



**Social Factor in Traditional Polyphony: Definition, Creation, and Performance**

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Theory and Concepts



I hope no one will argue against the fact that vocal polyphony is as much a social phenomenon, as musical. In spite of this, we often neglect this consideration when we try to analyze vocal polyphonic traditions. This text is written to fill in for this unjustified neglect and to discuss the importance of the social factor in (1) defining the phenomenon of polyphony, in (2) analyzing the peculiarities of the process of creation of traditional polyphonic compositions, and also in (3) understanding the performance process in a traditional society with vocal polyphonic traditions.

Before I discuss the importance of the social factor in the definition, creation and performance of traditional polyphony, let me say a few words on terminology, or how we denote the phenomenon of singing in different parts. Unfortunately, as in many other spheres, ethnomusicology does not have a set of commonly accepted terms regarding polyphony that everyone can easily understand without much cross-cultural misunderstanding. Defining the phenomenon of singing in different parts is one of such problems.

### “Polyphony” or Multi-Part Singing”?

Quite a few different terms have been used in ethnomusicology to denote the phenomenon of singing in more than one part. “Polyphony” seems to be the most widely used term, although not universally accepted. “Multi-part music” (or “multi-part singing”) is arguably the next most popular English term used widely in ethnomusicological publications. For example, the name of our study group is “Study Group on Multipart Music”. Apart from “polyphony” and “multi-part music” the terms “polyvocality”, “plurivocality” and “multiphony” have also made appearances. All these terms generally denote the same phenomenon and could be used as the uniting word for this phenomenon.

Let us pay attention to the most popular term – polyphony. Traditionally it has been used with two meanings - general (or wide) and narrow. “Those ethnomusicologists who accept the very general etymological meaning of the term often tend to call all multi-part music, whether vocal or instrumental, ‘polyphonic’ even if there is no obvious organization. In itself, the concept of polyphony thus embraces procedures as diverse as heterophony, *organum*, homophony, drone-based music, parallelism or overlapping. The shared characteristics of all these procedures is that they all relate to multipart phenomena” wrote Simha Arom more than two decades ago (Arom, 1985: p. 34). In its “narrow” meaning, as we remember, the term “polyphony” means a specific type of multipart texture, where each part is melodically independent.

In search of the alternative term, we could also use the term “multi-part music”. This word has not been so “contaminated” by extensive use in musicology and ethnomusicology and could make a good alternative for the term “polyphony”.

To find the most convenient term, we should know what we need this term for. I suggest that we need a uniting term, the one to conveniently use as the “family name” for all the members of the extended “polyphonic family”. This term in its

broadest meaning should unite a whole set of types and subtypes of this “family”. In comparing these terms, we should note that both terms (“polyphony” and “multi-part singing”) actually mean the same (the first one in a long ago dead ancient Greek language, and another in a very much alive and most widespread contemporary English). At the same time it is important to remember that in the one case we have a one word-term (“polyphony”) and in the other, a complex three-word-combination to denote the same phenomenon (“multi-part singing”). I think this simple fact works in favor of the practical use of the one-word-term “polyphony”. When I imagine myself (or my colleagues) using the term “multi-part singing” to denote the styles and sub-types of polyphony (for example, “heterophonic multi-part singing”, “drone multi-part singing”, “canonic multi-part singing”, or “pedal drone multi-part singing”), I feel there will be a certain resistance in implementing this kind of terminology. On the other hand, using the one-word term “polyphony” instead of “multi-part singing” seems to me a more practical option. Combinations like “heterophonic polyphony”, “drone polyphony”, or “canonic polyphony” are obviously more compact and convenient. As for the “narrow” use of the term polyphony, when all the parts of the texture are melodically independent, I suggest using the well-known term “contrapuntal polyphony.”

So, without insisting that this is the only correct way of naming this phenomenon and the members of the polyphonic “family”, including all its types and sub-types, for the sake of practicality I suggest that my colleagues use the term “polyphony”. I shall also be using the term “polyphony” in this article. This was an intro to my article. Now let me address the importance of the social factor in polyphony.

### Social Factor in the Definition of Traditional Polyphony

The traditional definition of polyphony only takes the musical factor into account (see, for example: “polyphony is a musical texture consisting of two or more pitches sounding at the same time”, Kauffman, 1968: p. 3). This definition might be fully justified when we have to deal with professional, classical music, but when we are dealing with traditional music, we give serious consideration to the social factor.

If we agree, that singing in traditional society has both musical and social aspects, then we should also agree that in the definition of polyphony we must use two fundamentally important factors: *musical* and *social*. According to the musical factor, polyphony is a musical texture where singers sing at least two different pitches, and according to the social factor, polyphony is a form of musical communication which involves the interaction of two or more singers.

Here we need to take important considerations into account. We know that a group of singers does not always sing in different parts. When a group of singers are all singing the same melody together, this is musically speaking monophony, but according to the social factor this is “social polyphony” (or rather many individuals are socially interacting via shared musical sounds and rhythms).

The variety of world singing styles does not stop here. Apart from group singing

in unison or in different parts, there is also a style where one person produces two different pitches at the same time. This singing style, known under different terms as overtone singing, throat singing, and khoomei, presents the unique musical style where according to the musical factor it is polyphony, but according to the social factor this is not polyphony (this is social monophony).

Let me formulate the four possible combinations of polyphonic styles according to musical and social factors:

(1) social monophony and musical monophony: this is a case when one singer is singing a melody; this is true monophony, both socially and musically. We can call this style simply “monophony.”

(2) social polyphony and musical monophony: in this case a group of singers are singing the same melody in unison (let us also remember that defining unison, particularly in traditional music, is not so easy). We can call this “social polyphony.”

(3) social monophony and musical polyphony: this is a case of overtone singing, where one person is producing two melodic parts. We can call the style “social monophony.”

(4) social polyphony and musical polyphony: in this case a group of singers are singing in different parts. This is true polyphony, both musically and socially.

So, I suggest using the term ‘polyphony’ with regard only to those singing styles, where polyphony is present according to both musical and social factors. In other cases, when there is a mixture of different musical and social factors, I suggest using the terms “social polyphony” (in case of unison singing), or “social monophony” (in case of overtone singing).

If we look at singing styles all over the world, we can see that social polyphony has a much wider distribution in the world than musical polyphony. According to my available information, there is hardly a traditional culture in the world where there are no instances of people singing together in groups. Even in the most monophonic cultures there are genres where singers perform together in groups (in unison), or sing alternating with each other.

### Social Factor in Creation of Traditional Polyphonic Compositions

The process of creation of new compositions in professional music has been studied considering the example of many professional composers, whereas the creation process of new compositions in traditional music has mostly been neglected. To understand how different these two creative models work, let me first give a couple of examples of how polyphonic compositions are created in traditional society.

In his insightful paper, delivered at the 1966 IFMC conference, dedicated partly to the problems of traditional polyphony, Nicholas England provides a description of the process of creating a new song by San (Bushmen) women. According to his words, creating a new composition, San women work together: “The medicine men (and rarely women with reputed medicine powers) compose these songs. At least,



The image displays a musical score for three instruments: Krimanchuli, Mtkmeli, and Bani. The score is organized into four systems, each containing three staves. The first system is labeled with the instrument names on the left. The second system begins with a measure number '8' above the first staff. The third system begins with a measure number '15' above the first staff. The fourth system begins with a measure number '21' above the first staff. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and rests, typical of a transcribed folk or classical piece.

Ex. 2. Adila. Gurian trio song (first half) (Transcribed by Nino Tsitsishvili)

interaction of several individuals, several brains.

Acknowledging the crucial difference between these two models of music composing, I should like to propose the existence of two music-composing models: (1) individual (we could call it “mono-brain”) and (2) group (or “multi-brain”) models. These two different music-composing models fundamentally affect both the composing process and the final product.

As professional composition is entirely constructed by an individual, the composing process is very much “authoritarian”. This could be the reason why professional polyphonic compositions contain so much imitation, strict parallelisms, and are generally more vertically organized. On the other hand, in traditional society, when two or more creative talents are trying to put their individual creative power to work for the shared composition, the process has more “democratic” features. This is why traditional compositions are usually less based on imitation, and are more melodically (rather than harmonically) organized.

The same kind of “multi-brain” model of composition can be used in other popular genres of contemporary music, where the composition is formed from the collaboration of more than one composer. The creative collaboration of John Lennon and Paul McCartney is a classic example.

The Beatles were a wonderful example of group creative activity. There was no clear leader, or even a main singer in the group. Most importantly for our topic, writing music for John Lennon and Paul McCartney, particularly in the first period of their partnership, was very much a shared creative act. Paul describes their process of writing a song in the following way: “We would sit down with nothing and two guitars, which was like working with a mirror. I could see what was he doing, and he could see me. We got ideas from each other. In fact, it was better than in a mirror because if he plunking away in D, I could see where his fingers might go and then I could suggest something. So that was like writing from the ground up. ‘She loves you’, ‘From me to you’, ‘This Boy’ were all written that way, as were most of the earlier songs” (Smith, 1989: p. 201). The Lennon-McCartney composing model was obviously a “group model” of music writing, widely employed in traditional polyphonic cultures, and very different from the “individual” model employed by professional composers.

This early period of intense use of the “group model of composition” resulted in some very interesting and unusual voice leading by the Beatles. Their song from the first single, “Love me do”, is a good example of this kind of unusual harmonizing:

The combination of the fifths, thirds and sixth, with the melodies moving sometimes in parallel motion and sometimes against each other, would probably have never been written if this was just the brainchild of a single composer.

Writing music as a creative communication was apparently particularly important for Paul McCartney. During his post-Beatles years McCartney wrote songs together with different musicians (Danny Lane, Eric Stewart, Elvis Costello, Stevie Wonder and Michael Jackson. See Coleman, 1995: pp. 127-128).



Fig. 3. Love me do, vocal harmonies

I suggest that one of the central factors that contributed to the break-up of The Beatles was Paul McCartney’s inner creative conflict. On the one hand, Paul always relished and greatly enjoyed the “group model” of songwriting with very open creative communication, but on the other hand, his perfectionist attitude towards the final product was taking over and he did not allow his songwriting partners too much creative freedom. In a 2006 TV interview with Parkinson, Paul McCartney was talking about playing almost all the instruments on his last album, as a means of having more creative control on the final production: “I was actually all geared up to play with my band, but he [the producer] said: ‘I’d like to try something different. I want you to play a lot of instruments’. So he got me drumming a bit, which I *love* to do. And I thought of it afterwards... usually I write a song, I bring it to the studio, and then, the drummer, kind of takes over and he writes the drum part, whereas if I play it, I’m still sort of composing, I’m still writing the guitar, the base, the drum...” (source??)

I think that during his long and extremely successful career as a songwriter, Paul McCartney made an about-turn from the initial group-based (or traditional, “multi-brain”) performing model, used by the young Beatles, to the solo, “single-brain” professional model.

Any traditional composition, as a rule, bears traces of numerous creative personalities from the past. The reason for this is that the song is a result of a group activity, a result of the traditional, collective, “poly-brain” model of creation of musical composition. As we can see, social interaction is crucial not only for the definition of polyphony and monophony, but in the process of creation of traditional polyphonic compositions.

### Social Factor in Performance in Traditional Societies

I remember very well when my parents took me to my first classical music concert. They explained to me how to behave during the concert, told me to sit quietly and listen to the music, not to talk, or make a noise, and to clap only after the musical piece had already finished. I tried to follow these rules although this was not always easy. Quite a few years later I attended my first jazz performance and was surprised to see listeners were often clapping while the musicians were still playing. This was

something new and unusual for me. Still a few more years later, during a traditional village wedding in my native Georgia, I noticed that everyone was participating in the singing of the table song. At that moment I did not pay much attention to these important differences in the music performance process of different musical styles. For me these were completely different musical styles, different sounds, different feelings, different audiences; in short everything was different, so it was somehow natural to have differently behaving listeners as well.

Much later, after I became a professional ethnomusicologist, I noticed that it was not only the different behaviour of listeners that was intriguing. To my surprise, I realized later, that there were no listeners at all at the Georgian traditional wedding. I mean “real” listeners, or the audience, those who only listen, without joining in the performance. As for a person raised in a city, the “normal” performance process comprised two equally important elements: performers and audience.

Later I came to realize that different styles of music differ from each other not only by the music (sound) itself, but by the social context of how the musical activity is organized. Interaction between the performers and the audience is a crucial element of the social aspect of musical activity. In some styles of music, the gap between the performers and the audience is huge. European classical music is possibly the best example of such musical style. Listeners are supposed to sit absolutely quietly during the whole time the music is sounding. Actually, they must sometimes remain silent even when the music is not sounding. For example, after the first, or the second part of the symphony, during the break, listeners are not supposed to clap. So if you are attending a concert of symphonic music, you need to know exactly how many parts are in the symphony if you do not want to embarrass yourself by unexpectedly clapping. (Or, if you are not sure, follow the wise advice of concert goers – start clapping only after others have started clapping.)

In other styles of music the gap between the performers and the audience is not so wide, although the division of society into two classes (performers and listeners) is still obvious. Jazz is in this category. Not to clap after a musician has finished improvising is almost as rude for jazz listeners as clapping after the first part of a classical symphony. Many monophonic cultures are also in this category: there is a soloist (or a relatively small group of professional or semi-professional performers), and the rest of the people present are listeners. But listeners here are not as passive as the listeners at the classical music concert. Very much like in the jazz sessions, listeners in traditional societies actively encourage performers after each display of their mastery, so there is some interaction between performers and the audience.

Cultures with rich traditions of vocal polyphony belong to a different category. The matter is not how big or small the gap between the performers and listeners is or how the listeners behave. There is no audience at all, as everyone is involved in the performance. Therefore everyone is a performer and a listener at the same time. If you go to the Georgian long banquet-style table sessions, or attend a village celebration in Polynesia or sub-Saharan Africa, you may see that often everyone is

involved in the performance.

Where does this “universal participation” model come from? Could this be a later phenomenon in the development of musical culture, or something coming from the depths of history? And what was the reason behind the creation of this kind of all-inclusive performance model?

I do not want to go into the historical research for the origins of the choral singing tradition. I devoted a book “Who asked the first question? The origins of human choral singing, intelligence, language and speech” (which is freely available on the internet) to this problem, as well as some other publications (Jordania 2009; 2010).

I only want to state, that according to my models of the origins of traditional polyphony, existing polyphonic traditions are survivals of a very ancient practice, not the result of the late cultural development of the initial monophony. The factual basis behind this model comprises the historical dynamics of the development of vocal polyphony in traditional music, and the geographic distribution of the polyphonic traditions. The recorded sources directly show that the general dynamics of the history of vocal polyphony are gradual disappearance.

Geographic distribution of the regions of vocal polyphony is remarkably consistent with the pattern of distribution of more archaic phenomena: polyphony mostly exists today in many isolated regions of the world. The actual regions of the distribution of vocal polyphony also show a remarkable coincidence with geographic environments, typical of the isolation and survival of the relict phenomena (hard to access mountain ranges, islands, large forest massifs and swampy regions).

Thus, the old model of the origins of polyphony, as a logical result of the late cultural development of monophonic musical culture, is not supported by the existing evidence, and therefore must be rejected.

The idea that the isolated islands of vocal polyphony (particularly in Europe) are a survival of the earlier wider practice is by no means new in ethnomusicology (see, for example, Rihtman 1958; Collaer 1960; Kaufman 1968; Emsheimer 1964: p. 44; Lomax 1971: p. 236; Messner, 1980). This is what Albert Lloyd wrote in 1961: “Certainly, comparing these [Albanian polyphonic] forms with those of Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and northern Greece, one has the impression that Albania has developed part-singing to a far higher degree. Or should one say: has *preserved* it better? For it is possible, even probable, that at one time various polyphonic forms abounded all over the southern Balkans and perhaps far beyond it, that have since dwindled or disappeared. Albanian country communities are more isolated and culturally more conservative than those of Bulgaria, say” (Lloyd, 1961: p. 145).

Here I must also mention a very interesting source- a critical view on the origins of southern European polyphonic traditions (Brandl 2008). Rudolf Brandl suggested that the type of polyphony based on drone and dissonant intervals (Brandl mentions this style with the German term *schwebungsdiaphonie*) might originate from the sounds of church bells and instrumental forms of polyphony, and its vocal form could only be a century, or even just a few decades old (Brandl 2008: p. 290). This very interesting suggestion has several problems. First of all, it fails to explain why

the polyphonic traditions in Europe have such a geographic pattern of distribution, concentrated in isolated and relict areas, a pattern that is widely known to be connected to archaic phenomena. As a matter of fact, Brandl does not even mention the pattern of geographic distribution of vocal polyphony in Europe in his discussion.

Furthermore, the absence of data on “roughness-diaphony” from 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century travellers in the Balkans and Georgia (which are used by Brandl as the proof of the absence of roughness-diaphony in this period, Brandl, 2008: p. 282), does not mean the absence of polyphony. I can point to a very recent research article dedicated solely to the musical traditions of Vietnamese minorities, written for the *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music* by a professional ethnomusicologist, where there is not a single word about vocal polyphony among Vietnamese minorities (Nguyen 2002). According to this article, written by an expert on Vietnamese traditional music, we should definitely conclude that there is no vocal polyphony in Vietnam, although the recordings on a CD *Vietnam: Music of the Montagnards* (released by CNR & Musée de l’home, 2741088.88, editor Hugo Zemp) present many wonderful examples of roughness-diaphony from the North Vietnam minorities. There are many other cases of neglect of the presence of polyphony in the writings of professional ethnomusicologists. An article on Basque traditional music does not mention the presence of polyphonic traditions among the Basques (Laborde 2000), an article on Ukrainian traditional music does not mention the very interesting drone polyphonic traditions in the Ukraine (Noll 2002), and there is no mention of the presence of vocal polyphony in several articles about South Indian tribal cultures (as a matter of fact, the words “polyphony” and “multi-part music” are absent in a very detailed index of the publication).

If we take these writings at face value (particularly as they are all written by internationally recognized experts of these musical traditions for the best currently available ethnomusicological encyclopedic publication), we should conclude that by the beginning of the XXI<sup>st</sup> century there were no vocal polyphonic traditions among Vietnamese minorities, Basques, the peoples of Southern India, nor any drone polyphony in the Ukraine as well.

I believe it is unrealistic to expect a mention of the specific traditions of drone vocal polyphony with dissonant intervals from non-professional travellers who had spent a few weeks in a new country, whereas even professional ethnomusicologists with an expert knowledge of a culture (and often natives of these cultures) fail to mention the presence of vocal polyphony in specially written musicological articles. Therefore, I propose that vocal polyphony is a very ancient phenomenon, which is gradually disappearing all over the world. As a result, I suggest that the universal social participation in the performance of polyphonic composition is an initial characteristic of musical cultures. I suggest that the appearance of the “audience” category was a much later event in the history of human musical culture. This is the reason why social participation, or singing in groups is one of the strongest musical universals.

## Conclusions

This article was dedicated to the importance of the social factor in different aspects of polyphonic singing in traditional societies. After analyzing this problem from different points of view, we came to the conclusion, that the social factor is crucial for the definition of polyphonic styles, for the process of composing new traditional polyphonic compositions, and for the process of the performance of polyphonic compositions. Music is as much a musical phenomenon, as a social phenomenon. The social nature of traditional societies is hardly demonstrated more vividly anywhere else than in traditional societies, during singing together by groups of people. Singing together in groups is possibly the best way to unite members of the group in order for all the members of a cultural group to feel a collective identity.