

“Community Concert”: A Multicultural Event in a Toronto Elementary School*

JUDITH R. COHEN

“Oh, Mom, please, don’t sing that old stuff!” Having just returned from California, I was walking my daughter to school recently, just behind a Korean mother with her son, perhaps seven or eight years old. She was singing a Korean song softly, with evident enjoyment; he wriggled and hopped about in an agony of embarrassment, repeating his opening plea in—as I later learned—both English and Korean. I said brightly, “You can sing it to *me* anytime: I’ll learn it!”—and we began a conversation. My seven-year-old daughter chimed in disgustedly, “Oh, Mommy! Come *on!* You’ve just been home for a day and you’re *already* doing yucky ethnomusicology!”

Why does my daughter so much like to sing the well-known Korean song “Toraji”?¹ Why did a group of Grade Four children sing this song as they walked home from school last spring? Why am I even *aware* of it being a well-known Korean song?

Recently, I was awarded a small grant from the Ontario Arts Council’s Ventures Fund to work on what I called a “community concert.” Palmerston School’s then Vice-Principal, Peter Hall, had tried to assemble a concert in which children and other members of the school community would participate. Almost all the musical contributions were in English, and I wondered what had happened to the school’s considerable non-English speaking population. Did they not understand the notice which had gone home? Did they lack confidence? Were they simply accustomed to being relegated to marginal, after-school, “Heritage” programming? I decided to attempt a little “applied ethnomusicology.”

My original, rather grandiose vision was of a concert that would be the fruit of months of collaboration between me (the understanding, dialogically oriented ethnomusicologist/parent) and several other components of the school community: parents, children, grandparents, teachers, support staff. It would not be merely a one-time production; on its own momentum, this event somehow would become a regular part of school life. To a modest

extent, the first components of my plan came true, accompanied by several problems and issues, some anticipated and others not.

I wanted the material to come from the students and their families, not from me, and not from educators who had decided what was "suitable." I wanted the project to traverse, or, even better, dissolve, boundaries of age, gender, language, culture, class. As an ethnomusicologist accustomed to working with music performed by older people, I wanted the songs performed in "traditional" (not "school-choir") styles. In short, I wanted rather a lot.

Because it was a small grant for a part-time project, I learned much about methodology and practical limitations. For various administrative reasons—unimportant in themselves—we got off to a slow start, the school sending letters out to the parents much later than anticipated. Eventually my carefully worded letter, translated by Toronto Board of Education staff into Spanish, Cantonese, Korean, and, I think, Greek, went out to all the parents. The tear-off replies arrived slowly. Meanwhile, I spoke with classroom teachers, the half-time music teacher, the "enrichment" committee, the Heritage teachers, and a few parents I knew already. Finally, it was time to sit down with the tear-offs and make telephone calls.

I soon discovered that many of the parents had replied out of sheer habit: "Oh, I thought it was just another form I was supposed to fill in." Several others had replied "just to be polite." Eventually, I set up home interviews with several families from different backgrounds: Chinese, Korean, Croatian, and others. Even after years of urban fieldwork, I still envisioned cosy scenes: the children would help elicit and record their families' songs, ideally from resident grandparents, happy to be called upon for their under-valued expertise. In practice, it was more usual for my daughter to disappear with the children to indulge in Nintendo orgies or some other activity for which she knows my tolerance is low, while I tried to improve my ethnocentric attitude toward videos of neatly clad children frisking about green fields singing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" in Cantonese.

In fact, almost every group I worked with offered "Twinkle" as a traditional song of its own culture. Cantonese, Korean, Greek, Hindi, Spanish, and others: each insisted it was "traditional." The runners-up, again cross-culturally, and again as "traditional," were Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" and "It's a Small, Small World." I had entered a nightmare of musical, ethical, theoretical, and social dilemmas. Socially, how could I drink their tea, eat their fresh spring-rolls, take up their precious family time, only to tell them they had all the wrong songs? Theoretically, how could I, the outsider, the scholar, the sinister embodiment of ethnographic authority, even think—much less tell them—they had all the wrong songs? Ethically, how could I dream of telling any people they had all the wrong

songs? And musically, how could I do anything else but find a way to tell them they had all the wrong songs?

Naturally, even as I tried to work through these issues, the very word "wrong" tolled a clamorous warning. "Wrong" for whom? No songs can be "wrong." No person's choice of songs can be "wrong." And, after all, have we not learned from Tony Seeger's study of the Suyá (58f.) how proud people can be of their craft in adopting and adapting "outside" music? Have I myself not enthused for years about Sephardic Jews' ability to do just that, writing little articles about contrafacta and cultural empowerment? And, anyway, would it not raise some interesting musical issues to stage an entire concert of multi-lingual renditions of "Twinkle," "Joy," and "Small"? Well, maybe. But something told me contrafacta, cultural empowerment, and interesting musical issues would not result in an enjoyable elementary school concert.

I decided to make a sacrifice, sometime in the future, to propitiate the gods and goddesses of dialogic ethnography; and meanwhile to elicit some material more easily identified with the musical traditions in question. I went through song anthologies and recordings, then asked parents whether they had ever heard such-and-such a tune. The results were often gratifying, though somewhat lacking in the spontaneity I had hoped for.

Here are two instances, from the Greek and Spanish Heritage groups. The Greek teacher and parents, apparently, could not come up with a song among them. The Greek Community Centre gave me a tape which, they assured me, was the latest thing in music education from Greece. After listening to it, I consigned it to my "Twinkle" file. Finally, I suggested the old standby, "Yerakina" (cf. Alevizos and Alevizos 30). The teacher agreed, but said, "Well, in that case, why don't we do one the children already know?" Weeks into the project, she suddenly began to reel off songs the children had already learned.

Both Spanish Heritage teachers spent a long time discussing what song would be appropriate. It was obviously impractical to include one from each Latin American country, but they were concerned about emphasizing any one over another. Finally, they decided on a 1947 composition, "Marcha Panamericana," which includes the names of all the Latin American countries. Well, it wasn't "Twinkle," "Joy," or "Small." We worked on it, and I limited my interference to a mild suggestion that we change "die" to "live" in the line "For our freedom we must die gloriously."² But the children and the few parents present almost unanimously preferred "die."

Then came the question of who would sing the songs. Many parents and other family members did not want to sing on stage, with or without their offspring, even in very informal circumstances. Several children also felt awkward about performing songs in their own language, except in the heritage classes, where it was, after all, expected. Eventually, Catherine

West, the music teacher, offered me her Junior Choir and two of her most enthusiastic older classes, and Cindy Beauvais “donated” the Primary Choir. The then Vice-Principal, Jamaican-born Claudette Neita, performed along with the Black Heritage group and with an ensemble that sang a Trinidadian piece, and taught me some songs (including a few which even I, reluctantly, deemed unsuitable for children, if educators were to be in the audience—or maybe just unsuitable for educators). Some family members participated, especially from the Latin American and the Black communities. I also took the liberty, as a school parent, of adding a few songs from our own varied family background: Yiddish for my grandparents, Native Canadian for my daughter’s ancestry on her father’s side, and Bosnian for my new fourth-cousin-in-law (the latter perhaps a minor strain on the kinship lines).

As I suggest above, musical style was also important. Working with the heritage classes posed no problem; they simply sang the songs as they had heard them at home and/or from their heritage teachers, not trained musicians. Working with Catherine was a little different. Let me stress that she was wonderfully cooperative, far beyond the call of duty, and our occasional differences of opinion about singing style had no negative effect on our collaboration. It did occur to me, however, that I was, unfairly, more concerned about imposing my views on the children’s families than on their music educator. The children were used to a “choir” style. Fairly high-pitched, nicely modulated, just this side of the angels, this style has its merits, and its appropriate contexts. But, though it worked well enough for some of our songs, I felt it was not appropriate for several others. I have discussed this issue often with other music educators, and probably shall again.

As for transmission, I had wanted family members to come into the classroom. They did not, for either work-related or personal reasons. I ended up working closely with almost all the singers, and in some cases, making tapes for them. Though the teachers all agreed that the children would learn the songs aurally, and memorization would be no problem, in fact at least half of them ended up using photocopies for the words. In a couple of cases, Catherine actually had two children hold up a huge sheet of paper in front of the whole group (which, with my medieval studies background, reminded me of early depictions of monks peering at oversized music manuscripts).

The concert went beautifully. The gym was overflowing, and there were tears in many eyes. Parents still come up, months later, to say how much they enjoyed it and why do I not do it every year. My booklet of the songs is ready to be duplicated. I still would have liked to involve the children more fully in the preparations. A nine-year old told me breathlessly that her Italian grandmother knew many “old songs”; she phoned her a few times, then reported proudly that her grandmother’s songs were called

“Pavarotti songs.” Also, I had hoped participation would be spread out more fully across the school, and in the case of the heritage classes, not so ghetto-ized. But this probably would require more time and long-term confidence-building. I also learned more about differences between my own values and the families’ in selecting appropriate songs.

My conclusion, though unoriginal, seems inevitable. Somehow we must liberate music from “projects,” even from such labels as “multi-cultural”, and ensure it has its rightful place in the curriculum—along with “ethnomusicology”, even if the children do not use the term. Meanwhile, I am thrilled that I heard those kids singing “Toraji” as they walked along, and my daughter singing it to herself—“yucky” as she may have found the process which led us to learn these beautiful songs.

NOTES

* This is a revised version of a paper read at the 1993 Annual Meeting of the Canadian Society for Musical Traditions.

1. A Canadian version appears in Song, 150-52).
2. In Spanish, I proposed changing “debemos de morir gloriosamente” to “debemos de vivir gloriosamente.”

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Résumé: *Judith Cohen retrace son expérience d'organisation d'un concert multiculturel et communautaire dans une école publique du centre ville de Toronto. Après un récit détaillé de sa collaboration avec enseignants, administrateurs de l'école, élèves et familles, elle conclut que de tels concerts devraient être remplacés par l'inclusion de traditions musicales dans le cursus scolaire.*