

Theoretical Approaches to Heterophony

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Abstract

Heterophony is one of the basic principles by which a multilinear texture comes about in the music of oral tradition. It can be found in many cultures both as a particular form of music making and as a component of more complex multipart practices. Heterophony is also a very intriguing topic for ethnomusicological investigation, especially if the researcher intends to describe this phenomenon at the theoretical level. The problems start with the very notion of 'heterophony', and in attempting to resolve them the researcher is faced with the ambiguity of such basic terms as polyphony, monophony, unison, etc. The reason why heterophonic music is especially difficult to describe using standard European terminology is that the phenomenon of heterophony, being intrinsically connected with oral and collective music creation, has no direct analogies in Western written music. The present article aims to interpret heterophony as a musical, social and psychological phenomenon, using and merging different approaches – music-analytical, anthropological and cognitive. The article also discusses the use of the ethnomusicological terminology connected with a musical texture – especially the umbrella terms for multilinear music – and searches for a more inclusive, yet differentiative and limiting definition of heterophony.

Timothy Rice in his article "Ethnomusicological theory", published in the *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, Vol. 42 (2010), expresses his concern over the tendency among most contemporary ethnomusicologists to recognize and use too little ethnomusicological theory in their works. According to Rice and some other authors to whom he refers (e.g. Ruth Stone 2008), despite quite frequent references to the various theoretical concepts (especially of sociological origin), serious, well-argued discussions on theoretical topics are rather rare in ethnomusicological publications (Rice 2010: 101). Ethnomusicological theory is, of course, present in a latent form in every piece of ethnomusicological research. Rice suggests, however, making it more explicit and beginning a more systematic theoretical dialogue among ethnomusicologists:

Writing ethnomusicological theory involves, at its minimum [...], conversations among ethnomusicologists. [...] Without explicit ethnomusicological theory developed in conversations among ourselves, the field is in danger of being little more than the sum of a succession of idiographic reports from here and there, a kind of academic journalism of fleeting interest, but of little or no long-term consequence (Rice 2010: 106).

One of such 'conversations among ethnomusicologists' on the theoretical issues of the field took place during the First Seminar of the ICTM (International Council for Traditional Music) Study Group on Multipart Music (Tallinn, 2014); this provided the impulse for the discussion in the present article. The theme of the Seminar, "Multipart Music: theoretical approaches on the terminology", was dedicated to the part inherent in every theoretical system – its conceptual and terminological apparatus; the actual core of the discussion, however, seemed rather to be the question of the nature of multipart music making. In accordance with the Seminar theme, its participants were inclined to theorizing more than usual and the brief 'idiographic reports' served merely as illustrations to the theoretical discussion. Although theorizing and generalization also prevail in the present article, I find it useful to mention in advance that my personal experience with traditional heterophony, which is the central subject of this research, is mainly connected with two song traditions: the ritual songs of the Russian-Belarusian borderland, where heterophony occurs in its pure form, and the ancient two-part singing of the Seto (South-East Estonia), where one of the parts is performed heterophonically.¹

¹ About these two song traditions see, for example, my recent publications: Pärtlas 2012, 2013.