

## Between globalisation and identity: polystylism and World Music in postmodernism

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**Abstract:** Globalization has caused contemporary music to face new challenges related to the preservation of cultural identity and the integration of stylistic diversity in a framework with increasingly permeable borders. The present paper explores the role of polystylism and of the *World Music* phenomenon in postmodern music, analysing how these trends contribute to the development of a complex musical language. Polystylism, by integrating several styles, and *World Music*, by adapting traditions to modern contexts, allow composers to create new hybrid forms. This study will provide important examples of creators who anticipated this stylistic synthesis – Heitor Villa-Lobos, Doina Rotaru – or perfected it – Osvaldo Golijov (combining traditional Sephardic and Arabic influences) and Unsuk Chin (reintegrating sounds from Korean street theatre through modern orchestration techniques). Their work demonstrates how postmodern aesthetics combine or offer new meanings to various influences, creating bridges between different cultural identities and aesthetics.

**Keywords:** globalisation, identity, polystylism, postmodernism, *World Music*.

### 1. Introduction

Globalization, an increasingly present and influential phenomenon in the contemporary landscape, has accelerated the interaction and interconnection between various musical traditions and styles and contributed to the shaping of phenomena such as polystylism and *World Music*.

Researching this phenomenon and its impact on contemporary music becomes essential for understanding the direction in which artistic creation is heading today. The difficulties of this research derive from the dynamic and fluid nature of the phenomenon. Globalization is not a linear process, and its influences on music vary depending on the cultural, economic and technological contexts. Thus, the problem of identity in music, in this context, consists of finding a balance between the influences of globalization and the preservation of cultural specificity, while providing space for innovation and personal expression. Phenomena such as polystylism and *World Music* combine various styles, but raise the question of whether these fusions are an authentic evolution or a

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simplification of cultural complexity. In this case, postmodernism provides the conceptual framework for understanding and integrating cultural and stylistic diversity in a world shaped by globalisation.

Postmodernism is a complex and elusive artistic attitude that reflects the dynamics of the ever-changing contemporary world. The study of this phenomenon has been undertaken by leading authors such as Charles Jencks (in *Die Postmoderne. Der neue Klassizismus in Kunst und Architektur*, 1987), Andreas Huyssen (in *The Search of Tradition: Avant-Garde and Postmodernism in the 1970s*, 1981), Jean-François Lyotard (in *La condition postmoderne*, 1979) and Wolfgang Iser (in *Unsere postmoderne Moderne*, 1993). Their research suggests that one of the elements underlying the evolution of postmodernism is *diversity*, whether voluntary or involuntary.

In most cases, the introduction of the term “postmodern” is attributed to the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, who in 1979 mentioned it in his work *La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir*, where he highlighted a break from modernism that occurred stylistically. This break should not be understood as a complete rejection of modernism, but as an evolution that embraces the scientific discoveries of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, without turning them into a rigid ideology. Thus, musical postmodernism is defined, in addition to the aforementioned *diversity*, by *pluralism* and *flexibility*, characteristics that allow composers to combine the past with the present in a free and non-constraining way.

On the other hand, the concept of polystylism has been used to describe the combination of several styles or techniques in a work in literature, visual arts, film, and especially music. In contemporary musicology, there are not many sources that define polystylism. The term appears rarely and is often associated with specific composers. In direct relation to music, the term was first mentioned by composer Alfred Schnittke in 1971, in the study called *Polystylistic Tendencies in Modern Music*. In his essay, Schnittke defines the two main principles of polystylism as “quotation and allusion”<sup>1</sup>. Even a cursory glance at the sources that provide explanations about the polystylistic concept shows that the use of the term is mostly linked to the post-Soviet, Eastern European cultural space (former Socialist countries). From a compositional point of view, in many cases, polystylism has been associated with the collage process, but there are also other approaches that analyse stylistic interactions in the music of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries and frame them within the polystylistic concept. This concept is considered to be a consequence of musical postmodernism, having its roots in the

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<sup>1</sup> “Schnittke defined the two main principles of polystylism as quotation and allusion”, Baiba Jaunslaviete (2018). *The Theory of Polystylism as a Tool for Analysis of Contemporary Music in the Post-Soviet Cultural Space: Some Terminological Aspects*, Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music, 2018, retrieved from <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/4309/ed02c667e3b91594a6aa48bab4f9629e7b88.pdf>, accessed on 7.03.2024.

works of composers such as Bernd Alois Zimmermann, Luciano Berio, Mauricio Kagel, and Alfred Schnittke.

## 2. *World Music* as a phenomenon

Also, in addition to the polystylistic concept, the *World Music* phenomenon is a musical and cultural movement with a growing international popularity, in recent decades. Although this concept has been theorised and debated extensively, its exact understanding has remained a subject of interpretation and discussion. There are few sources that provide a complete definition of the *World Music* phenomenon, as it is relatively new in the context of music research. Broadly speaking, *World Music* refers to traditional music from various cultures, often re-contextualised and integrated into the global circuit of the contemporary music industry.

In a first phase of my research, I came to the conclusion that this phenomenon is an important source of enrichment of the musical language. By means of this phenomenon, musicians can explore and better understand diversity, by closely analysing the various kinds of music performed by people from other spaces. We will thus see the integration of traditional music in contemporary contexts, investigating the way in which present-day composers use elements of *World Music* and the impact of this movement on contemporary polystylism, the way in which traditional and contemporary music interact and how musical resources can be used to create authentic artistic expression.

The transition to a postmodern aesthetic marked by fluidity and intertextuality was anticipated by a series of composers who innovatively explored the boundaries of traditional music and paved the way for this pluralistic aesthetic. One example is Heitor Villa-Lobos, whose cycle *Bachianas Brasileiras* (1930-1945) incorporates Brazilian rhythmic and melodic elements in a baroque-inspired framework, creating a bridge between cultures. An example from the Romanian space would be the composer Doina Rotaru, who showed an inclination towards nature symbolism, bringing archaic Romanian elements to the fore in *Salcia* [The Willow] (1984), which reflects a syncretic approach. These examples can be seen as forms of *avant la lettre postmodernism* – composers who, without explicitly operating in the register of postmodernism, anticipated many of the themes and aesthetic strategies associated with it.

Today's composers use elements of *World Music* not only as sources of inspiration, but also as means by which they can build bridges between different musical aesthetics, thus enriching the current musical language.

From the multiple possible examples, I have chosen two composers who come from different cultural and geographical backgrounds and are less known in the Romanian space: Osvaldo Golijov and Unsuk Chin.

Osvaldo Golijov was born in 1960 in La Plata, Argentina, to a family of Eastern European Jews with roots in Ukraine and Romania. As a child, he was

exposed to traditional Jewish, Argentine, and classical music. In the 1980s, Golijov moved to Israel to study composition, and later settled in the United States, where he developed his compositional style, characterized by the fusion of Western classical music with influences from *World Music*. This path prepared him for approaching complex and universal themes in many works commissioned by major festivals and stages, such as those present in the selected work – *Ayre* for ensemble and voice.

Unsuik Chin, born in 1961 in Seoul, South Korea, is an example of a modernist composer who combines East Asian tradition with Western avant-garde techniques. Chin studied composition with György Ligeti and has lived in Berlin, a centre of contemporary music, since 1988. Unlike Golijov, Chin focuses on abstract sound structures and the integration of technology to a greater extent, and is also active in the field of electronic music. Her works are characterized by a language that avoids any stylistic conventionalism. At the same time, she remains connected to her Korean roots and recalls them in her music as a source of inspiration.

*Ayre*, whose name means “air” or “melody” in Mediaeval Spanish, is an 11-song cycle commissioned by Carnegie Hall for soprano Dawn Upshaw. It reconstructs an auditory journey through the Mediterranean region and explores the fusion of Spanish, Jewish, and Arabic cultural and musical influences that coexisted in Spain before the *Reconquista*<sup>2</sup> period, approximately 718–722. The *Re-conquest* was the process by which the Christian kingdoms of Northern Hispania (present-day Spain and Portugal) reconquered the Iberian Peninsula from the Muslims (Arabs and Moors), a historical stage that unfolded over nearly 800 years. It was recorded and published on the album with the same name, which brings together two parts, the first one, *Ayre* by Osvaldo Golijov and the second one, *Folk Songs* for mezzo-soprano, flute, clarinet, viola, cello, harp, and percussion by Luciano Berio<sup>3</sup>. *Ayre* was enthusiastically received upon its release, enjoying positive reviews,<sup>4</sup> both as an album and as an original composition.

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<sup>2</sup> “The Reconquista (Spanish and Portuguese for 're-conquest') or the re-conquest of al-Andalus was a series of military and cultural campaigns that European Christian kingdoms waged against the Muslim kingdoms following the Muslim conquest of the Iberian Peninsula by the Umayyad Caliphate, culminating in the reign of the Catholic Monarchs of Spain. The beginning of the Reconquista is traditionally dated to the Battle of Covadonga (c. 718 or 722), in which an Asturian army achieved the first Christian victory over the forces of the Umayyad Caliphate since the beginning of the military invasion. The Reconquista ended in 1492 with the fall of the Nasrid kingdom of Granada to the Catholic Monarchs.” *Reconquista*, Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reconquista>

<sup>3</sup> “The first part *Ayre* (for voice and orchestra) the pieces are all performed by the soprano Dawn Upshaw accompanied by the orchestra *The Andalucian Dogs*. In the second part *Folk Songs* (for voice and seven instruments) the soprano Dawn Upshaw is accompanied by Helen Tara O'Connor, Todd Palmer, Ljova, Erik Friedlander, Bridget Kibbey, Eric Poland and Gordon Gottlieb. In addition to the instruments mentioned in the pieces *Tancas serradas a muru* (Sardinian) and ‘Wa Habibi’ (Arabic) a laptop programmed with electronica “beat” was

Although the text on the CD cover describes the work as a journey into the world of the Jewish Mediterranean, this characterisation is somewhat limiting. In reality, the cycle includes songs and poems belonging to various Arabic, Christian and Muslim traditions, suggesting Golijov's desire to illustrate the idea of a large family, made up of different faiths and ethnicities. Designed for voice and instrumental ensemble, the cycle is based on ancient texts and melodies, reinterpreted in a modern manner. The texts are sung and sometimes recited in several languages – Hebrew, Castilian, the Sardinian dialect. The cycle contains 11 parts and Osvaldo Golijov uses text and music sources that range from the mediaeval poetry of Yehudah Halevy and Mahmoud Darwish, to the Sardinian anthem written by the magistrate of the Kingdom, Francesco Ignazio Mannu, and traditional Sephardic songs. The composer uses classical instruments in the construction of the ensemble, such as viola, cello, double bass, harp, clarinet in Bb/bass clarinet, horn in F, accordion, flute/alto flute, percussion, guitar, exotic instruments (conch and ronroco), but also electronic ones. He proposes the use of a synthesizer for special effects on the accordion (*Hyper-Accordion effects in Wa Habibi Intro* and *Hyper-Accordion effects in Wa Habibi Outro*): at the beginning of the score, he mentions various technical details regarding the setting of frequencies and registers (examples: 1. Ping Pong Delay with degradation on repeats / analogue delay simulation, 2. Reverb, 3. Whammy Pedal/pitch shifter). He recommends the use of a Digitech GHNX3 device or a similar one for reproducing the desired effects. It is stated that the *hyper-accordion* version is preferred, but, in its absence, a classic accordion can be used, taking into account the nuances and phrasing indications from the recording on the published album, as well as the acoustics of the space where the work will be performed.

Due to the lack of a direct interview with Osvaldo Golijov, the analysis of the themes and the selection of sources of inspiration for *World Music* was carried out based on direct observations of the pieces and the historical context. This approach has allowed me to identify several recurring themes in the work: **sacrifice, spirituality, family intimacy, cultural resistance, contemplation, continuity and unity**. These are relevant both to the historical narrative of the

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used to provide a rhythmic driving background.” *Ayre*, Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ayre\\_\(Golijov\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ayre_(Golijov)).

<sup>4</sup> Several specialised articles comment on Golijov’s work. In his article, British journalist Robert Dennis Harris defines *Ayre* as “one of the defining works of our century”: “This polystylistic, transcultural melting pot of a song cycle is disorienting, rapturous, unsettling and transcendent.” *Opera News*

“Golijov has fashioned a careening, vital, emotional, wild concoction that demonstrates one essential fact: that all human emotions (and *Ayre* has them all) ... are shared and shareable.” *The Globe and Mail*

“Golijov’s score makes magical use of his orchestra, from a full complement of cellos to a vivid brass section, to produce richly layered suggestions of natural sounds that range from birds and insects to a more momentous sense of the shifts in the greater cosmos from agitation to calm.” *Chicago Suntimes*

*Reconquista* and to the contemporary cultural and spiritual realities that manifest themselves in the phenomenon of globalisation. The evocation of the Reconquista is a symbolic starting point for the composer's musical reflection on tolerance, identity and dialogue between cultures. At a time when global conflicts reflected religious and cultural tensions, the work took on a particular contemporary relevance, underlining the importance of history for the modern world.

**1. Sacrifice** – Inspired by biblical tragedies (*Una Madre Comió Asado*), Golijov explores collective and individual suffering, reflecting on the meaning of sacrifice in history and spirituality. He uses slow rhythms, the connection with *Jeremiah's Lamentations*. He expresses the collective and personal pain of sacrifice.

**2. Spirituality** – Sephardic, Arabic and Christian influences (*Wa Habibi, Aiini Taqtiru, Yah, Anna Emtzacha*) underline the religious convergence and the search for transcendence, a fundamental element in the cultural narrative of the *Reconquista*. It takes on oriental ornamentation, expansive melodic lines, Christian, Arabic and Jewish influences.

**3. Family intimacy** – *Nani*, the Sephardic lullaby, conveys family warmth and continuity between generations. Simple melody, minimalist accompaniment.

**4. Cultural resistance** – *Tancas Serradas a Muru* illustrates the struggle to preserve one's identity in the face of assimilation, a theme that resonates with the Jewish exile and the peoples' struggle for autonomy. Marked rhythms, clear structure, political theme. It represents national identity and the struggle to preserve tradition.

**5. Contemplation** – *Luna* and *Kun Li-Guitari Wataran Ayyuha Al-Maa'* offers moments of reflection, creating introspective spaces that connect the past with modern sensibility.

**6. Continuity and unity** – *Ariadna en su Laberinto*, a quodlibet of traditional and original melodies. It brings together the themes of the cycle through a complex sound tapestry and brings to mind the idea of the circle, cyclicity, an element that can return.

The second example is *Gougalōn: Scenes from a Street Theatre* (2009), where composer Unsuk Chin uses diversity as a point of inspiration, exploring sound and technology in a conceptual way. She creates a modernist sound aesthetic, influenced by the avant-garde, but subtly preserves traditional themes. We recognize it in the presence of effervescent rhythms on percussion instruments, but she avoids making direct references to cultural traditions like Golijov does.

The work was created as part of the *Siemens Arts Programme* and first performed in Berlin and Frankfurt in 2009 by *Ensemble Modern*. The final version, however, was commissioned by the famous *Ensemble intercontemporain* and performed in Paris in 2012. The title, inspired by the Old German language, reflects a moment the composer experienced during a trip to Hong Kong and

Guangzhou between 2008 and 2009. The atmosphere of the poor old neighbourhoods, located near the giant video screens and ultra-modern buildings, awakened memories of her childhood in Seoul in the 1960s. It was a time of poverty and military dictatorship, before the city's accelerated modernisation. The composer particularly recalled a group of entertainers she frequently saw as a child in a suburb of Seoul. “Gougalōn” is a form of “imaginary folk music” – stylized, fragmented, and only seemingly primitive. The music is inspired by Korean tradition and street performances. The orchestration combines elements of contemporary writing with sounds that evoke traditional Korean instruments.

### 3. Conclusions

The inexhaustible diversity of combinations between distinct cultural sources in postmodern music reflects the tension between globalisation and identity. Polystylism and the integration of *World Music* elements outline two directions of the use of traditions. In the case of Golijov, there is a concrete perspective, where the processing of source melodies does not detract from their colour and specificity. On the other hand, in the case of Chin, we are dealing with a more scholarly, conceptual composition, in which rituals and source melodies nourish the composition without establishing themselves in the foreground of the musical discourse. Traditional materials are sublimated into an abstract compositional language, in which source rituals and melodies enrich the musical texture without becoming dominant elements. Thus, between the direct assumption of identity and its dilution in a globalised context, postmodern music offers a wide range of possibilities for integrating tradition.

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