Trends in Recent English-Language Literature (2015–2021)

Subjects: Music

Contributor: Dustin Wiebe

Several recurring themes and discourses emerge within this literature, including identity/identity-politics, indigenous spiritualities and religion, and intercultural syncretisms (especially in the context of Euro–American Christianity). Many of these and other discourses intersect with notions of cultural purity and the overarching institution of Western colonialism, which significantly impacted indigenous peoples (and music) throughout the world, particularly over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Ingalls et al. propose “musical localization” as an alternative to other syncretic discourses—namely, indigenization, contextualization, and inculturation—to better address “the complex ways music-making becomes locally useful”.

literature review religion spirituality music sound ethnomusicology indigenous gender race music therapy

1. Introduction

In the past six years (2015–2021) music scholars, performers, and various practitioners have produced a tremendous amount of scholarship on the dynamic relationships between religion and music (herein the RM literature). This is my best effort to arrange these related—though sometimes divergent—writings into “concrete” categories for the purpose of noting and discussing recurrent trends in the RM literature. I will review four theoretical trends as entry points to review this vast body of scholarship: gender and sexuality; race and ethnicity; music therapy; indigenous traditions.

Other topical and theoretical trends could have been highlighted, including the intersection of religion and music with media, technology, colonialism, politics, and national and nationalist discourses, to name but a few additional possibilities. My decision to focus on the above four topics stems from both their recurrence in the literature itself and their relevance in many increasingly diverse societies around the globe. This is a review of English-language literature only. RM scholarship in languages other than English should also be consulted and reviewed as necessary. Additionally, it should be noted that the sources cited in this review represent part of a more comprehensive, open-source project called the Religion, Music, and Sound Bibliography 1 (RMSB), which can be accessed online at: https://www.zotero.org/groups/2662946/religion_music_and_sound_bibliography/library (accessed on 30 September 2021).

2. Definitions: Religion and Music

In the context of this review and the larger RMSB, I offer an intentionally broad definition of religion as a socially established system of beliefs, rituals, and/or symbols that are variously rooted in supernatural, transcendental, and cultural realities. This understanding of religion is at once functional—concerned with what a religion does in society —and substantive—concerned with constituent properties, such as the transcendental, for example (ref. Alles 2005, p. 7703). This includes theistic (e.g., Islam and Christianity) and non-theistic “world religions” (e.g., Buddhism and Confucianism), new religions (e.g., New Age movement and Scientology), and “folk,” “popular,” or indigenous religions (e.g., Santaria, Vodun, and paganism). The choice to employ such an encompassing definition stems not from a desire to obscure religious discourse but to draw it into greater focus by considering a greater diversity of perspectives on how humans collectively (socially, politically, etc.) experience, conceptualize, and organize themselves in relation to what King calls “a push, either ill-defined or conscious, toward…ultimacy and transcendence that will provide norms and power for the rest of life” (King [1987] 2005, p. 7695).

Also related to “religion,” is the overlapping yet distinct discourse of “spirituality,” which MacDonald identifies in contemporary—mainly Western—culture as an “alternative to religion” (MacDonald 2005, p. 8720). Music therapists Aldridge and Fachner propose: “spirituality is about the individual, ineffable and implicit, religion is about the social, spoken and explicit” (Aldridge and Fachner 2006, p. 163). They note the distinction to avoid the common, and sometimes careless, conflation of these distinct constructs within their field dating back to the mid-1990s. Similarly, I recognize these distinctions but in a less binary and more spectral fashion than MacDonald describes. As such, the literature reviewed herein looks at spirituality in relation to religion, a discursive confluence particularly pronounced in the music therapy literature—a point I will return to.

As with “religion,” I offer a similarly broad definition of music as socially situated, produced, and aestheticized sound. This conception of music is very much in line with Small’s well-known notion of “musicking” (Small 1998—read, music as a verb, not a noun). Humans enact great musicking diversity with various methods for performing, hearing, interpreting, knowing, and sharing auditory vibrations. Of course, not everyone shares the same sensibilities and what is music to one may be dinful to another. In this way, music is not a universal, as is popularly proclaimed. However, while there are no qualities of musicking that are truly ubiquitous in historical and/or contemporary human cultures, near-universal traits exist, such as singing/vocalizing/chanting and the use of consonant tones (esp. unisons and octaves) (Nettl 2001). Likewise, the literature reviewed herein exhibits both the “universal” generalities and cultural specificities of music in religious context.

3. Gender and Sexuality

Second, RM studies intersecting with themes of homosexuality are primarily focused on Christian contexts, such as Moore (2018b) (and Western Catholicism); Taylor (2018) (and Southern American Protestantism), Burnim ([1] 2017b) (and the music of Thomas Dorsey), and Jones (2017) (homosexuality and African American Protestantism). Jones’ 2018 article in the journal *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* is a good example of juxtaposing religious music with taboo forms of sexuality such as homosexuality and masturbation. Jones’ article—“You Are My Dwelling Place”: Experiencing Black Male Vocalists’ Worship as Aural

Eroticism and Autoeroticism in Gospel Performance"—is a criticism of the conservation of African American gender norms vis-à-vis the established (usually male, usually straight-identifying) Church leadership.

A third prevalent theme within this sub-section of the RM literature concerns gender norms and sexuality: Hebden (2020) (on competitive dance and femininity in Mozambique), Yearsley (2019) (on Anna Magdalena Bach and domesticity), and Owens and Welch (2017) (on timbre, aesthetics, and girls' voices). Several studies examine issues of gender related to Hinduism in India, including Lorea (2018) ("religious transvestism" amongst Vaishnava Hindus in Bengal), Graves (2017) (gendered performativity and nationalism) and Sarbadhikary (2015) (domestic goddess worship). A book chapter by Stone—"Feminism, Gender, and Popular Music" (Stone 2017)—argues that "public evaluation of popular music is steeped in hierarchies that privilege qualities deemed masculine…over those deemed feminine" (Stone 2017, p. 56). Stone provides an analysis of gendered and religious/spiritual elements in the music of Kate Bush and Madonna, concluding that such "contrasts are not confined to popular music culture but are features of the Western aesthetic tradition more broadly, and indeed of the Western philosophical and religious tradition" (Stone 2017, p. 64).

Several articles/chapters on (primarily male-oriented) gender expression in Islamic contexts focus on hip hop, including Copeland's (2017) article in the journal *Contemporary Islam: Dynamics of Muslim Life.* Copeland (2017) notes the connection between American 1990s narrative film and hip-hop culture: "As a natural feature of urban Black environments, Black Islam served as a vital force in these Black male narrative films of the 1990s, manifesting itself throughout the storylines via the presence of hip-hop culture…" (p. 263). Other authors explore intersections of Islam and hip-hop including (Neff 2015) (on global resistance and politics in Senegal), Shannahan and Hussain (2015) (on the promotion and distribution of hip hop in Tunisia), and Silverstein (2018) (on Sufi spirituality in France).

Additional articles by Cohen (2015) and Schweig (2016) discuss hip-hop and expressions of masculinities within Judaism and Confucianism, respectively. Schweig concludes that "Confucian value systems, and Confucian gender regimes in particular, have retained their currency in the [Taiwan] rap scene" (p. 403). She also notes that "only the future will tell whether female artists…with non-binary gender identities can or will gain a foothold in the community under these inhospitable conditions" (p. 404). Schweig's observations regarding the marginalized role of women in Taiwan hip-hop could apply to the previously discussed Christian punk and hardcore and Muslim hip-hop, as this scholarship collectively underscores and/or critiques the performance, maintenance, and transformation of primarily masculine identities in these historically male-dominated genres.

4. Indigenous Traditions

The varied discourses of indigenous musical traditions and the religious and spiritual connections intertwined therein are increasingly well represented in recent scholarly publications. Most of these sources can be categorized according to a particular geo-political region or continent. Scholarship focusing on music and indigeneity of Canada and the United States account more than one-third of the fifty-seven sources cited (21/57). Traditions in Oceania (7/57), Latin America (8/57), Africa (9/57), and Asia (10/57) are also well represented. Amongst the journals publishing literature on the topic *African Musicology Online* is most prolific. Since 2015, the journal has published no fewer than seven articles on topics of indigenous musical traditions in Africa, including àgídìgbo music of the Yorùbá in Nigeria (Adekola 2018), the kamabeka cultural dance of the Babukusu community in Nigeria (Kusienya and Masasabi 2019), and the influence on Luhya musical styles on the Anglican hymns in Kenya (Omulupi and Masasabi 2020).

The impact of foreign (Euro–American) missionization on beliefs and practices of indigenous peoples throughout the world are specifically examined by several scholars. For example, Clare Chan (2015) writes about significant impact of the “tourist gaze” (neo-colonialism) on Mah Meri musical customs in Malaysia. Guillermo Wilde (2018) employs archival research methods to explore the Jesuit missions to South America during the colonial period. He notes systemic efforts on the part of missionaries to dissociate indigenous music with all corporal/erotic associations. Similar colonial-era cultural manipulation and erasure is described by Rakena (2019) and Swijghuisen Reigersberg and Lloyd (2019) amongst Māori in New Zealand and indigenous peoples of Australia, respectively. As an anti-colonial practice, Swijghuisen Reigersberg suggests that non-indigenous researchers “conceive of practice as research (PaR) in music as a method that is able to increase the participation of Indigenous people in the shaping of our communal understanding of Australian history.” Several other authors document historical and contemporary encounters between indigenous peoples and missionization/evangelism in the United States (Love 2018; Charles 2019), Norway (Harrison 2019), and Ecuador and Peru (Waisman 2020).

Nearly fifty percent of the publications reviewed in this category consider some element of indigenous music cultures in/as ritual, liturgy, and/or ceremony (28/57). This reflects the importance of and growing interest in indigenous ritual cultures. This research includes Lebaka’s analysis of music and religion in Bapedi society in South Africa (Lebaka 2020), and Yoon’s article on ritualized *urtyn duu* (“long song”) amongst nomadic herders in Mongolia (2018). Several sub-themes emerge within this literature including the association of indigenous music with rites/ceremonies based on “indigenous ontologies” (Diamond 2019), including ancestor veneration and cosmology (So 2015; Adekola 2018; Bell 2018; Lepofsky et al. 2020) and healing (Clark 2017; Hämäläinen et al. 2021). Discourses related to “spirituality” and the musical sub-discipline of ecomusicology also emerge within the literature on indigenous ontologies (Ryan 2016; Yoon 2018). This includes Hachmeyer’s study in *Ecomusicology*, in which he notes that “in Kallawaya cosmology…musical practices [rituals] are closely related to the social, natural, and spiritual environment,” and in certain contexts are understood as “communications with ancestors” (2018, abstract).

While the effects of colonialism remain a source of social and economic challenges for many indigenous *and* non-indigenous peoples throughout the world there is substantial scholarship on the place of music in ameliorating indigenous/settler relations and processes of social justice and reconciliation between indigenous and colonial elements of social discourse. This ongoing dialectic emerges in an array of interrelated terminology, each aiming to describe processes of “decolonization.” For example, in their study of the Standing Rock protest, Johnson and Kraft (2018) explore the employment of certain terms as signifiers of a global indigeneity movement. They propose a “globalizing indigenous religious formation” that could further unite global indigenous peoples to challenge colonial power and authority. The terms “reconciliation” (Bartleet 2019), “reciprocity” (Rakena 2018), and "intercultural relations" (Diamond 2019), are all used to variously address the impacts of colonization, its continued influence, and to implement anti-colonial ideologies and practices.

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