

Worship Wars, World Music, and Menno-Nots: Recent Studies in Mennonite Music

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This article traces the study of Mennonite music from foundation-ary and historical ethnographies to more recent ethnographical research reflecting cultural studies methods. This line travels from understandings of Mennonite music as a form of ethnic accommodation and resistance, where music is an aspect of boundary construction or group identity maintenance, to arguments that Mennonite music can be understood best as an individual employment of expressive culture. Further, it argues that Mennonite ethnicity and group boundaries are not fixed but rather arise through the interaction of individuals who may be a part of multiple social groups or networks and that Mennonite music reflects this complex social interaction. And music then also provides a way of constructing or claiming an individual's place within the "Mennonite" group.

From Common Practice to "A Multitude of Practices in Search of a Theology"

A short historiographical sketch "places" this research work. In the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, Mennonite musical practice in North America, both among Russian and Swiss Mennonites, was characterized by independent movements towards common musical practices. Through contacts with wider North American society (and especially the singing school tradition), Swiss Mennonites developed a broadly adopted four-part hymn-singing tradition (Yoder 1999). At the same time, strong educational institutions and other venues of musical education, such as *Saengerfests* and church choirs, helped many Russian Mennonite churches create a four-part singing tradition (Berg 1985). Mennonite musicians describe this as a period of "common practice" among Mennonite groups (Kropf and Nafziger 2001, 23-25); Tony Funk has said that "one could travel from Winnipeg to Yarrow, from Vancouver to Gem and experience the same kind of worship service" (Funk 1998).

In the second half of the twentieth century in Canada and the U.S., Mennonites moved to urban centers in unprecedented numbers (Driedger 1989, 35-36). Concomitantly, the diversity of connections with broader North American society and their influences on Mennonite music became stronger in the 1960s, including strong participation in professional classical music circles (Schellenberg 1968). At the same time, and continuing through the 1970s and 1980s, popular worship music with evangelical content was increasingly used by young Mennonites (Kraybill 1977; Schmidt 1999; Schmidt 1979; Hiebert 1993, 68). This popular turn was part of a broader Protestant trend influenced by both Vatican II and the Catholic folk movement hymns of Sydney Carter (Luff 1995), and the evangelical Christian popular music subculture emblemized by the Jesus People (Liesch 2001). These popular music movements were in part intended to stem the tide of what was seen as growing disaffection with the church among young people.

A sense of ethnic diversity among North American Mennonites (and within their imagined global Mennonite community) expanded through the increased global contacts of the Mennonite World Conference and urban missions in North America itself. In 1969 the General Conference and Mennonite Church *Mennonite Hymnal* (Joint Hymnal Committee 1969) included several non-Western hymns and Anglo-American folk hymns. Its 1992 successor, the blue Mennonite *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, incorporated many more hymns from non-Western sources (Hustad 1993; Sharp 1992). The increase in evangelical popular music (Klassen 1995) and the professionalization in hymnody and classical music (Berg and Dyck 1994; Klassen 1993) thus were accompanied by a global Mennonite hymnody. One observer from the General Conference Mennonite church concluded "Mennonite worship today is a multitude of practices looking for a theology" (Rempel 2000). Meanwhile the phenomenon of an ethnic community of religiously disaffected Mennonites, sometimes colorfully referred to as "Menno-nots", has also continued. Mennonite diversity -- in terms of ethnicity, theology, and modes of worship and religiousness -- thus has been experienced as a complication of identity. This multilayered identity is the backdrop for the key issues concerning the ongoing debate on Mennonite music.

The first of these issues is what is often called the "worship wars," a series of debates on genre or style, most broadly between "hymns" and "praise music", also known as "choruses" or "contemporary worship music". The second is a debate concerning cultural imperialism, appropriation, and Mennonite music. This debate asks whether a global, inter-ethnic and inter-racial community is represented among Mennonites and whether it has been appropriately modeled or

embodied in Mennonite worship, especially in North American use of non-Western African and Native American hymns in the *Hymnal*? The third such key issue is the place of the ethnic “Menno-not” vis à vis the Mennonite community, the expression of that relationship and the expressive culture of the Menno-nots, especially their creative writing and music. These debates concerning musical practice lean towards questions of group identity: Who are the Mennonites when they worship in particular ways? What are they saying about themselves to others, to the world?

Today’s Mennonite experience of music provides rich material for new scholarly approaches and theory concerning Mennonite music. Below, I will briefly discuss foundational writings on Mennonite music. Then, using the three lay debates outlined above as a framework and equipped with a new set of theoretical and academic tools, I will examine recent research in Mennonite musical practice.

Foundational Studies of Mennonite Music: Resistance and Accommodation

The most important and major studies of Mennonite music thus far include Wesley Berg’s *From Russia with Music* (1985), and Doreen Klassen’s *Singing Mennonite* (1989). Berg’s approach is historical and focused on the development of the choral music tradition of Canadian Mennonites, while Klassen’s approach is anthropological and focused on folk culture as a site of resistance.

Berg begins with the unison hymn-singing tradition dating from the Mennonite migrations to Prussia and then to Ukraine. In Ukraine, a choral singing tradition closely related to present-day Canadian-Russian Mennonite singing emerged. Berg also describes class and ethnic conflicts among the early Canadian immigrants, the *Kanadier*. A progressive wing of the *Kanadier* formed schools in Manitoba and Saskatchewan that maintained a choral-singing tradition (Berg 1985, 43-46). This new trend was not initially accepted in the *Kanadier* churches. It was, however, after the second wave of Russian-Mennonite immigration during the 1920s saw new *Russlaender* immigrants assume positions of authority in the schools and establish churches with choirs (Berg 1985, 56). Berg focuses both on early individual Mennonite music leaders, and on the foundation of educational and musical church institutions in the mid-1940s. Leaders like K.H. Neufeld traveled widely, starting choirs and holding *Saengerfests* and choral workshops (Berg 1985, 68-74). These mobile institutions were succeeded as the primary training grounds for Canadian-Russian Mennonite musicians by the establishment of two Mennonite colleges

in Winnipeg (Berg 1985, 95, 103). By the mid-1950s Mennonites were performing with professional Canadian orchestras.

In *From Russia with Music*, Berg offers an accessible, well-written and researched story of immigrant arrival, making it both a popular and an academic social history. Berg's historical work is not explicitly theorized in this volume. However, his careful recounting of the trials and successes of progressive individual musicians, the building of insider institutions, and the sense of arrival with which the book concludes -- a difficult immigrant journey resulting in a highly regarded contribution to Canadian choral music-making -- are reminiscent of the emphasis on ethnic resistance and accommodation in Mennonite sociological work in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Kauffman 1975), and also of contemporary Mennonite-history writings (e.g. Epp 1974; Epp 1982; Regehr 1996). This kind of narrative also reflects analysis common in American ethnic studies, documenting the constantly changing relationship of ethnic groups to a wider society. Ethnic groups move from separation to accommodation, but not to assimilation, into the wider society, becoming part of wider society without being dissolved into it (McCormack 1997). A similar paradigmatic journey occurs in *From Russia with Music*.

Doreen Klassen, on the other hand, begins her study by asking why southern Manitoba Mennonites, "a people noted for their fine choral singing," in general have denied the existence of a singing tradition in their Low German mother tongue (Klassen 1989, 3). The answer lies in the idea that language has been a signifier of social class and boundaries among Mennonites. Klassen notes that the High German language is more strongly associated with *Russlaender* Mennonites, whom she characterizes as more powerful and highly educated. The Low German language is more strongly associated with the poorer and generally more rural *Kanadier* Mennonites (Klassen 1989, 6-8).¹ Thus, it becomes a resistant act to perform Low German song. Beyond the use of the Low German language itself as a sign of ethnic difference, selective appropriation of musical materials also shows how the two subgroups of Mennonites evaluate themselves in relation to other ethnic groups (Klassen 1989, 9-10). For example, High German melodies are common among *Russlaender* Low German songs, as are English melodies in *Kanadier* songs, signifying an emulation of a more powerful group in both cases (Klassen 1989, 10). These choices of melodies articulate differences among Russian-Mennonite groups. At the same time, for southern Manitoba Mennonites in general, Klassen suggests, the Low German language is the marker of Mennonite ethnicity par excellence (Klassen 1989, 8).

Klassen juxtaposes interviews and songs in a manner that make the concept of a singular "Mennonite" identity problematic. For example,

the song “*Daut foarmre*” (farming) is accompanied by a story about a family who sang it during the 1930s (Klassen 1989, 146). Despite the difficulties of farming during the Great Depression, the song celebrates the joy of farm work. By way of contrast, on the very next page Klassen presents the song “*Aule leewe Morjen*” (Every Dear Morning), in which a young boy celebrates *not* doing his farm chores (1989, 147). Klassen draws variously on the theoretical literatures of folklore studies, anthropology and sociolinguistics, while her focus on class and on language as a signifier of class, shows the influence of Marxist sociological thinking. At the same time, class and ethnicity overlap in this account so that like Berg, Klassen treats Russian-Mennonite ethnicity as an identity marked by strong boundaries. These boundaries are constructed and defended (closed), and sometimes negotiated and transgressed (opened), in relation to broader society.

Berg and Klassen’s foundational accounts of Mennonite music share some important commonalities. First, concepts of identity here are based on the ethnic group, but with an understanding of cultural and class “differences within” the Mennonite community. Second, music’s contribution to Mennonite identity is seen as representational, a sign to insiders and outsiders of a bounded religious or ethnic identity through language on the one hand, and through a particular choral tradition on the other. And lastly, music is embodied in institutions -- colleges, *Saengerfests*, choirs, *Plautdietsche Owends*, bands of Low German singers -- which especially on performance occasions, become bridges to or enclaves protected from the larger society. Both Berg and Klassen continue to write rigorous and thought-provoking work on Mennonite music. Berg’s recent work includes an ethnographic study of Old Colony Mennonite hymnody (1996), a biographical study of a Mennonite hymnologist (1986), a study of estrangement between Mennonite (classical) musicians and their churches (1994), and an examination of Mennonite singing and pacifism in Russia (1999). Klassen edited the pivotal 1990 *International Songbook*, which introduced many of the global Mennonite hymns now sung; and also examined the growth of popular and gospel music practice among Canadian Mennonite Brethren (1995). Despite their very different scholarly approaches, the common themes found in Berg and Klassen’s books constitute a foundation that enables a comparison with the new work of other writers on Mennonite music.

The Worship Wars, or a Political Economy of Culture

The Mennonite “worship wars” between advocates for hymn singing and advocates of Christian popular music, have been well documented

of late in church periodicals. Editorialists have taken conciliatory positions concerning these wars, arguing for shared and tolerant musical practice of multiple genres (Thomas 2001; Coggins 1998). However, letter writers in these same venues speak saltier language: “no ‘booing’ when your brand has a week off” (Lepp 1998, 16) exclaims the one side; “musical dictators” shouts the other (Neufeld 1998, 16). Theological arguments charge that “praise” music indicates an accommodation to values such as consumerism and materialism, which some associate it with North American evangelicalism. The contrary argument often made is that hymns are out of step with the times and focus worship not emotionally on God, but rather intellectually on the works described in didactic hymn texts.

Stephanie Krehbiel’s “Water for a Barren Land” (2003) is a study of musical performance among the Mennonite churches of East Freeman, South Dakota. Krehbiel describes two individuals involved in this debate, Bob, an older male pastor of one Freeman church and a hymn advocate, and Stacey, a young female associate pastor of another Freeman church and a praise music advocate. Both individuals employ variants of the arguments described above. Krehbiel’s central question is about the place of the individual in the community. Hymn advocates fear that the “I” language that they associate with praise music and with dominant North American culture, erodes the “we” of the church (Krehbiel 2003, 19). On the other hand, praise music fans express a deep need for a space for the individual and the emotive in the face of what is seen as staid Mennonite worship (Krehbiel 2003, 20-21).

Krehbiel does not shy from characterizing this theological debate in terms of an exercise of power within the church community. In this analysis individuals act locally, responding to broader social entities that impinge on their worship, such as traditional Mennonite emotional and expressive culture and North American market ideology. In East Freeman power plays were met with resistance. For example, one church’s youth group refused to sing the praise songs which were included especially for them: as Krehbiel offers, “the young people...did not respond as planned” (2003, 31). The question then is not only of musical style, but of how, in connection with music, power is exercised and received in a particular Mennonite context.

Another aspect of Krehbiel’s work is the placement of this debate in a rural, grain-farming setting. Krehbiel suggests that church growth in the East Freeman context was seen as a necessity for the simple survival of the church within an embattled farming community. Classical church music of a very high caliber produced cultural capital for the community, drawing people from the wider region to Freeman to hear church music. This music, thus, was seen as connected to a threatened

rural Mennonite identity. Ironically, competition for church members with evangelical groups meant that praise music became increasingly attractive. Krehbiel expresses this tension as a question: "How do we preserve our identity, and stay relevant?"

My own recent thesis "An Ethnographic Study of Three Mennonite Churches of Edmonton, Alberta" (2003), takes a genre-focused approach to these "worship wars." I pursue comparative ethnographic studies of three Mennonite churches in the Edmonton area.

One church's demographic was approximately one-third Swiss Mennonite, one-third Russian Mennonite, and one-third Mennonite "by choice," and this church practiced both popular music and hymnody. Another church was almost entirely Russian Mennonite and highly professional; and this church almost exclusively practiced hymns and classical music. The third church was primarily Mennonite "by choice," and this church exclusively, and very professionally, practiced popular music. Despite these differences, these churches (and several other Edmonton-area Mennonite churches) gathered once a year for a joint service in which musical content was jointly planned and practiced. Through this event members of each church then evaluated and often strongly critiqued the musical practice of one another's churches.

Ethnic and musical diversity, (even animosity) characterized these churches, but participants nonetheless mutually affirmed each church as 'Mennonite'. In other words, they strongly shared religious identity, though they diverged ethnically and, concomitantly in their practice of church music. To account for this tension between a singular Mennonite identity and multiple identities linked to diverse musical practices, I examined the social construction and the role of musical genre, especially "hymns" and "choruses," in the identities of individual church members and of each of the churches. Musical genre helped set up social structures in which church members located their identity within the congregational group. On the other hand, musical genre was a foil by which identity was constructed between churches, frequently in negative terms. Members, for example, might say "we are more Mennonite than you, because we do *not* sing choruses." Ethnicity played into these processes of identity construction, not only through ethnic differences between the congregations, but within each congregation. For example, French-speaking African members at one Mennonite church questioned the musical authenticity of African hymns led by white song leaders and offered their own Western-influenced popular music contributions.

In these churches music contributed to a diversity of identifiers, including ethnicity, religiosity, gender, institutional affiliations and fan cultures. Musical sound, such as 'Mennonite' choral music, sometimes

strengthened these various identifiers. Individuals, however, also found their place in the churches through the social groups that performed music, such as choirs and bands where individuals became “choir members,” “band players,” or took other specific roles. Musical genre provided a vocabulary to communicate various identities for individuals, so that in a musically plural social context an individual was located by claiming various musical affiliations. A hypothetical illustration: within an ethnically and musically pluralist urban Mennonite church, a young female popular-music fan could express her youthful, feminine Latina identity through claiming an affiliation with salsa music and expressing a preference for the Spanish-language hymnody of the recent Mennonite *Hymnal*. This vocabulary, however, would only be possible only once this music was also related to the broader church’s identity. For the young salsa fan’s placement of herself as an individual to have meaning, other congregational members would have to understand that “salsa fans” comprised a group within the church and they would have to identify with “Latino/a” as an ethnic identity and “youth” as an age group.

Krehbiel’s work and my study depart from the foundational works of Berg and Klassen, which examine the ethnic group as a relatively bounded (though complex and contested) entity. In contrast, we begin our theorizing on group identity with individuals who may represent themselves as part of more than one social group, for whom ethnicity is only one register of identity, and religiousness another.

Global Mennonites, the *Hymnal* and Authenticity

The question of music and authenticity in a newly global frame was brought into sharp relief in 1992 with the publication of *Hymnal: A Worship Book*. Hymns from African, African American, First Nations, Latin American and Asian sources enriched the worship life of Mennonites and contributed to an imagined multi-ethnic, multi-racial global Mennonite community.² The debates and controversies around this repertoire bring into question the notion that the Mennonite church is one community. How might we best conceive of Mennonites, in an inclusive and broad way, as not one community but as inter-related, overlapping communities with diverse stories and a host of musical practices?

Katie Graber’s recent ethnographic study of music at Madison Mennonite Church, entitled “Definitions, Divergence and the Depth of Tradition” (2004) breaks important ground by focusing on the *Hymnal* as the material embodiment of stories (broadly understood as discourse) which create an imagined North American, or even global, Mennonite community. Although the Madison church membership consisted of

primarily Swiss Mennonites, the presence of Russian Mennonites and non-Mennonites made it to some extent an ethnically open religious group. Nonetheless, the church placed the highest value on four-part a cappella singing and favorite Swiss Mennonite hymns (Graber 2004, 71). Other kinds of musical practice such as unison singing and praise-song singing happened only rarely, and the rationale given by members for practicing this music was one of inclusivity for non-ethnic Mennonites (Graber 2004, 45). Graber asks “what are the processes that make music meaningful, and how [do] those [processes] allow meanings to be contradictory” (personal communication). Following Jaques Lacan, Graber moves the discussion of Mennonite music from an essentialist focus on what is “Mennonite” to the role of language or discourse in ascribing meanings to Mennonite music practice. These meanings, negotiated in language, are also experienced in and through musical practice.

The 1992 Mennonite *Hymnal* embodies this discourse. Its pages and notes are overfull with signifiers of plural Mennonite identity, including imagined global and non-ethnic Western Mennonite identity. At the same time the *Hymnal* is enclosed by its blue cover as a single, unified physical object, an embodiment of a geographically unbroken Mennonite community of singing, which also reaches back to European Mennonite origins. In other words, the multitude of practices mentioned above, rather than requiring a unifying theology to function properly, allow for divergent theologies and beliefs to exist in what is still constructed and imagined as a whole community, but not an ideal or unproblematic community.

Graber’s work provides a language and a frame, grounded in solid ethnographic work, with which to examine what it is that the *Hymnal* means (and that meaning is a moving target) to North American Mennonites, including what it signifies about an imagined global Mennonite church. But what is the relationship of the discourses Graber describes to the discourses of non-Western, Latino, African-American, African, Asian, and more Mennonite communities and groups. For the ethnically Swiss or Russian-Mennonite scholar this task is fraught with difficulties, especially in that Western ethnography has been cited as usually ‘colonialist’ (Clifford 1993). And yet, these questions of authenticity arise from my own Western, Swiss or Russian, ethnic Mennonite perspectives, whether or not they are held in common with those of non-Western and non-ethnic Mennonites. At the very least, the established Mennonite studies field needs to invite dialogue with musicians and scholars of music in these communities in order to illuminate unexamined notions of difference, and to collaboratively make new meanings for global Mennonite music.

The Individual, and Embodied Experience: The Menno-Not and Lay Theology

Mennonite music scholars provide similar answers to the question, “where do Mennonite music studies need to go?” According to Stephanie Krehbiel “part of what Mennonite studies needs are people who. . . study people who are disenfranchised by the Mennonite church, who have a Mennonite identity, but don’t know where to put it.” (personal communication). Judith Klassen notes that the musical activities of Mennonites outside of church need to be valued and examined. (personal communication). In a sense Mennonite creative writing and literary criticism has begun this task. Rodney Sawatsky (1991) argues that Mennonite creative writing has often featured, as a character in poetry and narrative fiction, the figure of the insider / outsider who no longer identifies with the Mennonite church. However, they were, as Hildi Froese Tiessen puts it, “nurtured within a Mennonite community...[and] had access to the inside of the Gemeinschaft” and thus also have an insider quality (Sawatsky 1991, 115).

From an anthropological viewpoint, the insider/outsider “Menno-not” is not exceptional; from a sociological point of view negotiations between the individual and the group are constant. The breaking points and gray areas, spaces of “lurkers” as Jeff Gundy has called them (Gundy 1998), on the edges of a group, demonstrate most forcefully the negotiations of any individual with a group, or, for Mennonites, a community. Published literature tends to ignore the issue of music’s intersection with the “Menno-not,” despite the very prominent role of Mennonites in secular popular music. Several theses and other graduate research projects currently in progress, however, examine Mennonite engagements with popular music (Fairbairn 2004; Klassen 2003).

While it does not focus on the “Menno-not” in particular, Kenneth Nafziger and Marlene Kropf’s recent theological and church-music study *Singing: A Mennonite Voice* (2001) works at understanding the individual’s engagement with and experience of the church through musical participation. Rather than proposing a theology, it gathers and reflects on what is already in existence as a lay theology of music. *Singing: A Mennonite Voice* is the result of a research project in which Mennonites were asked, “What happens when you sing?” (Kropf & Nafziger 2001, 13). On the basis of the resulting stories, the authors argue that hymns act as a repository of memory for personal histories (such as hymns sung at a close friend’s funeral), and for particular geographies (that is, the sound of “my home church” as a sacred place). Hymns also represent a shared traditional repertoire and sound that unites Mennonites as a group in North America. Kropf and Nafziger

locate the formation of religious identity for a Mennonite church in the collective performance of singing together *during the worship service*.

The emphasis on individual stories of emotional, embodied experience as a primary source of data, as employed by Kropf and Nafziger, holds strong promise for understanding many kinds of expressive culture for Mennonites. For example, Mark Metzler Swain (2001) has argued that, given urbanization and the concomitant decline of ethnic enclaves and their characteristic patterns of dress, language and economy, Mennonite community is now experienced in largely symbolic and potentially global ways, or at least in ways which are “local” to more than one place. “Traditional” recipes, Mennonite magazines, and Mennonite literature and poetry are examples of such symbolic identity. Stories such as those related in *Singing: A Mennonite Voice* can provide important data for understanding this symbolic identity, and the concomitant formation and experience of community in both local and non-local spaces, such as the worldwide web. Kropf and Nafziger’s work shows the promise which stories of individual, embodied experience hold for the understanding of not only the individual but also the complex relationship between expressive culture, memory, and group identity.

Conclusion

I have suggested that recent studies of Mennonite music build on and depart from Berg and Klassen’s foundational studies especially in that they do not emphasize the sociological model of ethnic resistance and accommodation in examining group identity, but rather begin with the individual as musical actor in examining music and group identity. These recent studies of Mennonite music reflect new trends in the academic study of music. Ethnomusicology and ethnographic methods, and the theoretical perspectives of anthropology reflecting Geertz’s “literary turn”, in which culture is read as a text, are crucial to this rapidly growing “new musicology.” When coupled with the research technique of ethnography, these disciplinary trends provide tools serendipitously well suited to addressing Mennonite music in the present and recent past.

Notes

- ¹ Recent social-historical work by Delbert Plett (2000) argues that ideological rather than economic differences characterized the difference between *Russlaender* and *Kanadier*.

- ² However, Anna Janacek recently surveyed sixteen Ontario churches concerning the use of these international hymns (2003). Janacek found that international hymns were frequently connected with services whose theme addressed the global Mennonite church, rather than in everyday services, suggesting that this repertoire is literally marginalized.

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