

Theorizing the Orient: Orientalism and Its Synthesis with Opera, Jazz and Improvisation

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Abstract: In order to demonstrate how musicological discussions of Orientalism significantly changed the disciplinary profile of musicology in the direction of interdisciplinary or contextual musicology, the purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the history of the concept of Orientalism in the field of New musicology. New musicology has acknowledged the field of postcolonial studies as a potential place to start when developing new theories about the connections between music, race, ethnic otherness, and European colonialism.

Key Word: Orientalism, New musicology; Postcolonial Musicology; Edward Said.

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I. Introduction

The term "orientalism" has received a lot of attention in musicology, music criticism, and critical writing about other arts in recent decades, largely as a result of Edward Said's 1978 book of the same name. Unfortunately, the word has a complicated history and multiple meanings. The most conventional definition is provided by The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (1973), which tucks orientalism under the word orient with the brief but unimaginative definition "Oriental character, style, or quality," with an orientalist being "one versed in Oriental languages and literature." This definition is comparable to the one that Said famously brought into question and unpacked, documenting and reflecting on the many ways that studying the languages, literatures, and cultures of the eastern world might correspond to the appropriation, regulate, and ultimately marginalization and trivialization of those cultures and peoples, which might or might not include those of Africa but would unquestionably include the Middle East, Far East, and the Indian subcontinent. Even with some flaws and oversimplified generalizations, Said's expose study was groundbreaking in that it dismantled what was frequently uncritically regarded as a great constellation of respected academic disciplines, drawing attention to their (in some cases) imperial goals and frequently unacademic even inhumane underlying premise.

The descriptor "orientalism" is now most frequently used in this and related contexts, and critical viewpoints that are concerned with orientalism and its effects have been referred to as postcolonial for some time. In general, postcolonial criticism looks for and reads documents and works of art with a "oriental" undertone or flavor in order to subtly and unapologetically influence them. Given the connection between postcolonial music criticism and the broader field of cultural criticism, such "oriental" spice is rarely viewed as benign or advantageous, and as a direct consequence, the complexities and layers of meaning have gradually been reduced into a single, damning idea. According to Webster's Dictionary (2009), the third definition is "a viewpoint, as held by someone in the West, in which Asia or specifically the Arabic Middle East is seen variously as exotic, mysterious, irrational, etc.: [a] term used to impute a patronizing attitude," which captures Said's postcolonial sensibility.

II. Edward Said and Orientalism

Since its initial release in 1978, Edward Said's *Orientalism* has established itself as a seminal work of postmodern cultural criticism, providing a paradigmatic analysis of Western attitudes toward the "Other," in this particular instance, oriental and particularly Muslim culture. The ongoing process of European appropriation and dominance of the Orient is detailed in Said's study, which began at the end of the 18th century with scientific or pseudo-scientific endeavors and artistic representations that served as a theoretical foundation and justification for actual physical conquest in the 18th and 19th centuries. Said discusses a sizable number of philosophical, historical, and literary works, but gives orientalism in music only a scant mention. Nevertheless, this very feature of an abundance of musical compositions from the same period, representing similar ideological attitudes, attracted the attention of musicologists throughout the twentieth century, especially in

recent years; see for example the valuable collection of essays *The Exotic in Western Music*, edited by Jonathan Bellman.

Due to the terminological issue, it is impossible to say with certainty whether "orientalism in music" is (1) merely a particular type of musical exoticism, (2) more broadly, a beneficial critical tool for examining the wide range of ways in which music is integrated in and reflects, communicates with, or perhaps even comments upon its broader culture, or (3) a more specific aspect of postcolonial criticism, relevant only while the colonial system is still in place. An examination of the field will confirm that last, harshly framed possibility. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to "orientalism" as music that examines, disciplines, appropriates, and so forth the cultures of the middle and far east; "postcolonial criticism" as Saidian and post-Saidian critical work that identifies and engages with such musical approaches; and "transcultural music" as music that alludes to multiple cultures, regardless of time or place, whether using musical instruments derived from the land or culture in question.

For starters, in the words of Edward Said, it would be unreasonable to anticipate perfect philosophical and ideological coherence throughout a scholar-critic's entire life and thought. We owe Said the concept of orientalism as criticism, as well as a large portion of the notion that a discipline in and of itself is a form of appropriation, if not outright colonization, of its subject. But while his eye was focused on the colonialist implications of western ideologies, he also had a deep personal investment in western culture. I grew up as an Arab with a western education, he wrote in *Culture and Imperialism*, "for objective reasons over which I had no control. Since I can remember, I have felt as though I am a part of both worlds without being fully a part of either. Said's political activism served as a reflection of one and a testament to the value of his lifelong engagement with western art and literature, These two impulses interestingly interacted with one another throughout his life.

However, because these topics so preoccupied him in other areas, his music criticism frequently neglected to address questions of east and west, exile, and appropriation. We shouldn't be shocked by this, as Said himself noted elsewhere:

No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white [sic], or Black, or Western, or Oriental. (Edward Said, 1993, p. 336)

III. Orientalism and Opera

A well-known example of Orientalism in eighteenth-century opera is Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio*. A Spanish nobleman named Belmonte is the main character of the story. He aims to rescue his betrothed, Konstanze, and her English servant Blonde after they were captured by pirates and later sold to the Pasha Selim. Osmin is the Pasha's servant and the watchman over his harem, which itself is representative of the Orientalism-related power play and vigilance. Osmin, a stereotypically boorish Turk, frequently loses control of his emotions and finds himself "the apparent butt of Orientalist degradation and satire." Osmin's policing can be viewed as "emblematic of the Orientalist's own pre-occupation with boundaries (and boundary crossing)" because he consistently prevented Belmonte from entering the Pasha's estate. Osmin unmistakably embodies one aspect of the civilized/barbaric dualism. He is callous and lusty (making rough and unwelcome sexual advances toward the sympathetic Blonde), and his orchestration of the abduction is frequently driven by a soaring rage. As Said describes the Orientalists' archetypal Arab using Harold W. Glidden's 1972 essay "The Arab World," Osmin-like traits begin to emerge:

Arabs live "naturally" in a world "characterized by anxiety expressed in generalized suspicion and distrust, which has been labelled free-floating hostility"; "the art of subterfuge is highly developed in Arab life" ... the Arab need for vengeance overrides everything, otherwise the Arab would feel "ego-destroying" shame. (Harold W. Glidden, 1972, p.49)

Osmin's animosity undoubtedly reaches a vengeful peak in the film's final scene, where he claims he cannot comprehend the Pasha's choice to pardon Belmonte for saving Konstanze and claims he would rather have them put to death. The way Osmin was portrayed undoubtedly helped to keep Arabic stereotypes alive. However, it becomes clear from referencing Mozart's letters that the concepts driving Osmin's character weren't simply about being evil. Osmin "forgets himself" and crosses the lines of "order, moderation, and propriety," according to Mozart, as his rage intensifies. Was Osmin portrayed by Mozart as a helpless, ordinary person unable to control his erratic emotions? Said for one expresses sympathy for Mozart's depiction of the East:

An eighteenth-century mind could breach the doctrinal walls erected between the west and Islam and see hidden elements of kinship between himself and the Orient ... [Mozart's] *The Abduction from the Seraglio* locate[s] a particularly magnanimous form of humanity in the Orient.(Edward Said, 1978, p. 118)

By the 19th century, European opera had a noticeably Arabic flavor, with composers conjuring occasionally fairly accurate, other times egregiously inaccurate images of the Middle East. In Locke's words:

The best of them are "true" in a nonfactual, perhaps mythic sense: they constitute visions of a beckoning, amusing, or scary "nowhere land," a land that Westerners would like to think is very different from their own but is in fact more a projected self-image, however deformed to hide the painful self-resemblance.(Ralph P. Locke, 1998, p.106)

These observations highlight the crux of Said's argument, which is that Orientalism has "less to do with the Orient than it does with "our" world." Indeed, one theory holds that Western audiences flocked to French bayadères ('ballets about Middle Eastern dancing women') or Strauss's brazenly erotic 'Dance of the Seven Veils' from *Salome* because such works distilled the general desires and anxieties of those living in a bleak, sterile nineteenth-century urban Europe—an 'enervating, corruptive, brutalizing' Europe that drove artists like Lermontov and Gauguin to solitude in remote idylls where they could indulge in the sensuality of meek dusky maidens. However, Western music that depicts an idealized, "natural," Middle East falls victim to Orientalism, as such representations can "veil from sight the complexities of that other culture as fully as frankly negative stereotypes." Simple positivistic analyses of Oriental operas also ignore the frequently used alternative to a Middle East portrayed as dangerous and evil. These depictions typically feature oppressive and brutal male characters who are presented to the Western audience as the main "other":

In [Saint-Saens's] *Samson et Dalila*, the Hebrews are the God-fearing proto-Christians (in musical style as well as words and actions), while the Philistines are projected as lascivious and violent heathens, given to drunken revelry (in the famously lurid Bacchanale ballet), sacrilegious rituals, and vicious mockery. Effectively, this makes the Philistines the Middle Easterners or Arabs of the opera.(Locke, p. 108)

Along with bawdy gangs, 19th century operas frequently featured male authority figures in the form of hedonistic, aimless despots (as in Charles-Simon Favart's *Les trois sultanes*) and barbaric despots (like Ali Pasha of Lortzing's *Ali-Pascha von Janina*). These villains are typically accompanied (often for comedic effect) by the "Turkish jangle" of the allaturca style, a loud western appropriation of Ottoman military tunes played on the "wrong note." Hunter draws attention to the alignment of such characterizations with Orientalism:

Such portraits of power abused or squandered served European audiences both as thinly disguised warnings and as self-congratulatory comparisons; they encouraged notions of Western superiority and thus eventually justified the nineteenth-century political and economic domination of the East.(Mary Hunter, 1998, p.44)

Stereotypes of female counterparts that "served as both warning and fantasy" included "wanton oriental mistress" and "submissive Eastern slave." Said's reflections of Orientalist works saliently reflect the West in this blatant Occidental projection of anxiety and desire.

IV. Orientalism and Improvisation

The musical genre of improvisation is open to criticism as "deviant," "irregular," or "sloppy." Improvisation is described as the "primitive act of music making, existing from the moment the untutored individual obeys the impulse to relieve his feelings by bursting into song" in the 1954 edition of Grove's *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. The term has been used by Orientalists as a sort of euphemism for the musical "other," which is the antithesis of "real" art (composition). The British author and playwright John Beverly Nichols states in *Verdict on India*:

Indian music is almost entirely a matter of improvisation. Art is not, never has been, and never can be, a matter of improvisation ... Indian music has yet to suffer the pangs of birth, the pangs which are the inevitable accompaniment of all artistic creation. It must boldly proclaim itself on paper, in black and white.(John Beverly Nichols, 1944, p.134-135)

Nichols dismisses the nuanced distinctions and stringent rules of Indian musical performance by persuading himself that Indian musicians lack the capacity for long-term planning and, as a result, create music that has no lasting value (here he sits alongside the musical ignoramus described by Farrell in the introduction to his *Indian Music and the West*.) The implications of Nichols are obvious: Others, like Indians, have untaught

spontaneity, improvisation, and simple musical creation. Euro-Americans have art. The well-worn Orientalist stance that "accuracy is abhorrent to the Oriental mind" is one that Nichols unquestionably upheld with satisfaction.

Similar to this, the first Europeans who heard Iranian classical music thought it was improvised since it was played seemingly at random and without notation. The performances that were heard were "firmly anchored in a protracted and intensive training including the accurate memorization of a canonic repertory known since the late nineteenth century as *radif*," according to the report (literally, "series"). In actuality, Iranian musicians at the time had no concept of musical improvisation. However, Western writers began to refer to Iranian classical music as "improvised," and Iranian artists eventually started to accept the notion as true. This operation was primarily a result of the fact that certain "truths" about Iran, as they were constructed by Orientalist scholars (including musicologists), were given a lot of authority. This process was also a result of the pervasive emulation of Western ideas that resulted from the neo-colonial imbalance of power that existed between Iran and the West for much of the twentieth century and persisted even after the Islamic Revolution. A case in point for Said's statement that "knowledge of the Orient, being formed out of strength, in a way generates the Orient, the Oriental and his universe" is the Iranian embrace of improvisation.

Nooshin dismantles the Orientalist precept that Eastern musical systems must contrast themselves with Western musical systems through written notation: "lack of notation equals non- cerebral, which in turn equals non-art, which in turn is inferior to actual art, and so on." Henry Kissinger echoes this call for the East to "proclaim itself on paper" in his piece *American Foreign Policy*, where he claims that the Orient is intellectually behind the West because it was not included in Europe's Newtonian revolution:

Cultures which escaped the early impact of Newtonian thinking have retained the essentially pre-Newtonian view that the real world is almost completely internal to the observer.(Henry A. Kissinger,1974, p.47)

As is typical of Orientalist writing, Kissinger's article is full of dichotomies such as reason/passion, reason/superstition, and civilized/primitive. From these, we can infer the musical equivalents of tutored/untutored, composed/improvised, sophisticated/simplistic, etc. When one considers that improvisation has been an accepted practice of Western classical music for centuries—"Landini, Sweelinck, Buxtehude, Bach, Händel, Mozart, Beethoven, Liszt and Franck were all renown not only as composers but as improvisers"—the idea that improvisation is a subpar, Oriental practice seems even more tenuous.

V. Orientalism and Jazz

Picasso's chance discovery of an exhibit of African masks at the Muséed'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in 1907 served as the impetus for a *l'art nègre* and "primitive" cultural craze that engulfed Parisian art circles for the majority of the 1920s. A mixture of this craze and a fascination with exotic and intriguing newcomer jazz music resulted in numerous instances of Orientalist jazz appropriation.

Jazz, along with improvisation, was viewed even decades after its introduction as "a vestige of barbarism" that had a propensity to "unseat reason and set passion free." Jazz and its overtly sensual dances, whether performed by African American or white musicians, glamorized a "perceived lack of control and rational thought which undermined the basic premises of Western civilization." Jazz's popularity among some audiences has only increased as a result of press condemnations characterizing it as brutal and a sign of social collapse. By "beating their drums, ringing their bells, and shrieking with all their might against the First World War and the "civilized" mindset they held liable for it," the Dadaists employed jazz to counter-cultural effect. Jazz's "savage" character appealed many surrealist painters as well:

Notions central to their art (automatic writing, entering a 'trance', etc.) found support ... in the Surrealists' belief that improvising musicians accessed the subconscious if not a spiritual sphere.(Andy Fry, 2003, p.143)

Despite the surrealists' well-intended embrace of jazz and synthesis of it with their obsessions with Oriental (African) primitivism, those who were "attributing value to the underside of well-established [Orientalist] binaries... rather than dismantling them" by anchoring primitivist myths like shamanism to jazz musicians and then exaggerating and revelling in the music's anti-authoritarian, untamed elements as a form of escape or release.

The largest, most warped jazz spectacles were produced by the partnership between poet Jean Cocteau and musician Darius Milhaud, most notably in their ballet *La Création du monde* (1923). *Le Création*, which took inspiration from Satie's *Parade*, combined elements of contemporary pop culture with the exotically primeval. The Orientalism of Milhaud is found in his embellishment of jazz's wild characteristics. As "the most discordant, the most feral jazz, such as one must hear among the most backward tribes," one critic dismissed *Le*

Création. So it might be stated that jazz was appropriated by Jean Cocteau and his collaborators for their own purely aesthetic ends, impeding jazz's development as a fully realised Western art form:

While doing more to promote jazz than any other Paris modernist, Cocteau at the same time sought to position it in a cultural space clearly segregated from that reserved for high-cultural production.(Fry, p.145)

While Cocteau was not a supporter of foreign art, he did attempt to use the exotic, sensual, and Oriental attraction of jazz to advance his own career, much like French Post-Impressionist painter Gauguin had done with Tahiti. Jazz was seen by Cocteau as "not an art but a "brutal disorder", a means of "fertilising an artist's imagination" and "making his creation more virile."

VI. Conclusion

Said mentions music only a very small number of times throughout Orientalism. The fact that Said's theory can be applied to music in such a wide variety of intriguing and illuminating ways is evidence of its overall genius. Opera offers us blatant Orientalist dichotomies that unfairly denigrate the Orient. But how damaging are these representations in reality? Oriental music imitation can be seen as admiration or derision. The contradiction in Said's thesis of Orientalism, which sees it as both a system of dominance and a desire for the other, is beautifully illustrated through opera. Furthermore, the political implications become even more hazy if one only takes into account the Orientalist influence of opera music. In other words, how well, even stripped of all titles, programmes, costumes, settings, etc., would the aforementioned Orientalist works maintain their "amazing potential for telling stories, conjuring places, conveying passions"? The notion that Western Orientalist imitations of Eastern music amount to belittlement is complicated by the fact that the Middle East "had and has its own interest with the West and diverse Western music" and recreated them as a result.

Unsettling is the dismissive misrepresentation of Eastern improvisation. The placing of Eastern cultures in Orientalist frameworks appears to have been influenced by Western fears of improvisation since, as Said notes, "knowledge makes control easier and profitable." The alarming passion with which Nichols denounces Indian music as being un-born shows that he is on a mission to accomplish more than simply elucidate the distinctions between two musical systems. "What legitimacy would European power have over its colonies absent such fundamental differences?"

The relevance of these ideas in the present era is still up in the air. Under the weight of diachrony and the fall of Imperialism, it would appear that the connection between music and Orientalism has faded. "A nearly sacrosanct position in American culture" is now held by jazz. Perhaps Cocteau was applauding "culture as a distinguishing and expressive ensemble rather than hegemonic and disciplinary," a concept Clifford accuses Said of ignoring, and not the selfish appropriation of jazz that has been charged against him. Although Orientalists have shown interest, disdain, and disgust for music, they have never completely eradicated it, unlike with other more politically risky cultural qualities like language or religion. If anything, orientalism has contributed to the growth of the music industry. We can probably use the term given in the dictionary "a basic love with the exotic" in the context of music.

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