Intercultural reception as manifested in popular music

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Abstract
This paper views popular music as a very important and inseparable part of intercultural reception. Based on empirical material gathered for a project on the subject of the mechanisms of intercultural reception of Slavic cultures in Austria, the text offers a systematisation of the dynamics of the reception of “otherness”. Popular music constitutes and verifies those complex intercultural processes as a substantial part of them, rather than as a separate working mechanism.

Keywords: intercultural reception; the other; socio-cultural processes; interaction.

This paper’s starting point is the conviction that cultures need to be explored through their interaction with other societies and cultures, and this should be done interdisciplinary, because one single discipline is clearly unable to cover the various aspects of this interaction. Since intercultural reception is dynamic and multidimensional, the transformations it involves and the mechanisms that condition those changes could be examined using the methodological and theoretical experience of various fields, including popular music studies. In other words, this is an attempt at including observations on popular music and potential conclusions into the wide interdisciplinary web of intercultural studies.

Since 2010 I have been working on a post-doc project “Transformations of intercultural memory [Slavic and Austrian cultures: Mechanisms of intercultural reception]”. With the terms “cultural / intercultural memory” being so vast, as a working tool I offer the short definition of Astrid Erll (2008, p. 2), which presents
cultural memory as “the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts”. Moreover, the term intercultural memory suggests also interaction between various socio-cultural contexts, in this case Austrian and certain Slavic cultures. Austria’s unique historical, geographical and cultural position makes her especially fruitful for examination of the Western (and yet immediately close) reception of the Slavic cultures, of the socialist and post-socialist cultural models, and of the influence of that reception on the Central and Eastern European cultures and societies. The cultural interaction is examined through the fields of history and material cultural legacy, tourism, academia, popular culture and arts, media, generational gaps, youth culture, groups and practices, frames of reference, sources of prejudices, stereotypes, and the dynamics of the reception of “otherness”.

In this paper I use a few aspects of present-time cultural interaction between Austrian and certain Slavic cultures as a starting point, and try to trace some possible directions towards the conceptualisation of intercultural reception’s mechanisms.

I have tried to systematise the dynamics of the reception of “otherness” in five basic types, forming a scale from the most exclusive attitude to the most integrating degree of reception. Those five types are of course just a heuristic construction, they are not separate entities and their frontiers are virtually nonexistent. I need them only for the purpose of drawing a theoretical framework, which brings some order into the vast empirical material I have been observing. This framework can be verified from the point of view of popular music, which is here seen as a substantial part of the intercultural processes, rather than as a separate working mechanism.

**TYPE 1: THE OTHER AS AN EXTERNAL OUTSIDER**

**MODUS OF EXCLUSION / THREAT. CLOSEDNESS**

This initial point of the scale is the level of prejudices, cultural stereotypes, and internal resistance towards other cultures. One could even say that this is the “normal” (normal in the sense of “usual”) attitude of every culture confronted with foreign “intruders” – namely, the attitude of self-defence, reticence, and closedness (Geschlossenheit).

Viewed from the angle of history, certain Slavic countries have recently presented themselves as a multifaceted “danger” to the so-called West, especially after the fall of Communism in 1989. The situation is quite intense for Austria in particular, due to her geographical and historical position, and her relative legislative openness to immigration and naturalization. As opposed to the traditional minorities, considered a proud remainder of the former Habsburg Empire, the immigration in the last twenty years has formed new minorities, the reception of which starts from the conscious or subconscious feeling of threat, and develops further in various degrees of tolerance, nevertheless always leaving the sense of fear and resistance. At present, Austria has one of the highest rates of foreigners in the EU: 10,5% (Vasileva 2011), predominantly with the following origin:
Citizens from the former Yugoslavia, predominantly Serbs, accounted for approximately 50 percent of the foreign workers in Austria. Turks were the second largest group, making up approximately 20 percent of the foreign work force, followed by Germans at 5 percent. Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, and Romanians made up between 3.5 and 4.0 percent each. (Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress n.d.)

Details about the foreign population and numbers of the Gastarbeiter are available online (Statistik Austria 2011). Here I would like to point out that on this first level of reception they are predominantly perceived not only as an economic threat, but also as cultural intruders. The main obstacle for the foreign workers is of course language, and furthermore religion (in the case of Turks), customs, and various cultural practices. Already judged before they even make their start in Austria, immigrants have only one way towards integration – the path of gradual assimilation and Austrianization, which happens normally with the second Austrian-born and German-speaking generation.

And of course one should consider the huge role of the media. The reception of other cultures is hardly ever direct, it is always mediated, and digging into the media representations of Slavic cultures, especially Balkan ones, one could find a huge source of prejudice-forming, and imposed unconscious intercultural images.

Verifying this type of reception through popular music here is easy. Prejudices and stereotypes are often demonstrated or even promoted in popular songs. Music easily escapes the censorship of political correctness, especially with its nonverbal elements (although text, melody, voice, etc. are taken here as non-separate elements).

A good example of this type of reception is a piece by the Bulgarian ethno jazz band Wladigeroff Brothers & Band, which is a witty reply to an Austrian nationalistic slogan from 2008, by the leader of the far-right xenophobic Freedom Party FPÖ Heinz-Christian Strache – Wien darf nicht Istanbul werden (“Vienna must not become Istanbul”). Wladigeroff Brothers developed their clever multilayered instrumental piece under the name “Istanbul mustn’t become Vienna” (Extraplatte 2008). This was a very elegant and witty way to tell a story on the subject of not accepting the other.

**TYPE 2: THE OTHER AS AN INTERNAL OUTSIDER**

**MODUS OF INTERNAL SEPARATION / INNER CULTURAL ISOLATION**

This is the level of the modus of internal separation, or inner cultural isolation. Again, the most powerful tool here is language.

The empirical observations on some relatively closed youth groups (for example Bulgarian youth groups in Vienna) show that their practices often remain unchanged in the foreign social environment, which makes them practically invisible for the hosting culture. Very good musical and lyrical descriptions of the inner cultural iso-
lation of closed groups can be found in Riblja Ćorba song “Gastarbajterska pesma” (WIT 1996; lyrics at Riblja Ćorba n.d.).

Then we have the role of the cultural institutes, which is a little ambiguous. On the one hand, they have the primary goal to promote the respective national culture in Austria. On the other hand, many of the cultural events they organise contribute to cultural separation, both preserving the cultural uniqueness, and at the same time confining it to same-culture audiences.

And while cultural institutes are the “official” intercultural tool, one could also observe many other events of various organisational origin that also separate Slavic cultures. Through language and traditions, events in many forms of popular culture and arts (music of course being crucial) isolate themselves from the Austrian culture, thus depriving the host culture of the chance for any type of reception or interaction. For example, in Vienna there are various student parties that clearly establish intercultural boundaries, starting from the title of the event (“Bulgarian night”, “Serbian student party”, etc.), through the rules for access, to the nature of the event itself. On one such event, for instance, celebrating the Bulgarian Student’s Day on 7th December 2010, one could observe hundreds of Bulgarian students isolating themselves by recreating their culture in a beautiful Viennese castle, the most crowded hall of which was the one with pop-folk music and dancing on and around the chairs and tables.

A little bit more open is the situation with restaurants, shops and other commercial units, which are also designed to satisfy the needs of culturally self-isolated guest cultures, but manage to attract some relative interest on behalf of some Austrians as well. In restaurants, the food, as well as the music and the interior, function as markers creating a space to resemble the homeland. Those markers, however, can sometimes attract Austrian visitors as well. According to one of the owners of the Bulgarian restaurant Pleven in Vienna, Bulgarians bring their Austrian friends, who like the food and sometimes even dance to traditional Bulgarian folklore music (BNT 2011).

**Metalevels**

The next two types could be called *metalevels*, inasmuch as they consist of and constitute the “reception of the reception”, that is intentional intercultural efforts. Here we will find the whole academic layer, and I must highlight the fact that Austria’s academic interest in Central and Eastern Europe is extremely rich and multidimensional, and certainly more intense than the one of other Western European countries (comparable maybe only to Germany, in which post-communist studies of course have additional motives).

**Type 3 : The other as an object of interest**

**Modus of the unknown / interest. Openness**

This type represents the attraction to other cultures, and the genuine or necessary interest in some of its aspects. I have had the chance to observe the activities of a
great number of academic institutions engaged with Central and Eastern Europe (or Slavic cultures in particular), which I will not list now. I have attended many relevant conferences, lectures and seminars, and have tried (emphasising tried) to follow some of the periodicals and studies on the subject. My general impression is that Eastern Europe is still treated as *terra incognita*, which provokes great academic interest and attraction. Many international academic events put a lot of effort into rationalizing Central and Eastern Europe, and what is also interesting – guest academics are usually accepted with unreserved trust, just because they come from those not so well-known countries, and are supposed to bring stable credibility, not just their own point of view.

Another area driven by the interest in the unknown is of course tourism. Tourist representations of Slavic cultures are designed to “sell” Slavic cultures in Austria, and therefore emphasise the marketable sides of foreign cultures. Tourist advertisements, films, guidebooks, etc. are extremely interesting to examine, although one should take into consideration that most of the guidebooks are German and not particularly Austrian. The unknown that is still to be discovered remains a highlight in the image-making of Eastern and Southeastern countries. For example, the German guidebooks about Bulgaria might differ in form and content, but they always more or less draw on this aspect (Ilina 2001, p. 159).

Music is of course an essential part of tourism. Curiosity for the unknown foreign musical cultures, especially folklore, is a major driving force of interest in the other. It is also the driving force of everything that could be included in the type of intercultural reception which has produced in the last few decades a vast variety of intercultural music mixtures in the age of “increasing hybridisation” (Bennett et al. 2006, p. 3). Austrians are well-known for their long-lasting taste and background in classical music, but they also show vivid interest in various music mixtures and do not keep their distance from “world music” projects. One Bulgarian who has been working in Vienna since 2001 is the talented accordionist Martin Lubenov, whose band presents a unique mixture of Balkan Roma music with elements of jazz, swing, tango, salsa, etc. (Connecting Cultures 2005).

**Type 4: The other as a welcome guest**

*Modus of hospitality / Culture circulation. Openness*

This fourth type is actually quite close to the previous one, only this time the direction of the interest is not from the inside outwards, but rather from the outside inwards.

Austria offers extremely rich academic exchange programmes, ranging from student to professor levels. Rough numbers from the OeAD (Österreichischer Austauschdienst) show that Austria hosts about 530 scholars per month, plus sixty APPEAR guests, and 450 through the CEEPUS program. In other words, for the year 2010 only for incoming scholarships Austria has paid about ten million euro. Nearly all Slavic countries are object of vivid academic interest for Austria. Furthermore,
there are the Aktionen programmes, especially for partner projects with Slovakia, Czech Republic and Hungary.

One fact worth mentioning is that although most of the programmes are bilateral, the interest from Slavic countries towards study or research stay in Austria is way higher than the opposite. The amount of incoming students and scholars shows Austria as an excellent host and wise unifier. And this orientation is way beyond the strategy of brain drain, which other developed countries practice widely.

At a young scientists conference on Central and South Eastern Europe at the end of October 2010, a welcome address was presented on behalf of the Austrian Federal Minister for Science and Research, Dr. Beatrix Karl, which described the Austrian scientific and educational exchange policy as aimed at “brain circulation, rather than brain drain”. I find this orientation reasonable and convincing, straightly directed to intercultural dialogue and hospitable reception, and in this sense really admirable.

The other type of hospitable openness could be observed in the face of non-separated cultural events. Various aspects of popular culture and arts (again with popular music being crucial) get incorporated in the richness of Austrian cultural life and become part of it, unlike the aforementioned isolated foreign cultural events.

**TYPE 5: THE OTHER AS AN INSIDER**

**Modus of integration / Intercultural internalisation. Incorporation**

This is of course the most idealistic level, since it can never be fully achieved (in general by cultures, not particularly by Austria). Still, the Austrian reception of Slavic cultures sometimes happens to be in various ways a reception of the other as non-other.

For immigrants, this can usually happen with the second or third generation, or with those people who have successfully Austrianised themselves, blunting as much as possible the initial cultural differences (although one could argue that even in those cases certain shades of prejudiced reception will always remain).

Other examples include internalised cultural aspects, such as linguistic or cuisine features. In the case of Austria, historically there are many such aspects in which Slavic cultures have influenced Austrian culture.

And of course popular culture and arts offer some great examples of proper intercultural projects that are not artificially designed to promote interculturalism, but which integrate cultures in an almost natural way. For example, in recent years there has been a boom of bands not only mixing different music, but whose band members have different roots as well (Austrian + Balkan/Roma/Slavic, etc). It is hard to tell to what extent those musicians feel like insiders, but some of them have had long-lasting success that speaks for a considerable amount of intercultural internalisation. One of the most successful bands of this type is Wiener Tschuschenkapelle with a history of more than twenty years and twelve albums. As stated on their website, their programme mixes
traditional folk and songs of the Balkan region, Mediterranean serenades, Turkish-oriental tunes, Greek Rembetiko, Bosnian Sevdalinka, travelling as far as Russia, taking aboard one or the other Old Viennese song along the way (after all, the name is Wiener Tschuschenkapelle), experimenting with gypsy jazz, and even venturing into the classical realm. (We have even had the honour of playing with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra at the Vienna State Opera). (Wiener Tschuschenkapelle n.d.)

This type of intercultural integration is also often working very successfully on a regional level, especially through the channel of common or similar language. A good example of this is the TV show “Česko Slovenská Superstar” (“Czech and Slovak Superstar”), which has been a joint version of the Czech and Slovak “Pop Idol” versions since 2009. The role of language in regional integration is crucial. There are, of course, various regional cultural processes going on beyond the level of language, and that includes music too, but with Slavic languages and German being so different, one could hardly expect such common musical joy, as the one of Austria, Switzerland and Germany, expressed in the song “Servus, gruezi und hallo” (Rubin Records 2003) by Maria & Margot Hellwig.

As stated at the beginning of the paper, this is just a provisional heuristic scale of reception types, and it is not designed to be exhaustive or final. It is also a very condensed presentation of a much bigger project, many aspects of which could not be mentioned here. One of the possible conclusions when working with dynamic intercultural processes, though, is that popular music cannot be treated as a separate object, for quite often it does not work separately, but as a part of broader intercultural mechanisms.

REFERENCES


