

## Book Review

*The Paradox of Musical Vernaculars*, by Marina Ritzarev. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2023.

206 pp. ISBN 9781527527270 (cloth). £67.99. ISBN 978103641074 2 (paper). £33.99. Examples, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index.

Soon after Marina Ritzarev emigrated to Israel in the early 1990s, she was surprised to find that she recognized some of the melodies sung by local folk musicians. They were popular tunes from her childhood that she had heard on the radio during the Stalinist era of the Soviet Union. Now, decades after falling out of fashion in the popular sphere, here they were in a foreign country, sung to traditional Hebrew texts and repurposed as folk music (p. 40). The thought that there may be patterns and regularities in the social/functional transformations of vernacular music would become the germinal idea for *The Paradox of Musical Vernaculars* (p. xi). This book would take over two decades to write, and in Ritzarev's view it ties together a thread that had run through much of her career. Her previous English-language books have focused on the history of Russian music (*Eighteenth-Century Russian Music*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2006) and national and religious musical identity (*Tchaikovsky's Pathétique and Russian Culture*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2014). This newest project, however, would also require an expansion of Ritzarev's domain of scholarly activity from historical and critical musicology into the realms of semiotics and ethnomusicology. Though she is the first to admit that she is not an ethnomusicologist (p. xii), Ritzarev's outsider perspective allows her to reframe one of the central questions of the field and she pursues this new frame insightfully throughout the book.

The word "vernacular," in a strict sense, means something that is indigenous or native to a place or culture. In the context of music, the word is often used in association with unadulterated, rural folk traditions and in distinction to syncretic, urban popular music. However, the term has also been used to refer to naïve, spontaneous, and usually orally transmitted musical traditions in distinction to notated and self-consciously historical art music traditions. In this latter view, both folk and popular music may be considered vernacular. This tension runs through Charles Seeger's definitions of "folk," "popular," and

“academic” spheres of American music, and in the contemporaneous uses of those terms by Marc Blitzstein and Aaron Copland.<sup>1</sup> Ritzarev is most interested in the permeability and transformations of music from one sphere to another, as well as transformations across geography and time. In pursuit of this purpose, she finds significant precursors in Alan Lomax and Bruno Nettl, though she hopes that her contribution will be to establish a systematic methodology for detailing those changes of function (pp. xvii–xix). She adopts the following working definition of vernacular music from H. Wiley Hitchcock (p. 4):

By vernacular tradition I mean a body of music more plebeian, native, not approached self-consciously but simply grown into as one grows into one’s vernacular tongue, music understood simply for its utilitarian or entertainment value.<sup>2</sup>

The book’s eleven chapters are republications of previous journal articles. These articles were, however, developed with the object of a book in mind, and have been in some cases substantially rewritten for this new publication (p. xi). Part 1 (chapters 1–6) introduces Ritzarev’s theoretical framework and explores its nooks, crannies, and ramifications in multiple case studies. Part 2 (chapters 7–11) is more reminiscent of her earlier work in that it examines how art music composers express cultural and artistic identity through the strategic incorporation of vernacular idioms. Ritzarev focuses her study on Russian and Jewish music and musicians, which, as the author points out, is mostly a practical decision, since this is the music with which she has the greatest familiarity and expertise (p. xi).

A book born out of the intersection of ethnomusicology and semiotic theory runs a high risk of becoming bogged down in difficult jargon and abstractions. But Ritzarev reserves most of the theorizing for only the first of the eleven chapters, “Musical Vernaculars: Types and Transformations,”<sup>3</sup> and only introduces two technical terms: “phylo-vernacular” and “ontovernacular.” The prefixes for these terms are borrowed from an analogous dichotomy in the field of biology. Phylogeny has to do with the evolution of populations and species over long spans of time (as in a “phylogenetic tree”) while ontogeny has to do with the development of an individual organism over its life cycle. Phylo-vernacular music is

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1. Charles Seeger, “Music in America,” *Magazine of Art* 31 (July 1938): 411–13 and 435–36; as quoted in Archie Green, “Vernacular Music: A Naming Compass,” *Musical Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 40. See also Richard Crawford, *America’s Musical Life: A History* (New York: Norton, 2001).

2. H. Wiley Hitchcock and Kyle Gann, *Music in the United States: A Historical Introduction*, 4th ed. (Prentice-Hall, 2000), 54.

3. Originally “Musical Vernaculars and their Signifying Transformations,” in *Routledge Handbook of Musical Signification*, ed. Esti Sheinberg and William P. Dougherty (London: Routledge, 2020), 209–22.

therefore roughly equivalent to what we typically mean by folk music, in that it is crystallized, rigid, and only adaptive on a much longer time scale (and for different reasons) compared to the flexible, fluid, and quickly adaptable onto-vernacular music, which is roughly equivalent to popular music. The biological metaphor is useful and intuitive, insofar as vernacular music must survive (without notation) through adaptation to changing circumstances and environments. But, just like the biological dichotomy these terms are based upon, phylo-vernacular and onto-vernacular explanations are not easy to disentangle in specific analytical cases, as is also explored in chapter 1.

In the previous paragraph, I described phylo-vernacular as “roughly equivalent” to folk music and onto-vernacular as roughly equivalent to popular music. Chapters 2 and 3 problematize this simplification. Chapter 2 “Rothschild’s Violin and a Russian Tune,” explores the transformations of a fictitious lament described in one of Anton Chekhov’s short stories.<sup>4</sup> Although we cannot analyze much about such written descriptions of folk music, Ritzarev productively views the fictitious melody through both phylo- and onto-vernacular lenses. Chapter 3, “From the Volga River to the Kinneret Sea: Overturning Vernaculars,” reverses the trajectory, taking the popular music from Ritzarev’s childhood mentioned at the beginning of this review and viewing it also from both onto- and phylo-vernacular perspectives.<sup>5</sup>

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 test the limits of these definitions on extreme, rather than typical, cases. Chapter 4, “Singing Ethos, Pathos, and Ethnos: Three Generations, Four Israeli Eurovision Victories, 1978–2018” examines Israel’s winning Eurovision Song Contest performances of 1978, 1979, 1998, and 2018.<sup>6</sup> These are of course highly outward-facing displays of national identity designed also to be maximally entertaining. In that sense, they are an extreme case of the conflation and blending of folk and popular cultures. Chapter 5, “Sweet Sounds: Music and Food,” is a compare-and-contrast essay on food and music, at first generally, and then with regard to signifiers of cultural identity.<sup>7</sup> Chapter 6, “King David and the Frog: Sacred Music and the Vernacular,” compares the blurry boundary

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4. Originally “Rothschild’s Violin and a Russian Tune,” *Min-Ad, Israel Studies in Musicology Online* 17 (2020): 93–106.

5. Originally “Conceptualizing the Vernacular in Music,” in *Garment and Core: Jews and their Musical Experiences*, ed. Eitan Avitsur, Marina Ritzarev, and Edwin Seroussi (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2012), 31–40.

6. Originally “Singing Ethos, Pathos, and Ethnos: Three Generations, Four Israeli Eurovision Victories, 1978–2018,” *Nauka Televidenia* 14, no. 3 (2018): 28–47.

7. Originally “Music and Food: Cultural Parallels of Sign Systems,” in *Before and After Music*, ed. Lina Navickaitė-Martinelli, *Acta semiotica Fennica* 37 (2010): 278–86.

between liturgical and not-quite-sacred para-liturgical music with the distinction between phylo- and onto-vernacular music from earlier chapters, with a special attention on Tchaikovsky's reception of the para-liturgical music of Dmitry Bortniansky (1751–1825).<sup>8</sup>

Part 2 has a similar organization to part 1. Chapter 7, “Between the Field and the Salon,” is a theoretical chapter that introduces art music and style register into the conversation.<sup>9</sup> Broadly speaking, folk materials in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were filtered through urbanized ontovernacular processes before they were accessible to classical and romantic composers. But by the time of Stravinsky (and elsewhere Bartók), composers preferred to go “straight-to-source,” drawing on phylo-vernacular music specifically for its exotic appeal.

The final chapters are case studies in art composers' employment of vernacular idioms for various stylistic and ideological purposes. Chapter 8, “A Singing Peasant: Super-Icons in Russian Music,” surveys the politics of Russian nationalism in music, from the time of Peter the Great to the fall of the Soviet Union, the common thread among almost all expressions of Russian nationalism being the incorporation of either folk music or religious chant (the two “super icons” of the title).<sup>10</sup> Chapter 9, “Sergei Slonimsky and Russian ‘Unofficial’ Nationalism,” explores nationalism as a form of protest (somewhat paradoxically) using the case of Sergei Slonimsky, the Russian composer and scholar with whom Ritzarev studied at the Leningrad Conservatory between 1968 and 1973 (p. 121).<sup>11</sup> Chapter 10, “The Augmented Second, Chagall's Silhouettes, and the Six-Pointed Star,” examines some of the most recognizable signifiers of Jewish diasporic identity in music, visual art, and iconography.<sup>12</sup> This is the chapter that delves deepest into the “paradox” of the book's title: that even a landless community such as the diasporic Jews and the Roma have clearly identifiable phylo-vernacular music despite their almost definitional attachment to geography (pp. 21–24). ). The final chapter, “When Did Shostakovich Stop Using Jewish Idiom?” argues that Jewish

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8. Originally “King David and the Frog,” *Musicological Annual* 50, no. 2 (2014): 31–32.

9. Originally, “Between the Field and the Salon,” in *A Network of Significations: Texts on Music Semiotics in Honor of Raymond Monelle*, ed. Esti Sheinberg (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 35–45.

10. Originally, “‘A Singing Peasant’: An Historical Look at National Identity in Russian Music,” *Min-Ad, Israel Studies in Musicology Online* 6 (2007–8): 1–22.

11. Originally, “Sergei Slonimsky and Russian ‘Unofficial Nationalism’ of 1960–80s,” in *Schostakovitsch und die Folgen: Russische Music zwischen Anpassung und Protest*, ed. Ernest Kuhn, Jascha Nemtsov, and Andreas Wehrmeyer (Berlin: Verlag Ernst Kuhn, 2003), 187–210.

12. Originally, “The Augmented Second, Chagall's Silhouettes and the Six-Pointed Star,” *Musica Judaica* 18 (5766/2005–6): 43–69.

signifiers in Shostakovich's music never truly stopped but were sublimated into increasingly discreet references.<sup>13</sup>

As was mentioned earlier, *The Paradox of Musical Vernaculars* is a collection of previously published essays on a central theme. This organization is more common of *Festschriften* than argumentative theses, and some readers may find certain chapters more tangential to the central argument than others (chapters 5 and 7, for example). Others may find the eclecticism refreshing. The different publication histories of the chapters, however, mean that occasional inconsistencies in citation formatting, typographical errors, and awkward formulations for native English readers have slipped through the cracks. These complaints can be addressed more fairly to the editing than to the author. The book is highly relevant for ethnomusicologists and scholars of popular music generally. It will also be of interest to any musician looking to gain a deeper appreciation of Russian music, Jewish music, and the rich array of interconnections between the two.

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13. Originally, "When Did Shostakovich Stop Using Jewish Idiom?" in *Schostakowitsch und das juedische musikalische Erbe*, ed. Ernst Kuhn, Andreas Wehrmeyer, and Günter Wolter (Berlin: Verlag Ernst Kuhn, 2001), 114-30.