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Transformation of Hands Percussion Practice in Contemporary Global Music: Djembe and Conga in the Context of Modern Performance

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, hand percussion instruments such as the djembe and conga have undergone significant transformations within the context of global musical practice. Instruments that were originally deeply rooted in the musical traditions of West Africa and the Caribbean are now increasingly present in various forms of contemporary music, including popular music, jazz, world music, and diverse cross-cultural musical practices. This phenomenon occurs as a result of cultural exchange processes driven by globalization and the expansion of the global music industry. This article aims to examine how hands percussion practices change in function and meaning when they move from their original cultural contexts into modern global musical systems. Using an ethnomusicological approach, this study combines literature analysis, observation of performance practices, and reflection on the author's musical experience as a percussion practitioner. The results show that djembe and conga not only undergo technical adaptations within modern musical structures, but also experience transformations in social function, sound aesthetics, and the ways musicians interpret rhythmic practice in performance. By referring to the concepts of soundscape (Feld), bi-musicality (Hood), and the perspective of music as a cultural practice (Nettl), this article argues that the transformation of hands percussion in contemporary music is part of an ongoing process of cultural negotiation within the global music system.

INTRODUCTION

Hand percussion instruments represent one of the oldest forms of musical expression in human history. In many musical traditions around the world, percussion instruments do not merely function as rhythmic elements but also

serve as media of social communication, cultural symbols, and embodied forms of expression. In ethnomusicological studies, rhythm is often understood as a phenomenon inseparable from the social practices of the communities that produce it (Blacking, 1973). Two instruments that

have played a major role in the development of contemporary global music are the djembe from West Africa and the conga from the Caribbean region, particularly Cuba. Although these instruments originate from different cultural traditions, both function as hand percussion instruments that play important roles in shaping the rhythmic structures of musical ensembles. Since the second half of the twentieth century, both instruments have increasingly been used outside their original cultural contexts. This phenomenon is closely related to the development of the concept of world music, which allows various musical traditions to interact within global music production spaces (Bohlman, 2002).

As a result, instruments such as the djembe and conga have been widely incorporated into numerous modern musical genres, including jazz, pop, and experimental music. The relocation of instruments from their original cultural contexts into the global music system raises important questions for ethnomusicological research:

How do these instruments change when they enter different musical contexts?

Are these changes merely technical, or do they also involve transformations in cultural meaning and social function?

By focusing on hand percussion practices in modern performances, this article seeks to answer these questions through an analysis of the transformation of djembe and conga usage in contemporary musical contexts.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research approach within the framework of ethnomusicology to explore the transformation of hand percussion practices in contemporary global music. The qualitative method is chosen to enable

an in-depth understanding of musical practices as cultural phenomena, emphasizing meaning, context, and interpretation rather than numerical analysis.

The research employs three primary methods. First, literature analysis is conducted by reviewing scholarly works related to West African and Afro-Caribbean musical traditions, as well as key theories in ethnomusicology and cultural globalization. This approach provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the historical development, cultural significance, and global diffusion of instruments such as the djembe and conga.

Second, observation of performance practices is carried out through the analysis of both live and recorded musical performances that incorporate hand percussion instruments in modern contexts. This method focuses on identifying changes in playing techniques, rhythmic structures, ensemble roles, and musical interactions within various genres such as jazz, world music, and fusion.

Third, this study includes reflective musical practice, drawing upon the author's experience as a percussion practitioner. This approach aligns with the concept of bi-musicality, which emphasizes the importance of experiential knowledge in ethnomusicological research. Through direct engagement in musical performance, the researcher gains embodied insight into the technical and expressive transformations of hand percussion.

By integrating these three approaches, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how hand percussion instruments transform not only in terms of musical structure but also in their cultural meaning and social function within the global music system.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study reveals that hand percussion instruments, particularly the

djembe and conga, have undergone significant transformations when integrated into contemporary global music practices. These transformations are not limited to technical adaptation but extend to changes in musical function, performance context, sound aesthetics, and cultural meaning.

Transformation of Musical Function

The findings indicate that the djembe and conga have shifted from their original roles as community-based and ritual instruments into flexible components within modern musical ensembles. In traditional West African contexts, the djembe functions as part of an integrated percussion ensemble closely tied to dance, social ceremonies, and communal communication. However, in contemporary global music, it is often used as a primary rhythmic instrument in smaller ensembles, frequently replacing or complementing the modern drum set.

Similarly, the conga, which historically plays a central role in Afro-Cuban musical traditions through structured rhythmic patterns such as tumbao, is now widely utilized in genres such as jazz, pop, and fusion. In these contexts, the conga no longer serves solely as a carrier of traditional rhythmic cycles but becomes part of a more flexible and adaptive rhythmic system.

These findings support the idea proposed by Bruno Nettl that musical function is always shaped by cultural context. When instruments move across cultural boundaries, their functions inevitably shift to accommodate new musical environments.

Adaptation of Playing Techniques and Musical Structures

Another important result is the emergence of technical adaptations in performance practice. Djembe players, for

example, increasingly develop techniques that allow the instrument to imitate the roles of a drum set, including bass patterns, snare-like accents, and dynamic rhythmic variations. This reflects an effort to align traditional playing styles with the demands of modern ensemble performance.

In the case of the conga, traditional techniques are maintained but are often integrated with improvisational approaches typical of jazz and fusion music. This creates a hybrid performance style in which structured rhythmic patterns coexist with spontaneous musical expression.

This phenomenon aligns with the concept of musical hybridization, where elements from different musical systems are combined to produce new forms. It also reflects Mantle Hood's concept of bi-musicality, as musicians adapt their playing by engaging with multiple musical traditions simultaneously.

Changes in Sound Aesthetics and Performance Context

The study also finds that the sound aesthetics of hand percussion instruments have evolved significantly. In traditional settings, percussion sound is closely tied to specific cultural meanings, social functions, and acoustic environments. However, in global music contexts, these sounds are often reinterpreted within different aesthetic frameworks.

For example, the djembe and conga are frequently used in studio recordings, amplified performances, and digitally produced music. This shift alters not only the acoustic characteristics of the instruments but also the way audiences perceive and interpret their sound. The instruments may be valued more for their timbral diversity and rhythmic versatility than for their original cultural symbolism.

This finding supports Steven Feld's concept of soundscape, which emphasizes that sound is always experienced within a particular social and cultural environment. As the performance context changes, so does the meaning of the sound itself.

Transformation of Cultural Meaning and Social Function

Beyond technical and musical aspects, the transformation of hand percussion also involves shifts in cultural meaning. Traditionally, instruments such as the djembe and conga function as integral parts of community identity and social life. Their use is often embedded in rituals, ceremonies, and collective expressions.

In contemporary global music, however, these instruments often serve as symbols of cultural diversity and global identity. They are used by musicians from various cultural backgrounds and are no longer exclusively tied to their original communities. This reflects a process of cultural negotiation, where traditional meanings are reinterpreted within new global contexts.

Thomas Turino's perspective on music as social life helps explain this transformation, as musical practices become sites of interaction between local traditions and global cultural flows. The use of hand percussion in modern music can therefore be understood as part of a broader process of transcultural exchange.

Hands Percussion as a Medium of Cross-Cultural Interaction

Finally, the study shows that hand percussion instruments function as important media for cross-cultural musical interaction. The widespread use of djembe and conga in world music, jazz, and fusion demonstrates their adaptability and their ability to bridge different musical traditions.

Musicians who engage with these instruments often participate in a form of cultural dialogue, combining elements from diverse musical backgrounds to create new expressive possibilities. This process reflects the ongoing dynamics of globalization, where musical practices are continuously reshaped through interaction, adaptation, and reinterpretation.

Overall, the results of this study demonstrate that the transformation of hand percussion in contemporary music is a multidimensional process involving technical, aesthetic, functional, and cultural changes. These findings reinforce the view that music is not a static form but a dynamic cultural practice shaped by ongoing global interactions.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that hands percussion practices in modern music have undergone complex transformations. Instruments such as the djembe and conga not only move from one cultural context to another but also experience changes in function, playing techniques, and musical meaning.

In contemporary global music, these instruments have become part of cross-cultural musical practices that facilitate dialogue between different musical traditions. Therefore, hands percussion should not only be understood as rhythmic instruments but also as important media in the dynamics of cultural exchange within world music

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