

Dirty Tones - "You don't care"

Soundscape

by Fatih Aydogdu

White culture has always claimed normative authority by identifying its own cultural practices as "regular" whilst depriving those of the others as "deviant". It does this by perpetuating the "white self" as an unmarked collective in social, legal, and political discourses - and "the other" as categorised, codified and marked by "difference". Within music, this process of racial othering appears in the notion of "dirty tones".

Western music critics of the 19th century, emphasising difference and devaluating the other, labeled the inability of black musicians to play in an ensemble as producing "dirty tones". Supposedly, these musicians played incorrectly when they did not conform to an expected tone pitch. The adherence to a rigid tone pitch scale has long been the benchmark within European/Western classical music - yet, this quality has no structural or statistical anchor in African, Asian and Afro-American music.

At the end of the 19th century, Jazz moved with black migrant workers from the South to the North of the United States and caused a radical rupture in habits of listening. White audiences - past and present - perceived this music as "dirty". Adapted as they were to Euro-American mono-rhythm, white audiences could not easily understand the rhythmic complexity of Afro-Asian music traditions; the specific intonation, the absence of repeated set phrases of melody, and the enormous vitality of collective improvisations all caused problems for

dig me out

those expecting Jazz to provide dance music. Despite white audiences' lack of understanding, they still sought black musicians - with curiosity and exotic delight.

In perspective, "dirty tones" resulted from the efforts of black musicians to integrate pentatonic patterns of African music traditions into newer styles of music. The tone pitch, for example, has a completely different meaning in African than in European chant. In many West African languages, grammatical meanings are dependent on the tone pitch of a spoken syllable; hence, a melody cannot be composed separate from its grammatical context. There is no recognition of this within the concept of "dirty tones".

There are many more instances of prejudice against non-European traditions of music in Western musicology. For example, essentialism appears in the improper categorisation of different phenomena - such as "offbeat," poly-rhythmic and poly-metric techniques - as syncopation. A misunderstanding of African popular music also exists in the equation of rhythm with sexuality. In many African contexts, playing and listening to music involves the active engagement of musicians', listeners', and dancers' bodies - in musical rather than sexual terms. Yet, as the hand lifts and comes down on the drum skin, a rhythm in African music finds itself luridly described as an action. This misinterpretation is a product of European high cultural ideology and feeds the racist assumption that black musicians have "rhythm in their blood".

The inability of those socialised in the West to hear, identify, understand and geographically contextualise offbeat phrasing, as well as poly-rhythmic and poly-metric overlapping, has fed misrepresentations of black musicianship throughout white music history. These examples demonstrate that whiteness is not a question of colour, but of ongoing social status -

dig me out

race privilege and power continues to define African, Asian and Afro-American styles of music from within the white norm.

Translation: Sabine Strasser