

Dynamics of Identity in Russian Instrumental Folk Music Culture

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ABSTRACT: Issues of identity appear in Russian traditional music and in revival discourses in most different ways. In rural settings regional and local identities are rooted much deeper than ideas of 'Russianness' in music. These small-scale identities can be closely related to ethnomusical boundaries, especially to distinct geographical ranges of instrumental tunes. Their toponymic and ethnonymic terminologies are of relatively late origin. Traditionally local repertoires are conceptualised much more by functional and structural criteria. The newer terminology can be explained with a heightened mobility of the population as well as with a growing prestige of locality in the last decades.

KEYWORDS: *Russia, traditional music, identity, locality, Pskov region*

INTRODUCTION

DYNAMIC concepts of identity in the humanities and social sciences are deeply rooted in European philosophical and literary thought.¹ However, in contemporary cultural anthropology the fluent character of collective identities is sometimes overemphasised. This can be explained by historical experience of nationalism, by general postmodern trends, when "what in fact comes to be celebrated is the deconstructive power itself" (Taylor 1989: 489) as well as by the neo-Marxist distrust of non-class loyalties, other than in face-to-face settings. Contrary to current theories, the German sociologist Karl Otto Hondrich (1937–2007) called for a rehabilitation of collective identity and 'shared feelings', emphasising their functional importance for any society. Far from neglecting "multiple identifications" (2006: 5) Hondrich, however, disputed that "we are free to choose a collective identity" (*ibid.*: 4) and that "collective identities can be produced consciously" (*ibid.*: 11). This is not at all an 'essentialism' but a recognition of social-anthropological reality.

Collective identities to a considerable degree exist on different spatial levels. In Europe nowadays a majority of the people has an idea of national, regional or local, and may be even European identity. Ethnomusicology and folk music research continuously have to deal with the dynamics of these identities. In settings of what is sometimes called 'traditional culture' they doubtlessly appear in a different way than in folk music discourses of middle-class intellectuals, especially in the folk music revival (Livingston

¹ Stuart Hall's idea of the fragmented 'post-modern subject' opposed to the "Enlightenment subject [who] was based on a conception of the human person as a fully centred, unified individual" (Hall 1992: 275) is somewhat surprising. Before proposing such generalisations it would have been useful to consider Herder's "expressivist turn" (Taylor 1989: 368–377) or at least Goethe's Faust ("Two souls, alas! reside within my breast ..."). It should also be noted that the "sociological subject" (Hall 1992) is not at all an invention of the 20th century, as can be seen in an analysis of Herder's essentially mutual concept of identity (cf. Markworth 2005).

1999). In this article I would like to show, how ethnic and ethnomusical identities are expressed, and transformed as well, on different levels in traditional Russian instrumental culture.

As David Brandenberger (2002) has clearly shown, the idea of a national culture, most influential in European intellectual discourse of the 19th century, in Russia gained general acceptance only in the period of Stalin's national Bolshevism. In rural settings regional and local identities are rooted much more deeply. Such distinguished small-scale identities are of high significance for a huge part of the rural population in contemporary Russia as well.

Until recently in the south districts of the Pskov region (*Pskovskaia oblast'*) there was a remarkable distinction between the *skobari* (the inhabitants of the former Pskov Government) and the so-called *poliaki* living in the former Polish territory of the *oblast'* (cf. Morgenstern 2008a). Beside the linguistic border between the two groups, dividing the west-central Russian dialects of the *skobari* from the north-east Byelorussian ones of the *poliaki*, inhabitants of the Pskov region emphasize differences in physical anthropology, mentality, customs and clothing. Nevertheless, in the last two decades the *poliaki* increasingly describe themselves as *skobari* too, referring to the centre of the *oblast'*, Pskov. This secondary identity however is expressed with less enthusiasm as in the case of the ancestral *skobari*.

The recent expansion of the skobarian territory is clearly related to contemporary ethnic discourses. The very ethnonym *skobar'* in urban settings (especially in St. Petersburg) has a strong pejorative connotation.² In contrary, the folk etymology relates the term to the word *skoby* (cramps), as only the strong men from Pskov were able to bend them into shape with their bare hands. Anyway, the *skobari* are definitely believed by their neighbours to be people one should not raise a quarrel with. The substandard ethnonym *skobar'*, that also became the name of several local instrumental tunes, gained the status of printability, apparently in field documentations at the beginning of the *perestroika* (cf. Mekhnetsov 1987). A few years later the Pskovian TV started an ethnographic serial named *Skobari*. Subsequently an association of local writers, a city journal, a vodka company and countless other firms and products took over the fashionable name. This trend can be explained with a growing attractiveness of the 'small homeland', especially in the crisis of the gigantic Soviet homeland. In contrary to this celebration of local identity, the *poliaki* with their somewhat strange self-designation could not relate themselves to a political and cultural centre like the old Russian town Pskov. Bearing in mind the ambiguity of the term *poliaki* they always emphasise that they are no Poles but just have the same name. Many of them, especially the rural intelligentsia, became aware of the fact that their dialect belongs to the Byelorussian group. The transformation of identity in the village Saponovo (district Velikiye Luki) at the very boundary of the *skobari* and

²I remember a bus drive in the suburb of St. Petersburg in the late 1990s when a mother explained to her daughter: "All intelligent people have left the country long ago – there have remained only *skobari*".

the *poliaki* is reflected in the following dispute: an old woman I asked about the ethnic boundary indifferently stated: "It's Pskov, so we are *skobari*". Her husband, on the contrary, called out proudly with sparkling eyes: "Well, we are *poliaki*". With some irony his wife commented: "All are *skobari* now". This was a clear reference to the ubiquitous skobarian boom of the last two decades.

Beside the strong regional consciousness, identities on the level of a region, a parish (*volost'* or *sel'sovet*) as well as of a single village are of high significance as well. In a most dramatic way these identities actualized themselves at parish fairs where at least from the late 19th century ritualized fights between young male members of a village or a parish were a commonly accepted means for negotiating local conflicts. They are closely interlinked with musical and dance activities (cf. Morgenstern 2007a: 143–155).

LEVELS OF (ETHNO)MUSICAL IDENTITY

A sentiment of sharing particular qualities of musical expression and behaviour with other members of an ethnically or territorially defined group can appear on different hierarchical levels, corresponding to the respective geographic distribution of musical styles and repertoires. In the traditional instrumental practice of Northwest Russia these distinctions are clearly reflected in local discourses. Rural musicians recognise regional boundaries of repertoires and performing styles very well and are proud to share their knowledge with outsiders.

The lowest level of musical identity is the **personal level**, the artistic self-awareness of an individual musician. There are no highly developed identities of fixed performing groups, as contrary to other Central and Eastern European traditions instrumental ensembles are restricted to few regions or to relatively recent culture house or 'club' practice of the Soviet period. The very important **small-local level** comprises musical practice of one or several villages as well as of one or more parishes. The significance of the particular style of a village is hard to prove, by the reason that today by far not in every village musicians can be found. Thus differences of musical style, observed in neighbouring settlements, cannot always be distinguished from individual ones. Apparently in earlier times many local musicians, and their audiences as well, were able to identify particular styles of the neighbouring villages. The awareness of the **local level** of one or several regions increased with the mobility of musicians in the 20th century. The **regional level** related to an *oblast'* in rural culture of the late 19th century prevailed the collective identity on the **national³ level**. Both geographical levels relatively late have entered rural musical discourses.

³ The category of Russian nationality here is used according more to the ethnic concept of being a *russkij* [*russkii*], rather than a *rossiianin* – an inhabitant of the Russian federation, independently from his ethnic origin or language. As it is well known, this *national'nost'* was an officially defined category, reflected until recently in personal documents. While in Soviet times the remark 'Jew' or 'Crimean tatar' could be a serious obstacle to career the abolition of this category in the 1990s was met with scepticism by representatives of numerous non-Russian minorities.

Personal level

Traditional instrumental culture is interlinked with personal identity in many different ways. This is of particular importance in Russia where folk instrumental music, to a great extent, is soloist. It is – or it was – a wide spread activity in traditional settings. Generally a village had far more musicians than the social relevant performing situations would demand. Professionalism and semi-professionalism are not common, at least in the last three centuries. In this situation the ability of playing the balalaika or the button accordion *garmon'* and elaborating a skilful individual style was a means of heightening personal prestige, especially but not exclusively for a considerable part of young male members of the village community.

According to Jacob Stählin's famous musical ethnography (1770: 68) "it's not easy to find a house in Russia where there is no young servant who knows how to play for the maidens his tune on it" [on the balalaika]. In his *Dead Souls* Nikolai Gogol draws a very similar picture of the young peasant musician. The face of Sobakevich is described as

[...] *full and round as the Moldavian pumpkins called gorlyankas out of which the Russians make balalaikas, light two-stringed balalaikas, the adornment and delight of the jaunty twenty-year-old peasant lad, the saucy dandy winking and whistling to the white-bosomed, white-throated maidens who gather round to listen to the tinkle of his thrumming* (Gogol [1842] 1936: 133).

Gogol's lyrical picture corresponds to empirical studies in the early 20th century. When young unmarried women from different regions were asked about the desirable qualities of a man, some referred first of all to the ability of playing the *garmon'* (cf. Morgenstern 2007b: 97). Field interviews confirm the prestigious status of a skilful village musician up to the recent past.

The most important field for displaying musical skills and individuality is the genre *pod pesni* ("music for songs"). These are non-dancing tunes, traditionally played in spinning rooms, at seeing-off ceremonies for recruits, and most of all when walking along the village at parish fairs or on the way to a dancing event and back. The tunes can generally be performed together with short songs in the metre of the *chastushka* (four trochaic tetrameters), however in contrary to the *chastushka* (in a narrower musicological sense) the instrumental part is the dominating one. This repertoire is most complex and most demanding in terms of performance and perception. It also comprises a huge variety of functionally determined as well as of individual versions of a tune.

Small-local level

The most significant experience of geographical difference for the village population until recently belongs to the small-local level. Rural musicians and other experts frequently emphasise that it is possible to distinguish variants of the main regional tune from different parishes and even from different villages. So in Usmyń' (Kun'ia district of the Pskov region) an old woman complained that her grandson was not able to play *po nashinski* (in our manner), as he learned to play the *garmon'* with a woman from the neighbouring parish at a time when the most competent musicians in the own parish had already passed away. Unfortunately today it is very hard to examine the ability of discerning small-local styles, as by far not all of the remaining musicians are able to play the sophisticated regional tunes.

Local level

In the Pskov region musical identity formations encompassing the area of approximately one or several regions closely correspond (at least until the recent past) to the distinct geographical ranges of local instrumental tunes belonging to the genre *pod pesni*. In the central and south districts of the Pskov region there can be observed three or four local representatives of the genre with specific overall structure (cf. Morgenstern 2007, 2008a). Local musicians are well aware of these boundaries and frequently refer to the ancestral or foreign origin of the tunes from their repertoire.

Regional level

The regional level of identity is related to the *oblast'*, an administrative unit below the Russian Federation corresponding to the historical *gubernia*. The rural inhabitants of the Pskov region (*Pskovskaia oblast'*) feel a deep sense of belonging to this historical centre on the North West edge of Russia with its troubled and eventful past.

Local musicians who have spent some time in another *oblast'* love to speak about their experience with regional differences and proudly demonstrate tunes unknown in their own region. Yet, frequently musicians confess their inability to perform local tunes from other regions. Criticism concerning some aesthetic qualities of other instrumental styles is expressed at most as slight irony. I have never heard from a rural accordion or balalaika player general statements like 'our music is better than theirs'. Occasionally debates between musicians of different regions can arise, however they more express personal aesthetic concepts rather than group identities, pride or even arrogance. Concurrency of musical styles appears much stronger on the individual level.

A most important place of displaying regional musical identities is the framework of the military service. This provided a great chance for

enlarging the personal repertoire. Even in wartimes male musicians frequently made use of this opportunity. Here too a welcoming interest to other styles and repertoires prevailed scepticism or resentments.

National level

The idea of a 'Russian music', shaping the intellectual discourse of the 19th century, is a historically young phenomenon (cf. Taruskin 1997). Traditional musicians, even today, rarely characterize their style and repertoire as 'Russian' – regardless of the fact that in rural settings issues of Russian mentality, language, national history play a big part. Sometimes it is said that the *garmonika* is an instrument corresponding with a national expressive character. Yet, such considerations generally do not determine local concepts of music. The very terminology of the Russian accordion is international (Russian tuning, German tuning, the Venice *garmonika*, the *talianka* (from *italianka*). In contemporary folk music discourses the notion of 'Russianness' is related most of all to certain trends of folklorism (predominantly: national romantic, Soviet-style, nationalistic). A considerable part of the recent Russian folk music revival (cf. Olson 2004) is motivated by the idea that people have 'to learn to be Russians again'. (I can not remember a single statement like this from my fieldwork with hundreds of rural musicians.) It seems that large-scale national identities are prone to crisis to a higher degree than "shared feelings" (Hondrich 2006) on a small-scale level. Actually, I have never heard that somebody called for learning to be *skobari* again.

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TOPONYMICS AND ETHNONYMICS IN THE TERMINOLOGY OF THE INSTRUMENTAL REPERTOIRE

In folk terminology and, much more, in ethnomusicological collections frequently appear tune names of toponymic and ethnonymic origin. A diachronic analysis shows that this terminology is of relatively late origin (cf. Morgenstern 2008b).

Toponymic terminology of instrumental repertoires is most of all used *beyond* the original area of a local tune. So in the Pskov region the term *Novorzhevskaja* (*Novorzhevka*) is a musical exonym, as it is traditionally not common in the district of Novorzhev and the neighbouring parts of the Bezhanitsy, Dedovichi and Loknia districts, where the tune is considered a genuine part of the local repertoire. Here the term *Skobar'* is preferred, however this ethnonym is of recent origin as well. According to fieldwork in 1995, 1996, 2005, 2006 the older tune names are *Popolam* (in two) and rarely *Pod pesni* (used as an ethnomusicological genre designation as well)

or *Dlinnaia* (the long one). The toponymic term *Novorzhevskaia* is most of all used by musicians from the Porkhov district in the North and the Ostrov district in the West of the original area of the tune, occasionally including it in their repertoire. Similarly the term *Zavidovka* (from the town Zavidovo in the South West of the Tver' region) until recently if ever was rarely used in the ancestral area of the tune⁴, where it is called *Po derevne* (along the village) or *Pod pesni*. In such regions were the tune appeared in the 1930s or later (district of Dukhovshchina in the Smolensk region, and the boundary of the Pskov and Tver' regions) the toponymic *Zavidovka* (*Zavidochka*) is the basic if not the only tune name.⁵

⁴ Fieldwork 2005, 2006, supported by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*, and 2009 in the regions of Olenino, Nelidovo, and Bely.

⁵ Fieldwork in 2005, 2006, supported by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*, and in 2009.

All tunes in the Pskov region called *Skobar'* (or in accusative *Skobaria*) have alternative names of older origin based on structural and functional terminology (cf. Morgenstern 2008b). As an exception there can be mentioned local tunes emerging in the 1920s or some later in the Toropetski district of Tver' region as well as in the central districts of Pskov region. In the latter the *Sumetskaia* sometimes is called *Skobar'*.

The secondary significance of toponymic terminology in the main area of a local tune is not at all surprising. In traditional performing situations, restricted to representatives of the small-scale areas, the specification of a tune on the local level is of less relevance than its structural and functional properties. Toponymic terminology could emerge only in a period when an increasing mobility of the rural population heightened the awareness of ethnomusical boundaries on the local and regional level. In toponymics and ethnonymics an outsider's perspective is expressed or at least considered. Such broader discursive fields are shaped in the framework of musical competitions and festivals, occasionally carried out in the Soviet period, and, after all, in the dialogue with a fieldworker from outside.

Ethnonymics, beside the *Skobar'*, are reflected in the pan-Russian dance (*pliaska*) repertoire: *Russkogo* (the Russian), *Russkaja (igra; 'the Russian tune')*, *Cyganochka* (the Gypsy woman) as well as the male dance *Kazachek* (the Cossack). There is evidence from Pskov, Tver', Novgorod, Arkhangel'sk and Riazan' regions that the ethnonymic term *Russkaja/Russkogo* became common in the first half of the 20th century. Older terms are *Barynia* (the mistress), occurring in the refrains of numerous dancing songs, and *Pod pliasku* (for dancing).

Traditionally the repertoire was divided most of all by criteria of the social function: *Pod pesni* (for songs), *Pod pliasku* (for dancing), *Pod draku* (for fighting), *K devkam* (to the girls, that is: to the dancing event), *Ot devok* (back from the girls). Alternative tune names refer to their structural characteristics – *Dlinnaia* or *Dolgaia* (the long one), *Reden'kaia* (with a modest melodic rhythm), *Chastaia* (with an intensified melodic rhythm), *Popolam* (in two).

I have already mentioned that accordion and balalaika players devote most of their skill into an elaborated personal version of the main regional or local tune of the genre *pod pesni*. As an illustration I would like to compare different versions of the tune *Novorzhevskaiia* (or *Skobar'*, *Popolam*), as it is played in the central dissemination area and beyond on the diatonic, unisonoric button accordion *khromka*. In Anatoly Fedotov's version (Example 1) the material of the main melody is restricted nearly to two short motives. Nevertheless the bass line is much more versatile and sophisticated than the usual harmonic fundament of the modern repertoire of the *khromka*. Its coordination with the main melody requires considerable cognitive effort. So the musician remarks: "The *Skobar'* is the most difficult tune. My son plays couple dances [*tantsy*] and anything else. But the *Skobar'* he can't get right by any means".⁶

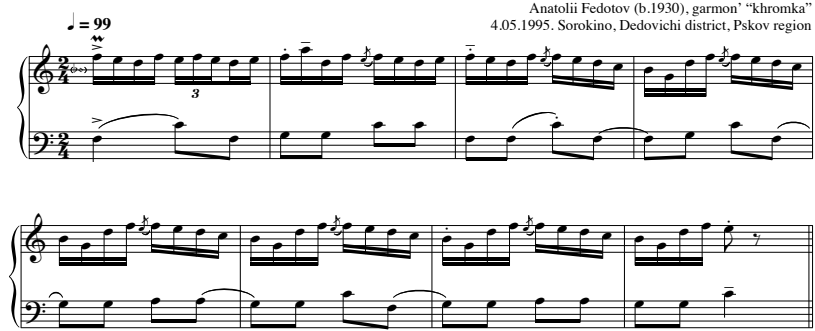
⁶ For further virtuous versions of the tune cf. Morgenstern 2007a (Vol. 2).

In contrary, the versions of Ivan Vasiliev from Slavkovichi, Porkhov district (Example 2), and Veniamin Bozhankov, Ostrov district (Example 3), are of much more schematic character. The musicians use simple melodic sequences, the sections of the basic pattern are clearly divided by a sharp internal cadence, untypical in traditional styles of Russian instrumental music. The bass part is strongly subordinated to the harmonic progression. No doubt that Fedotov's son could have learned such versions of the *Novorzhevskaiia* without any difficulties. Contrary to this foreign repertoire Vasiliev as well as Bozhankov play their highly elaborated local tunes with exceptional virtuosity and ingenuity (cf. Morgenstern 2007a, Bd. 2).

Examples 1–3. Different versions of the tune *Novorzhevskaiia*

1. Popolam (“In two”)

$\text{♩} = 99$ Anatolii Fedotov (b.1930), garmon' “khromka”
4.05.1995. Sorokino, Dedovich district, Pskov region



2. Novorzhevskaiia

$\text{♩} = 89$ Ivan Vasil'ev (b. 1915), garmon' “khromka”
28.04.1995. Slavkovichi, Porkhov district, Pskov region



3. Novorzhevka

$\text{♩} = 88$ Veniamin Bozhankov (b. 1929), garmon' “german tuning”
9.05.1995. Vorontsovo, Ostrov district, Pskov region



CONCLUSION

Fieldwork in the Pskov region has shown that local, regional and national identity discourses are reflected in musical culture in a different way. The increasing significance of ethnonymic and toponymic terminology of the instrumental repertoire can be explained with a heightened mobility of the population as well as with a growing prestige of locality in the last decades. The awareness of musical identity is most vivid on the individual and the small local and local level, recently on the regional as well. Elaborated instrumental performance appears most of all in local tunes in their traditional area of dissemination.

National identity discourses are more restricted to contemporary folk music revival. Thus Russian traditional instrumental culture in its original social framework is neither national nor nationalistic in Bohlman's understanding (2004). It does not represent the nation, neither bottom-up nor top-down, but lives in the direct human contact in small-scale communities.

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