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MUSICAL MULTIPLICITY: EMERGING THOUGHTS

by Mark Slobin

In 2000, I wrote an article for this journal in response to an ICTM colloquium held at Visby in 1999 about issues of musical “multiculturalism” (Slobin 2000). The idea was to test out our terminology in the light of social and musical changes. By 2006, things had changed when I co-hosted another ICTM colloquium, at Wesleyan University, on “emerging musical identities” from the transatlantic perspective, in Europe and North America. The present article scans some of the thoughts from that conference, then moves out to their implications by using the event as a mental trampoline. To carry through the metaphor, one crashes back onto the elastic surface before making another try at getting airborne, but at least one gets a good view in the process. In the following, I cite participants’ remarks and relevant writings of 2006 by other authors to keep a precise “ethnographic present.”¹

At the Wesleyan colloquium, questions of multiplicity dominated. I am introducing this term in response to the overwhelming interest in all the colloquium papers in multiple-source, multiple-levelled music-making. “Multiplicity” operates here as an umbrella term, resonating with the spirit of the participants, rather than as a newly buffed-up technical term.²

It seems the social location of non-mainstream music has shifted in less than ten years. In Europe, the radical repositioning of immigrant and minority groups opens up new alliances, oppositions, and rethinking about musical sources and strategies. In North America, the growing prominence of foreign-born and multi-sited populations also heralds a shift in older ideas of “multiculturalism,” a key term at Visby, but one rarely invoked at Wesleyan. That usually positive, but often contested, bureaucratic term has receded for all kinds of reasons. Not the least of these might be the growing distrust of the distinctiveness of minority groups. They can now be seen as possible threats rather than as colourful chips in the social “mosaic.” As Tom Van Buren points out, in the United States, this can lead to repressive legislation and a “third world war” that targets immigrants, and this dis-ease has

1. The local co-host was Su Zheng of Wesleyan, with Ursula Hemetek and Svanibor Pettan as the European collaborators. Other participants included: Philip Bohlman, Beverly Diamond, Mirjana Laušević, Krister Malm, Portia Maultsby, John Morgan O’Connell, Tina Ramnarine, Adelaida Reyes, Owe Ronström, Tom Solomon, Jane Sugarman, and Tom Van Buren. All citations from conference participants come from papers or discussion at the colloquium; I am sorry that space allows only fragmentary references to the presenters’ subtle and ramified remarks and responses by non-paper-giving commentators, such as Eric Charry and Sumarsam. I am grateful to Jocelyne Guilbault, Tina Ramnarine, John O’Connell, and Regula Qureshi for reactions to the present article.

2. I realize that Deleuze and Guattari have used this term, and come back to their work below, but find their formulations, as at the term’s first appearance—“multiplicities are rhizomatic, and expose arborescent pseudomultiplicities for what they are”—somewhat more opaque than helpful. They also say that “multiplicities are defined by the outside,” with which I tend to disagree, being rather more interested in internally-driven multiplicity (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:8–9).

certainly spread among some European nation-states, infecting even the musical arena. Partly in response to this troubling situation and to the internal turbulence in conflict zones such as the Balkans, Svanibor Pettan urges a closer look at available forms of applied ethnomusicology, so that music scholars can better target their interventions in tense times. He and others argue that we need not just observe, but also can try to ameliorate, the malaise of multiplicity. Certainly the celebratory side of the older diversity doctrines seems to be fading.

I am struck by other shifts in our language. Examining the discourse of the Wesleyan colloquium, it is easy to find dissatisfaction with some of the favoured terms of the 1990s and early 2000s, on display at Visby.³ As I said then, terms are like horses on the old post roads of Europe and America. When one animal gets tired, you should give it a rest and mount a fresh steed, which itself can only go so far. The current consensus seems to be that some of our chargers need recharging. In addition to multiculturalism, “diaspora,” “hybridity,” “emergent,” and “identity” seem to be wearing down. In their conference talks and other forthcoming work, Tom Solomon and Tina Ramnarine assert that diaspora and hybridity are simply insufficient to describe the range and complexity of people’s music-making in complex contexts, such as Caribbean carnival, as spread across London, Toronto, New York, and Trinidad, or Turkish-German hip-hop. Ramnarine suggests that people are making an active search for an expressive “home,” rather than a sense of attenuated translocal “identity,” and will construct it in an immediately useful way that might transcend stable categories and allegiances. The title of Solomon’s paper, “Whose Hybridity? Whose Diaspora?,” summarizes his challenge to received terminology, which can all too easily telescope the complex moving parts of today’s musical processes.

As for “emerging” identity, Adelaida Reyes points out that the term is unhelpful when it implies that “identity” settles down once it emerges, which it doesn’t. “Emerging” or “emergent” seems to be a legacy of Raymond Williams’s trilogy of “dominant, residual, and emergent.” While that formulation still has its uses, its force may have weakened for a number of reasons. The *dominant* has grown fuzzy with the increased energy of the subaltern, as well as the effects of marketing and bureaucratic strategies of inclusion. It is not accidental that a move to define “Britishness” has surfaced in the United Kingdom; shouldn’t it just be self-evident what the “dominant” is? When, as Ramnarine reports, a Caribbean musician in England can assert that calypso is “British folk music,” the quest for an overarching musical identity looks like a lost cause. The *residual* now might read as “heritage” rather than transient holdover, doomed to fade as the caravan of history moves on. If the residue rises not just to the surface, but to the top, as value added today

3. An anonymous reader of an earlier draft of this article asked whether the colloquium considered only nouns, the main topic of the present paper, suggesting that perhaps we might re-think our verbs. I take this point; beyond “musicking,” we tend to use noun-based words for processes, e.g., “deterritorialization,” sometimes the longer the better, rather than find a way to channel the intense energy of social processes into verb forms. Perhaps the “emerging” in the present article’s title is a gesture in a verbal direction, but as the later discussion about “emergent” shows, verbs are often no sturdier than nouns and get just as tired.

to what was popular yesterday, is the term still viable? *Emergent* might not be quite so radical as it once seemed. Or it could be viewed as a motion of continual replacement of one temporary consensus by another among and between social formations, rather than as an avant-garde moving ever forward.

Reluctant to part with the term, John O'Connell has come up with a new trilogy: "fixed, emergent, and composite" for Irish musical identity. This allows him to identify unchanging features, quite different from the notion of "residual," on one side of the emergent, and "composite," a set of blended qualities, on the other. At an earlier moment, O'Connell might have used "hybrid" instead of composite, but hybrid is another term that seems tired, since music today grows out of multiple evolving forms, rather than being "the offspring of genetically dissimilar parents or stock" or, to cite another online definition that comes from older linguistic models, resembling "a word that is composed of parts from different languages." Martin Stokes has already pointed out the problem of writers' ambiguity in discussing hybridity. On the one hand, mixtures of "true" natural source musics become themselves "the new authenticity," to quote Simon Frith. On the other hand, ethnomusicologists tend to simply assert that hybridity is the general state of music everywhere: "music is, of its very nature, hybrid" (Stokes 2004:60). To some colloquium participants, either of those formulations assume a kind of stability and generality that the world of music no longer offers.

It is not just minority musics that scholars are seeing this way; even some recent studies of "mainstream" musics try to shake up preconceptions. Jim Leary's (2006) book on the Euro-American music of the Upper Midwest casts it as a set of distinctively diverse styles in a "creolized cultural space," not the way one might usually think of the mainstream regional music-making of Minnesota and Wisconsin. To take urban Minnesota (the Twin Cities) as a model, Mirjana Laušević, one of the colloquium participants, finds that Lutheran music can be Hmong or Somali as much as "white" Protestant. She does not use the term, but "creolized" might seem to fit this Lutheran context where the mainstream meets the margins. However, "creole" itself might seem shop-worn for the Midwest. As a term, it tends to waft the aroma of older colonial-imperial time frames. Standard definitions of the term start from race-mixing in the West Indies and extend the term's semantic field to the vernacular spoken by a second generation of language-blenders, a situation we have mostly moved beyond, musically.

Regarding "diaspora," Su Zheng feels strongly that it is more asserted than assumed; the very title of her forthcoming book on Asian-American music is *Claiming Diaspora*. In any given community, people may choose to stress, ignore, or simply live with a sense of musical "diaspora." The internal fragmentation of diasporas, which Zheng has detailed for the Chinese population of New York City, complicates the term to the point of weakening its force. Extreme sub-subcultural fragmentation runs through Carol Silverman's work on American and Balkan Roma (Silverman in press), which complements and corroborates much of the colloquium's discourse. For the American side of the Roma dispersal, she focuses on just one subgroup, in one neighbourhood of New York City. The interests and even lifestyles of these immigrants do not coincide much with their Roma rela-

tions in other cities or subgroups. They also constantly weave multiple ethnicities into their lives—American, European, Romani, Turkish, Macedonian—depending on circumstances. Small-scale fieldwork projects like Silverman’s pick apart broader patterns, making “diaspora” ever more problematic. High human mobility also urges careful categorization. Jane Sugarman’s Albanian friends, like some of Silverman’s collaborators, live in the US, eastern or western Europe, and follow an extremely diverse set of itineraries and game plans to work as musicians. The Albanians may choose to commute from one part of Europe to another, shuttle to the US from Albania and back, or simply travel in video format among Albanian families in a number of locales. While Sugarman continues to rely on “diaspora” to discuss all Albanians living outside Albania, she puts the word in quotes half the time and spins out subtler distinctions among “immigrants,” “transmigrants,” and Aihwa Ong’s term “flexible citizens,” a term that seems to be coming into its own.

Portia Maultsby’s tracing of the differing ways that Dutch choral groups domesticate African-American gospel music extends the possibilities. A Dutch woman, who learned gospel from Americans at a US army base, teaches other Dutch amateurs how to sing, partly as a way of loosening them up. Not far away, a Surinamese-Dutch chorus thinks of their expressive gospel performance very differently, as a bridge that connects them to a transnational African heritage, not necessarily tied to a specific “homeland.” Where does “diaspora” fit into this musical landscape? This transnational spread of musical materials has become so pervasive that one wonders whether the term can be stretched to cover not only populations, but also cultural components. Fugan Dineen (in a Wesleyan dissertation in progress) is studying the ways that the South Indian rhythmic vocalization, *solkattu*, enters the transnational arena as a general concept that can find a home in a number of musical populations and discourses, Indian, academic, and music-educational. Maria Mendonça’s studies (most recently in Mendonça 2006) on the spread of gamelan in the United Kingdom offers a very detailed and nuanced example of a musical formation leaving its homeland and drifting into domestication across a wide range of social niches, from symphony orchestras to physical and mental rehabilitation sites, including prisons. Without a local Indonesian population guiding this work, gamelan is just one example of instruments from the *mbira* and *djembe* to the didjeridu (subject of a 2007 Wesleyan dissertation by Peter Hadley) that lead a kind of “diasporic” life without being grounded in communities. Words like “dispersal” and “dispersion,” while related to “diaspora,” have interesting English semantic fields that could conceivably cover many such situations. But it is a sign of the term’s weariness that such rearguard actions to preserve its purity need to be considered at all.

Meanwhile, Krister Malm warns that UNESCO and WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization) are throwing a far-flung net over world music from very different perspectives and with little communication. Either as a transnational umbrella organization or as a group of lawyers, the two outfits work through governments and local networks of gatekeepers and cultural developers to influence the way that music evolves in local circumstances in places such as Africa and

the Caribbean. These groups often overlook ethnomusicologists, who nevertheless try to guide the paths of these juggernauts. UNESCO and WIPO invent their own circuits and terminology, such as “intangible cultural heritage” that, by virtue of merely being put into transnational circulation, influence the development of musical traditions and markets. It is the Japanese who came up with the term, not “the West.” Malm tells us that the two organizations tend to generate terms without consulting each other much, spinning off parallel and powerful systems of control that meet musical reality in the form of grants and rules, rewards and penalties filtered through governmental and commercial agencies. UNESCO prefers “safeguarding,” WIPO “protecting” of what the former calls “intangible cultural heritage” found in “cultural spaces,” while the latter aims its regulation at “traditional cultural expressions” or “traditional knowledge.”

The two organizations agree on ignoring “folklore” and “multiculture” as too Eurocentric, a lesson for ethnomusicologists. As quoted by Malm from documents, WIPO’s attempt at cultural relativity is also worth noting, though the term “jurisprudential” in the following quote indicates the legal, rather than cultural, basis for such flexibility: “Any attempt to devise uniform guidelines for the recognition and protection of indigenous peoples’ knowledge runs the risk of collapsing this rich jurisprudential diversity in to a single ‘model’ that will not fit the values, conceptions or laws of any indigenous society.” Ethnomusicologists might ask WIPO to start from square one and define “indigenous,” as both they and UNESCO find it all too easy to equate “society” with their nation-state members or clients. Finally, these newer agents of global cultural control seem to have supplanted that old bogeyman of transnational music, the record industry, which was in fact not really mentioned at all at the Wesleyan colloquium.⁴

Despite increased pressure from the international system, local groups continue to play an active role in their own musical destiny. But what do we call them? Perhaps “subculture” has declined in explanatory force, and generalized terms like “community” or even “grouping” are trying to fill a very large gap. “Community,” according to Ursula Hemetek, is one of those English words that can cross language lines, being more useful in German today than older, overloaded words like *Gemeinschaft*. This is only one small example of a process noted earlier at Visby, the way that English permeates, and still partly determines, how non-English speaking scholars and agencies think about the social organization of music. Here “identity” might also come into play as an overly chameleoned term that overlaps English and cognate terms in other European languages. From a Swedish perspective, Owe Ronström prefers to start bottom-up from the “mindscape” of musicians, rather than to proceed the way he sees identity doing, from the top down.

What becomes abundantly clear from the works just quoted and other current research, is that both individual and group music-making have quickened people’s strong tendency to enjoy working with multiple sources. This has, of course, always

4. Hanging on to an archaic word like “record” betrays how hard it has become to achieve terminological stability in an era of increasingly volatile technologies of production and distribution of music. Today’s “peer-to-peer file sharing” and “iTunes” will look antique in just a couple of years, no doubt.

been a part of human musicianship, as Beverly Diamond points out in her paper about the early twentieth-century recording of Mi'kmak and Beothuk indigenous music in Canada. Already in 1910, Santu Toney, a singer, seems to be choosing to project a "modern and eclectic repertoire," adjusting her sense of who she is to suit the context in ways that she, rather than the ethnographer, controls.

To take a historical benchmark from my own research, the profile of eastern European Jewish immigrants seventy-five to a hundred years ago was in many ways similar to the situations described today by Sugarman and Silverman for musicians from that part of the world. Thinking transatlantically, musicians followed strategies of touring concert circuits, selective recording, and playing with multiple sources. Clarinetist Dave Tarras recorded as a Jew and a Greek, bandleader Abe Schwartz contracted the same mostly Jewish-American musicians under several ethnic labels, and singer David Medoff covered Yiddish, Russian, and Ukrainian genres as part of his recording contract. Internal subdivisions kept the eastern European immigrants socially and musically apart from their German and Sephardic co-religionists in North America. What is different today? Well, a figure like Gershon Sirota, the first recording-star cantor (even before 1910), could not move out into a world music circuit. Staying totally within the group, he ended up on the wrong side of the Atlantic on tour and perished in the Holocaust. Sirota and his compatriots, such as Tarras and Medoff, were never subject to the whims of today's promoters and networks, from WOMEX and WOMAD down to local impresarios. There were no government grants, no call to represent the group "multiculturally," and no WIPO to worry about who owns liturgical prayer-modes, or UNESCO to categorize them as intangible cultural heritage.

So yes, the current context continues older patterns of musical motion and complexity. But the action is more ramified, multidimensional, and volatile than ever. Perhaps this is why our basic metaphors seem a bit shop-worn. The biological basis of "hybrid" and "diaspora," and the colonial premise of "creole" might be dated. Perhaps this is why we've let the commercial forces work the word "roots" overtime. The postmodern "rhizome" of Deleuze and Guattari, another bio-term, has not taken root, so to speak, in ethnomusicology yet, though they do say helpfully that "music has always sent out lines of flight, like so many 'transformational multiplicities,' even overturning the very codes that structure or 'arborify it' that is why musical form, right down to its ruptures and proliferations, is comparable to a weed, a rhizome" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:12). Perhaps our hesitation to sign onto "rhizome" has to do with the lack of clarity in how "musical form," which for them seems always to refer to Western concert music, relates to the variety of social and cultural scenes we work with. One more bio-term struck me in recent reading: the late nineteenth century's fondness for "web." There's a term that suggests complex relationships, spinning out in many directions. But we would balk at the sense of the spider as designer, the aesthetic elegance of the structure, and the biological basis of the metaphor. It looks like we need a rest from metaphoric terminology.⁵

5. Perhaps biological metaphors will come back once we catch up to biology's new complexity, as witnessed by this remark from a plant hybridization expert: "there's not a whole lot of purity out there," and the view that "as the tools of molecular biology have become

One word for multiplicity that does not get much academic play is eclecticism. Its etymology from “choosing” or “selecting” marks it as instrumental rather than metaphorical. People make their choices. As an experiment, I offer a workout of the word, not as a new “model term,” but as an exercise. Eclecticism is so automatic now in all music and art forms that we perhaps deal with it too offhandedly. One almost expects to read that a new film score, concert-hall composition, a pop album, or any sort of “world music” presentation will combine various elements rather than representing a unitary style. Eclecticism is reaching a full flowering in the media, which apply it across the board to all cultural trends, from music to fashion, taking for granted that both artists and consumers will want to tap multiple sources for a personal sound or look. Promoters try to ensure that a given event will offer something for everyone. Jody Ackland of Ireland’s Dun Laoghaire Festival of World Cultures, according to *Songlines* magazine (July/August 2006), even added intercultural speed dating to the 2006 music mix, hinting at literal cross-fertilization.

What follows is a short attempt to break eclecticism down in some specific ways. Above all, bear in mind that the word’s Greek etymology comes from the idea of *choice*, selectivity and combination, not the way it traditionally figured in criticism as a kind of absence of originality or defect of taste. The *Oxford English Dictionary* also stresses eclecticism’s all-important link to open-mindedness, crucial for grasping today’s musical choices. After “that borrows or is borrowed from diverse sources,” the *OED* offers “unfettered by narrow system in matters of opinion or practice” and “broad, not exclusive, in matters of taste.”⁶

Eclecticism might be thought of as inherent, implicit, imposed, and strategic. It is *inherent* as a natural effect of the native soundscape of people’s childhood and youth. They simply hear many musics from local and distant sources, live and mediated. Eclecticism is a lifelong process. To take just one example close at hand, my father, born in Detroit in 1911, loved to sing. His repertoire included: American children’s, vaudeville, and popular songs, Christian songs he learned at a YMCA camp (his mother didn’t know it was non-Jewish), songs in Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, Ukrainian, and German, mixed-language songs, and songs in translation: English to Yiddish, Russian to Yiddish, even English to Latin. And this was long before the development of portable media and the Internet. Beyond this personal inherent eclecticism, the tendency is automatically built into certain systems and scenes, such as *klezmer* or almost any live-musician circuit, and outdoor events like Ramnarine’s carnivals that are understood to be multiply musically based. Here, eclecticism is *implicit* among marketers and audiences, who fix on the idea that certain kinds of music must by nature be multiform. Silverman cites the “Latcho Drom” model of “Gypsy music” concerts, for which promoters and audi-

increasingly powerful, biologists have shown that gene flow between species, subspecies and populations is far more common than generally believed” (Derr 2006), which might better match ethnomusicology’s concerns than do older biological models.

6. Jocelyne Guilbault has pointed out that in French, “*éclectique*” might be pejorative, another problem of using a multinational European term, and even in English, it might not always be complimentary to tell an artist his/her work is “eclectic.”

ences expect a variety of musicians that will represent a kind of historical caravan of styles, often against the wishes of the performers themselves. Philip Bohlman's work on the Eurovision Song Contest stresses the event's inbuilt eclecticism, even as entrants are supposed to be representing a unified nation-state. State-sponsored events such as the annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival in the US announce a deliberately diverse set of origins, performers, and events as part of both the ideology and the showmanship of a massive public spectacle.

In these contexts, it seems that eclecticism can be *imposed*. Either insiders or outsiders decide that it is important to preserve, or even to invent, types of musical diversity, for a variety of reasons. So it is not surprising that the opposite can occur: eclecticism *restricted*. Within revival movements or among cultural producers and gatekeepers, a feeling can grow that there's too much variety or innovation. A drive for authenticity and purism lurks within every music scene based on roots and heritage, so there are always feet ready to step on the brakes of the onrushing engines of creativity.

All these examples of types of eclecticism turn out to be a single one: *strategic*. Whether to make a point, stake a claim, build a career, or market a product, musical actors think through a range of choices and select from a huge range of strategies, meta-eclectically. Those strategies are built into the actually resulting music in two ways: sequentially and serially. As musicians bundle parameters into performances, they fuse units from different sources through code-switching and other approaches which signal mastery of sources and skill at unspooling time in strings of diversity. They might also jam together variables from many resource pools simultaneously. All you need to do is replace one instrument, change the voice quality, or displace rhythms, and a perfectly predictable piece turns from generic to provocative, easy to ear-opening.

Grouping musical variables can go beyond genre-bending. Sometimes the sound bundles suggest timeframes, moving listeners in and out of style periods. This makes eclecticism powerful. Clashing or sequential chronotopes take audiences on a kind of time-travel that has deep cultural and historical implications. Suggestions of place-shifting also causes resonance ripples. Much "diasporic" music-making dips into these strategy pools to make people feel they are here and there, now and then, while never leaving their seats. Mapped onto generational audience layers, these moves become multidimensional in ways event analysis often leaves untouched.

At this level, eclecticism works on the boundaries of the individual and the grouping, tapping both personal and collective memory, which may otherwise be unaligned. So often it is not musical homogeneity that deepens affiliation, but musical eclecticism through its tentacled outreach. On this kind of a transient, volatile, and open-eared model, affiliation, bonding, or affinity imply a kind of heightened awareness which helps to make "identity" seem too laden and leaden for our current concerns, as the Wesleyan colloquium papers signalled. One can attach oneself to an eclectic cluster that shapes and reshapes over short time periods rather than establish and cling to a stable musical profile.

This compressed discussion simply responds to the implicit call of the Wesleyan colloquium to keep reframing the questions. In retrospect, the event's title, "Emerging Musical Identities," ended up presenting less of the comforting reliability that conference titles are designed to offer and more of an incitement to question terminology. We need many-sided models to match the musical multiplicity which is outpacing our discourse, and this short essay is meant only as a suggestive intervention. Having begun with the metaphor of the horse, let me close under the sign of the automobile. The emerging literature shows every sign of trying to step on the gas as the millennial milepost recedes. But this metaphor falls victim to the negative aura around "gas," and as for cars, "hybrid" also looks to be an obsolete term in that domain as well.⁷ The turnover of terms will keep us busier than usual as the twenty-first century comes into its own.

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