# CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE MUSIC OF THE POLISH HIGHLANDERS OF TORONTO[1]

LOUISE WRAZEN

Toronto is surely one of Canada's most colourful "cultural mosaics." Among the numerous people who have made their home here, the *Górale* (Highlanders) from the south of Poland known as Podhale form but a small community. Like many other groups, they now find themselves in an urban, ethnically heterogeneous environment in which they must make a place for themselves and their predominantly rural culture.

The present study is a modest attempt to address the issue of continuity and change in the music of the *Górale* in Toronto. Two major questions were asked:

1. What is the extent and nature of the musical activity of the *Górale* in Toronto, and how is it similar to or different than the activity in Poland?
2. What role does the music of the *Górale* play in their lives in Toronto?

The first question will be addressed by discussing the occasions for music-making and structure of the performance events, in Poland (as described in interviews), and in Toronto (as observed). The second question will be addressed in two parts: first, a model of the community will be constructed to place music and culture within the context of other activities; second, interviews will provide the basis for discussing the *Górale's* own views of their music. This will be preceded by a general introduction to the group and its members.

The scope of the discussion is limited by the data, which was the result of field work undertaken during an eight-month period (September, 1982 to May, 1983 inclusive). This study, therefore, will inevitably pose more questions than it can answer.

## The Group and its Members

The *Górale* have organized themselves into an association independent of other Polish organizations in Canada. The "Polish Highlanders Association of Canada" was organized formally in the fall of 1978. In 1979, it drew up its own constitution and was incorporated under the Canada Corporation Act. Apparently an earlier group existed in Toronto during the 1930s, but little is known about it.

Five years ago, in 1978, there were about fifty or sixty active (i.e. paying) members in the organization. Today, in 1983, around 130 people have registered, but the number of active, paying members remains steady at around fifty to fifty-five. Members range in age from about twenty to eighty-one; the oldest came to Canada after

the second world war, but most immigrated during the 1960s and 1970s. The following discussion will rely on information from Mrs. S. Swiderski and Mrs. K. Ciesla, who came to Toronto in the 1960s, and Mrs. S. Siuty, who arrived three years ago.

**Music Occasions and Events**

Song, dance and instrumental music are closely bound in the Highlanders' tradition. And although unaccompanied singing, too, is prominent, this paper will focus on the occasions uniting song with dance and instruments.

This occurred frequently in Poland — indeed, there are spontaneous get-togethers almost every day except during Lent and Advent. Most informal dances were held in the winter, when there was the least work to do. In the fall, there were dances after the threshing of grain; in the summer, there were dances on Sunday afternoons.

The Highlanders make a distinction between these gatherings and the more formal weddings and special dances. Only young people participated in the music and dance at the informal gatherings, for once married, men and women usually no longer went to dances of this type. They only went when invited — to more formal occasions such as weddings. This difference is the result of the central function of these dances: namely, that they were an important venue for young men to meet young women.

What were these dances actually like: was their function as meeting places manifested in the actual performance events? The musical event itself did not vary with the occasion. The people of Podhale have two main dance forms: the *Góralski* (dance of the Highlanders) and the *Zbójnicki* (brigands' dance). The latter is a group dance for men; the former is a dance for one or two couples which dominated these occasions and will be discussed here. Mrs. Siuty describes the general atmosphere of these dances: "Normally, you sat on benches; one couple dances and everyone else sits in a circle around them." A band provided the music for dancing; it consisted of string instruments: a first fiddle, two or three second fiddles and a bass (of cello size).

The music played was the result of an ongoing dynamic relationship between the musicians and the dancers. One or two men would approach the musicians, singing the beginning of the tune to which they wanted to dance. This was then played by the musicians as the men turned to dance with their partners. Facing each other, the woman matched her steps to the more vigorous movements of the man. When finished this dance, the man (men) returned to the musicians and requested another dance in the same manner. The couple dancing remained separated until the end of the entire set, when the man could swing *(zwyrtać)* the woman. A new set would then begin with another man approaching the musicians.

The sequence of the dances within a set followed an accepted pattern of events based on dance steps. But the actual combination was variable, and therefore, the dancer could choose a sequence best suited to his talents and abilities. The pattern usually consisted of 'normal' dances *(swykle),* more difficult 'striking' steps *(krzesane),* and usually ended with a normal dance to the tune 'green' *(zielone),* followed by the man swinging his partner.

A general dance *(ogólny),* a polka or waltz, was usually included in this set, and Mrs. Siuty explains why:

> It's not like here that everyone dances — that's one of the reasons that they started introducing other types of dances — because everyone sat around. Some people danced very little during the entire dance.

She continued that it could be quite discouraging for some:

> Not all girls dance . . . if you have a boyfriend, you know that you'll dance, because he'll dance with you. If you don't have one, well it won't really work out . . . but a girl still wants to go, because it's primarily at these dances that couples met and then got married.

Therefore, the social function of these dances was of prime importance. But needless to say, any courtship undertaken here followed the strict conventions of the society. For example, a young man could not himself ask and lead the girl he liked to dance. As Mrs. Swiderski explained: "If a boy liked a certain girl, he asked another boy to lead the girl to a dance. He told him which one and the other would then lead her out to dance." A friend of the man singing to the musicians would lead a girl out to the centre of the floor, swing her and then leave her to dance with her proper partner.

The initial act of leading the girl out to dance was usually introduced by a special text in which the dancer asked the musicians to play so that a friend could lead his girlfriend to dance. Indeed, it was through these texts (often improvised and added to the tunes), sung ostensibly to the musicians, that many a young man made his feelings known to the girl he liked.

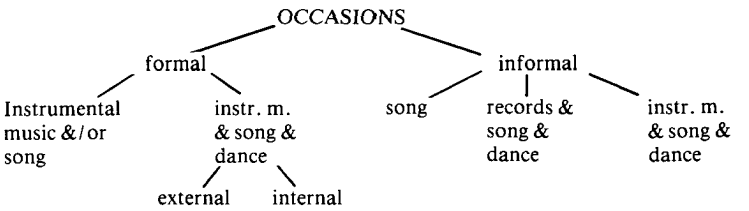
It was therefore important for the man to sing and dance well. Mrs. Swiderski remembers that: "Some boys couldn't sing or dance. Others did both well, and oh, the girls really went after them." According to Mrs. Siuty, a good dancer is distinguished by: "the movement of his legs, his arms — and he must be smiling. He should move with the beat, to the tempo and be light in his dance." A woman should also dance to the beat; her steps should be small and follow those of the man.

In these events, song and dance are therefore closely interwoven, and act as a vehicle for display and as a prelude to courtship. Indeed, it was here that boy met girl and could articulate his feelings

within the strict confines of social dictum and tradition.

It is little wonder that these events occurred frequently given the importance of their courtship function. But they are no longer as important in the Podhale of today. In fact, in the 1960s and 1970s it was questionable whether these traditions would even survive.

Occasions for music-making in Toronto obviously differ from those in Podhale. For the purposes of this study, I have classified occasions in Toronto in which music plays a part as either formal or informal, and the various subcategories are shown in the diagram:




Formal occasions are characterized by rehearsed presentations destined for a wide audience. These are subdivided according to the type of music event presented. In the first, song, instruments and dance are not united in the traditional way described earlier. The *Gòrale* participate in many special events with other groups (Polish and other): they usually wear their traditional costumes, and often perform some form of their music. Like the costumes they wear, music renders their participation in these events more significant.

In the second subcategory, song, instruments and dance are united in a re-creation of the dance event described earlier. This may occur during a relatively formal occasion which features organized entertainment for a large, external audience. The *Gorale* have participated in a number of such shows with other groups; perhaps the most ambitious was the re-creation of a traditional wedding in 1978. But more frequently, they present smaller, formal presentations for an internal audience consisting largely of fellow *Gòrale.*

The actual performance events in which song, instruments and dance are united for presentation at formal occasions are usually more or less the same (varying perhaps in length and complexity). The performance is based on the two traditional dances — the *Gòralski* and the *Zbòjnicki.* It is structured in the manner of the former: two men approach the musicians singing, dance with partners and repeat the sequence a number of times; two other men then approach and do the same thing. The rest of the group meanwhile stands in a semi-circle around the dancers. This sequence of events and staging corresponds to the traditional dance as described in the preceding section, but there are two significant departures.

First, the *Zbójnicki* is incorporated into the structure. (This is an energetic dance said to have originated with the *zbójnicy* (bands of men roaming the countryside much in the style of Robin Hood legends), and danced by a group of men with their *ciupagi* (long sticks resembling walking canes, traditionally used primarily as weapons). Four men approach the musicians singing (the leader starting and the others joining) and then dance together in a circle, performing various difficult feats. But this dance was not a part of the usual gatherings in Podhale, as Mrs. Siuty relates:

> The *Góralski* (was danced), never the *Zbójnicki.* It is only danced at shows. Oh, a long time ago men used to dance it in the glades — around 1910, 1915. But in my time (1950s, 1960s), this was no longer so. . .

Second, women sing; they may join in as the dancers sing to the musicians or they may provide an interlude to the dancing by singing a song. This too was not usually done in Poland according to Mrs. Siuty: "Only the men sing, the women and girls don't. Here the women sing only for these shows."

Certain concessions therefore, are made for the sake of the spectacle. Also, attention is paid to choreography: musicians, singers and dancers carefully file into the performing area, and dancing must be synchronized to a degree not always achieved in spontaneous performance.

The second main category — the informal occasions — consists of spontaneous get-togethers, private parties or other larger, organized activities when musical participation is spontaneous and general.

The organization's annual Christmas party was such an occasion. After the meal, four fiddlers, bass and accordion accompanied (unamplified) general dances such as waltzes and polkas, as well as the traditional *Góralski.* Men approached the musicians, sang and danced in precisely the manner described above as traditional to the old Podhale dances — except that the restrictions governing dance protocol did not hold (married couples danced, the choosing of partners was quite informal).

The dynamics between the musicians and dancers were clearly evident: the dancer stood talking to the musicians between numbers — telling them to play more slowly or faster, or just joking and resting; the musicians commented on the dancing, or advised the dancer what tune to sing; sometimes the dancer didn't sing — he chose the step he wanted and the musicians played the appropriate tune; sometimes the musicians joined in the singing with the dancers. Also, there seemed to be a constant trading of instruments and roles to allow the musicians to dance as well as to play. Clearly, therefore, musicians and dancers work together to form the sequence of both the individual *Góralski* and the total musical event. Except for the environment (a basement hall, people sitting in

groups around tables) and the dress (some were in costume, others were not), this could have been a dance in Podhale thirty years ago.

Occasionally, similar music and dancing occur in a private home: a christening, post-wedding party *(poprawiny),* pre-lenten party *(ostatki),* name-day or birthday celebration can provide the occasion. If musicians are present with their instruments, singing and dancing follow in the traditional way; if not, records may substitute as accompaniment for general dancing. Unaccompanied singing inevitably breaks out in either case. Providing that there is ample food and drink, and spirits are high, there will be some form of general music-making. And although in a different environment and often resulting for different reasons, the musical events at these informal occasions are almost identical with those in Podhale.

Bruno Nettl suggests some methods used by a European ethnic community to maintain its traditions in a foreign environment:

> It organizes singing groups and clubs, it sponsors professional entertainers, it develops specialists. Folk music becomes a concern of the intellectual leaders of the ethnic groups, something contrastive to the original situation.[2]

This is partly the case among the *Górale* of Toronto. At meetings of the organization, members frequently stress the need for an active performing ensemble to maintain this continuity. And the events discussed in the so-called formal occasions attest to activity at this level of music-making. Here, aesthetic qualities of performance are stressed to develop pride in the group and impress others.

But this is only part of the musical activity of the *Górale.* They also maintain a living tradition of music and dance for their own general participation and enjoyment. Although the function of these events has obviously changed (they no longer act as venues for young people to meet), their general structure and internal dynamics have remained largely unchanged. Bruno Nettl writes that:

> Some of the processes which usually operate in rural folk music, communal re-creation, oral tradition, general participation, diminish in strength when the music comes to the city.[3]

These processes have not yet disappeared among the *Górale* in the urban environment of Toronto. General participation and communal re-creation still operate at least within the parameters of some of these occasions.

**Music and the Gorale of Toronto**

Why are these traditions maintained? It has already been noted that Podhale has changed, but the "Podhale" of Toronto does not necessarily reflect these same changes. When first asked about the music of Poland, Mrs. Siuty answered: "When I came to Canada, I

saw more of this music and these dances than when I was in Podhale." Nettl has already pointed to America as a centre of "marginal survivals."[4] The *Górał* community seems to be an example in Toronto, and their formal Association is a contributing factor. The constitution of the organization lists the following among its aims:

> — to cultivate among members the legends, traditions, customs, folklore dress, music, songs and dances of the Polish Highlanders so that all of these treasures may be passed on to generations born and raised in Canada so that they may possess greater appreciation and understanding of their heritage.[5]

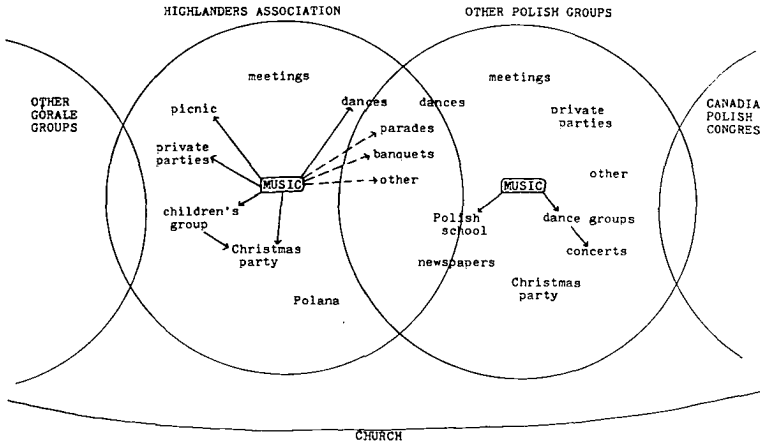
Traditions bind the *Górale* together, despite other differences. And the group in Toronto maintains close contacts with other Highlander organizations — in England, the United States, and Poland.

Ties are not as close with other Polish organizations in Canada. Although it participates in special events with other Polish organizations, the group has not yet joined the Canadian Polish Congress *(Kongres Polonii-Kanadyjskiej)*.[6] Also, because of their small number, the *Górale* have been encouraged to join with one of the many other Polish organizations in Toronto. But the *Górale* fear that this would defeat their purpose of encouraging a particular culture; their culture would be misrepresented by others and subsequently changed and lost.[7]

But neither are the Highlanders completely isolated from the other Poles in Toronto. Besides their common Polish ancestry, the strongest binding force between *Górał* and non-*Górał* Pole is their Roman Catholic faith. Therefore, the church provides one common meeting ground for people from all areas of Poland now in Canada. Also, a few members of the Polish Highlanders Association actually belong to other Polish organizations. A model has been constructed to show the place of the *Górale* in this larger Polish community. It represents three levels of interaction and activity:

1. at the most general level, the model shows the relationship of the Highlanders Association with other Polish organizations
2. at a more specific level, it shows the number and kinds of activities which are shared by the Highlanders Association and the other Polish groups
3. at a third level, it shows which activities of the two groups include traditional music.

The diagram is largely self-explanatory; activities in which both *Górał* and non-*Górał* organizations participate are listed in the area in which the two circles overlap; those listed on the outside parameters of this overlap indicate which group sponsors the activity. The Polish schools listed are attended by the children of both groups, but in addition, the *Górale* attempt to maintain a separate




children's group to supplement the language training with their native songs and dances.

Despite a number of shared activities, the model shows that the *Gòrale* sponsor numerous events independent of other groups. Of these, the publication of their newsletter, *Polana* (literally, glade) is perhaps the source of most pride. Furthermore, many of their activities are distinguished by the fact that they include traditional music (traditional music here refers to either spontaneous or sponsored production of what Shiloah and Cohen call "preimmigration musical forms.")[8] In contrast, other groups include music less frequently in their activities; moreover, it is always sponsored and would not correspond to the above definition of traditional music.

As already mentioned, the explicit aims of the Polish Highlanders Association encourage musical and cultural activity. But a final question remains: what motivates the individuals to realize these aims? In effect, what function does music play in the lives of the *Gòrale* in Toronto?

In Podhale, music and dance brought single young men and women together. But in Toronto, few young, unmarried people participate in the music events — those who do are recently arrived from Podhale. The music and dance entertain primarily the older, native *Gòrale;* indeed it reminds of their past, as Mrs. Ciesla indicated: "We in Toronto probably maintain traditions more than they do in Podhale, because we miss it — we long for it." Similarly, Mrs. Siuty commented: "This music seems the nicest; in it you can see the heart . . . you feel this, in short, it is a patriotism." As a form of patriotism, an identity with homeland and nationality, music and dance (together with other traditions) are part of the conscious and unconscious self-image of the *Gòral.* Mrs. Siuty explained:

It's something you have in your blood. It's there and it pulls you so that you always come back to it . . . the other music (of Poland) is nice, but ours is always the nicest, because it's in our blood. . .

As Bruno Nettl has pointed out, the preservation of traditional music can often be a relief when people are forced to move in a new direction. It can provide "the counterpoint necessary for equilibrium."[9] This is poignantly expressed by Mrs. Siuty:

You lost everything you had there in Poland and feel useless to everyone here in Canada. You see that as beautiful, and return to it with pleasure — there you have what you left behind — what you lost. It all somehow seems more valuable to you now — that which is from Podhale.

Therefore, to the *Gòrale* of Toronto, music functions to help satisfy a nostalgia for the past, reinforce self-identity, and bring the familiar to an unfamiliar world. But it does not have the same function in the lives of their children, who were often born and usually raised here. Members stress that if a child is exposed to this music when young, it will remain with him. And the intellectual leaders of the organization constantly stress the need to teach the children and youth of the group. But these efforts are not consistently maintained. Indeed, the children of the members of the association take little interest in the activities of their parents. And many members are concerned at the subsequent lack of youth in the organization.

In fact, the organization is approaching a crisis. As long as its members are still young and active, and as long as there continues to be a stream of new immigrants from Poland, *Gòrale* traditions will continue to flourish in Toronto. Musical occasions will not be restricted to the formal but will include the spontaneous events in which all are free to participate, and which are similar in event and structure to those once found in Poland. But this is likely to change in the future. As customs and traditions become less closely bound to the living past, they will undoubtedly become less closely bound to the living present (at least in their current form). Instead, given enough interest, they might continue within the bounds of formal occasions. In so doing, there would be a drastic change in processes and probably also in results.

The Polish Highlanders Association of Canada is at present still very young, and its members are relatively recent immigrants from Podhale. Therefore, currently, the group is devoted to maintaining a continuity of traditions. But what will happen as the association becomes older and its original membership changes? Perhaps then, it will be more appropriate to examine the processes of change in their music.

*University of Toronto*
*Toronto, Ontario*

## NOTES

1 This article is adapted from a paper given at the annual meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada in Quebec city, May 1983. I am grateful to the advice of Professor Timothy Rice and Alistair Macrae, and extend a special thanks to the members of the Highlanders community in Toronto.

2 Bruno Nettl, "Preliminary Remarks on Urban Folk Music in Detroit," *Western Folklore,* 16(1957), 39.

3 Ibid, 42.

4 *Ibid,* 40.

5 Constitution of the Polish Highlanders Association of Canada, Art. XIII Aims of the Organization, 8.

6 For more information on this organization, see H. Radecki and B. Heydenkorn, *A Member of a Distinguished Family — The Polish Group in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976), pp. 72 ff.

7 Interview with Mrs. K. Ciesla, treasurer of the organization.

8 A. Shiloah, and E. Cohen, "The Dynamics of Change in Jewish Oriental Ethnic Music in Israel," *Ethnomusicology,* 27(1983), 227-52.

9 Bruno Nettl, "Some Aspects of the History of World Music in the Twentieth Century: Questions, Problems, and Concepts," *Ethnomusicology,* 22(1978), 128.

Resumé: *Louise Wrazen écrit sur la continuité et le changement dans la musique des Polonais de Toronto, originaires des montagnes du sud de la Pologne. Elle a etudié ces habitants des montagnes du sud de la Pologne, connus aussi sous le nom de Gorale, en insistant particulièrement sur leurs chansons, leurs danses et leur musique instrumentale, et décrit le rôle que chacunes de ses formes musicales occupe dans les rencontres formelles et informelles. Alors que les patrons traditionnels demeurent les mêmes qu'en Pologne, à Toronto, ils ont une fonction différente, la plus important étant de renforcer l'identité du groupe.*

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## Notes *(Suite de la page 17)*

## NOTES

* Communication présentée à Montréal, le 4 juin 1980, lors de la rencontre annuelle de l'Association canadienne pour les études de folklore.

1 Publiée dans *Canadian Folk Music Journal,* 5, (1977), 17-23. Voir aussi sa dernière publication, *Joe Scott, the Woodsman-Songmaker, (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1978), pp. 393-196.*

2 *Complaintes acadienne de l'Ile-du-Prince-Edouard,* (Montréal: Leméac, 1980).

3 CCECT, Coll. P.P. Arsenault, ms. n° 83.

4 *Ibid.,* ms. n° 93.

5 Coll. Georges Arsenault, ms. n° 218.

6 CCECT, coll. P.P. Arsenault, ms. n° 22.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Coll. Georges Arsenault, ms. n° 44

Abstract: *In his article on "Lumbercamp Singing and the Two Traditions"* (Canadian Folk Music Journal, *1977, 17-23), Edward D. Ives noted that in lumbering regions public performance of songs was largely dominated by men while the women's tradition was of domestic in-the-family singing. When Georges Arsenault compared this pattern with the practices of Acadian singers in Prince Edward Island he found that there was a striking difference. Among the Acadians the women were prominent both in public and domestic singing and also in composing local songs. He suggests that this may be partly because the lobster canneries in P.E.I. played a similar part to the lumbercamps in preserving songs, and as many women as men worked in them.*