

FOLK SPACE ODYSSEY: TRAVELING TOWARDS THE MUSICAL ROOTS

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This paper will discuss spatiality and aurality as terms related to the natural way of creating the old folk callings, performed in the outdoors, which used to have strong social meaning (in general).¹ It will mainly focus on the interdependence of music and space, referring to the research trips I made in the Balkans, Estonia, and in Poland over the past decade.

Discussed in the text are details of music performance featuring the Korjen ensemble at the Libenská Synagoga in Prague in 2010 and the multidisciplinary project “Woman, Skin, Song and Bone” presented as a land art performative installation in Estonia and later as a theatre performance at Palace Akropolis in Prague in 2013. In conclusion, I will also comment on the Polish folk ensemble *My Ludove* [We Folks] in the Sudeten mountains and its uprooted society revitalized through music.

In addition, I will discuss more recent work with the spatial properties of a given space, where possibilities are opened to experience through sound, and to experience music in a multi-dimensional way. Finally, I will refer to my recent investigations into the roots of folk music.

Research in Bulgaria

During a trip to Bulgaria from June to July 2010, I visited singers in villages from different regions: the villages of Satovcha and Dolen (the Pirin Mountains), the village of Momtchilovsti (the Rhodope Mountains), and the village of Beli Iskar (the Shopi region, near to the Stara Planina Mountains). A diverse cultural and geographical landscape was selected to allow investigation of the

1. The paper is based on the doctoral theses *From Traditional Song to Site Specific Theatre* (Żurakowska 2015).

specificity and distinctiveness of musical patterns. In general, I was interested in folklore associated with music – rituals, gatherings, dances, traditional behaviour, costumes, and masks – but the main focus was on the singing as such.

In the village of Satovcha (Southern Bulgaria, the Pirin Mountains), I met two women, Katerina Kadjamanova and Baba Vanga, who taught me songs from their region. They would gesture with their hands to show how the voice goes up in tonality and down, sketching-out melodies in the air. The singers would emulate the shape of a vocal phrase, comparing it to elements of the environment: the lower voice behaves like a river; the upper voice follows the sharp edge of the region's mountain ridges. These kinds of melodic patterns belong to the heritage of folk song oral transmission that is typical of rural territories in many Balkan, Slavic, and Baltic countries, among which I have chosen to research.

During my sojourn, I observed that song-structures were influenced by the shape of the space where they were performed. One of the most significant features is rhythmical interdependence; for instance, in the Pirin Mountains, songs are usually performed with sharp and vivid rhythms, in odd meters like 5/8, 7/8 and 11/8. Another interesting phenomenon is the location of singers in a technique called *na vysoko* [on high] with a couple of singers called *rukačky* [female friends] that I observed in the southern Bulgarian village of Satovcha².

In this technique, singers would be situated on a hillslope in the form of a triangle, creating three sources of sound, such that their voices can flow in three directions, engaging each trajectory of reverberation.

Here we have a form using the physical occurrence of airflow reverberating in a specific way according to the location of the

2. The technique of singing *na vysoko* [on high], with a special duet called *rukačky* (the exact translation of the word *rukačky* relates to the Bulgarian word *družky*, which means female friends). In the technique *na vysoko*, two females called *rukačky-družky* would stand in another place at some distance from the whole ensemble, holding each other under the arms and singing the callings while the song is being performed. This technique is described by Bulgarian singer Katerina Kadjamanova in my documentary movie *Interval*; see <<https://vimeo.com/44659612>>, and an example at 12:50 – 12:58 min.

source of sound (singer) and the constellation of singers. A similar strategy of situating performers in space was applied during Korjen's performance in Prague, Czech Republic. I will describe it in the second part of this text.

Voice embodied: singing as a creation of space among singers through their bodies

In another Bulgarian village of Beli Iskar in the central part of the country (the Shopi region, near the Stara Planina Mountains), I was invited for a rehearsal of the Sanseto Slunce Ensemble, who performed *shopi* songs typical for the region. Singers gathered in a semi-circle, in two groups close to each other, holding each others' arms.

They sang in short intervals, alternating minor 2nd interval and major 2nd interval, often creating dissonances between each tone³. Due to the difficult harmonies, they had to also listen to each other with their bodies, focusing on singing clearly, as they did not have a conductor. Moreover, the rhythm was conditioned by their collective breath, taken as if by one body. This could be a real example of the "corporeal communication of uniqueness", as described by the Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero (2005: 199).

A group of eight women in the village of Beli Iskar assembled in a local library room to sing their repertoire, which originally had been sung in the fields during (or after) work. Even when they were singing indoors, the sense of open space was emitted from their collective voices, and the sound felt encompassing even without the natural space around. They kept space inside, as if it flowed within their bodies.

Another technique of singing is practiced in the broad hills of the Rhodope Mountains, where the melody is fluent and performed

3. The interval in music theory is a difference in pitch between two tones. Alternating between major and minor seconds gives the impression of sound density. This occurrence is often used in ritual traditional song, usually performed outdoors, during or after work. See <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interval_\(music\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interval_(music))>.



*Image 1. Women of the Sanseto Slunce Ensemble, Bulgaria.
Photo by Ewa Żurakowska, July 2010.*

according to an irregular rubato⁴ rhythm. In the village of Momchilovtsi, singers presented songs typical for the region: the sentences are long and flowing; the voice is waving and stretched like the gentle tops of the massive plain mountains around. The singer Alena, who I encountered, confirmed that singers would be very inspired by the shape of the landscape. The singer looks outside and can see the endless lines of the mountain chains. There are no sharp ridges; everything looks fluent. This is how their voices sound. It is only the length of breath that conditions the length of voice, along with the bagpipe, which is an accompanying instrument for the Rhodopian singers.⁵

4. Rubato is a musical term referring to the expressive and rhythmic freedom by a slight speeding up and then slowing down of the tempo of a piece. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tempo_rubato>.
5. Songs of the Rhodope Mountains are commented by singer Alena in my documentary movie *Intervals*, at 25:30–30:45 min. See the video at <<https://vimeo.com/user12273788>>.

Research in Baltic countries

While preparing the artistic project “Woman Skin, Song and Bone,” I conducted research in Estonia, also focusing on Finnish and Swedish vocal techniques, to explore the connections between voice and landscape. The project took place at the MoKS⁶ Cultural Centre, situated in the small village of Mooste in Estonia, surrounded by forests, lakes, fields, and trees. These elements of the natural world became the arena of our creative work, appreciating the value of nature for its own sake, but also building relationships with nature. In her essay *Aesthetics in Practice: Valuing the Natural World*, Emily Brady shows a tight link between aesthetic experience and “ethical attitude towards the environment” (Brady 2006: 277).

One of the research locations was Kihnu Island – a culturally significant region featuring an essentially matriarchal society. Old customs and songs have persisted there longer than anywhere else. The island is listed in the List of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO, and so the traditional songs of the *Seto leelo* society from Southern-East Estonia are covered under the patronage of UNESCO⁷. Estonian folk songs performed outdoors have a specific structure and tempo reflecting the surrounding landscape. The landforms here are subtle: flat extensive meadows, lakes surrounded by low hills of the land, soil covered with deciduous and coniferous forests. “Some environmental philosophers have suggested that developing relationships with nature through aesthetic experiences, that is,

6. MoKS, *Mooste Kõulalis Studio*, is a non-profit artist-run project space in Estonia situated in the rural community of Mooste, located 40km southeast of Tartu and 20km west of the Russian borders. With its diverse approach and open atmosphere, MoKS holds a unique position within the Estonian and greater European cultural context. For more, see <<https://moks.ee/>>.
7. In 2009, the Setos’ polyphonic style of folk singing, called *leelo*, was added to the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage. *Seto leelo* is usually performed by women, dressed in traditional clothing. During the Seto Kingdom Day celebration, the winning lead singer of a *leelo* group is awarded the title Mother of Song. For more, see <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Setos>>.



Image 2. Artists Katarina Fojtková, Ewa Żurakowska, Susanne Kass, preparing the project “Woman, Skin, Song and Bone” Mooste, Estonia (August 2013). Archives of Ewa Żurakowska

first-hand, multi-sensory, emotional and imaginative engagement can encourage or contribute to an oral attitude toward nature.” (Brady 2015: 280)

Another unique vocal technique, which shows the relation of the traditional way of singing with space, is *Kulning* [herding calls] – an old Swedish vocal technique used to summon cows and goats, and as a way of engaging with the landscape. Its practical function is to relay messages, gather animals, or to convey warnings. The technique exploits the acoustic environment of specific outdoor properties of the land, lakes, forests, and hills.

Exploring the relation of spatial, aural, and visual elements, the artists created a series of land art interventions near an Estonian lake. The performers were positioned on both sides of the lake in the natural environment to create a series of callings over the water surface, so that the voice would ‘travel’ above it. The artists performed through voice as a movement and were inspired by the



Image 3. Artists Katerina Fojtikova, Lucie Šimačková, preparing the project “Woman, Skin, Song and Bone”, Mooste, Estonia (August 2013).
Photo by Ewa Żurakowska

imagination of traditional singers, who often describe that they “go” or “move”, instead of “sing”.⁸ In these sound performances, each element of landscape – including performers – acquires sound personality (Blessner – Salter 2009: 2) and becomes a part of the natural aural architecture in that specific place.

Blessner and Salter in *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?* present some acoustic cues to comprehend the sonic process in the echo. According to them, these are essentially aural: “The adjective aural, which parallels to visual refers to the human experience of a sonic process; hearing, to the detection of sound; and listening, to active attention or reaction to the meaning, emotions, and symbolism contained within sound.” (Blessner – Salter 2009: 5)

8. I learned about that during a week-long masterclass with a traditional singer, performer and pedagogue of traditional vocal techniques, Svetlana Spajić, in Belgrade, Serbia, in July 2011.

Estonian folklore incorporates a patchwork of crafts with weaving having a special relevance. After researching elements of this craft, the artistic team created an outdoor performance working with lines of thread that stretched between the performers at distances of several meters.

This performance was accompanied by vocal callings. The artists were inspired to use the voice in the style of traditional Baltic societies. A series of short vocal compositions inspired by the soundscape of Estonian landscape became a part of the sound installations presented on stage at the Akropolis Palace, Prague, Czech Republic, where the project had its premiere on September 11, 2013.

The interdependence of songs and space connects the singing styles in many countries. People in the rural areas of my research in Poland, Estonia and Bulgaria have preserved singing techniques performed outdoors. Traditional singing techniques are often rooted in the relation of human and space; they served to communicate a certain message in the open-air area. This kind of “loud and clear” singing originates from practicing in the open air, while working in the fields, calling another person, or gathering animals. In Poland there is a vocal emission called *biały głos*⁹ [white voice]; in Bulgaria we observe the technique *rukačky* [na vysoko]; in Sweden, the technique called *Kuling* plays a similar role.

Applying the spatial phenomena of traditional songs to current artistic forms like world music and site-specific theatre

I will also consider spatiality on an example of a scenic concert in which I participated as a singer in the world music band Korjen (www.korjen.cz) and which I co-produced as a doctoral student in Prague at DAMU Department of Alternative and Puppet Theatre (KALD). The premiere of the concert “Korjen in Synagogue”

9. White singing/white voice is typical for traditional music in Eastern and central Europe.

White singing has been performed in rural territories in Poland, Ukraine, the Republic of Belarus and Bulgaria. The technique is based on the open throat and free volume of a bright colour. It uses all types of registers depending on many factors. Sometimes it is close to a controlled scream or just calling. For more, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_voice>.



Image 4. Ewa Żurakowska with Korjen Ensemble, performance “Korjen in Synagogue”, Libenská synagoga, Prague (October 2011). Archives of Ewa Żurakowska

took place at the Libenská Synagogue in Prague on May 26, 2012. The performance was founded as a site-specific project, based on the transformation of folk songs into the specific properties of space. It dealt with the acoustics of space and semantic notions of the synagogue, also using themes of songs to develop a musical dramaturgy. “Site-specific art is connected with building the relationship with space and searching for themes offered by the space of creation.” (Žižka – Václavová 2010: 86)

In the next paragraph, I will focus on the performer’s vocal presence, which builds the spatial relations in the show.¹⁰

10. An example of the performance is available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yBeKPVdISLg>> [accessed September 15, 2020].

The performance begins with soft tones that reverberate from balconies. There are three locations from which the singers' voices resound with the Slovak folksong *Slniečko horíce* [The Hot Sun], with the use of the *halekačky*¹¹ technique, and fill the space with vibration in the upstairs part of the synagogue. While the singers walk on the balconies, the source of the sound changes. Musical dialogues take place above the audience's heads: voices interweave with flowers and a big white curtain hanging between the balconies resembling, according to Jewish symbolics, a Tent for God meeting with humankind. Waves of voices create a bridge above the heads of the audience. The sound travels through the whole length of the synagogue, horizontally and diagonally. In each part of the concert, performers sang from a different spot in the synagogue, through which they were opening another perspective, discovering the next level of space. The vaults of the sacral building resounded with voices and instruments, the space becoming dynamic.

The artists of the Korjen ensemble attempted to redefine the symbolism of the sacral architecture through the notions of folk songs. The songs were selected in this way so they could correspond with the sacral character of the space. The altar with a recess in the wall, called *Aron Kodesh* [Torah Ark in English] and where the holy text of the Torah was kept, became a scene for ceremonies and rituals of transition: weddings and funerals.

In a Judaic synagogue in front of the Aron Kodesh, there is a curtain called the *parochet*¹². For the performance, the director Dana Račková and the set designer Tereza Sléřová made a visual reference to the *parochet* and used a white canvas as a wedding veil for the bride. The canvas was also used as a screen for projection, where the artists of the Korjen group presented a documentary video from the traditional societies that I filmed in Southern Bulgaria and Serbia. The field recording was to recall our great inspiration in the world music band Korjen and show our respect to the old singers.

11. *Halekačka* is a kind of folk calling, practiced in mountainous areas in Moravia, Silesia, and Slovakia.

12. *Parochet* is a specific curtain that covers the Torah ark in a Jewish synagogue, see <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parochet>>.

The project also attempted to involve the audience as much as possible in the space, the singers endeavouring to embrace the gathered audience with their voices. In this way, we intended to renew and recall the social function of building bonds among people through participation in singing rituals. Here, we are again inspired by traditional societies. As Jeff Todd Titon says, “Folk songs are shared among folk groups as events in the home or community gathering places in which most people take an active role, interacting as listeners, players, dancers, and singers.” (Titon 1992: 168)

Poland – unrooted traditional music on the borderlands of the Sudeten Mountains

Another example of a vocal project concerns the musical folklore in Lower Silesia, Poland, where I worked with a traditional folk ensemble to prepare an opening concert for the Hill of Literature festival curated by [the writer] Olga Tokarczuk. Singers of the ensemble *My Ludove* [We Folks] perform songs from diverse regions in Poland; however, the singers do not know many songs from their own region, as the Sudeten Mountains were an uprooted region¹³. Most of the musical traditions were brought to the Sudeten Mountains from eastern and central Poland. Unfortunately, the connections between generations, who used to pass on traditional songs from “grandmothers to mothers”, have been broken. I was searching for a way to restore this and find a repertoire which would reflect the relationship between human and landscape. I wrote for them new lyrics connected to the land, villages, and local crafts (among which weaving was important). The melodies were taken from remaining Polish folk tunes from central and eastern Poland, but the form of the songs transformed into the reflection of the spatial, sound, and social conditions. The outdoor

13. The complex subject of resettlement in Poland after the Second World War has disrupted the continuum of passing on the musical tradition from generation to generation. Local identity among displaced persons from East to Western Poland made it difficult to cultivate the local values. The vocal group *My Ludove* struggled to find their place in the social landscape of the Sudeten Mountains.



*Image 5. Women of the My Ludove Ensemble, Poland (July 2020).
Archives of Ewa Żurakowska*

landscape became the point of departure to invent new repertoire for the *My Ludove* ensemble. The concert took place on a hill in the Polish-Czech border area called Flucht, which is one of the festival venues. The ensemble sang on the hill using the aural properties of the space. Nowadays, the *My Ludove* ensemble work regularly on songs. I used to meet with its female singers quite regularly to develop and update their singing tradition in the region, which has gained a new chance to create a continuum of living folk culture. As Marcia Herndon says, a song is a form of social diplomacy: “As a form of cultural expression, the song is associated with marked events, also transformations, and the resolution of conflicts. It serves to create special kinds of temporal-spatial continua as well as to signal the support of the social system.” (Herndon 1992: 166)

Conclusion

This paper has sought to renew symbolic construction within traditional songs and their connections with space and environment. Here, I would like to use the words of my teacher Světlana Spajić, who taught me about oral traditions in terms of contemporary art: “Traditional song is a way of structuring your thoughts.” Spajić would emphasize that tradition is a dynamic process. This knowledge encouraged me to transform the heritage of folk songs to establish new connections among people, to renew bonds in societies, and continue the traditional folk music as a shared space in the broad sense.

I have presented the relationship between traditional music and the surrounding space. Their mutual relationship is rich, complex, and fascinating, rooted in both physical and material phenomena, as well as in the sphere of communication and culture, and at the same time extremely inspiring in artistic activities.

An interesting attempt to describe the spatial context of the traditional song and space is proposed by Henry Stobart as a “direct effect of the acoustic parameters on the nature of the tunes produced by the long-distance yodellers” (Stobart 2007: 137). Finally, there is the rich ethnomusicological heritage of Leoš Janáček, whose versatile and long-standing field research has also shown this interdependence of voice and space.¹⁴

Nowadays the music of the world becomes a space for the interconnection of musicians from different places on the world map. World music creates space for coexistence in the sound community, outside the physical distance and beyond the borders, which might be especially relevant in the context of the recent experience of isolation.

14. In his essay *On the Music Aspect of Moravian Folksongs* (“O hudební stránce národních písní moravských”, 1901), Janáček refers to the study of ethnic groups with a view to a certain geographic context, environment, and lifestyle as they pertain to singing. In the part “Melody of Folksongs” (“Nápěv lidových písní”), Janáček described the effects of co-creating the origin of folk songs.

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Summary

The article deals with the interdependence of traditional music and space, referring to the research trips the author made in the Balkans, Estonia, and Poland. While visiting traditional singers in different regions of Bulgaria and witnessing their outdoor performances, the author observed how the shape of the landscape influenced the songs. The author also depicts her observations of vocal techniques related to the aural qualities of space in Estonia and the old crafts connected to traditional songs, especially focusing on engaging the trajectory of voice reverberation based on the location of the singers in the space. As an example of applying the spatial phenomena of traditional songs to more current artistic forms, the author comments on the land art project "Woman Skin, Song and Bone" presented in Estonia and the musical performance "Korjen in Synagogue" presented in Prague. Finally, the author deals with the role of space – the geographical conditions and topography of the region – in restoring the traditional music heritage in the Polish-Czech borderland. The interdependence of traditional voice practice and space serves as an essential dynamic dialogue of past and present and as a way of building the bonds in society.

Key words: traditional song; vocal technique; musical performance; musical heritage; land art; embodied voice; aural architecture; Poland; Bulgaria; Estonia.