

Embodiment in the Context of the Transmission of Vocal Tradition. School of Traditional Music, Poland

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Abstract

In this paper, the experience gained mostly at yearly summer schools of traditional music (primarily at one school in Poland) is reviewed, noting in particular the importance of embodiment in the second link of the transmission chain “native singer – teacher – student”. The main purpose of these workshops is to practise certain traditional vocal techniques and styles, thus actually “embodying Otherness” (Trimillos 2004). The individual experience of the author (working as an instructor) and the reflections of other school participants are considered.

A number of points relating to the topic are discussed, including developing a “corporeal vocal memory”, imitation (overt or covert), hermeneutic “lay” instructions, adequate environment as part of a cognitive system, and the proportion of verbal/non-verbal means. The application of these to group training introduces special problems. These include creating a “bioenergetic” group space (related partly to the group geometry), statics and dynamics in embodiment dependent on and manifesting in the song genre, the singers’ individuality, and certain roles of the singers. Special attention is paid to the role of intentional/unintentional gestures in group leading and communication. The rehearsing of one song is presented as an example of the interplay of various aspects of embodiment.

About the School

Two Polish enthusiasts of traditional music, Jan Bernad and Monika Mamińska, came up with the exciting idea of launching a somewhat unexpected, brand new event in the context of modern Poland. Bernad and Mamińska were the first who formulated the aim “to create the folklore movement in Poland”. Neither of them had any formal education in ethnomusicology; they came with backgrounds in theatre (Bernad) and philology (Mamińska). They were strongly attracted to the magnificence and values of traditional vocal techniques (such as “biały głos”, i.e. “white voice”, the intense, taut Slavonic technique) and of traditional culture in general. They gained inspiration from other Eastern European countries where the folklore movement already had deep traditions (which were lacking in Poland). In the beginning they invited Ukrainian teachers, the members of the distinguished folklore ensemble Drevo known for their careful attention to vocal techniques and styles. In this way, the start of “creating the folklore movement in Poland” was ideal, based as it was on the

essential qualities of traditional singing and on general cultural matters.

The first International Summer School of Traditional Music (Międzynarodowa letnia szkoła muzyki tradycyjnej; hereafter ‘the School’) took place in 1998, in a small camp of summerhouses called Rybaki nad Narwią in the countryside of Eastern Poland. Most probably the very location of the camp, situated as it is on a hill with a far-reaching, panoramic view over the small stream, calm wide meadows and swamps in the valley below, has influenced the reception of traditional singing as embodied through what might be called an authentic, homelike environment.

Since then the School has been held at different places in Poland (Fig. 1) and organised or led by Bernad and Mamińska (under the auspices of the Fundacja Muzyka Kresów and Ośrodek Rozdroża).¹ The singing teachers (instructors) are invited from Poland and the neighbouring countries of Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, Lithuania, and also from Serbia. Some ten teachers participate; they are assigned separate groups of students. The teachers have remained more

¹ Bernad and Mamińska worked in both institutions (the Borderland Music Foundation and the Crossroads Center).