

Reception of music in cross-cultural perspective



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Introduction

This course will deal with reception of music from a number of different perspectives, all of which involve consideration of cultural contexts outside Europe. We will consider reception both in general, cross-cultural perspective and in the specific case of Sundanese *wayang golék* (rod-puppet theatre), and we will consider the influence of both social and technological change on music and the way it is received.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 3 study in [Arts and Humanities](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand how to study music reception
- demonstrate an awareness of how changing social situations and the availability of new technology impact on musical performance.

1 Reception and the musical event in cross-cultural perspective

The way music is received is clearly an aspect of the social and cultural context of music-making. Specialist, professional music-making in particular needs an audience and needs patronage. If audiences don't approve of the music being performed, and patrons cease to support musicians, music-making will be forced to change. If audiences or patrons demand different types of music, musicians may have to oblige (or, perhaps, move on to find new patrons). If the mode of reception changes, as for example when music begins to be disseminated via recordings or radio broadcasts, this too may have an impact on the kind of music produced.

The reception of music can influence musical events – in other words, *the reception of music affects the subsequent production of music*. This concept involves consideration of the way in which the production of music is tailored to suit the consumer, which involves asking questions such as:

1. Does this music have an audience (a person or group of people present and attentive, regarded as distinct from the performers)?
2. If so, is the presence of the audience a necessary condition for the performance?
3. Are the members of the audience socially distinct from the performers, and if so how?
4. Which aspects of the music seem to be particularly important to those who attend the event (both audience and performers)?

Some of these questions are easier to answer than others. I have considered four different types of music in [Table 1](#).

Table 1

	Panpipe ensembles in Conima, Peru	Suyá unison song, Brazil	Newari ritual music, Nepal	Jali performances, Mali
<i>1 Is there an audience?</i>	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
<i>2 Is the audience necessary for performance?</i>	Collectivity is important; the presence of a <i>separate</i> audience group probably not.	Not applicable	Probably not	Yes
<i>3 Is the audience socially distinct from the performer (s)?</i>	Not distinct in social class (although the audience probably includes more women and children).	Not applicable	Yes; it includes women and children.	Yes; it includes nobles, as well as children and a higher proportion of women than in the performing group.

4 Which aspects of performance seem most important or highly valued?	Size of group, volume, social interaction.	Participation/unity, ritual function.	Religious/ritual function.	First verbal content, then other musical features (melody, rhythm).
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To elaborate on the answers in [Table 1](#), the first two rows suggest that in more than one instance, either there is no audience, or, if there is one, its presence may be considered incidental to the performance (audience members don't have to be there, and if they are they don't have to like what they hear and see). Where a distinct audience group *is* present, its social relationship to the performing group is another variable factor. Two possibilities are represented here:

1. that the audience group, although drawn from the same social stratum as the performers, includes people excluded from musical performance on grounds of gender or age (for example the Newari ritual, and arguably the Peruvian panpipe ensembles);
2. that the audience comprises, or includes, people belonging to a distinct social class (here, the Malian noblemen patrons).

The fourth question is in most cases the hardest to answer. It can be difficult to determine which aspects of a performance are most important to the listeners. (Does every member of the audience appreciate the same things? Do people always know which aspects of a performance they value, or are they sometimes not conscious of them?). Nevertheless the answers do seem to vary widely. The Peruvian fiesta-goers like to see and hear large, collective groups performing music with a loud dynamic level; presumably, since many will dance, the rhythmic characteristics of the music must fulfil certain basic requirements. The collective nature of the performance seems to be particularly important to the *Suyá* too, and we might surmise that the particular type of song and mode of performance are regarded as essential parts of the ritual of which they form a part.

This ritual function seems to have an overriding importance in the *Newari* example too; one senses that, since the music is addressed to the God being propitiated, the attractiveness of the music to human ears may be of little importance. Of course, that is not to say the onlookers do not like the music, but 'liking' can be a complex process – for instance, one can like music because of its associations, as well as because of its intrinsic qualities. Finally, in the African example we are getting closer to a model of music-making we would recognise from a Western concert hall, inasmuch as the focus of the event is musical sound produced by one group of people for the appreciation of a distinct group. The last model, for obvious reasons, will be the dominant one where music is made by professional specialists, although other factors we have encountered should not be discounted. We go to concert halls to hear music, but for many of us the sense of collective enjoyment of, even participation in, a musical event remains an important factor. Likewise, musical events in modern Western societies retain certain ritual aspects – for instance, through our attendance we affirm our identity as part of our society (or a particular social and cultural sub-group); the behaviour of the participants, performers and audience, is in many respects formal and stylised, arguably to a greater degree than can be explained by practical considerations (this may be true of both art music and rock music performances, for instance). We may like to think that our musical events are purely means by which musical sounds are transmitted from performer to listener, but in reality there are always other factors involved.

The next example deals with some of these issues in a little more depth. Our focus this time is on the occasion on which music is performed – the performance event. We will be investigating the context within which this takes place; the expectations of performers and audience; and the reactions of the audience to what they see and hear.

2 Sundanese gamelan music and its reception

2.1 Gamelan music in context

We now focus on Sundanese gamelan music and see something of its traditional performance context. You can hear some of the music and see the instruments in OpenLearn course AA302_1 *Composition and improvisation in cross-cultural perspective*. Here we turn our attention to what the music is used for, and when, why and for whom it is performed. We will also be looking at the way the audience responds to the event and considering some views on Sundanese aesthetics.

Gamelan music is rarely played in a concert setting. Much more often, both in Sunda and elsewhere in Indonesia, it is performed as an accompaniment for either dance, dance-drama or (most commonly) highly sophisticated puppet theatre. Indonesian puppet shows, or *wayang*, come in various forms. Probably the best known in the West is the central Javanese *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet); in Sunda the more common form is the rod-puppet, or *wayang golék*. [Section 2.2](#) is concerned with Sundanese gamelan music as an accompaniment to *wayang golék* performance.

2.2 A wayang golék performance

The video section which you will shortly be watching was filmed at a *wayang golék* performance in September 1996, which took place in the village of Gempolsari, near Bandung in West Java (see [Figure 1](#)). The event was arranged to celebrate the 51st anniversary of Indonesian independence. (This anniversary actually falls on 27 August, but celebrations normally continue for several weeks thereafter.) Events like this occur quite frequently around Bandung, usually in celebration of a special event (if not Independence Day, then a wedding or circumcision ceremony perhaps), and are sponsored by an individual or organisation. The audience, as in the case of the event which we filmed, is not normally charged for admission.



Figure 1

This *wayang golék* performance, like most, lasted all night – starting at approximately 8 p. m.; there was no break in the performance until it concluded at approximately 4 a.m. The story enacted in this performance, called *Jabang Tutuk*, combines stories from the Indian epic Mahabharata with local characters and mythology. It is told through a variety of characters, including Gods – such as the hero of this tale, the winged God Gatotkaca – Kings, courtiers and soldiers, as well as clowns and ogres.

The following terms will be useful in understanding the video. (You don't need to remember all the terms introduced in this section, but these three are particularly useful.)

<i>wayang golék purwa</i>	the full name for the type of puppet show illustrated (Purwa, literally 'origin, beginning', indicates that the stories deal with the origins of the world and of aspects of Sundanese culture.)
<i>dalang</i>	puppeteer, in this case Pa Atik Rasta. Apart from animating the puppets the dalang also sings, speaks the dialogue, produces sound effects such as bangs and cymbal clashes, and directs the gamelan ensemble.
<i>ramé</i>	an important Sundanese aesthetic concept – see below.

The first sequence of the video sets the scene for the performance: we observe the final preparations on and around the stage, which has been erected especially for this performance. The rest of the video introduces, through a series of excerpts from the performance, some of the different aspects of the event. We see the gamelan musicians on stage; the dalang (puppeteer) manipulating a variety of puppets; the singers (one of whom, Ewis Rostini, stands up for an impromptu sequence of songs requested by audience members); speakers, including local government officials, who interrupt the performance from time to time in its early stages to make speeches and to lead (Muslim) prayers; the audience; and other distractions around the performance area. Captions and extracts from interviews help us to interpret what is going on in the performance.

Activity 1

Watch the video clips below. As you do so try to make a note of the following points:

1. How does the audience react to the performance?
2. What, according to those interviewed on the video, do the Sundanese look for in a wayang performance – what aesthetic values do they express?
3. What is perceived by the speakers to have changed in wayang performance in recent times, and why?

Video content is not available in this format.

[Part One](#)

Video content is not available in this format.

[Part Two](#)

Briefly, my answers to the questions I posed above would be as follows.

1. Shots of the audience illustrated a variety of reactions, from intense concentration on the performance to a much more relaxed mode, with people chatting amongst themselves or paying more attention to other points of interest such as food and cigarette stalls.
2. We are told that the event should be *ramé*. The implications of this aesthetic value seem to be that there need not be a single focus of attention; people are happiest in a lively, bustling atmosphere with multiple points of interest (the puppets, the instrumental music, the singers, the food stalls, each other).
3. At least three types of change are mentioned: changes in the expectations of the audience (especially in their decreasing willingness to watch the puppets and listen to the words); in the introduction of amplification; and in the growing importance of female singers.

A typical *wayang golék* performance, then, is a lively and diffuse aggregate of music, song and puppet theatre (which itself ranges from serious drama to dance, comic-interludes and fight scenes). All these elements take place on a raised stage, placed in such a way that audience members are ranged around the front and sides. The event goes on all night, and throughout that time the audience is free to move around, watching the puppets, the singers or the musicians or taking time out to enjoy a snack or a cigarette with friends.

Ideally there should be lots going on, a lively and bustling atmosphere – it should be *ramé*. *Ramé* (also spelt *ramai*) and related ideas provide an important aesthetic influence on Indonesian performing and decorative arts in general:

The Javanese predilection for *ramé* is well known. *Ramé* translates as busy, noisy, congested, tangled – but in a positive sense. [...] Busyness is clearly an important element in Javanese gamelan music, with some instruments delegated the responsibility of filling in the texture so that there is constant sound. The sparse or slow-playing of some instruments is always balanced by the busy activity of [these instalments]. Javanese textiles, particularly *batik*, are characterised by a high degree of 'busy' detail; for the most part, the greater the detail, the more highly valued the cloth.

(Sutton, 1996, p. 258)

Not surprisingly, we can find many interpretations of such events. At one level the *wayang* is public entertainment for the village, marking a particular celebration. Yet the event is also intended to have another level of meaning and significance, for instance through the moral teaching expressed through the mythological stories. The *dalang* (puppeteer) is a highly respected member of the community, partly because of the special knowledge to which he has access. The following description refers to the Javanese *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet) tradition, but also applies to the art we are studying.

While the *dhalang* is the supreme entertainer, he is also much more. *Wayang's* ties with ritual are not as strong as they once were, but many performances today are given in conjunction with ritual events, such as marriage and circumcision. The *dhalang* is a spiritual teacher, revered by the general populace. Moreover, he is considered to be *ampub* – endowed with

supernatural powers – in tune with the cosmic realm, the realm of the ancestors, and the everyday world, bringing them together in his demanding all-night performances.

(Sutton, 1984, p. 127)

The event, then, has significance on a number of levels from simple entertainment to esoteric ritual – it is received on a number of levels and that reception depends to a great extent on aesthetic values specific to this particular culture. This is aptly summarised by Kathy Foley, in her study of Sundanese *wayang golék*.

The word the Sundanese commonly apply to *wayang golék* is *hiburan*, ‘entertainment’. When a performance ceases to be entertaining, it loses its potential to instruct and influence. The primary criterion that villages use for judging a performance is whether or not it is *ramai* [...] When a performance is not *ramai*, people soon drift home to sleep. The word will pass that the *dalang* was mediocre. The family that hired him will gain little status, and he will probably not be invited to play in that area again. A *wayang* must first be entertaining.

The art, therefore, is receptive to the demands of its audience, and the audience has brought new demands. ‘People want to laugh more.’ ‘Audiences prefer new stories.’ ‘Audiences want to see lots of fighting.’ These observations are made by *dalang* about their audiences.

[...]

Dalang continue to include spiritual teaching, political philosophy, and social criticism in amounts they feel the audience will accept: ‘You give information to the people. But you can’t force it. You have to keep it indirect, not direct.’

Although the *wayang* changes in superficial ways, its core, it is felt, remains the same. [...] The *wayang* world is wide: if this is a time when ogres and clowns can speak most clearly to the issues, the *wayang* can shift its focus to them without violating the form. If a new song or dance catches the fancy of the audiences, the *dalang*, *pasinden* [singers] and troupe will incorporate it, without sacrificing the traditional elements. [...]

This balance of the traditional and modern continues to captivate the rural Sundanese, and a *ramai* performance is one of the highlights of the year. Performances are events that gather together the community, bringing joy and a feeling of unity. As the *pasinden* sings:

Culture and art
Aren't for nothing
It is important to use entertainment
To draw people together, to make them brothers

(Foley, 1979, from pp. 261–6)

As I said earlier, it is not necessary for you to remember all the terminology introduced in this section. (The most important terms are *wayang*, *dalang* and *ramé*.) More important are the issues raised about:

- the reception of performance events;

- the influence of reception on musical change;
- and the influence of technology (in this case amplification) on both.

These themes will be developed further in the next section, which primarily concerns the impact of social and technological change on music and its reception.

3 Changing patterns of reception: concert culture, recording and broadcasting

3.1 Concert culture

Changing performance contexts are a feature of many musical traditions around the world. But how do such changes affect music, if at all? When the context and social organisation of musical performance change, the expectations of audiences and their relationship to performers also change, and we might expect music itself to change too. Although this is a complex issue, and there are also factors which can counteract this tendency to change, this expectation does seem to hold true in many cases. It is therefore well worth our considering some of the factors influencing changes in the reception of music over the last 100 years or so.

One of these factors, which I will mention only briefly, is the spread of the European-style concert. By this I mean the adoption in various societies of many of the norms of concert performance, such as the use of auditoria in which the performers are physically separated from the audience (usually on a stage); the practice of audience members usually paying for entry, and sitting more-or-less quietly during the performance before applauding at the end of each piece; and of performances, which occur mainly in the evenings, having definite beginnings and endings and lasting for roughly 2–3 hours. This *concert culture* has become more of a factor in modernised urban societies, where (almost by definition) Western influence is greater. It presents a model for musical performance, and is one of many ways in which the West has influenced the rest of the world in the last century or so.

3.2 Technological change and the mediation of music

The adoption of concerts is not the only change to have affected the reception of music over the last hundred years or so. There are several other factors, including social changes and technological innovations, which have changed the ways in which music is experienced. Two major categories are the developments of recording and broadcasting technologies – which we might consider together as different forms of the *mediation* of music. This is a relevant part of the study of reception, since recording and broadcasting introduced new ways in which music could be received.

Although the first recording devices were western inventions, it may surprise you to learn how early the technology reached other parts of the world – Asia and South America in particular. The first recording machine was widely available in Europe and North America from the 1890s; commercial production of gramophone discs began around 1900; and the first commercial recordings of Asian music were made, by the Gramophone Company's recordist Fred Gaisberg, as early as 1902:

... by spring 1903 Gaisberg had recorded a total of 1700 discs of Indian, Burmese, Siamese, Malay, Javanese, Chinese and Japanese music. The master recordings were then sent back to Europe to be processed, and the finished records shipped to local agents along with gramophones manufactured by the same company.

(Gronow, 1981, p. 251)

As may be clear from this quote, the early recording of Asian music was part of a systematic attempt at commercial exploitation by the Gramophone Company and its competitors. Wanting to establish their products in Asia and South America, these companies decided that it made commercial sense to have records of local music with which to interest consumers in each market. As the Gramophone Company's agent in Calcutta, John Watson Hawd, wrote in 1902, 'The native music is to me worse than Turkish but as long as it suits them and sells well what do we care?' (quoted by Farrell, 1993, p. 33).

Naturally in the early days gramophone machines were a luxury that only the elite could afford, yet the fact that they did have an impact around the world can be seen from comments such as that of Ravi Shankar:

I had a pleasing voice and my family often asked me to sing some [Bengali] songs when we had guests at home. ... Soon, I enjoyed singing and accompanying myself by picking out the notes on the harmonium's keyboard. We had a Gramophone at home and some records of instrumental music, some of Tagore's songs, and many religious songs and songs from the semiclassical musical dramas in Hindi and Bengali. I often used to imitate the records and sing along with them.

(Shankar, 1968, p. 60–1)

Thus even at this time (Shankar is referring to the 1920s and '30s) the mediation of music by recording was beginning to have an impact around the world, making music available in new contexts and circumstances, inspiring and influencing musicians who had access to the technology. This pattern has continued to the present day, its importance increasing as the technology has reached more and more parts of the globe. Truly mass access to such mediated music did not come with the early gramophone, but had to wait for further developments: of films, radio and later TV broadcasting, and more recently of cassette tapes. I want to use the next activity to introduce some of the more important issues raised by these phenomena.

Activity 2

Sources A–D below describe, in different ways, the influence of recording and broadcasting technologies on music – in India, Java and in general. (All are written by well-known ethnomusicologists.)

Once you have read each of them, make brief notes of the following points.

1. Summarise the key point(s) raised by each source.
2. To what extent do these authors, taken together, present a coherent picture? What evidence do we have of recording technology having varying, even contradictory, effects – and what does this tell us?

Source A

Bruno Nettl on the effects of recording technology in the non-Western world in general

As to the effects of the record industry on the non-Western world, each culture had its own experience, but one can to some extent generalise. A small number of performers, some excellent, others selected for recording by the coincidences of life, have come to dominate the listening of a large public ... Further, music has decreased in its traditional, often religious function and become more associated with recreation. The connection of particular pieces or genres with specific times of year, or of day, has given way to a general use of music by anyone whenever he or she wishes to hear it ... Third, variety in musical style has tended to give way to unification. Traditional folk and classical styles, religious music, and Western imports have converged into a group of related styles comprising light classical genres (of both traditional and Western music), Westernised forms of traditional music, and arrangements of folk songs – a kind of musical mainstream.

(Nettl, 1985. pp. 62–3)

Source B

Nazir Jairazbhoy on the impact of recording and broadcasting on village musicians in Rajasthan, India

Radio and films are among the more potent forces inducing musical change in Western Rajasthan as in most of India. Transistorised radios are found even in remote villages, and although they are generally beyond the means of most village musicians, a few do possess them. There is no doubt ... that through radio and films nearly all these musicians have been exposed to many genres of Indian music [...] It is only with their [i.e. the musicians'] apparently limited stock of film songs that we can be sure of wholesale borrowings from radio and films.

There are, however, indications of the influence of mass media on a more subtle level. Some ... musicians employ a musical device, 'break', which introduces a moment of complete silence – when even the drum and clapper rhythms cease – following a climactic arrival at the main beat. This is a device commonly found in a variety of light classical musical forms and is also sometimes found in film songs. It is an easily duplicated dramatic effect which could well have been adopted by these musicians since they have been exposed to these other forms which are now commonly played over the radio.

(Jairazbhoy, 1977, pp. 57–8)

Source C

Anderson Sutton on the impact of cassette technology in Java

Not only have cassettes and cassette players penetrated to the remote villages, they have also become part of contemporary language. The noun *kasèt* (sometimes spelled 'cassette') refers to the cassette tape recording, and the noun *tèp* (from 'tape') to ... the machine itself. [C]assettes have

penetrated the realm of Javanese verbs as well ... contemporary Javanese now includes words for the process of recording onto a commercial cassette: *Gendhing kuwi wis dikasètke* (That piece has already been recorded on commercial cassette' – i.e. there is an objectified 'text' which can be referred to like a publication). [...]

One of my *gamelan* teachers once explained to me that he preferred to play one tone on the large kettle instrument *kenong* at a certain point in a well-known classical piece, but that another player had chosen a different tone during a recent recording of the piece. My teacher knew that this recording ... would be heard widely. Putting his aesthetic preferences aside, he taught his students to play the same tone as on the prestigious recording. [...]

Whereas dancers used to require the presence of musicians to provide accompaniment for their rehearsals, the standard practice now is to use commercially produced cassettes of dance music, or to make recordings for that purpose. It is not unusual for a dancer to use a cassette recorder for performances, thereby eliminating the musician completely [...] Ritual ceremonies in which *gamelan* has traditionally played an essential role are often held to the sound of cassettes blasting through a rented loudspeaker system. [...]

The industry is taking such a large bite out of the livelihood of skilled musicians that very few can make a living simply as performing artists.

(Sutton, 1985, pp. 24–7)

Source D

Peter Manuel on the impact of cassette technology in India

The primary effect of cassette technology has been to facilitate the emergence of new stylised folk-pop genres whose financing, styles, origins, and often language are independent from those of cinema culture. [...]

Many of the regional musics now disseminated on cassette are traditional genres marketed in more-or-less traditional styles, with relatively little audible influence of commercialisation or mass consumer culture. Cassette dissemination of the more traditional of these genres ... has ensured a place in consumer culture for archaic yet still expressive genres which might otherwise be increasingly vulnerable to obliteration by a homogenising mass culture.

(Manuel, 1993, pp. 258–9)

1. I would summarise the key points in these quotations as follows.

Source A (Nettl): the overall impact of recording and broadcasting means that (a) small numbers of performers dominate; (b) music's connection with traditional ritual functions decreases, as it becomes more associated with recreation; (c) diverse styles tend to become unified.

Source B (Jairazbhoy): musicians learn songs and musical techniques from the radio – causing a trend towards the unification of diverse styles.

Source C (Sutton): cassette recordings displace live recordings and put musicians out of work; musicians imitate recordings (thus reducing diversity).

Source D (Manuel): cassette recording aids diversification of repertoire, and the preservation of archaic, endangered forms.

2. Most observers seem to agree that recording has led to the unification of different styles and a consequent lessening of musical variety, as the recordings themselves are imitated. There is some dissent from Manuel (D), however, who points out that cassette recording can have the opposite effect (the reason Manuel gives for this, elsewhere in his book, is that whereas disc recording tends to be controlled by a few large, monopolistic companies that can impose a limited repertoire, cassette technology is intrinsically more democratic in that it lends itself to private, small-scale recording). Although Manuel seems to believe that the situation he describes is caused by the inherent qualities of the cassette technology, it is striking that Sutton does not report the same effects in Java. It is difficult for us to judge, but we might guess that this has to do with cultural differences between the two societies shaping the way the technology is employed. In other words, although new technologies change the ways in which music is received, the precise impact on musical traditions seems to depend on the ways people in different societies choose to use those technologies.

The issues raised here are very wide-ranging. The impact of recording (and, although we have barely considered this, broadcasting) technologies are many and various; they differ from place to place and from musical genre to genre, and are the subject of considerable debate and even controversy. Although we have introduced recording (which includes, of course, a variety of technologies from wax cylinders to compact discs) as one theme, we have also begun to see both how different technologies have their own distinct characteristic effects, and how their impact may be different in different cultural contexts.

4 Conclusion

Since this course has covered a wide range of issues and examples, I will try to summarise the material we have covered here.

The key point of [Section 1](#) is that one can usefully study reception by looking at the aesthetic values employed by performers and audiences in judging performances, and by examining the presence (or absence) of a distinct audience group, their role and their social identity.

We moved on in [Section 2](#) to look in more detail at a particular performance event in Sunda, West Java. The aesthetic criterion *ramé* (lively, bustling) proved to be an important consideration within the culture. Another theme to emerge from this case study was that of change: that is, how changing social situations and the availability of new technology impact on musical performance.

These themes in turn provided the substance of [Section 3](#), which concentrated on the impact of recording and broadcasting technologies in India and Java. The main points were:

- that these technologies can, and do, have an effect on musical performance;
- that the particular impact depends to some extent on local factors (i.e. the way people in different societies choose, or are able, to employ new technologies).

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