**Music**

**Music**, the organized movement of sounds through a continuum of time. Music plays a role in all societies, and it exists in a large number of styles, each characteristic of a geographical region or a historical era.

**Cultural Definitions**

All known societies have music, but only a few languages have a specific word for it. In Western culture, dictionaries usually define music as an art that is concerned with combining sounds—particularly pitches—to produce an artifact that has beauty or attractiveness, that expresses something, that follows some kind of internal logic and exhibits intelligible structure, and that requires special skill on the part of its creator. Clearly, music is not easy to define, and yet most people recognize the concept of music and generally agree on whether or not a given sound is musical.

Indefinite border areas exist, however, between music and other sound phenomena such as speech, and the cultures of the world differ in their opinion of the musicality of various sounds. Thus, simple tribal chants, a half-spoken style of singing, or a composition created by a computer program may or may not be accepted as music by members of a given society or subgroup. Muslims, for example, do not consider the chanting of the Koran to be a kind of music, although the structure of the chant is similar to that of secular singing. The social context of sounds may determine whether or not they are regarded as music. Industrial noises, for instance, are not music except when presented as part of a concert of experimental music in an auditorium, with a listed composer.

Opinions also differ as to the origins and spiritual value of music. In some African cultures music is seen as something uniquely human; among some Native Americans it is thought to have originated as a way for spirits to communicate. In Western culture music is regarded as inherently good, and sounds that are welcome are said to be “music to the ears.” In some other cultures—for example, Islamic culture—it is of low value, associated with sin and evil, and attempts have been made to outlaw its practice.

**Music as a Cultural System**

Music has many uses, and in all societies certain events are inconceivable without it. A proper consideration of music should involve the musical sound itself; but it should also deal with the concepts leading to its existence, with its particular forms and functions in each culture, and with the human behavior that produces the sound.

Somewhat analogous to having a language, each society may be said to have “a music”—that is, a self-contained system within which musical communication takes place and that, like a language, must be learned to be understood. Members of some societies participate in several musics; thus, modern Native Americans take part in both traditional Native American music and mainstream American music.

Within each music, various strata may exist, distinguished by degree of learning (professional versus untrained musicians), level of society (the music of the elite versus that of the masses), patronage (court or church or public commercial establishments), and manner of dissemination (oral, notated, or through mass media). In the West and in the high cultures of Asia, it is possible to distinguish three basic strata: first, “art” or “classical” music, composed and performed by trained professionals originally under the patronage of courts and religious establishments; second, folk music, shared by the population at large—particularly its rural component—and transmitted orally; and, third, popular music, performed by professionals, disseminated through radio, television, records, film, and print, and consumed by the urban mass public.

***The Sounds of Music***

In the simplest terms music can be described as the juxtaposition of two elements that involve pitch and duration and that are usually called melody and rhythm. The minimal unit of musical organization is the tone—that is, a sound with specific pitch and duration. Music thus consists of combinations of individual tones that appear successively (melody) or simultaneously (harmony) or, as in most Western music, both.

**Melody**

In any musical system, the creation of melody involves selecting tones from a prescribed set called a scale, which is actually a group of pitches separated by specific intervals (the distances in pitch between tones). Thus, the scale of 18th- and 19th-century Western music is the chromatic scale, represented by the piano keyboard with its 12 equidistant tones per octave; composers selected from these tones to produce all their music. Much Western music is also based on diatonic scales—those with seven tones per octave, as illustrated by the white keys on the piano keyboard. In the diatonic scales and in the pentatonic scales—those with five tones per octave, most often corresponding to the black keys on the piano—that are common in folk music, the tones are not equidistant.

Intervals can be measured in units called cents, 1200 per octave. The typical intervals of Western music are multiples of 100 cents, but in other musical cultures intervals of about 50, 150, and 240 cents, for example, are also found. The human ear can distinguish intervals as small as 14 cents, but no interval that small seems to play a significant role in any musical system.

**Rhythm**

The handling of time in music is expressed through concepts such as the lengths of notes and the interrelationships among them; relative degrees of emphasis on different tones; and, in particular, meter.

Most Western music is built on a structure of regularly recurring beats—that is, a metrical structure. This structure may be explicit (as in the beating of the bass drum in popular music and marching bands), or it may be implied (often in symphonic or piano music). The three most common meters in Western music are units of four beats (with main stress on the first beat, secondary stress on the third beat); of three beats (stress on the first); and of six beats (primary stress on the first, secondary on the fourth). Conventionally, these meters are called o, k, and u. Far greater complexity is found, however, in 20th-century Western art music, Indian classical music, and West African drum ensembles. Furthermore, much music is structured without regular meter, as in some genres in India and the Middle East, and in Christian, Jewish, Islamic, and Buddhist liturgical chant.

**Other Elements**

The organization given to simultaneously produced pitches is also of great importance. Two or more voices or instruments performing together may be perceived as producing independent although related melodies (counterpoint); or the emphasis may be on how the groups of simultaneous tones (chords) are related to one another, as well as on the progression of such groups through time (harmony).

Timbre, or sound quality, is the musical element that accounts for the differences in the characteristic sounds of musical instruments. Singers have a variety of timbres as well, each affected by such features as vocal tension, rasp, nasality, amount of accentuation, and slurring of pitch from one tone to the next .

One major characteristic of music everywhere is its transposability. A tune can be performed at various pitch levels and will be recognized as long as the interval relationships among the tones remain constant. Analogously, rhythmic patterns can almost always be perceived as identical, whether executed quickly or slowly.

These elements of music are used to organize pieces extending from simple melodies using a scale of three tones and lasting only ten seconds (as in the simplest tribal musics) to highly complex works such as operas and symphonies. The organization of music normally involves the presentation of basic material that may then be repeated precisely or with changes (variations), may alternate with other materials, or may proceed continually to present new material. Composers in all societies, often unconsciously, strike a balance between unity and variety, and all pieces of music contain a certain amount of repetition—whether of individual tones, short groups of tones (motives), or longer units such as melodies or chord sequences (often called themes).

**Instruments**

All societies have vocal music; and with few exceptions, all have instruments. Among the simplest instruments are sticks that are struck together; notched sticks that are scraped; rattles; and body parts used to produce sound, as in slapping the thighs and clapping. Such simple instruments are found in many tribal cultures; elsewhere, they may be used as toys or in archaic rituals. Certain highly complex instruments exhibit flexibility not only in pitch but also in timbre. The piano produces the chromatic scale from the lowest to the highest pitch used in the Western system and responds, in quality of sound, to wide variation in touch. On the organ, each keyboard can be connected at will to a large number and combination of pipes, thereby making available a variety of tone colors. On the Indian sitar, one plucked string is used for melody, other plucked strings serve as drones, while still others produce fainter sounds through sympathetic vibration. Modern technology has utilized electronic principles to create a number of instruments that have almost infinite flexibility.

Instrument types are so numerous that classification systems have had to be developed. The most widely used system distinguishes idiophones, in which the main vibrating units are the resonant bodies of the instruments themselves (for example, rattles and xylophones); membranophones, which have vibrating skins (drums); chordophones, which have vibrating strings (violins, guitars, pianos); aerophones, which produce vibrating bodies of air (clarinets, reed and pipe organs, harmonicas); and electrophones, in which electronic circuits produce sound (electronic organs, sound synthesizers).

***The Creation of Music***

Music is created by individuals, using a traditional vocabulary of musical elements. In composition—the principal creative act in music—something that is considered new is produced by combining the musical elements that a given society recognizes as a system. Innovation as a criterion of good composing is important in Western culture, less so in certain other societies. In Western music, composition is normally carried out with the help of notation; but in much popular music, and particularly in folk, tribal, and most non-Western cultures, composition is done in the mind of the composer, who may sing or use an instrument as an aid. Creative acts in music also include improvisation, or the creation of new music in the course of performance. Improvisation usually takes place on the basis of some previously determined structure, such as a tone or a group of chords; or it occurs within a set of traditional rules, as in the *ragas* of India or the *maqams* of the Middle East. Performance, which involves a musician's personal interpretation of a previously composed piece, has smaller scope for innovation. It may, however, be viewed as part of a continuum with composing and improvising.

The normal method of retaining music and transmitting it is oral or, more properly, aural— most of the world's music is learned by hearing. The complex system of musical notation used in Western music is in effect a graph, indicating principally movement in pitch and time, with only limited capability to regulate more subtle elements such as timbre. Both Western and Asian cultures possess other notation systems, giving letter names of notes, indicating hand positions, or charting the approximate contour of melodic movement.

***The Social Role of Music***

Music everywhere is used to accompany other activities. It is, for example, universally associated with dance. Although words are not found in singing everywhere, the association of music and poetry is so close that language and music are widely believed to have had a common origin in early human history.

**The Function of Music**

Music is a major component in religious services, secular rituals, theater, and entertainment of all sorts. In many societies it is also an activity carried on for its own sake. In American society in the late 20th century, for example, one main use of music involves listening at concerts or to radio or records (music for its own sake); another involves the provision of music as a suitable background for unrelated activities such as study or shopping (music as an adjunct to something else). In many societies music serves as the chief entertainment at royal courts. Everywhere, musicians sometimes perform for their own diversion; in some societies, however, this private use of music has been formalized—in southern Africa, for example, special genres and styles are reserved for musicians' performances for their personal entertainment.

The most ubiquitous use of music, however, is as a part of religious ritual. In some tribal societies, music appears to serve as a special form of communication with supernatural beings, and its prominent use in modern Christian and Jewish services may be a remnant of just such an original purpose. Another, less obvious, function of music is social integration. For most social groups, music can serve as a powerful symbol. Members of most societies share keen feelings as to what kind of music “belongs.” Indeed, some minorities (including, in the U.S., black Americans and Euro-American ethnic groups) use music as a major symbol of group identity.

Music may serve as a symbol in other ways, as well. It can represent nonmusical ideas or events (as in the symphonic poems of the German composer Richard Strauss), and it can underscore ideas that are verbally presented in operas (notably those of the German composer Richard Wagner), in film and television drama, and often in songs. It also symbolizes military, patriotic, and funerary moods and events. In a more general sense, music may express the central social values of a society. Thus, the hierarchical caste system of India is symbolized in the hierarchy of performers in an ensemble. The avoidance of voice blending in a Plains peoples singing group reflects the value placed on individualism. In Western music the interrelationship of conductor and orchestra symbolizes the need, in a modern industrial society, for strongly coordinated cooperation among various kinds of specialists.

**The Musician**

In most of the world's societies, musicianship requires talent, special knowledge or training, and effort, and the view is widespread that a successful musical work or performance is difficult to achieve. There is no evidence that superior musical abilities arise in one society or race as opposed to another; rather, variations in achievement are the result of differences in technology, in the degree of specialization of musicians, and in the value placed on music. Individual talent, however, is recognized among most peoples, and the musical specialist exists everywhere: as a true professional in the West, India, the Far East, and Africa; as an informal leader and singer in folk cultures; and as someone who also has supernatural power in tribal societies. But if music is regarded as indispensable everywhere, the musician has rarely enjoyed great prestige. In certain early societies in Europe and America, for example, musicians were regarded as undesirable social deviants; this remains the case in the present-day Middle East. In many societies music is relegated to outsiders—foreigners or members of religious and ethnic minorities. Many modern social systems, including those in the West, inordinately reward the outstanding “star” performer but pay little attention to the average musician. Nevertheless, musicianship in most parts of the world requires long periods of concentrated study, extending in the case of European and Indian virtuosos to some 20 years.

***Musical Regions***

Each culture has its own music, and the classical, folk, and popular traditions of a region are usually closely related and easily recognized as part of one system. The peoples of the world can be grouped musically into several large areas, each with its characteristic musical dialect. These areas include Europe and the West; the Middle East with North Africa; Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent; Southeast Asia and Indonesia; Oceania; China, Korea, and Japan; and the Americas (Native American cultures). All coincide roughly with areas determined by cultural and historical relationship, but, surprisingly, they do not correspond well with areas determined by language relationships.

The history of Western music—the one most easily documented because of Western musical notation—is conveniently divided into eras of relative stability separated by short periods of more dramatic change. The periods conventionally accepted are the Middle Ages (to c. 1450), the Renaissance (1450-1600), the baroque era (1600-1750), the classical era (1750-1820), the romantic era (1820-1920), and the modern period . Other cultures, less well documented, likewise have experienced change and development (not necessarily always in the direction of greater complexity), so that the simplest tribal musics also have their histories. In the 20th century, however, rapid travel and mass communication have led to a great decrease in the musical diversity of the world.