

Liminality in Cross-cultural Composition

By Kevin Leomo

Introduction

The concept of liminality is central to my work. Liminality can be described as a threshold state of transition; a space of in-betweenness; existing between and across boundaries. Liminality manifests in two key ways in my work: exploring transitional elements or spectra in sound: sound-silence, fragility-stability, and stasis-movement; as well as liminality as cross-cultural practice. The focus of this essay is on my cross-cultural practice and how I situate myself within a liminal space – existing between Western music, which my background is in, and non-Western musics, an area I have researched and collaborated with performers in on several occasions. This liminal space is also important to me on a personal level, as a person of mixed race, trying to reconcile my identities and who I am as a composer.

Liminality

The concept of liminality was first introduced by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, in his seminal 1909 work, *The Rites of Passage*. Liminality here is referred to in terms of rites of passages or ceremonial acts between two social phases. His work went largely unrecognised during the twentieth century until Victor Turner brought new light to it during the 1960s. Bjorn Thomassen's *Liminality and the Modern* (2014) further develops liminality in the field of social and political theory, building upon the groundwork laid by Gennep, and later Turner. 'Liminality refers to any "betwixt and between" situation or object, any in-between place or movement, a state of suspense, a moment of freedom between two structured world-views' (Thomassen 2014: 7).

Liminality is therefore an extremely useful concept when working between different musical practices; between cultural boundaries. These boundaries are important thresholds, full of contradictions and ambivalence; they both separate and join different places, providing a site of representation (Sharma 2009: 115). Homi K. Bhabha discusses the ‘third space,’ a liminal area useful for framing cross-cultural work. This third space is a ‘fantastic location of cultural difference where new expressive cultural identities continually open out performatively to realign the boundaries’ (Bhabha 1994: 219). As in my cross-cultural work, elements from different musical cultures are interwoven and the ‘third space’ can be seen as an opportunity where differences are embraced not as divisive elements, but as possibilities co-existing. In discussion of people with mixed backgrounds, anthropologist Halleh Ghorashi builds upon Bhabha’s writings to describe cultural hybridity as: ‘people celebrating multiple positioning by making choices about living with and within cultural difference’” (Ghorashi 2004: 334). For Ghorashi, this notion of cultural hybridity represents a dynamic and plural notion of culture, as opposed to an essentialist view of a static, monolithic notion of culture. My cross-cultural work engages with historical cultural practices which are then situated in a new context, occupying a liminal space, dynamic and alive.

Cross-cultural engagement

Having studied Western art music practices, I first encountered the notion of cross-

cultural practice during my master’s, when I had the opportunity to compose for Ensemble Okeanos. The ensemble is comprised of a mixture of Western and Japanese instruments – at the time, this was shakuhachi, oboe, koto, and cello. In order to write for these instruments, I undertook research into the performance practice, history, and playing techniques of the shakuhachi and koto, as well as their place in Japanese music, both traditional and contemporary. Aside from learning about these instruments’ physical characteristics, I also researched the accompanying philosophies and aesthetics of Japanese music, which are ingrained in the instruments’ performance practices.

In my work for Ensemble Okeanos, I attempted to bring Western and Japanese instruments together through blending their sounds in a way that was symbolic of a cross-cultural approach, engaging in dialogue between multiple cultural sources. The resulting work examined the ensemble’s fundamental juxtaposition of Japanese and Western instruments to highlight their contrasts whilst also demonstrating how they could be brought together. Ghorashi states that the process of identity formation involves both sameness and difference simultaneously (ibid.: 330). Although I didn’t recognise this at the time, this initial act of cross-cultural composition was also a way for me to reconcile my dual identity.

This was the first time I worked in this cross-cultural space, bringing together Western instruments and in this case, Japanese instruments. Inhabiting this liminal space between two cultural practices was extremely

fruitful and led to me to consider the value of this synthesis or bringing together of two cultures; a reflection or way for me to engage with being from two different cultures myself, embracing both these confluences of similarities and differences. Bhabha describes this intercultural experience, the ‘contaminated yet connective tissue between cultures – at once the impossibility of culture’s containedness and the boundary between. It is indeed something like culture’s ‘in-between’, bafflingly both alike and different’ (Bhabha 1996: 2).

I learned how a cross-cultural approach can afford a different perspective to composition, which is something I pursued further, by developing different models for cross cultural composition and collaboration.

I am interested in a repurposing of instruments or altering how performers interact with their instruments, unlearning ‘traditional’ training or methods of playing. Recontextualising performance practices and techniques to create different sounds has been a fruitful avenue of research for me.

Following my initial study of Japanese instruments, I went on to write a piece for solo alto flute as part of Psappa Ensemble’s Composing for Flute scheme. Based on acquired knowledge of shakuhachi playing techniques, I created a recontextualisation of shakuhachi performance practice and sound production on the Western alto flute in order to demonstrate how traditional techniques can be repurposed into a new music idiom. Another example of this model was work I carried out for cello as well as string quartet, influenced by my research into Korean instruments, haegeum and geomungo, following a composition for performers from the Society for New Korean music. Similarly to the interpretation of shakuhachi on flute, I worked with cellist Emily De Simone on techniques informed by the sounds and playing methods of these two Korean instruments.

Models of cross-cultural composition		
non-Western instruments	Western instruments	mixture of Western and non-Western instruments
sketches (2019) for sho, shakuhachi, duduk, erhu, kemençe, sarangi	<i>Nocturne</i> (2017) for alto flute	<i>Cross Currents</i> (2016) for shakuhachi, oboe, koto, cello
<i>catching the light</i> (2020) for sitar	sketches (2019) for cello / string quartet	<i>The Way the Light Falls</i> (2018) for flute, clarinet, horn, bassoon, haegeum, geomungo

Sound and silence

My engagement with cross-cultural work has had a lasting impact on my approach to sound and silence. From my initial research into Japanese music, I learned about Zen Buddhism's close link with the shakuhachi and approaches to noise (*sawari*) and silence (*ma*). It was eye-opening to discover these different ways of thinking about music. What I discovered about Japanese musical aesthetics reframed my compositional practice and how I thought about musical parameters such as sound, silence, space, and temporality.

My fixation with instrumental timbre has certainly been influenced by non-Western instruments' much broader colour palettes in comparison to Western ones, as well as the inclusion of a wider range of sounds. The acceptance of 'noise' or sound in addition to pure pitch contrasts with traditional Western approaches which often focus on 'purity' of tone and technique. This has manifested in my writing for Western instruments, where I seek out playing methods which create more detailed and varied sounds, as well as techniques that can be considered fragile and not necessarily reliable, which can be considered antithesis to typical Western notions. A prime example of this would be my exploration and research of multiphonics – the sounding of multiple pitches and frequencies simultaneously on instruments which normally produce single pitches – across various different instruments and how they can be exploited to create rich and fascinating sonic results.

Of course, Western composers have

approached these ideas in various forms, but it was important for me to discover my own pathway through my navigation of intercultural thinking about sound. The very concept of combining or synthesising Western and non-Western instruments and associated approaches to music was very interesting to me as a way to help forge my own compositional identity whilst also considering my own mixed heritage, between East and West, situated in this liminal space between two cultural zones. In this work, I perform the role of what Victor Turner describes as a 'liminal actor' (Turner 1977: 94-113), bridging cross-cultural differences. Jasmin Mahadevan expands upon this by stating that liminal actors' culturally liminal position between two spaces allows them to be intercultural specialists; 'the permanent inhabitants of the in-between' (Mahadevan 2015: 243).

Sitar collaboration

A significant development in my practice was participation in Psappa Ensemble's Composing for Sitar Scheme. I had the opportunity to write for solo sitar – there isn't much experimental music written for sitar, so I was eager to create a work in a cross-cultural space between my Western practice and traditional Indian music.

At our first session, the sitarist Jasdeep Singh Degun informed me that we weren't going to work with notated scores, and he therefore wouldn't be playing the sketches that I had brought with me. He instead asked me to sing

what I wanted him to play, engaging with aural transmission practices rooted in classical Indian music. I was immediately forced outside of my comfort zone – which was working with notated scores; certainly not singing. I realised that in my practice as a composer relying on said scores, I hadn't devoted time to thinking about how so many musical cultures operate *without* a reliance on these written scores. In my previous cross-cultural engagements, I had benefitted from the luxury of working with musicians proficient in Western notation. While Jasdeep was of course conversant in Western notation, it was clear that my compositional process would be carried out differently.

I therefore embarked on an extremely interesting project, grappling with the challenge of working within a cross-cultural space I was less accustomed to. I had to reconcile our different musical practices, preconceptions, and approaches to music making. I had to learn to work in a way which didn't rely on notated scores, as well as adapt my compositional approach to be more inclusive of Jasdeep's musical practice of North Indian classical music. In turn, Jasdeep became more open to experimentation and incorporating sounds and techniques which he normally wouldn't utilize. Occupying this liminal space between our practices allowed for a certain type of freedom that Thomassen espouses; a freedom which 'sparks creativity and innovation, peaking in transfiguring moments of sublimity' (Thomassen 2018: 1). This process could be likened to the *intercultural* negotiations described by Mahadevan in which 'transition takes place from two different and culture-specific negotiation scripts towards a

potential intercultural script that establishes a link between previously divergent negotiation patterns' (Mahadevan 2015: 242). The concept of liminality here helps to explain this process of intercultural negotiation and collaboration.

We ended up working together closely over a period of several months. I would record sounds of other instruments or techniques such as utilizing piano strings as a proxy for the sitar and experimenting with the types of actions and sounds I wanted Jas to replicate or try out. Eventually these sounds were codified in a text score, but the main method of transmission and composing and learning the work was sonic. This different experience of performer-composer power dynamics was a crucial learning experience for me, particularly in this realm of cross-cultural work. Coming together with Jas to create a work collaboratively in a liminal space between two different musical cultures was a really special experience – I learned so much about collaborative practice and working within and between Western and non-Western musics, navigating personal and cultural boundaries, whilst considering my own personal identity.

Notation

In addition to my collaborative practice, my notational practice has been influenced by my cross-cultural engagements. I believe that it's important to use an appropriate method of notation for the context of the collaboration or the practice of the performer, as I discovered in my work with Jasdeep. I've a system of notation which tries to be less prescriptive and more

open, especially in terms of duration, rhythm, and structure, while still maintaining a high degree of control in regard to sound production and timbre, as these are key elements of my practice.

I am also interested in having notation engage with the sonic result in some way. The perception of silence and extremely quiet music can be likened to visual imagery and the concept of negative space. In the work of artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Marcia Hafif, viewers must take a closer look to attend to the minute surface detail of their paintings; one's method of attention shifts to accommodate the object being perceived. This is something that I try to capture in my approach to notation, especially in terms of simplicity; allowing the player to focus on the production of sound rather than trying to grapple with too much visual information or clutter.

This has been particularly influenced by my study of Japanese approaches to silence, or *ma*, which led me to study composers such as John Cage and Tōru Takemitsu, and more recently, interacting with composers from the Wandelweiser collective. Through this research, I was able to refine my approach to silence and notation. I have also begun to utilise more text-based scores, as well as further develop my practice in aural transmission and collaborative work, influenced by non-Western practices.

Conclusion

In summary, much of my recent work has involved evaluating the different influences on my practice and how their convergence

has helped shape my compositional identity. A significant part of this has been my cross-cultural engagement and time spent occupying a cultural space between Western music, and musics of Japan, Korea, and India, as touched upon throughout this essay.

It's important to note that working in a cross-cultural space carries certain elements that one should be acutely aware of. Sensitivity in this space is extremely important – you *must* be aware of the value of things that you can never fully understand or understand in the ways that someone from that lived culture does. However, these collaborations are so fruitful, and should be continued to be undertaken, with the correct intention and approach.

In my work with the sitarist Jasdeep Singh Degun, we both left our comfort zones and were significantly challenged in our working methods and practice to create a work together navigating the relationship of our collaboration, as well as cultural boundaries and musical practices. Ghorashi describes this hybrid positioning as being not about a duality of cultures, but about the feeling of being different but the same – a duality is not created, but instead a potential duality is solved (Ghorashi 2004: 339).

As a person of mixed heritage, this cross-cultural journey has been important. The concept of liminality is useful in helping me describe this feeling of in betweenness – of being between two spaces: one Western, the other Asian – while often at times not feeling entirely home in either space, but rather somewhere in between.

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