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Document Version

Accepted author manuscript

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Citation for published version (APA):

Bithell, C., & Managadze, K. (Ed.) (2015). Performance as an Ambivalent Act: Views from the UK and Corsica. In K. Managadze (Ed.), *The Issues of Performance (of) Folk and Church Music: Giorgi Garaqanidze X International Festival of Folk and Church Music in Batumi* (pp. 127-144). Batumi State University of the Arts.

Published in:

The Issues of Performance (of) Folk and Church Music

Citing this paper

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Performance as an Ambivalent Act: Views from the UK and Corsica

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NOTE: This is a post-print (Author's Accepted Manuscript) for:

Bithell, Caroline, 'Performance as an Ambivalent Act: Views from the UK and Corsica'. In *The Issues of Performance of Folk and Church Music: Proceedings of the Giorgi Garaqanidze 10th International Festival of Folk and Church Music*, ed. Khatuna Managadze, pp. 127–144 (Batumi: Batumi State University of the Arts, 2015).

I type the word “performance” into my computer’s search engine. The first hit is an extract from a Wikipedia article which tells me (somewhat simplistically) that “A performance ... generally comprises an event in which a performer or group of performers present one or more works of art to an audience. Usually the performers participate in rehearsals beforehand. Afterwards audience members often applaud.” The more concise dictionary entries that follow include “a musical, dramatic, or other entertainment presented before an audience” and “an activity (such as singing a song or acting in a play) that a person or group does to entertain an audience”. These definitions encapsulate common assumptions about what performance is (from a modern Western or European perspective, at least), with “entertainment” and “audience” emerging as keywords. In this paper I wish to consider performance in a range of alternative guises, as well as discussing some of the problematic implications of the performance–as–entertainment or performance–as–professional–presentation model. I shape my discussion around two contrasting examples. The first comes from my research in the Mediterranean island of Corsica and addresses the complexities, compromises and sometimes troubling consequences associated with presenting traditional or folk material in a concert format. The second relates to the world of contemporary community choirs in the United Kingdom, where the merits or otherwise of performing on stage are a frequent topic of debate and where choirs engage in many alternative ways of sharing songs in public spaces.

Traditional culture on the stage: perspectives from Corsica

For those who carry the knowledge of ancestral practices, adopting the modern concert format involves a process of dislocation and recontextualisation as the musical material is separated from the cultural context in which it originated or from the particular occasion as part of which it would normally feature. Material may be presented on stage in this way in order to bring particular musical repertoires to the attention of those who are not able to experience the music in its natural context, or as part of the project of preserving distinctive repertoires that can no longer be found in their primary setting. Modifications may be introduced for a variety of reasons, some derived from the performers' sense of what will work well for the audience and others from the need to adapt to the demands of the new presentational structure.

The story of one of Corsica's longest standing ensembles, A Mannella, offers useful insights into how the repertoires and practices of an ensemble might evolve and why certain changes or compromises might be made. The driving force behind A Mannella was Jacques Luciani, who in 1957 was appointed to the post of schoolteacher in the village of Sermano. As he settled into his new surroundings, Luciani was astonished to find himself in a profoundly different cultural world from that of the nearby town from which he had come and whose musical culture was aligned with popular continental styles. He began to record the local songs and was soon faced with the question: should he simply keep the tapes as a private historical record or should he find a way of showing this repertoire to a wider audience of Corsicans and others who were as yet ignorant of the existence of an authentic indigenous culture? He decided on the latter course of action and so the group A Mannella was born.

Polyphonic songs from the oldest layer of the oral tradition, including extracts from the settings of the Catholic mass that were unique to Sermano, formed the core of A Mannella's repertoire. These items were performed without any conscious musical modification. Instrumental pieces featured the old traditional melodies but here the players experimented with new tempos and harmonies and sometimes texts were added: as one member explained, "we tried to arrange things a bit". Added to this more or less traditional base were recently composed songs whose melodies were modeled on traditional patterns but whose texts dealt with contemporary subjects; these also included instrumental accompaniment. These newer pieces were seen as necessary for introducing variety into the stage presentation and holding the audience's attention in a way that could not have been so easily achieved if the group had restricted itself to unaccompanied songs in a language the audience couldn't understand. In a culture where traditional music – particularly that

associated with the church – was largely the domain of men, another function of the modern songs was to provide material for women, other than laments and lullabies. The group became affiliated to the National Federation of Folkloric Groups, membership of which brought a range of benefits, including invitations to perform in other countries. They then had to comply with the federation's regulations and these included the requirement to wear folk costumes on stage: it should be noted that this was not their own choice and that folk costumes are viewed very negatively by the present generation of Corsican music ensembles, whose members wear plain shirts and trousers, or even jeans and tee-shirts, when they perform.

By the 1990s, when I was conducting fieldwork in Corsica, the island had a thriving culture of well-established traditional music ensembles together with younger groups who performed their own contemporary songs in the Corsican language: both kinds of ensemble were commonly referred to as “cultural groups”. The concerts and festivals that took place in different parts of the island were especially numerous during the summer months, giving tourists several concerts a day to choose from, and a wide selection of CDs could be found not only in specialist music shops but also in outdoor markets, hypermarkets and petrol stations. Reports about the groups and their activities were a permanent feature of the island's two daily newspapers, *La Corse* and *Corse-Matin*, and these reports were notable for the way in which they presented the activities of the performing groups as proof that traditional music was alive and well.

In reality, this world of staged performances – what I referred to in my own writing at the time as “performance culture” – was clearly an entirely different thing from a “living tradition”: at best, it could only be a representation of a tradition that had its primary existence elsewhere. Some of the musicians themselves were engaged in ongoing debates about the nature of culture and how best to keep traditional musical practices alive as a meaningful part of contemporary life, as opposed to turning them into either museum objects or consumer items. Many regretted the extent to which musical activity had become part of a consumer society. As one singer put it, “it's business, business, business”. Another expressed the view that the current frenzy of activity was “a bit of a façade” and that all of the official support for the professionalisation of musical performance might, in fact, be detrimental as far as grassroots, local activity was concerned. While “traditional culture” and “Corsican identity” were being promoted via grand public spectacles, more modest, less visible initiatives were left to fend for themselves. Reflecting on twenty years of cultural development, Ghjiseppu Turchini suggested that the concert stage had served well as a platform for re-appropriating and disseminating traditional music in the revival of the 1970s but had ended up becoming a

substitute for collective practice (1999: 350). More than once, I heard people express the view that “When people sing a paghjella on stage, it’s all over.” (The paghjella is the archetypal polyphonic song genre of the island.) Others feared that those local practices that remained might now be seen as inferior to the new performance culture, which was more visible, more polished and also easier to access for young converts who were attracted by the glamour of the group lifestyle and its promise of a passport to the wider world. “Being in a group can go to people’s heads and then they are always off singing somewhere else,” one singer observed. There is a danger, said another, that plenty of people will turn up to sing when they are going to be seen – especially when the television cameras are present – but when someone dies in a remote village there will be no-one left to sing the mass for the funeral. “Culture must live every day,” Iviu Pasquali insisted when I interviewed him in 2004. “What counts is to impregnate this in our villages, to continue to perpetuate our traditions in our villages.”

More concrete problems had surfaced as the distinction between performance culture and living tradition became confused and the professionalisation of musical activity came into conflict with the maintenance of popular, participatory traditions in local contexts. Members of one village association told me of how they had invited one of the newly formed groups to give a short concert as part of their patron saint’s day celebrations. The performance had been a great success and so they had invited the same group back the following year. By this time, however, the group’s aspirations had risen. They now required an amplification system and their fee had tripled. On this particular night problems with the equipment caused delays to the programme and when the concert finally started the music was so loud that it drove part of the audience away. Normally profits made from the sale of refreshments would have been used to pay for repairs or improvements to the communal facilities in the village but now all of this money was needed to pay the group. In this case, then, the focus had shifted from the musicians contributing to the village celebrations to the village supporting the musicians, and the service provided by the musicians had been not only disappointing but also disruptive with respect to the socio-economic balance and the use of communal space and time.

Degrees of performance: community choirs in the UK

A useful complement to my distinction between performance culture (or stage culture) and living tradition is ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino’s distinction between what he calls “presentational performance” and “participatory performance”, each of which corresponds to different musical styles and forms. Presentational music is “prepared by musicians for others

to listen to” while participatory music is “not for listening apart from doing” (2008: 52). Classical music, the archetypal presentational music, may be seen as a closed form in which almost every detail of a performance is dictated by a written score. Participatory music, more often associated with an oral tradition, may be seen as open-ended with a flexibility that allows it to be adapted to any given situation. Most pertinent to my present discussion is Turino’s characterisation of participatory performance as “a particular field of activity in which stylized sound and motion are conceptualized most importantly as heightened social interaction” (28). When we make music in this way, he says, the focus is on “the other people one is interacting with through sound and motion and on the activity in itself and for itself” – we are not performing for an audience. Of the different musical fields that Turino identifies in his model (presentational, participatory, high fidelity and studio audio art), participatory performance is the most democratic, the least competitive and the least hierarchical. As such, it belongs to a world apart from what he terms “the capitalist-cosmopolitan formation, where competition and hierarchy are prominent and profit making is often a primary goal” (35). Gary Ansdell, in his writings about community music therapy, also takes up the theme of performance as social interaction: he writes that “performing has shifted from being seen as just reproducing musical works to instead creating and sustaining social relationships through musicing” (2010: 168).

Nurturing community through music-making and reclaiming music as a universal, democratic, non-competitive art is the foundation on which most community choirs are built. The number of community choirs in the UK has increased dramatically in recent years, as has the range of activities in which these choirs engage. Many of those who direct community choirs belong to the Natural Voice Practitioners’ Network (NVPN), whose guiding principle is that everyone can sing and everyone has the right to sing. It is no accident that so many of the songs in the community choir repertoire come from the world’s oral traditions – traditions where participation is again a fundamental principle – and so are structured in ways that maximise their capacity to include (in principle) all members of the community. In contrast to the more conventional amateur classical choir or choral society, performance is not the main goal of a natural-voice-style choir. As outlined in the organisation’s “Philosophy and Working Principles”, “the main focus is on the process of coming together to sing whilst at the same time developing people’s vocal skills”. Some members reject the conventional performance model whereby a select group is raised up on a stage and is then exposed to the judgement of a much larger group of observers; this is seen to be especially inappropriate when a choir includes less secure singers who may have been negatively affected by past

criticism of their efforts. In the directory of choirs that can be found on the NVPN website, some choirs describe themselves explicitly as “non-performing”.

Many of the more established choirs do give annual concerts in small concert halls, community halls or churches. Even if a formal performance in front of a paying audience is not their main goal, however, most choirs reach a point at which the singers want to do something with the songs they have learnt outside their weekly meetings. Even the most tentative or nervous singers, once they have found their feet and gained in confidence, may be eager to share what they have learnt with a supportive audience of friends and family. A choir might therefore present a selection of songs in the spirit of a sharing, perhaps construed as an end-of-term party to which family and friends are also invited. A choir might take part, together with other amateur music groups, in charity fundraising events or other community events that the audience attends for reasons other than expecting to witness a first-class performance. It might sing for a particular group of people – the residents of a care home or hospital, for example – where once again the focus is on aspects other than a virtuosic musical spectacle. Finally, a choir might sing at the birthday parties, weddings and funerals of its own members. In these alternative contexts, the choir’s performance takes the form of a voluntary contribution as opposed to a saleable product.

When I paid a visit to the Good Vibrations Community Choir in Cambridge, I browsed through the posters for recent events in which the choir had been involved. Themes of peace and solidarity were prominent. One poster was for a concert entitled “Peace in Our Time”, described as “a concert of songs inspired by those who work for peace”, and the money raised was to be donated to the Mines Advisory Group (an organisation that helps to clear unexploded landmines and supports people who have been injured by mines and other weapons). Another event, entitled “Singing for Change”, was in aid of the Pakistan Earthquake Appeal: the poster invited the public to “join Good Vibrations and friends for an inspiring and uplifting evening singing songs that changed the world (or should have done!)”. A third poster advertised an event for National Holocaust Remembrance Day, called “Stand With Me”. This was described as “An evening of songs and stories of resistance, life, hope and solidarity from different cultures. . . . The stories we will share give voice to the inspiring bravery and courage of ordinary people who have been prepared to stand up for others against tyranny and genocide.” For choir leader Rowena Whitehead, it was important to create opportunities for her choir to use their voices in this way. She reflected: “One of the things I feel proudest about is that there is now a sense of people feeling that they’ve got a voice, and that they will go and sing together, with confidence and passion, in different situations. . . .

There's a real groundswell now of folk who are happy to get together to share their voices at social events and for good causes. . . . It's a hunger to belong, to connect with people, in a way that goes deeper than words and I know it feeds the soul" (interview 2007). Here, then, we also have the suggestion that this type of performance can be transformative at a personal as well as a socio-political level.

There are also many opportunities to perform at more neutral events such as craft fairs, summer fêtes or open days at museums, for example. The biographical note for Newcastle-based choir Heaton Voices in the programme for the 2012 National Street Choirs Festival captures the almost limitless possibilities: "We've sung at a range of venues, from shopping centres to churches, Christmas markets, to concerts at the Sage at Gateshead [a large arts centre]. We've sung at train stations, Metro stations and on buses. We've sung in heat waves, monsoons (usually at street choir festivals!) and blizzards. We've startled small children, bemused teenagers and had pensioners sing along with us at various 'busks'. . . . Most of all, we've made true friendships through singing and (generally!) raised a smile wherever we go."

Choirs of this kind occupy an interesting mid-field position. Their members are not, and do not aspire to be, professionals or performing artists. But neither are they traditional singers or representatives of "the folk". They are members of modern societies seeking to make music in a way that maximises participation, to reintroduce collective singing to social spaces and life events where it might have had a part in the past, and to perform (when they do perform) for reasons other than simply entertaining an audience or enhancing their own reputation. By helping to animate community events, they open up new spaces of conviviality in which the usual barriers between artists and audience are broken down. In this respect, community choirs are replicating what is in many parts of the world a natural state of affairs, where music making has a far more visible presence in the day-to-day life of the local community and fulfils many functions other than pure entertainment.

Concluding thoughts

By focusing on alternative modes of performance, I do not mean to imply that presenting traditional or folk music on stage is a bad thing. On the contrary, in the present geopolitical climate it is more important than ever to claim a place on the international stage for the many different kinds of music that exist in the world today and that are part of our rich human heritage. The concert stage should not be dominated by Western classical music, and other kinds of music should not be devalued as simply "folk" music. There is also nothing

intrinsically wrong with music as entertainment. As my Corsican interviewees insisted, however, if our project is the safeguarding of cultural heritage then it is important to ensure that there is a healthy balance between different kinds of musical activity and that by enriching one aspect we do not impoverish another. It is also important to be clear about what exactly it is we are talking about and what exactly we want to achieve. Are we aiming to preserve a musical repertoire in isolation or are we also trying to preserve, or reintroduce, the kinds of human relations and moral values that are associated with a particular way of life – a way of life in which music has many functions other than entertainment? In developing my own new research directions here in Georgia, I am interested in the kinds of musical initiatives that are happening away from the stage – and in some cases away from the attention of the media and official bodies – but in a way that complements, and works in tandem with, the evolution of professional musical activity. From my perspective, there is significant potential for Georgia to act as an instructive case study in international, interdisciplinary debates about safeguarding intangible cultural heritage and I look forward to working with colleagues here in contributing to those debates.

Note: The examples used as illustrations in this paper are discussed in greater detail in my books *Transported by Song: Corsican Voices from Oral Tradition to World Stage* (Scarecrow Press, 2007) and *A Different Voice, A Different Song: Reclaiming Community Through the Natural Voice and World Song* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

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