

A Review on Musical Exoticism the History of Scholarship and Extension of Concept

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Abstract: Musical Exoticism has emerged as a significant concept in musicology. The previous research on it has evolved from a narrow focus on foreign musical elements to a much broader view of full-context-exoticism practices. This paper explores this historical development of the scholarship and its implications for interpreting Western music. By examining the transformation of Music Exoticism, the researcher can gain insights in how it has shaped our understanding of Western musical tradition.

Keywords: Exoticism, Orientalism, Musical Devices, Cultural Critique

1. Introduction

Musical Exoticism is a multifaceted and intriguing subject that has engaged scholars and music enthusiasts for generations, as Ralph P. Locke has argued with prestigious illustration in the article *On Exoticism, Western Art Music, and the Words We Use*[1], which he published as a sort of supplement to his pivotal work *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections*[2], the term “Exoticism”, which the researcher assumes to be normalized by now carries varying meanings to a considerably large degree in different contexts.

In the article, Locke examines the concept on two basic levels: 1) the etymology of the word “exotic” itself, which dates back to Ancient Greece, meaning “away from” a specific entity that is commonly considered to be home and (at least vaguely) reflects a culturally identifiable “Elsewhere”; 2) the way it has been applied in both music-theoretical and more general cultural practices, often referring to something “unusual” or “rarely encountered.”

However, this limited understanding does not fully capture the complexity of the concept.

While early examples of exoticist music can be traced back to the 17th and 18th centuries — banking no doubt on the Age of Exploration, musical representations that evoke overt exotic perception to present-day audiences are linked to 19th-century composers such as Bizet, Delibes, and Puccini, who drew inspiration from the music of Spain, Egypt, and China, respectively.

Even though these composers are confined to the same opera genre, the differences between the exotic practices of the former and the fin-de-siècle composers are never merely musical components or dramatic scenario that signifies alterity (whether a specific sense of place is at issue or not).

There is a broader picture of 19th-century imperialism and colonialism. Furthermore, there are artistic attributes involving the question of what function exotic elements serve in making Western art music itself.

This was once expressed by the German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus in his old formulation, which

did not touch on the full range of the issue: "...the crucial factor in the spread of exoticism among serious-minded musicians was a development in compositional technique"[3].

Therefore, this paper aims to explore the different perspectives on "Exoticism" (or corollary terms such as "Orientalism") found in various scholarships the researcher encounters in musicology studies, focusing on the dimensions of musical devices and cultural critique and proposing an extended understanding of the concept in the end.



Figure 1: Century Music [2]

2. Exoticism as Musical Devices

In the monograph *On the Question of "Exoticism" in 19th Century Music* [4], author A. L. Ringer traces the early source of non-Western music available in Europe that was first introduced during the Enlightenment. Yet, Ringer questioned why such documentary resources were not used for at least a century.

Missionaries and other travelers printed precious authentic melodies of the Orient as early as 1736. However, the supposedly artistic novelty of these resources was largely neglected or simply applied in musical practice without any progress for decades.

The situation in Germany, where classicism essentially took place, was slightly different. In 1740, Composer Telemann commented: "... could pick up enough ideas from them (Polish and Hanakian music) in a week to last a lifetime.

In short, this music contains much valuable material if it is adequately treated" [4].

However, such an attitude was almost an isolated case since an entire century was to pass before this view towards folklore became mainstream or the usage of folkloristic resources became folklorism.

In the article, Ringer attributes this overlook of foreign musical resources partly to the values and prejudices of the time. However, most importantly, when concerning thriving exotic works in the 19th century with reference to Nietzsche, who regarded the narrow nationalism as the greatest danger that threatened German music, Ringer considered all Exoticist practices that had now come into being as a matter of artistic survival — saving German music from its banality and monotony. He concluded that "in the end, art follows its organic evolution, ... never completely subject to socio-political events" [4].

In a word, this article viewed the practice of Musical Exoticism merely as applying musical

components with a curious nature to replenish the European arsenals.

Some progress is evident in *Orientalism and Musical Style* [5] by scholar Derek B. Scott, published 34 years later.

He opened with a critique of Edward Said's famous impression: "The researcher need not look for correspondence between the language used to depict the Orient and the Orient itself, not so much because the language is inaccurate but because it is not even trying to be accurate..." [6].

Scott argued that this is only the situation found in works like Rameau's *Les Indes Galantes* (1735), where "Persians are musically indistinguishable from Peruvians" [5].

More composers in the 19th century, such as Delibes, had come to realize that there was no homogeneous cultural Other.

Therefore, the central part of this article was to analyze all the changes in the Orientalist musical code.

Nevertheless, it is somewhat ironic that after mapping the Orient into Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Spain, North Africa, the Asian Subcontinent, and the Far East, and through a careful analysis of how each of them was connoted in a more precise manner, the article still inevitably concluded that there might be no distinction made between more specific cultural unit such as China and Japan. Furthermore, the end of this article touched on the question of the meaning of Orientalist music.

The author argues that the positive side is that it promotes the weakening of the dominant values within the West itself. In this sense, the description of the European's rural countryside plays no different role than the representation of the East. An in-depth discussion of this question will lead us to the next topic, the cultural critique of Exoticist Art.

3. Exoticism Within Cultural Theory

By "dominant values," Scott vaguely suggested that it should refer to "the rapid social change brought on by industrialization" [5], and it is in this context that the Orient was conceived of as a fascinating place where civilization is stable and with eternal quality.

Musical Exoticism [7] by YiMin Jiang further examined the distortion and alienation of human nature brought about by the high development of capitalism in the Industrial Age.

Jiang claimed that the distant foreign culture had provided a safe zone for the trauma of reality for the European elite and that they had used it as a kind of self-salvation not only for their music but also for their national survival [7].

By functioning the Orient as areas that have not been polluted by commodity culture, the concept of "Noble Savage," which couples fascination with denigration, was formed.

Concurrently, the risk of the Occident's intellectual authority over the Orient also took shape.

Critiques of the West's systematically formalized discourse on the Orient culminated no doubt in Edward W. Said's influential work, *Orientalism* [6]. Since 1978, there has been a significant increase in the attention and research on the postcolonial aspect of Musical Exoticism studies.

These studies highlight two fundamental notions, i.e., 1) the West invented the Orient, and 2) the Orient suggests mixed messages of both negative and positive. However, it is essential to re-emphasize some fundamental aspects of Said's argument, especially when applying them to musicology. In an article published in 2016, author Sindhumathi Revuluri re-underscored Said's intervention about the "*relationship* between imaginative acts of representation and institutions of knowledge, and how the interaction continues to exert a powerful influence on scholarly work." [8] While the imaginative acts of representation refer primarily to arts, institutions of knowledge refer to a series of scholarly works that are supposed to be objective and ideologically free.

In Said's ideas, of course, the West spontaneously invented both aspects. Moreover, Said says, Orientalism initially took shape among the interplay between them.

Revuluri reflected this notion on the very title of Said's book, claiming that "-ism" within the term

Orientalism “already built in the idea of an active practice: a making of or an attention to” [8]. Therefore, for us musicologists, the researcher must capture this coherent representation system in the study of Musical Exoticism in various historical moments. Instead of focusing solely on musical scores, the researcher must also consider scenario, performance, reception, and scholarship genres.

In this circumstance, *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections* by Ralph P. Locke is intriguing. As Matthew Head has indicated in *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*[9], its intention of rejecting ideology or any cultural theory ends up being illusory and, in my opinion, not in a negative way.

In many cases, it appears to be somewhat a response to Said’s initial call on attention to the active and systematic practice of Orientalism, or at least had inadvertently bridged the gap between Said’s intention and how his work was invoked in musicology for decades.

His inclusive definition of what Exoticism is shed light on multiple domains that were exclusive to previously established theories: 1) Musical Exoticism as characterization, including those without audible significations of Otherness; 2) Exoticism as nationalism; 3) “Overt,” “Submerged,” and “Transcultural” Exoticism.

The latter, before all, is an intricate area since (audible or inaudible) elements here sometimes no longer serve a representational purpose as markers of a cognizable Other at all.

To elaborate on all these new zones, Locke reflects on the complete process of musiking: the approach to exoticizing in composition, the role of performers in conveying resulting works, and the way the audience and scholars perceive and reflect on all the things given.

In doing so, there is a clear demonstration of the dynamic process of how Otherness is constructed.

4. Conclusion

The above analysis demonstrated how scholarly works shifted their focus from exotic materials to how they function as Exoticism within the Western framework.

However, by emphasizing this aspect, the researcher draws attention to Western music’s developmental trajectory for its own sake. Such evoke is particularly evident in domains of “Submerged” and “Transcultural” Exoticism, which lies in chapter 9 of Locke’s book — it is an excellent elaboration of how European compositional norms can be absorbed, domesticated, or appropriated outright from another culture.

Therefore, at this stage, as an intelligent review article on Locke's book by David R. M. Irving has pointed out, "the critical question is: *when* and *how* do exotic (...) styles become ‘naturalized’ by the appropriating culture?" [10].

And obviously, this question is less about Exoticism and more about musical evolution. Or is it? On all accounts, one thing is certain: by investigating this critical question within the realm of Musical Exoticism, not only the content of the concept is to be extended and transformed but also its form — Exoticism would no longer be a question of an entity but a question of lens.

As Irving has argued, "the prototypes of almost every 'Western' instrument derive ultimately from the 'Orient.'," through the lens of Exoticism, an innovative perspective on the reading of the entire history of Western art music will be shed light on.

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