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Sampling Traditional Instruments: Challenges of Globalization

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Abstract

This article discusses the technical and cultural challenges of sampling traditional musical instruments. It emphasizes that preserving authenticity requires multi-layered recording, fine-tuning, and the involvement of cultural bearers. Ignoring these principles may result in a loss of sonic depth and a risk of cultural appropriation. Globalization, on the one hand, contributes to the popularization of ethnic sound; on the other, it leads to its standardization and distortion. The article explores both unethical and ethical examples of ethnic sample usage in pop music and commercial projects. Particular attention is given to the necessity of involving native performers and maintaining a connection to the original cultural context. It is emphasized that responsible sampling can become a tool for cultural dialogue, while a superficial approach leads to a loss of meaning and trivialization of traditions.

Keywords: sampling, ethnic instruments, cultural appropriation, globalization, authenticity, traditional music, audio recording, digitalization, pop culture

Аннотация

В статье рассматриваются технические и культурные сложности сэмплирования традиционных музыкальных инструментов. Отмечается, что для сохранения аутентичности требуется многослойная запись, тонкая настройка и участие носителей культуры. Нарушения этих принципов могут привести к потере глубины звучания и риску культурной апроприации. Глобализация, с одной стороны, способствует популяризации этнозвучания, с другой — приводит к его стандартизации и искажению. Обсуждаются примеры неэтичного и этичного использования этнических сэмплов в поп-музыке и коммерческих проектах. Особое внимание уделено необходимости привлечения самих исполнителей и сохранению связи с оригинальным контекстом. Подчеркивается, что ответственное сэмплирование может стать

инструментом культурного диалога, тогда как поверхностный подход ведёт к утрате смысла и профанации традиций.

Ключевые слова: сэмплирование, этнические инструменты, культурная апроприация, глобализация, аутентичность, традиционная музыка, звукозапись, цифровизация, поп-культура

Annotatsiya

Maqolada an’anaviy musiqa asboblarini sэmplash qilish bilan bog‘liq texnik va madaniy murakkabliklar muhokama qilinadi. Haqiqiylikni saqlab qolish uchun ko‘p qatlamli yozuv, nozik sozlash va madaniyat vakillarining ishtiroki muhim ekani ta’kidlanadi. Bu tamoyillarga rioya qilinmasa, tovush chuqurligi yo‘qolishi va madaniy appropriasiya xavfi yuzaga kelishi mumkin. Globallashuv, bir tomondan, etno-tovushlarning ommalashuviga hissa qo‘shsa, boshqa tomondan, ularni standartlashtirish va buzilishiga olib keladi. Maqolada pop musiqa va tijorat loyihalarida etnik sэмplardan noetik va etik foydalanish misollari keltiriladi. Asl madaniy kontekstni saqlash va mahalliy ijrochilarni jalb qilish zarurligiga alohida e’tibor qaratiladi. Mas’uliyatli sэmplash madaniyatlararo muloqot vositasiga aylanishi mumkin, yuzaki yondashuv esa ma’no va an’analarning yo‘qolishiga olib keladi.

Kalit so‘zlar: semplash, etnik asboblar, madaniy appropriasiya, globallashuv, autentiklik, an’anaviy musiqa, ovoz yozuvi, raqamlashtirish, pop madaniyat

Sampling traditional musical instruments presents unique technical challenges. Many ethnic instruments feature non-standard tunings that require specialized microphone setups, recording environments, and equipment to accurately capture their distinct sonic qualities. Achieving realism involves recording dozens of layers—various articulations, dynamic intensities, and random variations—and applying meticulous editing and mixing techniques. If handled improperly, samples may lose their “liveliness,” such as natural amplitude modulation or characteristic decay. As researchers have noted, careful calibration of recording and post-production parameters is critical to preserving the instrument’s authentic features [1]. It is through such precise adjustments and editing that developers can create sound libraries which “faithfully convey the unique

characteristics of the original instruments." Without this, digital representations risk sounding flat and artificial.

Careless use of "exotic" sounds can verge into cultural appropriation. Many instruments are used outside their native cultures for the sake of sonic novelty, stripped of context and cultural meaning. As a result, listeners perceive them as mere "exotic" effects, rather than appreciating their depth. Moreover, commercialization often simplifies traditional forms: entire traditions are "restored and reissued" under global labels as commodified products [2]. As one study on "world music" notes, recordings of ethnic traditions "are clearly no longer pure—they are being actively commercialized and used as a resource for innovation and profit" [2]. This carries the risk of distorting customs and eroding cultural heritage. In response, some developers now involve culture bearers in the sampling process and provide educational materials to promote responsible use of sounds within proper context.

Extracting elements of traditional music from their cultural settings and using them as "exotic effects" has been widely criticized as a form of cultural appropriation. Scholars emphasize that packaging ethnic samples often involves orientalist stereotypes and misrepresentation of the source culture [3]. One notable project, *Instruments INDIA*, was developed as a deliberate intervention against systemic orientalism in sample pack marketing and aimed to counter negative stereotypes about the sounds and musicians of other cultures [3].

Traditional melodies are often tied to rituals, languages, and religious practices. Removing them from their original environment and repurposing them as decorative "musical accents" risks reducing a rich tradition to a surface-level aesthetic. A striking example of this is the use of a traditional shamanic chant of the Amis people from Taiwan in Enigma's 1993 hit *Return to Innocence*—used without permission. Legal action followed, and after an out-of-court settlement, the performers received full royalties. This case illustrates how using such material

without cultural awareness can be perceived as distortion and mystification of the original.

Amid growing criticism, more responsible practices have emerged. Researchers and producers are increasingly calling for the involvement of cultural custodians in sample library development—participating in recordings, sharing knowledge, and contributing to educational outreach. For instance, the creators of *Instruments INDIA* collaborated with Indian musicians and made their participation publicly visible [3]. Musicians from specific communities emphasize that samples of ethnic instruments should primarily be preserved and circulated within the originating culture. Kenyan orutu harpist Labdi, for example, has stated that recordings of her instrument must always remain accessible to her own people [4]. Such approaches—collaborative work with tradition bearers and educational initiatives—help maintain cultural respect and prevent the reduction of music to a flashy template.

Critics caution that these practices may still risk turning authentic traditions into stereotypical "calling cards," where an instrument serves only to create a "foreign mood" and its historical context is distorted. Using collective ethnographic recordings in a pop track has been compared to "mass performance of sacred songs not intended for a wide audience." Commentators observe that when "culturally significant songs are used as exotic effects, it harms the source culture and reflects an ethnocentric stance" [5]. Put simply, modification and commercial reproduction of ethnic melodies without appropriate reverence may be perceived as mystification of their essence.

In the commercial sector, some ethical sampling practices have emerged. For instance, Spitfire Audio released the archival *Earth Encounters* collection, based on the field recordings of ethnomusicologist David Fanshawe. Commentators note that in the 1970s and 1980s, Fanshawe preserved the sounds of vanishing traditions, and

through the Spitfire project, these samples are published with proceeds supporting the preservation of the original archives [5].

Translating a musical instrument into a digital format inevitably results in the loss of nuance. Samples capture sound under specific conditions and articulations, while live performance is more flexible—musicians can improvise and modulate volume, intonation, and timbre in real time. To simulate this, developers employ multiple velocity layers and round-robin variations. Still, even the best libraries admit that "adding additional effects increases authenticity," as noted in sampling research, leading to the inclusion of varied reverbs, filters, and impulse responses (IRs) modeled on traditional acoustic environments [1]. Nevertheless, digital sound remains a simulation of the real, and listeners sometimes detect a "robotic" quality or loss of clarity. Preserving the interactivity of traditional performance remains an unresolved challenge—potentially addressable through future AI technologies.

When ethnic instruments are featured in pop music, advertisements, or film, layers of meaning are inevitably lost. The instrument's sound becomes a symbol of exoticism rather than a vehicle for conveying specific cultural values. As one scholar noted, playing a traditional instrument within Western contexts often "deprives it of its historical function and original context" [2]. Western influence also imposes production standards: traditional compositions may be slowed down or simplified for pop songs, turning folk music into bland background sound. As a result, many listeners stop perceiving authenticity: instead of the spontaneous rhythm of a dance or a sacred hymn, they hear only a stylized "exotic" soundtrack. The licensing industry reinforces this phenomenon. As one critic highlights, once integrated into the Western music economy, such traditional recordings are inevitably "commodified" and abstracted for market purposes [2].

As an instrument becomes a popular "sound effect," its perceived authenticity often declines. Listeners unfamiliar with its context may view it as nothing more than a novelty. Meanwhile, within its native culture, the instrument often has a rich

history and specialized technique. Globalization brings opportunities for broader reach, but with it comes the fear of losing cultural depth.

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