



# Re-evaluating Bimusicality in and for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: An Immigrant's Perspective

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## Abstract

After laying out the complexities of the globalism that surrounds us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this paper attempts to offer some reflections considering the experiences of immigrants against the background of thinking on the subject of bimusicality in ethnomusicology.

## Özet

Bu bildiri, 21. yüzyılda bizi çevreleyen küreselleşmenin ihtiva ettiği karmaşıklıkları irdeleyip etnomüzikoloji disiplininde çift müziklilik konusu üzerine yapılmış çalışmalar ışığında göçmenlerin tecrübelerini değerlendirerek çeşitli fikir ve düşünceler öne sürecektir.

There have been great changes in the world of music in the current generation brought about by the advancement of audio technologies. In a very short period of time we have transitioned from LPs to CDs, and from downloadable mp3s to limitless streaming, as a result of which instant accessibility of a vast amount of material on the web has become an accepted part of our lives. However, this new form of accessibility has also promoted, especially among the youth whose lives primarily exist online, what I would call a default form of cultural reductionism. Indeed, while it is simply not possible for an individual to process and internalize the nearly infinite amount of musical resources online, the globalism that surrounds us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century enforces an unquestioning view of this new form of accessibility as proof that we as individuals, and our 'global' period, are superior to the past. Those who are born into this reality readily accept their stature of superiority and buy into an illusion of immediacy, ubiquity and omniscience. Serge Gruzinski (2010) explains this phenomenon in the introduction to his book entitled

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*What time is it there?* "...though the Elsewhere may today be endlessly mediated, it is still no better known nor anymore familiar" (p. 3). Imagine a young, internet-saturated musician of the current generation whose musical understandings are rooted in a single musical style suddenly able to access the music of another culture. Lacking a critical view of their own provinciality and their inherited feelings of cultural 'superiority', they will be highly likely to take only a brief look at the first couple of hits on their YouTube search before moving on, convinced that they now 'know' Indian or Inuit or Javanese music. As a result, such a tendency towards reductionism can be seen as a continuation of the age-old issues of exoticism and orientalism often resulting in a heightened sense of cultural appropriation which has been quite visible recently.

Awareness of this phenomenon can certainly turn our difficult position into an advantage: I believe that attaining a sophisticated form of cosmopolitanism can certainly allow us to access many worlds without seeking to reduce or standardize them. However, this will require that now, more than ever, individuals spend more time and effort on possessing multi-cultural understandings. For example, an individual who is a bilingual speaker will have a much better chance of sorting through information pollution where complex cultural phenomena are often reduced to simple labels or headlines. I am convinced that a musician fluent in two or more musical traditions is in a similar advantageous position since they can more easily negotiate the complexities of exoticisms and appropriations in music. As a result, I strongly believe that endorsement of musicians becoming fluent in two or more musical traditions is highly necessary for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A term has been suggested to define such fluency in more than one musical tradition: bi-musicality.

The term "bi-musicality" was coined by Mantle Hood (1918-2005), an important ethnomusicologist active at the University of California Los Angeles, in his article entitled "The Challenge of "Bi-Musicality"", published in 1960. While I was expecting to confront a significant amount of literature on this topic, interestingly enough, I found out that both the usage of this term and the studies related to it following Hood's article are quite scarce. I must admit that in a world where second language acquisition has been firmly established as early as elementary education in most countries (and even extending to pre-school years in some cases), I was extremely surprised to discover the scarcity of writing on bi-musicality. Is the acquisition of a second musical tradition not as important as acquiring a second language?

Hood's short article, just a little over four pages, mainly advocates that ethnomusicologists should become competent performers of the musical traditions they study. Toward the end of the article he raises the question of the amount of time needed for an American musician to master a non-Western musical tradition, which hints at the kind of sacrifice musicians must make if their goal is to master a second musical tradition. Thirty-five years later, Jeff Todd Titon (1995) in his article entitled "Bi-musicality as metaphor" expands

the concept by describing his own experience as to how bi-musicality helped him understand musicking in the world, and greater enabled him to be in the world musically. As a result, he suggests that “bi-musicality can operate as a learning strategy, a strategy that not only leads to musical skills but to understanding people making music” (p. 289). About ten years after Titon, a few other scholars including Baily, Cottrell and Hosokawa further extended the concept to suggest an even more performative ethnomusicology, a form of bimusicality functioning at a local level, and how this concept relates to retaining the music of one’s homeland as part of an immigrant experience. Lastly, I would like to note that in 2014 Alison Tokita, primarily a linguist, in her article entitled “Bi-musicality in modern Japanese culture” effectively extends and examines the concept in light of bilinguality at societal and individual levels.

I feel that the time has come to remove the hyphen in bi-musicality and integrate this concept into all musicians’ education more seriously than ever before. However, along with this position come several important questions: Is it possible for a musician to truly become fluent in a secondary musical tradition which they acquired later in life? Is bimusicality a genuine human condition or is it a concept which is useful only as a metaphor?

My goal here is not necessarily to answer these complex questions. However, I would like to suggest that there are a number of similarities between the experiences of immigrants and bimusical individuals based on the parallels that exist between language and music which may help shed some light on the above questions. As both an immigrant from Turkey to the US and a bimusical individual first trained in western classical music and jazz who later studied Turkish music, I will refer to my own experience as I am confident that I am able to identify some of the most important issues arising from a bimusical life.

### **A State of Constant Questioning of Identity and Belonging**

One of the most difficult issues immigrants are challenged with is the uncertainty of their identity. To try and balance how much to retain of their homeland’s culture while adapting to their new home is a very difficult task. Faced with this conundrum, questioning of their identity by themselves and others around them becomes a constant in their life, which in turn forces them to reevaluate their own sense of belonging. I came to the US at the age of eighteen, but it took me about 20 years to be able to finally accept the hyphenated identity “Turkish-American”. Surely, this duration differs from person to person. However, such questioning almost never ends for others surrounding the individual. Still today, I continue to be challenged by the “stranger reactions” I sense in the actions of others. Similarly, a bimusical performer is subject to such self-questioning but also by the ‘native’ practiti-

oners of the musical tradition they are trying to master. For example, American musicians studying Hindustani music or Turkish music have been known to confront the skepticism of Indian or Turkish musicians about their ability to internalize the nuances of their traditions. This experience can, in turn, force the American musician to question his or her own feeling of belonging.

### Having a (musical) Accent

Scholars such as McGilchrist (2009) argue that similarities between music and language suggest a common origin. Indeed, one can particularly think of a number of similarities between learning languages and learning musical traditions. In fact, I have always thought that the concept of having a foreign accent was quite similar to how musicians are often able to identify an outsider in a musical tradition. I would like to try and provide an outline of possible issues which contribute to having a foreign accent in language as well as music.

It is accepted that children who master languages prior to puberty often do not develop foreign accents. However, their accent-free fluency is devoid of grammatical knowledge. Similarly in music, those who learn a musical tradition later in life are likely to have a musical accent however, musicians who grow up with a particular tradition not only do not possess a musical accent but they also rarely know about theory. For example, Roma musicians around the world almost never possess theoretical knowledge however, they are often considered the best practitioners of local musics.

Interestingly, in contrast with the above, we typically attain better fluency in writing later in life. Indeed, having written command of a language seems to be different from speaking it. For example, a native-born person with high school education will speak with no accent yet may write poorly, whereas a foreigner with a doctorate degree may speak with a heavy accent while writing far more proficiently than a native-born high school graduate. Does this phenomenon apply to music? If yes, can one argue that a composer and/or a music theorist may be in a similar position to the foreigner with a doctorate degree when they are studying a new musical tradition?

Lastly, it is important to remember that in some cases accents are not necessarily considered foreign. For example, many Hispanic Americans born in the US speaking English with an accent are not only accepted as part of the native culture but are expected to speak with their particular accent too. Similarly, when Hispanic Americans perform jazz they would be expected to exhibit all of the necessary traits of the Latin jazz genre. The main difference here is that such people (and their accents) are not necessarily 'foreign' as they are born into and make up the local culture. This position is different from a foreigner trying to access the local culture. The Turkish shadow play, *Kara-*

göz, with its stock characters provides an excellent example: just as there is the character of *çingene* representing the local Roma people, there are the characters of *Ermeni* (Armenian) and *Rum* (Greek) representing other local people speaking Turkish with heavy accents, however, all of these characters are fundamentally different from the character of *Frenk* (the European) who is clearly a foreigner.

Just as there are varying levels of integration, of sense of belonging, and of accent among immigrants as well as locals, there may very well be multiple forms of bimusicality among musicians fluent in two or more musical traditions. In the end, I am not attempting here any more than to offer some reflections and raise further questions based on my own experience against the background of thinking on the subject in ethnomusicology. That being said, I am convinced that understanding the variety of possible bimusicalities and the challenges they present to us all in this global environment will help us integrate the valuable and necessary human capacity into our education systems. The hoped-for result will be a more nuanced understanding of its contribution toward the creation of a more cosmopolitan society.

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