
Borrowed for Permanent Use: The Instruments INDIA commissions

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This article reflects on a number of issues surrounding the appropriation of culturally identifiable sound material for artistic purposes – both overall or broader concerns and those that may arise particularly in conjunction with electroacoustic musical composition. More specifically, we explore questions potentially raised by three electroacoustic compositions recently commissioned by the Instruments INDIA project, a unique cultural partnership between Liverpool Hope University (represented by Dr Manuella Blackburn) and Milapfest (represented by Alok Nayak). Those three compositions were created exclusively with materials from an extensive library of Indian music performances, curated and recorded by Blackburn specifically for Instruments INDIA, and premiered in concert in Liverpool, UK, 20 January 2017. Following the broader discussion of relevant concerns, we briefly review some perspectives offered by the three composers (one of whom is the author), as they relate to cultural appropriation in general, and working with the Instruments INDIA sound library in particular.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Preface

In 2015, following an international call for proposals, the Instruments INDIA project offered several composers the opportunity to access a unique, custom-recorded library of Indian traditional musical material and to ‘borrow’ that material for commissioned compositions. The three works completed using the library were premiered in the Capstone Theatre, Liverpool Hope University on 20 January 2017.

Selections from the project’s library have remained available online, as a resource for both researchers and the general public – and the project as a whole appears, in many ways, to be a benchmark for promoting constructive cross-cultural understanding.

But the artistic appropriation or ‘borrowing’ of culturally identifiable material continues to be a widely debated practice, and even those contexts that try to be respectful and constructive by design may raise questions about ‘appropriate appropriation’.

This article reflects on some of those questions, both from broader perspectives such as acquisition tactics and power, singularity and loss, and curation (among

others), and in the particular contexts of the project and the three commissioned works.

The author was one of the commissioned composers; much of the commentary, then, will inevitably be subjective. My hope is simply that personal experience with this project, and with earlier creative activities involving ‘cultural appropriation’, will bring some useful additional perspective to the discussion.

1.2. About Instruments INDIA

The Instruments INDIA project is the result of a partnership between Liverpool Hope University and Milapfest, led by Dr Manuella Blackburn and Alok Nayak respectively (Instruments INDIA [n.d.](#); Blackburn [2014a](#)).

Blackburn, who is both an active electroacoustic composer and a respected commentator on cultural appropriation in sound, has explained that the project initially ‘started life as a creative pursuit with the aim of composing new electroacoustic music from recordings of Indian musical instruments’. Those initial explorations resulted in new compositions by Blackburn – an acousmatic piece, *Javaari* (2013), and a mixed work, *New Shruti* (2013) (Blackburn [2014a](#): 146).

To broaden the scope of the work, Blackburn partnered with Milapfest, a long-standing Liverpool-based arts organisation dedicated to ‘the promotion of Indian Arts, Music and Crafts’ (Milapfest [n.d.](#)), and set out to create ‘a sound archive for educational and compositional use’ (Blackburn [2014a](#): 146). Through a website that introduces the archive, and a related ‘app’, the project now provides easily accessed educational resources for both the general public and concert-goers, as well as promotional assistance to participating Indian traditional music artists.

The full library of performances ultimately recorded by Blackburn for the project (with sessions in both India and the UK), and made available to the commissioned composers, is both large and extensive, comprising nearly five hours of high-resolution recordings, and covering more than two dozen distinct instruments or vocal traditions.

The project's public online content also acknowledges the fundamental creative and cultural value of the recorded performances, and offers visitors introductory information about the performers, their instruments and the music.

When composers set out to collect materials for acousmatic electroacoustic music, contemporary recording technology enables sonic appropriation to be undertaken very spontaneously, without necessarily pausing to consider potential cultural sensitivities. And even if the composers do already have consciously respectful intentions, permission to record or to subsequently incorporate those materials may still be impractical or difficult to seek, and ultimately overlooked.

The Instruments INDIA Project offered the commissioned composers a creative context in which those considerations were handled entirely by the project organisers, thus theoretically freeing the artists to concentrate fully on their own creative work.

2. BORROWING IN ELECTROACOUSTIC MUSIC: SOME PERSPECTIVES

At the same time, the practice of artistic 'borrowing' is potentially controversial, complex and nuanced, with many factors – both pragmatic and ethical – to consider. Notable among the commentators who have weighed-in thoughtfully and extensively on those factors, particularly as they relate to electroacoustic music, are Blackburn (2011, 2014a, 2014b, 2017) and James Andean (2012, 2014). The author has also previously contributed to that discussion, with a focus on cultural appropriation in the context of earlier compositions (Naylor 2014).

In the following section, we review several related (and often potentially intertwined) factors that might be deemed particularly applicable to the Instruments INDIA project, and consider their actual relevance or impact.

2.1. 'Borrowed for Permanent Use'

As a young Canadian student, I lived next door to a household of fellow students from several locations in India. We got along well, and often chatted and shared books.

One evening, the conversation turned to things that had been loaned to friends and never returned. One of my neighbours good-humouredly suggested a phrase to describe that scenario: 'borrowed for permanent use'. (In hindsight, it was likely a polite reminder that I still had not returned his book of poetry by Rabindranath Tagore – but I failed to take the hint.)

Decades later, when given the opportunity to work with the Instruments INDIA recordings, my

neighbour's phrase promptly re-appeared in my mind. I realised that his description was exactly what we, as electroacoustic composers, were going to do with this remarkable pool of creative performances: borrow them for 'permanent' use as fixed media content within our own work.

We frequently see artistic appropriation characterised as 'borrowing', regardless of the artistic medium, or the source material involved. But, of course, we usually cannot give that material back when we are finished with it (though I did, eventually, return that book of poetry). The 'borrowed' material remains embedded within our own work – and, even in works where that material might have been extensively processed or otherwise adapted so as to no longer be readily identifiable as the source, it remains, nonetheless, a key component of what we have produced.

An artist might try to argue that the act of turning so-called 'borrowed' material into a new work is, in effect, 'returning' it – at least returning it to an imaginary meta-pool of artistic endeavour, even if not to the original artist. And, a rather over-confident extension of that argument might even go on to suggest that we have somehow 'enhanced' or 'improved' it by incorporating it into another work.

But those hypothetical arguments still skirt one rather fundamental issue: once any artistic material has been 'borrowed' for use in another context – particularly a context that can be readily distributed electronically – the original source of that content is much less likely to be widely acknowledged.

As we noted earlier, information about the performers of the Instruments INDIA library materials was carefully documented and made publicly available online. But we simply do not know whether listeners hearing the commissioned compositions will actually choose to engage actively with that information.

In other words, despite the meticulous documentation of the project, the performers of the source materials for the commissioned compositions could quite reasonably consider their work 'borrowed for permanent use' – with no guarantee of listeners' knowledge of their individual contribution.

2.2. Tactics and power

Tactics for acquiring borrowed sound materials can range along a continuum from transparently informing rights holders of the intended use and receiving clear legal permission for that particular use, to stealthily recording with no permission requested or given for either the acquisition or the ultimate use.

Situations where permissions are given may be straightforward enough, assuming that the rights requestor fully discloses the intended purpose to the rights holder. However, we still should not make the

mistake of presuming that every negotiation will take place in power-balanced circumstances – a consideration that seems particularly germane to a discussion focused on contemporary cultural appropriation.

Public awareness of potential imbalances may be gradually growing, thanks in part to expanded media coverage of connected topics. For recent examples, see the section ‘Supplemental material: selected online media coverage’ at the end of this article. Within that collection, the online commentaries by Andrea Bear Nicholas (2017) and Hilary Bird (2017) seem especially relevant to our present focus, for their consideration of power and cultural appropriation with reference to Indigenous Peoples.

Broadly speaking, if both parties to an appropriation ‘scenario’ are equally aware of potential economic stakes, and both parties have equal access to competent legal and administrative representation, we could perhaps presume that some balance exists.

But such conditions normally exist only in highly (and mutually) commercialised environments – and it would be very naive to assume that everyone choosing to use legally well-protected sound materials will always have the best interests of the copyright holder, or any other stakeholders, in mind.

‘Stealthy’ sound acquisition brings its own additional set of ethical (and legal) questions to the table. Some forms of stealthy acquisition, such as the practice of making illicit recordings at popular music concerts, are so common that they even have an established virtual community dedicated to sharing techniques, tactics and achievements (Taperssection Forum n.d.).

But the ongoing trend towards increasingly sophisticated and miniaturised recording technologies enables a much broader spectrum of relatively invisible appropriation scenarios, which can encompass almost any situation where sound is being produced. In particular, travellers regularly record sound and video materials in locations that, to them, are ‘exotic’. In some situations, the action might be more or less visible – for example, mobile phone videography is still reasonably difficult to completely hide (and probably also widely anticipated in some situations or locations). And, in those circumstances, one might presume that subjects have the opportunity to protest, or at least to distance themselves from, the recording.

However, power imbalances between ‘tourists’ and ‘locals’ can be very common – the result of varying combinations of pragmatic, economic and cultural factors – and those imbalances can go a long way towards weighting the odds heavily in favour of the would-be stealthy recordist.

And when the recording apparatus is either less visible (e.g., in-ear microphones or miniature recorders)

or simply more ‘stealthily’ operated, the subjects may have no awareness that they are being recorded – and, in most cases, no realistic potential recourse once the recordist has moved on to their next destination. (Of course, hidden recording can also take place in situations more ‘local’ to the recordist. But whether from a stronger fear of prosecution, a lopsided sense of respect, or simply greater interest in relatively ‘exotic’ locations and sounds, many recordist/composers seem less interested in making stealthy recordings on their ‘home turf’.)

In contrast, the recording of materials for the Instruments INDIA archive was done professionally and transparently, with studio-quality results – a collection of favourable outcomes that is certainly not always the case with more casual or ad hoc ‘field recording’. Blackburn has also noted the importance of actively gaining the trust of the participants, by making it clear to them that ‘the project was officially endorsed and promoted by an Indian arts organisation with a high international profile and reputable standing’ (Blackburn 2014a: 147).

We can therefore reasonably assume that the Instruments INDIA participants clearly understood that their recorded work would become part of a reference collection of some kind, and made public in some way, consistent with Milapfest’s mandate.

However, it would probably be naïve to also assume that the participating artists – who were deeply steeped in traditional music practice – would necessarily grasp exactly how their work might eventually be incorporated into such potentially unfamiliar work as contemporary electroacoustic compositions.

We must therefore acknowledge that situations where ‘sources’ are fully aware of the eventual application of their recorded performances are more likely to be the exception rather than the norm – and, by extension, that ‘borrowed’, culturally identifiable sound materials seem more likely to end up in electroacoustic works via considerably less direct, and probably less sanctioned, ways.

2.3. Singularity and loss

When a physical object is ‘borrowed’, the original owner typically loses the use of that particular object for a period of time (e.g., my friend’s book).

That ‘loss’ may not necessarily be a concern for the owner – perhaps they will not need the object during the period of its absence, or perhaps they have multiples of it and can simply use another copy. But the fact remains that they have usually lost the potential use of that particular object while it is being ‘borrowed’.

In the case of borrowed virtual objects, the situation seems considerably more complex.

A virtual object, such as a non-commercial digital sound recording made for use in an acousmatic composition, may be much more nuanced in its singularity than a physical object – and, of course, particularly so if the comparative physical object was mass produced. For example, the virtual object may convey private or personal information, or it may include a range of culturally sensitive content that is usually reserved for ‘insiders’.

That singularity might make the virtual object readily identifiable in the (unlikely) event of some kind of copyright enforcement process. But it also makes its ‘loss’ potentially more personally significant for its ‘owner’ – an identity that we might, in some situations, reasonably expand to include anyone with a legitimate personal, economic or cultural connection to the content of the virtual object.

James Andean has commented astutely on the unique nature of ‘ownership’ of sound, noting that ‘when ownership is being claimed over sound, it is most often ownership of the sonic *symbol* that is at issue, rather than ownership of a precise wave pattern, or of a particular instance of that pattern’s storage’ (Andean 2014: 174–5, emphasis in original).

On the one hand – and disregarding for the moment potential concerns related to the dilution of symbolic value – the ‘lending’ of a virtual object likely causes no direct and visible ‘loss’ to the original ‘owners’, even if they were the ones who originally recorded it. Unless they happen to have loaned the only existing copy, chances are that they will still have full access to another iteration of that virtual object, and can still use it in any way they wish, at any time.

But it is also essentially impossible to trace the ultimate disposition of a digital recording, given its potential to be reproduced without perceptible change or degradation. In other words, the original owner has no practical control over potential wider distribution of the borrowed virtual object.

If that distribution happens to include highly visible commercial usage, the original owner theoretically does have legal recourse, and the possibility of economic compensation. But in practice – and particularly within the relatively modest economic realm of electroacoustic music, where the financial stakes for all concerned are (regrettably) relatively low – both recourse and compensation seem to be highly unlikely.

The Instruments INDIA library partially pre-empts some of these concerns by limiting the extent, duration and audio fidelity of the public online examples, and by restricting access to the full, high-resolution library to the selected commissioned artists. However, we would be wise to recognise that, once shared, virtual objects are never completely immune to potential mis-appropriation or unsanctioned use.

2.4. Curation

The continuing expansion of sound recording technologies, and the resulting increasing ease of collecting, editing and distributing recordings, is taken as a ‘given’ by most technology users – and electroacoustic composers are certainly no exception.

But, as any good hoarder discovers, ease of acquisition can lead us down impractical paths, with far too much material to catalogue or properly assess. The ‘trail’ left by the accumulation of physical objects may (eventually) become impossible to ignore. In contrast, field recordists and composers can easily find themselves with vast collections of uncatalogued – or at least poorly catalogued – sound materials, packed into a relatively modestly sized collection of digital media.

The traditional exhortation for recordists used to be something along the lines of ‘edit before you press record’ – and that certainly resonated strongly in the days of analogue recording, when recording media was brief, bulky and expensive. But, in parallel with the expansion of small, low-cost digital storage, those collecting sound material now for any creative purpose have become much more likely to ‘press record, then edit’ – which readily results in overwhelmingly large collections of material to sift through ‘when we have time’ (Naylor 2012).

Pre-emptive self-curation of the material we collect ourselves, then, appears to be at best a fantasy for most creators. As a potential solution, we may then turn to commercial sound libraries, where much of the hard work of documentation (and the curatorial focus itself) has already been done for us.

That can certainly be an advantageous approach, particularly when sonic creators need to find specific materials to match an externally imposed conception for a work, such as a commission for a specific functional context. Or, like the three composers participating in the Instruments INDIA commission, we may even find ourselves in the fortunate position of being given free and relatively exclusive access to an unusually well-curated collection of material.

But, in the author’s personal experience, there may also be a tendency amongst electroacoustic composers to assume that materials recorded by ‘others’ are somehow inferior to self-collected ones – or at least less ‘honourable’ to use. In other words, while there are clear pragmatic benefits to using material that has already been well curated by someone else, it is also possible that our creative egos will insist that the absence of our direct involvement with both the collection and the assessment of that material somehow diminishes its potential creative value.

The Instruments INDIA project effectively bypassed that possible obstacle, by requiring that the proposed commissioned works be based exclusively on the project library. In other words, composers submitting proposals

clearly knew, and accepted at the outset, the potential range of source materials for their work.

However, the commissioned composers still had to navigate – even if initially only in their own minds – the much larger, and potentially much more public, set of hurdles that is popularly (or, for creators, probably ‘un-popularly’) characterised as ‘cultural appropriation’.

2.5. In search of ‘appropriate appropriation’

‘Cultural appropriation’ is now very much in the public eye, with increasing media coverage of potential sensitivities and concerns – which, understandably, may present quite varied positions on the matter (for illustrations, see ‘Supplemental material: selected online media coverage’ section).

A quick scan through the ‘comments’ section of any contemporary social medium or web-based forum will also likely suggest that the collective rush to condemn is a powerful instinct, and seldom truly selective, regardless of which side of the ‘fence’ the commentators inhabit. Thus it is perhaps impossible now to appropriate culturally identifiable material without inciting censure, or at least agitated concern, from someone, somewhere.

At the same time, appropriation of some kind (even if not necessarily ‘cultural’) continues to provide the fundamental materials for most acousmatic electro-acoustic composers, apart from the relatively smaller number who may build their pieces entirely from synthesised materials. And, as we observed earlier, the tools available for ‘capturing’ material continue to be increasingly sophisticated, affordable and invisible.

When artistic appropriation involves anything culturally identifiable, the stakes are immediately quite high. But when that appropriation involves the direct incorporation of ‘captured’ performances of culturally identifiable music by highly regarded performers, the potential for indignation is even higher.

Such condemnation might sometimes be reasonably dismissed as an overly ‘politically correct’ response. But the widespread practice of oblivious appropriation of culturally identifiable, and culturally sensitive, materials – and the long history, in some nations, of paternalistic and extremely damaging political practices towards Indigenous Peoples – makes it necessary to consider every appropriation situation carefully, and to recognise any inherent power imbalances that may be implicit in those situations.

In Canada, there appears to be a growing trend for a kind of *mea culpa* to be recited at the beginning of many public events, correctly acknowledging that the event is taking place on the unceded lands of a local First Nation. While a single act of public hand-wringing may do little, practically speaking, to address generations of inequity, we can perhaps

choose to view this practice more optimistically, as a kind of starting point.

In the case of the Instruments INDIA project, no public hand-wringing was necessary (and we can probably assume that social media channels were not flooded with reflexive negativity). Composers were given a carefully curated, stakeholder-engaged opportunity to ‘appropriate’ potentially culturally sensitive material. And the collection of that material appeared to be fully transparent – quite unlike the ad hoc practices that typically take place with ‘stealthy field recording’.

But even when every known objection has been considered, and every recognised cultural sensitivity has been addressed, any artistic project that directly proposes, and facilitates, cultural appropriation must still be prepared for questions.

After all, cultural appropriation has increasingly become a ‘minefield’ for artists – one on which they must tread gingerly, with full consciousness of the potentially explosive sensitivities that may be ‘triggered’ by their steps.

3. THE INSTRUMENTS INDIA COMMISSIONS

We next consider the three new works commissioned by the Instruments INDIA project, and premiered in the showcase concert at Liverpool Hope University (20 January 2017).

We briefly present the background of the three composers (including the author), highlight some features of their new works and, finally, consider what impact (if any) questions or concerns related to cultural appropriation may have had – positively or negatively – upon their creative processes and the eventual compositions.

I am grateful to fellow commissioned composers Greg Dixon and Ish Shehrawat, who patiently provided thoughtful written responses to a series of questions relating to their pieces (Dixon 2018; Shehrawat 2018). The commentary about their work in this section is based largely on that feedback, as well as on information they provided earlier for the premiere concert’s printed programme (Dixon 2017; Shehrawat 2017).

3.1. Anantatā (Navajīvana)

3.1.1. About the composer: Greg Dixon

Greg Dixon holds a PhD in composition, specialising in computer music, from the University of North Texas, USA. He is presently Assistant Professor of Music and Sound Design at DigiPen Institute of Technology in Redmond, Washington, teaching courses on sound design and composition. His compositional research focuses on interactive music systems

for video games, acoustic instruments, sensor technologies and human interface devices.

3.1.2. *The commissioned work*

Dixon's approach to using the Instruments INDIA library took a very ambitious direction: in addition to composing a suite of 12 electroacoustic miniatures using the library materials, he also designed and physically constructed a new electronic instrument, which he called the *Space Regenerator*, specifically to play back those works. The instrument's primary component is a custom-programmed computer that potentially loops the miniatures infinitely to evoke mantras or prayers.

That instrument is controlled in performance by another custom component, which Dixon calls the *Space Regenerator Commander*. The 'Commander' module, which Dixon programmed with both Arduino and ChucK code, allows the performer to interact live with the 12 miniatures – thus turning what would otherwise be 12 fixed media compositions into source materials for an interactive performance.

The premiere performance was a concert hall presentation, but the *Space Regenerator* instrument's speakers were placed so that listeners could physically walk around the instrument without any loss of sound intensity – thus potentially expanding the interactivity, in other performances, to include an audience's spatial experience.

The scope of Dixon's use of the library is also notable. He writes that he was 'intrigued and impressed by the quality of the recordings and performances' in the project library, and, despite being unfamiliar with many of the instruments, he set (and achieved) the goal of using every instrument available from the library in his new work.

3.1.3. *Thoughts on appropriation*

Dixon remarks on the depth of knowledge he believes is required for effective cultural appropriation for creative purposes:

I think it's important for composers to understand that there is a spectrum of experience and knowledge that comes with understanding another culture's musical traditions, and with more experience and knowledge comes ... the ability to unlock more potential for responsible forms of recontextualization.

For the Hindi naming of the 12 miniatures that made up his work, he relied on a combination of his own research and personal feedback from a Hindi-speaking colleague. That experience highlighted for him the importance of finding a balance between cultural authenticity and artistic integrity:

Not all of my choices were in agreement with what she ultimately suggested so it's important also that the composer should have some license to bend rules and expectations. To know they are breaking or bending the rules is what is most important rather than ignorance.

Dixon also noted his reluctance to 'take their traditions and modify them', and instead preferred 'to look towards elements that were more abstract' – an approach he believed would be more respectful.

Finally, Dixon is very clear about the responsibilities that arise when a composer is given the opportunity to work with culturally sensitive materials:

I don't think composers should shy away from ... modeling their ideas on other culture's traditions and culture. However, I think that they must be responsible for taking some time and care to listen and do research and be able to clearly realize how that culture has had an impact on what they are doing as well as giving credit where it's due to that culture for the ideas they have borrowed. They then need to synthesize it in a way that it is their own.

3.2. *Mimetic patterns*

3.2.1. *About the composer: Ish Shehrawat*

Ish Shehrawat, who frequently performs and exhibits as Ish S, is a composer, sound artist, musician and curator from New Delhi, India. He maintains ongoing, pan-stylistic, creative connections across South Asia and Europe, where he presents his musical work and sound installations widely in festivals, exhibitions and concerts. In 2009, he founded the music label Sound Reasons to promote contemporary and electronic music; he continues to release albums and curate a South Asian audio art festival under that umbrella.

3.2.2. *The commissioned work*

Mimetic patterns, Shehrawat's composition using the Instruments INDIA library, was presented in concert using software that allowed him to perform and spatialise the composed components of the work in a highly improvisatory manner.

He describes the piece as a kind of 'Sound Sculpture' that, through its combination of materials, can 'expose the real instruments in a new light and with a new listening perspective'. In the performance of the work, he initially focuses on establishing the material statically, then gradually builds the spatial component to 'evoke a distinct listening process in the form of compound rhythms and layered harmony/implicit melody'.

Rhythmic energy is particularly important for his aesthetic goals of the piece, which 'spatially evokes the loose and almost organic rhythm of "folk music"

from India'. His intention is that the attentive listener will perceive two, or even three, simultaneous rhythms, moving in and out of apparent synchronisation.

3.2.3. *Thoughts on appropriation*

Any consideration of cultural appropriation or 'borrowing' will potentially raise different concerns or questions, and result in different answers, depending on the cultural connections (if any) that one has with the source material.

As the only commissioned composer of the three with a personal connection to India, Shehrawat's perspective on the question of 'borrowing' the Instruments INDIA library sounds is of particular interest to our discussion.

In his programme note for the premiere of the piece, Shehrawat hinted at this connection, noting that, in their original form, the sounds of the instruments are 'mostly perfect, meticulous and well arranged in their traditional forms and practices'. But, at the same time, the thoughts he provided later about cultural appropriation or sonic borrowing indicated that he is also broadly less concerned about the practice than the other two composers. That difference in perspectives is certainly worth exploring further.

Shehrawat does not feel that the discourse about cultural appropriation is truly applicable to sound. More broadly, he considers appropriation simply part of 'human experience'. He also questions why we might now be so quick to question only some transcultural musical appropriation, while essentially ignoring its application in the work of other long-established artists, such as Debussy. Similarly, he reminds us that a very large percentage of popular music was, in essence, 'appropriated from the black slaves from North and South America'.

Finally, he accurately notes the heightened (and potentially less well-considered) scrutiny that cultural appropriation now receives in the 'fast age of computing and Internet culture'.

We cannot ignore the fact that the musical traditions this commissioning project was rooted in are likely to feel more familiar, and less 'exotic', to an artist with personal experiences potentially closer to those traditions than the other artists. And, by extension, questions about appropriation might be relatively moot for that particular artist.

But Shehrawat also raises wider perspectives that simply cannot be dismissed as some kind of 'positive ethnocentrism'. His point of view is a very important reminder that, in this era of digitally enabled (and heightened) scrutiny, the impulse to 'automatically condemn' may well be considerably stronger than the instinct to 'rationally consider'.

3.3. Rivers

3.3.1. *About the composer: Steven Naylor*

The author is an independent composer (electroacoustic and instrumental concert music; theatre and media scores) and Adjunct Professor in the School of Music, Acadia University, Canada. He completed a PhD at the University of Birmingham, UK, supervised by Jonty Harrison.

3.3.2. *The commissioned work*

My own Instruments INDIA composition, *Rivers*, is an octophonic acousmatic work designed for concert presentation over four stereo pairs of speakers or an appropriately scaled-up larger system.

The piece strives to merge distinct Indian musical traditions into new pools of musical practice that might never exist – deliberately combining sources that might not ordinarily meet, but which I felt had a sonic affinity that could magnify the musical power of each component. With that fabricated narrative, *Rivers* is also clearly a kind of 'cultural fiction'.

Materials with strong resonances, such as culturally identifiable ones, can also lend themselves readily to 'framing' – the process of highlighting them largely by their placement within the piece. There is, however, one particular danger in simply 'framing' such strongly resonant materials: for the informed listener, any awareness of their inherent sonic properties can easily be overwhelmed by those cultural resonances.

In other words, the composer must be careful to strike the right balance between deliberate sonic highlighting – invoking detailed listener engagement with the sound – and allowing the listener to passively bask in what is familiar or unchallenging.

Similarly, even when I did rely on 'deconstruction' or relatively extreme processing of chosen materials, my goal was still primarily to highlight those characteristics that I wanted the listener to notice, rather than to transform that material into something entirely unrecognisable.

3.3.3. *Thoughts on appropriation*

The commentary presented earlier represents my overall thinking about both cultural appropriation in general and the Instruments INDIA project in particular; however, a few additional observations may help to anchor the composition within those thoughts.

Many of my previous acousmatic works were also firmly based upon culturally identifiable source recordings. While some of those recordings were made visibly – in a few cases even with explicit permission – most were made in 'less direct' circumstances, and probably without the sources' knowledge.

In contrast, in composing *Rivers* I was able to engage in direct appropriation of culturally identifiable materials without concern about disclosures, power imbalances or eventual uses – all of which had been taken care of by the project leaders. In other words, there appeared to be no reason to invoke the same level of *angst* that often accompanied my use of culturally identifiable materials in earlier works. But that is not to say that I was oblivious to potential concerns; on the contrary, the differences between the two sets of circumstances actually heightened my awareness of them.

More specifically, working on this piece drew my attention to the stark contrast between my frequent use (now spanning several decades) of the Norwegian *seljefloyte* or willow flute, within both electroacoustic and instrumental pieces, and my regular incorporation of field recordings from East and Southeast Asian cultures into my acousmatic work. The former is something I simply take for granted as an acceptable use, while the latter is often accompanied by a considerable measure of hand-wringing and elaborate rationalisation.

In other words, there appears to be a pattern of ‘selective guilt’ in my self-assessment of my own appropriation scenarios – a pattern that seems to divide across Western vs non-Western cultures. And such a ‘divide’ must inevitably raise questions about exoticism, paternalism, and power imbalances.

3.4. The three composers’ perspectives: a quick review

All three commissioned composers were given the opportunity to incorporate potentially culturally sensitive material into their creative works, with project organisers taking full responsibility for both the collection of that material and permissions to incorporate it.

With that ‘heavy lifting’ already done, it is probably unsurprising that any concerns expressed by the three composers, about cultural appropriation within the context of this commissioning project, were relatively modest.

Greg Dixon indicated that he was primarily concerned with being respectful of the traditions embodied in the recordings, and interested in exploring the sound materials with some depth of knowledge, rather than simply appropriating them superficially.

Ish Shehrawat sidestepped the potential *angst* often associated with cultural appropriation, and focused directly upon his artistic conception. It might be tempting to dismiss that stance as a reflection of his position as a relative ‘cultural insider’. However, as we saw above, his thoughts are considerably more nuanced, and broadly challenge some of the

contemporary assumptions and concerns surrounding transcultural appropriation.

My own response, as this article suggests, was to reflect more widely on my relationship with appropriated material, while happily accepting the relative ease of the circumstances afforded by the commissioning project.

But even if the three composers’ responses were not particularly ‘uneasy’, we must be very careful not to conflate the relative ease provided by a single, highly controlled creative context with the much thornier questions that readily arise in many other appropriation scenarios.

4. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this article, we took a very quick journey into potentially fraught territory – one I characterised as a ‘minefield’. While that characterisation is admittedly melodramatic, the fact remains that any discussion about cultural appropriation will almost certainly highlight current sensitivities, and potentially even dredge up previously buried grievances.

As creators who appropriate sound, we may have the slight advantage of working with relatively intangible manifestations of cultural identity – manifestations that also typically require time to experience, and to react to.

But once cultural identity has been ‘assigned’ to that material by a listener, we are probably at no less risk of possible adverse judgement than those who work with static visual or physical materials that might be more instantaneously recognisable.

In other words, time is only briefly on our side.

The inevitable conclusion is that those who ‘borrow’ culturally identifiable sound materials must be no less sensitive about their actions than those who appropriate more tangible visual or physical materials.

We may feel somewhat ‘under attack’ by any increased scrutiny our work might now attract – and that can be both uncomfortable, and a distraction from our creative processes.

But that scrutiny can also encourage composers to reflect more deeply on the sound materials we use, their provenance, and their impact on listeners – reflections that may ultimately help our work connect with a wider audience, in meaningful ways.

And that is, after all, an outcome most artists would probably welcome.

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