

Relics of Lithuanian Polymusic: An Analysis of Three Cases

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Abstract

This article discusses three different cases of Lithuanian polymusic, all connected to the rites of passage. They are all in some way related to the lamentation tradition of funeral and wedding rituals. During funerals polymusic can be heard in the interweaving of laments and Catholic hymns. Instances of polymusic that occur at weddings are more numerous and varied when singing-lamenting, singing-playing instruments, or lamenting-singing-playing and so on are combined during one ritual act. A comparison of polymusic at Lithuanian weddings with examples from other nations offers possible interpretations as to the meanings of the Lithuanian examples in a ritual context. In the third, atypical case of polymusic, different genres – a so-called lament and a song that resembles a dancing tune – are heard not in parallel, but alternately. On one hand, it would seem that such a performance appears to go against the concept of polymusic, but on the other, the form of alternate singing is considered to be the source of polyphony. Thus, the author argues that this case can also be considered alongside other examples of polymusic (especially since two different wedding actors perform the two “pieces” of different genres in the alternating singing example).

A rather long time ago, while taking part in folklore expeditions, listening to archival sound recordings of traditional Lithuanian music, or studying the literature (mostly descriptions of various feast days), I noticed a rather rare and strange phenomenon: the sound of several different musical genres in one traditional situation. I had encountered similar phenomena in ethnomusicological literature about the cultures of other nations, yet for a long time it failed to attract my interest.

In the second half of the 20th century, researchers from Western countries¹ (musicologists, ethnologists and other specialists) noticed various phenomena that they considered to be ‘polymusic’. ‘Polymusic’ is a neologism coined in 1991 at a seminar of the French Ethnomusicology Laboratory of the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS). It was then defined by the acoustician Gilles Léothaud (n.d.) as being “the total result of the simultaneous, deliberate presence of several autonomous musical entities, without any coordination in time” (Rappoport 2013: 10). However, since these were usually evaluated as coincidental and interpreted as “cacophony or incoordination” (Basset 1995: 103) the term used to have a negative connotation.

It should be noted that in the 1970s a similar phenomenon in East Slavic countries drew the

attention of ethnomusicologists. First of all, wedding folklore – and then, more specifically, wedding laments either performed together with songs or in a collective lament (Engovatova 1997) – became an object of interest. The polymusic of Russian (and other East Slavic polyphonic cultures) is called ‘exceptional forms of collective singing’ (*особые формы совместного пения*), and is analysed in depth in the works of Margarita Engovatova. The essence of such polyphonic forms, according to this researcher, is the performance of two or more musical texts (in the semiotic sense of the word) simultaneously. This results in a new text with a more complicated structure, which acquires a special functional and semantic charge. As Engovatova points out, each of the subtexts that comprise such a text may traditionally circulate as an independent piece as well. Performers consciously combine them, while the specificities of the new text may be more or less realized (*ibid.*). Engovatova’s insights are especially important for our research into Lithuanian instances of polymusic in wedding contexts (see cases II and III).

Examples of polymusic studies in the tradition of Belarus are to be found in the work of Zinaida Mazheyko, Tatyana Berkovich and others. Belarusian researchers began paying attention to the distinctive musical-ritual phenomenon “Borona” (*Борона*) that is practised in the region

¹ See e.g. Elkin 1967 [1938]; Lomax 1968; Schaeffner 1968; George 1996.