

The *World Music* Phenomenon Through the Perspective of Philip V. Bohlman

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“World Music is both very old and very new; it chronicles the ancient and the modern; it lives in the past and in the present.”
(Philip V. Bohlman, *World Music: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 23)

Abstract: Renowned ethnomusicologist Philip V. Bohlman has made a remarkable contribution to the study of the *World Music* phenomenon and its impact on culture and society. An alumnus of Yale and Harvard, Bohlman has built a distinguished academic career across various countries, conducting extensive research in ethnomusicology. His work delves into the intricate relationships between music, cultural identity, nationalism, and migration, addressing themes such as music in the Holocaust, musical folklore, Jewish and Roma music. Overall, the volume *World Music: A Very Short Introduction* is one of the essential resources for a deep understanding of the complexity of the *World Music* phenomenon and highlights the importance of this cultural expression within globalization. The author draws on historical and musical resources gathered over decades of archival and field work. We learn key elements for understanding this living, current phenomenon: the historical, cultural and political contexts in which *World Music* developed, the stylistic and structural characteristics of this phenomenon and the relationship between music and identity, the impact of globalization on music and the emergence of new forms of phrase. Bohlman emphasizes the need to clear up the frequent confusions between *World Music*, traditional music, and commercial music with traditional influences – one of the major challenges in studying the *World Music* phenomenon. We will take a look at both traditional and modern forms of *World Music*, providing a comprehensive perspective on the various genres and styles of music, as well as the cultures they stem from.

Keywords: World Music, Philip V. Bohlman, globalization, cultural identity

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1. Introduction

Ethnomusicologist Philip V. Bohlman is recognized for his outstanding academic contributions dedicated to the deep exploration of music as a cultural phenomenon, and its impact in diverse social and historical contexts. Among his most prominent research interests are the study of music and the Holocaust, musical folklore, Jewish music and Roma music, relative to which he has published numerous books and articles, contributing to the understanding of musical diversity worldwide.

By going deeper into the *World Music* phenomenon, we find in Bohlman several research directions, from a musicological perspective and not only. He touches on a wide range of concepts such as cultural and musical diversity, the interconnectedness of cultures and mutual influences, social and political implications, technology and innovation in music, and the impact on contemporary polystylism.

2. The author's approach

Bohlman draws on historical and musical resources gathered through decades of archival and field work, and emphasizes the need to clear up the frequent confusions between world music, traditional music and commercial music with traditional influences – one of the major challenges in studying the phenomenon.

In the volume's introduction, Philip V. Bohlman summarizes the meaning of the term *World Music*. Since we are talking about a phenomenon that is known as new, the author nevertheless demonstrates in the historical incursion he develops that the phenomenon is older than we can imagine, it is a binder between the old and the new.

2.1. First perspective: mythology

German A first direction Bohlman approaches is the connection between mythology and religion and their importance in what he considers the beginnings of the *World Music* phenomenon. The author tells us that the first musicians who existed inscribed music in the fundamental myths on which religions around the world are based. Why is this important? Musicians are often mentioned in both mythological and philosophical-religious writings about the origins of religion, history and music, from which the author deduces that they are an important factor in the foundations of the *World Music* phenomenon. These first musicians are recorded first as performers and second as artisans who make musical instruments, and they, Bohlman says, “appear at the mythological moments

when identity is most critically called into question, particularly the identities that distinguish sacred from secular realms, and the natural from the artificial”²

Identity thus becomes an essential element in associating music with a space, it will be the key element making the connection between sound and meaning – the brief definition of what *World Music* represents as a phenomenon.

The story the author selects as the beginning of *World Music* history refers to the visit of the Swiss Huguenot (French Calvinist) missionary Jean de Léry (1536-1613) to the Tupinamba population, today the Gulf of Rio de Janeiro. In 1557, during his missionary visit, Jean de Léry made a series of transcriptions of the melodies and texts used by the Tupinamba group for their rituals. Looking objectively, Bohlman likens the music collected by Léry to European church music. He mentions that Léry's writings on Tupinamba music and their reception may have been the moment that initiated a tradition of writing about *World Music*, “a tradition that would accelerate through the Age of Discovery and the Early Modern era, culminating in Herder’s late 18th-century collection of folk songs”³.

2.2. Perspective 2: Religion, Tradition and Aesthetics

In early 1914, “Music possesses the aesthetic power to transform the material world into human experience, and it does so sweepingly at moments of beginning, enunciated by the earliest sacred texts of world religion”⁴.

The second perspective presented by the author brings numerous examples from various cultures and religions in order to reinforce the fact that World Music is older than we can imagine. He mentions the ontological role of music in the Qur'an and other sacred texts, as well as the influence of religious practices in the 21st century on the phenomenon of *World music* globalization.

3. Defining the phenomenon

Concerning the term *World Music*, the author analyzes three directions: the historical evolution, different definitions and the challenges faced in the evolution of the phenomenon.

The author looks at the historical evolution of the term, tracing its meaning back to the beginning of the 21st century and researches how it has changed over

² “First musicians appear at the mythological moments when identity is most critically called into question, particularly the identities that distinguish sacred from secular realms, and the natural from the artificial.” Philip V. Bohlman (2020), *World Music: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 39.

³ “Léry’s writings on Tupinamba music and their reception set a tradition of writing about *World Music* in motion, a tradition that would accelerate through the Age of Discovery and the Early Modern era, culminating in Herder’s late 18th-century collection of folk songs.” *Idem*, p. 34.

⁴ *Idem*, p. 42.

time. The term was first used in the 1980s in the United States to describe and distinguish the music coming from the traditional, folk art of various countries and cultures from popular music⁵, broadcast on the radio and in various public spaces (such as pubs and restaurants).

Historically, the author tells us that there are certain times when recorded definitions explain the presence of music in the world in specific ways. Here he cites as an example Johann Gottfried von Herder who coined the term *Volkslied* or *folk song*, which he mentions in his writings “to account for a repertory he had gathered and published from global sources that together signalled a common humanity.”⁶

Bohlman points to the last relevant context in the evolution of the term, when the concept of *World Music* became an important tool, both in the context of entertainment and in that of social change. This dual function profoundly influenced the way people perceived and still perceive this term today.

The author illustrates his point with the example of a significant moment in the summer of 1987, when executives of British record labels gathered in a London pub to discuss how the different genres of music in their catalogue could be packaged and marketed under the umbrella of World Music. This event illustrated how the music industry began to recognize the commercial and cultural value of traditional music and non-Western genres, and the use of the term *World Music* became a tool to bring these varied sounds and influences from around the world to the attention of global audiences.

4. *World Music* and traditional folk music

The connection between *World Music* and traditional folk music begins, according to Bohlman, with Johann Gottfried Herder whose work *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* (1778-1799) and the term *Volkslied* would lay the foundation for the phenomenon of *World Music*. Documenting this inference, Bohlman provides details of Herder's work.

The first traces of what would become a sustained interest in folk song are evident in his 1770 meeting and collaboration in Strasbourg with Goethe, who was at the time gathering Alsatian folk songs. Herder himself took a special interest in folk songs from the peripheries of Europe, and traditions from the Baltic lands – his first pastoral position was at the cathedral of Riga, Latvia – occupy a very visible position in his collections.⁷

⁵ In general, the term popular music does not refer to traditional/folk music, but to the popularity of music, to music that is then ‘trending’, the music listened to by the masses.

⁶ “There is no clearer example of such a moment than Herder’s coining of the term, *Volkslied*, or ‘folk song’, to account for a repertory he had gathered and published from global sources that together signalled a common humanity.” Philip V. Bohlman, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁷ *Idem*, p. 58.

The author assumes that the German writer knew about the history of cultured and traditional music, but in his time this was not part of the topics studied. If he were writing today, Bohlman continues, he might, like many others, have two opinions. The first concerns the common origin of music and speech valid for all popular songs of the world. The second opinion emphasizes the fact that each nation had its own folk music, closely related to its own history.

Therefore, Herder's two volumes from 1778 and 1779 (which he entitled *Volkslieder, Folk Songs*)⁸ suggested a new approach to understanding music, introducing the concept of oral tradition and he argued that "all men communicate through music as naturally as through speech."⁹ Thus, for about two centuries, it was believed that each of the world's societies has its own music.

For the early twentieth century, Bohlman spoke about musicologist Robert Lachmann (1892-1939), presenting his important role in the development of music anthologies and *World Music*, and his interest in Jewish music. As one of the collectors of music in German prisoner-of-war camps¹⁰, Lachmann was at the time head of the scientific commission at the Arab Music Congress in Cairo in 1932, and producer of the *Oriental Music* radio programs he broadcast in Jerusalem.

Certainly, Béla Bartók (1881-1945) and Zoltán Kodály are also mentioned, about whom the author says: "Bartók and Kodály were neither the first nor the last Hungarian composers to show an active interest in traditional music as well – argues Bohlman – but they raised issues of ethnic identity, racial purity and national integrity"¹¹.

This entire journey of anthologies has been closely cultivated by the Berlin Phonogram Archive, which in 2011 released a 5-CD set entitled *Music! The Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv 1900-2011 in 111 recordings*. The Berlin Archive was involved in the storage and management of Bohlman's aforementioned anthologies and records. Examples come from Asia, Australia, North and South America and Europe. Bohlman described this collection as "a recorded history of recordings, conscious attention focused on how scholarly concerns intersect through ethnography and performance"¹². This CD collection is the obvious

⁸ "When publishing his volumes of *Volkslieder*, or 'Folk Songs', he provided an attribution of nation and language to accompany the song's title: the first two songs in his seminal anthology were 'German' and 'English', the final song 'Peruvian'." Philip V. Bohlman, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

⁹ *Idem*, pp. 44-56.

¹⁰ "One of the founders of modern ethnomusicology and Jewish music research, as the head of the scientific commission at the 1932 Cairo Congress of Arabic Music." *Idem*, p. 63.

¹¹ "Folk music embodied and grew from a musical discourse of Hungarianness, and the stakes of that discourse were very high, for they raised questions not only of ethnic identity, but also of racial purity and of national integrity." *Idem*, p. 82.

¹² "It is clear already from the cover of the anthology that *Music!* represents a recorded history of recording, conscious attention focused on the ways scholarly concerns intersect through ethnography and performance." *Idem*, p. 64.

example of how ethnomusicologists and musicians coexist in the spaces that *World Music* creates.

5. Differences and similarities between traditional folk music and *World Music*

And yet, what was the author's conclusion? Traditional folk music and *World Music* are two musical genres closely related to each other, but with distinct developments. Traditional folk music is specific to a region or culture and is passed down through generations, through oral traditions. It has deep historical and cultural roots and reflects the values and traditions of the community of origin.

On the other hand, *World Music* is a form of music that combines elements from different cultures and musical traditions, thus creating a new artistic expression. *World Music* originates in traditional folk music, but can also be influenced by other musical genres such as jazz, rock or hip-hop. In many cases, *World Music* has been influenced by traditional folk music, and artists and composers have sought to incorporate specific elements of it into their creations.

There are many *World Music* performers who have collaborated with traditional artists from different parts of the world to create unique sounds and styles. A distinguished example is the album *Talking Timbuktu* by guitarist Ry Cooder and Ali Farka Touré, where traditional music from Mali was fused with *blues* and *rock* elements.

6. The global city

The global city is a concept invented by Bohlman, with which he concludes his “brief” introduction to *World Music*. It is an imaginary city, which was formed along with immigration, because the *World Music* phenomenon facilitated creating an immaterial space, where dozens of cultures, traits, trends, historical and current phenomena came together. Where different musical styles and genres meet and merge, and create new forms of musical expression that transcend geographical boundaries.¹³

Music recording was another essential factor in the formation of this global space. Given that *World Music: A Very Short Introduction* was originally published in 2002 and revised in 2020, we can understand why updating information on the evolution of technology and its influence on World Music was more than necessary. Recording technology allowed musicians to record their creations and distribute them widely.

These artists and musical genres that the author selects stand for the diversity and impact the diaspora has had in the development of music globally – he mentions here Bob Marley and the *reggae* genre, Celia Cruz and *salsa*, Paco

¹³ Philip V. Bohlman, *op. cit.*, pp. 110-114.

de Lucía and *flamenco*, as well and Ravi Shankar and Indian *raga* music, Amália Rodrigues and the Portuguese *fado* and Carlos Gardel and *tango*.

7. Conclusions

The emergence of this common culture opened the doors for mutual influences and the assimilation of musical elements from various traditions. In a globalized context, musicians have begun to explore and combine different musical traditions, resulting in a rich and diverse sound amalgam, but *World Music* is not only an expression of cultural plurality and intercultural dialogue, it is the basis of open-mindedness, it is a space where we manifest ourselves day by day and which voluntarily, or less voluntarily, influences today's creative minds¹⁴. As Bohlman concludes – close the door, but keep a window open – this was just the beginning of what surrounds us acoustically, nowadays. We just need to listen better.

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¹⁴ Philip V. Bohlman, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

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