***Music Across Borders*** *–* Conference Report

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*Music Across Borders,* a conference of the European Popular Musics Research Group, was held in Paris from 10-11 July 2023 with support from the French branch of the IASPM (IASPM-BfE: https://iaspmbfe.wordpress.com/), the University of Sorbonne Nouvelle’s Media, Culture, Communication and Digital Studies research laboratory (IRMECCEN), and the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies at the University of Leeds. Organizers Stuart Green (Leeds), Catherine Rudent (Paris Sorbonne Nouvelle), Isabelle Marc (Madrid Complutense) and Barbara Lebrun (Manchester) represented a collaboration of four universities from three different countries, and the 20 presenters and 2 keynote speakers crossed many borders themselves, arriving from Hungary, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Italy, Slovenia, the UK, Reunion Island and the US. The event provided the ideal occasion to commemorate the Leeds-Sorbonne research partnership created in 2019, with *Music Across Borders* being the partnership’s biggest collaborative project to date. The conference took place at the Sorbonne Nouvelle’s Maison de la Recherche in the 5th arrondissement, a pleasant district sandwiched between the Jardin du Luxembourg and the Jardin des Plantes, and the organization of consecutive panels allowed participants to attend all the presentations. The panel topics ranged from politics, production and consumption, transatlantic movements, and fandom to the more open-ended “Songs and Sounds,” but the multidisciplinary nature of the conference and the resonance between recurring concepts made it possible for many papers to connect with more than one theme and for different genres and styles of music to be featured across multiple panels.

The first panel on music and politics immediately raised ideas that would reemerge in panels to come, particularly the effects of Communist and other political agendas on production, consumption, transfer and adaptation. The opening paper by Ádám Ignácz, “Adaptations of Soviet Songs in Socialist Hungary (1949–1989),” demonstrated how Hungary’s relative openness to Western culture made it a conduit of transfer to other Soviet countries at a time when Communist policies and levels of state control greatly impacted the importation, anchorage and export of musical styles, instruments and songs, and fostered mentalities that led to different interpretations of songs in different decades. Communist party agendas were also at the heart of Jacopo Tomatis’ presentation (and recently published book) on the transnationalism of the song *Bella Ciao*. Tomatis traced the links between the Italian folk revival and militant researchers whose ideological bias pushed them to search for and construct the origins of the now well-known song in older ballads and oral traditions to create distance from the mass culture associated with capitalism, while at the same time various processes of adaptation, translation and interpretation caused *Bella Ciao* to spread through Europe and beyond as a “total pop object.”

The links between political history and stylistic development were echoed in later panels. Ilker Birkan spoke on Turkish iterations of disco in the 1970s and 1980s, a period in which the country’s policies played a major role in determining the circulation and appropriation of musical genres and styles between Turkey and Western Europe. The state’s desire for Westernization caused some forms of Turkish popular music such as arabesque to remain underground for decades while Western genres and instruments were imported and reappropriated with influence from traditional styles. Towards the end of the conference, Cassie Gonskaya’s paper on the development of rock music in Soviet Russia and its treatment in the Western press provided a different angle on the relationships between Soviet policies and Western influences, noting that the underground nature of rock music in the USSR before Perestroika meant that it couldn’t be exported in the same way as nationally sanctioned artforms such as ballet. Western reception of Soviet artists was also inhibited by the Red Scare mentality, but at the same time, the process of othering during the Cold War resulted in Western fascination (a few examples of Western artists referencing communism came to my mind, from the Beatles classic “Back in the USSR” to Dylan’s more cynical treatment in “Talkin’ John Birch Paranoid Blues”) and created a parallel discourse through the media’s comparison of Soviet groups to Western ones by presenting Russian artists as the Soviet John Lennon or Bob Dylan and so forth. Gonskaya also pointed out multidirectional flows in the Soviet rock scene built on collaborations with Western hard rock icons during concerts and festivals in the 80s and acknowledged common Soviet stereotypes with self-deprecating wit while showing how they played into the media image of “Gorby Rock.”

Political events were also shown to factor into the relationships between individual and collective identities expressed in music. Jérémy Sauvineau’s paper during the “Music and Politics” panel discussed the role of desert blues as a factor of identity and recognition for Touareg refugees in France during the last decade’s migrant crisis and showed how the perpetuation and adaptation of musical practices, both on an individual level and via public performances, serve as a form of mediation between Touareg cultural attachment and the desire or pressure to integrate in France. Jasmina Šepetavc and Natalija Majsova’s joint presentation also touched on individual and collective factors while discussing Slovenian accordion music and the significance of the instrument as a symbol of Slovenian identity, both within the country and for diaspora communities in the US. In this case, a combination of political and individual artist agendas caused only certain folk music styles to be registered as official heritage, in contrast with the diversity of collective practices and perceptions throughout Slovenia and those transferred to the US and other countries through immigration.

The phenomenon of adaptation, which had first been discussed from a political viewpoint by Adam Ignácz, was further explored from a more aesthetic angle during the panel “Songs and Sounds.” Christina Richter-Ibáñez spoke on relationships between language and vocal sound in the late-50’s-early 60’s multilingual career of international pop sensation Connie Francis. The study of lyric translations highlighted interesting choices made in adapting the text to different target audiences, while analysis of vocal frequencies showed how the recordings capitalized on the characteristic sound of Francis’ voice, which remained largely unchanged despite variations in mixing and production as well as in the artist’s linguistic mastery. Richter-Ibáñez’s work reminded me of several other examples of “self-adapting” artists in my thesis corpus; Nino Ferrer, Peter Gabriel, and Mikael Åkerfeldt have all produced dual-language versions of full albums, renowned artists like Stevie Wonder and Dionne Warwick sang Italian versions of their hits at the San Remo festival, and many others released translated versions of their songs either for commercial reasons, to connect more fully with fans, or to express their own cross-border identities. However, I chose to speak on an artist whose adaptations went far beyond lyric translation, focusing on Spanish avant-garde pop icon Tino Casal’s rewritings of English and American hits wherein elements of text as well as Casal’s pronounced visual aesthetics combine in a complex poetic expression of generational, national and individual identity.

Hip-hop and rap were key elements in the ongoing discussion on cross-border identity, with Stuart Green chairing a panel on hip-hop while other papers tied into the themes of musical expression and marginalized or minority identity, the notion of Blackness, and contemporary issues of race, class, and social and geographical mobility. This demonstrated a very 21st century preoccupation with the borders or boundaries created by socioeconomic and political obstacles, in addition to highlighting current trends in rap that have now catapulted the genre far beyond its original cultural context to achieve global popularity and increasing recognition of its poetic potential in addition to commercial success. A pertinent approach was provided by Meila Assani and Carmen Irvin, who along with a third PhD candidate, Elsa Vallot, form an international multidisciplinary team combining anthropology, philosophy and media and communications studies to investigate constructions and expressions of Blackness in Reunion Island, where their qualitative fieldwork has allowed them to elaborate on the complex issues of race and identity in the island’s postcolonial context. They noted for example that although all three identify as black researchers, their investigations are not received in the same way by the local population, suggesting an interesting perception of differences between American, French, and Reunion Blackness, distinctions within a wider shared identity that emphasize hip-hop’s global role as a vehicle of expression, solidarity and recognition between multiple cultural groups.

Three other papers explored the notion of borders in rap and hip-hop from different angles. Amparo Lasén used first-hand interviews with the Spanish rapper Ergopro to provide insight into his expressive intentions and artistic approach, including interesting examples of intertextuality, while highlighting sociological boundaries stemming from economic and educational factors of social mobility, “hood-ism” and urban accessibility. Florian Coppenrath’s paper on the Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) hip-hop scene resonated with Lasen’s discussion of the socio-economic and geographical barriers independent artists face (in this case the privilege of travel) while focusing on issues of production, artist recognition and economic success. The links between language barriers and transfer flows in this context were particularly interesting, as Bishkek rappers were shown to receive musical influences in English while their production continues to mainly target a local population which doesn’t understand English. Lucy O’Meara, on the other hand, took a more literary approach, focusing on two “Afropean” hip-hop artists with a discussion of the expressive nature of both text and peritext. Visual elements as well as poetic and musical stylistic choices pointed to the artists’ preoccupations with the link between place and identity, their sense of betweenness and of being continually in transit, the psychic splits created by the childhood immigration, and the potential for artistic expression to create a new belongingness that defies border limitations.

Questions of identity continued to surface when discussing fan-artist dynamics. Multidisciplinary research partners Jara Fernández Meneses and Vicente Rodríguez Ortega presented the contemporary Spanish pop artist Rosalia as an example of building transnational pop careers in the 21st century. Drawing on respective groundings in film studies, communications and media representations, their analysis zoomed in on visual elements in Rosalia’s use of viral video fragments or teasers, her overall focus on content specifically meant to be viewed on screen, and the importance of providing fans with accessibility via the use of personal social media content. The dichotomy between national identity and a more global pop identity arose in Rosalia’s insistence on maintaining her own artistic integrity as a Spanish artist (by not singing in English, for example, or through the curation of images and shooting locations used in her videos) while simultaneously referencing exterior stylistic influences and engaging in cross-genre and international collaborations with other artists.

The final paper of the conference was for me the most intriguing conceptual presentation as well as the only one to focus on an East Asian country. Oliver Seibt spoke on the Western fascination with Japanese Visual kei music, linking fan pilgrimages from Europe to Japan with a metaphorical journey to Wonderland, which in addition to being a fantasy escape provides female fans in particular with a psychological safety zone of idealized, non-threatening sexuality. Seibts presented Japan as a mirror both in the Foucaultian sense and as a boundary between the real and imaginary worlds, like Alice’s looking glass (a concept reinforced by the many references to Alice in Visual kei songs). The paper also evoked several of the conference’s recurring themes such as directions of musical transfer, with musical influences first flowing into Japan from the West and only more recently reversing as Japanese music, including the more underground genres, begin attracting more and more outside attention. The importance of visual aesthetics in musical performance and production provided another link with other speakers’ work; I found some resonance with my own ideas on the poetically intentional nature of costuming, staging, performance gestures, and album presentation, and we had previously seen how Rosalia exploits the visual through video fragments and social media to bond with her fanbase and establish her artistic identity. In the case of Visual kei it is the strong association with manga that attracts a visually oriented fanbase, and the bands’ visual representations play a key role in their relationship with and ability to impact fans during performance. Beyond the focus on visual and conceptual elements, I was fascinated by the sound of Visual kei, which in the examples played leaned heavily towards extreme metal with progressive and symphonic elements that recall European groups like Arch Enemy or Opeth, and I felt it could be an interesting continuation of the topic to trace the flow of these sonic influences and processes of musical genre-building in connection with Seibt’s concepts.

My general impression of the “Music Across Borders” experience might be summed up as a paradox of hearing papers on seemingly divergent topics but that somehow managed to significantly overlap with each other on a surprising number of conceptual levels, and the conference’s two keynote addresses were no exception. David Hesmondhalgh’s talk entitled “Music Culture in the Age of Streaming” raised several contemporary issues in the industry that impact the flow of music and musical practices across the globe, such as the power dynamics between tech holdings, record labels and artists, the question of fair payment for streaming artists, and the phenomenon of DIY production (a notion evoked by other speakers as well). Hesmondhalgh also pointed out some misperceptions about how people truly relate to music, which seem to be rooted in an idealized vision of pre-digital listening that reduces listener attitudes and emotional responses to being either aesthetic or functional without considering the multiplicity of individual uses and ways of interacting with music both before and after the advent of streaming platforms. The links between music and emotion and the relationships between individual and collective approaches and processes, such as building a sense of community identity around music, also struck me as interesting in their potential to condition the construction and reception of poetic elements. On the other hand, Alice Aterianus-Owanga’s keynote, “Music in the Black Mediterranean,” further cemented the notion of Blackness evoked in many of the hip-hop papers as a topic of contemporary pertinence and one that is not solely the concern of black researchers investigating their own cultural identities. In the context of this paper, which focused on the circulation of music and dance styles and the exchange of creative talent between African and European countries due to immigration and intermarriage, the cross-border flow between cultures and identities is both recent and direct, as it is in hip-hop and in other musical genres and contexts presented during the conference (the adoption and appropriation of reggae codes and other Caribbean musical traditions in France, for example). However, it could be argued that all the forms of popular music that were discussed could trace at the very least an indirect, historical connection to the transfer of Black music if one goes far enough back, and the diffusion and popularity of blues, soul, and R&B, for example, can be seen to directly impact the identity constructions of non-Black communities and populations, in addition to being particularly expressive of the multitude of Black identities. The universal appeal of the expressive media of a specific population or cultural identity can itself create flows and circulations that go beyond our imaginary constructions of cultural, national, or socioeconomic borders to create a new type of belonging to communities such as those described by Hesmondhalgh, which establish identity through musical affiliation rather than through divisions of race, class or nationality.

Looking back, the title “Music Across Borders” encouraged a proliferation of common themes: political agendas, constructions of identity and othering, directions of musical transfer (Isabelle Marc’s work on travelling songs was referenced more than once), and the importance of individual versus collective forces were all viewed from different angles. Some less expected concepts surfaced as well; the significance of visual elements in popular music, the specific uses of language and discourse at play in cross-border musical representations, and the sticky question of musical appropriation could provide interesting pathways to explore more deeply in the future. In terms of geographical boundaries, despite the multitude of nationalities represented in the topics and by the researchers themselves, with few exceptions the discussion remained within the confines of Europe and its links with Africa via past colonization, leaving many of the most populated countries on the planet completely out of the picture, although the same cross-border phenomena and processes of transfer are assuredly happening in these areas of the globe as well. I wondered if this was purely coincidental or if it suggested an actual barrier for European researchers, and what could be revealed through a similar discussion of pop music trends and development in India, China, Latin America, Australia, or Indonesia. Would we still see the same emphasis on rap and hip-hop or learn about the emergence of new national or local genres and sounds, and how would the cross-border influences and flows compare with those we explored during these two days? All in all, as Stuart Green summed up in his closing remarks, the conference shed light on many connections to cultivate, not all immediately obvious but which became apparent within later questions and discussions that led us to rethink previous papers, as well as our own perspectives in researching music across borders.

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