

■ Music as indicator of social adjustment: National patterns in Melbourne

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Abstract Research on migrant musics is more important and crucial to the study of musical cultures at large, than we usually make it. We do not really know a musical culture, until we see how it reacts to the experience of migration, and experience possible disregard, disrespect, hostility, and discrimination. Moreover, immigrants find themselves in a condition in which traditional forms of behaviour are challenged by the new environment; at which point the choice is either to abandon or adapt them. How they react tells us much about how their carriers are amenable to integrate and merge into a different social fabric. In other words, musical behaviour can be looked at as an indicator of social adjustment, integration or, on the contrary, of marginality or malaise. A few examples taken from recent research in Melbourne (among Swiss, Maltese, Italian, Turkish, Armenian migrants) help clarify the point.

Keywords Migration, music, social adjustment, integration, Melbourne.

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Roger Norrington to begin with...

Star conductor Roger Norrington (2004) published a few years ago an article in the *Journal Early Music*, where he says: *'This short essay is not a scholarly paper such as this journal is used to. It is perhaps more a call for an imaginary conference...This essay is a call for research, a cri de coeur'*.

Much as my musical interests diverge from those of Roger Norrington's, and much as the topic of his contribution, 'The Sound Orchestras Made' is unrelated to that of this essay, still, I like borrowing his opening words. That's because what I am going to express is a *cri de coeur* just as well, an attempt to make converts if you will.¹ Not that I really wish to steal anybody's soul, but I would very much like to tickle the curiosity of my readers and possibly entice someone of them to participate in a type of research in which I would enjoy having more company. Research on migrant musics is of course, and rightly so, quite a relevant theme in contemporary ethnomusicology. And yet I feel it is even much more important and crucial to the study of musical cultures at large, than we usually make it. The reason is: a) we do not really know a musical culture, until we see how it reacts to the experience of migration, and b) how it reacts to that experience, tells us much about how its carriers are amenable to integrate and merge into a different social fabric. In other words, musical behaviour can be looked at as an indicator of social adjustment, integration or, on the contrary, of marginality or malaise. A few examples taken from my recent research experience in Australia, may help clarify the point.

Malta and Switzerland...of all places

Let us say we wish to study the musical traditions of Malta. The right place to begin is, of course, Malta itself – but it would be wrong to believe that it is the only place to investigate. In fact, it makes a lot of sense to look for Maltese music in many other places outside of Malta. That is because Maltese culture in Malta, in its own turf so to say, is confronted with no competition at all, and is simply taken for granted by everyone. Indeed, I would go as far as saying that just like we do not know the real character of a person, until he or she incurs in a confrontation with people representing conflicting interests, by the same measure, we do not sufficiently know a culture until it is confronted with competition, maybe disregard or even disrespect, hostility, and discrimination. In other words, much as it is obvious that cultures are to be investigated first in the territory, in the surroundings in which they first developed, still, some of their deep-seated attitudes only become visible in observing how they react to displacement and transplantation. That is so, because immigrants find themselves in a condition in which traditional forms of behaviour are challenged by

the new environment. At which point the choice is either to abandon or adapt them. It is in situations such as these, that people become aware of which of their values they regard as essential, or 'central' (that is, not amenable to compromise), and which are, on the contrary, 'peripheral', 'accessory' (and, therefore open for negotiation).

Not only many contemporary scenarios across the world suggest such an angle of observation, but even examples from recent and not so recent music history are waiting to be considered. For instance, even the very interesting case of the so many of Italian migrants to America who became professional musicians and champions of American music could be examined in this light: Nick La Rocca (trumpet player, author of the famous *Tiger Rag*), Frank Signorelli (pianist with Bix Beiderbecke), Joe Pass (alias Joe Passalacqua, celebrated guitar-player), Joe Venuti (the most famous jazz violinist of all time), Peter Rugolo (Stan Kenton's arranger), Chuck Mangione (trumpet player and composer), Bill Russo (composer-arranger with the Stan Kenton orchestra), Tony Scott (alias Anthony Joseph Sciacca, distinguished clarinet-player) and, last and not least – Frank Sinatra. Their music was as American as apple pie. Does that mean that they did not really feel (or they were not) Italian anymore? Or that American music could be part of their lives, without disturbing what they felt was the Italian heritage that really mattered for them, and maybe music was not part of that?² Of course, that is difficult to say: the contributions immigrant Italians gave to American popular song and jazz has not yet been investigated from the point of view of their national or trans-national identity. Similar questions could be asked in a variety of different context, and not just when people migrate and have to decide how much they care about the music they grew up with (and actively or passively practiced) in their homeland; but also in the case of people who embrace music that is not accepted in the social group they are part of and who, by doing so, become marginal in their own milieu, home, or territory.³

And now my statement that traditional forms of behaviour meet no challenge in their land of origin needs to be better qualified, because, indeed, there are exceptions. In fact, cases exist where traditional behaviour is strongly challenged even in its original habitat, for instance, when processes of modernisation or of culture contact may significantly affect the *status quo*. In extreme circumstances an entire society may even go as far as replace one musical system for another; the wholesale adoption of Western music by most of the population of Korea may be a case in point.⁴ That does not seem to damage the Korean sense of identity. Another interesting example may be those European teenagers, often politically on the left, and then vehemently anti-American, and yet so much of their musical consciousness is occupied not by their national traditions but by... American rock and pop which they listen to avidly. That probably means they have made American music part of their own identity, and no longer perceive it as somebody else's and as 'American music'. But it is usually abroad, among immigrants that this type of challenge and adaptation needs to be met on a daily basis, in music as well as in every other realm of human behaviour.

The Maltese, in Malta, still practice a vibrant form of vernacular singing, called there, *għana spirtu pront*, a song type requiring instantaneous ability to respond, featuring improvised rhyming duels, somewhat comparable to rap music. In this song-

-genre Arabic modal scales and European chord progressions intermix freely while the singers, accompanied by a couple of guitars, argue with one another. This type of performance is ideally suited to a cohesive social environment of people who know each other well, and easily understand the humour made at the expense of someone of them. Unless this kind of social environment exists, in which everyone knows everyone else, it doesn't really work. Now it just so happens, that groups of Maltese in Australia are reviving this type of song (Klein, 2005). One wonders why, because motivations can be remarkably different: obstinate attachment to, and nostalgia of the land of origin (leading to forms of marginal survival), wish to recuperate an almost forgotten tradition (and then revival and reconstruction with possible mannerism of performance may occur) (Katz, 1968), and desire to acclimatize (and then fusion, hybridising of various kinds may take place).⁶ In the case of Maltese *Għana* songs, it could be a wish to reconstruct a network of social relationships among compatriots, with no equivalent in Australian society, where *Għana* songs may be instrumental in achieving that goal. And then, when the intention is to make one's music accessible to outsiders, for instance, when that of one immigrant group is taken to the stage and literally exhibited in a festival, as it so often happens in Melbourne, attitudes at play may be quite different; so much so that a tradition being exhibited may more or less consciously undergo transformation, out of a desire to make it palatable to with no acquired taste for it (Duffy, 2005). Indeed, content and intention of musical behaviour (including listening attitudes), to be found among immigrants could hardly be more diversified. The case of the German-Swiss is a good example of that.

The German-Swiss in Melbourne occasionally listen to their own *schweizerische Volksmusik* (a kind of Germanic equivalent of country music, also popular in Bavaria and Austria) and often they actually learn how to make it right there, in Australia; they learn to make this music which, in their younger days, in Switzerland, they once rejected as their parent's music, and were attracted by the Beatles and the Rolling Stones.⁷ But nothing in their behaviour today betrays any wish whatsoever to pass their acquired taste for Swiss traditional music on to their children; nothing in their attitude reveals any regret, it might at some point be forgotten. Is it a mere coincidence that the German-Swiss community is so well integrated into the fabric of Australian society? In fact, the German-Swiss in Melbourne, never express any wish to go to back to their country of origin. I would like to understand all of this better, and that is why I would cherish the opportunity to compare observations with those of other scholars interested in looking at music as an indicator of social adjustment: integration, isolation, or malaise.

It makes sense to compare apples and oranges (...if they are in the same basket)

No question about it: the study of music behaviour gauged as an indicator of social adjustment is nothing less than a daunting task. So many factors and variables are at play: geographic and cultural distance, community size, generational make up, reasons for leaving the land of origin, successive waves of immigration, cultural policy of the homeland to keep in touch with its citizens abroad, the variable ease and frequency of visits home, etc. And yet, when all is said and done, in looking at the Maltese,

Swiss, Armenians, Cook Islanders, French-speaking people of various nationalities, one cannot avoid the strong perception of how these groups widely differ in their attitude to adapt and merge with the Australian environment. Daunting as the task of understanding such attitudes through music really is, cosmopolitan cities make it possibly a little more manageable. Melbourne, for instance, where about fifty national groups found their new home, offers the possibility of observing what strategies communities of widely different origin enact, in order to meet, basically, the same challenge: adapting to the same urban environment. That makes comparative observation if not exactly simple, at least not quite as hopeless as it would be to compare the Italians in Argentina with the Pakistani in London. In Melbourne they all have to meet the same challenge and, indeed, just about every one of the immigrants living in Melbourne (Italians, Turks, Indians, etc.), organizes musical events meant to exhibit the music they used to hear and practice before arriving in Australia; just about every group shows, and I am thinking here mostly of first generation immigrants, different degrees of appreciation for the music they find in Australia – which also opens up an attractive field of observations.

I am reminded in this connection of the old story of Ishi, the California Indian, last surviving member of the Yahi tribe, discovered in 1911, and studied by anthropologists Alfred L. Kroeber and Thomas Talbot Waterman. Ishi was, literally, the last of a 'lost' tribe who at some point stumbled into twentieth-century California (Kroeber, 1961). What I find most fascinating about his story is not so much the testimonial of a vanished culture he provided, but how he reacted to the way of life of early 20th century America. And here Kroeber and Waterman do not tell us much. They tried to document the songs he knew; but they did not try to gauge his reactions to the American music of the day. That would also have been most interesting.

Of Plato, and a few other things

We all remember how the Greek philosopher Plato believed that preserving conventions of musical style is fundamental to maintaining political and social order. More interestingly, he believed that in order to measure the 'moral climate', of a society, one should 'mark the music' (see Anderson, 1994; Fubini, 1976). This is not the occasion to recall what a long history this platonic view of music has had, and what may still be valuable about it. I only wish to say that I would very much like to convince politicians that musical behaviour needs to be observed and studied, every time we are confronted with migratory phenomena; and tell them that musical tastes and practices (and their change in the course of time) help gauge how easy or difficult it is for immigrants to strike a balance between assimilation and co-habitation, and the maintenance of a sufficient number of cultural traits that make their national origin still worth identifying with (Keller, 2005). Musical behaviour has a lot to do with the way people feel about their present self and their past.⁸ Through music-making, and participation we exhibit, sometimes we even flaunt, our sense of belonging to a given culture, nation, ethnic or social group. Through music we make it clear to ourselves who we are, or think we are, or would like to be, or think we should be. And in conflict situations the extent to which the opposite parties are willing to listen to each other's

music tells us how deep-seated their enmity may be. Is it going too far to say that if Israeli and Palestinian politicians knew what happens musically in Jerusalem and Gaza, they would interact with each other better? Maybe, and yet, if we look at the situation between Israel and the Palestinians, music and politics do not tell us exactly the same story. There is a very promising mixture of musical styles over there. If we really want to know how the majority of Israeli and Palestinians feel about their own future, listening to the music they make, and the music they like would probably not be a waste of time.

We do know how often different people may claim the same of music, the same performance or the same repertoire as their own. That has got to mean something as well. No doubt, any given sound structure may be compatible with perception habits of more than one culture. And everyone will associate to those sounds one's own memories, feelings, attitudes. In other words: songs may be simply shared or they may be claimed as one's own by several people at the same time; especially groups, or cultures, that are fundamentally similar. But different groups may also claim the same music as their own, and maintain that all the other cultures who also make it are 'derivative', while their own is the 'authentic' and the 'original' (Keller, 2005).⁹ Or else, when music is shared, some wish to identify with larger groups could be the reason.¹⁰

There is no shortage of examples of how complex patterns of identity can be, as they are expressed through musical behaviour. Across Anatolia a very special genre of popular music called *arabesk* may be heard. But Martin Stokes (1992) reminds us that people listen to it even in Lebanon and Egypt. And *arabesk* has something in common with rock *mizrahi* in Israel and the *rebetiko* of Greece – of all things (but try to tell Greeks and Turks how their musics are related...and see how they react!). These are all matters worthy of scholarly attention. So I think it is no overstatement to say that any politics that does not take into consideration musical behaviour risks overlooking essential patterns of social interaction. If we really wish to know how people feel about their own future, about their neighbours, about themselves, it is a good idea to listen to the music they make, the music they share, the music they exhibit, the music they reject. One fundamental question might be: is the music immigrants find in the host country more easily accepted when there is a strong desire to become part of the new environment? I tend to think so. Does so-called "marginal survival" express strong attachment to the past, potentially detrimental to social adjustment in the host country? I tend to think so as well. To be sure, no oversimplification is ever possible; every case is a little different and our comprehension of migration, a huge body of literature dealing with it notwithstanding, remains quite sketchy.

Music for crying, music for laughing

The large Turkish community in Melbourne can afford television programs, and competitions in which young people exhibit their talent in performing traditional songs. Armenians organize events where their national culture is celebrated, with almost religious overtones (e.g., orthodox priests attend and bless the public and the musi-

cians). During a concert that took place in August 2004, several Armenian traditional folk songs were performed in such a manner as to sound more like art-songs than folk songs.¹¹ Swiss-German folk songs could never be sung with such a serious attitude without appearing ridiculous.¹²

Quite on the contrary, when the Tonga and Cook islanders organise musical and dancing events, the atmosphere is relaxed and informal. During a musical evening I attended (in July 2004, organised by the Unitarian Church of Melbourne, which encourages young people not only to learn traditional practices but also, to adapt them to their taste and attitudes), the traditional music of Cook and Tonga islanders was interspersed with 'techno' and 'hip-hop' episodes in which, incidentally, the young performers manifested the same light and elegant touch that makes their more traditional dancing so enjoyable and pleasant to observe. Everybody in the audience, young and old alike was invited to join in, regardless of national origin.

The enormous Italian community in Melbourne is capable of supporting newspapers, magazines,¹³ radio stations,¹⁴ as well as retail businesses that sell videos, CDs, and DVDs of Italian popular music. In Melbourne, in music stores, not necessarily just in the Italian neighbourhood of Carlton, one easily finds, not simply mainstream Italian popular music, but also sub-genres that only enjoy regional circulation in Italy, and even songs that are by now quite out of fashion and mostly forgotten – and more questions come to mind...

Conclusions

All such realities are waiting to be studied, ideally in a comparative fashion. In fact, if there is something obviously missing in the large literature of immigration studies (sociological, anthropological, ethnomusicological, etc.), that is the comparative dimension. How different are the Maltese immigrants in Australia, in their musical likes and dislikes from Australians of other origins? Casual observation suggests that differences are quite remarkable. While some people in hearing music of their land of origin get moved and cry, others just laugh and dance. Much work is needed if we wish to understand what is really going on there. Is there anybody willing to help? A Platonic trend in ethnomusicology might be a good thing to have!

Notes

¹ This article elaborates and combines my paper *Musical Memories of the Land of Origin: National Patterns in Melbourne* (39th ICTM World Conference, Vienna, Austria, July 9, 2007) with a talk "Why the Musical Behavior of Immigrants is so Very Important to Know", I gave at The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, on May 8, 2008. It is based on three rounds of research made in Australia, for which I am extremely grateful to the School of Music/Conservatory of Monash University in Melbourne, and to the Freilich Foundation at the National Australian University in Canberra. They both provided me with generous hospitality and financial support.

² The same could be said of musicians of French origin like Stephane Grappelli (violinist of Italian origin) and Django Reinhardt (gypsy-Belgian guitar-player).

³ One good example would be the "Punk subculture" in England in the middle 1970s.

⁴ Alfred Louis Kroeber (1963) was one of the first anthropologists to consider processes of loss and substitution resulting from cultural contact.

⁵ To this day, the most extensive discussion of this repertoire is by Marcia Herndon (1971).

⁶ And also revival, reconstruction, substitution/replacement, imitation, compartmentalization, modernization, etc.

⁷ It may be worth pointing out to the non-Swiss reader that in German-speaking Switzerland *Volksmusik*, as recognized by non-specialists, is a musical genre (equally popular in Germany and Austria). It is a type of *Volksmusik* that has little in common with the "folk music" that folklorists and ethnomusicologists are usually interested in. It might therefore better be referred to as *neue Volksmusik* (which helps understand it as a musical genre quite in touch with modernity: it uses electric guitars, jazz and country style elements, along with the diatonic accordion, *Schwyzörgel*, and it is disseminated through CDs, TV and radio programs) or as *volkstümliche Musik* (folk-like music). All this is in some way comparable with the situation in Serbia and Montenegro where repertoires and genres in indigenous styles are generally referred to as *narodna muzika* (i.e., "national", "people's", or "folk" music); modernized, stylized versions of this music, which often incorporate some features imported from the West, or elsewhere, are occasionally referred to as *nove narodne pesme* ("new folk songs") or *novokomponovana narodna muzika* ("newly composed folk music") (Ringi, 2003).

⁸ It is not uncommon for people who were poor and destitute in their home country, not to wish to remember much of their past life once they find a new home abroad – especially traditional songs bound to memories of hard work and starvation.

⁹ Adela Peeva, *Whose is this song?*, Adela Media Bulgaria, VHS, 2003: this is a film showing how all across the Balkan area people identify with one particular melodic type, and they resist or even resent any suggestion that it might have originated in any other country than theirs.

¹⁰ In former Yugoslavia, foreigners often noticed that Croatia and Slovenia, were much more in touch with Western popular music than Serbia or Macedonia – probably an indicator of openness.

¹¹ In the valuable arrangements by Komitas Vartabed and Arax Mansurian.

¹² Intriguingly enough, in the German-speaking area an art song can more easily become a folk song than vice versa. One such case is mentioned by Alfred Einstein (1947) when he remembers how pleased was Brahms when, browsing through a folksong collection, he discovered that one of his *Lieder*, "In stiller Nacht" had in fact become a *Volkslied*! As such it was published in the song collection as a melody by unknown author!

¹³ For instance the newspaper *Il Globo*, and the quarterly *Italy Down Under – The National Magazine of the Italian Australian Affairs and Culture* published in Melbourne.

¹⁴ *Rete Italia*, KHZ 1593 AM

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