Multicultural Metamethods: Lessons from Visby

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Source: *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 2000, Vol. 32 (2000), pp. 166–173

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.com/stable/3185249

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LESSONS FROM VISBY

by Mark Slobin

On January 10-13, 1999, an ICTM Colloquium was held in Visby, Sweden, sponsored by the Swedish committee of the ICTM as part of the long-term research project "Musik-Medier-Mangkultur" (Music, Media, Multiculturalism), directed by Krister Malm and Dan Lundberg. I was one of the participants, along with the following cast of characters: John Baily, Dieter Christensen, Beverly Diamond, Salwa El-Shawan Castelo-Branco, Eva Fock, Josep Marti i Perez, Pirkko Moisala, Pieter Remes, and from Sweden, Hans Huss, Henrik Karlsson, Dan Lundberg, Krister Malm, and Owe Ronström. Presenters were asked not to give formal presentations, but rather thematic introductions to extensive discussions, which were taped and transcribed. Malm and Lundberg later created diagrams and tabulations of the terminology introduced and the concepts raised by the sessions, and asked me to use the conference papers and discussion as a springboard for addressing the issues raised at Visby.

The colloquium illustrates the thorny, complex, and thought-provoking concepts that arise when a small international group of ethnomusicologists tries to grapple with what was presented as the colloquium theme: "Music in 'Emerging Multicultural' Societies." My reflections on what I am calling the "metamethods" of such events are grouped under two headings: An analysis of the general discourse of the colloquium, and an overview of broad themes that emerged from presentations and discussion. Given the strength of the assembled scholars and the seriousness of their approach over a few days of intense discussion, I am not critiquing anyone in particular, or the entire enterprise in general, in what follows, but mean only to muse on the way we approach the task of thinking across local studies to aim at general cross-cultural principles.

Diagramming the Discourse

Events such as the Visby colloquium occur within a general discursive framework, which is to say everyone arrives with a tacit set of assumptions about how to present the data derived from observation, and then proceeds to discuss the issues that arise from the papers. The outlines of this framework struck me as worth sketching out as part of my assignment.

The Use of English as a Conference Language. The decision to make English the sole language of papers and discussion strongly influenced the discourse at Visby, beginning with the pre-conference definition of the topic. The program committee wrestled long and hard with a one-phrase rubric. The final choice, "music in 'emerging multicultural' societies" was not easily arrived at, as the quotation marks indicate. It is clearly English-based, since the connotations of "emerging" and the word "multicultural" bear the imprint of American thinking. The choice of "multicultural" tended to inflect the discussion. For example, Salwa el-Shawan Castelo-Branco was led to remark: "I think we confuse the political term 'multiculturalism' coming from above

with the analytical term." (In the long run, it was agreed that the term was an administrative/political concept more than an "analytical term.") Josep Marti's offered this distinction: "I distinguish between multicultural and pluricultural. When I use multicultural, I am referring to policies, the ideas. Pluricultural is in a more neutral manner." The problem here is that the shades of meaning both North Americans and Europeans have drawn from the semantic field of the English word "multiculturalism" do not readily allow for linguistic play like "pluricultural," an English neologism brought in from outside an accepted frame of reference. Other words in the call to the conference, such as "cultural pluralism," "cultural diversity," "ethnic group," and "subculture" trail similar Anglo-origin clouds of meaning.

From the point of view of English itself, this international extension of American terms filters out their multiple meaning within the language of origin. In the US, "multicultural" has tended to fade, since it became so radically polarized a concept. It did service as a rallying-cry among liberals, or a badge of shame as used by conservatives seeking to discredit those liberals. A general discourse agreed upon by an international group will tend to crowd out more local understandings of a term. A case in point is "heritage," another word that has traveled abroad from English. After hearing Slobin's description of the US situation, where the term has been fairly broadly accepted as a bland political compromise, Beverly Diamond noted that "in the Canadian context, it has kind of conflicted connotations. We have a Ministry of Heritage [already marking the term off from US usage], which is serious political stuff. But some community members really see it as a way of locking culturally specific traditions in the past, and they don't like it much at all." Here we have the nesting and overlapping of US and Canadian practice and of supercultural-subcultural rifts in understanding, all nearly lost in the context of needing to foster a conference discourse. I have no doubt that this conference account itself is deeply marked by the ways English pushes my pen in certain semantic directions.

From the European side, speakers sometimes noted the gap between an English-origin term and the local counterpart, as when Swedish delegates pointed out that *invandrare* is not at all the same as "immigrant." Yet the echo that "immigrant" sends out into our discourse tends to displace local usage even if the original English term is not directly cited, but translated into a national language, including a nation's bureaucracy and its scholars.

Similar issues arise in a project like the *Europe* volume of the Garland Encyclopedia of Music, published in 2000 (Rice, Porter, and Goertzen 2000). Summarizing a continent in the grip of serious self-analysis, the editors had to make many choices about topic headings, and they used mainly American categories expressed in English. Words like "traditional" and "contemporary," phrases like "world music" and "local knowledge" that appear as entry titles — these are just surface markers of a deep Anglicization of discourse. Although the construction of musical reality in *Europe* (a splendid contribution to knowledge) belongs mostly to the homegrown scholars of many lands who contributed, they must express their understanding of their own societies and heritages in the English medium. Suitably, the "Immigrant Music in

Europe" essay is written by an English-raised writer (Elizabeth J. Miles), who finds it easy to deploy the kinds of terminology and conceptualizations I have been mentioning in regard to the Visby colloquium.

Regional Voices. The general discourse at Visby was deeply marked by the (commonplace) decision to invite participants pretty much as "delegates" from specific countries. Speakers tended to resort to the "in my country..." approach to discussion. This situation arose not only from the kinds of disparities I've hinted at above, but from the UN nature of many of our international meetings. Some sharp exchanges between Swedish and Finnish participants (about the experience of minority groups — including Finns — within the Swedish multicultural framework) showed that scholarly identities can still be strongly shaped by earlier national histories.

Despite the dominance of *national* representation, the growing *regionalism* of Europe showed through. Marti, for example, spoke much more from a Catalan experience than from a general Spanish perspective. The grounding of the conference on Visby, an island with rather weak "Swedish" identity located far from the mainland, allowed us all, particularly through Owe Ronstrom's adept orientation, to appreciate why the national may no longer be the most cogent means for summarizing individual and local consciousness, even in musical terms.

Taken as a whole, the colloquium was remarkably Eurocentric, including the pan-European North American influence just cited. Examples from outside, like the very interesting analyses of Tanzanian society by Pieter Remes and Oman by Dieter Christensen, mostly showed the incommensurable, rather than the universal, nature of trends. Here is one moment of discussion that illustrates this issue: Krister Malm — "Is there a discourse about multiculture in a place like Tanzania?" PR — "They don't talk about it in terms of multiculturalism, but in terms of...imported and indigenous cultures." So is Tanzania an "emerging multicultural society?" Does outside or inside evaluation of trends count most? Such questions arise when we look beyond a standardized, English-derived Euro-American discourse.

Ethnomusicological habits. Some ways of doing business have carried over from ethnomusicology's older venues — "remote" cultures — to the way we approach the internal social groupings of "our own" societies. Despite disclaimers and exceptions, the bulk of the reporting at Visby was about public events. Social behavior that is "out in the open" is easy to find and to document, so it gains a presumed importance. A great deal of discussion centered on the "official" representation of subcultural groups within complex societies. Yet such activity represents a tiny percentage of the total share of consciousness that individual social actors devote to music.

A sentence like this one can stand for a broader bent of thought: "Who are the groupings that use music to become visible, to create, manifest, and give form to themselves as a collective?" Such a question ascribes to public performance a really outsized significance.

It also makes another assumption: That music moves from inside the community or individual outwards, even if, as Krister Malm points out, the musics of representation — hip-hop, trash metal — are understood by everyone

to originate from external sources. What remains from dissecting the processes of distinction is a two-way process: People externalize as a response to outside demand while simultaneously selecting music from the great flux of available cultural energies for internal effect and affect, personally or as a group choice. In this context, Ewa Fock's account of the musical preferences of "minority" youth in Denmark pointed to the common lack of imprecision about choice. Her study stressed private listening habits, and delineated the sharp disparity between those youth tastes and what the mainstream erroneously generalizes as "ethnic" preferences, based on a vague knowledge of the public music of older generations.

Yet even here another old habit crept in: The tendency to take informants' opinions at face value. Sympathetic to or even advocates for the people we engage in our work, we lean towards ignoring the internal contradictions of their discourse or the possibility that, consciously or unconsciously, they are putting us on, or saying what we want to hear. Given the power disparity that is still inherent between the scholar-bureaucrat and the subcultural citizen, we might strain a little harder to get past our own stake in the dialogue.

General Issues

The entire conference proceedings were shot through with periodizations, large and small. While this can also be attributed to scholarly habit, it arises mainly from the fact that, like the words themselves—"multicultural"—the experiences of post-1945 Euro-America pulsed in wavelike fashion across the geographic, political and social landscape. A brief summary is in order.

The United States slowly implemented the ideology of "cultural pluralism" that had first been sketched out in the 1920s, at the very end of the period of mass immigration. After 1945, the movement for "black power" merged with redefinition of immigration policies in 1965 to create new official and media attitudes and policies about internal diversity. Canada actually moved more quickly than the US to formalize some of the supercultural machinery around pluralism. For Western Europe, the tacit acceptance of an internal demographic shift brought about by postcolonial returnees, "guestworkers," and refugees in the 1960s and 1970s, turned towards bureaucratic acknowledgement. In the 1990s, the post-cold war reality of a western Europe free of external threat and ready to both expand and consolidate its power accelerated redefinition of internal differences. No longer a threat to the authority of the nation-state, long-standing regional distinctiveness (Friulian, Breton, Catalan...), old-time relations with minorities (e.g. Saami in Scandinavia, Jews and Roma elsewhere), and recent understandings about new groupings (Turks in Sweden and Germany) changed their character, in both the legal and the popular mind. The European Union's definition of itself as "the Europe of Regions" has only accelerated and legitimized this centrifugal process.

This outward rippling of the new multicultural mentality eventually reached the postsocialist states. By the mid-1990s, Poland could serve as an

example of a society that was once intensely — and tensely — multicultural, but with the extraordinary resettlement of populations and redrawing of national boundaries after 1945, found itself forming an almost monoethnic state for the first time. It soon adopted the notion of "minority" recognition and encouragement in the multicultural vein that "Europe" offered as part of a new national redefinition. At the same time, the collapse of multiculturalism in the former Yugoslavia and its apparent difficulties in the new Russia (e.g. the agonies of Chechnya) only enhanced the sense of a pulsating flow lapping around islands of contentiousness.

Within this general tidal motion, of course, there are local swirls and eddies, apparent in this remark by Salwa el-Shawan Castelo-Branco: "In Portugal now, we see the shift from ex-colonials to a multicultural situation. The nature of immigration is changing. We now have a lot of people coming as workers from African countries that were not Portuguese colonies." This particular configuration is not a widespread one — ex-colonial African immigrants vs. non-ex-colonial African immigrants, each with different musical inclinations or relationships to local European societies. But even if it were, it would play itself out differently in each case. Every social space has its own experience of the general pattern, so the conference had to look for the generalities amid the particulars.

It is here that terminology works hardest, trying to conceptualize rather diffuse and novel social realities. So it is not surprising that we get sets of parallel metaphors for the same situations, such as "the mosaic," "the salad bowl," "the fruit salad," "the birthday cake," to name a few European examples. Underlying all of these is this concept: We are all different, in the same way. Well known in the US for decades and thoroughly worked out in Canada (e.g. the federal Minister of Heritage, the Ontario Minister of Multiculturalism), this benevolent attitude towards diversity, all under the banner of an assumed joint understanding of civility, strongly stresses isolated and innocuous features like food (hence the gastronomic metaphors of the terms themselves), and music, as metonyms and metaphors of difference. The recent shift in Germany away from nationality by inheritance to a more generalized sense of citizenship is but one example of a truly conceptual shift within the European social space.

As I mentioned earlier, the devolution of power from nation-state centers to regional bases seems mostly to have had the effect of merely shifting the rhetoric and praxis down the ladder. Still, reports like Marti's from Barcelona show that this need not be the case, since the taking on of supercultural status might have different results, once the Catalans decide how they really do want to relate to the Moroccans in their midst, to take just one example of dozens happening across the newly multicultural Europe. But even within a small-scale, supposedly unified society like Malta, the grounds of identity have shifted in the new Euro-transnational order. Paul Sant Cassia uses the term "post nation-state" not to refer to devolution of central authority, but to describe the situation of Malta, a marginal country, pressing its nose against the window of Europe. Part of the process of putting its own house in order vis-à-vis the EU is Malta's fostering of emergent forms of nostalgia to reshape

a community and set into motion "new communities of listening." (Sant Cassia 2000:299)

The role of the state seems clearer than that of the media in this ongoing process. Talks at Visby referenced this powerful agent of cultural transmission and brokering sporadically, but tended not to spell out just what media intervention means. Partly, this might be due to the differential activity of the media. The traditional contrast between the state-controlled media of Europe and Canada and the uncontrolled media of the US has been collapsing as Europeans and Canadians have allowed commercial competitors to join the formerly state-dominated media market. Still, despite the inevitable resulting homogenization, local disparities remain across the Euro-American territory and within the media worlds of individual nation-states globally. The intensive marketing of selected "world" musics to local populations was cited here and there at Visby as an important variable, with unpredictable results, since analysts tend to assume similarity rather than difference locally, or view the media politically rather than culturally. Newer media loom as important shifters of strategy, as revealed in Dan Lundberg's report on the Assyrians, a tiny ethnic/religious group that has found new strength through worldwide cyberbonding.

Another broadly based theme that recurred unsystematically was the nature of the aesthetic domain. Some participants reminded us that aesthetic choice is conditioned by access—what you get to hear. Others took up the important question of whether group aesthetics represent autonomous choices or arise as a response to the top-down power of bureaucratic intervention. Generally, speakers described aesthetic affiliation and affinity as a free-ranging force, part of individual or generational preferences, or as a statement of some other category of variation within an acknowledged subculture. But the very nature of aesthetic choice as a social category was also put into question by Owe Ronström's work on Swedish pensioners, a non-ethnic subculture. He finds that they exert strong aesthetic choices as compensation for their general lack of social power, creating their own venues and formats for music. Yet this scores them no points, since "to enter the aesthetic realm is a mark of being in the periphery...so doing the music confirms their peripheral position." Such a finding flies in the face not only of our accepted view that self-affirmation through music is socially important, but even challenges our bedrock assumption that music really *counts* in the social arena—not a comforting conclusion for ethnomusicologists.

Overall, agency kept emerging as the unused, but ubiquitous center of discourse. John Baily described the Khalifas, a South Asian "ethnic group" that has moved strongly into concert venues in a chameleon-like way while maintaining powerful internal values. From the Swedish side, Ziya Atekin, a Turkish musician who has been the focus of several studies, once again emerged as the example of an individual exercising a powerful sense of agency that swirls across the commercial-subcultural divide in kaleidoscopic ways. These and other case studies remind us that we are far from understanding the many manifestations of agency, a fashionable word for identity-based initiative. Many of the terms Malm and Lundberg tabulated from the

conference proceedings can be grouped under this powerful rubric: desire, nostalgia, self-esteem, cultural broker, identity, awareness, representation, enacting, displaying, staging, projecting, shaping ...all these and many more speak to the effervescence of Euro-American societies in their current state of weak governmental control, constant flux in the definition of social units, strong commercial competitiveness for markets, continuous innovation in the technologies of linkage like the incursion of the Internet, and a greater sphere of action for individual, as opposed to group or national, identity.

Identity, of course, was one of the most-used words, appearing under individual, collective, multiple, fragmented, performed, artistic, national, cultural, articulated, and coherent in the tabulation of terms. Needless to say, "coherent" is not my word of choice for summarizing what we know about identity. Like many another term before it, this one is doing its work as the much-traveled, overburdened horse we ride until it drops, exhausted, from overuse, just in time for us to notice a fresh steed in the distance we can mount to carry us to greener fields of metamethod.

In my own report at Visby, on the transatlantic klezmer music scene (detailed in Slobin 2000), I pointed out that part of my choice of topic flowed from the problems this particular micromusic presents for methodology. Born in Europe as part of eastern European Jewish culture, transplanted to North America, and nearly annihilated in its homeland, klezmer since 1990 has returned to Europe in a reverse flow, seen in certain ways as an American music, as Jewish music, as a "world music," or locally as a "minority" music. The aesthetic, identity, and agency issues I've just cited come to the fore here in a puzzling way.

A useful comparison and contrast to the klezmer case might be found in the account Paul Austerlitz (2000) gives of Finnish national musical thinking today. Far from the restless rootlessness of the klezmer scene, it might appear that Finnish experimentation would be homegrown and flow logically from a national narrative. Yet in his conclusion, Austerlitz points first to the strong authority of transnational influences: "Today's experimenters make old local styles relevant by relating them to global currents," and almost immediately points to agency: "Each contemporary Finnish musician whom I met chooses from a plethora of available influences to construct his own aesthetic universe, to forge a '*personal*' national identity..."(ibid: 205).

Toying with terminology aside, the discussion at Visby only intensified the urgency of ethnomusicology's need to grapple with the tough questions that arise when we look at contemporary societies not as sets of fixed formations, but as volatile mixtures of social, cultural, and political ingredients, with strong implications for pushing the edges of our often fixed notions about music's "role" and "function," or its existence as a component of consciousness. Certainly, focused symposia, colloquia, conferences, and study group activity help speed us down the pathway of understanding by forcing us to confront the way our insights come up against the realities of world musical life.

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