

## **Closing Reflections, "Sacred Music in Transition" Conference Mark Slobin**

I would like to begin with an epigraph, the motto of the State of Connecticut, where this conference began. I assume you all know it, but to refresh your memories, it is "qui transtulit, sustinet," adapted from Psalm 79. In the local context, it meant that God would sustain those whom he had transplanted, in this case the English immigrants of the seventeenth century. Nothing could be more appropriate for this occasion, where our accomplished speakers have told us that people experiencing great changes feel that God will sustain them. So New England is a fine place to think about sacred music in transition.

But as it happens, it was in New York that I had an insight about the overall shape of this conference and how to respond to it. I was watching the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. The dancers were constantly regrouping from individual to collective activity, from traditional to innovative dance movements, and the word "oscillation" sprang to mind. It is not surprising that dance should spark one's thinking about the social arrangement of music. Upon reflection, it occurred to me that one way to think through what's been presented here is as a set of *oscillations*, arranged as a continuum of intensity. In no order, they are: between the individual and the community, between heritage and innovation, between mainstream and sectarian, and between local and universal.

This perspective casts something of a shadow on the keyword of the conference, "transition," or at least sheds a different light on it. The possible problem with transition is that it retains a vestige of older unilinear approaches; it might make one think of change as a one-way street. We come from somewhere and transition to the next stage. Oscillation suggests a vibration, as in oscilloscope or oscillogram. It might imply a pendular motion, with a return to an earlier position, or, in my preferred dictionary definition of the verb to oscillate, "to vary or vacillate between different beliefs, conditions, etc.," which covers much of what has been said here. I'll try this idea out on what I heard, and hope not to be oversimplifying people's often complex and subtle presentations.

Zoe Sherinian's paper speaks to oscillation between the individual and the community. Appavoo's daring and dynamic intervention into local caste and religious politics appears to have affected the way people think. His personal, risk-taking repertoire has infiltrated the local collective consciousness. So often sacred music

flows from a charismatic creator to an initially skeptical, then convinced congregation. On another plane, Zoe's work points to an oscillation between innovation and heritage. What started as something brand-new has rather quickly become part of the accepted way of thinking performatively and transformatively.

The individual-community oscillation also stands out clearly in Jeff Summit's work. Many of the small congregations he has studied are themselves breakaways from the larger communal units that defined American Jewry in earlier decades. As Jeff has shown in his book-length study of these subcommunities, music can be a powerful motivation for identity within small sacred social structures. But once these are set up, individuals may feel their own urge to find personal goals, or even be ambitious to take leadership roles, and this drives their self-imposed pedagogical task of learning cantillation. Disregarding the communal structures they themselves have often helped to set up, Summit tells us these driven people "understand this proper performance of sacred text as a way to position themselves at the core of authentic religious experience." And they compound their self-imposed isolation by not learning orally from an acknowledged authority, but on their own, in their spare time. Nevertheless, these spiritual seekers have to oscillate back to communal identity to chant the texts they have mastered, since the performance can only occur in front of the whole congregation at the Sabbath service. At this point, in one congregant's pithy phrase, your fellow-worshippers can be "like sharks who smell blood in the water" as they monitor your accuracy. This back and forth within even small religious units is striking. The weekly alternation between the privacy of your car, where you multitask along a brain-twisting learning curve, and the nakedness of chanting, still alone, in front of your censorious peers, presents a very striking oscillation. Heritage is very solid here, with innovation being limited to technology rather than substance.

Turning to Engelhardt's Estonian evangelicals, here the local-universal oscillation seems most pronounced. The metropolitan is Cypriot, and Estonians go abroad to several countries in search of community with other Orthodox brethren rather than turning inward to create a purely national church. Along the heritage-innovation axis, we see movement in both directions. A patron saint now anchors their church, a true heritage move, while the inclusion of rock and hip-hop, or what Marini calls "an exchange of denominational identity for popular cultural identity" is truly innovative. It also evokes the mainstream-sectarian oscillation, since, to quote Marini again, "gospel makes no racial or cultural distinctions." The simultaneity of these varied oscillations makes us realize that cultural moments combine

often disparate strategies and possibilities, a sort of bricolage that is particularly pronounced when the shock of social disjuncture slowly gives away to a temporary new order of musical meaning. "Transition" does better work in these postcolonial or postwar situations of which, unfortunately, we have not fewer, but a steady number in our days.

Timothy Rommen's paper also accentuates the oscillation from local to universal. Full Gospel Trinidadians strategically concentrate on American gospel as a prime source of music. This helps them to integrate a diverse congregation, since this non-local music "makes it easier to participate despite one's ethnicity." Trommen cites the concept of "the invisible church" as a defense for the adoption of what might otherwise be considered culturally imperialistic gospel in the Trinidiadian. This defense only strengthens the appeal to a universalist orientation. But he also tells us that despite looking like an import, "North American gospel music is more local(ized) than are gospelypso or jamoo or gospel reggae," its homegrown competitors. In today's very volatile musical environment, we need exactly this sort of well-informed microstudy, with its suggestion of internal cross-currents as the motivation for change. Words like "globalization" or even "glocalization," especially with their implication of active external agents, are increasingly weak reeds to lean on.

By contrast to the Trinidadian Gospel notion of outreach and domestication, Tore Tvarno Lind's talk points us to the oscillation towards a very local heritage as part of a strategy aimed at an almost hegemonic authenticity. The Vatopedi monastery is currently swinging away from reforms of the nineteenth century that restricted pre-existing practice, probably in the service of a kind of modernization that involved standardization, a process common to many sacred music practices. Vatopedi's leaders want a rich diversity of sources, but completely under the control of their powerful aesthetic: "the richer the better the more accurate the better," with high stakes---"who earn's God's blessings." This form of revivalism has much more riding on it than similar projects arising from the more familiar Euro-American folk music movements, but the quest for authenticity, and even a certain hegemony based on excellence of performance—dare I say--rings a bell. Virtuosity, combined with an appeal to heritage markers—here manuscripts, furniture, and handicrafts—is a powerful organizing force in all sorts of revival movements. Despite the collective nature of the chant process, what we are seeing is a sharp shift to individuality, here the singular monastery among its peers, rather than a move to a more universal approach to sacred music.

Across the Mediterranean Sea, Rich Jankowsky's work centers more on long-term trends of accommodation than on recent seismic musical change. The way former sub-Saharan slaves intervened in Tunisian spiritual life suggests subtle forms of sectarian-mainstream relations. Here, a subaltern subculture has gained its cultural footing and some amount of social power through an extensive network of sacred performances and practices, which have for a very long time coexisted with the daily spiritual practice of a nominally Islamic society. No doubt there have been many small oscillations in this relationship over the centuries. I think terms like "syncretic," and even "transition," do very little work in a context as rich as this Tunisian case study.

I have probably veered towards the reductive in my quest to identify trends of sacred music oscillation. This becomes less of a danger with presentations that have layered motivations and multiple moves. Mirjana Lausevic's description of the history of ilahiya performance among Bosnian Muslims evokes oscillation on more than one plane. In its early period, the ilahiya gained attention as a move from mainstream to sectarian. Building on a pre-existing genre, the new ilahiya added novel performance features, moving the genre from heritage to innovation. It is through this very innovation that the ilahiya has found its place, oscillating back as heritage in its new, postwar embodiment. Finally, the ilahiya now swings out to the universal from the local by its referencing of a more pan-islamic, rather than purely Bosnian Muslim, context. The community-individual motion seems less pronounced in this case.

Stephen Marini's talk brings us to the full complexity of the American, media-dominated scene, a long ways from Mount Athos or the newly mediaized space of postwar Bosnia. Typically for the US, Marini finds that innovation is in itself traditional. He cites two hundred years of carefully crafted change, a heritage of strategic volatility that is very American, across denominations and religions. Indeed, he finds that some of the most media-driven performances represent what he nicely terms "repristinization" rather than being perceived as radical change. Yet he does not let us rest comfortably with one layer of oscillation. He also points to a strong local-universal shift as part of a strategy to gain audience expansion through multicultural outreach. The message must be diversified to embrace all potential audiences in today's spiritual marketplace, to quote the title of a book that is so relevant to understanding recent sacred music in the US. Implicit in these moves is a strong oscillation between sectarian and mainstream. In fact, the burgeoning, multibillion-dollar sacred music industry blurs this line more than ever in American history, as earlier fears of sacred-

secular mixing give way to boundary-blurring. This will no doubt eventually provoke a swing among some Protestants back to a more purely sectarian approach.

Phil Bohlman's contribution goes beyond a single scene and covers many disparate performance trends in the New Central and Eastern Europe. His phrase "sacred community," referencing new nation-states as well as religious manifestations, makes "sacred" more of an umbrella term than do the other papers. In so doing, it widens the range of oscillation. Pilgrimage, once taken for granted as universally European, contracted severely under socialism and has now swung back to its older social position in the pendular motion that the word often connotes. The Czestochowa example offers the example of a dynamically revamped internal Polish pilgrimage. Its addition of a secular saint—Lech Walesa—illustrates how innovation works in the service of heritage creation. Finally, Bohlman's Ukrainians work furiously to return to a nationalism that never really existed before, since the Ukraine is only in its first full flowering of nation-state development. Hardly surprising, then, that it is in the modern media version of staking a claim—the Eurovision Song Contest—that the local can coexist with the universal so comfortably, if not exactly sacredly. Finally, Sarah Weiss and Marzanna Poplawska have laid out very different visions of the transitions that occur in one sacred space, Java. Today's Javanese can swing in very different directions in rethinking their ritualized dramatic performances. Sarah describes a mainstream situation, where the wayang kulit mostly entertains, and only lightly implies a sacred context. Innovation enters not so much to enhance ritual efficacy as to maintain the shadow puppet's core position as heritage, with its potential for ritual transformation. The genre needs to stay competitive in a context of multiple entertainment forms and increasing secularization. This instigates something like a sectarian-mainstream move as forms like the flashy dangdut filter into traditional wayang kulit. For Marzanna's Christians, however, innovation makes a more universalist move. Activists can infuse local heritage forms with a practice like singing in chords, signaling the Church's connections beyond Java to co-religionists around the world. As she describes it, inculturation is not just a transitional practice that moves natives towards the universal church, but a set of ongoing and localized practices that oscillate in unpredictable patterns globally.

To wrap up this wrapup, I can only say that I have been educated and enlightened by the very colorful and characteristic ways that people make choices in their ritual lives. I am heartened that everywhere, music seems to be a key component of definition, acting

as the propellant that fuels people's transitions from one version of sacred space to the next.

## Transition and Oscillation in Sacred Music

Mark Slobin

One way to think through the preceding essays is as a set of *oscillations*: between the individual and the community, between heritage and innovation, between mainstream and sectarian, and between local and universal.

This perspective casts a shadow on the title of the original conference, Sacred Music in Transition. "Transition" might retain a vestige of older unilinear approaches, where change is a one-way street. We come from somewhere and transition to the next stage. Oscillation suggests a vibration, as in oscilloscope. It might imply a pendular motion, with a return to an earlier position, or, in my preferred dictionary definition, "to vary or vacillate between different beliefs, conditions, etc."

This retrospective look examines each contribution for the intricate and multiple ways in which musical traditions, repertoires, and actors move back and forth from various positions over time, in a complex dance. Layered motivations and multiple moves characterize the unfolding of musical scenes; over time, we can begin to discern patterns in the very colorful and characteristic ways that people make choices in their ritual lives.

Overall, this anthology supports its basic assertion: music acts as the propellant that fuels people's shifts from one version of sacred space to the next.