You Need Beethoven to Modernize

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It is possible to modernize without Westernizing? This is the dream of despots around the world. Leaders as diverse as Mao on the Left and Khomeini on the Right seek a high-growth economy and a powerful military -- without the pesky distractions of democracy, the rule of law, and the whole notion of the pursuit of happiness. They welcome American medical and military technology but reject its political philosophy or popular culture. Technology shorn of cultural baggage is their ideal.

Sad for them, fully reaping the benefits of Western creativity requires an immersion into the Western culture that produced it. Modernity does not exist by itself, but is inextricably attached to its makers. High rates of economic growth depend not just on the right tax laws, but on a population versed in the basics of punctuality, the work ethic, and delayed gratification. The flight team for an advanced jet bomber cannot be plucked out of a village but needs to be steeped into an entire worldview. Political stability requires a sense of responsibility that only civil society can inculcate. And so forth.

Western music proves this point with special clarity, precisely because it is so irrelevant to modernization. Playing the Kreuzer Sonata adds nothing to one's GDP; enjoying an operetta does not enhance one's force projection. And yet, to be fully modern means mastering Western music; competence at Western music, in fact, closely parallels a country's wealth and power, as the experiences of two civilizations, Muslim and Japanese, show. Muslim reluctance to accept Western music foreshadows a general difficulty with modernity; Japanese mastery of every style from classical to jazz help explain everything from a strong yen to institutional stability.

Muslims

Among Muslims, choice of music represents deep issues of identity. Secularist Muslims tend to welcome European and American music, seeing it as a badge of liberation and culture. Ziya Go"kalp, the leading theorist of Turkish secular nationalism, wrote in the early 1920s that Turks face three kinds of music today: Eastern music, Western music, and folk music. Which one of them belongs to our nation? We saw that Eastern music is both deadly and non-national. Folk music is our national culture, Western music is the music of our new civilization. Neither of the latter can be foreign to us.

More recently, as Turkish secularists find themselves under siege, sold-out crowds turn out for concerts featuring Western classical music. In the words of a reporter, these
have "become a symbolic rallying point for defenders of Turkish secularism." In an event rich with symbolism, the Turkish embassy in Tehran gave a two-hour concert of Western classical music in late December 1997, in tribute to the forthcoming (Christian) new year. Few cultural occasions could quite so sharply delineate the contrasting visions of Atatürk and Khomeini.

In contrast, fundamentalist Muslims, who nurse an abiding suspicion of the West, worry that its music has an insidious effect on Muslims. When Necmettin Erbakan was prime minister of Turkey in 1996-97, he cut back on dance ensembles, symphony orchestras, and other Western-style organizations. Instead, he fought to increase funding for groups upholding traditional musical forms.

For fundamentalists, merely listening to Western music suggests disloyalty to Islam. A speaker at a fundamentalist rally in Istanbul flattered his audience by telling them, "This is the real Turkey. This is not the aimless crowd that goes out to see [sic] the Ninth Symphony." An Iranian newspaper published a poem that characterizes the opposite of the downtrodden, faithful Iranians killed by Iraqi troops as an audience of classical music buffs -- women with "pushed-back scarves" (i.e., who resist Islamic modesty) and men with "protruding bellies" (i.e., who profit from the black market). The same poem, titled "For Whom do the Violin Bows Move?" argues that concerts of Mozart and Beethoven promote the "worm of monarchical culture." Anyone who listens to Eine Kleine Nachtmusik, in other words, must be a traitor to the Islamic republic. Or to Islam itself: naming the very same composers, a Tunisian claims that "the treason of an Arab . . . begins when he enjoys listening to Mozart or Beethoven."

Of course, if eighteenth-century composers so rile fundamentalist Muslims, what do they think of rock and rap music? American popular music epitomizes the values that Muslims find most reprehensible about Western culture -- the celebration of individualism, youth, hedonism, and unregulated sexuality. The Pakistani fundamentalist group Hizbullah has singled out Michael Jackson and Madonna as cultural "terrorists" who aspire to destroy Islamic civilization. The group's spokesman explains this fear:

Michael Jackson and Madonna are the torchbearers of American society, their cultural and social values . . . that are destroying humanity. They are ruining the lives of thousands of Muslims and leading them to destruction, away from their religion, ethics and morality. Terrorists are not just those who set off bombs. They are also those who hurt others' feelings.

Hizbullah finished with a call for the two Americans to be brought to trial in Pakistan.

The Hizbullah statement points to the reasons why fundamentalists mistrust Western music: it demoralizes Muslims and distracts them from the serious requirements of their faith. Ahmad al-Qattan, a Palestinian preacher living in Kuwait, finds that Western music "involves pleasure and ecstasy, similar to drugs" and elaborates:

I ask a lot of people, "When you listen to Michael Jackson, or Beethoven, or Mozart, what do you feel?"
They tell me: "Oh, I feel my heart torn from the inside."
I say, "To that extent?"
They tell me: "Yes, by God, to that extent. I felt that all of a sudden I am flying. One moment I am crying, the next moment I am laughing, then dancing, then I am committing suicide."

Our God, we seek refuge with You from singing and its evils.

Ayatollah Khomeini had similar views, as he explained to an Italian journalist:

*Khomeini*: Music dulls the mind, because it involves pleasure and ecstasy, similar to drugs. Your music I mean. Usually your music has not exalted the spirit, it puts it to sleep. And it destructs [sic] our youth who become poisoned by it, and then they no longer care about their country.

*Fallaci*: Even the music of Bach, Beethoven, Verdi?

*Khomeini*: I do not know these names.

But then, unexpectedly perhaps, Khomeini softens his condemnation: "If their music does not dull the mind, they will not be prohibited. Some of your music is permitted. For example, marches and hymns for marching. . . . Yes, but your marches are permitted." Others join Khomeini in making an exception for marching music. Qattan, for example, distinguishes between degenerate and useful music: "No Mozart and no Michael Jackson, no singing and no instruments, only war drums." Fundamentalist Muslims allow the ecstasy that Western music can create is allowable only if it helps march youth to their deaths.

(As an aside, it is interesting to note that marches are the only Western music significantly influenced by the Middle East: Gypsies introduced Turkish -- or "Janissary" -- music to Europe in the eighteenth century. The Austrian army appears to have been the first to adopt this genre. It involved exotic new uniforms and such new percussion instruments as tambourines, triangles, cymbals, bass drums, and -- suggestively -- crescents. Accented grace notes added to the exoticism. Soon after, these elements entered the orchestra too; Mozart first used Turkish-style music in a sketch dating from 1772 and "Turkish" effects are especially prominent in his Abduction from the Seraglio as well as the finale to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. In a sense, then, with marching music the Middle East is letting back in its own innovation.)

In contrast, the Turkish authorities, marching to a different drummer as is so often the case, rely on classical music to quiet their forces. The so-called "Steel Force" units, the baton-swinging riot police notorious for their tough tactics against street protesters, are forced to listen to Mozart and Beethoven in their buses on the way to operations as a way to calm them down.

Other fundamentalists have divergent ideas on what music is permissible, a debate symbolized by the King Fahd Cultural Center, a magnificent concert hall seating 3,000 at the perimeter of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Shortly before his death in 1975, King Faysal approved the building of this center as part of the recreational facilities to turn Riyadh, his capital, into a handsome modern city. Completed in 1989 at a cost of $140 million, it boasts such lavish touches as the finest marble and precious woods, not to speak of a state-of-the-art laser lighting system, and a hydraulic stage.

But the hall has never staged an event. A foreign diplomat who managed to visit the mothballed facility found that a full-time staff of 180 has for almost a decade
maintained the building and its gardens in mint condition. This has meant not just tending the flower beds but air-conditioning the facility all year around so that the delicate woods on the interior not deteriorate. Why is the cultural center not used? Because it offends the strict Islamic sensibilities prevalent in Saudi Arabia. According to one report, on hearing about Western-style music played by mixed casts (meaning men and women) to mixed audiences, the country’s religious leaders "went berserk."

The saga of Riyadh’s concert hall neatly illustrates the ongoing debate about Western music among fundamentalist Muslims. King Faysal, no slouch in his Islamic faith, thought it a permissible pleasure, but the Saudi religious authorities deemed otherwise. Other fundamentalists, too, disagree on specifics. The author of an advice column in a Los Angeles Muslim weekly concedes that "Music with soft and good tunes, and melodious songs with pure words and concepts are acceptable in Islam," provided that this does not lead to "the mixing of men and women." In contrast, 'Ali Hoseyni Khamene'i, Iran's spiritual guide, deems "the promotion of music is... not compatible with the goals of the Islamic system." Accordingly, he rejects the teaching of music to children and prohibits "any swing music that is for debauchery," even when played in separate-sex parties. Egypt's leading television preacher, Sheikh Muhammad ash-Sha`rawi, went further and condemned Muslims who fall asleep to Western classical music rather than a recording of Qur’anic recital. Inspired by his words, fundamentalist hotheads in Upper Egypt stormed a concert and broke musical instruments, leading to their arrest.

With such attitudes prevalent, it is hardly surprising that Muslim practitioners of Western music have achieved little. As the historian Bernard Lewis notes, "Though some talented composers and performers from Muslim countries, especially from Turkey, have been very successful in the Western world, the response to their kind of music at home is still relatively slight." They enjoy neither renown or influence outside of their native countries, and even there remain minor figures.

**Japan**

How different is Japan! True, the early reactions to Western music were adverse: on hearing a child in song in Hawaii, Norimasa Muragaki, a member of the very first Japanese embassy to the United States in 1860, compared the sound to "a dog howling late at night." Within a few years, however, Japanese heard Western music much more favorably, to the point that the music drew some individuals into Western religion. In 1884, Shoichi Toyama argued that "Christianity ought to be adopted for, first, the benefit of progress in music, second, the development of compassion for fellow men and harmonious cooperation, and third, social relations between men and women." Note that he lists music first.

Before long, some Japanese discovered that Western music expressed their feeling far better than anything in their own tradition. As he left French soil, the leading writer Nagai Kafu (1879-1959) mused wistfully on the beauty of French culture:

_No matter how much I wanted to sing Western songs, they were all very difficult. Had I, born in Japan, no choice but to sing Japanese songs? Was there a Japanese song that expressed my present sentiment -- a traveler who had immersed himself in love and the arts in France but was now going back to the extreme end of the_
Orient where only death would follow monotonous life? . . . I felt totally forsaken. I belonged to a nation that had no music to express swelling emotions and agonized feelings.

Kafu here describes emotions almost entirely unknown to Muslims.

The local musical tradition engages in an intense give and take with Western music. Woodblocks, a traditional Japanese instrument, are a standard of jazz percussion. Traditional Japanese music has influenced many Western composers, and John Cage probably the most directly so. The Suzuki Method, which applies the traditional Japanese techniques of rote training (hiden) to children learning the violin, has won a substantial following in the West. Yamaha sells over 200,000 pianos a year and is the world's largest maker of musical instruments.

Conversely, European classical and American popular music have become part of the Japanese scene. Tokyo has nine professional orchestras and three operas, giving it the highest mass of European classical music talent in the world. Seiji Ozawa, music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, rates as the most renowned of Japanese conductors. Classical performers with wide reputations include pianists Aki and Yugi Takahasi and percussionist Stomu Yamashita.

Though Japanese composers are yet little known outside Japan, their pace of activity is considerable. Toru Takemitsu, who makes a specialty of exploring timbre, texture, and everyday sounds in both European and Japanese media, is perhaps the most renowned internationally. Akira Miyoshi composes classic Western music. Toshi Ichiyanagi, Jo Kondo, Teruyaki Noda, and Yuji Takahashi write in an avant-garde manner. Shinichiro Ikebe, Minoru Miki, Makato Moroi, and Katsutoshi Nagasawa write for traditional Japanese instruments. The marimbist Keiko Abe is the best known of classical Japanese musicians and Toshiko Akiyoshi the best known of jazz players.

European classical music has shed its foreign quality in Japan, becoming fully indigenous. In this, Japan resembles the United States, another country which has imported nearly all of its classical music. Just as Americans have adapted the music to their own tastes and customs -- playing the 1812 Overture on the 4th of July, for example -- so have the Japanese. Thus does Beethoven's Ninth Symphony serve as the anthem of the Christmas and New Year's season. Not only do the country's leading orchestras play the symphony over and over again during December, but gigantic choruses (numbering up to 10,000 participants) rehearse for months before bellowing out the Ode to Joy in public performances.

As for pop music, the Japanese -- like nearly all the world -- idolize American pop stars and grow their own local talent. But more interesting is their intense engagement with jazz. So large is the Japanese jazz market that it affects music produced in the United States. Jazz coffee shops (which play music on state-of-the-art equipment) have proliferated, and Japan hosts numerous international jazz festivals each year. Japanese Swing Journal sells 400,000 copies a month (compared to only 110,000 copies of the best-known American publication, Downbeat) and roughly half of some American jazz albums are bought by Japanese. Indeed, according to one American producer, Michael Cuscuna of Blue Note Records, "Japan almost singlehandedly kept the jazz record business going during the late 1970s. Without the Japanese market, a lot of
independent jazz labels probably would have folded, or at least stopped releasing new material." This is too big a market to lose, so American and other artists must increasingly pay attention to Japanese taste.

As for Japanese creativity, the results here have been modest until now -- composers and musicians do little more than imitate the styles of foreigners -- but the existence of a large and increasingly sophisticated home market offers fertile ground for Japanese musicians to experiment and then to lead. Attempts to combine jazz with traditional Japanese music have begun; these blendings are likely to influence jazz as much as they already have architecture and clothing. It seems safe to predict that the Japanese before long will become a major force in jazz.

The Japanese give musically in other ways too. The karaoke machine plays instrumental versions of popular songs and permits a bar patron to accompany the music as though he were an accomplished singer, providing a good time for all. Not only has karaoke become an amusement staple worldwide, but the characteristic Japanese-style bar (with its hostesses, a mama-san, and karaoke microphone) has proliferated in the West. Karaoke machines are sold in Sears Roebuck stores and have won a large and cheerful, if slightly tipsy following.

**Conclusion**

Muslim and Japanese responses with Western music symbolize their larger encounters with Western civilization. Muslims have historically approached the West warily, fearful of losing their identity. This prevents them from immersing themselves in Western learning or gaining the needed skills in technology and business. They remain permanently in arrears, coping with one wave of Western influence after another, barely keeping up and exerting virtually no influence over the West.

The Japanese do things very differently. First, they throw themselves whole-heartedly into the new subject, not fearing the loss of their own identity. Second, they acquire skills, matching and even beating the West at its own game; what the Tokyo orchestras are to music, Toyota and Nissan are to cars. Third, Japanese evolve original customs of their own, either based in their traditions (karaoke) or an amalgam of cultures (Beethoven's Ninth for New Year's). Finally, they develop techniques that Westerners adopt; the Suzuki Method in music parallels the just-in-time system in car manufacturing. They have absorbed Western civilization in its entirety, discarded what does not interest them, taken what does, and mastered it.

Thus does the response to Western music exemplify the whole of a civilization's experience with modernity. Its lack of utility makes it all the more useful as an indicator of achievement. Why this connection? Because, as Lewis observes, "Music, like science, is part of the inner citadel of Western culture, one of the final secrets to which the newcomer must penetrate." Music represents the challenge of modernity: competence in this arena implies an ability to deal with whatever else the West might serve up. Muslim resistance to accepting music from the West represents its larger unwillingness, whereas the Japanese have truly entered the inner citadel. In short, whoever would flourish must play Beethoven as well as Westerners do.