Sounding Spaces: *Lange Wies*, Community, and Environment

Judith Klassen

Recent efforts to engage environment and space in ethnomusicological discourse have led to a burgeoning "ecomusicology," what Jeff Todd Titon has called "the study of music, culture, sound, and nature in a period of environmental crisis."[1] Following literary criticism, the discipline began as a space for the study of musical interactions with nature or musical text (composition) as a representation of nature. More recent developments have expanded this frame substantially to examine musical, cultural, and environmental sustainability and to problematize a static understanding of "nature" in related studies.[2] In this paper, I will build on Titon's notion of sustainability as dynamic permanence, examining points of convergence between song and environment, and paying particular attention to relationships between so-called simple living and soundscape in Old Colony Mennonite *lange Wies*, a Low German expression meaning "long melody" or "long way."

Lange Wies

Lange Wies has long been associated with Old Colony church and community life. The song form is no longer universally practiced in North American Old Colony churches, but it remains foundational to many congregations in northern Mexico. It is within that region, where I conducted doctoral fieldwork in 2006,[3] that this examination of sound, community, and environment is situated. The literal translation of *lange Wies* as "long melody" or "long way" describes both the distinctive style in which conserving Old

[1] Jeff Todd Titon, "The Nature of Ecomusicology," *Musica e Cultura: revista da ABET* 8, no. 1 (2013): 8-18.

[2] Ibid., 11. See also Aaron S. Allen, "Ecomusicology [ecocritical musicology]," *The Grove Dictionary of American Music* 2nd ed., ed. Charles Hiroshi Garrett (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013).

[3] Judith Klassen, "Encoding Song: Faithful Defiance in Mexican Mennonite Music Making" (Ph.D. dissertation, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2008).

Sound in the Land – Music and the Environment, ed. Carol Ann Weaver, Doreen Helen Klassen, and Judith Klassen, special issue, *The Conrad Grebel Review 33,* no. 2 (Spring 2015): 168-175.

Colonists sing hymns during worship, and the melismatic (multiple notes sung to one syllable of text) and orally-transmitted melodies associated with song texts in the Old Colony hymnal, *Gesangbuch: Eine Sammlung geistlicher Lieder zur Allgemeinen Erbauung und zum Lobe Gottes*. Charles Burkhart and Wesley Berg have written about *lange Wies* and its function in Old Colony worship in Mexico and Alberta, respectively. Underscoring the historical lineage of the long melodies, Burkhart uses *alte Wiese* (High German: "old melodies") to describe them,[4] while Berg uses *oole Wies*(*e*) (Low German: "old melodies").[5]

As a musical repertoire, long melodies are distinctive in several ways. Though orally transmitted, each melody has an assigned number. These numbers are listed in the *Melodien Register* of the *Gesangbuch* and are associated with particular hymn texts. While there are also *korte Wiese* (Low German: "short melodies") associated with each melody number in the *Gesangbuch*, it is the long melody repertoire that is used by conserving Old Colonists in worship. Song leaders, or *Vorsänger*, are charged with maintaining the long melodies on behalf of the community. To that end, they meet together during the week to review and prepare for Sunday morning. During the worship service, they sit at the front of the sanctuary—facing the congregation—and call out the hymns to be sung. The focused nasal timbre used in singing *lange Wies* serves to draw in congregational voices, who follow the lead of the *Vorsänger* at the start of each hymn. At phrase endings, the congregation falls silent in order to enable the *Vorsänger* to lead them into the next line of text. Long melodies are sung in unison; however, their melismatic form and the related absence of regular meter or pulse make their learning and retention complex.[6]

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[4] Charles Burkhart, "The Church Music of the Old Order Amish and Old Colony Mennonites," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 27 (1953): 34-54. See also Charles Burkhart, "The Music of the Old Order Amish and the Old Colony Mennonites: A Contemporary Monodic Practice" (Master's Thesis, Colorado College, 1952).

[5] Wesley Berg, "Hymns of the Old Colony Mennonites and the Old Way of Singing," *The Musical Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (1996): 77-117. See also Wesley Berg, "Old Colony Mennonite Singing: Old Songs in a New Land: Russian Mennonite Hymns Come to Manitoba," in *Old Colony Mennonites in Canada: 1875-2000*, ed. Delbert F. Plett (Steinbach, MB: Crossway Publications Inc., 2001), 23-24, originally published in *Preservings* 16 (2000): 44-45.

[6] For further details regarding *lange Wiese* and their historic and social significance, see Helen Martens, "The Music of Some Religious Minorities in Canada," *Ethnomusicology* 16, no. 3

Attesting to the challenge of retaining the melodies and to the alternate literacy involved in learning them, *Vorsänger* Abram Wolf recalls:

> Ich weiss einen [Vorsänger], aber der is lange gestorben, der konnte neun und neunzig Melodien. . . . Die Hunderste hat er auch noch wollen lernen, aber, das war nicht vollbracht. Ja das—dieser Melodien alle lernen, das meint—pass auf! Und, weil wir haben nichts zum beschauen auf Zahlen oder wie—man muss nur wissen, horchen. Und der selbe der tut das üben, und andere der tut das folgen.[7]
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> *I know one [songleader], but he is long dead, he knew 99 melodies. . . . The hundredth he also wanted to learn, but it was not to be. Yes—these melodies, to learn them all, that means—look out! And because we do not have anything to look at—like numbers—one must just know how to listen. And we do the practicing, and others do the following.*

Describing the process of learning the *lange Wies* as "etwas schwerer als Glaubens Lieder" (somewhat more difficult than belief songs),[8] Wolf emphasizes that learning a new melody is a slow process that, like participation in Old Colony community life, requires commitment:

> Das ist nicht in einen Abend getan. [Laughter]. Das muss drei, vier mal. Und dann, es selber zu Hause allein, wo mich kein, niemand hören würde das probieren. . . . Ja, ich habe zu Hause auch noch etliche gelernt. Na, erst sie von abhorchen, und dann—so bei dem arbeiten so denkt man, "Wie würde das gesungen?" Und dann geht man, nimmt sich das Buch, und dann mal selbst, "mal sehen," [demonstrates with Gesangbuch] probieren ob man kann.[9]

(1972): 360-71. See also Burkhart and Berg.

[7] Abram Wolf, interview by author, Manitoba Colony, Mexico, February 15, 2006.

[8] The hymnal used by the *Kleine Gemeinde* church in Northern Mexico is called *Glaubens Lieder*. The strophic nature and minimal use of melisma in *Glaubens Lieder* hymns makes their melodies easier to retain than *lange Wies*; the *Glaubens Lieder* hymnal uses shaped notes to indicate pitch.

[9] Abram Wolf, interview, 2006.

> *That is not in one evening done. [Laughter]. That must be done three, four times. And then, try it out by myself at home, where nobody can hear me practice. . . . Yes, I have also learned quite a few at home. First from listening, and then—while working one thinks, "How was that sung?" And then one goes, takes the book [hymnal], and then by oneself, "let's see," [demonstrates with* Gesangbuch*], find out if it works.*

Social Interaction, Social Effects, and Environment

The retention of *lange Wies* by many Old Colony churches is consistent with community values of simplicity, nonconformity, and commitment to the *oole Ordnunk* (Old Order). At the same time, the singing of *lange Wies* is performative, with what ethnomusicologist Jane Sugarman refers to as social effects, whereby performance forms are understood "both as structured by a range of shared meanings, and as structuring, in their capacity to shape ongoing social formations."[10]

In the singing of *lange Wies*, Old Colonists perform a particular meeting of performance style, kinesthetic practice, and social effect. Engaging vocal production techniques requiring "a long breath" in a melismatic song form that prizes continuity of sound in its performance, long melodies are difficult to learn and even more difficult to sing solo. This difficulty is not just an embodiment of humility but a physical limitation identified by singers of the complex melodies. In a community that prizes collectivity and lived belief, this seems significant: Are the *Wies* an enactment of societal value through aesthetic choice, or do the melodies just happen to be "long" and best sung in groups? Do the melodies reflect inevitable changes in a collectively-practiced oral tradition through time, or are their aesthetic features intentional?[11] Conversely, is it significant that the same characteristics that reflect ongoing community cohesion in this genre (oral transmission, absence of visual

[10] Jane Sugarman, *Engendering Song: Singing and Subjectivity at Prespa Albanian Weddings*, Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1997), 27.

[11] Nicholas Tempereley's "pitch-matching theory" argues that long melodies are the result of a long history of separation from other musical influences. Nicholas Tempereley, "The Old Way of Singing: Its Origins and Development," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 34, no. 3 (1981): 511-44.

cues, introduction during childhood) make it difficult for "outsiders" to participate? And, finally, what might all of this say about the complexity of so-called simple living?

Lange Wies can be regarded as the product of an oral tradition, shaped by its integration into the life of a community; it can also be seen as a practice that shapes and is shaped by a specific built environment. Upon arrival in Mexico in the 1920s, conserving Old Colonists brought with them the building techniques and architectural styles common in the western Canadian Mennonite villages from which they had come. However, they soon adapted their built structures to respond to environmental conditions and material costs in Mexico.[12] Adobe was adopted in the early years, followed later by concrete structures with metal roofs.[13] Consistent throughout these material changes was an emphasis on simplicity of form: church walls remained unadorned (save for windows for natural light); wooden church pews remained backless and rested on a painted floor. The de-emphasis on elaborate visual ornamentation within the sanctuary has continued into the 21st century and is consistent with the importance placed on lived belief.

Roland Sawatzky, Curator of History at the Manitoba Museum, uses the term *orthopraxis*, "correct practice," in reference to Mennonite domestic architecture in Manitoba, underscoring connections between sacred experience and everyday life.[14] A similar framework can be used in this context. For Old Colonists, faithfulness is explicitly tied to "correct practice," as it is through the practical choices made in day-to-day life that commitment to the church is expressed. In the Old Colony sanctuary, *orthopraxis* impacts not only one's visual and tactile senses but also the soundscape of worship. While in Western classical traditions a nasal timbre is often taken to be the antithesis of "blending," the acoustic result of Old Colony church architecture is a live space that enables participants to sing full voice without standing out. Here it is useful to consider connections between song practice, community, and environment, and in particular

[12] Harry Leonard Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1971), 272-78.

[13] David M. Quiring, *The Mennonite Old Colony Vision: Under Siege in Mexico and the Canadian Connection* (Steinbach, MB: Crossway Publications Inc., 2003), 40.

[14] Roland Sawatzky, "The Control of Social Space in Mennonite Housebarns of Manitoba, 1874-1940" (Ph.D. dissertation, Simon Fraser University, 2005).

what sustainability and a relational epistemology of ecology might look like in this context. Is it possible that values of *orthopraxis* are embodied not only in repertoires and song forms but also in community infrastructures (like buildings) that contribute to social cohesion?

Titon speaks of sustainability as dynamic permanence: "The elements in the system, their proportions, structures, relations, and functions will vary; but the system itself is permanent for practical purposes in the foreseeable future, though not for eternity."[15] This is a simple and useful reference point when conceiving Old Colony life and music making. While non-conformist Mennonite communities in Mexico have frequently been framed as unchanging, monolithic, and static,[16] the church is more usefully conceived as a system that is sustainable through the dynamic nature of its parts—what diaspora theorists might refer to as stance rather than entity; a chosen position, not a "thing."[17]

So, how does an ethnomusicology of the environment—accounting for sustainability and relational epistemology—play out in this space? Continuity and change in worship and song practice reflect dynamic engagement with physical and cultural environments in Old Colony worship: the oral transmission of *lange Wies* has begun to be supplemented by cassette tapes made by community members in order to enable retention and practice outside of Sunday morning services; unison singing and proscription of musical instruments during Sunday worship remain, but *korte Wies*, instruments, and even singing in parts can be heard in some homes and youth gatherings; and while services continue to be held in High German (the language of church and school), some pastors use Low German to elucidate points made in their sermons.

In the past, I have referred to these apparent inconsistencies as "faithful defiance"—cultural expressions that defy community proscriptions but in fact support the community's very fabric.[18] Here, they can also be framed as part of a sustainable and dynamic permanence. Connections between belief and engagement with the physical environment are ongoing.

[15] Titon, "The Nature of Ecomusicology," 10.
[16] See, for example, the film by Carlos Reygadas, *Stellet Licht* [Silent Night] (eOne Films, 2008).
[17] Rogers Brubaker, "The 'Diaspora' Diaspora," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no. 1 (2005): 1-19.
[18] Klassen, "Encoding Song," 2008.

Nonconformity and "simple living" shape physical infrastructures and their uses, but the results are neither static nor unchanging. Inside the church, a minimalist architecture and unadorned sanctuary enable an acoustic that is all-encompassing. Dynamism is equally evident outside: hitching posts remain but they now organize cars and pickups rather than horses. That church services begin one hour after sunrise also points to tangible connections between community life and the so-called natural world, but this is not uncomplicated. Agrarian life and chosen simplicity are not only about a life rhythm tuned to "nature's clock" but about breaking land, drought, poverty, land scarcity, and related social challenges. Similarly, the move from Canada to Mexico was about hope for a new start without government intervention (building non-conformist communities), yet it brought with it tensions with rural Spanish Mexican populations.[19] Conceptualizing social and musical context vis-à-vis more traditional understandings of nature, place, and environment points to tensions between perceived stasis and dynamic change, and underscores challenges alluded to in Titon's reference to environmental crisis.[20]

Conclusions

Ongoingness and sustainability in Old Colony communities are not about stasis, nor is the complex of sound and environment a thing that can be fully known. Congregational singing occurs in unison, with a vocal timbre that enables full participation by individual singers and results in a rich collective sound. The development of vocal competence "is not in one evening done," nor are the tunes of *lange Wies* "catchy." Still, the ongoing investment of *Vorsänger* and community members makes this sustenance possible. Whether named as such, whether chosen or not, this requisite intentionality shapes and is shaped by community participation and functioning, with a social effect (to return to Sugarman's terminology) of sustaining community cohesion through song. Connections between sound, belief, and environment are written into this cohesion.

The commitments of Old Colonists to continuity, tradition, and the

[19] Martina E. Will, "The Mennonite Colonization of Chihuahua: Reflections of Competing Visions," *The Americas* 53, no. 3 (1997): 353-78.
[20] Titon, "The Nature of Ecomusicology," 8.

oole Ordnunk are not exclusive to song practice but extend to such areas as language use, clothing, education, and the adoption of new technologies. It is not just long melodies that have been sustained through time but a particular sonic environment as well. The soundscape during Sunday worship is created by human voices singing *lange Wies* and facilitated by the acoustic character of Old Colony building methods and aesthetic decisions. The resulting sound is neither a calculated aesthetic choice nor a by-product of non-conformist faithful living. Instead, it is part of a complex ecosystem involving belief enacted through practice. Such a reading is not an end in itself but an example of dynamic permanence.

Stephen Marini, a historian of religion, has suggested that hymnody may be considered "a medium of religious culture—a complex of acts and psychological effects, texts and vocal techniques, group behavior and ritual gestures—that expresses for worshipers the universe of sacred meaning,"[21] asserting further the "protean ability of hymnody to express virtually everything about a religious tradition."[22] I do not seek to assign total and inclusive meaning to hymnodic practice among Old Colony Mennonites; however, Marini's work resonates with this examination of *lange Wies*. Placed in counterpoint with music analyses that take seriously the relationships between sound, place, and environment, the significance of the form in expressing Old Colony understandings of community extends beyond its sonic character. By considering aspects of community life in relation to sound production and physical space, we can see that despite the apparent clarity of non-conformist practices and lifeways, there is very little that is "simple" about "simple living."

Judith Klassen, ethnomusicologist and violist, is Curator of Cultural Expression at the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau, Quebec.

[21] Stephen A. Marini, "Hymnody and History: Early American Evangelical Hymns as Sacred Music," in *Music in American Religious Experience,* ed. Philip V. Bohlman, Edith L. Blumhofer, and Maria M. Chow (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), 134.
[22] Ibid.