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MUSIC AS HERITAGE IN INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY

As an expression of intangible cultural heritage, music and its myriad forms and contexts are broadly present in the most important international cultural policy instrument dealing with this form of heritage: the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

This Convention was adopted in October 2003 by the 32nd General Conference of United Nations Organisation for Education, Science, Culture and Communication (UNESCO). It should be recalled that the adoption of a convention, i.e. of a legally binding instrument in international law, which not only is negotiated through a complex and long process but also needs to be ratified by at least 30 national governments in order to enter into force, is nothing less than the most ambitious form of political action that a multilateral forum such as UNESCO can actually take.

The Convention entered into force rather quickly (in 2006) and today counts 178 signatories (so-called ‘State Parties’). For Cecile Duvelle, former Chief of UNESCO’s Intangible Heritage Section, and Secretary of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, the rapid pace of ratification was remarkable but not surprising:

“The international legal framework developed over the years by UNESCO in the field of cultural heritage was obviously lacking an important dimension: a type of heritage that makes our daily lives so different one from another, giving us the sense of our diverse belonging and providing us with a direction for our own future. What has been called, after long and thorough debates at the international level, ‘intangible cultural heritage’.”

The Convention serves the following purposes:

- To safeguard the intangible cultural heritage;
- To ensure respect for the intangible cultural heritage of the communities, groups and individuals concerned;
- To raise awareness at the local, national and international levels of the importance of the intangible cultural heritage, and of ensuring mutual appreciation thereof and;
- To provide for international cooperation and assistance.

Clear Definitions to Ensure the Convention's Application

In order for the Convention to be applicable, the negotiating parties had to agree on a definition of the term intangible cultural heritage, as there were many different understandings and interpretations. The Convention defines intangible cultural heritage as “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage”. The originality of this definition lies with the central role of communities in the recognition of what is, for them, their own intangible heritage. No external expert, no political decision-maker, no national or international jury may decide for them, but just the practitioners, the bearers, those that enact and recognise a specific heritage as their own. This fundamental principle lies at the very heart of the Convention and has huge implications for how it is implemented.

It should also be underlined that the Convention considers solely “such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development”. This definition of scope might be interpreted as a way to prevent the misuse of this policy instrument for the promotion of traditional values against the backdrop of political ambitions that would aim at weakening critical voices in certain societies, containing youth opposition or even at denying (Western) modernism which, along with globalisation, was and is seen as a means of exerting pressure on many countries to engage in social transformations. Food for thought...

As it is a legal instrument, the Convention offers a range of more definitions, including the criteria for intangible cultural heritage: it is transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.

If the Convention is about safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage, what does this exactly mean? Once again, the answer can be found in the text which indicates to “measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various

aspects of such heritage”. This sounds similar to an exceptionally comprehensive and compelling to-do list.

A Dazzling Diversity of Manifestations of Intangible Cultural Heritage

Under the terms of the Convention, intangible cultural heritage is manifested *inter alia* in the following domains:

- (a) Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage (such as fairy tales, legends, regional languages);
- (b) Performing arts (such as vocal and instrumental music, dance and theatre, pantomime, sung verse);
- (c) Social practices, rituals and festive events (such as worship rites; rites of passage; birth, wedding and funeral rituals; oaths of allegiance; traditional legal systems; traditional games and sports; as well as their physical elements: special gestures and words, recitations, songs or dances, special clothing, processions, animal sacrifice, special food);
- (d) Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe (such as traditional ecological wisdom, indigenous knowledge, knowledge about local fauna and flora, traditional healing systems, rituals, beliefs, initiatory rites, cosmologies, shamanism, possession rites, social organisations, festivals, languages and visual arts);
- (e) Traditional craftsmanship (skills and knowledge involved in craftsmanship rather than the craft products themselves; such as how to make tools, clothing and jewellery; costumes and props for festivals and performing arts; musical instruments).

When appreciating the dazzling diversity and wealth of these domains, the myriad forms and contexts of music come again to our mind. Considered as perhaps the most universal of the performing arts, music is found in every society, most often as an integral part of other performing art forms and other domains of intangible cultural heritage including rituals, festive events or oral traditions. Musical expressions can be found in the most diverse contexts: sacred or profane, classical or popular, to work or for entertainment. There may also be a political or economic dimension to music: it can recount a community's history, sing the praises of a powerful person and play a key role in economic transactions. Similarly, the occasions on which music is performed are just as varied: marriages, funerals, rituals and initiations, festivities, all kinds of entertainment as well as many other social functions. Music as an expression of intangible heritage is everywhere!

Ensuring the Long-Term Viability of Intangible Heritage Within Communities and Groups

The central role of communities in the recognition of intangible heritage has already been mentioned earlier in this article. In this context, it is to be noted that the Convention makes State Parties responsible to “ensure the widest possible participation of communities, groups and, where appropriate, individuals that create, maintain and transmit such heritage, and to involve them actively in its management”. Although the Convention does not provide a concrete definition of community, community participation is repeatedly emphasised in several parts of the Convention. As previously addressed, the persons most involved with a particular intangible heritage are those who can define their intangible heritage and must, therefore, be fully associated with and involved in the various activities and strategies conducted to safeguard it. This association is necessary since they are the ones who create, recreate, maintain and transmit such heritage. Without the active involvement and participation of the communities concerned, the safeguarding measures will be unable to be effectively implemented and will not ensure transmission within the community. This is why any initiative for safeguarding needs to prove the “free, prior and informed consent of the community”. In the same spirit, the respect of governing access of customary practices to specific aspects of intangible cultural heritage is also an important requirement. This is especially relevant when safeguarding measures or inventory-making also involves actors who are not members of the community or when dealing with tourism or promotional activities, including the media.

Music in the Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices

Music in its myriad forms and contexts is present in a large number of elements in the two lists that the Convention provides: the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding as well as in the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices. When browsing these lists for the keyword music, only one element would show. However, using other keywords reveals many more elements, such as 19 mentions for music education, 31 about musical instruments and 26 for choir singing. Other mentions concern musical notation, performances, styles, musicians and musicology. Altogether, the list includes a total of 83 music-related elements from 51 countries representing all continents. These elements were, for the majority, inscribed in 2008 (first year of inscriptions), 2009 and 2017.

Only five music-related elements are declared as being in need of urgent safeguarding. Would it be too daring to deduct from these figures that music as an expression of intangible heritage enjoys an extensive recognition and seems well equipped for the future?

Let it at least be a way to conclude this incursion into international cultural policy from the perspective of music as heritage on a positive and forward-looking note.