

Music and Culture: Sound

The music we think of as normal is due in part to something called enculturation. This word refers to the process by which we learn about our surrounding culture and what is considered appropriate, preferable, desirable, etc. It applies to manners, how we learn, how we worship, and so much more.

But wait, what is culture anyway? Culture is a set of shared understandings about the world and how to do things in it. It is shared among a group of people, sometimes these people share a geographic space, and other times they do not. For example, there are English people who live in the United States but still observe English customs and are culturally English.

Take a few minutes and think about the music you like. Why do you think you like it? Is it something your parents listen to? Is it something you hear at school or in the grocery store?

Listening exercise:

Go to YouTube and search for Angklung. Pick one or two videos to watch. How is the sound different than what you are used to? How is it the same?

Try the same thing with a Mbira/lamellophone.

Spend some time exploring other instruments you might not be familiar with. To find some, search for a country's name and the words "musical instrument". What did you find? Which one is your favorite?

Music and Culture: Uses*

Have you ever sung “Happy Birthday”? Why? It was someone’s birthday, right? But what is the deeper reason? It is because in American culture it is considered appropriate to sing that song on someone’s birthday. Music serves cultural purposes: it marks special occasions, it creates social bonds, it helps us have group identities, and it can be used to help engage in protest. It can also be very important to celebrations like birthdays, weddings, coming of age ceremonies like graduation, or even funerals.

Music helps us create social bonds, and can be a way we announce our identity. Have you ever heard the bagpipes? What place or culture do you associate with that instrument? Did you say Scottish or Scotland? You’d be right! That instrument has come to signal a particular place and culture. Cultures aren’t just associated with countries though, they can apply to other groups like scouts or schools. At Indiana University many students know the school’s song. Knowing it, and when it is appropriate to sing it, signals that you are part of IU. (If you sing it while you are washing your hands you’ll know you’ve washed your hands for long enough!)

Music plays other important cultural roles as well. It can be a form of shared memory that unites cultures that might be spread out around the world, and music helps create a space for us to participate in culture, often our own, but other times not. What examples can you think of?

Music can also be used to engage in protest or politics, both of which are part of culture. What songs can you think of that are associated with protest? One of the most famous in the United States is “We Shall Overcome.” This song served as the unofficial anthem of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and continues to be a well-known song today.

Historically another important function of music has been to tell stories and remember histories. In some European cultures the person responsible for doing this was called a bard. In parts of West Africa the French word *griot* has been used for these very important people. You can listen to a griot performance at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xaBvnG13qlo&feature=youtu.be>

If you were writing a song about this year and important moments in it, what would it sound like? What would the words be?

If you are interested in more on this topic please consult
Lidskog, R. (2016), The role of music in ethnic identity formation in diaspora: a research review. *International Social Science Journal*, 66: 23-38. doi:10.1111/issj.12091