

*Explorations in Ethnomusicology:*

*Essays*

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## *Multilingualism in Folk Music Cultures*

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A great many of the world's folksongs have been, and still are, sung by multilingual singers. This simple fact has not received the attention it deserves in our work on language and music. Most studies, often for very good reasons, tend to assume a monolingual singer. For example, a scholar seeking to define a distinctive ethnic or "national" style may look for songs in a single language, ignoring "influences" from neighboring peoples. The more abstract theorists who align linguistic and musicological theory, reasonably enough, proceed with one language at a time.

The present brief contribution<sup>1</sup> attempts only to outline the scope of multilingualism in folk music cultures and to suggest in a preliminary way the inherent research potential of this approach. I will point out some avenues of exploration and introduce examples from world areas where beginning research has started to yield interesting insights. My working hypothesis is that, for folksingers, multilingualism can provide the material for personal and cultural strategies not available to monolinguals.

It seems to me that there are two basic viewpoints from which to examine multilingualism in folk music cultures in an introductory way. One might approach the question holistically. This would mean investigating multilingualism as a general phenomenon within an entire music culture, or coexisting, co-territorial music cultures. It would include the study of the historical determinants and cultural underpinnings affecting musical choices.

The other way to address the issue is from the standpoint of individuals. Looking at singers whose repertory includes items in more than one language, what can we say about this factor in their singing lives? Here we may have to look beyond cultural formants to biographical and psychological aspects. In the balance of the present essay, I would like to sketch briefly the basics of both avenues to multilingual folk musics, beginning with the holistic viewpoint.

Let us begin at the far end of the multilingualism continuum. In some regions where ethnic groups and languages are tightly bundled over a long period of time, a kind of cultural knot is tied. Though the individual strands can be identified, at the point of juncture a Gordian merging occurs which only an Alexandrian scholar tries to cut. Linguists refer to such a situation as *Sprachbund*. In my work on northern Afghanistan (Slobin 1976), I describe such

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<sup>1</sup> The present essay is a slightly amplified version of a paper delivered at the International Symposium on Music and the Language Mode of the International Folk Music Council, Kolobrzeg, Poland, May 1981.

a situation among the co-territorial Uzbeks and Tajiks. Two languages, the former Turkic and the latter Iranian, along with associated musics, had coexisted for nearly five hundred years. This resulted in a pattern of convergence, more marked in some districts than others. In certain areas, the Uzbek language was heavily Tajikized, and vice versa. Musically, I found teahouse musicians performing for a mixed ethnic audience, purveying a consensus music involving improvised quatrains that often showed the effects of bilingualism. Performers from a crossroads town at the juncture of the two ethnic/language/musical style areas specialized in this eclecticism and some were themselves considered ethnically ambiguous. Here the inter-ethnic contact situation had settled into a complex series of adjustments of which the multi-musical element was just one symptom: in Afghan Turkestan there was no way to discuss either Uzbek or Tajik music in complete isolation.

A more radical *Sprachbund* situation exists in an area of Eastern Europe described by the Soviet musicologist V. I. Elatov (1977). At the intersection of the Russian, Belorussian, and Ukrainian music areas, there is a triangular area Elatov calls the GBCh (Gomel'-Briansk-Chernigov) Region. Members of the three local ethnic groups have formed a fused musico-linguistic cultural unit, a sort of *Musik-und-Sprachbund*:

Over the course of the whole history of their existence, first at the level of individual peoples, and then as independent nations, the Russians, Ukrainians, and Belorussians on the territory of the GBCh Region have shown an enviable unit in the formation of a common folksong repertoire and in the working out of specific stylistic musical norms [Elatov 1977:6].

First, Elatov demonstrates the marked linguistic convergence of the three local languages. Then he points to a jointly-held repertory and approach to folksinging. What his data indicate is an absence of distinctively ethnic songs, so that the GBCh Region stands out, in a sense, due to its grayness rather than to its color. It seems the population has chosen to retain archaic song styles which antedate the more recent, strongly ethnic repertoires of the surrounding regions.

My concern here is not with such extreme cases of fusion, but it is well worth citing these examples to indicate one type of choice available in a multilingual region: convergence. We often tend to view convergence as a result of the intensive acculturation so prominent in recent times as a result of "westernization" and "modernization," those bogeymen who force cultures to surrender older values along the road to world musical standardization. What I am suggesting through the Afghan and GBCh Region examples is that patterns of ethnic accommodation are quite old and can result in a mutually agreed-upon cultural truce where the existence of multilingualism is a key factor in compromise.

The main body of multilingual songs probably occurs outside fusion situations, as part of everyday patterns of inter-ethnic contact. A number of my examples come from Eastern Europe, as this is a region where scholarship has long been cognizant of the importance of musical meeting grounds. In 1932 the Ukrainian researcher Filaret Kolessa pointed to the extraordinary uniformity of certain genres, as well as specific songs, among the Ukrainians, Slovaks, Czechs, and Poles of the Carpathian region, which covers a large territory. He focused specifically on one group, the Lemki, as being the epicenter of this phenomenon. Kolessa (1932) raised the possibility that the transhumant mountain Lemki acted as a channel for the dissemination of folksongs across a wide stretch of space, even influencing the Hungarians adjacent to the Carpathians. Of particular interest is the variety of common traits Kolessa found in his corpus of songs. All the ethnic groups apparently shared certain basic topics in their balladry and lyrical songs. Furthermore, within these

particular genres there was a whole series of direct translations from one language to another. Kolessa pointed out the commonality of the Western Slavic languages, which fosters musical closeness, and pinpointed specific similarities in the metrics of the song types. He therefore suggested a specific cross-ethnic Carpathian folksong cycle.

The details of this situation are not germane here. What emerges from Kolessa's work is that a high degree of multilingualism correlates with very concrete and specific aspects of the folksong repertory in a given region. It was not possible, in 1932, for Kolessa to examine ethnic folksongs as isolated products of monolingual singers. One had to think of folksingers as people who use their knowledge of more than one language creatively, to enrich individual and group repertories and to build a common regional stock of songs. We do not find the convergence pattern of the GBCh Region here; translation, not fusion of languages, is the norm. What we do see is the spreading out into the music culture of ideas from neighboring groups, evident in the sharing of specific topics of song texts. This suggests that multilingualism works through stimulus diffusion, influencing parallelism of choices based on multiple models, not just in point diffusion, where specific song texts are adapted across language lines.

Of course, the ethnomusicologist will want to know why multilingualism produces particular results in specific instances. This can only be answered on a case-by-case basis, and we have remarkably few published examples to draw on in order to build hypotheses. From the functionalist's point of view, there must be a good solid reason for the sorts of influences we are citing here. Perhaps there is political domination by one group, or there are ritual reasons for the incorporation of outside text items. I believe that a whole range of rather complex, often shifting reasons might be found. Let us look at two recent studies, both from African data, that attempt to delineate the specifics of multilingualism.

The African scholar Dakubu (1979) has written a short study appropriately entitled "Other People's Words." It seems that speakers of the Ga language in Ghana incorporate both English words and phrases plus items from the neighboring Akan languages into certain songs. Dakubu concludes by speculating on the motivation for this phenomenon:

Ultimately, Akan and English words occur in Ga songs because these are the languages of powerful states whose cultures exerted what might have been an overwhelming influence on Ga culture and the Ga language for a long time, and still do. This fact seems to rest rather lightly on the singers of Ga songs. They seem far more interested in what they can do with this additional material than in what it may ever have done to them [Dakubu 1979:110].

In other words, Dakubu suggests that beyond historical preconditions may lie another reason for the multilingualism of Ga songs: a folk aesthetic which regards the total pool of words, from whatever sources, as raw material for the shaping of songs. Dakubu begs the question a bit by leaving open the specifics of that aesthetic, not making entirely clear why particular items from given languages are chosen and how they fit into an overall pattern.

A rather more comprehensive study comes from the Sudan, where Gerd Baumann (1981) has attempted an analysis of multilingualism in the songs of the Miri, a people of the Nuba Mountain region. He arrives at two conclusions; the first supports Dakubu's tilt towards an aesthetic interest in multilingual borrowing, while the second reaches for another level of analysis:

1) songs show patterns of absorption of, and resistance to, linguistic change which follow genre-specific considerations of musical aesthetics, rather than linguistic convenience;

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2) the specific combination of music and language in certain songs is understood as establishing a new discourse which is perhaps best to be called "myth" [Baumann 1981:1].

The Miri, a numerically small people, are exposed to modern life styles tied to the Arabic language. They sing songs in both languages. Conveniently for analysis, those in Miri are inseparable from the Miri ethnic way of life, while those in Arabic speak to the newer model the Miri observe among Arab speakers:

In a Miri language song, to change but a personal name, a location, or a date, will affect the contents, as it is about known people, real things, and specific events. By contrast, an Arabic language song can, and very many do, replace one personal name by another, and one thing by another. . . . If Miri language songs can be compared to films, Arabic language songs are like photographic stills: they describe not a process of doing, but a state of being; their characters are not actors, but models, their things not real, but props; their words not things, but symbols [Baumann 1981:9].

So for Baumann, the use of language is synonymous with a cultural pattern of ambivalence, an interest in two parallel but opposed life styles: the traditional Miri way and that of the "dream world of Arab-style comfort," of "The Good Life" (ibid.). This is what he means by "myth," so he concludes that:

If language and music do indeed, in specific combination and at specific historical junctures, establish the discourse of myth, then it becomes all the more necessary to view music as an active force which, of its own momentum, reacts WITH, rather than TO, the language mode [Baumann 1981:12].

I am not sure Baumann's definition of "myth" as part of a musical/cultural process is as yet focused. The idea that language and music must be seen as two equal, dynamic systems, is one which has been accepted for some time. What is salient, however, about his argument for our purposes is the suggestion that situations of multiple languages and musics can offer some really fruitful, otherwise unavailable examples of the specific ways in which these two systems interact. In the Miri case, opposed song styles as a paradigm of a cultural dichotomy present us with a very different use of multilingualism than the inter-ethnic accommodation pattern of Eastern Europe and northern Afghanistan cited earlier.

Having briefly surveyed multilingualism as a holistic phenomenon embracing entire music cultures, I would like now to turn to the question of the individual multilingual folksinger. We might think of such musicians as people who build a personal repertory from a pool of songs in more than one language. This leads to a linguistic stratification of the individual's song world, a fact I find to be of more than passing interest. It is at the micro-level of such highly personal choices that one can gain valuable insights into the processes that shape the music culture as a whole. I will take my examples from Jewish materials, both in the Mediterranean area and in Eastern Europe. The Jews offer a particularly rich case to examine: multilingualism has been built into their varied regional cultures for two thousand years. Internally, many Jewish communities have their own, in-group bilingualism involving Hebrew, the tongue of sacred texts, and a colloquial language, itself a fusion of several linguistic sources linked to the immediate ethnic surroundings of a given Jewish community. Added to this inbuilt multilingualism is the need to acquire one, often several, local non-Jewish languages for trade and daily social intercourse with surrounding populations.

In the Mediterranean area, the Jews are Sephardic, that is, descendants of the Jewish population of Spain which was expelled five centuries ago as part of Christian reconquest

of Iberia from Muslim rule. These Jews moved along the entire Mediterranean littoral, from Morocco to Egypt, Turkey, and the Balkans. Musical multilingualism was a way of life for the Sephardim, articulated differently in each local area. The Israeli writer Amnon Shamosh has vividly described the situation for his native town of Halab (Aleppo), Syria, and the musical consequences:

Halab . . . was the meeting point of three cultures. . . . It was Arabic at home, French in society and on the street, and Hebrew in the synagogue. . . . We spoke a jargon which was composed of Arabic, in its unique Allepine accent, with touches of French, Ladino [the pan-Sephardic, Spanish-based language] and Hebrew. To this day, a Jew from Aleppo is easily recognized by his speech, be his birthplace Mexico, Panama, Japan, Buenos Aires, or Brooklyn [Shamosh 1979:5].

I sensed all this many years before I comprehended it. Already at the age of five, when I commenced my first "career" as a singer to entertain celebrating adults, I chose my songs accordingly: there would be one by Abdul Wahab, another of Maurice Chevalier, and *Adon Olam* [a Hebrew hymn] to round off the repertoire. And if an encore was demanded, I would let them beg a little, shut my eyes artistically, begin with *Mipi-El* [Hebrew], go on with *Ala Dal'una* and end with the *Marseillaise*. . . . I'd descend from my chair to receive my favourite reward: praise, kisses and sweets [Shamosh 1979:6].

Why the acclaim? Presumably because the precocious child has grasped the essence of his family circle's culture, which lies in an unruffled eclecticism. It is part of their heritage as well as of their toolkit for strategic survival in an alien, often threatening non-Jewish culture. For the individual, the process of selecting a personal edition of the available cultural encyclopedia becomes an understood fact of life.

A recent study (Shallon 1982) of the Turkish-Sephardic community of Seattle underlines and amplifies the point just raised. Linguistic and musical eclecticism was part and parcel of the life of these people in Turkey, yet varied enormously from individual to individual, depending on personal context. One informant was extremely proud of his ability to chant long passages of the Qur'an, learned while temporarily attending the local Muslim school. Obviously, there is nothing typically Jewish about such behavior, but it underlines a strong desire to use one's potential for multilingualism, even in the case of a culturally inappropriate repertory.

In fact, what is distinctive about this group of Sephardim is not so much their retention of fifteenth-century Spanish balladry, the trait for which they are coveted by scholars, but their heavy investment in eclecticism. For some singers, it meant recording careers in the early decades of the twentieth century, when Jewish musicians performed in a variety of languages for commercial release. However, in the American context this versatility is no longer of strategic value. Rather, it has tended to isolate the older generation of Sephardim. Multilingualism as a musical way of life makes sense only in the presence of the formative linguistic and musical communities, which simply do not exist on the coast of the Pacific Ocean the way they did along the Mediterranean. Thus, the question of transmission to the next generation becomes highly problematic. In the Seattle case, it is via Hebrew alone, which still continues as the sacred tongue, that such handing down is possible, as Ladino, Turkish, Arabic, and Greek are not viable choices for the American-born generations. The multilingual context that spawned a set of musical biographies has vanished; communal continuity must be rephrased in a set of choices involving only Hebrew and English. A new eclecticism emerges on American soil.

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From this fairly broad picture of how individuals fit into a complex web of multilingual music-making, I would like to move, in conclusion, to the highly personal factors involved in song selection. For a number of Eastern European Jewish singers we have ample documentation of the slow accretion of repertory.<sup>2</sup> The case of a woman like Lifsha Schaechter Widman is typical in its singularity. Born near the turn of the century in a Bukovina village, she was located on the far edge of the Austro-Hungarian cultural-administrative sphere. At the other end of the bridge across the nearby river was the Russian Empire, where her relatives grew up in a markedly different cultural, linguistic, and musical context. The early phase of Widman's life, through age thirteen when she left for America on her own, was a time of avid song acquisition from a wide variety of sources and languages. She learned German early from aunts and in her one year of formal education. The stock of German songs thus acquired became crucial in her emigration experience. As her route to America lay across German-speaking territory and via a German shipping line, her ability to perform songs stood her in good stead on numerous occasions. She became something of a leader among her refugee group at temporary detention centers and on board ship where, for example, singing for the German crew was rewarded with coveted oranges for Widman and her friends. Such experiences leave their mark on folksingers, charging particular items with special electricity.

Widman's American phase lasted through 1914, when, unluckily, she returned to Europe to find a husband just in time to be delayed for thirty-odd years due to the outbreak of World War I. From this brief New York period she remembers an Irving Berlin song as peddled by a street singer. It was the song Berlin wrote on losing his first wife, "When I Lost You." Perhaps it is not too speculative to imagine Widman tying Berlin's sense of loss to her own situation. Upon surviving two world wars and the Holocaust, she returned to America. Each phase, each locale, and a great many key people in her life continued to add items in a number of languages to her expanding repertory. For Widman, as for so many multilingual singers, material is not necessarily stored by language, but by association. It is not enough to say that since she lived in a multiethnic world, she ended up with a patchwork repertory. Eclecticism does not mean indiscriminate absorption of diverse sources, but rather choosiness in building a personal musical world. Multilingual singers, like polyglot speakers, may not be aware of slipping from one language to another in singing unless the exact memory or bond to the song text is brought up by the interviewer. Such attitudes go against an assumption of clear lines of demarcation between "our" music and "their" music. That this is the case among Jewish singers is striking, since this is a group well known for maintaining, and/or having forced upon them, strong ethnic boundaries.

The assimilation of the same "outside" item into the repertoires of two different Eastern European Jewish folksingers drives home the point of personal choice and context. Lifsha Schaechter Widman sang the Schubert song "Ständchen" ("Serenade"), because it was in the air in her Austro-Hungarian village. In performing the song, as I have discussed elsewhere (Slobin 1980), she effectively turned Schubert into an Eastern European Jewish songwriter through musical adaptation, cutting short the composer's through-composed structure to form the standard Yiddish-language folksong quatrain. This truncation also retains the minor mode as the prevalent key, typical of her group's repertory. In addition, her singing style introduces glides and ornaments in places typical of the Jewish folksong.

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<sup>2</sup> The research cited is from the data of the YIVO Yiddish Folksong Project, a NEH-funded project directed by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and cited with her permission.

Henryk Rubinlicht, a Polish urban Jew, was interviewed for the documentary film *Image before My Eyes* (1980), a chronicle of pre-Holocaust Polish Jewish life. He discusses his sadness at being drafted into the Polish Army in 1919. He speaks of parting from his girlfriend, and of the song he sang to her that evening. This is the "Ständchen," with a Polish text he himself composed for the occasion. The fact that he was able to sing it in a tender, dreamy manner sixty years later echoes the poignancy of that moment. That he used Polish indicates his urban Jewish origins: one sister became a sculptor, another a prominent actress, all cultural activities far removed from Widman's rural village. What is striking about the contrast of the two Schubert variants is that it is the singer who was more removed from the source of high culture and concert life who was faithful to the Schubert original in text, but less faithful in music. The man from the city took the melody for granted, including the modulation from minor to major, and used the text as the arena for creativity. Once again, one has to view language and music as equal, interactive systems to grasp the nature of folksong process, and to take the existence of multilingualism as a basic component of the equation.

In this brief study I do not pretend to state impressive conclusions on multilingualism in folk music cultures. What I have tried to show is how subtly multilingual singers handle their linguistic resources; they seem to use them as a factor for creative choice. A similar situation seems apparent from the little work that has been done for folk music cultures as a whole. The analysis could easily spread into the domain of popular music as well. In his study of Ukrainian-Canadian "country" music, Robert Klymasz (1972:376) carefully delineates stimulus diffusion from English song texts to Ukrainian among bilingual songwriters. Just as Kolessa showed common metric schemes in Western Slavic languages to aid in adaptation of song texts, so Klymasz points out that similarities in prosody between Ukrainian and English leads to similar transplanting. Broadening our survey to include such popular song processes reinforces my belief that multilingualism is both widespread and significant, yet neglected, in our continuing study of the world's music.

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