

Bamboo and Music Composition in the Philippines: Disquietudes on the Ascendancy of a "Cultural Object"¹

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ABSTRACT

The twanging of mouth harps, buzzers and zithers, the percussive sounds of tubes, and the rasping of scrapers are put against the backdrop of what could be labeled as Philippine modernity. These counter-hegemonic sound impulses challenge an ever-dominating soundscape created by commercial industry. This paper presents critical views on the ascendancy of what was before a marginalized object of culture: that of bamboo musical instruments. It gazes upon the appropriation of bamboo in various modes of production in musical composition and attempts to analyze its place within an emerging Philippine cultural imaginary.

Keywords: *Bamboo musical instruments, contemporary/avantgarde music, cultural appropriation, cultural politics*

DALUY 1 (MEDITATION-1)

THE SOUNDS of bamboo stamping tubes, and that of quill-shaped percussion and slit drums, of mouth harps and buzzers, of scrapers and zithers, and of various types of flutes provide a variety of impulses that challenge the hegemony of a soundscape created by a western-dominated culture industry. At the onset, we might, on the one hand, be celebratory of bamboo's relative ascendancy, i.e., its relative emergence into power and entry into the modern imaginary through contemporary music composition. On the other hand, however, we may look into this relative ascendancy with an amount of reservation. "Philippine culture" is being imagined with,

if not totally for us by those in positions of power in the field of cultural production. Our reflections therefore put us within a liminal position with regard to the relative ascendancy of bamboo as an object of culture, placed somewhere in our imaginaries by those in the structures of power.

In this paper, I would attempt to extend that paradox suggested by Feld (1999) in being both ‘anxious’ and ‘celebratory’ of bamboo’s relative ascendancy. I aim to map out bamboo’s position in the compositional praxis of composers in the Philippines, and in doing so, provide a glimpse of that compositional praxis within a global political economy.

Philippine colonial experience has rendered bamboo musical instruments as interstitial or marginal objects. In the post-colonial years, however, bamboo has become part of a counter-culture despite the continuous domination of Anglo-American culture. In fact, in the last few decades of the twentieth century, bamboo musical instruments have evolved into “cultural objects,” and among those at the helm of this development are the composers who have appropriated, experimented on, and incorporated these instruments into their modern works. Bamboo sounds in its seeming ironic confluence with modernity, therefore, signify what we can surmise from Attali (1977) as a “noise,” a “disquietude,” or an “anxious disturbance,” that signal emergent changes even on the level of the cultural imaginary. In the next section, we will look into this “disquietude,” and attempt to map-out bamboo’s place within an evolving Philippine soundscape.

DALUY 2 (FLUX)

PERHAPS bamboo’s ascendancy into the modern Philippine musical soundscape arises from the confluence of two rather distinct fields of musical praxis: ethnomusicology and composition. Both these fields in the Philippines appear to be hinged on the re-discovery of, and enticement with, interstitial music cultures, which for centuries have been alienated from the mainstream of society by centuries of colonial subjugation.

In the pioneering work of Jose Maceda, the confluence is even more explicit than many of those in his generation outside the

country – like for instance Lou Harrison. The early works of Maceda were modeled after the musical paradigms of modernist European composers. One finds in his works *UGMA-UGMA* (1963), *AGUNGAN* (1965), and *KUBING* (1966), echoes of Edgard Varese in his ideas of classifications of sound colors². In *PAGSAMBA* (1968), we find parallels with Iannis Xenakis' *TERRETEKTORH* (1964) and *NOMOS GAMMA* (1965) in terms of its integration of spatial dimensions into the musical structure. In those early works, gong and bamboo sounds become alienated from their cultural sources, and appropriated into a modernist compositional aesthetic of sound densities and sound colors.

In subsequent years however, Maceda transcended his early models by critically addressing the impact of technology to society. His realization of the potential of musical composition to present criticisms of modernity was gradual, beginning perhaps with *CASSETTES 100* (1971) and *UGNAYAN* (1974). Both these works diffuse sound impulses of recorded voices, bamboo and gongs through the medium of cassette tapes and radios. In the process, the audience is virtually transformed into a social environment, the music becoming as much a buffer in this transformation, as it is a mere aesthetically organized set of sound events. In the next years to follow, this critical consciousness is made even more manifest in Maceda's *UDLOT-UDLOT* (1975), and *ADING* (1978), both aestheticizing theoretical constructs of societal "machine complexes" (Maceda 1978), and concepts of populations, comparable perhaps, but not exclusively, to Durkheimian "mechanical solidarity" (Baes, 2005). The relative "simplicity," or "ease" by which various bamboo instruments could be played, the variety of sound colors produced from these instruments, as well as the aesthetics of hundreds of diffused sounds appear to disalienate the mainstream audiences from what were once objects of difference and otherness. In Maceda's work, a new musical sub-culture appears to have emerged.

Further developments of this new musical sub-culture also come in the work of Ramon P. Santos, especially in his *LIKAS-AN* (1978). Among the various improvised or invented instruments featured in this work is the "kantawayan," made from bamboo stamping tubes attached to a large horizontal bamboo pole and played by slightly moving this long pole, making the tubes attached

to it freely stump the flooring. The “instrument player’s” role becomes more of one who “induced” gestures, allowing the natural physical movement of the tubes to produce the sound events. The accommodation of nature, up against control is the primary aesthetic of this composition, such being made manifest with this musical instrument.

As a student, I attempted to create a musical composition that explored the paradox of how faint, diffused, and relatively subdued sounds could create some kind of “disturbance.” In my work PANTAWAG or MUSIC FOR CALLING PEOPLE (1981), faint and thin sounds from bamboo scrapers, palm leaves, and high falsetto “forest voices” emanate from a group of about fifty performers, made to walk together around corridors of a building, or in an open-air space. The work intended to have diffused sounds of bamboo, leaves and faint voices challenge modernity’s soundscape of loud motor vehicles, radios and other sound media—practically using “non-noise” (i.e., soft, faint sounds) to challenge the noises of modernity. The compositional sub-culture emerging from Maceda may appear to manifest the emergence of a musical counter-culture. The process seems to remain turbulent, however, as other modes, models and processes of musical composition continue to emerge. But how do all these counterflowing musical practices hinge themselves to a broader imaginary of Philippine culture?

DALUY 3 (MEDITATION-2)

PROGRESSING from discussions in the last section, I now aim to pursue the question of how bamboo instruments, in the process of composition, ascend as cultural objects. Any object in use within certain rubrics of knowledge becomes a “cultural object.” Transcending from that rather traditional anthropological gaze, Alec McHoul (1997) outlines the nuances in the emergence of objects as “cultural” ones by looking into the process of dis-ownership. Like Maceda’s early works in the 1960’s, making things into cultural objects carries the inherent paradox of alienation from its sources, and in my reading, carries within its process the power structures imbedded in cultural appropriation. I therefore look into the process of cultural objecthood and the ascendancy of bamboo instruments as a

question of power. It is a question of who appropriates bamboo instruments to become objects of culture, and subsequently, for whom is this object being appropriated. Cultural objecthood within the present power structures and imbedded in the process of alienation and appropriation, therefore, appears to be an oxymoron.

The ascendancy of bamboo instruments as objects of culture in musical composition could be hinged to the musical modes of production in contemporary or modernist society. With this comes my belief that Maceda's compositional gaze, its ensuing sub-culture critical of western technology, and its impact on the works of RP Santos and myself, represent glimpses into an alternative mode of musical production. It represents something that implicitly goes beyond the rubric set by the technology in contemporary musical performance.

The ultimate product of modern music, the recording—as today's CD, DVD, and MP3—would make Maceda's compositional paradigm appear to be mere enigmas of performance practices. Arguably, every recording production also becomes auditory illusions of musical performance, and such are the intentions of recording productions. On the other hand, to play a recording of Maceda's *ADING*, RP Santos' *LIKAS-AN*, or my own *PANTAWAG*, in other words, to perform the music when the performers are not there, denies the very intentions and aesthetics of those works, where environmental sounds are incorporated into the soundscapes.

Furthermore, the entry of bamboo instruments into the various forms of popular music had subjected those instruments to the commercial or modernist mode of production and its inherent technologies. In here, the enigma of musical performance is the very object of such a mode of production. Recordings intend make the music transportable, mutable, and reifi-able, thus also in line with the consumerist mode of production and dissemination (Baes, 2004).

The use of bamboo and other “indigenous” musical instruments in popular music is an outgrowth of a *Zeitgeist* in the 1980s or 1990s of appropriating interstitial musical forms and sounds of instruments into a general world music culture. Labeled “world beat,” or “world music,” this trend of popular music creation could be seen on the one hand as a mediating mechanism for the incorporation of marginal musical traditions into the production of music within a larger world order. Paradoxically, however, the

trend seems to have strengthened the technologies of consumerist/modernist musical production by empowering and privileging the technologies used in the process of production, perhaps even more than the bamboo or other instruments that are appropriated.

The enticement with technology, specifically those used in recording, had determined much of the aesthetic outlay in the production of popular music. What with the use of sampled bamboo and gong sounds in some of the songs revolving around Ryan Cayabyab's "brown music" of the late 1980s, or with Joey Ayala's ornamentation of interlocking bamboo sounds in one or two songs of his albums? The enticement comes with the capacity of recording apparatus to create—through the medium of recorded products, and incorporated within already existing forms of popular music—hyper-real assimilations of bamboo and other indigenous instruments into a world order symbolized by popular music. In this case power is privileged upon those producing the recording production, down to the composer, and further down to the person recording, mixing, and processing the recorded sound. Bamboo has lost its inherent power, its sounds being mutated, panned, or made crisp by means of a digital recording apparatus.

DALUY 4 (COUNTERFLUX)

I BEGAN this paper with a paradox, and so will I end it with a paradox. This paper commenced with the paradox of anxiety and celebration, and in an attempt to extend the arguments made by Feld (1999) by problematizing the use of bamboo instruments in various idioms and media of musical composition in the Philippines. I read Feld as an invitation to accommodate reflexivity and affect in the discourse of musical praxis.

In the course of the discussion, I have presented a biased stance for the compositional paradigms advanced by my forerunners Maceda and RP Santos, and even my work during my student days, up against the trends of assimilating bamboo instruments within the various modes of production of popular music in the 1980/1990s. That bias is based on my views that the assimilation of bamboo and other indigenous musical instruments in popular music, its inherent use of and enticement with technology, and its mode of commercial consumption further privileges the already

existing structures of power and the world order in musical production. The ontology and epistemology of musical composition and performance advanced by Maceda seems relatively peripheral as compared to the powerful mechanisms of production and consumption that privileges popular music. This therefore leads me to conclude that if bamboo music emerged as an alternative medium to challenge the soundscape of modern/commercial society, then to continue to function as a powerful alternative to the existing world order, it should remain within a relatively peripheral position.

Still holding on to the affect suggested by Feld, I now would like to transcend the celebration of bamboo as a mystified object of culture to gaze upon those people from whom these objects have emerged: the so-called indigenous peoples in the Philippines. Their position within the milieu of Philippine society is indeed one gigantic paradox. Acknowledging various nuances of their relationship with the mainstream and centers of power of Philippine society, I could at the moment find two opposing trends with regard to the concept of cultural production: first, the loss of “culture,” as exemplified by the internal refugees from Mindoro and Rizal in Southern Tagalog, and second, the engagement in cultural brokerage, as with the many different performing groups sprouting like mushrooms from the various regions of the country.

A priori to this is the notion of “culture” as, in itself, an object; an invention of those holding significant positions in the field of cultural production. This includes the academe, the state through its cultural apparatuses, civil society, and the other agencies of a “culture industry.” Inherent in this invention is the notion that Philippine culture is significant not only in telling citizens of the country about themselves, but also in telling other nation states about the Philippines—a kind of cosmopolitanism necessary for the state to relate to other nation states (Anderson, 2004). These so-called indigenous peoples acquire a general significance in the eyes of the culture industry by virtue of being considered as repositories of “authentic Philippine culture.” The schema thus locates indigenous peoples within a history constructed by the locus of power.

The so-called indigenous peoples, in the process, also become “cultural objects;” as they engage in cultural production that reconstructs then showcases their ways of living. The showcase of

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culture seems contrary to the conditions of marginality, minoritization, disenfranchisement from ancestral domain, and militarization that confront them. Therefore, like bamboo instruments, the so-called indigenous peoples become alienated from themselves in the process. I end here for the moment, in hopes that we re-examine ourselves, as well as the positions we represent in continuing with this celebration.

DALUY 5 (MEDITATION-3)

SILENCE.....

ENDNOTES

¹This paper was read at the First National Bamboo Conference, “*Tanag ng Bantula*” held from September 21-23, 2005 in Manila, Philippines.

²*Kubing*, for instance, features a string of musical events where human voices simulate bamboo sounds.

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