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The Transformative Role of Classical Music in Cultural Diversity and Cross-cultural Understanding

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Abstract

This paper explores the transformative potential of classical music in promoting cultural exchange and emotional connectivity. By examining its historical significance, contemporary applications, and societal impact, the study sheds light on how classical music serves as a conduit for cultural dialogue, enriching communities worldwide.

Introduction

Music has long been recognized as a universal language, transcending cultural, linguistic, and geographical boundaries. Among its various forms, classical music holds a unique position, embodying centuries of artistic expression and intellectual pursuit. In the 21st century, its relevance extends beyond mere performance, serving as a powerful tool for fostering cultural diversity and cross-cultural understanding. In China, classical music has experienced an unprecedented rise, with millions of children learning Western instruments like the piano and violin. This phenomenon reflects not only a growing appreciation for the art form but also its role in bridging Eastern and Western traditions.

This paper explores the transformative potential of classical music in promoting cultural exchange and emotional connectivity. By examining its historical significance, contemporary applications, and societal impact, the study sheds light on how classical music serves as a conduit for cultural dialogue, enriching communities worldwide.

1. The Globalization and Cultural Transformation of Classical Music: From West to East

The globalization of classical music reflects its evolution from a distinctly Western tradition to a global art form embraced by diverse cultures. Initially rooted in Europe during the Renaissance and Baroque periods, classical music expanded its reach through colonial encounters, trade, and missionary activities in the 18th and 19th centuries. Western powers introduced classical music to their colonies, often as a symbol of cultural authority. For example, British colonial influence established Western orchestras and conservatories in India, while missionaries in East Asia promoted Western music as part of their educational initiatives.

The interaction between Western classical music and Eastern traditions gained momentum in the 20th century. In Japan, the Meiji Restoration (1868–1912) marked a turning point, with classical music incorporated into national modernization efforts. Today, Japan is a global hub for classical music, fostering both traditional performances and innovative compositions. Similarly, in China, Western classical music flourished in the early 20th century through the establishment of conservatories and orchestras in cities like Shanghai and Beijing. Chinese composers such as Xian Xinghai merged traditional Chinese melodies with Western symphonic forms, exemplified by the *Yellow River Cantata*, a seminal work blending Eastern and Western styles. Thanks to the cultural revolution of the 20th and 21st centuries, the Chinese world appreciates and treasures classical music in its archives as well as institutions. Digging deeper into this topic, the high acceptance of Western music in Chinese performances by adults and children is remarkable. For instance, studies have recently revealed that the number of children learning and playing the piano exceeds 40 million (Mellor, 2019). In addition, Western orchestras have steadily increased their influence on Chinese living, thereby promoting cultural entrepreneurship. Moreover, the expansion goes beyond the borders, prompting Chinese people to pursue classical music in other parts of the world, such as San Francisco, London, and Germany (Mellor, 2019).

In appreciation, the outcome of this development in the instrumental arena is the beautiful and serene display of classical music in auditions, festivals, and schools. The increasing demand for the latter is evident in Chinese neighborhoods. For instance, many young people are taking more lessons in classical music, while others view a top-tier understanding of the genre as their dream come true (Mellor, 2019). Furthermore, learning classical music to widen the scope of one's dreams is a great milestone for international students who use it as a means to cross cultural borders. On the other hand, it is becoming a common sight to find children practicing pianos in their spare time rather than playing games or other extracurricular activities.

It is intriguing to discover the prevalence of classical music in grassroots training levels and upper echelons of society. For example, an experience with the Young Music Culture Academy in Guangdong performing its annual concerts, and other similar occasions have crossed their internal cultural restraints, bringing classical music to a wholesome level (Mellor, 2019). The refined quality music appeals not just to the ears of its audience but also permeates deep into their feelings and way of life. Ultimately, the view of the future of classical music in China and beyond is not just one of its embedment into piano performance, but also the idea of reinvention of the genre in the coming years. As more people learn about it, the music genre is slowly becoming a cross-cultural vehicle, promoting the sharing of different styles and knowledge among various communities.

2.Role of Classical Music in Promoting Diversity and Cross-cultural Understanding

Like other types, classical music has several categories, such as concerto grosso, sonata, suite, recital, and opera among others (Afshari, 2018). Exploring the original works of Mozart, Beethoven, and Joseph Haydn in the classical era of the early eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century, leads to a discovery of how profound the genre is, in terms of its potential to transform a society. Music, as an art genre, plays a crucial role in preserving heritage and thus provides opportunities for society to widen its perspective on important cross-cultural aspects. It helps one view the world around them with respect and appreciation, by considering the differences in background, and beliefs, thus developing cultural competence (Afshari, 2018).

Perceptibly, classical music is a knowledge repository, promoting emotional experience, preserving cultural values, ethics, and identity as well as fostering the growth of a civilization. Classical music is the bridge that draws one from the outside world and experiences, toward the inner self, thoughts, and feelings, to bring a sense of restoration (Basstlap, 2014). This restoration is a form of self-reflection that allows one to make peace with the past, accept the present, and embrace a future of change. The tranquil approach of classical music prompts one to pay attention to their inner self, allowing thoughts and ideas to mature, thus enhancing awareness. Furthermore, classical music is expressive and hence allows communication of abstract ideas (Basstlap, 2014). With such a tool, composers and performers can imbue their experiences, thoughts, and desires into the body of classical music, thus bringing forth life in every note.

With this understanding, classical music no longer registers as an old art, but as a continuous reflective tool that is at the disposal of all generations. In the modern world where people are highly likely to lose touch with their inner self, due to the constant pressures of uncertainty and change from the outside world, classical music calls people of all cultures back to this realm. Through sharing and adopting different music styles, people can ultimately adapt to modern living without losing their individuality, alongside fostering a universal connection (Trehub, Becker & Morly, 2015).

Cultural cohesion is multidimensional, whereas music is a subset of culture. For instance, in a particular culture, a particular set of talents and interests lead to the creation of different types of music, whereas different cultures have their musical preference and orientation (Cooks-Campbell, 2023; Trehub, Becker & Morly, 2015). Therefore, music addresses cultural and social needs, and integration of different styles further enhances effectiveness. For instance, classical music has demonstrated its effectiveness and value in promoting luxury among members of the upper echelons of society, as well as high-end entertainment events. In a study conducted by Afshari (2018), classical music is both therapeutic and promotes relaxation as well as serenity. One exemplary study shows the likelihood of customers purchasing high-end merchandise and luxury goods when classical music was introduced into the shopping center (Areni 1993; Afshari, 2018 p. 60). Classical music has also proven effective as an intervention for agitation behavior in older adults with mental health illnesses such as Alzheimer's disease. When used in this way, music plays an important role in phasing out anxiety and stress, thus improving relaxation (Gardener, 2000).

The effects of classical music have profound effects on a multicultural audience. Not only does it create a peaceful environment, prompting emotional and psychological evocation, one feels a profound sense of connection with their environment and the universe as a whole. Trehub, Becker & Morly (2015) outline that music synchronizes emotion and other universal feelings or desires, which is an important factor in social bonding. This universal feeling creates a safe space crucial to the modern world, promoting the integral aspect of humanity through evoking sadness, happiness, yearning, and other aspects that people from all cultures share. Classical music therefore appeals as a tool for emotional development, something that requires institutionalization with freedom of interpretation unlike the stereotypical view of superiority and antiquity that hinder the genre.

From a grand perspective, performing classical music is not merely limited to cultural territories, but rather follows an omniscient path to expressionism. While the genre is subject to different levels of sensitivity in a cultural dimension, scholars consider it an open window of exploration for people of all backgrounds. For instance, creating and performing music abroad, with conjoining aspects such as forming a multicultural band for the same genre promotes cross-cultural communication and understanding (Trehub, Becker & Morly, 2015). In a holistic sense, its psychological and emotional appeal to cultural diversity is against the popular skeptics of society, discrimination, and religious conflict, among other elements that hinder the development

of a cross-cultural community (Dasstlap, 2014).

3. Case Studies in Cross-cultural Classical Music Initiatives

Cross-cultural classical music initiatives showcase the genre's capacity to bridge cultural divides and foster mutual understanding through shared artistic expression. A notable example is the Silk Road Ensemble, founded by Yo-Yo Ma, which merges the traditions of Eastern and Western music. This ensemble features a diverse range of instruments, including the Chinese pipa, Indian tabla, and Western violin, crafting compositions that celebrate the cultural heritages of its members. By performing globally and engaging in educational outreach, the ensemble inspires audiences to appreciate the interconnectedness of global cultures.

Another compelling case is the Yellow River Piano Concerto, a work that exemplifies the fusion of Chinese and Western musical traditions. Adapted from the Chinese revolutionary piece Yellow River Cantata by composer Xian Xinghai, the concerto combines traditional Chinese melodies with the Western symphonic form. Its international performances have become a symbol of how classical music can transcend cultural boundaries while honoring distinct identities.

In the realm of education, programs like the Lang Lang International Music Foundation encourage young musicians worldwide to explore classical music as a means of cross-cultural dialogue. By providing scholarships, mentorship, and opportunities for collaboration, the foundation enables students from different countries to perform together, fostering a shared appreciation for classical music's universal appeal. Similarly, international competitions like the Tchaikovsky Competition and the Chopin International Piano Competition have drawn participants from diverse backgrounds, highlighting the unifying power of classical music as a global language.

In Latin America, Venezuela's El Sistema program stands as a remarkable example of classical music's social impact. Founded in 1975 by José Antonio Abreu, this revolutionary music education initiative has transformed the lives of millions of underprivileged children, producing world-renowned musicians like Gustavo Dudamel while serving as a model for similar programs worldwide.

Cross-cultural collaborations are also evident in large-scale events like the Beijing Music Festival. This festival regularly features Western and Chinese orchestras performing side by side, offering a platform for artistic exchange and showcasing works that blend Eastern and Western influences. Similarly, the Ravinia Festival in the United States has hosted numerous multicultural performances, emphasizing the importance of inclusivity in classical music.

These initiatives demonstrate that classical music is not bound by geographic or cultural limitations. Instead, it evolves as a living art form, enriched by the diversity of those who create and perform it. By fostering dialogue, mutual respect, and creative exchange, cross-cultural classical music initiatives play a crucial role in promoting cultural diversity and understanding on a global scale.

4. Challenges and Opportunities for Classical Music in Modern Society

Despite its transformative potential and universal appeal, classical music faces significant challenges in its role as a medium for cross-cultural understanding. These obstacles highlight the need for innovation and inclusivity to ensure the genre's continued relevance in an increasingly globalized and diverse world.

Cultural Stereotypes

Classical music is often perceived as an elitist art form, primarily associated with high-income and well-educated audiences. This stereotype can alienate people from underrepresented communities, discouraging them from engaging with the genre. Many associate classical music with exclusive concert halls, formal attire, and a rigid performance culture, which can feel intimidating or inaccessible to newcomers. This perception creates barriers to participation and appreciation, particularly in cultures where classical music is not traditionally part of the mainstream. Breaking down these stereotypes requires reimagining classical music performances to make them more inclusive and approachable, such as hosting open-air concerts, casual performances, and educational workshops.

Competition from Popular Music

The dominance of popular music genres poses another challenge for classical music, especially among younger audiences. In a world saturated with instant-access music streaming platforms, social media trends, and viral pop culture phenomena, classical music often struggles to compete for attention. Its long-form compositions and intricate structures can seem less appealing in comparison to the immediacy and accessibility of pop songs. Moreover, classical music is sometimes perceived as outdated or irrelevant to modern lifestyles. To counter this, efforts such as blending classical music with contemporary genres, incorporating multimedia elements into performances, and leveraging platforms like YouTube and TikTok can help attract a broader and younger audience.

Accessibility Issues

Access to classical music education and performances remains a significant barrier, particularly in economically disadvantaged regions. Many schools lack the funding to offer music programs, leaving children without opportunities to learn about or engage with classical music. Additionally, ticket prices for live

performances can be prohibitively expensive, further limiting access. Rural areas and smaller cities often lack the infrastructure for orchestras or music schools, leaving residents disconnected from classical music culture. Addressing these disparities requires targeted outreach, such as offering subsidized or free tickets, funding music programs in underprivileged areas, and using technology to bring performances and education to remote regions through live streaming and online courses.

Balancing Tradition and Innovation

Another challenge lies in maintaining the integrity of classical music traditions while adapting to modern tastes and cultural contexts. Purists often resist changes that blend classical music with other genres or modify its presentation, fearing a loss of authenticity. However, clinging too rigidly to tradition can render classical music inaccessible or unappealing to contemporary audiences. Striking a balance between honoring the past and embracing the future is crucial for the genre's survival. Initiatives such as cross-genre collaborations, experimental performances, and modern reinterpretations of classical works demonstrate that classical music can evolve while preserving its essence.

Globalization and Cultural Identity

While globalization has facilitated the cross-cultural exchange of classical music, it also raises questions about cultural identity. The dominance of Western classical music in global contexts can sometimes overshadow local musical traditions, leading to concerns about cultural homogenization. Efforts to incorporate indigenous and regional musical elements into classical compositions can help address this issue, ensuring that the genre evolves in a way that respects and celebrates cultural diversity.

By acknowledging and addressing these challenges, classical music can continue to thrive as a powerful medium for cross-cultural dialogue. Embracing innovation, inclusivity, and accessibility will not only ensure its relevance in the modern world but also strengthen its ability to connect people across cultures and generations.

Conclusion

Classical music serves as more than just an art form; it is a universal language that fosters emotional connection, cultural appreciation, and mutual understanding across diverse societies. Its growing presence in China, both within grassroots communities and at an institutional level, exemplifies its transformative power. As millions of Chinese students embrace classical music, it has become a bridge connecting Eastern and Western traditions, demonstrating how the genre transcends geographical and cultural boundaries.

Beyond its aesthetic and intellectual appeal, classical music plays a significant role in addressing societal challenges. It promotes emotional healing, enhances cultural competence, and facilitates meaningful cross-cultural interactions. By exploring its therapeutic potential and fostering collaborations across nations, classical music has the power to unite individuals from diverse backgrounds, enabling them to share in the universal language of harmony and creativity.

Looking to the future, the genre's continued evolution will depend on its ability to adapt and remain relevant to modern audiences. By blending tradition with innovation, classical music can further cement its role as a cultural and emotional cornerstone in an increasingly interconnected world. In doing so, it will not only preserve its historical legacy but also inspire new generations to use music as a tool for cross-cultural dialogue and global unity.

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