

Research in Practice

Sound & Moving Image

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1. Collectivism

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3. Progression

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Independent Inquiry Proposal:

Identity Through Art, Your Place in the World

Proposed question for independent inquiry:

Within the context of music, what is the biological link between our physical brain and body and our 'mind space' and how does it help us to make sense of the world and shape us as people?

Introduction

As part of this proposal for my subsequent dissertation, I have chosen to focus my research into culture and our own identity, within the context of music. I will be looking into how our culture identity affects the art we produce and as a music practitioner, how music and other art forms influences and changes our culture and sense of identity.

I will also explore how we develop and progress as a people, on both an individual level and as a group, and how ideas created by individuals spread from a small group to encompass whole societies, using music and examples from our increasingly globalising culture to exemplify these changes.

This proposal will focus on three key aspects of human society within the context of music, *Collectivism, Individualism and Progression*.

Collectivism

"Any culture member can immediately sense that something is stylistically wrong about a greeting, a cooking pot, a song or a dance, without being able to explain why this is so" Alan Lomax, *Folk Song Style and Culture* (1968)

The concept of society forms a core part of what makes us human. Sociologist Peter L. Berger describes society as, in his book *The Sacred Canopy*: "...a human product, and nothing but a human product, that yet continuously acts upon its producers." (Berger, 1967). Society and our sense of the collective simultaneously acts on, and is acted upon by, humans (Berger, 1967).

Society is a construct that has allowed us as people to both survive and thrive for millennia. Harry Triandis describes this behaviour in his book *Individualism and Collectivism* as a “consequence of norms, duties and obligations” where an individual’s relationship with others allow them to develop and grow as a person.

It is not surprising then when we observe that all human cultures and societies naturally show a sense of music (Boer, 2009). Diana Boer, in her thesis *Social Functions of Music Listening for Young People Across Cultures*, describes the role that music plays in human society as “...very similar, for instance, lullabies are sung, dance and festivals are celebrated, personal and group identities are communicated, it delivers pleasure around the world, and many religious practises cannot be imagined without music” (Boer, 2009).

It therefore is easy to see that music forms a central part of the human collective. Music can define our identity within a group and can foster relationships between individuals (Frith, 1996).

This concept of a collective culture appears to be more prevalent in Eastern societies, i.e. Japan and India, than in Western societies, i.e. Great Britain and United States (Gajda & Oie, 2017 & Triandis, 1995).

Harry Triandis describes this process in his book *Individualism And Collectivism*: “In collectivist cultures people act like collectivists in most situations in which they are dealing with an ingroup, but they act like individualists, maximising their benefits and outcomes, in most situations where they deal with outgroups.” (Triandis, 1995).

Our sense of creativity stems from our environment, and the people we are surrounded by (Gajda & Oie, 2017). And in turn, by creating, we influence our environment and the people that reside within it.

We express our emotions and social values through music, and part of what sets humans apart from other species is our ability to collaborate with others in shared goals (Michael, et al., 2005). Music bands are formed with shared goals and intentions, and are used to express common views of the world (Boer, 2009). These shared musical expressions, if deemed relevant enough to the wider human society at a given time, can form cultures and movements that change the way a society functions over time (Randall, 2005).

Musical styles by today however, are not limited just by the borders of one’s society. With the advent of radio and especially the internet in the 20th century, we can see that the rapid globalisation of culture breaks down barriers between geographically separate societies (Boer, 2009). Diana Boer exemplifies this in her thesis: “At the present time, many music styles can be considered as global

phenomena: Hip-hop, Jazz or Rock music vibrates from radios around the world. However, it is not just Western music circling the world in the search for global popularity; there are fans of Bollywood, J-Pop, Samba and others all around the world.”

The concept of the globalization of culture and creativity has been largely met with pessimism and scepticism by many through the years (Stokes, 2014). Alan Lomax, for example in his 1968 book *Folk, Song Style and Culture*, believed that with the increasing popularisation of American music and film throughout the world, other world cultures and traditions would decrease in popularity and die out (Lomax, 1968).

However with subsequent studies into world music, we have found that societies, using the push and pull of their own collective culture over time, have developed their own unique styles that have grown into differing cultures without the traditional culture “dying out” (Stokes, 2014).

Martin Stoke exemplifies this in his journal article *Creativity, Globalisation and Music*: “Consider, for example, that broad range of musical practices usually labelled “Afropop” in the West... A guitar-based dance music, blended with rumba rhythms, and popularized in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) in the 1950s, spread to a number of emerging African post-colonial states as a result of a political identification with both Cuba (for its revolution) and Zaire (for its glamour and modernity).”

Individualism

“I ask everybody to abandon the modern tradition...do not accept counsel from masters who work in this manner”

Antonio di Pietro Averlino, Italian Renaissance Architect (1460)

Just as the sense of collectivism forms an important part of human culture and society, the inverse of collectivism, known as individualism, also forms another important aspect. Whereas collectivism focuses and prioritises shared goals and group aspirations, individualism prioritises the goals and aspirations of the individual in order to influence and change our cultures and societies (Lukes, n.d.).

Individualistic thinking prioritises autonomy, if the individual feels that the ideas of a group do not match their own, then their own ideas take priority (Triandis, 1995). This way of thinking is not without its pitfalls however, as Harry Triandis exemplifies in his book *Individualism And Collectivism*: “If the costs of relationships are greater than their enjoyments, they drop the relationships...and thus divorce is frequent” (Triandis, 1995).

In musical terms, the concept of individualism is a relatively recent phenomenon. Whereas music in the collective sense has been used to define our identity as part of a group for millennia (Frith, 1996), music in an individualistic sense is more recently used to express one's emotions and aspirations as an individual (Johnes, 2018).

This musical sense can be found commonly in the more individualistic cultures of the West, such as in the 18th century classical works of Ludwig van Beethoven (Beethoven, et al., 1905). Beethoven is widely credited with popularising the concept of “self-expression through music” as described in the book *Beethoven: The Man And The Artist As Revealed In His Own Words*: “Beethoven often gave expression to the belief that words were a less capable medium of proclamation for feelings than music” (Beethoven, et al., 1905).

Individualism, through music and other arts, allows one to determine their own goals and worldview, independent of the attitudes of the surrounding culture and society. As the writer Oscar Wilde wrote, in his essay *The Soul Of Man under Socialism*, “Art is individualism, and individualism is a disturbing and disintegrating force. There lies its immense value. For what it seeks is to disturb monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine.” (Wilde, 1891).

It is no surprise therefore that a strong sense of individualism, especially through music, has been perceived in the past to be a negative force upon society. For example the *Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology: Social Behaviour and applications*, edited by John W. Berry et al., describes the more critical conclusions of studies conducted in the United States in the 1970s: “The self-indulgence of the “me-generation” in search of self-satisfaction and a lack of social commitment have been called “social-ills” engendered by excessive individualism.” (Berry, et al., 1997)

John Ruskin, a leading art critic of the English Victorian era, was also known to have negative opinions of individualist artists (Wittkower, n.d.), as Rudolf Wittkower in his article *Genius: Individualism in Art and Artists* says: “John Ruskin abhorred individualist artists; he loved medieval art and fully accepted the concept of the medieval artist as the servant of God and as such lacking the worldly pride of individualists.”

However, we have found little evidence of this attitude having any prevalence during the Medieval period, with common knowledge nowadays supporting the idea of artists during the Middle Ages having highly individualistic attitudes just as artists do today (Schapiro, 1952).

Thus one can conclude that through individual expression and thought in music, one can create new ideas, independent of the views of wider society and push the boundaries of what is possible within not only the field of music, but as a culture and society as a whole.

The writer Tzvetan Todorov in his book *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism* describes individual thought as a “slow-revolution”, one that takes place over centuries: “To grasp it in its most general sense, we can describe it as the passage from a world whose structure and laws were pre-existing and immutable givens for every member of society, to a world that could discover its own nature and define its norms itself.” (Todorov, 2002). However, to think as individual does not mean that you must ignore the social structure of society, “the freedom of the individual does not mean he underestimates his dependence on other men” (Todorov, 2002).

Progression

“Don’t call it jazz! Call it social music!” Miles Davis (1970)

History has shown time and again that the push and pull of both Collectivism and Individualism can irrevocably change human culture and society (Gajda & Oie, 2017). This is especially apparent when we look at the history of music. When we look at popular music during the 1960s and 1970s for example, it is plain to see that music was used as a tool for change in both a collective and an individual sense (Johnes, 2018).

Martin Johnes, in his journal article *Consuming Popular Music: Individualism, Politics and Progressive Rock*, describes the progressive rock movement of the 1970s as: “...an important part of life for many young music fans. It provided them with escape, entertainment and a sense of individualism, community and intellectual reward, much of which centred upon the idea that the genre was different, uncommercial and difficult to access and understand.” Progressive music during this time, by utilising both a sense of collectivism and individualism, encouraged the first “global counterculture movement” and sparked a debate regarding where young people’s place was in wider society.

This combination of individualism and collectivism culminating in progression can be observed in many of the global musical styles that we know of today. For example, the Jazz revolution of the early 20th century can be attributed to the rejection of the string dominated style of ballroom music by Charles Joseph Bolden of The Buddy Bolden Band in 1905 (Bultman, 2017). Bethany Bultmann, in her article *Opening Riff: 100 Years of Pushing Boundaries in American Music*, says this: “...the Buddy Bolden Band (1900-1906) created an acoustic revolution in New Orleans by pushing the boundaries of loudness—

relegating strings to the rhythm section and creating a “front line” of sound with trombones, clarinets, and his cornet blasting out its dominance.” (Bultman, 2017)

Jazz, while initially an individualist idea, garnered more and more popularity as the 20th century progressed and eventually developed into a collective and formed a community, with a shared idea and worldview. The Jazz Revolution was eventually attributed to hastening the American Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, as both white and black jazz musicians would play together in jam sessions and eventually in public clubs and bars (Cosby, 2016). This is but one of many examples throughout history of how music has been used to shape and reshape human society.

It is plain to see that a balance of individual thinking and collective empathy is the only way a society can progress and improve. Having this balance can help us to discover and take into consideration the actions and consequences of our societies policies and government (McIntyre-Mills, et al., 2018).

Conclusion

With this initial exploration into the inner workings of our society, I have learned that music plays a critical role in how we initialize, enforce and adapt to change, in both our personal lives and as a wider society. Without this basic way of expressing ourselves as both individuals, and as a group, an important outlet for change and improvement would be inaccessible to us.

From representing and uplifting little known cultures to inciting global change, music remains a central and universal part of the human psyche, as it has been for millennia. This example of the process of individual thought leading to collective behaviours, which in turn culminate in the forward progression of human society, is a window into the working of our minds that I propose to research further and write my dissertation about, using my experience and knowledge as a music practitioner to exemplify and contextualise my work.

This dissertation shall be specifically on the subject of “Building Us: How Evolution has shaped our Brain, Body and Mind” which shall focus on the question of how the biological link between our physical brain and body and our ‘mind space’, helps us to make sense of the world and shape us as both individuals and in turn as a human race.

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