

Comments

Akiko Asai
Kanazawa University

Two research papers and presentations in the Cultural resource study seminar No.10 held in Kanazawa University gave me several questions that I should consider as a composer and teacher in the music education department.

The first question is whether or not the music discussed in the presentations is popular music like what is known as J-pop in Japan when they use the terms “Tai-Pop” and “Lahu-Pop.” In the Japanese popular music scene, sometimes the music based on minority cultural resources in the southern or northern areas of Japan, detached from the cultural center, rises to the top of the charts nationwide. These songs are written in their original dialects, sung in a style that is characteristic of their cultures, or/and accompanied by traditional instruments. However, the style of the music we listened to in these presentations was very similar to the Japanese folk songs in our parents’ generation from the aspects of musical style. They consist of lyrical and nostalgic melodies and western based harmonic progressions including the sound of traditional instruments. If you do not understand the languages in which the lyrics are sung, as the musical shape is totally in a classical style, it seems difficult to find the modernity that would be attractive to young people nowadays. According to the explanations of the presenters, they define the word “pop” as music listened to by ordinary people in a particular cultural area, which exists in very small market compared to the “popular music” listened to by the masses. That is why the term of “Tai” is used instead of “Thai,” which determines a particular cultural sphere.

Additionally, Prof. Wasan gave us a detailed explanation of the musical contents of Jaran Manophet’s music as an example. His music, titled “Noy-Tai Ya,” was sung by female and male singers and accompanied by a northern Thai string instrument called Xung and acoustic guitar. The musical form of a female and male duet is one musical tradition, and he combined these traditional and folk materials, transforming them into “new” music forms that had not previously existed.

We as musicians tend to comprehend music as a sound phenomenon, so I received the impression that I mentioned above the moment I listened to the music. However, music, especially in the context of being a cultural resource, is also a tool to convey words and meanings to others, and it is necessary for us to understand that the cultural, political, and social background of a musician's people is what influences its

creation. Unfortunately, the presentation was too short to understand the historical snapshot of the Tais of the upper Mekong region completely. However, I realized that their choices of words, instruments, and the musical forms they use to express themselves may be more meaningful to the people's appreciation of the music than the beauty of the sound.

The second question is what are the circumstances that affected the development of their music, including the use of chromatic instruments like the harmonica heard in Christian Lahu's pop music.

When I visited Uzbekistan, I found that folk music ensembles always include an accordion. Of course these chromatic instruments give a western-based tonality and harmonic system to their music. For present-day people in this country, the music made with these instruments is very easy to listen to, and they recognize it as an indispensable element for that kind of music. However, for me the richness of music produced by those instruments dominates other fascinating musical elements and assimilates their music to western music. In the case of Christian Lahu's pop music, their musical experiences and activities within their Church led them to the use of these western/chromatic instruments, which was explained in the presentation of Prof. Nishimoto. In the case of Central Asian countries, the roots of the use of these instruments can be related to being a part of the Soviet Socialist Republics. Based on my impressions of the examples provided in this presentation, I would like to further consider the origin of the instrumentation of the Uzbek Folk music ensemble.

Additionally, it is also an interesting result that Lahu-pop of Christian Lahu eventually evolved into a music detached from its original religion-ritual contexts. It is clear that they may have been simply absorbed in the creative process of making music, which could be one reason for this, but the tonality of the music produced by the chromatic instruments can be the other reason. Tonal music is established by binding harmonic progressions, and in popular music it overpowers linguistic accents and intonations in its musical flow. It is just my shortsighted idea, but it can't be wrong completely, that because western-based classical music followed this way of tonality, it has become a pure medium as "music." Of course, throughout history music has often been composed with religion-ritual contexts in mind, but now music is also accepted independently as an artform.

The third topic is not a question but a subject I have to think about seriously. It is about the relationship between musicians and political issues, which was the central theme of the research by Prof. Wasan. In his research paper three typical musicians of Tai-pop are introduced, and Sai Mow and his "Shan sound" was regarded as a notable

example. He lived a sublime life, and his music, and he himself as a musician, have a special place in hearts of people. Prof. Wasan explained that people believe he is the greatest musician ever. The words in his music represent the words of the people presently resisting their political situation, though the first release of his music was about forty years ago. Again, the musical form is nothing special in comparison with other music. However, Prof. Wasan emphasized that the inspiration of Shan musicians, who were influenced by the popular music on the opposite side of the Thai-Burma border, is reflected in their lyrics and melodies. He argues that the development of Shan popular music is inseparable from the Shan political movement. We are required to have an adequate historical knowledge in order to understand this important aspect of in his music. Unfortunately, due to time constraints I could not reach the point of fully understanding the historical and political background this time, but I have been considering this subject for several years.

Mr. Tadashi Suzuki, the director of a theatre company active worldwide, said in his festival in Toga that Japanese contemporary music declined after composers and musicians began not to be concerned with their own political issues. Fortunately or unfortunately, we in the younger generation have never experienced a situation where we have to insist on our rights or where we believe that our voice would change our political situation. What we can do is learn from the historical records and imagine what others may have faced. The music must have been a tool to convey thoughts and had a great power to move people. If one has a specific belief or is faced with a struggle within one's own society, what else can possibly be the seed that leads to the creation of music or other forms of art? It has been an unsolved question in my mind.

The fourth question is whether or not Thailand tries to preserve the origin of their folk music that pop musicians use as their creative materials and whether they educate young people so that they can recognize the value of those cultural resources. Uzbek people also enjoy their ethno-pop music that is based on their folk music, but for me the origin of the musical form is more attractive and respectable because it is realized by only the musicians' skilled technique and experience. In his presentation, Prof. Wasan explained that various types of folk music are performed in big festivals. This kind of event is produced in many countries for the purpose of developing their tourism resources, however in Japan the traditional or folk elements of our culture are totally different from our ordinary life and many people cannot realize what our tradition is. For example, traditional and folk music have been included in the educational materials for a decade, but it cannot be said that experience and knowledge about it increased by changing the curriculum. I believe that we need to know the value of the cultural heritage first, and

then develop it and transform it into a new cultural context, as was discussed in Prof. Wasan's presentation. For this aim, education would be the key, and music, especially songs, would be the most sufficient way to hand down the experiences, thoughts, and beliefs of our ancestors to the next generation. I am very curious about the music and art education in those cultural provinces.

Incidentally, Thai gong is a very popular instrument, and I have used it in my compositions many times, but it was the first time for me to see the original utilization in a ritual event of the Traditionalist Lahu. Composers tend to focus on the quality of sound and the impression of sound much more than the background of the instruments, because the sound constructs the concepts that form their creations. Through this meeting with the two researchers, I learned it is important for me to consider music from a wider range of viewpoints. It is impossible for us to understand the historical backgrounds, the words in their songs, and cultural memories of the peoples discussed in very short time, however this kind of experience should cultivate not only my imagination as a composer but also the imagination of musicians in the future.