Polyphony as Tool and Trope: Theorising the Work of Polyphony in the Twenty-First Century

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In the paper I wrote for the Fourth International Symposium on Traditional Polyphony in 2008 (Bithell, 2010), I described the functions and meanings of singing multipart songs from other cultures in the context of the community choirs, workshops and summer camps associated with the Natural Voice Practitioners’ Network (based in the United Kingdom) and the organisation Village Harmony (based in the United States). In particular, I addressed questions about why singers are attracted to particular sounds, why they might prefer to sing songs in languages other than their mother tongue, and what they feel they gain from learning musical repertory and vocal styles from different parts of the world. In answering these questions, I drew on my collection of personal interviews and questionnaires to show how the explanations of my respondents encompassed humanistic, social, psychological and political realms, as well as the technical and aesthetic.

In the present paper, I offer a more theoretical analysis of polyphonic singing as a form of social and intercultural engagement, a tool for building social capital, and a site for exploring new subjectivities. For this, I draw in part on ideas presented at greater length in my new book, A Different Voice, A Different Song: Reclaiming Community through the Natural Voice and World Song (Bithell, 2014). There, I pursue a set of key themes and concepts, including participation, performance, identity, community, empowerment, liberation, transformation, transcendence, empathy, reciprocity, conviviality and collective joy. Some of these, as will be immediately apparent, relate only obliquely to the music itself. What they point to are a set of broader affects, consequences and states of being associated with, or derived from, singing the multipart songs that bring the people in these networks together. Crucially, they pertain to music as an action or process, rather than an object or product. Together, they open a window onto a world of human experience whose significance lies in the realm of the existential as much as the musical. This, then, is the territory in which my present discussion is situated.

In his contribution to a collection of essays on “Music and Meaning” (published as a special issue of the British Journal of Ethnomusicology), Timothy Rice identifies a series of metaphors in common use among musicologists and ethnomusicologists: these include music as art, music as entertainment, music as emotional expression, music as social behaviour, music as commodity, music as referential symbol, and music as text. He also proposes that culturally specific metaphors “may be as endless as the cultures we study”: among the examples he gives is the Navajo notion of music as medicine (Rice, 2001: 23). Meanwhile, Veit Erlmann’s work on the South African genre isicathamiya led him to suggest that “the essence of art” lies not in any meaning as such but “in the interaction to which it gives rise” (Erlmann, 1996: 481). Metaphors and meanings, Rice notes, are neither fixed nor mutually exclusive. Within a given culture we might observe a shift from one dominant metaphor to another in response to fundamental changes in the social, economic and political climate. Multiple meanings might also co-exist, depending on the different subject positions
of those who have a stake in the music in question. The power of music, Rice suggests, surely lies
in part in its malleable and multivalent nature.

In my own research into polyphonic singing traditions, both in their native habitats and in the
transnational environments in which some of them now circulate, the metaphors that have emerged
most forcefully are those of music as social interaction, music as revelation and music as transcen-
dence. Themes of music as medicine or therapy (broadly speaking) and music as a force for bond-
ing have also featured prominently. In pursuing these alternatives to the trope of music as cultural
commodity that is more usually associated with the world music industry, I hope to shed a different
kind of light on questions about what is lost or gained in the changing polyphonic landscape of the
twenty-first century.

Sociability is – almost by definition – at the very heart of polyphonic singing. As Robert Farris
Thompson (Professor of History of Art at Yale University) puts it in a documentary film about the
polyphony of the Bayaka people of Central Africa, “You cannot get the music off the ground with-
out the group” (Kidel, 1992). The central premise of Bernard Lortat-Jacob’s study of polyphonic
singing traditions among the confraternities of Northern Sardinia is that “acoustic harmony results
directly from social harmony and cannot exist without it” (Lortat-Jacob, 1998: 10). Writing about
polyphonic traditions in Russia, Irina Raspopova emphasises that the singers must be able to work
together in non-hierarchical way: it is impossible for people to sing polyphonically, as opposed to
harmonically (in chords), unless they are able to “accommodate” one another (Raspopova, 1996: 9).

A similar notion of “the two-way interaction between aesthetic and social considerations” pro-
vides the keystone for Jane Sugarman’s research into the polyphonic practices of Prespa Albanians
in Macedonia and in the North American diaspora (Sugarman, 1997: 22). Sugarman tells us, speak
of polyphonic singing in social and moral terms, rather than purely musical or aesthetic ones. She
describes how at social gatherings singing is “expected to take precedence over conversation as a
means of socializing” (Sugarman, 1988: 4). Typically, the two upper parts of the three-part poly-
phonic songs featured at these events are performed by soloists, with the rest of the assembled com-
pany joining in the bass drone. Droning “provides an assurance that no one in the room will be lured
into conversation, for a mouth that is occupied with droning cannot also be speaking” (Sugarman,
1997: 221). The extent to which participating in this kind of collective singing is directly linked
with matters of obligation and honour – we also learn that, “as an important means of asserting
one family’s respect for another, singing is regarded as a moral act” (Sugarman, 1997: 59) – leads
Sugarman to propose that “if Presparë cannot be said to have a codi-
fied music theory, they do have
something approaching a theory of singing as social behaviour” (Sugarman, 1988: 6). The social
dimensions of singing relate not only to obligation, of course, but also to reward: in the Prespa case,
collective singing is carefully orchestrated to nurture a state of heightened intimacy and elation.

Further variations on the theme of music and sociability are played out in Thomas Turino’s
book *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*. Turino sets out the fundamental differen-
ces inherent in two very different kinds of music making that he labels presentational performance
and participatory performance. Presentational performance, which typically involves members of
a specialist class of highly trained, professional musicians performing musical “works” (often by
“great” composers) for a comparatively passive (and often paying) audience, is associated in Turi-
no’s model with the values of hierarchy, competition and profit that belong to the capitalist-cos-
mopolitan formation. (Here we are in the realm of music as product.) Participatory performance, by contrast, fits with a democratic ethos that seeks to maximise active involvement. (Here we are in the realm of music as process.) In now familiar terms, Turino characterises participatory performance as “a particular field of activity in which stylized sound and motion are conceptualized most importantly as heightened social interaction”. The “special kind of concentration on the other people one is interacting with” when making music in this way, he goes on to say, “is one reason that participatory music-dance is such a strong force for social bonding” (Turino, 2008: 28, 29).

Social bonding is a key concept in the work of Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam, who established his influential social capital thesis with his best-selling book *Bowling Alone* (2000), in which he documented the dramatic decrease, from the late 1960s, in the numbers of Americans joining civic associations, social clubs, churches and unions. The import of Putnam’s work lies in the way he links this data directly with a parallel decline in health and wellbeing – both individual and collective – which he sees as resulting in part from the weakening of the norms of reciprocity and trust that are among the by-products of properly functioning social networks. It follows that recovery lies in the revival of community-based activity (which, in Putnam’s language, equates to an increase in social capital). Identifying active involvement in the arts as being “especially useful in transcending conventional social barriers”, Putnam makes explicit reference to singing as an accessible leisure activity through which people can accumulate social capital. Perhaps most pertinent of all is his proposal that “singing together does not require shared ideology or shared social or ethnic provenance” (Putnam, 2000: 411).

At this juncture, with Sugarman’s observations about singing’s pre-eminence over conversation still in mind, we might also add to the mix a comment made by a WaterAid volunteer in a trailer for Helen Chadwick’s Sing for Water project: “We can’t all talk at the same time, but we can all sing at the same time”. Even more to the point, the lack of a common spoken language need not prevent us from singing together.

As has been proven by the vast numbers of amateur community choirs and world music choirs that can now be found in Britain and elsewhere, vocal polyphony lends itself eminently well to bringing people together remarkably quickly, with minimum investment in resources and with immediate rewards. Many of the songs chosen come from oral traditions and so are well suited to the participatory ethos. They are taught by ear and therefore accessible to the majority of people who do not read music notation. Singing bypasses the years of slow and sometimes painful apprenticeship involved in learning to play a musical instrument. It does not require any costly equipment or technology. It is also highly portable and lends itself to spontaneity. Participants may derive pleasure on many different levels: from the thrill of the harmonies, the discovery of new kinds of music, meeting new people who may soon become friends and, in some cases, finding a voice they didn’t know they had and perhaps overcoming associated fears and obstacles. Here, then, we can see music at work in its revelatory, emancipatory and therapeutic guise as well.

While the social capital model is a useful aid in elucidating the benefits of joining this kind of choir (and equally of singing in traditional ensembles, with the caveat that some traditions do require a lengthier apprenticeship), there are also more strictly scientific explanations for the efficacy of singing in having a positive impact on health and wellbeing. Recent years have seen a marked increase in research into the benefits of singing across a range of disciplines, including music psychology, public health and social care. The interdisciplinary team at the Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health at Canterbury Christ Church University in the United Kingdom, for
example, has been working to build the research evidence base for drug-free interventions such as “Singing on Prescription”. Alongside undertaking a systematic review of published research on singing and health, they have conducted a cross-national survey of choral singers in Australia, England and Germany and established a series of choirs for people with specific health conditions whose progress they are then able to monitor. Indicators of the physiological changes caused by music (as shown by numerous studies) include a rise in blood pressure and heart rate, an increase in muscle tone, and changes in respiratory rate. Biological research has identified links between music and the release of hormones and neurotransmitters such as oxytocin, serotonin and dopamine, variously associated with feelings of satisfaction, pleasure and general wellbeing and with processes of interpersonal intimacy and bonding. Studies of singing in particular have pointed to an increase in the secretion of immunoglobulin A, associated with positive or relaxing experiences, and a decrease in cortisol, a hormone linked with emotional stress. Here, then, we have scientific explanations for the experiences of bliss or intoxication reported by many singers, and by singers of polyphony in particular. The accounts of the Corsican paghjella singers that inspired the title of my earlier book *Transported by Song* (Bithell, 2007) were packed with references to pleasure, liberation, communion and a transcendental state of grace – all seen as part of the mysterious alchemy of voices coming together in song. In this connection there are also hints of a science of harmony, with singers speaking of the way in which certain intervals or harmonic configurations have an intensely visceral effect, producing physical vibrations as well as musical overtones and thereby contributing directly to the sense of a euphoric peak experience. At this point, we are a long way indeed from the notion that singing is about learning the words and the notes.

It is interesting to discover that in some cases it is precisely these intense singing experiences that have given established singers the urge to share their own musical heritage with amateurs who are also cultural outsiders. When I interviewed Belgian-Zairian singer Anita Daulne – best known as one of the founding members of the female *a cappella* group Zap Mama – she explained that she had always loved the rehearsal process “because it’s such a good interaction and feeling that circulates between us’. She spoke of how audiences showed their immense delight when seeing the group perform on stage “but”, she said, “they didn’t experience that way of singing and I was convinced that way of singing is accessible for everybody and I didn’t want that way of singing [to be] just for *them*, far away”. It was this sentiment that inspired her to start giving workshops. The Afropean Choir that she went on to establish in Oxford – with a repertoire of “ethnic” songs that she had rearranged, drawing on both African and European influences – also built on her philosophy of the kind of “cultural mixing” that allowed Zap Mama’s performances to function as “a bridge or a door to make people understand . . . ethnic music [better]” (interview 2009).

What, then, of the more thorny questions of rights and rules, ownership and authenticity, which inevitably enter into debates about cross-cultural borrowings? Some especially salutary insights are to be found in E. Patrick Johnson’s study of gospel music in Australia that is the subject of a chapter in his book *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*. Of particular interest in Johnson’s analysis is the way in which he, as an African American scholar and performance artist who grew up with gospel singing, views issues of power and representation as he sets out to answer the central question: “How does performance reproduce, enable, sustain, challenge, subvert, critique, and naturalize ideology?” (Johnson, 2003: 161). Perhaps surprisingly, he mounts an energetic critique of what he terms “the authenticity bug”. He describes how many of his Australian interviewees expressed reservations about their own legitimacy as white and mostly
atheist enthusiasts performing the music of black religious communities on the other side of the world. He himself, however, sees such sensitivities as misplaced on the grounds that this way of thinking “fail[s] to articulate the discursivity of music” (Johnson, 2003: 198). To ascribe authenticity to black Americans alone and to regard the appropriation of gospel music by others – including oneself – as inauthentic, he argues, serves not only to perpetuate but also to collude with an essentialised racial discourse of authenticity. Insofar as it is this discourse that has formed the basis for the mass marketing of black folk-cultural forms to white audiences, an overly fundamentalist interpretation of what authenticity means and what its markers are may be viewed as a type of continued segregation or ghettoisation. Once the authenticity question is put to one side, he concludes, “another set of possibilities emerges”. If we allow that performance has “the potential to alter one’s epistemological frame of reference”, then gospel music is “too rich a cultural form to be confined to a simplistic essentialist/antiessentialist binary” (Johnson, 2003: 197–198). Johnson’s reading of the way in which the liberatory potential of cross-cultural performance plays out in this case is also illuminating: “Because [white Australians]’ gospel performances are in striking contrast to the socially and culturally sanctioned Australian cultural performances, they hold the potential of transgressing the strictures of white hegemonic systems that sanction behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes” (Johnson, 2003: 207). In allowing Australian singers the opportunity to shed “the residual traces of British propriety”, gospel singing enables them to discover “a part of themselves that had been underdeveloped or lying dormant”, and it is the sharing of these previously unexpressed parts of themselves with one another, Johnson suggests, that creates such a strong sense of community (Johnson, 2003: 188).

The dynamics of cross-cultural encounters are brought into even sharper focus when singers who are drawn to other musical heritages in this way travel to the music’s place of origin and meet with traditional singers on their home ground. In his afterword to a special issue of the journal The World of Music on the theme of “Music, Travel and Tourism”, Martin Stokes highlighted the need for more nuanced ethnographic research into “the specificities of music as a form of social engagement” in the context of tourist encounters and exchanges (Stokes, 1999: 141). Here again, polyphonic singing lends itself as an ideal medium for intercultural encounter of a fully participative or immersive kind. The fact that it is perfectly possible to sing songs in a language one does not speak allows people who do not share a common spoken language to interact in a meaningful way. Since polyphonic singing is often associated with moments of leisure it is also conducive to generating a heightened atmosphere of conviviality when guests are present. For those who journey to the source of the songs they have already fallen in love with, the extra-musical rewards discussed earlier are intensified by yet another layer of potential benefits, derived this time from the experience of travel. In itself an adventure of discovery, a journey overseas offers the traveller not only an encounter with novel environments and unfamiliar ways of life but also the time and space to experiment, at a personal level, with trying on different identities and imagining different ways of being. Joining in singing the songs of a place can be a powerful way of making this kind of experience more visceral and thereby reinforcing its potential for having a longer-term impact on the traveller’s sense of self well beyond the timeframe of the journey itself.

We may now, then, bring notions of how polyphony manifests social relations in the relative-ly local cases documented by Sugarman and others into articulation with a global vision. George Lipsitz has written of how “culture enables people to rehearse identities, stances, and social relations not yet permissible in politics. . . . Popular culture does not just reflect reality, it helps constitute it”
The culture of polyphonic singing is now helping to constitute new realities for many of those newly drawn into its ranks. Somewhat unexpectedly, John Potter wrote on the first page of *The Cambridge Companion to Singing*: “I would hazard a guess that what we now call world music is the well-spring from which new forms of vocal expression will flow” (Potter, 2000: 1). It is not only a matter of vocal expression, however. As we have seen, rewards of many different orders are conflated and amplified when people sing polyphonic songs from different parts of the world. There are the health benefits of singing with respect to the human body and mind, the psychological and physical rewards of singing harmonies, the social rewards of interacting with others, the educational and humanistic rewards of encountering other cultures, and the horizon-expanding rewards of travel. It is clear, then, what the receiver stands to gain when polyphony is part of an intercultural exchange. In normative readings of cultural appropriation the giver, by contrast, has all too often been portrayed as being left deprived. Appropriation of intangible heritage does not, however, equate to removal in the way that might apply to material heritage. When ancient artefacts are put in a museum, then clearly they are no longer in their original location. But as Ulf Hannerz puts it, “One curious thing about the economics of culture . . . is that this reserve, this particular kind of transnational common, does not risk becoming depleted merely because people borrow heavily from it, as people can keep giving meanings and their expressions away to others without losing them for themselves” (Hannerz, 1996: 62). In the case of touristic encounters, the givers or hosts may also benefit in practical or material ways and this, too, might form part of their motivation for entering into such exchanges.

When we listen to polyphony being performed today – whether by foreigners or by younger singers in the cities who have come to their own heritage as part-outsiders – we are, of course, likely to see and hear things that have changed when we compare these performances with performances by village singers or by singers from the past whose voices are preserved in archival recordings. We may identify losses – of complexity, of variants, of regional nuances or subtleties of expression; we may worry about transgressions of established rules and other markers of what we would consider to be an authentic performance. Here I have tried to shed light, from a rather different perspective, on what we might see as gains. In this regard, it is also pertinent to keep in mind Turino’s distinction between presentational and participatory performance. In presentational contexts, where music is serving above all as art, we might well expect certain standards and norms; but when that same music is appearing in a participatory capacity, where it is serving as social interaction (and, for some individuals, as discovery, transcendence or therapy), it does not make sense simply to apply the same criteria in assessing its value or efficacy. In some ways, the attraction of amateur singers to polyphony in its participatory guise might be seen as part of the revival of music as social behaviour, which in itself provides a counter-balance to the increasing pull towards music as commodity. The notion of revival also reminds us that things that are lost can be found again.

In the village, polyphony may be but a vestige of a way of life for whose passing we feel a sense of nostalgia. In the global marketplace, it may have become a commodity that leaves us with a sense of unease as we try to weigh the rewards and compromises. For its new converts who strive to participate and not just consume – the youth in the cities, the pilgrims and seekers, or those who dwell in the lands without harmony² – it can become a new way of being, a different way of experiencing the world. We do not have to approve or disapprove. The legacy of the postmodern turn is that we can rest in the knowledge that any story that is told, any meaning that emerges, is a partial truth which opens up new ways of seeing and understanding. This is what lies behind Rice’s insis-
tence that “ethnomusicologists should take all musical metaphors they encounter, whether of their
own making or that of their research subjects, seriously and for what they are: fundamental claims
to truth, guides to practical action and sources for understanding music’s profound importance in
human life” (Rice, 2001: 22).

It is in large part thanks to new theoretical and methodological developments in the fields of
ethnomusicology, anthropology, cultural studies and political science, and the different epistemol-
ogies to which they direct our attention, that we are now able to articulate the layered meanings and
significances of musical activity in this way. It is this marriage of disciplinary advances on the one
hand and developments in polyphony’s new life in the world music arena on the other that allows
us to fully apprehend the work of polyphony in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1 See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BEolWXnGKVo. Sing for Water was launched by Helen
Chadwick in 2002. Every year an 800-strong choir, made up of members of community choirs
from across the UK, performs at the Thames Festival in London as a way of raising money for
WaterAid projects in Africa and India. Sing for Water events now also take place in France, Ger-
many and Australia, as well as different parts of Britain

2 My formulation “the lands without harmony” is an adaptation of the title of Andrew Blake’s book
The Land Without Music. One of the reasons given by several of my British interviewees for sing-
ing multipart songs from other cultures is that the British folk heritage features predominantly

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