

BOUNDARIES OF AUTHENTICITY IN TRADITIONAL IMPROVISED MUSIC

I had the good luck to study Azerbaijani mugham with several different exponents teaching greatly divergent playing styles. It led me to question what was authentic in the music I learned. Thanks to that question, my perspective on what is permissible and what is not in the realm of improvisations has undergone considerable scrutiny. From the earliest phases of my lifelong study, the issue of authenticity has always been a high priority, especially given my status as a non-member of the community.

Authenticity in musical traditions has been a source of concern for ethnomusicologists from the inception of their profession. People used to bite coins to test their authenticity. How do we test the authenticity of an ethnically distinct musical tradition? We have to ask a member of that community whether the sample of music belongs to their cultural milieu. If the response is an immediate and unequivocal yes, we must assume this member ascribes the quality of authenticity to that sample of music. When enough members arrive at a consensus, we can safely declare the music "authentic."

In the case of mugham and its various styles of playing, there is classical mugham played on native indigenous instruments taught in the national music conservatories and music schools, and there is modern wedding mugham which is played on western instruments; saxophone, clarinet, electric guitar, electric violin, synthesizer, and accordion or the Azeri adaptation, the garmon. Musicians playing on western instruments for the Azeri wedding ceremony play highly improvised, almost jazz-like versions of mugham. There are so many versions of mugham - especially instrumental mugham - that one cannot insist on any one version of it. Mugham has enough flexibility for that. That doesn't mean mugham has no boundaries; every genre has boundaries by definition. Mugham contains a wide variety of styles, from simple versions that are nevertheless emotionally powerful, to the most elusively nuanced, complex and intricate versions redolent of musical virtuosity and nearly impenetrable to learn. In other words, you can play anything you want, so long as it feels like mugham to a member of that community.

Improvising in the manner of theme and variation in traditional music is not just allowed, it's expected, but incorporating foreign musical styles veers from tradition in the strictest sense of that word. Everyone has a right to play or sing music however they wish. However, it seems reasonable to want experimentalists to explain what they are doing to those who may not know the difference between the traditional version and an experimental or fusion version. In Azerbaijan, there are fans of experimental blends of mugham with other genres and there are critics. I haven't conducted any formal surveys, but anecdotally I would say there are at least two critics for every fan, maybe three, in the capital Baku, and the ratio goes up the further from the city one goes. The question is, has the blend under consideration veered from tradition sufficiently for the members of the community to question its authenticity.

The essential elements of mugham lend themselves to improvisatory melodic experimentation, within certain limits. One of those elements, meter free composition, is particularly open to interpretation. Because mugham is meter free, there is no overt 'beat'

to indicate when a certain note is to be played. Therefore one must learn the 'syntax' of mugham just like one learned the syntax of one's first language, by exposure to it. The cadence of the phrases in meter free mugham improvisations resembles the cadence and has the feel of declamatory speech used in the telling of epic legends. Indeed, the feeling brought on by how mugham unfolds is similar or analogous to the unfolding of a story of great antiquity.

Mugham can be said to have a distinct, recognizable syntax when referring to the phraseology of mugham: by what 'rules' a practitioner knows how to assemble a cluster of notes together to make a phrase that sounds authentically within the genre of mugham. Once learned, the syntax of mugham lends itself to a practitioner evolving their own unique version of that style and still be authentically within the genre.

In contrast to improvising in the traditional syntax of mugham, mixing mugham with other genres - jazz, blues, rock, classical and pop – shows how they can be enhanced by borrowing elements of mugham, but mugham itself isn't enhanced by the introduction of these other genres; it can only be diluted and weakened. That raises the issue of 'living' traditions vs. calcified traditions. To what extent is a tradition dependent on experimentation and improvisation to be a living tradition and not calcified, and when is that experimentation only spoiling the beauty and attenuating the power of a tradition?

Within the context of a given cultural milieu, there are elements of variety on common themes that define the category. Azerbaijani mugham, for example, is a category of music making that by general consensus among the members of the group who identify themselves as Azerbaijani, they call mugham. If any singer or musician alters the specifics of mugham to suit their own musical needs, then they run the risk of their art being regarded by a significant sector of community members as not authentic. Authenticity, in this context, could be interchanged with the word 'pure' in the sense that the musical tradition itself - not the confluence of cultural milieus which gave birth to the tradition - can be rendered authentically, that is, not infiltrated by other musical sensibilities which are identifiably foreign to the tradition.

The word 'pure' is being used here in a way similar to metallurgic purity or impurity. One can say that any mix of metals is potentially an alloy; therefore the concept of impurity is invalid. But when a group of chemists regard a certain alloy as, by definition, a mix with specific properties, i.e. stainless steel, then any mix of metals which does not strictly conform to the recipe of metals that constitute that alloy would be considered an 'impure' mixture, and therefore not really stainless steel.

We have international standards for what can and cannot be in the mix of some alloy. With music, that is not so easy to establish. Yet members of a community deem the experimentalism of a musician as 'impure' when he incorporates musical elements and sensibilities that are foreign to the genre. It would be regarded as mixing into a traditional musical recipe foreign (impure) elements and therefore it is no longer pure traditional. A purist holds purity of tradition as a very high priority, if not the highest priority. This doesn't mean that the so-called 'pure' traditional form of the music is not itself evolved from a mix of derived and even foreign cultural elements. But once that

mix has been established and generally accepted as a valid category, it goes forward in time possessing the quality of integrity. It becomes true to itself as a form of art analogous to a metal alloy that is widely used, and any significant alteration to the recipe constitutes the injection of impurities and in the world of traditional music, that constitutes a distortion rather than an improvement of the genre.

In metallurgy and in music, injections of impurities have often produced a new material with arguably superior - or at least unique – metallurgic qualities, or a new musical genre with notable artistic merit. We have vivid examples of African music evolving into blues, jazz and rock by incorporating other styles of music and by sheer invention. Many if not all musical traditions have similarly mixed origins. But once it is an established tradition, it can be rendered pure or impure. Injections of foreign musical elements push the new version past the boundary line of 'authentic'. That is the meaning and sense of my use of the word 'pure' in this context. It is not meant to imply that mugham or any other traditional music has no antecedents derived from other genres.

Certainly the music we now regard as authentic did not sound this way from the dawn of civilization, so it may seem reasonable that it could be still evolving. That question - sincere enough sounding in the asking - allows us to believe that modern day innovators are improving the tradition right before our ears, when mostly we can feel how they are diluting something of great beauty and perfection, something which perhaps can no longer be improved, strengthened, evolved, etc. Is it hubris that causes us to imagine the version we call authentic is unimprovable? Is this not what people of past epochs may have felt about their authentic traditions at that time?

One musician I know suggested that the best measure for whether a given genre has been weakened or strengthened is in the realm of what he calls spiritual radiance. For traditional musical genres, it appears to be a natural process at work that enriched and empowered the increase in spiritual radiance in the music as it evolved. This perspective pits the traditionalist view against the innovational view. Ultimately, it is up to the community to determine by consensus and practice what form will prevail to become the new authentic version.