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WHOSE WORLD MUSIC?

Abstract

World music might be defined most benignly as an attempt to conceptualise all of the world's music. More cynically though, world music can be also seen as just an advertising label for all non-Western music. Many scholars have gone even further and argue that world music is a delusional subjective fantasy, an unreal utopia and an oppressive discourse of western hegemony. Defining what world music is really depends on who is asking the question. Whose world music is it? This paper will focus on the philosophical conundrums of 'world music' within the context of the current BA World Music at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick. The paper will be framed through the following questions: *what* is world music; *whose* music is it; *why* should we world music and *how* it can be done? In this article, I will trace the shifting meanings of world music from its origins as pedagogical framework, to its use as a popular music marketing term and finally its significance as part of a post modern critique of globalisation. I will outline how students at the Irish World Academy engage with 'world music' both as a problematic concept but also an exercise in exploring transcultural musical relationships, particularly through practical ensemble work in five different cultural areas: popular music, Javanese gamelan, Indian Classical music, Ewe drum and dance and Turkish maqam. I will also discuss my own journey as a musician and outline how this practice has influenced both my pedagogical and theoretical framing of what it means to be a performer in the contemporary global music landscape.

Keywords: worldmusic, ethnomusicology, pedagogy, transcultural

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WORLD MUSIC PEDAGOGY AT THE IRISH WORLD ACADEMY

Photo 1. A lesson in world music.
Photo credits: Maurice Gunning

'What in the world is world music?' A question I ask my students in the first lecture of every year.
The responses are often insightful.
'World music is all music…the sounds from earth around the globe' is usually the most common category of answer.
'So, then…I guess we're here in this class to learn about music from all over the world'.
The students nod approvingly.
But inevitably, someone always bring up the idea of 'difference'.
'Well yeah, world music is studying music from different or other cultures'.
And from then, things get interesting.

WHAT IS OUR MUSIC?

Our conversations then predictably move into a reflection on the position of Western culture as a dominant and central force in shaping our understanding of music. My students commonly define world music most benignly as fundamentally a Western conception of Otherness, or all the other music in the world. More critically, my students have been astute

enough to recognise that world music is also an advertising label, an unreal utopia and subjective fantasy. Even more cynically, some of them would argue that world music is an oppressive discourse of western hegemonic bias that maintains cultural and even racial stereotypes. But these definitions are from Irish third level students enrolled in a World Music module facilitated by a professor. We have discovered that when we have Chinese students in our class their understanding of 'world music' is very different. Likewise, what world music means (or doesn't) for a musician is completely different depending on their professional, traditional and cultural perspective. Defining what world music is really depends on who is asking the question or, to put it another way, whose world music is it?

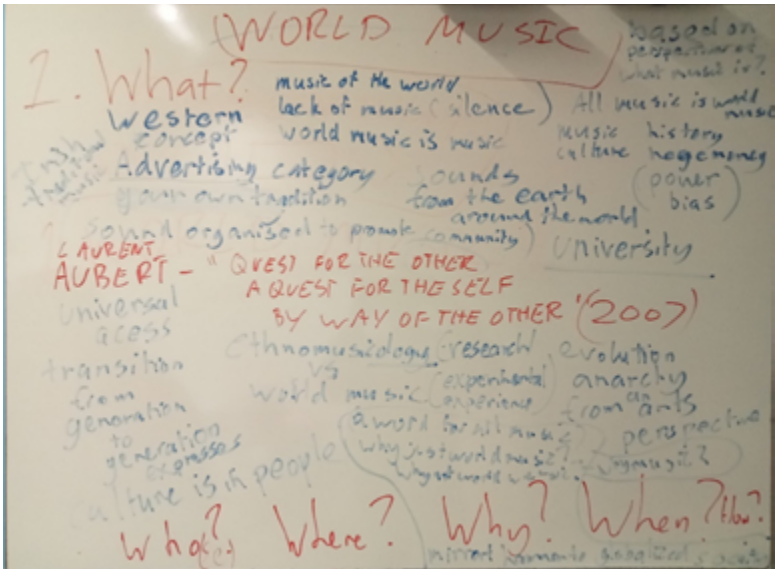

Photo 2. Brainstorm with students on the question, 'what is world music?' Photo credits: Maurice Gunning

I have become obsessed with these questions over the past decade or so. In 2022, I took on the role of Course Director of the BA World Music at the Irish World Academy in the University of Limerick. Since taking on this stewardship, I have been seeking ways to problematise not just the structure of the course syllabus but the very essence of the entire 'world music project.' What is it? Does it have any validity anymore? Should we abandon the term' world music' altogether? Should we even have a BA in world music? Should it be a BA in Global music studies? Or why not just call it a BA in music?

This paper will begin to unearth some of this thinking. To do this, I will frame my thinking on the three 'w's': *what* is world music, *why* should we world music and *how* it can be done. I will begin with reviewing scholarly critiques on the origins of world music, firstly as marketing term but also as a pedagogical framework for third level music discourse. I hope to demonstrate that the answer to *what* world music is and *why* we use the term is very much a reflection of *who* is using it. The BA in world music will be offered as a case study for *how* students are taught to engage and problematise 'world music' through engaging in practical ensemble work alongside critical thinking. Finally, I will offer some considerations for how we might consider reclaiming worlding music as a contemporary engagement for critical, savvy and radically engaged musicians.

WHAT IS WORLD MUSIC?

In trying to define world music, it is easy to slide down "a tautological slope" (Bohlman 2002, I) because of the complexity of music, musicians and musical processes involved in the exchanges. Stokes says that the term world music is not even "remotely adequate for descriptive or critical purposes" (2003, 52). Aubert suggests a broader position when he describes world music as "intercultural experiences… resulting from the meeting of musicians… and the integration of 'exotic' instruments and sonorities" (2007, 53). Although Hijleh offers a perhaps more accurate characterisation when he says that "all music is to some degree world music, and world music is the music of synthesis" (2012, 2). World music, in its broadest sense, represents a musical consciousness able to regard itself from nowhere and everywhere, it is a summing up of all "heres" and "elsewheres" which have woven our lives together (Aubert 2007, 54).

World music, as a term, was popularised in the 1990s mainly for marketing musicians from non-Western backgrounds. A substantial amount of ethnomusicological research on world music has been primarily focused on commercial, commodification and the deterritorialisation of culture with particular reference to the dichotomy of power between East and West and the exotification of the Other (Feld 1996; Taylor 1997; Feld 2000; Stokes 2003; Connel & Gibson 2004; Taylor 2007). This branch of ethnomusicology has been strongly influenced by Lomax's 'cultural grey-out' anxiety and Marxist critiques of the appropriation of power and capital. It has been convincingly argued that "world music participates in shaping a kind

of consumer-friendly multiculturalism… that follows the market logic of expansion and consolidation" (Feld 2000, 168). It's not only record companies that have been compliant in this commodification and cultural domination but 'world music' artists themselves, particularly those from Western countries who collaborate or incorporate instrumentation or musicians from other cultures. World music as a genre can be at best described as a "naive syncretic impulse" (Cooper 2005, 221) and at its worst as "music that functions as a backdrop to Western exotic consumerism" (Farrel 1997, 202). Toop has described the world music impulse as a "fantasy of new hybrid transculturation," a utopian imaginary universe (the "Fourth World") in which all music and cultures "mingle freely without concern for authenticity or propriety" (1995, 260). London-Indian jazz artist, Sarathy, also argues that the term, "helps reinforce the narrative that other people's music is less evolved" (in Kalia 2019).

Wade has suggested world music is not an adequate term to describe music making in the post-modern age and prefers the expression "music in global culture" (2009, 166). She argues that nothing is truly local yet the inverse is also applicable. In this sense, the term global culture ceases to have a static meaning. I would argue that a more meaningful expression would be to explore 'music in the global condition.' This condition is a post-modern one of shifting signifiers of meaning of culture, selfhood and place. Frith suggests that "the post-modern condition is reflected both in the collapse of grand musical narratives and authorities and in the blurring of musical borders and histories" (2000, 159). It could also be argued that it is "inauthentic to view any music as a museum piece" a trap to which many ethnomusicologists have fallen into (Hijleh 2012, 209). I agree with Schippers when he argues that we need to put "the myth of authentic traditions in context" (2010, 41). Hijleh urges that "understanding cultural meaning increasingly depends on understanding cross-cultural synthesis" (2012, 209). To deny this, Hijleh argues, is a kind of "reverse racism by isolating every culture from all others" (2012, 10). Hijleh urges that "understanding cultural meaning increasingly depends on understanding cross-cultural synthesis" (2012, 209). In analysing world music purely with the musical commodity, then we actually contribute further to the consumer impulse and the exotification process of sound itself. Frith concedes that ethnomusicologists and world music markets are intrinsically linked and act as a parody of each other. His approach suggests "the fruitfulness of attending to how understandings of transnational music are created through a set of intertwined vernacular and academic discourses" (Frith 2000, 308).

WHY WORLD MUSIC?

Photo 3. Bonang player at 'World Music Party' 2024.
Photo credits: Maurice Gunning

Due to the many problems and negative associations, should we even still use the term, 'world' music? As David Byrne scathingly asserts, world music has now become too problematic to be of any utility and is, 'a none too subtle way of reasserting the hegemony of western pop culture' (in Kalia 2019). I agree that world music as a thing, a marketing category, is redundant. Most musicians these days do not describe themselves as 'world music artists' and even large world music festivals such as WOMAD are rebranding and removing the 'world' from their descriptors (Kalia 2019). However, maybe if we considered world music as a verb rather than a noun we may proceed to a new kind of insight. How do we *world* the idea of music? Why do we *world* music? Ironically, the idea of worlding music has earlier pedagogical origins before it was taken up as a marketing label for Western record executives. World music is a term now in general use but not always in its original definition. Ethnomusicologist Bob Brown first deployed the idea of worlding music when he established (to my knowledge) the first ever world music programme in Wesleyan University in the 1960s. Brown proposed that we 'world music' in an attempt to overcome the problem that most music pedagogy is

fundamentally based on a western ontology. In Brown's conception, world music included multiple performance based and theoretical engagements with human musicking from various global traditions, including Japanese *koto*, *Malinka* drum and dance from West Africa, modal improvised traditions such as Turkish *maqam* and Hindustani music as well as European music including classical repertoire, jazz and pop. The philosophy of this course was an attempt to develop 'a rational approach to a philosophy of music, free from the constraints of ethnocentrism' (Brown 1991, 365).

It is ironic to consider the original pedagogical intention of the world music project in Wesleyan and its subsequent negative connotations in western popular culture and ethnomusicology scholarship. This shift in meaning of the term is a reflection of free market capitalism and the commodification of expressive culture: our most utopian ideas are shaped into words but our words can be shaped into objects of desire and commerce. Perhaps it is impossible, as Brown attempted, to teach music free from the constraints of ethnocentrism. Solis has explored the complexity of 'performing ethnomusicology' and describes the world music ensemble as an attempt to "express in inexpressible" (in Solis 2004, 4).

Music is intrinsically connected to our most fundamental ideas of cultural self and identity. In our contemporary age of globalisation and transcultural exchange, it is inevitable that music is an accomplice in the discourse of ethnicity and also within our reflections of third level pedagogy. World music, for want of a better term, at least in a pedagogical sense, might be considered the sound of the postmodern experience, a potential mirror of the diversity of consciousness in our globalised society. Due to the convoluted nature of its meaning, perhaps world music has a potential for opening up discussions about what music can and cannot be. To reiterate, I agree the term is outdated and deeply problematic, but I don't think we should throw the baby out with the bath water and get rid of the term 'world music' altogether, not just yet in any case. Good contemporary music pedagogy, whether it is labelled as world music or not, as a "musical context for encounter" enabling students to explore global culture through both traditional and hybrid definitions (Bohlman 2002, 114). Despite its contentious nature, it is clear that multiplicity "has become one of the places most articulated by world music" (Bohlman 2002, 115, 118). The term still has much to offer as a lightning rod, to attract energised discussion and critical reflection in a classroom environment and also on an individual level.

WHOSE WORLD MUSIC?

Photo 4. Debajyoti Sanyla on tabla, Matthew Noone and Kris Burda on sarode. Photo credits: Maurice Gunning

In this discussion on the worlding of music, it is important that I situate my own unique perspective. I am a Western academic situated in a European University, an assistant professor in World Music at the University of Limerick. However, long before I came to academia, I was a musician, indeed I was a classic example of a 'world musician'. I grew up in the vibrant multicultural sub-tropical city of Brisbane, Australia in the eighties and nineties. My first musical love was heavy and instrumental guitar-based music: the blues, indie-rock, grunge and post-rock. I played guitar and drums in numerous bands throughout Brisbane and Sydney before, being inspired by John Cage and my engagement with zen buddhism, became fascinated with experimental electronic music. I made ambient music at forest raves, squat parties, zen retreats, book launches and on numerous recordings. Throughout my mid-twenties, I became increasingly genre curious, exploring hip-hop, alt-country, European folk and West African drumming until I eventually discovered a recording of Qawwali music and become obsessed with music from the sub-continent.

In 2003 I travelled to Kolkata India and met my guru, Sougata Roy Chowdhury and began a lifelong journey studying Hindustani music on the fretless classical stringed *sarode*. This was the biggest impact on my

musical and personal outlook on life and has shaped much of my thinking that informs this current research. For almost seven years, I returned annually to Kolkata to study with my teacher for three to six months. I began accompanying my teacher, as many traditional Indian students would, to my guru's concerts in India and Europe. I spent countless hours travelling with him, listening to him talk about music, practice and perform. One evening, while we were on tour in my ancestral home Ireland, I had a dream about my guru presenting me with the gift of an orange butterfly. He told me that this was symbolic of my duty to take his teaching and spread Indian classical music across Ireland.

I settled in Ireland and began performing and teaching Indian classical music, first privately and eventually as a guest tutor in the Irish World Academy at the University of Limerick. I also began collaborating with a variety of other Irish performers, formed numerous world fusion musical projects and even performed at the premiere world music festival, WOMAD. In many ways, I was the quintessential world musician. And yet, as I began reading ethnomusicological critique on the idea of world music and the thorny issue of appropriation, the more I questioned my artistic authority to play Indian music. I attempted to circumnavigate this conundrum by firstly exploring a more 'native' tradition, that of Irish traditional music and going beyond the boundaries of tradition through electroacoustic improvisation and more experimental sound art. I stopped using the 'world music' label to describe my own music a long time ago. Yet I have also become curious about other words that might describe what I do as an artist moving between music cultures and styles. I have explored the idea of being a musical 'mongrel' (Noone 2016), adopted the idea of being an 'edgewalker' (Chang 2008), a 'decomposer' (Noone 2021), and more recently as a 'transcultural ritualizer' (Noone 2022).

So then, I feel it is somewhat ironic that I fell into the position of running a 'world music' degree. I inherited the programme, its name and its contextual history and have deeply pondered the appropriate label to describe what it is we are trying to do. The idea of world music, and all of its associated baggage, does not accurately reflect what I want for our students: to be globally informed, critically and radically engaged musicians. Along with the obvious theoretical issues, as a marketing term, world music does not really appeal or even make sense to the average school leaving music student. Based upon these reflections, it is imminent that in the near future, we will change the name of the programme to simply a BA in

Music. At the same time, the term *music* itself is a Western word that does not have an equivalent in many other cultures or languages other than English. Furthermore, student perceptions of a 'straight' BA Music degree may be quite different to what we are offering.

However, what I have to come realise is that even if we drop the term 'world' from our musical category lexicon or from the title of our degree, the idea of world music still has an important role to play in shaping our thinking about global contemporary musical practice. The questioning that arises from the ashes of the death of world music challenges us to go beyond the what, why and who of music making and enter into more practical considerations: how do we teach a truly global music perspective? In this way, I have begun to think that world music is not a thing but a process, something that can be done to open the minds of our students. The next logical question then, is how do we teach it? How do we truly *world music*? As a case study, allow me to describe the impetus of the Academy's world music programme and my ongoing reflections of how best to shape a radical contemporary global music syllabus.

HOW TO WORLD MUSIC?

Photo 5. Dr John Nutekpor performing with BA World Music students.
Photo credits: Maurice Gunning

Founded in 2017 at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance in the University of Limerick, the BA World Music emerged out of the independent development of four undergraduate degrees in Voice, Irish traditional music, Irish traditional dance and Contemporary Dance. A fifth degree was envisioned to cater to musicians who did not fit easily into the category of a traditional artist or vocalist. Based on the expertise of my predecessor, Prof. Mel Mercier, the BA World Music was designed to introduce students to the performance practices of both Western and non-Western music while also engaging with different scholarly traditions such as ethnomusicology to expand, deepen and re-conceptualise their own music making. Throughout the four years of the programme students participate in a wide range of ensembles, including Javanese Gamelan from Indonesia, Middle Eastern and Indian Classical Music, Global Pop Ensemble and West African Drumming. Students also take individual lessons on their own 1st instrument and receive tuition on a choice of 'world' music instruments, such as the North Indian plucked stringed instrument *sarode*, the West African *djembe* drum and the Javanese two-stringed bowed fiddle *rebab*. In my short time as Course Director, I have implemented a more explicit emphasis on including Western repertoire and instrumentation within the 'world music' curriculum. For example, students can also learn drum kit, piano, harpsichord, electric bass or take vocal classes as their world instrument and we have begun running a jazz and electroacoustic music ensemble as well as a quite experimental early music ensembles that reinterprets repertoire from the medieval and baroque era.

The BA is currently in a phase of growth and transition. We have a little over twenty students across the four years of the programme. Most of the students are predominantly Irish based secondary school graduates, but there is a growing international energy from cultural backgrounds including Poland, Ukraine, Pakistan, USA and China. I have been attempting to review the syllabus of our programme in a reflexive dialogue between the founding principles of the course, ongoing student reflection and my own experience as an artist-scholar. I have also been drawing upon Bob Brown's model of world music as scaffolding on which to develop our syllabus. In particular, I have attempted to define the theoretical basis for our global conception of music making based on Brown's suggestion of a global music programme focusing on five main cultural areas. Through predominantly performance-based encounters, I am also attempting to build an understanding of musical theory that does justice to the diversity

of human musical thinking. Contemporary global music pedagogy should be about engaging with multiple levels of consciousness: through culture, ecology, technology, spirituality and practicality. Expanding upon Brown's model, I have articulated a series of 9 philosophical assumptions that I hope could provide a solid foundation for a radical contemporary global music course.

1. *5 main music-cultural areas*: drawing upon the resources easily accessible, the programme should focus on five main musical/ cultural areas.
   a) Europe (Early music/ Popular music)
   b) Middle East (Maqam/Klezmer)
   c) West Africa (Ewe/Malinke)
   d) India (Hindustani/Carnatic)
   e) Asia (Javanese Gamelan/Chinese Folk).

Europe is situated as the first main cultural area in this list as it represents the locality of the course and the predominant background of most of the students. European music is explored through the polarities of early music and popular music repertoire, with popular music also including genres such as jazz, the blues and electroacoustic music. However, the intention is that western music is explored in relatively equal proportion to the other musics. Each of these cultural-musical areas will form the basis of the programme due to the human and instrumental resources available in the locality. Within each area, there will be a broad scope between different aspects of the traditions: classes exploring music from the European cultural area will explore both classical and popular repertoire, Indian music will be explored from both a Hindustani and Carnatic perspective, Middle Eastern music classes will explore both Arabic and Jewish traditions, the music of West Africa will be explored through Ewe and Malinka traditions and music from Asia will be explored through encounters with Javanese gamelan and Chinese folk music. These cultural areas are explored first and foremost through practical ensembles and supported by academic seminars exploring the theoretical, cultural and historical contexts of the music.

2. *Music making precedes theory*: the programme will provide both music and language about music in rational proportion. Group ensemble experience is crucial in understanding music as relationship based and

involves the development of social skills in listening, communicating, negotiating, spatial awareness and empathy. Performance based knowledge then becomes the foundation for engaging with scholarly frameworks in lectures, seminars and through academic writing as a way to gain deeper insights into the purpose and meaning of music in contemporary global music practice.

3. *Global music theory*: the programme provides a model of the realities of the global condition of music, at any given time, in so far as feasible. The intention is to enable students to think and communicate musically within multiple musical frameworks including: a nuanced understanding of pitch, temporality, composition and improvisatory structure, timbre, dynamics and the uses of text. Western art music should have its logical but proportionate place. No single musical theory (or performance) system should dominate student experience.

4. *Diversity*: the programme caters to a diverse range of student backgrounds in terms of musicianship, academic ability, physical mobility, age, gender and social-cultural background. Learning approaches and syllabus should represent the diversity of human culture and not prioritise Western-centric views of music theory and scholarship. Sensitivity to different physical and academic abilities will be approached through a universal design of learning.

5. *Ethnomusicology and Performance studies*: to enable critical thinking, a combined theoretical model interweaving ethnomusicology and performance studies should be employed. This approach should combine lecture-based seminars and regular scaffolding in academic writing as well as reflexive journalling and contemporary media projects such as audio recordings, podcasts and interviews.

6. *Visiting Artist-Scholars*: the programme aims to host international performers of the highest standard to supplement regular experienced faculty and tutors. To supplement regular ensembles in the five main cultural areas, a weekly space for 'world music workshops' will be kept open in the timetable to avail of the expertise of any special guests. These workshops could include any musical genre or tradition within or beyond the five main cultural areas.

7. *Variety of pedagogical styles*: visiting artists and tutors will be encouraged to teach as much as possible in their traditional ways whether that be aurally or through the use of text or notation.

8. *Concert spaces*: the programme aims to facilitate regular performance spaces for students and visiting artists in the Academy, local schools and city centre. Weekly informal 'Performance Labs' will be held for students to share works in progress and gain valuable feedback from their peers and faculty. Large scale public performances will feature at important points throughout the academic year and culminate in an ensemble performance event at the conclusion of each year. Monthly showcase gigs will be held in the city centre featuring students and faculty members to bring the work of the program to the local music scene.

9. *Artistic Vocations and Activism*: a truly contemporary and global music programme should endeavour to provide students with the skills they will require to make not only living but also a difference in the world. This programme aims to open up paths of career possibilities to students with modules in various vocations for musicians such as music therapy, arts administration, education and performance technology. This practically-minded approach will be balanced with an arts and activism model that explores the socio-ecological potential of music making through self-directed projects on relevant themes selected by the students.

WHERE IS WORLD MUSIC NOW?

In his 2019 *Guardian* article, Kalia argued that 'world music is dead' and on one hand, perhaps this is true and also appropriate given the nuanced ways we understand musicking in the 21st century. At the same time, I would like to return again to words of my students, and to reiterate, 'what is world music depends on who is asking.' When I ask my students this question, I am always impressed by the depth of their thinking and their ability to hold seemingly contradictory beliefs in dialogue. It is this space of critical questioning that goes some way to explaining why I think we should continue to explore ways to *world* music, even if we don't agree on how we should go about it or where world music is. World music as a pedagogical lens has the potential to explore both creative anarchy and

utopian authenticity aspiring to and also challenging the idea of a "new aesthetic form of the global imagination" (Erlmann in Born & Hesmodalgh 2000). And yet our imagination is not really an abstract idea, or a music syllabus. Our imaginary is a sensory cognitive experience. Wherever and whatever music is, it is certain that it is core to who we are as humans. I am reminded of what one of my students once said in a heated discussion on a Tuesday afternoon in the Health and Science building. 'Music is something that happens in the body, through the body,' she said, 'So, then culture is… culture is people!' Such a simple axiom that can profoundly shape our thinking as music pedagogues, world music, vernacular, classical, traditional or otherwise. Music lives in people and our culture is in our consciousness, in the relationships between all beings. It is not just in the festival, the record shop, the mp3, the concert stage, schools, universities, houses, pubs and village streets, the world of music lives in the intimate space of our own flesh and blood. Music across our contemporary world, represents an ontology of knowledge. To be students of this world of music requires embodied scholarly praxis, imaginary thinking and critical discourse so that we can reclaim the idea of music to include the whole world. To reclaim music as a global experience is to reclaim our own sovereignty, our place in the world and our deep connection with it.

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