

Those that Fly Without Wings

Music and Dance in a Chilean
Immigrant Community

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This thesis is based on research linked to the multi-disciplinary KUSK (Cultural and linguistic contact¹) project at the University of Oslo. KUSK is one of several Norwegian research efforts that have been launched in order to face the many challenges posed by the development of a modern multicultural society. Over a period of almost five years KUSK has brought together a group of researchers from the fields of linguistics, history of religion, cultural studies, literature and musicology. We have combined our efforts towards one common goal: to gain a better understanding of cultural and linguistic processes relating to immigrant groups. The immigrant experience involves dramatic social change and therefore provides an especially interesting field in which to investigate the dynamics of cultural and linguistic change. KUSK researchers have studied issues as different as language switching, immigrant literature, children's jokes, burial practices, interpretation in police interrogations, and the iconography of Norwegian mosques.

The object of this thesis is to present a study based on the practice of music and dance within a Chilean immigrant community in Norway. It is a qualitative and interpretive account of how music activity plays a part in the negotiation and construction of immigrant identity, as well as how it gives a voice to tensions and contradictions within an immigrant group in an urban landscape. The study concerns a community with a considerable musical activity of various Latin American genres, taking place in both public and private arenas.

Field research, which has provided most of the empirical material this thesis is based on, has been conducted in the Chilean community of Oslo, especially concentrating on Casa Cultural Chilena, the Chilean Culture Centre. This institution organises and supports a variety of activities for immigrants² with a Chilean background. At Casa Cultural Chilena visitors can meet fellow countrymen, speak Spanish, eat *empanadas*³, read Chilean books and magazines,

¹ *Kultur- og språkkontakt.*

² When referring to the entire group of people with a Chilean background living in Norway the term *immigrants* will be used throughout the thesis. *Immigrants* will both refer to the political refugees fleeing from the dictatorship in Chile from 1973 onward, and the larger wave of Chileans coming to Norway in the late 1980's.

³ Chile's national dish: a seasoned meat pasty typically containing onion, boiled egg, olives and raisins.

watch Chilean movies or football matches, listen to poetry readings and not least, take part in a great variety of music and dance activities with a “Chilean flavour”.

The main discussions raised in this thesis are centred on issues of meaning. The "object" that is subject to investigation and interpretive analysis can be spelled out as: “*ways in which people construct meaning in relation to the practice of music and dance*”. These “ways” constitute a varied and complex field of study. I have come to know them and found clues to understanding them by interacting closely over several years with people who are performing music, dancing to music, talking about music and thinking about music in this specific setting.

When issues of music and meaning have been addressed in academic research – from Leonard B. Meyer (1956) to Tia DeNora (2000) – the focus has often been limited to the reception of music through listening, and particularly to the ways in which music listening can have an emotional effect on individuals. In this study I have chosen to focus more on the ways in which active involvement in *music making* becomes meaningful in a particular social setting. Consequently, most of the people whose voices appear in this thesis are active performers – most of them amateurs – who have chosen to engage in music making and dancing within a social network that is closely connected to their past, their feeling of belonging to a group and their understanding of who they are.

“Making meaning” of musical activity is a social and relational process. It has to do with processes of connecting to, creating and maintaining discourses and value systems of different kinds. These discourses may be private, collective, political, national, religious, aesthetic or quite simply human. In order to give a sense of the variety and complexity of these processes I have found it necessary to cover both the very macro and the most micro levels of analysis, and deal with issues that range from the policies of nation-states to community building to the world building of individuals.

In accordance with a “meaning-centred” approach, the primary focus lies neither on the musical activity itself nor on the society in which it is found. In other words, my intention is not to give a more or less comprehensive account of the musical practices of the Chilean community of Oslo nor of the social structures or processes that might characterise it. Still, as the reader soon will notice, both musical practices and social issues do have an obvious presence in the text. I have however, throughout the entire research process, never thought of “findings” related to these issues as the actual goals of my study, but rather regarded my examination of them as a path leading up to an understanding of the interface between people

engaged in music and their surroundings, their backgrounds, their image of themselves and their ambitions for the future.

My encounter with the multiplicity of discourses surrounding the musical practices of the immigrant community in which I have been working, has contributed to the adoption of an approach characterised by flexibility and relativism. I have come to see the practice of music as historically specific, continuously shaped and reshaped in interaction with the social world that surrounds it. It has become obvious to me that immigrants do not simply move to Europe carrying with them a unified culture, but attempt to construct within the local circumstances and geography a cultural environment of their own making. In this process the practice of music, the cultural value it achieves, and the ways in which it is made meaningful to performers and audiences will undergo significant changes. At the same time new understandings and new relations between cultural categories emerge. It is my aim to address some of these developments, which concern changes in social function, interpretation, recruitment and experienced meaning.

In the Chilean immigrant environment various musical practices contribute to providing a sense of identification in numerous settings and circumstances: in everyday life, in public performance and in contexts with a ritual character. I have attempted to look at these practices with an open mind, without presupposing any underlying core principle. I have tried to look beyond the view that performative expressions are to be conceived as the enactment or reflection of fixed systems of meaning. Rather, I regard them as sites for negotiating and renegotiating cultural identities and social life.

The “researcher’s gaze” is concentrated upon the actors: their actions and experiences, their reflections and interpretations. At the same time I recognise my own influence on the research process and the significance of my personal background. I regard the construction of knowledge as an interactive process, taking place between the researcher and the research participant. In my interaction with research participants, some of the questions that I have sought to answer – though seldom posed directly – have been: In what way is musical activity meaningful to you? How does it influence you? What part does it play in your personal life and in the life of the community?

A research project involving the study of human practices, ideas and ambitions will always be a personal endeavour. In my own case, my scholarly involvement in the culture of Latin American people clearly relates to two different periods of my past, which both in various ways have contributed to my cultural competence in this field and to the making of

this study. Firstly, there is an obvious link to my own childhood. During the three years I lived in Mexico as a child I made my first acquaintance with Spanish language and Latin American culture. Through my mother Carol's involvement in Mexican folk culture I became interested in Latin American song and guitar playing, a passion which has been with me ever since. Secondly, when as a teenager I met some of the first refugees arriving in Norway from Chile in mid-winter 1973-74, I felt strongly attracted by their cause. I soon became both politically and musically involved in the solidarity campaigns, eventually performing side by side with Chileans in the music group Macondo. In many ways, working with this study has revived these two periods of my past, rekindling emotions and memories and also leading me to take up again old acquaintances.

My professional background prior to engaging myself in musicology has undoubtedly also influenced the focus of this study. My training as a social worker and a music therapist, and the many years that I practiced in these fields have spurred my interest in exploring the relationship between musical practices and issues of a social and psychological nature. Hopefully, my discussions concerning these issues will present the reader with some thought-provoking perspectives on ways to understand the role of music in everyday life.

This thesis is based on two main sources of research material: interviews and participant observation. Additional sources are music and song lyrics performed, composed and listened to in the Chilean community. A total of 48 interviews have been carried out during the research period. Most of the interviewees are Chilean immigrants in Norway who are actively involved in some kind of regular music activity. In addition to these I have interviewed thirteen performers and researchers during a research trip to Chile (September-October 2000) and three performers in Scotland (March 2000). Research observations have been carried out at the two different localities in Oslo used by Casa Cultural Chilena during the research period, as well as at a number of other private and public arenas where research participants engage in musical activity.

The different chapters examine discourses surrounding musical practice at different levels and with different methods. The "core" of the thesis is made up of chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8. These four chapters each have a different basic subject as a point of departure and are, in a sense, written in four different "keys". I am convinced that this way of writing and structuring the thesis reflects the complex reality I have been studying, and also gives an adequate representation of the research approach and method.

The chapters following this introduction can briefly be described as follows:

Chapter 2 presents an overview of the general theoretical approach. Aspects of *social constructionist* thinking are discussed and related to ethnomusicology in general and to this study in particular. The terms *discourse* and *narrative* are outlined in the view of social constructionist thinking.

Chapter 3 discusses research methodology, particularly concentrating on the role of the researcher in close interaction with research participants. Considerations are made regarding the interview process and the practice of participant observation.

Chapter 4 presents an overview of the musical styles practiced in the Chilean immigrant community Oslo. These are described both from a historical perspective and through the way in which they have been shaped in this particular setting.

Chapter 5 concentrates on the history of the Chilean community of Oslo and its music. It includes statistical and historical material concerning migration as well as a number of personal reflections by community members. The Chilean culture centre in Oslo – Casa Cultural Chilena – and the various music groups related to it are made subject to an analysis that highlights the role of music activity in the building of immigrant community. The chapter ends by expanding the perspective to the Chilean expatriate population worldwide, especially focusing on the "fourteenth region": the conception of a "virtual Chile", constructed and maintained through cultural expressions.

Chapter 6 focuses on dance. The role of Chileans on the Latin dance scene is discussed and related to issues of gender, sexuality and relationships to majority society. Further on, the nationally emblematic *cueca* dance is highlighted. Historical and political developments are discussed as well as aspects regarding the "resurrection" of the *cueca* in the immigrant community.

Chapter 7 makes a close reading of a small passage from an interview transcription, highlighting one artist's relationship to a particular song. It explores the way in which this song connects to her speech, contributes to her worldview and takes part in her construction of identity.

Chapter 8 takes as its entry point two different "tendencies" or "directions" influencing music activity among Chilean immigrants: "*tierra*" and "*compromiso*". These notions are described as constituting a "field of tension" that provides a backdrop for discussion. The research material discussed here consists of both song lyrics and interview excerpts.

Chapter 9 brings together some of the major discussions of the thesis and discusses future prospects of Chilean culture in the immigrant community. Finally, some of the ambitions and visions of the Chilean community are considered in the view of prevailing tendencies in official Norwegian policies towards immigrant groups.

Those that Fly without Wings

The thesis title, “Those that Fly without Wings” is a term that emerged from one of my first experiences of field research in this project. It would, however, take almost three years before I selected it for use as a title. Like a number of other statements and impressions from my work it has been accompanying me as part of my thoughts, “surfacing” from time to time and connecting to new observations and reflections. During the course of the research process the concept turned out to prove its relevance in a number of different ways. In early 2002 I found that its qualities as an overarching metaphor could make it a useful label for my entire work.

For all Chileans living in *el destierro*, far from what they regard as their homeland, the metaphor of flight relates to their personal life stories, whether we think of flight as flying away or flying home, connection or disconnection. On the one hand we may think of the physical flight away from Chile. Some of the Chileans living in Norway today came as political refugees during the Pinochet dictatorship 1973-1988; forced to leave Chile as a result of the massive political persecution that was an essential part of the military government’s strategy for gaining control of the country. Others left Chile towards the end, and after the dictatorship, in search of better opportunities for themselves and their families.

On the other hand, the metaphor of flight suggests a mental dimension. It is a common notion in contemporary western culture, that experiencing music may have the capacity to “transport” or “fly” you from one emotional state to another, as a cultural vehicle that can be “ridden like a bike or boarded like a train” (DeNora 2000:7). A number of research participants refer to experiences of this kind, whether they are actively engaged in the practice of music, or music primarily is part of the everyday listening experience. Music may afford a vehicle for “flying home”, a way of building and maintaining mental links to their homeland, resurrecting memories, creating connections, bridging the distance. Through the simple act of playing an Illapu song on the CD player or tuning in the car radio to “Radio Latin Amerika” an audio-environment with a “Chilean flavour” may be created, affording a “space” into which personal values may be projected and articulated (see Ruud 1992:220).

The notion of flying, or being transported, may be aimed towards a specific special place one remembers in Chile, or, as salsa instructor Luis Gutiérrez expresses in the quote below, a more idealised, imagined Latin America independent of any “real” geographical place, where the sun shines and people are friendly. For Luis, Latin America is a place in the mind; an imagined community that always will be just that: a mental construction, rather than a place you can travel to.

When I hear salsa music I feel as if I were in Latin America. Not in Chile, but in any part of Latin America. Where there are happy people, where there is sunshine. Without a climate like outside here where there is wind and rain and everything. If I put on some salsa music of I do not even feel that there is rain outside here. As if it cheers the spirit. And it makes me forget of that I am not in Latin America. That it is cold outside. It is something that supports you. Do you understand me? (Luis Gutiérrez, interview October 2002)

Cuando escucho la salsa me siento como que estuviera en Latinoamérica. No en Chile, sino que en cualquier parte de Latinoamérica. Donde hay gente alegre, donde hay solcito. Sin que hay un clima como aquí afuera donde hay viento y lluvia y todo. Si yo pongo una música de salsa, ni siquiera siento que hay lluvia aquí afuera. Como me alegra el espíritu. Y me hace olvidar de que no estoy en Latinoamérica. De que hace frío afuera. Es algo que te mantiene. ¿Me entiendes? (Luis Gutiérrez, interview October 2002)

For some, this way of interacting with music may be part of a personal, or even a therapeutic endeavour: it may be a way to relieve loneliness, fight anxiety or resurrect a personal past in order to create a defence against the “collective amnesia” experienced (See Alvarez 1999). It also concerns the construction and maintenance of the immigrant community. Letting your mind fly “home” to Chile and to what is conceived of as a Chilean way of life is by many regarded as a part of the development and maintenance of a community based on “Chileanness” in a foreign cultural setting. This mental link to Chile constitutes the single basic element that binds together the community focussed upon in this research. Further on we shall see how the cultivation of music and dance can be closely connected to these processes.

The term “flight without wings” originally appeared in one of the first field interviews I conducted⁴. The research participant is Olivia Oñate, a performing amateur artist and a well-known figure in the community. She tells me that she regards herself as one of “those that fly without wings”. Drawing upon this image, she identifies herself as different, living a life that

⁴ Olivia Oñate, interview April 1999. This interview is discussed in detail in chapter 7.

contrasts with what she feels is expected of her by the majority culture: those that are “grounded”. In her case, music and poetry, have become symbolic vehicles of flight that allow “dreamers” like her to escape what she regards as the “normalcy” of the society that surrounds her. Such issues, concerning the role of music and dance in producing experiences of difference in the immigrant community and its surroundings will be dealt with from various angles several times in this thesis.

Another field interview suggests a somewhat different experience of “flying”. Antonio⁵, a member of the folk dance group Tierra Chilena recounts his own experience of performing with his group as sometimes - in special moments - being able to produce an altered state of consciousness, giving him the feeling that he is flying: oblivious to the audience and his fellow dancers, detached from the physical world surrounding him. It is when he gets this almost transcendental sensation that he feels he is really expressing himself “as he is”. Being able to do this, to perform “naturally”, “as you are” is according to Antonio and many of his fellow dancers a fundamental condition for presenting an “authentic” dance performance. Issues concerning both the participatory experience of dancing as well as issues concerning authenticity will be dealt with in chapter 6.

In the poetic, symbolically loaded language of Chilean poetry and song lyrics, we can often come across the image of flight used as a metaphor for hopes, dreams and longing, or to illustrate the exile experience⁶. Sergio Campos, the “house poet” of Casa Cultural Chilena has called his poem honouring Víctor Jara “Singer of the doves” (*Cantor de las palomas*). In “Juana Obrera” Olivia Oñate employs metaphors of birds and flight to express her impression of the military takeover:

I saw the dove detain it's flight,
the condor lowering its wings,
the seagulls drowning in the salts
liberty tied down in chains

*Vi a la paloma detener su vuelo
al cóndor bajar sus alas
a las gaviotas ahogarse en sales
la libertad con cadenas atada*

I saw purity
consumed by burning pyres

*Vi la pureza
consumirse en piras*

⁵ Antonio, interview January 2001.

⁶ For example songs by Víctor Jara like: “Manifiesto”, “Luchín” and “El arado”, songs by Illapu: “Lejos del amor”, “Paloma vuela de nuevo” and “Volarás”, and songs by Violeta Parra: “Como pájaros en el aire”.

the light of truth
transformed into dementia

*la luz de la razón
trastocada en demencia
(Oñate 1988:28)*

Another example, which uses the metaphor of flight to illustrate the immigrant experience, can be found in the repertoire of Illapu – one of the major Chilean groups with roots in the Nueva Canción song movement. Illapu has for many years cultivated close contacts with members of the Chilean-Norwegian community and regularly visits Oslo when touring Europe. One of their most popular songs, “Lejos del amor” (Far away from love), features seagulls as symbols of the Chilean migrants spread around the world: so “far from the sea” where they belong. At a concert in Oslo in May 2001, I had the opportunity to experience Illapu playing for Chileans in Norway. In their powerful, idiosyncratic style, the sounds of the Andean instruments of northern Chile: zamponas, quena and charango, created a dense and rich blend in combination with synthesizer, electric bass and drum set. The performance of “Lejos del amor” produced an immediate and strong emotional response from the audience, and made many members of the Chilean community stand up from their seats, clap, sway to the music and sing along, some of them waving Chilean flags.

Lejos del amor

P. Valdivia, R. Márquez

What are they doing here
these seagulls
so far from the sea

*Qué hacen aquí
estas gaviotas
tan lejos del mar*

What are they doing here
between the rocks and the corner
in this dirty river

*qué hacen aquí
entre piedras y rincón
en este río marrón*

What are they doing here
so far from the sea?

*qué hacen aquí
tan lejos del mar*

... ..

... ..

Far away from love
far from the sky
like a lost soul
like a lifeless sun

*Lejos del amor
lejos del cielo
como un alma perdida
un sol sin vida*

What are they doing here
these anxious people
What are they doing here
with no consolation?

*qué hacen aquí
estos desvelos
qué hacen aquí
sin un consuelo*