TEMPO 70 (278) 67–69 © 2016 Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S0040298216000358

AMERICAN LOCAL AMERICAN GLOBAL

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Of the conversations I had with Bob Gilmore when he was a Dartington College lecturer and lived in Totnes, five minutes from where I live, there was one in particular that we returned to a few times. And it concerned the way the burgeoning American folk movement from the 1920s through to the 50s interacted with experimentalism in music, perhaps surprisingly, yet in some significant ways.

Perhaps this dynamic could be traced to the very non-experimental Dvorak's visit to America in the 1890s when he urged American composers to seek out their nation's folk music, the musics of Native Americans and African-Americans. But of course there were also white folk music traditions of which he apparently knew little or nothing. My conversations with Bob, however, mainly focused on the period of the 1930s and 40s when the Library of Congress got heavily involved in the work of folklore collectors. It was part of the New Deal and had the backing of President Roosevelt and also of the American Communist Party.

Some interactions between vernacular music and experimentalism are well known. There's the case of Ruth Crawford Seeger who was drawn into the folk movement via her husband, the ethnomusicologist Charles Seeger, and also via folklorist Alan Lomax, for whom she worked as transcriber of field recordings and music arranger. Charles Ives, famously quoted musical Americana. Harry Partch sent some of his music and ideas to Alan Lomax, not entirely fruitfully it seems. Partch and Woody Guthrie shared some personal history riding the rails in boxcars out of places like Barstow, about which Partch, of course, wrote a set of pieces. As far back as the 20s and certainly the 30s, Henry Cowell used folkloric influences in his some of his compositions, as well as actively promoting interest in vernacular music from many countries. In the late 1920s, he taught a course entitled 'Music of the World's Peoples' at the New School for Social Research in New York – a pioneer of what is now called 'world music'.

In the same vein was Moses Asch's Folkways record label, launched in 1948, which was devoted to international field recordings. Yet Folkways also issued John Cage's performance lecture *Indeterminacy* performed by Cage and David Tudor. At one time Folkways, unwittingly one feels, even suggested a rapprochement between the vernacular and the experimental by listing Cage in their catalogue as Johnny Cage. In 1957 Folkways put out a remarkable album of new music from the 1920s onwards, including works by Mossolov, Cage, Varese, Cowell, Ussachevsky, and Frederick Ramsey Junior, who was also a folklorist and fieldworker in jazz and blues. Some pieces on this album were electronic – so it seems there was no hang-up about supposedly 'natural' folk coexisting with electronics.

What else? Little details like Cage's notes to singers of his *Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs* which includes the instruction to sing non-vibrato like a folk singer, and so on . . .

In seeking some confluences between the folkloric and the experimental I'll suggest just two avenues that I find particularly interesting. The first is to note that folk music and experimentalism were, in effect, both countercultural in America, although also utopianly patriotic; and this was long before the popular counterculture of the 60s. At the heart of countercultural movements is a sense of 'scrap the orthodoxy and start again'. The folklorists implied this by retrieving musical frameworks from a pre-modern past, albeit idealised and sentimentalised undoubtedly. The experimentalists like Partch or Cage aimed to 'start again' by sidestepping or rejecting what they saw as Western musical orthodoxies. In both cases, however, there was a search for a wider, universal perspective that nevertheless can sometimes become intensely community based. The aspirations of the folk movement have always looked both ways, from localism on the one hand to universal aspirations on the other.

For those who sought out paths other than commercial popular music or European-derived art music, both areas, folklore and experimentalism, were very inviting. Despite their apparent incompatibility (conservative versus radical) both offered relevant and complementary areas of discourse. The folkloric invoked the grass roots, and was broadly democratic and in many cases socialistic. Experimentalism, however, was more liberal, anarcho-liberal perhaps, in a typically American way – I am thinking here of Thoreau, the Transcendentalists, the come-outers and the rest. Socialism and anarcho-liberalism are both inherently countercultural, or at least they are when they are still marginal and not official culture. The twin cultural prongs of democratic myth and the individual freedoms of liberalism are both writ large on the American folk movement and experimental music alike.

I said I'd suggest two avenues: the other concerns folklore and experimentalism as opposite predispositions in a dynamic of cultural spaces – artistic, political or social – and incidentally touches on my own path as a musician. Folklore generally takes us to local, face-to-face relationships, long tradition, community, and art with an implicitly collective character at root. Experimentalism, in its overall stance, although not necessarily in practice, generally goes for a more global view – humanity rather than community, innovation rather than tradition, an unknown rather than a known public, individualism rather than collectivism. These perhaps look like irreconcilables, but can also be seen as two sides of the same coin – related because of their opposition.

Amongst the resources of locality may be numbered a fund of musicians and willing participants, traditions, colleges, venues, or idioms and so on. These can be used as the basis of statements of wider significance than the purely local, and can at the same time position this within face-to-face contact, bonding, human size. The tension between the local and the experimental can be used inventively with no sense of being irreconcilable. For example, ask a group of untrained, non-specialist performers to carry out experimental actions and you get different results to if you had given this to trained specialists.

Harry Partch could perhaps stand as symbol, a kind of one-man crossroads, of this dynamic. On the one hand he wrote much about music as a universal practice, striving to go beyond established idioms and musical frameworks. On the other, his unique instruments constructed with the skill and dedication of a traditional craftsman,

were (and are) almost impossible to move out of one locality, and need performers whose training in unique skills bonds them together as a kind of community. His actual practice, it might be said, was in danger of aborting his aspirations to a greater purview. Articulating this vernacular/experimental dynamic in a more concrete way, listening to Partch we sometimes hear commonplace musical ideas such as waltz time, for example, but played on unusually tuned instruments with odd timbres. This can result in the music sounding like an oddly out-of-tune waltz or whatever; both aspects of the dynamic are thus clearly audible.

The local/global dynamic is characteristic of our times, increasingly so in the digital age. In this respect Cowell, Asch, the Seegers and the rest were prophets of globalism, although their contributions were distinctively American. For example, it's hard to imagine the crossovers between the vernacular and the experimental, which I began by describing in the American context, occurring in England, despite England's long and pioneering history of folksong collecting and revivals. The American story, on the other hand, has much to offer us now.

Today there are two nightmare scenarios. One is to lose all sight of locality and therefore any sense of the grass roots vernacular. The other is to retreat away from the global view and into petty regionalism and nationalism. Working with the positive aspects of this dynamic, even bringing the two dispositions together, is enriching and grounding, rooted in locality and yet looking beyond it. As an example, I am associated with a community radio station in South Devon, Soundart Radio, which has an intensely local character but is also part of the international Radia network with more than 25 stations including Paris, Montreal, Sydney, Rotterdam, Vienna, Oslo and London. Programmes are exchanged or made specially for international broadcasting.

In my own work, inspired by the Americans, but also others such as Cardew, I have often explored the apparent paradox of localist experimentalism or experimental approaches to the vernacular and everyday people. But that's another story.