

PERCEIVED IDENTITY OF POLISH FOLK SONGS

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ABSTRACT

Background. Tune identification is a basic component of musical information processing. For psychological research purposes it is assumed to be a universal, species specific, cognitive ability of the mind that is not variable socially or culturally. However, tune identification implies man's auditory knowledge acquired through experience and learning. The latter depend on the social model of musical communication, hence on the socially and culturally accepted musical identity concept.

Aims. Perception of folk song identity was the subject of an experiment aimed at establishing the degree of tolerance for modification of the various elements of a melody in listeners from folk culture backgrounds and in listeners who did not have a background in folk culture. The above research aimed at (i) identifying the criteria which determine the process of recognising folk songs which have a range of local and individual variants, and (ii) examining the extent of tolerance towards alterations of the parameters which are crucial to the tune identification process.

Method. 136 persons took part in the experiment: 97 students and 39 experienced folk singers from south-eastern Poland. They were asked to assess 14 variants of songs selected from the region's popular folk repertoire. The research method combined an informal interview and a „same-or-different” test.

Results. Statistical analysis of the data was performed to study the degree of acceptance of the variants by all study participants. Four variants were rejected as being different than original songs. Among the remaining eight variants, four had a really high level of acceptance while for the remaining six the acceptance level was somewhat lower.

Conclusions. The results are moderately satisfactory, primarily because it was impossible to sufficiently control the type and extent of modifications in variants of original songs. The experiment included „natural” transformations of songs, with a lot of attention paid to preservation of their musical and emotional context. Such an approach makes it difficult, often even impossible, to manipulate musical processes freely, and consequently does not allow to design the experiment that could be more conclusive.

1. INTRODUCTION

The question of how folk songs exist poses problems of investigative and analytical nature to researchers. In terms of performance and research an individual song is always the record of a specific situation: it shows at the very most a random variant of the song performed by a singer at a particular time in a particular place and recorded by a researcher. The variability of folk songs in time and space and in individual performance

became a starting point for the development of various classification and typology methods (cf. Stockmann; Sęszewski 1973; Żerańska-Kominek 1995) Classification and typology were in fact a major problem for folk music researchers; it determined the extent of their methodological discussion.

More than fifty years ago Béla Bartók (Bartók 1951) came up with a completely new method of classifying folk melodies, which he called grammatical. The method was one of the greatest ethnomusicological achievements of this outstanding composer and collector of folk songs. Bartók expected his method to help him arrange melodies closely related to one another in structure and style into groups. One of the fundamental difficulties he encountered was defining the concept of variant and relation (similarity). This in turn depended on how identity was understood. Without a precise definition of identity it seems impossible to break up melodies with similar characteristics into separate groups (Bartók 1951, p. 17). The objectivity-aimed analytical-descriptive methods, employed by Bartók and other researchers following in his footsteps, could not help solve the problem of song identity and of assembling song variants in a satisfactory manner. They remained within the sphere of former analytical tradition based on the classification and typology of musical material as presented in the musical notation.

2. EXPERIMENT

Identification is the main component of listening and the basic condition of understanding music. For this reason it remains the focal point of not only ethnomusicology but also music psychology (cf. Dowling 1986; Crowder 1993). Identifying even the simplest melody is a highly complicated cognitive process, one that includes many activities of the mind which make up the processing of sound information. The end result is achieved when the listener is able to compare the melody he is hearing with all melodies he knows in order to identify the most similar one and to discover (to establish?) its identity. Identification, understood as searching for similar structures by the auditory system, is *in fact* a process of classification which the mind makes when listening to music. Auditory knowledge and experience depend on the social model of musical communication and education, both of which are part of a cultural system. A culturally determined model of communication and education produces a socially acceptable concept of song identity.

3. THE EXPERIMENT

Perception of folk song identity was the subject of an experiment whose objective was to identify the interdependence between the level and type of musical education and the perception of song similarity. This is why the experiment included students with different levels of musical education and local experts whose experience and musical knowledge stem from traditional folk

culture. 26 out of the 97 tested students do not have any musical education, 21 have a primary education, while 50 have either a secondary or higher musical education. The group of experts comprised of 39 persons, mostly women, from three different ethnomusic regions of Poland.

Selected for the experiment were four authentic folk songs from south-eastern Poland, recorded in 1950. The original version and three or four variants of each song were performed by a person who has knowledge of Polish folk music and musical experience and who is perfectly at home with the idiom and style used by genuine folk performers. The test consisted in presenting 14 pairs of melodies to the listeners. Each of the four authentic folk songs was presented together with its respective variants, one at a time: A-A1, A-A2, etc. The listeners assessed the similarity of each variant to the original song on a three-grade scale: grade 1 - the variant was identical with the original; grade 2 - the song was „a little similar” to the original version; grade 3 - the song was „completely different” from the original. These results were examined statistically with the aim of establishing the level of acceptance of each of the 14 variants for the whole group and for the six subgroups individually (3 groups of experts and 3 groups of students). The Minitab statistical package was used for the analysis.

4. RESULTS

The results may be considered as moderately satisfactory, primarily because there was not sufficient control over the modifications of the songs’ individual parameters which are important for identification (cf. Eerola et.al. 2001). The experiment confirmed that the contour line (Dowling 1971, 1978) is important for categorizing songs. As mentioned earlier, Bartók thought it to be the most fundamental similarity criterion. It has to be noted though that a serious modification of the contour line is not always tantamount to song rejection. Listeners do not always unequivocally assess modifications of the tone color of a melody and of its performance (mainly articulation, tempo, and timbre resulting, e.g. from a change of the register). The initial motif (Deliège 1996) may play a fairly important role in identity perception although our results are not clear-cut here either.

The time limit does not allow me to discuss in detail all results of the experiment. Therefore I will focus on the perception of one variant of *Hops Wedding Song* marked with letter C. It was modified in three ways. In variant C₁ the leap upwards by a sixth in the beginning motif appearing in the original was replaced with a leap by a fourth in the same direction. This modification was accompanied by local changes in the melody. Variant C₂ differed from the original in performance and especially in the embellishment of the melody. The variant C₃ melody was identical to that of the original, but the singing tempo was markedly slower.

The assessments of variants C₁ and C₂ were statistically unequivocal: song C₁ received a medium level of acceptance: 67,7% of listeners considered it as identical with the original. Variant C₂ was almost totally accepted because for 94,8% of the listeners it was identical with the original version of the song. As to variant C₃ the listeners were divided into three subgroups: 1) few folk experts thought it identical with the original; 2) some

students who do not have a musical education accepted the variant as similar with the original, and 3) majority of the experts rejected variant C₃ as completely different with the original. Let us note here that the pitch structure of *Hops Wedding Song* was left unchanged and the only modification was the drawing out of the melody as it was sung at a very slow tempo.

5. CONCLUSION

Failure to recognize the song, which was identical in terms of pitch structure but was sung at a much slower tempo, suggests that melody classification may depend on performing and expressive qualities, such as timbre, tempo, articulation, etc., which are more difficult to analyze. Let us add that the „non-analytical”, emotive-expressive aspects of music may have played the most important role in human communication at some early stages of the cultural evolution (cf. Brown 2000). The rating of variant C₃ by two groups of experts does point to a slightly different way of perceiving identity, partly confirming the differences between listeners with different levels and types of musical education.

6. REFERENCES

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