

# Cantometrics: Song and Social Culture

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<http://web.ukonline.co.uk/mustrad/articles/cantomet.htm>

Musical Traditions No 12 contained a review of Alan Lomax's book, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, in which the author touches on the topic of *cantometrics*. As your reviewer seemed somewhat uneasy with the concept, I thought he and other *MT* readers might appreciate a nonspecialist word of explanation.

Cantometrics arose out of 'The Cross Cultural Study of Expressive Style', a multi-disciplinary research programme, formed under the direction of Alan Lomax in 1961. <sup>1</sup> The term refers to a system for the measurement of singing style which had been devised jointly by Lomax and musicologist Victor Grauer, to test a number of hypotheses formed by Lomax during his collecting work. These were; that the dominant values of societies fundamentally influence how their members sing; that this influence applies wherever folksong is found in its natural state; and that the world distribution of singing styles is patterned on the world distribution of human societies. The survey method was as follows. First, 37 style elements were identified, covering solo vocal technique plus related features such as group singing and accompaniment. Next a sample of 2,527 recorded songs, from 233 cultures, was prepared. Each recording in the sample was analysed aurally by a pair of research workers who recorded their impressions for each applicable element on a rating scale of 1 to 5. The results were then compared statistically with the cultural traits of the societies they represented, from which conclusions were drawn about the relationship of singing styles to social norms. Further research has involved the sample's being widened to 4,000 songs and 400 cultures, extending and reinforcing the team's initial conclusions. It also laid the basis for development of the data into a multimedia software survey of the world's musical and choreographic cultures, which Lomax calls The Global Jukebox.

However, given the wide parameters on which the original study was set, it is not surprising that the findings confirmed initial hypotheses, or that further conclusions were reached. Firstly, style is significantly affected only by certain cultural elements: i.e., subsistence type, political structure, sexual conventions, modes of social order and complexity of class structure. Secondly, these elements affect song cross-culturally. That is, where otherwise dissimilar societies resemble each other in respect of these elements, they will also resemble each other in respect of singing style.

Thirdly, individual cultures share features with their neighbours, which merit their grouping into much larger regions: Eurasian, African, North American Indian, etc. Finally, singing varies with social structure, solo singing and unified choirs being found in centralised, cohesive societies, while leaderless group singing and diffuse choruses identify egalitarian groups and individualised cultures.

The above only scratches the surface of the complete programme, which includes equivalent studies of dance (choreometrics) and folksong texts. The full story can be checked out by reading the survey team's writings on the subject, but unwary browsers should be warned that they could be in for a stiff and none too well organised read. <sup>2</sup> Nowhere could I find a comprehensive summary of the central argument, or what criteria were applied in selecting the survey data, or any attempt to say what is meant by such core terms as 'culture' or 'folksong'. Clarification of this latter term is particularly important here as the programme was dependent on donations of sound recordings from archives and individuals all over the planet. Since usage of the word varies at least as widely as the sample data sources, do we have any certainty that the researchers were comparing like with like?

While I can claim some familiarity with arguments which relate to culture and singing style, appraisal of the statistical method on my part has to be limited and subjective. However, although the number of cultures sampled seemed sufficiently large and diffuse to represent the entire planet, and the style features analysed all significant aspects of song performance, I felt that the sample of ten songs per culture was too small to be reliable. Also that analysis rested too heavily on subjective judgement and that interpretation reflected the researchers' culture, rather than that of the performers. Finally, the links between vocal traditions and culture are not as straightforward as Lomax seems to think.

To explain this latter point, let me discuss the example which first let the cat out of the cantometrics bag.<sup>3</sup> During a major collecting exercise in Spain in 1953, Lomax noticed that the intensity of local sexual prohibition was reflected in the vocal tones adopted by his singers. Thin, harsh, high pitched and piercing, with intense emotional delivery, in the proscriptive south. Broader, softer, lower pitched and more relaxed in the comparatively permissive north. A recording trip to Italy, two years later, found the pattern repeated.

At first the argument seems logical and well substantiated. The rules of a harsh, restrictive society finding expression in a harsh, restricted vocal style, with the commercial issues of Lomax's fieldwork confirming the geographical spread for both countries.<sup>4</sup> But to what extent can we draw general conclusions from such findings? The recent splendid Topic reissue of Tangent's *Music in the World of Islam* has reminded me afresh of the magnificent singing of Dunya Yunis, a woman from a mountain village in the Lebanon.<sup>5</sup> How readily she equates with those singers from southern Spain! Harsh, narrow toned and tormented, with a passion that could carve its imprint in granite, and long extended mordant passages to underline the tension. It stings like a cry of anguish in the teeth of a society which continues to harbour medieval attitudes against women. Yet, when her song lapses into something akin to recitative, I am reminded of similar field recordings from further east in Rajasthan.<sup>6</sup> There, if what's available to western listeners is anything to go by, singers tend towards a terse vocal projection. But, when compared with our other examples, they appear broader and softer toned and lower pitched. According to cantometrics theory this should signify some measure of sexual liberation, but I'd be very surprised if the sexual mores of Rajasthan are any more easygoing than those of Spain, Italy or the Lebanon.

What's wrong here, I think, is that the style has been viewed against too small a number of cultural elements. If we take the term culture to mean a socially acquired system of shared meanings, attitudes and values and the symbolic forms through which they are expressed, then this can only be considered in its entirety.<sup>7</sup> For, while culture moulds our attitudes to life and gives meaning to the world which surrounds us, it does so as a complete and interactive system of ideas, beliefs and moral codes. Therefore, if it is to act as a means of expression, singing style must reflect the whole of culture, not just part of it.

Yet, whatever the validity of the experiment, I feel that Lomax, in discerning an axiom of folk art, was intuitively more right than wrong. It is not just that, by the time of those 1953 observations, he had already spent more time in the field than any collector before him. It is that few of his predecessors developed such a close empathy with their subjects, or possessed equal opportunity to understand and appreciate how singers use their skills to express their emotions. For wherever people are trapped in the hardship and squalor of stark poverty and ruthless exploitation, singing represents one of the few avenues available for giving vent to what they feel. Now, since culture defines our view of the world, it also defines our emotional responses and tells us how these should be expressed. It is therefore a crucial factor in deciding the form and context of a people's songs, as well as having a strong say in how these will be performed.

The problem with doing things cantometrically, however, is that the method relies on analysing performances 'typical' of their tradition. But what constitutes typical song performance? The examples of Sam Larner and Harry Cox have often been quoted, and with good reason. For although less than 15 miles separated their respective Norfolk villages, Larner's engaging, conversational manner couldn't be further removed from Cox's dry and diffident approach. Similar contrasts can be found wherever you look.<sup>8</sup> Which, for example, represents the 'true' style of

County Tyrone, Northern Ireland? Robert Cinnamond's thin, stark projection, with the high notes held and extended as though time had lost all meaning, or Geordie Hanna's lower-pitched, gapped, ornamented and altogether more emphatic delivery? All four of these, by the way, together with the rest of the singers who make these isles such a rich and varied tapestry, are bracketed within a general European culture area. So far reaching is this grouping that it finds a unity of style stretching 'from the Caucasus to the Atlantic'.<sup>9</sup> Of late, I've been taking a close look at one isolated parish on the fringes of this region, in Gaelic-speaking Ireland. There are around 12 singers in this parish and the styles in that one small neck of the woods are anything but unified.

Instead of viewing the singer as the passive vessel of external forces, it is far more realistic to see him or her as a creative artist working within the constraints of culture, just as a painter works within the constraints of paint, canvas, subject and imagination. Here it's as well to emphasise that I'm not trying to advance abstract theory for its own sake. As listener and performer I'm constantly aware that I'm digging in soil where I have no roots of my own and that my life's experience and outlook are vastly different from those of the people whose songs I've acquired. Understanding the culture of tradition-bearers enables us to look through their eyes at what moves them when they sing. By so doing we can comprehend what should be moving us.

If the record is silent concerning variances between near neighbours, there are valiant efforts to explain similarities which arise over far flung and seemingly unconnected traditions. Lomax makes much of Eurasia, a huge region which embraces a great deal of North Africa, Southern Europe and Continental Asia. In his eyes the movements of migration, conquest and trade were responsible for spreading across this area a type of society characterised by rigid hierarchies, deferential attitudes, strongly defined sex roles and absolute despotism. There is obviously a lot in this, but far too much emphasis seems to be placed on culture as it originally developed, and not enough on culture as it now is. For if music expresses our view of the world, then it will change as that world changes. In any event, Lomax tells us, there followed in the wake of this autocracy, a sorrowful, repining kind of song. It was heavily ornamented, melodically indeterminate, with narrow intervals and rhythmically free. This he calls the high lonesome complaint. It spread to the Orient in one direction, to the empires of North Africa in the other and down to the Wolofs of Senegal, before being carried from there into the mouths of Mississippi convicts and mule skinnners. A staggering traverse by any standards, but the ball doesn't stop rolling even then. 'There are', he tells us, 'more than hints of this ancient song type in the so called big songs - the highly-ornamented and complex bardic melodies - that entertained the kings of Ireland in ancient times.'<sup>10</sup> I do not know where Lomax finds the evidence to support this statement, for the ravages of Irish history were so far reaching that we have next to no idea what the orally transmitted bardic music of ancient Ireland sounded like. Hardly anything earlier than the seventeenth century survived to be written down.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps it is too late in the day to wonder what the well heeled kings of Ancient Ireland would have found to listen to in the high lonesome complaints of their downtrodden subjects. Nevertheless, it is probably true that Cromwellian dispossession of the Catholic hierarchy, and consequent absorption of it's file into the ranks of the peasantry, had a hand in shaping the elaborate melodies and handsome texts of modern Gaelic tradition. True also that the passionate droning, nasal intonation and ornamentation associated with singers from Connemara finds echoes all over Eurasia, and that Connemara singers seem to share the Eurasian fondness for wandering melodies, narrow in compass and indeterminate in structure. But vocal styles and melody structures vary throughout Gaelic Ireland. Over generalisation is an easy trap to fall into, but the province of Munster has thrown up melodies no less complex than those of Connemara but frequently they are much more wide ranging more sharply defined and arguably more handsome. Frequently too, and with the exception of certain singers from West Cork, one comes across performers from Munster who use relatively little ornamentation and who project their voices in a clearer, more open throated manner. Melodically and stylistically we can place them in a different camp to Connemara and Eurasia.<sup>12</sup> Yet, while both parts of Ireland share many songs and are culturally very close, they differ in one important respect. Munster, generally, is good farming country; Connemara, on the other hand, is a barren wilderness of thin, stony, rock strewn soil and savage Atlantic storms. Ireland, as with

peasant societies generally, once possessed severe modes of sexual conduct,<sup>13</sup> and it's people knew everything which tyranny, in the form of rack renting absentee landlordism, artificially induced famine, mass evictions and emigration could throw at them. The miseries of foreign exploitation undoubtedly played their part in shaping the way people sang, yet comparison between all three areas suggests that the high lonesome complaint may be the subject of a further hypothesis; that harsh impassioned singing, whether from Connemara bog, or Eurasian desert, can also be attributed to the rigours of being forced to wrest a living from a harsh unyielding environment.

Cross-cultural parallels account for many of the song world's stylistic similarities, but there are others which I suspect would be less readily explained. What for instance, of singers from the Spanish Asturias, such as Manuel Gandoy, who use tone and voice projection in a way that we'd usually associate with the Balkans?<sup>14</sup> What of singers from the Tatar region of the former USSR, who not infrequently sound like their confrères from the Hebrides?<sup>15</sup> Am I alone in hearing parallels between the raw emotion of flamenco and the tortured singing and strident guitar playing of Fred McDowell, Bukka White and Blind Willie Johnson? Apparently not, for Lomax himself refers to the blues as 'America's Cante Jondo'.<sup>16</sup> Yet what social similarities exist between black Americans and Spanish gypsies? I would not question Lomax's assertion that song expresses the culture of which it is a part. But how that expression is realised is far more complex, multifaceted and indeterminate than the cantometrics method will allow.

Mention of such icons brings me back to *The Land Where the Blues Began*, and the premise propounded throughout the book that the idiom was born in Mississippi of African parentage around 1900. Few observers nowadays would dispute the date,<sup>17</sup> but I thought the question of location was a canard which had starved to death years ago for want of substantiation. The blues could well have had its genesis in Mississippi, for it found its apotheosis there in the raw and harrowing singing of a litany of Delta bluesmen like Son House, Robert Johnson and Big Joe Williams. But apotheosis does not necessarily equal origin and the requirements for incubation were a feature of black social conditions all over the South.

So many writers have sought to explain the blues in terms of African survivals and adaptations without appearing to give due weight to the socio-historical implications of their arguments: that if African music reflects African culture, then we would expect that music to be transformed as the culture was transformed. Also, if the blues did not come into being until almost two generations after the abolition of slavery, then it must be the product of social forces which followed in the wake of slavery. Plantation experience and African heritage moulded social attitudes and musical background, but neither can directly explain the idiom.

Cantometrics is rather better at discovering cultural patterns than it is at explaining them and it generally supports traditional arguments about the African nature of Black American music. It does, however, throw up a thought-provoking - and disturbing - variation to this theme. Pointing to the wide melodic intervals and leaderless choruses of African music, Lomax cites these features as evidence of well-integrated, free, egalitarian societies.<sup>18</sup> The picture is exaggerated, but it highlights the dramatic contrast between African freedom and American slavery. Turning to the blues, however, he does not look to slavery to explain the idiom's flattened notes and expressions of discontent. Instead he points to the post-abolition campaign of terror and destabilisation waged on black people by an insecure white population.<sup>19</sup>

I am not in a position to evaluate this argument, but I find it extremely persuasive. The plantation system was dehumanising, degrading and horribly brutal. Yet an enclosed institution could well have generated a measure of communal solidarity among its inmates, to help counter the worst excesses. But a free black population turned loose on the world, may have been perceived by the whites as more of a threat than ever they were when suppressed by slavery. If so, would the whites not have tried to destroy that threat via the disorientation of lynch mob and Ku Klux Klan?<sup>20</sup> In breaking the back of whatever bonds of community kept black people going through the years of slavery, did they not also sow the seeds of social alienation so characteristic of the blues? If so then it is here we should look to explain this crystallisation of pre-existing song forms, so negative in content, so disaffected in outlook and so completely different in emotional temperament to the

songster tradition which preceded it.<sup>21</sup> The blues makes sense, not as a survival of West African tradition, but as the artistic expression of the transition from slavery to nominally free, downtrodden citizenship.

The music of black America was born out of the cultural experience of black Americans. If they could do nothing to change their situation, their musical lingua franca at least gave them a voice through which to channel their feelings - a capacity shared by the natural inheritors of folk tradition the world over. Today, while much of that capacity has been displaced by the intertwining of mass media and mass society, what's left of the world's musical traditions is increasingly subsumed beneath a plethora of sanitised, soulful singers and gentle, tinkling soft-rock bands.

Criticism of certain aspects of Alan Lomax's work should not be taken as criticism of the man's achievements generally. I feel a considerable personal debt, not just for the way he has liberated so much of the world's music, but because most of the intellectual and ideological baggage I carry around with me stems from his influence. There are those of us - and Lomax would surely count himself among the coterie - who believe that unburdening of emotions through song is important, both for the community of performers and for the community of listeners. In *Folk Song Style and Culture* he referred to Telstar rising 'balefully on the western horizon'. A quarter of a century later we are bombarded with satellite videos, computer games, cable networks and the whole paraphernalia of a technology designed to entertain, not to express. At the same time the march of progress destroys native cultures almost as fast as it destroys rain forests. Before we are deafened completely by a soundscape of stultifying blandness, is it yet too late to reopen the cantometrics debate?

#### Acknowledgements

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#### Footnotes

1. The study was lodged at Columbia University until 1982. It was later transferred to Hunter College, New York.
2. Principal works dealing with world singing styles are:  
Alan Lomax (ed.), **Folk Song Style and Culture** (Transaction Books, New Brunswick: 1968)  
Alan Lomax, **Cantometrics: An Approach to the Anthropology of Music** (University of California Extension Media, Berkeley: 1977)  
Alan Lomax, **Folk Song Style** *American Anthropologist*, LXI (1959).
3. **Folk Song Style and Culture**, Introduction.
4. The Spanish fieldwork is surveyed on a fine set of LP recordings from the long-defunct Westminster label, **Songs and Dances of Spain** WF 12001 onwards (11 volumes). The Italian recordings can be sampled on Everest / Tradition TLP 1030, **Music and Song of Italy**. See also the relevant volumes for both countries in the **Columbia World Library of Folk and Primitive Music**.
5. **Music in the World of Islam** (Topic TSCD 901-3).
6. The example in mind is on Harmonia Mundi HM959, **Songs of Love and Devotion of Rajasthan**. See also Ocora OCR 81, King KICC 5117, or Saydisc SDL 401.
7. Adapted from Peter Burke, **Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe** (Temple Smith, London: 1978).
8. Look no further than the review section of **Musical Traditions 12**. Peta Webb's review of **An Hour of Song** (ITSC 002) contrasts the styles of Maggie McGee and Dan McGonigle, who live a few miles apart on the Inishowen peninsula, Donegal.
9. Lomax (ed.), **Folk Song Style and Culture**.

10. Alan Lomax, **The Land Where the Blues Began** (Methuen, London: 1993).
11. Donal O'Sullivan, **Songs of the Irish** (Browne & Nolan, Dublin: 1960).
12. With the exception of Connemara, the world of Irish Gaelic song is woefully under-represented on commercial record. However, see Amhrain ar an Sean Nos. RTE CD 185 for a fascinating survey of the riches of the idiom - and a bewildering array of singing styles.
13. K.H. Connell, **Irish Peasant Society** (Oxford University Press, Oxford: 1968).
14. Manuel Gandoy, **En Gaita Traigo a Asturias** (Spanish Fontana 64-29-066).
15. For example, compare **Music of the Tatar People** (Tangent TGM 129) with Scottish Tradition 2: **Music From the Western Isles** (Tangent TNGM 110).
16. Lomax, **The Land Where the Blues Began**, p. 9.
17. Paul Oliver, **Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records** (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1984), Ch. 9.
18. Lomax, **The Homogeneity of African-Afro-American Musical Style**, in N.E. Whitten and J.F. Szwed (eds.) **Afro-American Anthropology** (Free Press, New York: 1970).
19. Lomax, **The Land Where the Blues Began**.
20. Those parts of the Caribbean where African cultural retentions are stronger than in the USA, show markedly stronger African musical retentions also. See, for instance, **Drums of Defiance: Maroon Music From the Earliest Free Black Communities of Jamaica** (Smithsonian Folkways SFCD 40412), **From Slavery to Freedom: The Saramaka Maroons of Surinam** (Lyricord LLST 7354) and **Early Afro-Cuban Songs** (Albatros VC 4932).
21. Oliver, **Songsters and Saints**.