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## **Listen to Music through the Ears of Music**

### **Why Harmony had to wither in the Age of Equality**

Speech delivered at the meeting for the inauguration of the Ivan Illich Center for Intercultural Documentation, at Lucca, Italy: June, 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> 2003.

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## **Listen to Music through the Ears of Music**

### **Why Harmony had to wither in the Age of Equality**

Ladies and Gentleman,

dear Aldo Zanchetta, it is a pleasure and an honor for me to speak here in Lucca for the inauguration of the Centro di Documentazione Interculturale della Scuola della Pace. As the final speaker of this gathering, I would like to thank Aldo for making this event possible. The atmosphere of this meeting here at the Palazzo Ducale seems to me the most appropriate way of celebrating Ivan Illich. And I hope, we will continue this conversation next year.

In the next twenty minutes, I would like to tell you a short story about a concert of twelve musicians in my hometown in Northern Germany Bremen. And I owe this story to Illich, because he taught me to listen to this concert through his ears. He made me listen to it as the sound of a globalized world. A world where not only musical harmony, but also the unique of every culture for harmony has to wither under the regime of equality. This story is an almost Illichian one, which means, some may suspect: “Se non è vera è ben inventata”. But before I start, I would like to introduce you to the two main characters of this story – On the one hand musical harmony and opposed to that on the other hand equality. And I would like to do it by referring to an old text of Ivan: *The Delinking of Peace and Development*, that he wrote 1980. Because there, Illich argues that peace cannot blossom but in a world of unique cultures. And this is also true for the practice of and the reflection on music.

Since a couple of years now, a group of friends of Illich meet around a table to discuss this question: how under the regime of Equality the sense for what once was called ‘harmony’ has to wither? For me, these conversations have been a special gift, because, working as a musician and a musicologist, the notion of ‘harmony’ and its history is crucial. Like my collaborators, I understand the reflection around a table as a gift that allows me to think beyond an academic discipline. I owe to Illich and to these friends that for me the reflection on music became an extraordinary opportunity for a better understanding of the unique per-versions of modern society.

### **Illich on peace**

In his opening address to the Asian Peace Research Association in Yokohama, Illich emphasized one argument: peace can only blossom in a harmonious society. A society where every culture has its own notion of what it means to live in peace. “Culture”, Illich writes “has always given meaning to peace. Each *Ethnos*, each community has been mirrored, that is symbolically expressed and reinforced by its own *ethos*, myth, law, gods” – and I have to add – music. This particular condition was historically felt, discussed and striven for as harmony. For Illich, the enemy of peace is equality. War, he writes, tends to make cultures alike, whereas harmony is that particularly condition under which each culture flowers in its own incomparable way. Under the regime of equality, a peaceful life is impossible. Equality implies the idea of an universal man. The uniform consumer of global goods. Now in the age of equality, he argues, the pursuit of what fits, what is appropriate for every culture has been

transmogrified into a claim for equal access to limited goods. For Illich, equality destroys the possibility of harmony.

Today 'equality' evokes also a number of related concepts. Words like 'difference', 'needs', 'access', 'justice', 'human rights', 'development' and 'scarcity' became key terms for globalophiles and globalophobes; Those, who battle for or against globalization. Equality now works as a kind of umbrella word that brings together different aspects of what Illich called the universal man. Now, twenty years after *'The De-Linking of Peace and Development'*, in the light of the work of Samar Farage, Silja Samerski, Sajay Samuel and Jean Robert I am tempted to add:

The delinking of peace and 'health',

The delinking of peace and comparability,

The delinling of peace and space

The delinking of peace and decision-making

The delinking of peace and value

## **Global Music**

Now, after I have told you why Illich's reflections on peace and development were crucial for me, I tell you my story. It starts in the office of the marketing manager of Siemens in Bremen. It was almost two years ago, when he came together there with his sales manager. Every year, these two people organized a special event: the announcement of the annual report to their employees. In the Bremen branch of Siemens, more than 2000 people are employed to produce standardized parts for electronics for the world market. For this occasion, they invited all the worker of SIEMENS to a little cultural event; A concert followed by a cold buffet and free champagne. The year before, they had engaged a string quartet. Schubert and a little Mozart seemed to fit perfectly the prosperous economical state of SIEMENS. But this year, the situation was much more complicated. The business was bad because of the world market. There were rumors that some people would be fired for the sake of consolidation. This event had the function to show that SIEMENS as a GLOBAL PLAYER now fully depends on the world market.

The two managers decided to emphasize explicitly their image of the company as a global player by celebrating SIEMENS as an example for a multi-cultural society. Indeed, they have a lot of immigrant workers, especially in the lower paid jobs. The multi-cultural uniqueness of their employees was supposed to demonstrate that a multi-cultural workforce was essential to serve the global market. Therefore, the two managers decided to hire not a string quartet but a multi-cultural music group for the celebration of the annual report.

Two month later a group of twelve musicians met for a first rehearsal. They were all hired by an agency for artists that gathered them just for this special event. Under the leadership of an American musician – I told you, this story is almost too perfect to be true - they were supposed to play in concert. The agency had promised them two things: money that all of them

urgently needed and big hope – for another concert in the Bremen Concert Hall and this time well paid. The group consisted of a colorful assemblage of strange birds. There was a fiddler from Hungary, who studied at the Music Academy of Bremen. The Double-Bass player had come all the way from Ukraine to study music in Bremen. There was a Chilean guitar player who was famous in town for his performance. A French woman was engaged as a singer. There were also a Persian musician who played a very old traditional string instrument called Canon and a Turkish Lute player, who also played ‘Darabuka’, a Turkish drum. A Chinese whom all his friends called Ching Chang, was asked to represent the Asian culture in this event. He came with a traditional Chinese violin, that had nothing in common with the fiddle western style played by his Hungarian colleague. A drummer from Ghana was sent as the representative of the African art of drumming. Another Persian musician played Dumbalek, a traditional drum. And last, but not least, the American leader of the group. He played African drums as good as the Persian Canon or a German Accordion.

## **The rehearsal**

Music always was an art rooted in a specific culture. Music is an art that can only be understood by practicing it. If you want to know what it means to play an instrument, you have to practice it for a long time. Every ethnos, every community has not only its own songs and instruments but also its own rhythms and modes that they used for different occasions; Its own way of tempering and its own ways to get attuned. This variety of ways of expression was consubstantial with the sense of harmony. Every man and woman had to learn what was considered to be appropriate for a unique place and moment. Until the eighteenth Century music was inseparably interwoven with a certain place. Every town had its own diapason its own ‘La’ to get attuned. That gave every place a certain frame where music could blossom. But this uniqueness made it also impossible to play together in a placeless space. That radically changed at the end of the nineteenth century when an international standard pitch of 440 Hz di altessa (diapason normale) was established by an international committee of bureaucrats. The variety of ‘La’ that gave the music of every place its specific flavor had to disappear in favor of a bureaucratically defined standard.

When this group of international musicians tried to rehearse, they had first to get attuned. But most of them, the non-European ones, were still immersed in the art of tuning that fits the place they came from. And they insisted being true, because they were hired to demonstrate a variety of cultures to a multi-cultural audience. When they finally stopped discussing and started to play they immediately had to stop because it sounded horrible. They were just out of tune and none of them sounded together with his neighbor. So what to do now? The only way out would be to use standard pitch, the American musician argued. Only if all would get attuned to the world standards, they could perform together as a multi-cultural group of musicians.

I could go on and on telling you how every musician had to give up his cultural uniqueness for the sake of a multi-cultural sound of globality. The drummers for instance could not play their traditional rhythms because nobody can follow them. If one is not immersed in the motion of another musician's time, one cannot follow the flow of his rhythms and his tempo. But fortunately there was a German engineer, Mr. Mälzel, who in the middle of the 19. century, made a unique invention: the metronomo [apparecchio a orologia munito di un’ asta che

scandisce in modo visibile], a device that allows musicians to follow the tick tack of a certain number of beats per minute. This machine is the end of rhythm, because it kills the flow of the music, that, which distinguishes the beat of a drum from the sound of a pile driver. On the one hand, the metronome kills music but on the other hand, it allows global sounds. I could also tell you what happens if musicians whose music is founded on the art of improvisation and who do not know how to play written music, have to get along with musicians, who only can follow notated music. But I have come to an end and I still have to tell you what happened when the musicians finally went on stage. What happened when a dozen of musicians whose cultural uniqueness was finally washed out by a set of standardized measurement, played together.

## **The Concert**

The concert took place in a big shed, where normally electronic parts are pinned together. Almost a thousand employees were sitting there, Germans, Chinese, Africans and other people from other countries, waiting for the great event to start. After the who managers had spoken about the glorious opportunities for a multi-cultural society in a global world, the light on stage went on and the music started. What came out of the loudspeakers what a kind of cacophonic sound, a hotchpotch of standardized noises produced by a bunch of universal musicians. All the cultural uniqueness of their musical practice had disappeared. By standardizing them, they got all equal. But the musical harmony, the essence of musical practice, had vanished.

## **Conclusion**

Here my story ends. This night, Siemens presented a model of a society that was grounded on the concept of the universal man, described by Illich. The musicians had transmogrified into Global Players, a bunch of equally rootless producers of sounds, who had to follow global standards. Their culturally rooted sense for musical harmony, the practical knowledge of making music had to wither. For me as a musician who tries to listen through the ears of Illich, this story makes quite clear, that only if one delinks music and globalization, can music be harmonious – can society be at peace.