

Welcoming Voices: Memory, Migration and Music

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This article considers the relationship between the experience of migration and the musical practices of migrants. It stems from a research project called 'Welcoming Voices', which explores Eastern European migration to Lincolnshire. This particular component of the research, funded by the UK's Heritage Lottery Fund, is called 'Memory, Migration and Music'. We interviewed Polish and Lithuanian migrants who have settled in Lincolnshire, asking them about their migratory experiences, their perceptions of the UK before and after migrating, and the ways in which they have engaged with music throughout that experience. My analysis of the interviews suggests a complex relationship between migrants and their notion of national identity, played out in part through listening practices, and in part through the perspectives individuals express about the songs to which they listen. Trends relating to cultural preference and national affiliation are revealed despite a typical distancing of migrants from national identity. This allows me to build on Simon Frith's assertion about the self-in-process (Frith 1996). I conclude that musical preferences and listening practices indeed relate to the experience of the self-in-process, but that complexities for the transitioning migrant make the articulation of their self through the way they engage with song something that is a poignant performance of what I call their notion-identity.

Music and Identity

Traditionally, there have been two different perspectives on how music relates to nation and nationhood (see Born and Desmondhalgh 2000:31; Negus and Velázquez 2002). The

first suggests that music reflects qualities, characteristics and features of a particular race, ethnicity or nation—that Russian music somehow reflects essential characteristics of the Russian people, for example. The second suggests the opposite, that it is the music that constructs the identity of a people—that the culture of a territory is one of the factors that makes its people distinct from those of another. Both the reflective and the constructive thesis have flaws, and both have been challenged by theorists who have emerged with a third perspective, following the work of Simon Frith. His argument is that both music and identity share the qualities of being affected by experiences: ‘first’, he remarks, ‘identity is mobile, a process not a thing, a becoming not a being; second’, he continues, ‘our experience of music—of music making and music listening—is best understood as an experience of this self-in-process’ (Frith 1996: 109).

Never is this more the case than when we consider music in relation to migration, itself a process of transition. As Frith theorizes (along with scholars such as Deleuze and Guattari), in the experience of migration something inherently changes in what defines them as an individual: at the very least, the individual becomes a migrant, caught betwixt and between, a self-in-process. Yet as Jakub, one of the respondents in ‘Memory, Migration and Music’ remarks, music ‘is one of those things that you can take with you without a suitcase; it is part of who you are, I guess, like your identity’. That’s an evocative comment, but it implies despite the movement of migration a sense of stasis, a sense that although someone may physically relocate, the self stays the same. If—as Jakub’s comment suggests—individuals are not always cognizant of the transformative fluidity of their own self-in-process, what role does music play in accompanying the experience of migration?

Many commentators have observed that, for migrant communities, the ‘music of home’ can offer ‘a sense of well-being’ (Dueck in Toyne & Dueck 2011: 26),

‘reconstruct[ing] a personal and collective identity through music while developing a feeling of belonging’, as Ulrike Präger puts it (Präger in Waligórska 2013: 164), or in the words of Mark Slobin, ‘linking homeland and here-land’ (Slobin 1994: 243). The possibilities for music to be used as an emotional anchor to elicit comfort or nostalgia or connection seem straightforward. On the other hand, writes Magdalena Waligórska, music can evoke ‘a sensation of distance [or] estrangement’ (Waligórska 2013: 6), and as Ana Sobral suggests, it can often magnify ‘the marginalization that belonging to a minority group brings’. For commentators like her, both migrant identity and musical affiliation are therefore rather complex, and she discusses the listening practices of migrants seeking ‘to find a place in the host society without renouncing their roots’ (Sobral in Waligórska 2013: 29).

If this exposes the migratory phenomenon of individuals grappling with their own identities, it is paralleled by the phenomenon of cultural studies grappling with the idea of ‘nation’. This is the focus of Ian Biddle and Vanessa Knights’ introduction to their edited collection, Music, National Identity and the Politics of Location. As they assert, in the recent intellectual turn towards either global or local issues, the national has become unfashionable. Furthermore, ‘popular music studies in the Anglo-American tradition is dominated still by two ideological orientations, neither of which has dealt terribly constructively with the conceptualization of the nation-state’ (Biddle and Knights 2007: 8). One point of view sees the idea of the nation-state as an ‘antiquated bourgeois construction’; the second sees it as a ‘sovereign but pragmatic unit’. There is yet a third—a ‘conservative’ tradition that ‘seeks to wrest “national” (and “regional”) musical traditions from the march of a perceived global erosion of difference’. One contributor to the Biddle and Knights collection, John O’Flynn, distinguishes between the ‘nation state’ (a ‘civically-oriented conception of statehood’) and the hyphenated ‘nation-state’ (a social unit defined

by ‘ethnic and/or cultural homogeneity’) (O’Flynn in Biddle and Knights 2007: 20). This allows me to propose a term that will be useful towards the end of my discussion: the idea of notion-state—the perception individuals have of the territories or national communities with which they have a relationship. I’m taken by this term because it calls up the idea of nation as a conceptualized entity, working for the migrant in respect of both the nation of origin and the destination nation. While the migrant will also have a relationship with the nation state/nation-state in a conventional sense, they will have a conceptualization of a destination prior to emigration, and a conceptualized relationship with their home nation once they have migrated: notion-states.

Cosmopolitanism

Sobral follows Bernhard Giesen in suggesting the identity transformation of these migrants as one that rejects national affiliation in favour of cosmopolitanism, ‘the capacity to adapt to different cultures in the world “without feeling at home in any of these local environments”’ (Sobral in Waligórska 2013: 31, quoting Giesen 2010: 175). This is a concept that appears throughout the literature: Ewa Mazierska refers to ‘aesthetic cosmopolitanisation’ (Mazierska 2016: 5), while Jason Toynbee and Byron Dueck refer to ‘cosmopolitan alienation’ (Dueck in Toynbee & Dueck 2011: 25). Meanwhile, respondents in my own research express a similar sense of both detaching themselves from their former identity and not (yet) feeling a part of their new lives. ‘I’ve reached the point of no return’, remarks Jakub; ‘because England’s not home, and Poland’s not home either any more’. Jakub’s English is excellent, but even he struggles to articulate himself: ‘I would love to forget about...’ and he pauses before listing an increasingly unlikely set of identity markers ‘...I’m English, I’m Polish, I’m black, I’m green’. There is a sense of frustration with the idea

of defining himself by category, something that has been aggravated in the move towards Brexit: 'I would prefer to say that I was a European', Jakub concludes, 'whatever that means at the moment because of all that chaos'.

Jakub was born in Poland, and comes from an old industrial mining area on the German border. He is university educated, and came to the UK around twelve years ago. For him, there was a fundamental difference between the way he saw his own country and the perception he had of the West. 'In simple terms', he remarks, 'Poland's bad, UK's awesome. They've got bigger tomatoes, and better bread, and cucumbers grow better. Everything's better apart from weather'. Jakub presents this argument as if it is commonly held: 'I think as a nation we still have that running theme that we are worse than everybody else, which pisses me off and I've found no evidence for that but there is still something in the nation's spirit, that you think...'. He tails off, before summing up: 'So that is the perception, that I'm going to land in the best country ever. [...] West is better, basically'. After over a decade's experience of living in the UK, Jakub's rose-tinted view of the West has somewhat modified, and his confidence has taken a hit following the referendum vote to leave the UK. I ask him if he takes solace from calling home or talking to his family on Skype: 'I'm avoiding contact with really close people', he replies; 'because it's like licking sugar through a glass. You're kind of there but you're not there. You can't taste it, so... When you talk for an hour or two hours and you have to break that call it's like... so you'd not expose yourself to that because it's painful sometimes'.

'Memory, Migration and Music'

Jakub is one of around a dozen Polish migrants interviewed for 'Memory, Migration and Music'; we also interviewed around a dozen Lithuanian migrants, to reflect the two main

migrant demographics that have settled in Lincolnshire. Since 2004, when a number of Eastern and Central European countries joined the EU, there has been a significant influx to the UK of communities from Poland and the Baltic States. Lincolnshire has been one of the principal destinations of this migrant flow, owing in part to the amount of unskilled seasonal agricultural work available which UK populations are typically unwilling to take on. Although migrants like Jakub are middle class and educated, prospects in the UK are viewed as more desirable than those in their home countries, and the immediacy of casual labour which does not need language proficiency makes Lincolnshire an attractive area in which to settle. In some areas of the county the Eastern European population now reflects over ten per cent of the total population, whose growth has expanded exponentially with little provision of infrastructural resources (see Anon. 2011). This has fed anxieties about immigration and cultural otherness, and to some extent it can be seen as a factor behind the UK's 2016 referendum vote to leave the EU. Against a backdrop of tension and sometimes hostility towards immigrant populations, my research aims to better understand the relationship(s) between migrant and British communities, to assess cultural integration, and to foster dialogue between groups. I am exploring this area through finding out about the ways in which migrant communities engage with music.

If the identity of these migrants is itself in a state of uncertainty, what can their attitudes towards music reveal? After all, music features in most people's lives, and my own experiences of how music has comforted me during times when I have lived abroad makes me think that the role it plays in the process of migration may be significant. Sure enough, the comments of our respondents when asked what music means to them are poignant: 'Music for me means a lot', admits Agnieszka; 'It's like my therapist and my religion'. For Jakub it is just as important: 'For me, it is my life', he acknowledges; 'I cannot live without

music'. Meanwhile, Lithuanian respondents make very similar remarks: 'I do not really imagine if someone turned off the music', says Brigita; 'something would be missing'. There's a similar comment from Snieguolė: 'Music is an integral part of our life', she says; 'Life is empty without music'. And for Egidijus, it is practically the same: 'My life is always accompanied by music. If music plays, it's better to live'. The passion with which these interviewees relate to music and the ways in which they express that passion evoke deep emotional ties. For some of the respondents who are themselves musicians, feelings are even more intense: 'Probably it's all my life', remarks Danguolė, who plays the traditional Lithuanian Kanklės, runs her own children's choir, and teaches music at one of the local supplementary schools. She considers herself fortunate, as she is able to retain music as a central part of her life. By contrast, Andrius had an active musical life in Lithuania where he sang in a choir and took part in the TV show Chorų Karai (Choir Wars). In the UK, he now works in a box factory, but reveals a fascinating commitment to his music even in the mundanity of his factory job:

I am happy that I am a musician, especially, when I have to perform some mechanical tasks at work, like folding the packaging box. I can hear the rhythm whilst doing that, so that makes the job easier for me than others. I listen to the machines at work, and I know how to work in the rhythm, synchronously with them. So music means a lot to me even at work.

It's worth mentioning that music and particularly song has had a profound historical significance for Eastern European nations and their identity, demonstrated vividly in the events surrounding the collapse of the USSR in the late 1980s. Throughout 1987, the

Lithuanian Rock March Festival toured the country to perform forbidden ('Western') songs by way of political protest; in 1988 the anti-Soviet rock musical Lāčplēsis took Latvia by storm playing to over 180,000 people; and in the same year, Estonian musician Alo Mattiisen's 'Five Fatherland Songs' formed the basis of the Tartu Music Days festival, constructing a strident song-cycle of anthems against the oppression of the Soviet state. Following this, the journalist Heinz Valk penned a celebrated article crystallizing the significance of these events in the evocative term 'The Singing Revolution'. In this context, song became for these nations a deep expression of identity, a force for non-violent protest against oppression, and a communal bond whose articulation in mass singing events created a powerful voice enabling their emergence onto the stage of the coveted West.

Clearly the significance of music is deeply-felt amongst our interviewees, whether they consider themselves to be musicians or not. 'It is like part of your family', muses Alicja, with a characteristic sense of humour: 'sometimes you don't fancy it but it is always great to have it with you'. But behind that sense of humour, what does that mean, exactly? Through a close reading of the comments made in the interviews, I will discuss a number of trends that add to our understanding of music and identity.

Trends

The first trend is a general disavowal of the idea that migration has intrinsically changed the lives of these migrants. 'Life is pretty much the same anywhere you go in the world, isn't it?', suggests Aušra; 'You have to get up in the morning, you have to go to work, you have to pay your bills, you have to do all that kind of stuff'. This sort of disavowal (as we have seen with Jakub) is something that can persist for years following migration, and is extended to the way people talk about their listening habits: 'I don't think emigration affected me in

music, because I'm still listening to the same music I like and doing the same things I like here as in Lithuania', reports Marian; 'You can't just change your type of music; you feel the music, so it is the same'. Aušra makes the point even more explicitly: 'Because of the global thing going on I think everyone is listening to the same music', she says, and she lists a series of global superstars that corroborate her point: Adele, Ed Sheeran, Kanye West, Bon Jovi. This might indicate that in a twenty-first century Europe of open borders and globalized music consumption, individuals perceive that there is intrinsically little difference between life in one country and life in another—that the experience of cosmopolitanism is indeed homogenous.

The second trend is that, perhaps not surprisingly, our respondents perceive music as being a form of escapism: 'Music helps me to relax', confirms Egle, echoing Marian who listens to heavy rock music 'only to relax'. For Jakub, 'it is a form of expressing me and escaping daily life', something he sees as linked to the greater freedom enabled in the UK: 'I have more possibilities here', he says. In some ways, therefore, this remark contradicts the assumptions noticed in the previous trend: life is after all different in the UK. Agnieszka notes how 'the access changed, definitely', as she reached her later teens and popular Western music began to become available. Andrius too: 'When the Soviet Union fell apart there was a wave of English music which came to Lithuania', he notes. Anna recalls the same thing—'I've got a vivid memory of "The Wall" of Pink Floyd':

this was a time when MTV was just introduced in Poland, and I remember a very strange video clip of hammers and a cartoon-like song. A song about teachers and school, and that we don't need to go to school any more. And all those voices—I think I was sixteen or seventeen so I do remember. I started to understand the lyrics,

and when I hear the song on the radio, I picture myself in my room, and posing, and trying to listen and understand the music and the lyrics.

For Anna, the greater freedoms represented by Western songs were also enabled by the possibility of learning language: 'I've got good memories of English music because that's how I was encouraged to learn English, cos I wanted to know what they were singing about'.

When asked if there is a national identity in the songs to which they listen, the findings have been interesting. On the one hand, many of our interviewees informally resist the idea that a particular music defines a particular part of the world. 'They are playing the same popular music everywhere in the world', claims Andrius; 'I would not say the music was very different', suggests Alicja; 'Music is music. Music is international. At this point there are no differences. You can't say music is Polish, American or British. It is all the same', remarks Marian. Yet on the other hand, these same people in the same interviews recognize clear distinctions between the music from their home cultures and the music of their adopted nation, often related to moments of change. 'I thought that music in UK was different to music in Poland', says Jakub. Alicja expands: 'Even in the 80s we could see a British influence of punk rock in Polish bands', she recalls; 'After '89 we had Myslovitz, which sounds like British punk rock music'. Quite what this means is unclear, though it's fair to say that Myslovitz has established an international (cosmopolitan) pedigree.^{[note]2} However, Alicja speaks more broadly about the access of young Poles in the late 1980s to Western bands: 'In the 80s we did not have MTV', she reminds us; 'we didn't really have the "window" to the Western countries. But my cousin she had music from abroad, I don't even know where from. And I think that is where I fall in love (a little bit) with Madonna and George Michael. She had a big influence on me'. Like Andrius (who is Lithuanian), Alicja

remembers growing up to the music of ABBA and Boney M, along with technotronic music. She recognizes that her musical tastes changed as she grew older, and identifies a later phase of listening to 'Polish rock music bands' like O.N.A, Hey, Wilki, and Republika. Now, having been settled in the UK for over ten years, Alicja lists her favourite groups as O.N.A, Roxette and Rammstein, indicating bands associated with her youth in the 1980s, with a broad musical style (rock), and with an international though heavily Northern European origin (O.N.A is Polish, Roxette is Swedish and Rammstein German).

The third trend, then, is to note a general preference for music fitting this categorization: 'Rock is my favourite', says Aušra; 'I think people listen to more rock than other types of music', remarks Anna; 'I don't like Polish music', claims Alicja, but then qualifies that remark with, 'only Polish rock'; 'You know I am a rock man', admits Marian; while Jakub's preference is for 'heavy music like Sepultura and Slipknot'. Among the other bands mentioned are Czerwone Gitary (1965—), Skaldowie (1965—), Republika (1978—2002), Dżem (1973—), Maanam (1976—), Perfect (1977—), Lady Pank (1981—), Hey (1991—), Wilki (1991—), Myslovitz (1992—), and O.N.A (1994—2003), and although our interviewees name plenty of British and American acts, these tend to be either the recognizable global superstars such as The Beatles, Michael Jackson or Prince, or bands with a similar rock/metal sound like Metallica, Megadeth, Therapy, or Faith No More. In short, there seems to be a distinct predilection among Polish migrants for heavy rock or metal. Marian expands on the significance of the rock aesthetic: 'Back then you had to have courage to sing in those types of bands and this type of music because of the system we lived in. British people won't understand this'.

'Imagined Communities'

The concept of a national affiliation with music is as we have seen somewhat challenged, though following the theories of Benedict Anderson (1983), many writers refer to 'imagined communities', groups of people who perceive shared bonds: in this case, migrants with similar experiences. Since we have seen that such an experience creates a complex understanding of transitional identity, it is useful to adapt Simon Frith's idea of the self-in-process to accommodate the various different processual dynamics that are experienced by migrants, particularly those in long-term transition: identity shifts as we get older; popular musical styles changing with each generation; our affiliation to these styles bending as we move through phases of our own lives; and all of these nuances being compounded by the transitions undertaken across borders, in and out of identity communities, and in response to being probed about our tastes. Perhaps for this reason, as Garapich asserts, migration culture 'is in constant shift, change, and adaptation' (Garapich 2016: 21); and as Waligórska puts it in terms of nation, 'we may indeed need to allow for more nuanced relationships with music than only complete affiliation or disaffiliation' (Waligórska 2013: 6).

Here, it is worth making two observations, again drawn from these interviews. First, despite many studies of different world musics, whether these are defined as local, ethnic or national in identity, studies of regional identity or shared heritage (of, for example, the Baltic States, Eastern Europe, or the former Soviet republics) are extremely rare, perhaps due to anxieties about cultural essentialism or over-generalisation. Those studies that do exist take great pains to avoid the "clichés and stereotypes" that lump all post-Communist countries together' (Purs 2012: 10).³ In their own way such studies therefore problematize shared experiences that I would argue are in fact fundamental to identity. How do we explore the fact that both Polish and Lithuanian respondents to our research

have mentioned Boney M as a key Western act emerging in the wake of 1989, for instance? How do we interpret the remarkably similar comments apparent in the trends noted above? For all that we might wish to resist reductive claims about national identity (let alone regional), the connections between people in our study from Poland and Lithuania not only invite intriguing questions, but also allow cultural and individual similarities and differences to stand out.

Second, those shared experiences become particularly poignant when they are linked to cultural shifts that at the same time break apart and bring together—events such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, accession to the EU and, most topically, Brexit, all moments that have inspired, instigated or enabled migrational flow, and all moments that allow new identities to emerge in which notion-states find new shared connections. In these cases, how do you tease out the significance of similarity and difference without, in Garapich's terms, 'reify[ing] groups and their cultural content' (Garapich 2016: 31)? Moreover, how do you tease out the significance of shared experiences that transcend even these thematic boundaries—experiences such as migration, language-learning, alienation, and so on?

Here the term notion-state and a further term, notion-identity, may be useful, at least as springboards from which to conceptualize alternative 'imagined communities' and thereby grasp the cultural landscape in which they dwell (in relation to music, for instance). As we have seen, the term notion-state plays with the already-contested idea of the 'nation state/nation-state', and allows us to recognize that, for those who have emigrated, national identity and nation are freighted with resonance. Jakub, for all his protestations, and despite his affiliation to the UK, his excellent language skills, his cosmopolitan outlook and his

ambivalent in-process self, is somehow more Polish by virtue of emigrating from Poland: the political backdrop of Brexit confirms as much.

But this is not the main point of my argument; instead, it is that the shared identities of the migrant communities we have interviewed, despite having different nationalities, different languages and in many other ways different attributes—are bound together by a notion-identity of themselves as, variously, migrants, language-learners, aliens, and so on. As Garapich asserts, ‘The very act of leaving the borders of the administrative unit generates a specific set of cultural meanings and symbols, which can easily be intertwined with narratives about imagined community and its boundaries and hegemonic, naturalized and biological concepts of the nation belonging, and territory’. At the same time, he notes, ‘migrants themselves resist and contest these dominant discourses’ (Garapich 2016: 47). And our exploration of music reveals this notion-identity to be something that is articulated through an appropriation of cosmopolitan-hybrid song, typically, rock; in Waligórska’s terms, ‘Music articulates, alleviates and is fed by the experience of migration’ (Waligórska 2013: 8). The fact that different national groups share these articulations rests on the shared experience of migration and the notion-identity that comes with it. This would explain what John O’Flynn calls ‘affinity interculture’: ‘how aspects from one national-musical field come to be replicated or adapted in other national-musical contexts’ (O’Flynn in Biddle and Knights 2007: 31).

Epilogue

Of course, there are many exceptions, and musical tastes clearly differ between different individuals with different experiences, upbringing and education. The extent to which music matters in the life-changing decision to move country is brought home to me in this

poignant account by Andrius, the Lithuanian musician whom we encountered working in a box factory above. Here, he tells us of his attempts to find a church community with whom he could participate in mass. 'I usually pray together with Polish Catholics, so their hymns sound different if compared to British or Lithuanian', he reports. 'And I was trying to sing together even without knowing the Polish language'. Despite the challenges of a different language and culture, he was invited to join the Polish choir; but it was only when he discovered a congregation celebrating in the language and song of his home culture that he was able to feel spiritually at home: 'During the first Lithuanian mass when I heard the traditional Lithuanian hymns, I had a feeling I had never left Lithuania. I was singing together and wanted to join the choir there. I hope I will do this in the nearest future'.

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Notes

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2. Formed in Poland in 1992 but produced by the British music producer Ian Harris, they have played internationally and gone on to support artists as diverse as Iggy Pop, The Corrs and Travis.

3. Purs quotes Estonian president Toomas Hendrik Ilves in a speech to the Swedish Institute for International Affairs, 14 December 1999.