



# Polyphony in the Global Village: Motives and Meanings

## Document Version

Accepted author manuscript

[Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer](#)

## Citation for published version (APA):

Bithell, C. (2010). Polyphony in the Global Village: Motives and Meanings. In R. Tsursumia, & M. Kachkachishvili (Eds.), *The Fourth International Symposium on Traditional Polyphony: 15-19 september, 2008, Tbilisi, Georgia* (pp. 563-571). Nova Science Publishers.

## Published in:

The Fourth International Symposium on Traditional Polyphony

## Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on Manchester Research Explorer is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Proof version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version.

## General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Explorer are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

## Takedown policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please refer to the University of Manchester's Takedown Procedures [<http://man.ac.uk/04Y6Bo>] or contact [uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:uml.scholarlycommunications@manchester.ac.uk) providing relevant details, so we can investigate your claim.



---

*CAROLINE BITHELL*

**POLYPHONY IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE:  
MOTIVES AND MEANINGS\***

Tullia Magrini has commented on the way in which “musics coming from the most different places... find unexpected new listeners, fans, and sometimes performers in the most unlikely places” (2000, 328). Were you to find your way to the Unicorn Natural Voice Camp, set up for eight days each summer on a remote farm deep in the English countryside, you would find an intriguing example of this phenomenon. Brightly dressed groups of people - of all ages but mostly light-skinned - gather around campfires under the stars. Someone starts a song in a language that is clearly not their mother tongue and twenty others, who also know the words by heart, join them in three- or four-part harmony. A song from South Africa is followed by one from Bulgaria, then one from Hawai’i, and another from Georgia. They sing on into the night, weaving their eclectic songlines around their global village. If you were to enquire further, you would find that many of these people have never met before. So how do they know all these songs? And why do they choose to sing them?

Singing songs from other parts of the world is, of course, nothing new. Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, and other singers associated with the North American folk revival popularised songs such as “Wimoweh”, based on the South African song “Mbube” (first recorded by Solomon Linda’s Evening Birds in 1939), Chilean singer-songwriter Violeta Parra’s “Gracias a la Vida”, and the Cuban song “Guantanamera”. These songs often assumed the status of anthems and were sung the world over as a statement of solidarity with those resisting oppression or of hope for a better world. What we have witnessed in recent years is the dissemination of a vast selection of lesser-known songs, many drawn from local oral traditions rather than the more obvious popular music canon. Most striking of all, perhaps, is the extent to which these songs have become part of people’s day-to-day lives and identities.

Some of the people attending the Unicorn Camp are also members of community choirs, many of which – like the camp itself - are associated with the natural voice movement. “Natural voice” in this context can be seen as both ideology and methodology. The “natural voice” refers principally to the “untrained” or “authentic” voice, characterised on the website of the Natural Voice Practitioners Network as “the voice that is instinctively used in folk traditions around the world” ([www.natural-voice.net](http://www.natural-voice.net)). The website’s home page offers a concise statement of the natural voice philosophy: “We believe that singing is everyone’s birthright and we are committed to teaching styles that are accepting and inclusive of all, regardless of musical experience and ability.” Several themes emerge from the more detailed explanation that

follows. In particular, there is an interest in the functions of song and its potential for building community: “For thousands of years all over the world people have sung – to express joy, celebration and grief, to accompany work and devotion, to aid healing – without worrying about having a ‘good’ voice or ‘getting it right’. Song has been a part of life, a way of binding the community together.”

The emphasis on community and inclusivity also relates to notions of oral tradition. There is a much quoted African saying: “If you can walk you can dance; if you can talk you can sing.” Frankie Armstrong, one of the UK’s leading natural voice practitioners, relates this principle to a particular quality of voice when she writes: “I encourage the use of the open-throated style of singing found in cultures that sing in the open air, singing as naturally and spontaneously as they speak” (1992, 107). These images are diametrically opposed to the Western model of the highly trained professional musician performing pre-composed works on stage in a dedicated and exclusive arts venue for a passive audience, many of whom are non-musicians.

Choirs that identify themselves as community choirs are usually run according to the natural voice principles outlined above. They are open-access: they do not have auditions or require sight-reading; material is learnt by ear; songs are sung *a cappella* rather than with the more usual piano accompaniment beloved of amateur choirs; there is relatively little emphasis on public performance; and art or classical music is notably absent from the repertoire. The rewards of choir membership as identified by participants range through the personal, social, aesthetic and spiritual. Sally, for example, comments: “I don’t like singing in formal choirs as a rule – I prefer the informality and the genre of people attracted to community choirs and the repertoire and the speed of gratification!!” (Qu<sup>1</sup>. 2007). Nickomo Clarke, leader of three community choirs and also co-founder of the Unicorn Natural Voice Camp, writes: “I see the work of such choirs as crucial in allowing more and more people to become empowered and embossed by singing together. ... Unaccompanied vocal harmony has the most potent magic for me, I regard it as a great gift and as sacred as anything I understand by that word” ([www.nickomoandrasullah.com](http://www.nickomoandrasullah.com)).

Many of these choirs include in their repertoire a number of songs from different parts of the world. Some refer to themselves specifically as world music choirs, adopting names such as Crediton World Music Choir, WorldSong, Global Harmony or Songlines. Other names, such as Circle of Song or Singing in the Round, are evocative of the democratic, community ethos. Others again make reference to the positive attributes of singing, as in Good Vibrations Community Choir or Sing for Joy, and some allude to cultural diversity or the image of the global village, as in Kaleidoscope Community Choir or Patchwork Choir.

Given the natural voice philosophy as summarised earlier, the presence of so many songs from other cultures is less surprising than it might at first appear. Seeking out unfamiliar musics becomes part of the quest for a voice that is perceived as more organic and has access to a broader palette of technical and acoustic possibilities than the bel canto voice, as well as satisfying a hunger for novel harmonies and

rhythms. At the same time, songs from distant parts of the globe fuel the imagination, transporting the singer to another place, another time and, perhaps, another identity.

But how, then, does such a rich carnival of songs find its way to the UK? Frankie Armstrong, accomplished folk singer and one of the founder members of the Natural Voice Practitioners Network, acted as one of the earliest conduits for Balkan songs. Her mentor was the American folklorist Ethel Raim, who had conducted research on the open-throated style of singing found in rural areas of Eastern Europe. Frankie met her during a visit to the United States in 1973. At this time Ethel was running weekly vocal workshops in Philadelphia and New York, where she taught Balkan singing style and songs. Two years later Frankie started her own voice workshops in the UK, initially using many of the vocal exercises and songs she had learnt from Ethel. Later Vivien Ellis and Judy Greenwell added more Bulgarian songs to the mix after spending time in the Pirin Mountain region of Bulgaria with the Bisserov Sisters. More recently, Dessislava Stefanova – a former member of the Philip Koutev Bulgarian Folk Ensemble now living in London, where she runs the London Bulgarian Choir - has delighted workshop participants with her distinctive style of teaching. Over the past fifteen years, hundreds of singers around the UK have learnt Georgian songs at workshops led by Edisher Garakanidze, Joseph Jordania, Natalia Zumbadze, Frank Kane and others. The biennial Giving Voice Festival – an initiative of the Centre for Performance Research based at the University of Aberystwyth in Wales – brings together singers and voice practitioners from all over the world to give workshops and master-classes, as well as performances and lecture- demonstrations. The association Village Harmony, working from its base in Vermont but with long-standing connections with the UK, goes one step further in organising summer camps in different parts of the world where participants learn directly from native singers in the songs' place of origin. This workshop, festival and camp culture plays a crucial part in creating a common repertoire among singers in different parts of the country and beyond.

Published sources – usually with a tape or CD accompanying a book of transcriptions - include Mary Cay Brass's *Balkan Bridges Songbook*; *99 Georgian Songs*, published by Black Mountain Press for the Centre for Performance Research; *Let Your Voice Be Heard: Songs from Ghana and Zimbabwe* and other books and sheet music produced by the US-based World Music Press; a series of songbooks produced by the group Libana (again in the US); Ysaye Barnwell's *Singing in the African-American Tradition*; and Northern Harmony's workbooks, mostly produced in conjunction with their concert and workshop tours. Copies of the music and words for individual songs have also circulated in circle dance networks, many Balkan songs in particular being performed live for dancing.

What is it, then, that makes these songs so popular? My questions to singers about why they are attracted to particular sounds, and what they feel they gain from learning repertory and singing styles from different parts of the world, have elicited

a range of responses encompassing humanistic, social, psychological and political realms, as well as the technical and aesthetic. Reflecting on the inspiration she drew from her attendance at Ethel Raim's workshops, Frankie comments: "Ethel's workshops not only were wonderful for the actual quality of the singing, but it was very obvious to me as a social worker, group worker, that people went out bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, even if they'd come in dragged off the New York subway pretty bedraggled. ... You could actually see people's physicality change" (Int. 2008). Another thing she found interesting was "to hear, see what happened to women when they found the bigger, peasantry voice" (many of Ethel's sessions were with women's groups). "So right from the beginning," she reflects, "it was ... the musical, the social and the psychological elements that intrigued me and that excited me."

As far as the musical dimension is concerned, many relish the opportunity to broaden their horizons. As Anthony expresses it, "As a singer, I get a whole different sense of what it means to sing in terms of what timbre and what volume to use. ... As a musician, my sense of what melody, harmonisation and rhythm are is challenged too. The rules of Western music, spoken and unspoken, are questioned, broken down, and are seen for what they are – constraints" (Qu. 2004). Charles similarly alludes to the value of learning different styles as a way of expanding one's own technique, while also paying tribute to his deep attraction to particular sounds: "People ... tend to use one way of singing for their entire lives ... not even thinking about it because they don't need to. Actually learning music from throughout the world shows you so many drop dead gorgeous singing traditions, exposes you to music that moves you down to the very marrow ... And it makes you exercise so many different ways of singing that you start to figure out the ways that work best, not just the ways that you've always done it" (Qu. 2004).

Especially interesting are some of the responses to my more specific question: "Do you find yourself attracted to the songs of a particular culture (e.g. Bulgaria, Georgia, South Africa)? If so, how would you explain this affinity?" Balkan songs, with their "clashing" harmonies, vibrant timbres and powerful female voices, hold a special attraction for many singers. Sue Parlby, co-director of Cambridge's Good Vibrations Community Choir, describes how she spent many years singing in traditional choirs as "a very sweet little soprano" - until the day she went to a Bulgarian singing workshop led by Frankie Armstrong. There she discovered "this huge voice, which was terribly exciting; I didn't realise there was one of those lurking inside me. ... That voice had always been inside me somewhere, probably, but it hadn't been brought out" (Int. 2007). Part of her excitement, she reflects, was also due to fact of her being a woman: "For me to discover that I do have a powerful voice that will be listened to I think is working on other levels as well. It felt like I had found a strong part of me as well."

Not surprisingly, similar themes occur in Mirjana Lauševia's discussion – in her book *Balkan Fascination* - of the attraction of Balkan music for American participants. Balkan music seems to offer an example of a more democratic style of music

making, in which – in contrast to the world of Western classical music - music and dance are not reserved for “the talented few”. The repertory itself is also seen to “foster group experience and social enjoyment ... in the ways many other musical styles do not” (2007, 55). Added to this are “important musical and extra-musical associations with the ancient, the natural, and the spiritual” (59). The use of unusual modes is also associated, in the minds of many non-native singers, with an experience of the communal, earthy, otherworldly, ancient or exotic.

For some, song texts in unfamiliar languages whose sounds do not always have an equivalent in English present a major challenge. At another level, however, this can liberate the singer from the inhibitions, judgements and sensitivities associated with his or her past experience of singing more familiar repertoire. Sally comments: “Sometimes it is releasing. ... I notice my own language can get in the way of numinous experience” (Qu. 2007). Beth confesses: “I get a bit hung up on the meanings of words, so unless they really jump out at me in a poetic way, I feel a bit silly singing about some things in English” (Qu. 2008). And Jenny talks about “a chance to let go into my voice when I am singing sounds that are unfamiliar or words that don’t carry associations for me” (Qu. 2007).

Singers – both native and non-native - often comment on the psychophysical effects of multipart singing, including an enhanced sense of well-being, a feeling of being re-energised, and a palpable “buzz” derived both from the musical vibrations and from the feeling of bonding with others through a shared experience. These effects are intensified when singers are free of a score and therefore more focused on one another, and when they use the more “open” type of voice production characteristic of Bulgarian songs, for example, which together with particular intervals increases the potential for producing overtones and “beating”. Joan Mills, director of the Giving Voice Festival, comments on her early encounters with Balkan songs: “I *loved* these songs and I *loved* the way that they required other persons to lean on and to kind of be locked in to ... In my ... culture of folk tradition ... they’re all solo songs and you’re alone there singing those. And suddenly here was this community of other people” (Int. 2005).

Many singers comment on the way in which their encounter with other cultures through music leads them to feel that they can identify with other people who, despite obvious geographical and cultural-historical differences, share basic human experiences. Angela refers to “sharing hopes and dreams, knowing that we are all one, though facing different problems and similar joys!” (Qu. 2007). Anthony alludes to a more intimate sense of connection to particular places: “Each country’s songs have their own unique flavour, being born out of the people’s relationship to their everyday existence; their work, daily struggles, their joys, celebrations, rituals, customs, their history, their stories, and their relationship to the land. By singing songs from around the world, I feel as if I am meeting the people who sing or would have sung those songs. I meet something of who they are; their lives, their land, their soul” (Qu. 2004).

A recurring theme is the way in which music can serve as a bridge between people by providing them with a means of communication. Heidi reflects on her participation in a Village Harmony camp in Corsica: “Singing another culture’s songs while immersed in that culture is also a powerful means of connecting with people. The Corsicans we met and sang for were obviously deeply moved and pleased that we respected and loved their music enough to come to their island and study it, and the Corsican singers who sang for us and with us connected with our group with enormous warmth and generosity. Singing together obviously creates harmony in more than one sense!” (Qu. 2004). Anthony also comments on the “specialness” of the Corsican experience: “I felt like a very welcomed and even honoured guest, and with the songs that we had learned we had something to give back. ... I feel that we met Corsican people in a way that far surpasses any interaction that would have come about by being mere tourists. There was a real sharing and mutual respect that grew from the whole experience” (Qu. 2004).

For Edisher Garakanidze, imparting an understanding of where the songs came from was a crucial part of his role as a teacher of Georgian polyphony outside Georgia. The book *99 Georgian Songs*, completed with substantial input from Joseph Jordania and other Georgian colleagues, was his inspiration. Conceiving of the book as a tool for those who, through his UK workshops, had already begun to sing Georgian songs with such passion and insight, Edisher writes in the introduction: “From experience I have learnt that a practical workshop is still the best way to come into contact with folk music and to go deep into it. This is because it allows participants to obtain ethnomusicological, historical, geographic and ethnographic information at the same time as communicating directly with the music.” He goes on to propose - somewhat enigmatically - that “workshop participants become the co-owners of a culture that stems from the depth of centuries and millennia!” (2004, ix).

While there may be some who seem over-eager to accumulate new songs that catch their fancy without always giving thought to matters of right or etiquette, and while some may over-romanticise the lives of the supposedly more innocent peoples from whose heritage these songs have come, there are many more who are aware of the ethical complexities, are concerned to treat both songs and native culture-bearers with respect, and are looking for ways to “give something back”. In questionnaires distributed to participants in the Unicorn Camp, I asked the question: “How important do you think it is to know something about the background to the songs you learn (how they are used and what they mean in the native culture etc.)?” Jane replies: “Crucial. Otherwise the value is limited (‘nice sound’) and the solidarity etc lost. Also we’re at risk of ‘cultural imperialism’, grabbing others’ good songs, but completely out of context or respect” (Qu. 2007). Some of the Village Harmony singers on the Corsican camp referred to earlier did feel uncomfortable about certain aspects. For Clara, for example, “it always felt a little strange to be performing Corsican music that we had only learned two weeks earlier to people who had been

singing it their entire lives” (Qu. 2004), while some of the teenage girls felt self-conscious about performing songs that were normally the preserve of Corsican men. The reactions of Corsican audience members to Village Harmony’s efforts were of particular interest to me. One reflected that many young people on the island weren’t interested in the traditional songs, yet some of these young people had travelled all the way from America and after only two weeks were singing the songs “better than some Corsicans”. A member of a Corsican polyphonic ensemble expressed the view that the efforts of these visitors encouraged him in his own efforts to preserve a heritage that some of his compatriots didn’t value enough.

Back in the UK, a desire to “give something back” has increased as the movement has matured. An example of this is Sing for Water, Helen Chadwick’s brainchild, which since its inauguration in 2002 has raised £250,000 for WaterAid projects in Africa and India. The London Sing for Water event in 2007 attracted almost 800 singers from across Britain to sing world songs on the banks of the River Thames as part of the Thames Festival. Nickomo says of the funds raised for WaterAid at the Unicorn Camp that same year: “To be able to pay something back to the developing world for all of its songs that we have been enjoying, and to permanently change for the better the lives of another community was a wonderful feeling” (NVPN newsletter, Nov. 2007).

There has certainly been much agonising in the academic literature in recent years over issues of cultural imperialism, appropriation and consumption of the “other”. Appropriation does not necessarily, however, have to be viewed in negative terms as a one-sided transaction that leaves the “giver” deprived. Bruce Ziff and Pratima Rao, in their book *Borrowed Power*, propose that we might see appropriation as just one form of cultural transmission. Seeking to make distinctions between different types of appropriation, they note that: “The singer [from the US] who performs a Senegalese folk song does not preclude others from doing the same. ... the taking of the song does not lead to a corresponding deprivation of the appropriated groups in the same way as it would if tangible objects were involved” (1997, 4). Similar sentiments have been expressed by some of the native teachers I have spoken with. Petru Guelfucci acts as vocal advisor to Corsica’s Centre for Traditional Music and also runs workshops for visiting overseas groups. He is of the opinion that Corsican culture can only be enriched by opening itself to others. He’s not worried, he says, about people going away and singing the songs and perhaps even changing them a little. As long as it doesn’t impoverish the music in its locality, why should it be a problem? Frontiers only exist “in the heads of certain politicians ... music itself travels”. It’s important to respect the nucleus, he continues, but if the songs evolve further, “so much the better – that’s the richness of it all”.

Culture-bearers are increasingly taking the initiative to share their heritage with outsiders. For some, this trend has been prompted by UNESCO’s Proclamations of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. These require that action plans be set in place for safeguarding the cultural heritage, where safeguard-



ing includes not only preservation but also promotion and dissemination. The title of the UNESCO award suggests that, while these masterpieces are at one level culturally specific, at another they might be viewed as the common human heritage. Perhaps this is a clue to what Edisher meant when he talked about workshop participants, armed with sufficient understanding, becoming “co-owners” of a culture.

While proponents of the “global village” philosophy might be charged with overlooking real and sometimes deep-seated cultural differences and geopolitical complexities, essentialist notions of ethnicity also have to be challenged. As Anya Royce observes in her book *Ethnic Identity: Strategies of Diversity* (1982), individuals as well as societies can be multicultural and transethnic. This proposition might be understood at a metaphorical as well as a literal level. We do not all feel at home in the skin or the surroundings we are born into. Some of us feel a profound and uncanny sense of homecoming when we arrive somewhere else. Histories and ancestries are in any case complex. If we were to trace our ancestry back far enough, few of us would be able to consider ourselves 100% English, German or Georgian. We might talk instead, then, about the “imagined communities” evoked by Benedict Anderson (1983), whereby shared experiences are made possible via modern media and networks. Tullia Magrini draws on John Blacking’s concept of “sound groups”, “formed by people who choose a certain music mainly because they identify a part of themselves with the values they connect with that music” (2000, 329). These groups may coincide with ethnic, generational or social groups within a given society but they may also be transnational and, crucially, they remain open. Veit Erlmann adapts Kant’s notion of the “aesthetic community... that forms and undoes itself on the basis of taste”, applying this to “all those social formations – the loose affiliations, groupings, neo-tribes, and cult groups of free-floating individuals – that are not anchored in rigid structures of control, habitus and filiation” (1998, 12). Concepts such as these lend themselves well to describing the nomadic communities of song-lovers who come together in different parts of the globe – whether it be at the Unicorn Camp, a Village Harmony Camp, or at the Tbilisi Symposium - to recreate, if only for the space of a few days, a multicultural, transnational extended family.

#### **Acknowledgements**

Fieldwork for this paper was supported by a Small Research Grant from the British Academy. I am grateful to all those who so generously shared with me their thoughts and experiences via interviews and questionnaires.

#### **Note**

<sup>1</sup> “Int.” and “Qu.” indicate quotations taken from personal interviews and questionnaires.

**References**

Anderson, Benedict. (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London and New York: Verso.

Armstrong, Frankie. (1992). *As Far as the Eye Can Sing*. London: The Women's Press.

Erlmann, Veit. (1998). "How Beautiful is Small? Music, Globalization and the Aesthetics of the Local." *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 30: 12-21.

Lauševič, Mirjana. (2006). *Balkan Fascination: Creating an Alternative Music Culture in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Magrini, Tullia. (2000). "From Music-Makers to Virtual Singers." In David Greer, ed., *Musicology and Sister Disciplines: Past, Present and Future*, pp. 320–30. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Royce, Anya Peterson. (1982). *Ethnic Identity: Strategies of Diversity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Ziff, Bruce & Pratima V. Rao. (1997). *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press.