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Songs, Sounds and Sentiments in Translation: The Transnational Travels of Corsican and Georgian Polyphony

This article considers the concept of translation as applied to the phenomenon of amateur singers in the West learning songs from ‘other’ cultures. Following an examination of the reasons why some people may prefer to sing in a language that is not their mother tongue, I go on to explore the processes involved in learning a new musical language, taking as my case study traditional polyphonic songs from Corsica and Georgia. I consider the roles of the native practitioner as teacher and transmitter and the non-native teacher as transmitter and intermediary, examining the methods developed by particular teachers to help students reach a deeper cultural understanding while also finding an ‘authentic’ sound. Pursuing the notion of social relations being implicit in the acts of both translation and music making, I conclude by reflecting on the kinds of transformations—personal and political, as well as musical—that may result. [1]

Translation, as we all know, goes beyond a simple concern with conveying the meaning of verbal or written expression in another language. Even in its conventional linguistic sense, there are choices to be made in moving beyond a word-for-word, literal translation to something that is not only more idiomatic but also comes closer to capturing an equivalent idea or situation in terms that make sense to a reader in the target culture. Unless the objective is deliberately to bring the reader into confrontation with the ‘foreign’, a successful translation needs to ring true by accommodating the reader’s own cultural-experiential world. In this sense, translation inevitably involves adaptation and transformation. More recently, a
distinction has been made in the field of literary translation between ‘cultural transfer’ as a one-way activity and ‘cultural transmission’ as a reciprocal process that places great emphasis on the mediatory and pioneering role of the cultural transmitter. [2] Concepts of translation, transmission and transformation will resonate in different ways in the analysis that follows.

The central project of social anthropology has often been glossed as the ‘translation of cultures’. As ethnographers, we set out to translate cultural practices in a way that allows others—far away in space, history and psychology—to understand meanings and mindsets. We act as intermediaries linking those whose lives we have been privileged to share during fieldwork with our audiences who try to make sense of the worlds we describe out of context. To succeed in the role of a translator of cultures involves reaching an understanding of, and conveying to others, something beyond the life experience that we ourselves may have shared with our readers up to this point. We need to meet our audience partway, to know what won’t make immediate sense to them, and why. Crucially, translation is about facilitating relationships. It is, as Naoki Sakai puts it in a recent article in the journal *Translation Studies*, ‘an ambiguous act of creating continuity out of discontinuity; it pertains to a political labour which generates social relations’ (2009:71).

In this paper I focus on the act of translation as it pertains to the case of amateur singers learning songs from other cultures in languages they do not speak. In the UK, this trend has snowballed dramatically over the past fifteen years, as witnessed by the range of songs included in the repertoires of many community choirs. The CD *WorldSong Live: A Decade in Harmony, 1997-2007* by the Coventry choir WorldSong, for example, includes songs from France, Norway, Croatia, Macedonia, Poland, Georgia, Ukraine, New Zealand, Japan, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Hawai‘i and Wales, together with a Shaker song, four spirituals, a gospel song, and a setting of a Latin liturgical text. How all these songs find their way into the repertoires of amateur singers across the UK or any other country far removed
from their point of origin is in itself an interesting question, but one that space does not allow me to elaborate on here. Several further questions arise that speak more explicitly to the theme of translation. What exactly gets translated when singers learn songs from other cultures? What form does the transmission process take? Who is best placed to translate or act as intermediary? What motivates culture-bearers to teach their songs to strangers and what do they want them to learn? What do the songs mean to those who adopt them and sing them out of context? What makes songs from other cultural traditions translate well for British or other non-native choirs? What are the challenges and rewards experienced by each of the parties in this exchange?

There is scope here, then, to consider translation in many of its different senses: (i) As interpretation, including the literal translation of song lyrics and performance instructions as well as elaborations on their deeper meaning. (See the definition given in The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary: To ‘turn from one language into another; express the sense of in another language. Also, express in other words, paraphrase.’) (ii) As the process by which the songs themselves move from one place to another, in this case independently of the bodies from which they would normally emerge. (To ‘bear, convey, or remove from one person, place, time, or condition to another; transfer, transport.’) (iii) As the transformations, both material and metaphoric, which often ensue. (To ‘change in form, appearance, or substance; transform, alter; renovate or reform;’ and to ‘transport by strength of feeling; enrapture, entrance.’) What exactly is translated, and how it is translated, will of course vary according to the situation. Singers might first of all learn ‘foreign’ songs in a choir or workshop in their home country, taught by a compatriot who may have learnt the songs at second hand or from recordings. Secondly, they might attend a workshop, again in their home country, but this time led by a visiting singer from the songs’ country of origin. Finally, they might travel to the country of origin to learn songs from native singers there, to experience the songs in their
natural environment, and to see and hear how they are a part of social practices and life ways. Examples from each of these scenarios feature in the discussion that follows; but let us begin with the question of language.

**Singing in a language you don’t understand**

It might be supposed that song texts in foreign languages, some of whose sounds do not even have an equivalent in one’s mother tongue, might present a significant challenge. It does not follow, however, that singers always prefer to sing in their mother tongue. Singing unfamiliar words and using the voice in unaccustomed ways can be liberating at many levels. First and foremost it can free the singer from the inhibitions and sensitivities associated with his or her past experience of singing more familiar repertoire. Many welcome the opportunity simply to be free of the literal meaning of the words. Chris Rowbury, founder and former director of Coventry’s WorldSong choir, explains: ‘I’m not a word person, so I like the foreign lyrics because I use the sounds of the words as a vehicle for the musical expression. […] If I understand the words they get in the way, the semantics of it gets in the way.’ He enjoys being left with ‘just the sounds of the words. […] It sort of slightly takes you out of yourself’ (Interview 2008). Choir leader Sarah Harman highlights a similar dimension when she remarks: ‘There’s something to be said for moving people away from a language that they think they’re really comfortable in, into a language where they have to work much harder at the sound. […] If it’s in English, they think if they understand the words then they’ve got the song’ (Interview 2008).

Sarah goes on to cite further reasons for introducing songs from other cultures into her work with community choirs. In practical terms, she found that many of the songs worked well because they ‘were easy to pick up’ and ‘you got glorious harmony very, very quickly’.
It was also important to her, at an ideological level, that the songs ‘were introducing a whole other culture and introducing ideas, they were broadening people’s perspectives and making them think about what it might be like to be somebody else living in another culture’. She was keen to challenge ‘people’s rules that they’ve got in their head about what is a good harmony and what is a bad harmony’ and to plant the idea that ‘if you lived somewhere else, what you thought was a normal, everyday, ordinary harmony would be completely different [...] to give people a chance to suddenly go: Oh, so I see, that’s not weird or wrong, it’s just something unusual for me.’ This she characterizes as ‘part of the political work’ (Ibid).

Broadening people’s musical horizons is here linked explicitly with the humanistic project of promoting greater understanding between cultures. Many of the singers I have interviewed—members of community choirs and participants in workshops and summer camps—have indeed reflected on how their encounter with other cultures through music making has brought a sense of shared human experience or enabled them to ‘see through other eyes’ (a term used by one questionnaire respondent). Often they also invoke the sense of community that has been lost in modern industrialized/capitalist societies but can be touched again through the songs and the partly imagined worlds from which they come.

Learning a new musical language

In pursuing the questions outlined earlier, traditional multi-part songs from the Mediterranean region and other parts of Eastern Europe emerge as especially interesting case studies. They are attractive to the amateur singing communities I am concerned with here because they come from oral traditions (many community choir members do not read music); they accord a central place to harmony, which is pleasurable while requiring people to interact (thus helping nurture the sought-after community); and they are for the most part designed to be sung
unaccompanied and without a conductor (which again matches the preferred practice of non-classical choirs). For the core of my discussion I propose to focus on polyphonic songs from the Mediterranean island of Corsica and the Caucasian republic of Georgia. Georgia may be rather far removed, geographically, from the Mediterranean, even if some have attempted to make a case for viewing the Black Sea as an extension of the Mediterranean. In historical, ideational and indeed practical terms, however, there are striking points of contact; these relate both to the music itself and to the ways in which singers from these cultures have engaged with one another and with the transnational amateur singing communities eager to learn their songs. Adopting a comparative approach to these two cases will allow me to highlight a number of points that are especially pertinent to the thrust of this paper.

Marius Schneider followed Siegfried Nadel in proposing that Georgia, despite its ambiguous position bridging Europe and Asia, might have been the birthplace of European polyphony—an idea that continues to tantalize. Corsican and Georgian polyphonic songs clearly have quite distinct identities with respect to their melodic and harmonic construction. The similarities between the two in terms of musical conception and performance practice, however, explain the strong sense of affinity felt by singers from the two cultures. Jean-Claude Acquaviva of the group A Filetta recalls the first time a Georgian group performed in Corsica: ‘[W]e had the impression that they were reflecting back to us an image of ourselves [...] We recognized the same gestures, the same ways of searching for one another in the song’ (cited in René-Worms 2003:n.p.). In Georgia, as in Corsica, the natural habitat for the old-style polyphonic songs—prior to twentieth-century trends towards urbanization and professionalization—was the village. In many cases, song repertoires and singing styles continue to be cultivated in small, close-knit groups of family members and friends, among whom the art of collaboration and adaptation is refined by years of living and working together. Both styles, broadly speaking, allow for significant flexibility in the two upper
voices, which are typically sung solo and are highly ornamented. In songs other than those related to work or dance, matters of timing and rhythm are similarly flexible. Both owe much, in terms of their characteristic sound, to their use of non-tempered intervals, chords that in Western terms would be viewed as dissonant and other harmonic procedures that go against the rules of classical European harmony. The features that are most highly prized often fall outside the parameters of what can be shown in notation. Timbral quality and techniques of vocal production continue to be of central importance, together with the pursuit of particular harmonic resonances.

In more recent times, the polyphonic songs of both Corsica and Georgia have found their way onto the world music stage and are often to be found in the same festival programmes, where their workshops are likely to attract a similar clientele. Many singers in the UK, for example, had their first experience of Corsican and Georgian songs in the context of the Giving Voice Festival hosted by the Centre for Performance Research (based in the Welsh town of Aberystwyth), and many American singers have encountered both styles through the summer camps organized by Village Harmony (an association based in Vermont but also offering an annual programme of overseas camps). Both have also been recognized by UNESCO: Georgian polyphonic singing featured in the 2001 Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, while in 2009 the Corsican cantu in paghjella was added to the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding (successor to the original Proclamations).

At the same time, their histories have diverged in ways that make the comparison a particularly interesting one. Georgia has a well-established tradition of larger professional performance ensembles, based on the Soviet model of state choirs: the choral collectives established in the 1930s often numbered a hundred voices or more. While there has been a deliberate move in recent decades away from this model, its legacy remains. In Corsica there
is no such tradition. When contemporary professional or semi-professional ensembles perform songs from the traditional canon on stage, the bass at most might be doubled; otherwise, the trio arrangement remains the norm. This in turn has implications for the way in which the songs are taught to both native and foreign students. It also partly explains why, in the UK and elsewhere, specialist Georgian choirs have proliferated while Corsican songs appear only as solitary and, as yet, rare examples in the working repertoire of the more eclectic community choirs. [3]

Corsica and Georgia certainly share a rather different concept of song from that associated with the contemporary popular music culture of mainstream Western society, where a song might be defined as an easily recognizable and reproducible unit consisting of a fixed text and melody, with a one-to-one correlation between these two components. In Corsica, texts and airs are often interchangeable; in the case of the paghjella, the most ubiquitous type of polyphonic song, an infinite number of texts can be sung to what is essentially the same musical arrangement or versu, while a given text might also be sung to different versi. In both places, songs may exist in different (albeit close) variants with no definitively ‘correct’ version, even if individual singers might seek to claim authority for the interpretation they have inherited. Even in the latter case, a degree of personalization is expected so that the song is created anew at each performance rather than being a mere reproduction. Walter Benjamin (in his essay ‘The Task of the Translator’) has proposed that ‘no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original’, and that a translation should be viewed not as a copy but rather as an echo of the original (1968:73). The Corsican and Georgian polyphonic traditions present prime examples of an aesthetic according to which, in order to be authentic, the echo should never be an exact reflection of the original.
This, of course, places significant demands on the student, for whom it is never simply a matter of learning the notes but rather of learning what Jean-Claude Acquaviva has referred to as ‘a way of singing’ (Interview 2004). The ‘gestures’ and ‘ways of searching for one another in the song’ invoked in my earlier quote are a crucial part of what any student approaching these traditions has to understand and assimilate. I have written elsewhere about the experience of a group of American singers who, in 2004, took part in a singing camp in Corsica organized by Village Harmony—how they found the task of learning the songs bewildering at the outset but then reached a breakthrough point where suddenly the song took flight as the singers ‘locked into each other’; how they reached the realization that, having learnt a way of singing as opposed to a series of set pieces, they were able (as one participant expressed it) ‘to sing with many different musicians songs we had never heard’; how (to quote another) they were ‘learning how to sing all the songs with the first song [Benedettu] taught, learning what they meant, beyond the words, learning with our ears, minds, and bodies, not just our eyes’ (Bithell 2009:162).

The native practitioner as teacher and transmitter

I would now like to examine in greater detail some of the methods used by individual teachers to help their students reach an understanding of a ‘way of singing’ and achieve what might be described as a more authentic sound. I have had many opportunities to observe Jean-Claude Acquaviva and other members of the group A Filetta in action through participating in numerous workshops led by the group, first in Corsica (where I lived in the mid-1990s while conducting fieldwork for my PhD) and later in Wales (when the group was twice invited, on my recommendation, to take part in the Giving Voice Festival). In keeping with the traditional practice of singing with one voice to a part, the emphasis was largely on the
individual singer. Rather than teach a part to the whole group, Jean-Claude would demonstrate one line or melodic segment and then focus on each participant in turn as they attempted to sing the line back to him. What was especially interesting for me here (and challenging for us all) was to try to reach an understanding of the parameters governing an acceptable interpretation, given that the reproduction was not meant to be exact. Some notes were identified as ‘points of reference’; these were the stable points in the line and needed to harmonize with similarly stable notes in the other two voices. How one got from one of these pivotal notes to the next was one’s own affair, but with the proviso that one could not simply do ‘n’importe quoi’ (anything at all/any old thing). Some variants were not ‘faux’ (wrong) but neither were they ‘beau’ (nice or beautiful). The answer to the question of what was ‘beau’ was that one needed to ‘educate the ear’.

It was instructive to note the points that Jean-Claude was most keen to emphasize. Timbre, use of the breath, the way in which melismatic figures were articulated and other nuances of vocal production featured prominently. The breath was often used in a particular way as part of the ‘attack’ at the beginning of a line, to give impulse in association with a plosive sound mid-phrase, and again at the end of a line where, combined with nasalization and a closing of the mouth, it often added to an effect that resembled overtoning. Here watching was as important as listening: on one occasion, while working on a tiny detail relating to the articulation of a particular word, Jean-Claude drew attention to the way in which, when the breath is exhaled in a certain way that resembles ‘a kind of sob’, the chest caves in and the shoulders fall as the lungs contract. Even when it was not explicitly articulated, it was clear that the quality of sound produced related to physique and that imitating physical gestures could therefore help unlock the sound. Mastering techniques and nuances such as these, even if some were more readily associated with the style of an
individual singer than with ‘the tradition’ as a whole, contributed to a more convincing sound that moved one out of the Western classical aesthetic.

Once the lines were put together, it became important to listen to one’s co-singers and adapt to what they were doing, in such a way that any one voice might be seen to answer another rather than simply beat its own well-rehearsed path. A key principle here was ‘rhythm’, a concept that encompasses both the interplay between the voices and the tension within a single line between dense melismatic passages and sustained notes. Sometimes what was sought after was explained in terms of its opposite: ‘regularity’, the ‘linear’ and the ‘schematic’ were to be avoided in favour of ‘breaking the logic’.

The late Georgian singer and ethnomusicologist Edisher Garakanidze—revered in the UK for having first introduced Georgian songs to the amateur singing community, together with his colleague Joseph Jordania—had other ways of helping his students to unlock a more authentic sound. [4] Imparting an appreciation of where the songs came from was crucial to the role he adopted when teaching outside Georgia. In the preface to the book *99 Georgian Songs*, conceived by Edisher and published after his death by the Centre for Performance Research, Joan Mills recalls how he once spoke about workshop participants taking a ‘step towards working at internal obstacles and complexes and one step to an internal freedom’ (2004:vi). In his own introduction to the collection, Edisher wrote: ‘From experience I have learnt that a practical workshop is still the best way to come into contact with folk music and to go deep into it. This is because it allows participants to obtain ethnomusicological, historical, geographic and ethnographic information at the same time as communicating directly with the music’ (2004:ix). Helen Chadwick, who often acted as Edisher’s translator in the days before he learnt English (they both spoke German), was struck by his skill in presenting information about the social and historical contexts of the songs in such a way as to shape the sound made by the group he was working with. She describes how, having taught
a song, he would then stop and contextualize it by, for example, getting them to imagine that they were in a tiny fifth century church on top of a hill; or he might tell a story about the war in Chechnya. When they returned to the singing, ‘the song would fly in a different way and that was wonderful. [...] I guess it’s making a connection between the people who are in the room and the material, as opposed to it just being some nice harmonies and a few words—giving a reason to sing’ (Interview 2008).

Another dimension of Edisher’s talent was his ability to adapt the musical material itself so as to make it more accessible for his British students. Next to matters of intonation, the pronunciation of the Georgian language represents a serious challenge for non-native singers. One of the peculiarities of the language is the high incidence of complex consonant clusters, in addition to some consonants that have no counterpart in European languages. Edisher described his two-fold solution to this problem: ‘I usually select songs with as little text as possible for foreigners. In workshops I usually deliberately decrease the number of consonants in the text’ (2004:xv). Making such compromises was in keeping with his categorization of the ‘authentic’, rural performance style as ‘a higher level of learning which is by no means compulsory for all of those interested in Georgian music’. Achieving this higher level is not ruled out, he conceded, but ‘it needs special training, which involves listening to authentic recordings, travelling to Georgian villages in different regions, and establishing personal contact with traditional singers’ (Ibid:xvi). [5]

An important way in which traditional singers prove their mastery of the art is by demonstrating a facility for improvisation. This is another area in which compromises have to be made if the songs are to be adapted for use by larger groups with more than one voice to a part. A degree of standardization, in the sense of fixing melodic and rhythmic motifs that might otherwise vary from one rendition to the next and simplifying ornamental flourishes, has to take place to enable all of the voices on a given part to sing in unison. Interestingly, in
this case the process began in Georgia itself with the fashion for large, professional state choirs referred to earlier. Edisher’s use of the term ‘secondary folklore’ to characterize the work of these choirs refers not only to the fact that the songs have been taken out of their primary habitat but also to the way in which non-traditional aspects of organization and performance practice were adopted under the influence of modern European music (see Garakanidze 2007:152–63). These large ensembles differed from groups of village singers in a number of ways. Typically, they included both singers and repertoire from different regions of Georgia. This in itself resulted in some normalization as the finer nuances of local tuning systems were compromised. In the case of choirs who undertook extensive overseas tours, supposedly rough edges might be smoothed over in deference to the assumed tastes of Western European audiences, as well as the practicalities of singing on stage in large concert halls. Another practice introduced as part of the communist pedagogical style was the deliberate teaching of individual parts, with the assumption that singers would always keep to the same part. (This was in stark contrast to the natural method of learning by hearing the song in its entirety throughout one’s youth, only later coming to distinguish the different vocal lines and thereafter becoming adept at singing each of them.) Again this provided a model, in some respects, for the later transfer of the material to non-native choirs. [6]

**The non-native teacher as transmitter and intermediary**

American singer Frank Kane, now based in Paris, is an interesting example of a non-native who has developed innovative methods for teaching the musical language of another culture. [7] Combining his intimate knowledge of Georgia’s many regional singing dialects with an understanding of the learning style of singers in a more westernized milieu, Frank has become a key player in the dissemination of Georgian material outside Georgia; he works regularly
Frank has built up a range of techniques that, while appearing unorthodox to native Georgians, are highly effective in helping non-Georgians achieve a more convincing or authentic sound. They also map in interesting ways on to the key principles underpinning Jean-Claude Acquaviva’s teaching of Corsican songs as described earlier. Frank’s initial experiments were prompted by the conviction that simply listening and repeating was not sufficient: he refers to how what the Western apprentice hears is ‘put through the filter of their own prior experience and frame of reference’, resulting in ‘something which is superficially similar to the Georgian song, but which has a very different flavour’ (2003:558). He began by developing exercises to help his French students locate the non-tempered intervals used in Georgia. Further work focused on helping them improve their perception of harmonics and the way in which harmonics function as a component of timbre. He describes how working with a French singer and voice trainer inspired by Tibetan and Tuvan throat singing furnished his choir members with ‘the ability to hear and identify those harmonics most audible in Georgian singing and also the points at which these harmonics converge when Georgian chorus sing in polyphony’ (Ibid:559). Informed by his study of Tai Chi and Alexander Technique, he then began to pay greater attention to what he terms the ‘physical disposition and intention’ of the singers. Close observation of the way in which Georgian singers stand, open their mouths, move their jaws and breathe led to a series of realizations including, for example, that Georgian village singers, when forming vowels, rely more on the throat area behind the tongue, and that this in turn affects harmonic production. Further experiments allowed him to deduce that Georgian singers also deployed the larynx and its muscles differently from Western singers. ‘By gaining a better understanding of how Georgian singers...
produce their sound,’ he concludes, ‘non-Georgian singers are no longer simply imitating a sound, they are imitating the physical gestures and intentions which form this sound’ (Ibid:561). Frank’s workshops now feature a colourful assortment of vocal and physical exercises that, together with his characteristic brand of vivid description, evocative instruction and postural experimentation, can achieve quite phenomenal results in modifying the voices of the singers he is working with.

Another way in which the non-native teacher can act as intermediary is in helping the native teacher develop his or her teaching skills in a way that will optimize the accessibility of the material for the foreign learner. Patty Cuyler, co-director of Village Harmony, consciously adopts this role in relation to the teachers she engages for the overseas camps that will attract a predominantly American clientele. She describes how, in advance of one camp in Corsica, she arranged one-to-one sessions with Jean-Etienne Langianni, who was to be the Corsican tutor that year, and gave him feedback as he went through the motions of teaching her the songs. Having got a head start in this way, she was then well placed to support the teaching process by supplementing any directions or explanations that did not make immediate sense to workshop participants. As she explains it, ‘If I understand the music that they’re teaching and I understand where we’re coming from with our own musical traditions, then often there’s this grammar of the music that the ethnic teacher will just assume is the same grammar in our musical history and it’s often not. There are things that they do so naturally that they take it for granted, and yet that’s what needs the interpretation and that’s where it’s helpful when I can step in because I bridge the worlds’ (Interview 2008). The Corsican camp that particular year also included Georgian songs taught by Frank Kane and shape note, gospel and South African songs taught by Patty. This format therefore brought the additional opportunity for Jean-Etienne to observe other teachers in action and to experience what it was like to be in the position of a ‘foreign’ learner.
Transmission, transformation and the translation of concern

The phenomenon of amateur singers becoming accomplished in the songs of another culture, together with the increasing numbers of culture-bearers eager to share their heritage with outsiders, might be viewed as an extension of local revival processes, whereby musical practices, functions and meanings are translated from one environment—often a relatively circumscribed rural location, where they are associated with an aging population and old, ancestral traditions—to a new context where they are adapted by a younger generation to reflect more contemporary concerns and practices. It is the ‘burning souls’ often to be found in the vanguard of revival movements (see Ronström 1996) who, armed with the skills, insights and missionary-like zeal gained from their own project of deliberate learning, most often go on to act as the intermediaries who transmit the material to those whose outsider status is more obvious but who may be viewed as just one more circle or shockwave generated by the original pebble.

UNESCO has also played a part in this trend through its nomination of cultural practices as Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity and, more recently, Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. The dossier presented as part of the application process has to include an action plan for safeguarding the heritage in question, where safeguarding is understood as encompassing not only preservation but also promotion and dissemination, and where the practice under review is now framed not only as a regional or national treasure but also as part of the common human heritage. Ensuring transmission to future generations within the culture may require the establishment of specialized teaching programmes in schools, universities and cultural centres, together with specially prepared materials in the form of songbooks, recordings and other resources, many of which may be
Transactions of this kind are most successful when human relations are at the heart of the undertaking. Spending time together on a mutual passion inevitably leads to the forging of friendships and allegiances. If, as Veit Erllmann has proposed, ‘performance […] potentially transforms individuals into persons in control of their own destiny’ (1996:xix), it is certainly the case that it can also implicate them in the destinies of others. Likewise, if the process of engaging with the vocal expression of others can, as Edisher Garakanidze suggested, help individuals overcome internal obstacles, it can also lead them to confront external obstacles. Affirmations of the life-changing nature of their experiences feature regularly in individuals’ accounts of their singing journeys, together with references to feeling ‘enchanted’, ‘transported’ or ‘blessed’. An awareness of personal gain, as well as an insight into the realities of life in other places, inspires in many an urge to give something back and to make more far-reaching changes not only in their own lives but also in the lives of others. Georgia again presents itself as an interesting example that demonstrates how an initial attraction to the songs of another culture can lead to the forging of practical as well as affective links that now reach far beyond the realm of music—in this case, to causes that have ranged from improving facilities in orphanages to rebuilding key institutions following the Russian invasion of 2008. The kinds of musical encounters I have described in this paper can, then, become part of ‘the political work’ in numerous senses.

Aspects of the music itself may indeed change as it is translated in space and the desirability of such changes may be disputed; the practice whereby strangers adopt aspects of a culture to which they have no natural or inherent right might also be contested. But if we take a more holistic view, setting aside hasty assumptions and probing deeper beneath the surface, more intriguing complexities are revealed. Less tangible transformations also take
place as people’s understanding and disposition is changed in ways that transcend the purely
musical, and these transformations surely have moral dimensions of a separate order. The
exchange itself may be entered into freely, with a clear recognition of the benefits to both
parties, the absence of any sense of exploitation on the part of the giver and an
acknowledgement of accountability on the part of the receiver. This perspective helps unpack
the nuances of the title of Bruce Ziff and Pratima Rao’s book on cultural appropriation—
*Borrowed Power*—and to appreciate their argument that what is often described as
appropriation might, under some circumstances, be viewed more neutrally as just one form of
cultural transmission (see Ziff and Rao 1997:4-7).

**Coda**

In this article I have sought to unpack the concepts of translation and transmission and to
suggest the different levels at which they may usefully be applied to the project of teaching
and learning songs of the oral tradition in cross-cultural contexts. In the case of written
language, without translation there is no communication. Music’s multivalent nature, by
contrast, means that it is not imperative that every word be translated—in the conventional
sense of literal, textual translation—in order for meaningful connections to be made, whether
between the performer and the material or between performers and listeners. Added to
music’s heightened currency in this regard are the ephemeral nature of the oral tradition and
the premium placed by many local musical systems on personalized variation and skilled
improvisation, both of which render many aspects of a musical performance fluid and
negotiable.

For some aficionados of songs-from-elsewhere, part of the initial attraction lies in
what remains untranslated. As for world music as whole, the material needs to be sufficiently
accessible but it also needs to be different. Lexical opacity may be desirable insofar as it allows the singer to focus attention instead on other aspects of performance; it may also add to a sense of the numinous. Features of the musical language that represent a departure from Western norms add a veneer of exoticism while also appealing to intimations of a lost past or opening a window onto the possibilities of alternative lives. It is certainly feasible to offer a convincing rendition of a song without understanding the literal meaning of the words. In some cases, this position is shared with culture-bearers themselves who use archaic words from obsolete languages, meaningless vocables or text that is clearly fragmentary primarily as a pretext for sonic exploration and harmonic interaction. Here, what is untranslated or untranslatable opens up a space for new and multiple meanings, pointing to the productive potential of unintelligibility as a politico-aesthetic choice.

Patty Cuyler, in reflecting on the recipe for success enjoyed by Village Harmony’s overseas camps, stresses nonetheless the vital role played by a dedicated interpreter who is fluent in the local language and English and can therefore facilitate not only the translation of song lyrics and performance directions but also interactions of a different kind—with the wider community, with the natural environment, with the history of the land and its people, and with what might be termed the spirit of the place. It is at this level that translation truly realizes its power to breathe life into the songs. Patty also alludes to other dimensions that have emerged earlier in this article when she makes a comparison between the performances of participants in Village Harmony study-tours and those more typically offered by the kind of world music choir whose main objective is to build a colourful, multicultural repertoire but whose members have not had the opportunity to experience at first hand the cultures whose songs they sing. These choirs might present ‘a jolly song, good tune, nice harmonies,’ as Patty puts it, but ‘that’s all you really get out of it without the stories, without the body language’ (Interview 2011).
The intermediary, then, plays a crucial role in helping foreign learners to find a way in—not to the music in isolation but to the culture as a whole. Patty refers repeatedly to the notion of channelling and the need for a teacher ‘to channel their understanding’. ‘It’s not about the notes,’ she insists, ‘it’s about finding that centre of understanding of what it is to be human’ (Ibid.). The understanding gained by the student may then be communicated to a new circle of listeners, and at the same time the teacher may emerge from the process enriched with new understandings of his or her own. The mutual meeting ground on which these exchanges are played out might be likened to Homi Bhabha’s notion of a ‘third space’ that is emancipatory in allowing personal, social and political transformation to take place.

Crucially, making music—as opposed to being an audience to someone else’s performance—cannot exist independently of social relations. In the case of the musical communities I have described here, song has served as the key that allows ordinary citizens not only to communicate but also to share profound experiences with people with whom they cannot converse in speech. These experiences go beyond the cognitive; they are intensely physical, emotional, spiritual and, for some, political. In the case of singing, it might be argued, these effects are at their most powerful, if in using our voices we are exercising what Alfred Wolfsohn famously characterized as the muscle of the soul [8]. Undoubtedly, this is one arena in which music’s humanistic project truly comes into its own.

Notes

1. This article builds on a shorter paper presented at the 8th meeting of the ICTM Study Group ‘Anthropology of Music in Mediterranean Cultures’, held at the University of Malta in July 2010. It draws on research conducted with the help of two Small Research Grants awarded by the British Academy.
2. See, for example, the website for Studies on Cultural Transfer and Transmission (www.soctat.org).

3. The vibrancy of the Georgian singing network in the UK is also indicative of the strong links that have been established with Georgia itself. Singers from Georgia tour the UK on a regular basis, giving both concerts and workshops.

4. Edisher and Joseph first visited Britain in 1994 at the invitation of the Centre for Performance Research, then based in Cardiff.

5. In recent years, surprising numbers of singers from the UK, North America, France, Australia and elsewhere have found their way to Georgia, where they have worked directly both with members of younger ensembles such as Zedashe—currently the local partners for Village Harmony camps—and with some of the older generation of village song masters, including Islam Pilpani in Svaneti and Andro Simashvili in Kakheti.

6. Another difference worth noting between the Corsican and Georgian cases is that the majority of those who now lead workshops in Georgian singing have undergone specialist music training at Tbilisi State Conservatoire. No equivalent exists in Corsica.

7. Frank travelled to Georgia for first time in 1984 with the Yale University Chorus. In 1988 he moved to France to study Georgian at the Institute of Oriental Languages. He later founded two Georgian ensembles in Paris, Marani and Irinola. Another American singer
who has become deeply immersed in Georgian culture, learning the language and leading
regular singing tours, is Carl Linich.

8. Alfred Wolfsohn (1896-1962) devoted his career to exploring the potential of the human
voice not only as an instrument of artistic expression but also as a tool for psychological
and therapeutic development. His designation of the voice as “the muscle of the soul” is
often referred to by voice practitioners.

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