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COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TRADITIONAL POLYPHONY: YESTERDAY, TODAY, TOMORROW

Starting with the previous symposium (in 2010), we decided to add a new particularly important topic to the themes of the biannual Symposia of Traditional Polyphony in Georgia. The first special topic was “Traditional polyphony in Asia” and it was featured at the symposium two years ago. The reason for choosing Asia as the first such topic was the fact that in most Asian countries the study of polyphony is completely neglected. Our colleagues learned a great deal about the very interesting and rich polyphonic traditions of Asia. Some of our participants heard for the first time polyphonic examples from the Nuristanis, living in the impenetrable mountain ranges of Afghanistan, from the mysterious Ainus of north Japan, from the Aka Tibetans, living in the Himalayas, or from the minority groups of North Vietnam. It is our particular delight that the theme of Asian polyphonic traditions continues strongly at this symposium as well, as the authors of Asian papers are still with us, adding new materials and ideas to our common knowledge. We even tried to bring singers to represent such traditions, such as the Ainus from Japan and the Aremai Tibetans from China. Unfortunately, this was not possible this year, but we hope that we will manage to bring some carriers of Asian polyphonic traditions during our later symposia for the delight of conference participants. It seems that the new topics presented at our symposia will continue active participation in our work. We can conclude that the introduction of new topics had a positive impact on the further development of our symposia.

Our current symposium also has a newly added topic – the comparative study of traditional polyphony. We definitely cannot say that the comparative study of traditional polyphony is as neglected as the study of polyphonic traditions in Asian countries. On the contrary, the comparative study of traditional polyphony has rich scholarly traditions. In my presentation I will try to highlight the main points of the rich past of comparative research of traditional polyphony and its relatively modest contemporary status, and I will present the possible prospects of such research.

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Polyphonic singing is one of the most mysterious phenomenon of human musical culture, so it was natural that the search for the origins of polyphony became one of the central research topics in the history of musicology. We can say that after the problem of the origins of music, the problem of the origins of polyphony is the second most important topic of musicology and evolutionary musicology. Discussions about the origins of polyphony have never stopped, although during some periods of the development of our discipline this topic was sometimes more, and sometimes less active. Most importantly for our topic, the study of this problem was always directly connected to the comparative research methodologies, as any serious research of the origins of traditional polyphony naturally requires knowledge of the worldwide distribution and comparison of this phenomenon.

In my paper I will address both of these issues. On one hand, we will see how attitudes were

changing towards the comparative studies in ethnomusicology, and on the other hand, we will review what was happening in the studies of the origins of traditional polyphony. I propose to distinguish three periods.

The First Period: from 1880s to 1945: Domination of Comparative Studies

The comparative method had a very interesting and full life during the first period of the development of musicology. As we know, the field known today as “ethnomusicology” started as a discipline heavily based on comparative research. This phenomenon is quite well known from the history of the science of various fields. As a new discipline starts to emerge, pioneering scholars working in this field naturally try to cover the new sphere in all of its manifestations, taking into account all the available information from all over the world. They try to cover such wide problems as the genesis of this phenomenon, the history of its development and its distribution in different regions of the world. This initial period of the development of scholarly studies is also widely based on a great deal of groundless speculations and overtly optimistic generalisations. All this was characteristic of the initial development of our discipline and the study of the history of polyphony as well.

This period lasted from the birth of the discipline in the form of “comparative musicology”, or sometimes as “music history of non-European cultures” in the 1880s, until the end of the Second World War. The name of the discipline “comparative musicology” was a testament to the wide use of comparative method in this new field of study. Europe, and particularly Germany, was the centre of this line of scholarly thought. The Berlin school was paramount for the development of this field.

I would like to suggest that in relation to the study of the origins of polyphony this big period should be divided into two sub-periods, as these periods were quite different from each other in terms of the attitudes towards the origins of polyphony. Let me first briefly list the characteristics of the first sub-period paradigms. This sub-period lasted until the 1930s:

(1) According to the prevailing (or even the only accepted) model, polyphony was a later cultural invention. This idea seemed so obvious that no one tried to formulate it as a falsifiable hypothesis or a theory. This idea was treated more like an axiom that does not require any proof.

(2) It was not only believed that polyphony was a cultural invention, but it was even believed that it was invented by Medieval Christian monks in the 9th century. This was the time when the first information about church music sung in two parts (known as “organum”) has been attested. Here we should also mention that there were also sources pointing to an earlier origin of polyphony, for example, in some countries of the northern Europe;

(3) It was firmly believed that polyphony entered into traditional (folk) music from European church-based professional music, via the activities of European missionaries (Werf, 1997). We remember, that Nadel started comparing Georgian and early European polyphonic traditions with this idea (Nadel, 1933).

This model of the origins of polyphony was based on an assumption that the early human had extremely primitive musical faculties. He did not yet have a good perception of pitch, sense of scale, precise rhythm, and of course, a sense of harmony.

The second sub-period of the origins of polyphony started after the facts that did not fit into the existing paradigm were revealed. It became gradually accepted that polyphony as a phenomenon was

not invented by medieval monks, but originated in traditional music, and later spread to European professional music. This period was very short but intense. It only lasted about a decade (1930s). Paradigms of this sub-period can be formulated in the following way:

(1) Polyphony is a cultural invention, resulting from the gradual development of monophonic music (according to this element, the second sub-period was similar to the paradigms of the first sub-period);

(2) Polyphony was first developed in traditional music, not in professional European music (this was a paradigmatically new view on the origins of polyphony).

(3) Polyphony came to professional music from traditional music (This idea was primarily supported by Schneider; Nadel was of the same opinion).

(4) Polyphony was probably born (invented) in one region and then it spread to various regions of the world via cultural diffusion. This was the model of the greatest authority on the history of polyphony of that period, Marius Schneider (Schneider, 1934-1935); There was another point of view as well, albeit it came a few decades later, and was developed by Paul Collaer (Collaer, 1960). According to this view, polyphony was developed in various regions independently from each other. We must admit, Collaer did not base his view on materials from the whole planet.

(5) When exactly polyphony was born is impossible to say, but it must have been born sometime in the first millennia, some time before it penetrated to the European professional music in the 9th century.

Musicologists did not consider polyphony as an archaic phenomenon. For example, when Ann Kilmer made a well-known transcription of the clay tablets from the Ancient Ugarit, and came to the conclusion that the music recorded on the clay tablets was polyphonic (two and three-part), this triggered a very negative response from her colleagues (Kilmer, 1971). "One's immediate reaction is scepticism at the notion of this kind of harmony existing in any ancient music" wrote Martin West (West, 1994: 173). Other scholars also expressed the same kind of scepticism (Wulstan, 1974; Duchesne-Guillemin, 1975, 1980: 11-18). The same story happened to another renowned expert, Hans Hickmann, who earlier proposed that two-part music with drone was known in Ancient Egypt. He even made a transcription of this music (Hickmann, 1952, 1970: 138-140). Scholars were critical of this revolutionary interpretation, for the same reason – how could anyone believe that polyphony existed in such ancient cultures? (for example, see Manniche, 1991: 30-32).

Scholarly thought had another common feature: it was believed that the existing polyphony in various tribal cultures, was "haphazard" and "unconscious". We must remember here, that in this period it was believed that early humans had very primitive, if any, musical faculties. In regard to the perception of harmony, it was believed it was way outside the capability of the early human. Arguably the greatest musicologist of the first half of the 20th century, Curt Sachs, believed that the presence of the dissonant seconds in several tribal cultures was purely haphazard. According to Sachs, traditional singers could not feel the emotional sharpness of the interval, and therefore, these harmonies could not be evaluated by the standards of contemporary aesthetic criteria (Sachs, 1962).

The first period of study of the phenomenon of traditional polyphony had its positive, as well as negative, sides. On the positive side, scholars in this period tried to study the phenomenon of polyphony as a single historical phenomenon, and they strived to study polyphony as an international, worldwide phenomenon. Marius Schneider, a student of Erich Moritz von Hornbostel, was the cen-

tral representative of this direction of thought (Schneider, 1934-1935, 1951, 1961, 1969). Siegfried Nadel's well-known work on Georgian music is one of the important works of this period (Nadel, 1933), and it had a long-lasting influence on Marius Schneider's ideas on the origins of polyphony. I want to remind the audience that a special round table will be dedicated to the interaction between Early European professional and traditional polyphony, so I will not discuss this issue in detail in this paper.

Second Period: from 1945 till the end of the 20th Century. Fall of Comparative Methodology

The attitude towards comparative studies had undergone a paradigmatic change after the Second World War. The world centre of the study of traditional music shifted from Germany to the USA. According to the paradigms of cultural anthropology, popular in the USA during this period, the comparative study of various cultures was not justified. Such a negative attitude towards the comparative methodology had many historical and psychological factors. Earlier generalization of cultures into "developed" and "primitive" cultures became ideologically untenable and racist. Authors of comparative studies and their works were severely criticized for a number of reasons. Among other reasons, the central critique drew attention to the fact that scholars involved in comparative studies did not bother obtaining any deep knowledge about the cultures they were comparing, or organizing fieldworks in the regions they were comparing to each other. For example, neither Nadel nor Schneider ever visited Georgia, although Georgian polyphony played an important role in their historical reconstructions. The example of WW2 did not help either. After the Second World War, where racist ideology yielded catastrophic results and cost lives of millions of peoples, labelling cultures as "primitive" and "highly developed" was considered unethical. Therefore, for many reasons the comparative method was rejected, and "comparative musicology" became "ethnomusicology".

If we try to summarise the paradigmatic postulates of this period of development of scholarly thought about the origins of polyphony, we probably come to the following result:

- (1) Comparative study of cultures and the creation of simple evolutionary ascending scales is not justified either scientifically or ideologically;
- (2) Research into the origins of polyphony is based on groundless speculations, and we do not have any hard evidence for studying this problem objectively;
- (3) Not only the search for the origins of polyphony, but the research of other "big" themes (like the study of musical universals, or the origins of music) is not justified.

Leading methodology of this period was based on the traditions of cultural anthropology. According to this approach, every culture was to be studied according to its immanent rules and importance, without the use of comparative methodology. The USA became the centre for this line of research. Occasionally, during this period, the "big" themes were also discussed (for example, the discussion of the music universals was organised), but the results of these discussions were, as a rule, negative, or at least, pessimistic (Braun & Jordania, 2013).

Unlike the previous, comparative period of development of ethnomusicology, when scholars did not even try to obtain detailed knowledge of a studied culture, followers of cultural anthropology were consciously limiting themselves to the number of studied cultures and regions. Long fieldworks, lasting for months and sometimes years, became the leading method for obtaining materials. Most

scholars were dedicating their lives to a single culture, or even a single region, investing plenty of time, finances and energy in studying their language, history, and cultural traditions. During the long fieldworks ethnomusicologists would try to live the life of ordinary members of traditional society. Creating families with the representatives of these cultures also became widespread, as a logical result of a lifelong fascination and study of a single cultural tradition.

Ethnomusicological practices of this period had their share of sceptics and critics. For example, representatives of the non-European cultures were pessimistic about the desire of Western scholars to obtain a deep intimate knowledge of foreign culture. On the contrary, European and American ethnomusicologists considered their approach scholarly superior, as an objective picture, in their opinion, cannot be obtained by the representatives of the studied cultures. They supported the idea of studying the culture from “outside” rather than studying it from the “inside”.

Here I would like to discuss an interesting historical tendency in ethnomusicology that presents the history of our discipline in an alternative light. The study of traditional music in non-West-European countries had very different dynamics. Unlike Germany and other European countries, in these countries the first period of development of the discipline (from the end of the 19th century till the end of WW2) was fully dominated by the studies of local traditions. After WW2, as American and European scholars rejected comparative methodology, non-European countries, on the contrary, embraced the comparative method. This was the case, for example, in Georgia, where the first examples of comparative studies appeared in the 1980s (Gvacharia & Tabagua, 1983; Maisuradze, 1989; Jordania, 1989). In Russia comparative works also appeared after WW2 (Rubtsov, 1962). The same happened in the Ukraine, Bulgaria, and many other countries. So if we compare the total volume of works dedicated to the study of traditional music, we will have to admit the increase in the number of comparative works after the 1960s. Despite this, the idea of a shift of comparative methodology into deep regional studies after WW2 is still strong in the history of our discipline. This must be the result of the prevalent general Euro-American tendency in many spheres of life and scholarship to view the world from the western viewpoint. In my 2006 book I labelled this tendency as a “milk-drinking syndrome” after the history of the study of lactose intolerance in populations around the world¹.

On the other hand, it was in this period of neglect of comparative methodology by American and European ethnomusicologists that the most ambitious comparative project in the history of ethnomusicology was undertaken. I am talking about Alan Lomax’s “cantometric” project (Lomax, 1968). Lomax’s work, entirely based on a comparative study of hundred of cultures, was met by the professional circles of ethnomusicology with a strong hostility. The reason for this hostility was not only the educational background of the author of the study (Lomax was not an academic, and he did not know and did not use musical notation in his research). According to the critics, Lomax’s grand comparative study was a gross simplification of the true diversity of the world’s musical cultures, and therefore the results were not credible. As a result, Lomax’s study was totally marginalized by ethnomusicological academia, which is a pity.

Apart from Lomax’s highly publicized work, a few other comparative works were also produced in this period. Let me briefly mention them. Jaap Kunst published a book (more precisely a brochure) about the amazing closeness of Balkan and Indonesian polyphonic traditions, (Kunst, 1954). Yvette Grimaud together with Gilbert Rouget noted the closeness of the polyphonic traditions of the Central African Pygmies and the South African Bushmen (Grimaud & Rouget, 1956); Erich Stockmann

wrote a small article about parallels between Albanian and Georgian polyphonic songs (Stockmann, 1957); Cvjetko Rihtman noted the closeness of the polyphonic traditions of the Balkan peoples (Rihtman, 1958, 1966), followed by Nikolai Kaufman (Kaufman, 1966). Paul Collaer studied European polyphonic traditions and came to the conclusion that European professional polyphony came to life as a result of impulses from the ancient vocal polyphony of the European peoples (Collaer, 1960, see also 1955). Bruno Nettl discussed the available information of polyphony among North American Indians in the only article on the subject (Nettl, 1961). Oscar Elschek conducted a comparative study of European polyphonic traditions (Elschek, 1963). Ernst Emsheimer compared vocal and instrumental forms of polyphony of different European regions (Emsheimer, 1964). Alica Elschekova conducted a comparative study of vocal polyphonic tradition in the Balkans and the Carpathians (Elschekova, 1981). Gerald Florian Messner studied the polyphonic traditions of the Balkans, Indonesia and the Pacific region (Messner, 1980, 1989, see also 2013). Gerhard Kubik analysed polyphonic traditions in Central and East Africa (Kubik, 1968, 1986). Izaly Zemtsovsky is among the scholars who used the comparative method for many decades (Zemtsovsky, 1969, 1988, 1998). Karl Brambats, discussed polyphonic traditions of the Baltic peoples in a wide Mediterranean and East European context (Brambats, 1983). Martin Boiko studied Baltic polyphonic traditions in the context of archaeological data (Boiko, 1992). Nino Tsitsishvili studied parallels between the polyphonic traditions of Georgians and South Slavs (Tsitsishvili, 1990, 1991), and the author of this paper has published several comparative studies on traditional polyphony (e.g., Jordania, 1988, 1989).

Mentioning these works that used the comparative method might create an illusion of active comparative research in ethnomusicology, but if we take into account that this period lasted for half a century, and that none of these articles appeared in the central academic journal “Ethnomusicology”, we will get a better perspective of prevailing research in the field after WW2.

The Third Period: The First Decade of the 21st Century: Changing Attitudes Towards Comparative Studies

By the end of the 20th century ethnomusicologists gradually realized that the negative attitude towards the comparative method and “big themes” in ethnomusicology had to be changed. During our conversation at the Rio de Janeiro ICTM World Conference in 2001, Timothy Rice said that with the full rejection of comparative methodology “the baby was thrown out together with the bath water”. It was at the ICTM conference in Rio de Janeiro in 2001 that a possible comeback of comparative methodology was discussed as the first theme of the conference. During this conference an informal meeting was organized of ethnomusicologists interested in comparative studies. Despite the interest expressed by the dozen or so participants at the meeting, and encouragement of the members of the ICTM executive board, the meeting did not culminate in the creation of a comparative study group. Blame for this should be divided between the organisers of this meeting: Steven Brown refused to lead this group as he was heavily involved in research into the origins of music, and the author of this paper alternatively was heavily involved in organizing the international research centre for traditional polyphony and the first symposium in 2002.

Decade later Timothy Rice expressed his discontent with the state of contemporary ethnomusicology in a polemical article in the central journal “Ethnomusicology” (Rice, 2010). The author of the article was complaining that as everyone is busy with their deep regional studies, major theoretic-

cal problems get neglected. Earlier this year (May of 2012) in Canada, at a conference organised by the journal "Analytical Approaches to World Music", a special session dedicated to the comparative study of traditional music was organized by Steven Brown and Michael Tenzer. There are also plans for a larger special conference on the topic, with all the papers to be published by a major publisher.

In my opinion, the first decade of the 21st century should be considered to be the period of changing attitudes towards comparative studies. It was in this period that several important works discussing the traditional musical cultures worldwide appeared. The impressive volume from MIT, "The Origins of Music" did not discuss the origins of polyphony, or the return of comparative methodology, but with its wide scope of approaches towards the origins of music and the multidisciplinary treatment of the problem, it became a stepping stone for the revival of interest in the big themes in musicology, like the study of the universals, or the study of the origins of music. In the same period comparative-based major works were published by Victor Grauer, the co-author of the "Cantometrics" project and a close associate of Alan Lomax (Grauer, 2006, 2007, 2011), and by the author of this paper (Jordania, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2011).

The important change introduced by these two authors was that they put the phenomenon of polyphony in the very centre of the evolution of human music, and they do not consider polyphony as a late cultural invention. Both scholars consider polyphony to be a legacy of human evolutionary history, and consider its age to be hundreds of thousands of years (Grauer), or even millions of years (Jordania). These suggestions and timelines give us a totally different picture of the origins and the history of polyphony, and heralded paradigmatic changes in ethnomusicology.

We can formulate the paradigms of this new period of comparative studies and research into the origins of polyphony in the following way:

(1) It is impossible to solve any large-scale scholarly problem without the use of wide comparative methodology;

(2) Polyphony is not a late cultural phenomenon. Very complex polyphony was taken by the first humans that came out of Africa;

(3) Our distant ancestors had a much better sense of pitch and sense of rhythm than contemporary humans have (one of the facts confirming this is that all newborn babies have perfect pitch. Saffran, 2003);

(4) In regions where no polyphony is found today, vocal polyphony was lost. That is the main reason why polyphony is predominantly found in geographically isolated and inaccessible regions of the world (mountain ranges, forest massifs, islands); The reasons for losing polyphony, according to these two authors, are different. Grauer suggests polyphony in certain regions was lost because of the Toba catastrophe some 70 000 years ago, and the author of this paper suggested that the reason for the loss of polyphony was the shift from vocal communication to articulated speech that occurred in different regions in different epochs;

(5) Comparative studies in the 21st century are based on the drastically increased data on traditional music, connected to the new possibilities of travel and the new revolutionary means of communications. These new means give us a possibility (but not a warranty) to avoid the mistakes that were so difficult to avoid for the representatives of the Berlin school of comparative musicology of the 1930s.

I do not intend to speak more about the future of comparative research in the search for the origins of polyphony as a special round is dedicated to the contemporary view on the origins of the human polyphonic tradition. I want only to mention that contemporary search for the origins of polyphony is based not only on comparative research, but also on a multidisciplinary research, involving many related and ostensibly unrelated spheres. We can confidently conclude that the comparative method is vital for research into vocal polyphonic traditions. It is not accidental that the increase in interest in traditional polyphony that is clearly evident during the last decade coincides with the increase in interest in comparative methods in ethnomusicology.

Notes

¹ Until 1960 it was believed that it was the norm for adult humans to be able to drink milk. Studies undertaken in the 1970s shattered this belief and proved that only the populations of north and central Europe and their descendants could drink milk after childhood. After the studies of human intolerance towards lactose it became clear where confusing reports of humanitarian organisations delivering non-quality food to the starving populations of the world were coming from. Apparently, thousands of tonnes of milk powder were sent to countries where the populations could not absorb milk. Realising this, humanitarian organisations changed their food policy. Such extrapolations of the Euro-North-American experience on the rest of the world constitute the essence of the “milk drinking syndrome” and are methodologically very dangerous.

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