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American Choral Music. Historical and Stylistic Aspects

Abstract: Speaking about the American choral music, conductor Kathy Romey observed that “our choral inheritance reflects a kaleidoscope of cultural and religious roots which gave birth to an astonishing melting pot” of musical and individual voices. The “American” choral music can be observed from two geographic perspectives—the United States and North America—which include works of composers from Canada, the United States, Puerto Rico, and Mexico. In both contexts, “specific American” choral music is extremely varied, flexible, and in a continuous change. It could take the form of a hymn of Shakers, of a song of Native Americans, a Moravian hymn, a spiritual Negro, of a song from the divine service of Judaic Sabbath, of a lullaby, a civil war marching, a Mexican salsa dance, a gospel hymn, an Asian artistic song, Broadway music, blues, a cowboy ballad or a European folk song. All these and much more are part of our collective culture—a diverse and rich tradition of many peoples, which expresses itself through a multitude of musical styles and genres.”

Keywords: American choral music, choral musical styles, choral musical genres, musical influences, musical tradition.

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Muzica corală americană. Aspecte istorice și stilistice

Rezumat: Vorbind despre muzica corală americană, dirijoarea Kathy Romey a remarcat faptul că „moștenirea noastră corală reflectă un caleidoscop de izvoare culturale și religioase care au dat naștere unui uimitor „melting pot” (vas în care se topesc și se amestecă diferite metale) de voci muzicale și individuale. Muzica corală „americană” poate fi privită din două perspective geografice – Statele Unite și America de Nord – ce includ lucrări ale compozitorilor din Canada, Statele Unite, Puerto Rico și Mexic. În ambele contexte, muzica corală „specific americană” este extrem de variată, flexibilă și în continuă schimbare. Ar putea lua forma unui imn al Shaker-ilor, a unui cântec al băștinașilor americani, un imn moravic, un negro spiritual, unei piese din serviciu divin de Sabat iudaic, un cântec de leagăn, un marș al războiului civil, un dans mexican de salsa, un imn gospel, un cântec artistic asiatic, muzică de pe Broadway, blues, o baladă a cow-boy-ilor sau un cântec popular european. Toate acestea și multe altele fac parte din cultura noastră colectivă – o tradiție diversă și bogată a multor popoare, care se exprimă într-o multitudine de stiluri și genuri muzicale”.

Cuvinte cheie: muzică corală americană, stiluri muzicale corale, genuri muzicale corale, influențe muzicale, tradiție muzicală.

Introduction

We add to this especially varied palette the amazing fact that 1 of 10 American adults sings weekly in a choir, according to a recent study of the National Arts Foundation. *Chorus America*, one of the most important associations, published its own study which indicates that choral interpretation is the preferred form of art in America. There are approximately 250,000 American choirs amongst which 12,000 are professional or community ensembles, 38,000 are school choirs, and 200,000 are church choirs. The majority of the participants in the study reported that “their participation in the choir has broaden the area of skills, influencing social and professional interactions, developing the team spirit, the skill of listening to and following instructions, social interaction, and discipline.” The report states that these skills “are not efficient only for the individual, but also for the community, society as a whole.”

Most part of the music sung in America at the end of the 20th century was actually musical hybrids, unique musical traditions which were specific to existing cultures. On the one hand, musical traditions are to a great extent copies of the original, extra-American or pre-Columbian, and on the other hand, they are completely different, influencing a different tradition. Amerindian musical activities used different combinations, for instance: vocal music with drums or electrical guitar, only with textual references to the Amerindian origin (native populations of America, of the Mongoloid race). African tradition also varies from religious music with percussion instruments and text coming from the Western African culture, up to orchestral pieces specific to the Western Europe tradition, but also African rhythms and tone influences. The same can be said about European, Asian traditions, and other traditions present in the music sung nowadays in America. In many cases, a musical tradition is not defined by those who are directly involved in musical activities (music being a part of this tradition or a part of the other tradition), but they consider it as belonging to them. A style can be classified as specifically African, European, Amerindian, or as belonging to a certain culture, but, actually, music reveals a unique combination of sounds and rhythms which do not necessarily come from a certain place.

The terms used to describe musical traditions in America reflect political processes and academic sensitivities that have modified throughout time. The national identity was the main concern of the 19th century, but also in the beginning of the 20th century, the use of electricity and of cultural distinctions as organisation concepts (both found in the same nation or even in multinational regions) have increased in importance towards the end of the 20th century. The musical traditions of ethnic or cultural groups in the same nation have originated from local variations of historical and musical events. A certain combination of groups in a given area, the contact established between these groups on an economic and political level, together with economic and cultural events, and certainly, the influence of different composers, musicians, critics and the laws of the local culture, all these contributing to the creation of a certain history of music for nations and certain regions within the nations.

Most of the collections of instruments are found in museums of natural history, in connection with other works of art, and necessarily, removed from the context of sound or of

their musical attributes. After 1500 and during the colonial period, important documents were preserved by colonial powers and can be consulted today especially in archives in Spain and Portugal, but also in France, England, and in other countries. The accounts of that time mention musical events and ecclesiastical documents, but also refer to important musical manifestations of colonial churches. Later, the documents of the colonial church were transferred to the archives of the country of origin.

Results

1. American Musical Traditions

The study of music on the territory of the United States of America requires an understanding of persons composing this music. Together with the arrival of Christopher Columbus and of other Europeans to America immediately after 1492, the first contact with the Amerindian societies was established, contact which has proven to have a very powerful impact on the European and Amerindian communities.

1.1 Amerindian Influences

Some Amerindian inhabitants lived in very small villages, and the only means of survival were hunting and very simple foods coming from working the land. They used only several instruments that accompanied the vocal singing. Other Native Americans lived in larger communities, and they provided for themselves using very advanced systems of practising agriculture. These communities were organised in extended empires, with very complex social and political structures, which included musical ensembles, the making of professional music, and a large area of specializations in music. Many communities were located somewhere between the two categories mentioned above.

From the south of Argentina and the North of Canada, we find continuity in musical activities: in the intent, style, and dance. These include:

- 1) association of music with powerful spirits, animals, and gods;
- 2) using music in magic and in healing with the help of spirits and gods, which is often accompanied by the use of alcohol or tobacco;
- 3) a predominance of vocal music and of elaborate spoken styles, accompanied by instrumental ensembles;
- 4) the unity of music and dance;
- 5) general image of the body during dancing;
- 6) types of musical instruments used;
- 7) certain structural aspects of music, including repetitions and also the use of certain onomatopoeic sounds.

The music of the Native Americans is correlated with certain seasons of the year, and often associated with agriculture and hunting. The season can be temporal, specific to the agriculture (seeding or harvesting) or correlated with certain religious celebrations. The solstice, for instance, was very well calculated in certain communities, and more recently, in the Catholic calendar, including the celebrations of saints, it is used for the scheduling of certain musical activities.

One of the most important influences coming from outside the Amerindian music is the music of Christian churches. Both Catholic missionaries, and the Protestant ones discouraged or even prohibited Amerindian communities to use traditional music, offering them instructions about the forms of European music. Furthermore, many Native Americans were converted to Christianity and singing the hymns is found in many communities in the North and South of America, in very different styles reflecting the denomination they belong to and the period of their conversion. In other cases, in Brazil, the only musical genre is the sung hymn. In other cases, the intonation of hymns survives together with traditional social music. The result is usually synthetic.

1.2 Influences of African Music

Although the cultural differences were obvious between the ones coming from Africa, we also find certain musical and cultural values that they had in common. Amongst the things that we find in Africans in the Western area, we can remind: rhythmic structures, an aesthetic base for the combination of various tones, an active interaction between the audience/public and the artists, the integration of various sounds, of dance and the use of music for expressing certain spiritual states. The artists insist on active participation through movement (by clapping or dancing) and the frequent use of antiphony. Improvisation was very well-spread. In Western Africa, music was associated with religions where the venerators directly experimented divinity through the possession of the spirit, things that were going on during rituals involving percussion (even a drums ensemble) and singing; this musical genre is currently in certain parts of America. Religious institutions have played a very important role in maintaining and developing African musical genres.

Around 1720, in English colonies, the participation of African slaves in the Great Baptist Awakening had as a result the foundation of Baptist churches of African American persons and of independent churches belonging exclusively to African American persons, which favoured an institutional framework for the development of the musical style specific to North America. The emotional appeal of the Great Awakening probably found resonance in multiple religions in Western Africa, and independent churches soon published their own books of hymns, that they sang in new, different styles.

Negro-spirituals and later on compositions in the gospel style, have developed and have become musical styles recognised internationally, with the sustained help of African-American composers and educators. African-American churches were also important public institutions whose influence was visible in the rights movement in the 20th century, where churches and the music in churches played an important role in mobilising a very large number of participants (*Voices of Civil Rights Movement, 1997*). African slaves could not practise their specific music styles. Colonial decrees indicated attempts of modifying public celebration and religious activities. African slaves were trained both by the churches and by the owners of plantations to use European instruments.

1.3 Influences of Emigrants' Music

The 19th century was a period when many emigrants from Europe or Asia came to America, especially after the abolition of slavery. Favourable laws encouraged masses of people to come

to America and the number of emigrants increased during this period. A large number of emigrants remained in America and formed important segments of population and regional cultures, with distinctive musical genres and traditions maintaining the South-Asian and South-Eastern roots. The impact of musical traditions was different in each county, but it is clear that these communities of emigrants influenced the local music.

1.4 European Influences

The immigrants from various parts of Europe brought their own genres and styles to the USA. Some of the musical genres were subsequently preserved: choirs of children and ballads, genres of folk dance and the music that was part of the religious context. Different social classes often brought distinctive musical traditions. European music can be characterised as a music containing a measured meter, a fixed number of moods, pieces based on varied harmonic structures, the creation of melodic parts which inter-relate in quite a complicate manner with a complex harmony sung by instruments or vocal ensembles, the daring use of string instruments with increasing tendencies in using the instrumentation or orchestration and the concept of fixed melody. Although there is certainly more to tick regarding European music, these are amongst the main tendencies distinguishing it from other contributions to nowadays American music.

Wealth and patronage were the incentives for European arts music and both were found in America. Secular and sacred administrative structures in America dominated by Spanish people, provided for diverse (secular and sacred) musical activities. Composers, choirs, and musicians were involved in administrative centres. The wealth of the colonies encouraged the creation of administrative and urban centres that funded only the best musicians, who influenced the remaining of the population through musical education and competition. Cathedrals promoted chants and various other musical forms found in religious music.

The colonisation within English colonies intensified in the 17th century and pilgrims and other emigrants brought with them hymn books. Secular dancing music was discouraged, and church music was promoted due to the fact that it was appropriate to the church creed. As a result, multiple discussions regarding the manner in which hymns should be sung emerged in the British colonies. Understanding the importance of the involvement in musical activities within divine services and adopting a correct manner of singing the hymns, certain “singing schools” are founded where musical notation was taught to a rather large group of interested students.

This visibly contributed to the development of publishing houses, that printed and multiplied hymn books and, later on, had a diversity of books with different musical styles that they distributed. The opera became popular amongst the members of the elite. Operas together with other forms of urban popular shows produced for the stage were composed and presented in various countries, opera houses (or buildings dedicated to opera) and in many cities.

2. Gospel Music

Descendant of the African music, gospel music has an especially important place in the history of American music. Due to its special role within the American choir genre, we shall attribute it a distinct section. Without doubt, the “cry” is a reminiscent form of the African cultural phenomenon of “possession”... it is a sign of favour from the gods when, for a short

period of time, the individual consciousness is replaced by the divine one and the human body is used for their own expression.” (*Hurston, 2000, p. 11*)

“From the variety of folk songs that survived in America until the present moment, “the spiritual” is the vastest one and to a certain extent the most well-known. Under the name of “Negro spirituals,” these songs penetrated both religious places and secular ones. They influenced music composers from Dvorak to Virgil Thompson, were sung in schools and by choir ensembles from the entire culture English-speaking space. However, despite the large popularity, both through publication and public performance, the origins of these songs are little studied and the manner in which they were sung initially is probably little known.

Even the term of “spirituals” was not used by the colored population (although it was used in the Caribbean space, instead, the name of “hymns” was much more frequent and has survived until the 1950s in rural areas.” (*Oliver & Balcom, 2002, p. 20*) Thus, the “hymns,” later on renamed “spirituals” and even later gospel – “Evangelic” music, although they do not have a direct and vital connection with the African continent, they are essentially American songs. A musical genre so well-integrated into the “tapestry” of the American musical culture that most musical folk genres have connections with it.

2.1 African Origin

African tribal music of 400 years ago was different than the European and American-European one, firstly, through the fact that they had no secular version of expression. Apart from the religious music, European also sang about love, war, drunkenness, as well as about “historical events” occurred either in the neighbouring village, or in far-away countries. Although many of these songs mentioned God tangentially, they remained secular, folkloric in spirit. Alternatively, African music was predominantly sacred and the concept of singing secular music was unknown to Africans. Their music seemed to satisfy distinct aspects of everyday life: religion, agriculture, sexual fertility, and hunting. From this point of view, African music had more in common with the traditional music of aboriginal (native) peoples in American than with the European music, as long as the song was perceived as a means of harmonising man with nature and with the cosmos.

A predominant style, which has remained prevalent until today was brought to America during the slavery period between the 1600s until 1865, is the one of “calling and response” where a soloist sings a line and then an entire group answer. Typical styles also contain a backup with drums and other percussion instruments. A good example of this style is the super-hit of American singer Ray Charles: “What’d I Say.”

2.2 The Slave Era

From the need to subjugate, or from certain fears, many owners of American slaves allowed colored slaves to use African instruments or to sing their traditional music. In time, many of these texts and melodies have been forgotten and have vanished from Northern America. But this interdiction of the connections with the ancient music issued a new African-American typical music style. New songs saw the light of day in a combination of African traditional harmony, *call and response*, on a background of distinct rhythmic meter, harmony and European traditional instruments. The new gospel songs created by colored artists used Christian leit-motifs with

typical African rhythmic and vocal influences. The church had become a sanctuary of cultural expression for colored slaves. It is the only place where groups of slaves could gather outside the supervising eye of the masters. When the slave masters did not allow religious gatherings or services, such meetings took place in secrecy.

The process of enslaving the colored population in American colonies started in the 1600s. Slavery flourished in the Southern part of the American states' confederation, on the vast plantations of cotton, tobacco, and sugar cane. These plantations required intense manual labour. Work songs and "work cries" were used to brighten the spirits during the tiring toil on the torrid fields. In time, the same songs were also sung on railway sites or the ones for the manufacturing of turpentine (colourless liquid obtained from the resin of coniferous which is used as a solvent for lacquers, resins).

Slavery was not profitable enough in the Northern states, where the economic activity was focused more on small farms and industry. Around the 1860s, slavery states owned almost 4 million slaves. These represented approximately a third of the population of the Southern states. And because from a demographic view point, the coloured population was more predominant in the South, the emergence of the gospel music was born there, to then be taken over in the rest of America. Many songs and melodies were adopted by white persons and at the same time, they began to influence the American folk and religious music.

Around the 1800s, the artistic performances of the slaves before the master's families had become a fashion and then these performances extended to larger and more refined audiences, even with instrumental backup. However, only at the end of the civil war, did European instruments become accessible to the former-coloured slaves. Sometimes, these instruments were just abandoned on the battle fields, other times they were found in fairs, and recently-liberated slaves used their small incomes to buy them or they used trade-off (exchange of products in kind, without the use of money).

Although some forms of "blues," had existed at the beginning of the 1800s, the complete development of the genre—the first form of secular music of the colored population—did not take place until the end of the 20th century instantaneously and simultaneously in all the territories populated by colored minorities. Actually, "work cries" constituted the first steps of separating from religious musical themes, with a theme strictly connected to everyday activities. However, musical critics suggest that many of the songs considered as having a strictly religious content, such as "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," would have a double thematic meaning. On the surface, the lyrics refer to the promise of afterlife, but any colored slave knew very well that the promise was for the present life lived outside the shackles of slavery. The word "home" in the song is not necessarily paradise, but freedom itself. Some historians even state that all gospel songs of the early period are actually codified protest songs. However, "blues" was not the first secular African-American strict form, immediately followed by styles of *ragtime* and *jazz*." (*Tanner, 1999*)

The role of the church has a central character in the life of the colored population in America after the liberation from slavery. Unfortunately, "the liberation" did not manage to bring genuine freedom and social equity, these still being evasive. The laws of subjugating the colored population, named the "*Jim Crow*" laws, were still in force in the southern states, which led to a massive exodus to the industrialised area of the northern states. This exodus continues until the 1970s and promised employment on the work field and with it, genuine freedom. To a

certain extent, jobs could be found, but most of them were refused by white persons. Some historians suggest that more freedom was possible in the north, because society there did not have a tradition of racist organisation and structure, on the contrary, the so-called “Abolitionist” life philosophy had become predominant after the civil war. Thus, the lawyers for the abolition of slavery in the north had then taken the first step forward: from the liberation of the colored population to ensuring equal rights in society for the new members.

On this social and political background, the church evolved from a sanctuary for defending fugitive slaves, to a forum for the development of their culture and music. In this atmosphere, churches were used for organisational community meetings, which had most of the times political agendas and not at all religious ones. Gospel music was also in a process of transformation. Once the rural coloured population began to migrate to the urban centres in the north, but also to the ones in the south to a certain extent, and built an urban minority micro-economy, a somewhat sophisticated one, gospel music has slowly pulled away from its pure forms of harmony, melody and structure. White artists disguised in colored singers, imitating their style in travelling performances, had the role of tempting the audiences of the majority white population and working up their interest for authenticity. In 1871, the group *Fisk Jubilee Singers*, whose members were students of one of the first segregated universities for African Americans, went on a successful national tournament, singing “spirituals.”

“Furthermore, at the end of the 1800s, the *Ragtime* style began to evolve, while, later on in 1917, a musical critic for the *San Francisco Journal* newspaper called it “jazz” or “jass.” Gospel music had initially influenced the *blues* and *jazz* music style, but now, at the beginning of the 1900s, it was in turn influenced by these styles. For instance, syncopated rhythms of *ragtime* penetrated then the performances of the singers in church. Many of the travelling preacher-singers began to be accompanied by the piano or guitar. The guitar had become the most renowned backup instrument due to its mobile nature. And because “blues” pianists and guitarists were more and more and were increasingly popular, preacher-singers began to adopt their melodic and harmonic styles. “Blues” and “Jazz” became the new fashion, being thus, a sort of “condiment” for the taste of the coloured population, while *gospel* music continued to be the “basic nourishment.” The most organised and prosperous of these travelling preachers had concerts in evangelization tents, in churches and in asylums for the homeless. Many of them travelled from place to place accompanied by an entourage of musicians and small choirs.” (Tanner, 1999)

Many music publicists in the society of white people began to recognise that the style of the pre-war coloured music of “jubilee” and “spirituals” were going extinct, so they decided to publish on a large-scale score with the music of the 19th century. This phenomenon brought this dying form *gospel* music to the centre of attention: in venues and churches attended by white people and colored ones, it is appreciated either for its simple artistic beauty, or for the nostalgia of the southern pre-war period. After the civil war, the phenomenon of splitting the African-American churches into different denominations became predominant and this schism was made depending on the differences between the regions and the influence of the white religious community. Therefore, more conservatory nuance churches, such as the Colored Methodist one and the Separatist Baptist one, from the beginning embraced traditional hymns such as those of English composer Isaac Watts (1647–1748).

Coloured parishioners appreciated to the most part the Methodism, because the white Methodists were very enthusiastic in adopting some hymns and choirs from the liturgy of the colored churches. Moreover, these Methodists imitated even some styles of creeds, prayers, and vows. Nonetheless, the liturgies of the Methodist churches (both white and colored) and those of the colored Separatist Baptist Church were quite balanced from a musical viewpoint, in comparison with the new *Holiness* churches and the so-called *Foursquare* ones. The latter preserved the rural unrestrained nature of the less sophisticated meetings. The music in pure colored churches bonded in terms of form, intensity, and attitude with the versions of blues and later on with those of “rhythm and blues” (R&B), “rockabilly” and even “rock and roll.”

The new invention of the phonograph and later of plastic disks exceeded the sales of *gospel* music scores and at the same time, they facilitated the access of this artistic form in American living rooms, both white and colored, certainly only of those who could afford it financially. At the beginning of the 1920, the radio intensified this phenomenon of propagation, but the status of “stars” of *gospel* music singers was not reached until after World War II.

After World War II, a former “blues” singer and the son of a preacher (who used to be the backup for the popular blues singer Bessie Smith), T. A. Dorsey converted and capitalized his talent by writing religious music. He is known for the hymn *Precious Lord, Take my Hand*. He is the first African-American who opened a publicity campaign in America, taking Sellie Martin as partner. It is the distinctive style of Dorsey of writing that most choirs use today: a combination of the old melody of Watts and “calling-response” of African origin, sang in rural churches. With much controversy amongst the church-goers, he was the first to make publicity for religious concerts cashing in money from the participants. By doing this, T.A. Dorsey helped create and promote choirs, quartets or especially valuable soloists.

Conclusions

The musical resources of America before the 1500s are limited and are restricted to the archaeological discoveries in certain regions. The presence of musical instruments, their description in ceramics or their sculpted visualisation, presents only vaguely indications about how those instruments were played or how they sounded. We find references to wind instruments and sometimes to drums.

Moreover, at the end of the 20th century, local, national, and international archives of communication companies became important resources for the studying the evolution of musical style. The condition and possibility of obtaining access to these companies is very varied. Furthermore, publishing houses that print music, the radio, television programs and recording studios offer a large variety of musical styles.

Many countries developed their musical dictionaries and encyclopaedias, for instance *Enciclopedia de la música popular brasileira* (1977), they also created musicological journals, where they included detailed historical studies. Some authors wrote books about continental regions (*Behague, 1979; Hamm, 1983*), and others became very renowned due to their studies and researches during that period (*Stevenson, 1968*).

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