United States*. Lawndale, CA: New Alliance Records.

Prescott, Anne (2012), *Music as a Gateway to Learning about East Asia*.

Education About Asia Online. Volume 17, Number 1 Spring 2012. Retrieved

June 4, 2014 from: http://www.asian-studies.org/ea/Prescott_17-1.pdf

Schafer, Edward (1963), *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of T`ang Exotics*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963, 50-57.

Wong, Isabel (1992), *China. Excursions in World Music*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1992, p. 79.