

Under the Bed and Behind the Barn: Musical Secrets and Familial Vitality in Mennonite Mexico

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Introduction

That music making in domestic contexts may function to unify family members is not a new observation (J. Klassen 2003; Kropf and Nafziger 2001). That music has been important in connecting communities across transnational boundaries has also been acknowledged (Shelemay 1998), as has its ability to forge connections between individual members of a collective religious group (Bohlman 2006b; D. Klassen 1989; Mazo 2006). Referencing religious experience in America, Philip Bohlman writes,

Central to the power of music to instantiate American religious experience is its ability not only to represent but in fact to unify *community*. The religious community assumes other metaphorical forms, notably that of the *family*. Sacred music, it follows, ensures the reproduction of that family, thereby

providing through performance the agency through which the religious community's genealogy unfolds. (2006a, 9 italics his)

But what happens in religious communities where familial emphases are not metaphorical? Where distinctions between church and family, between private and public, and among individual members of a collective church are decidedly ambiguous, and where "music" is forbidden?

Given their history, it would seem likely that "conserving" Mennonite families in Mexico might engage in music-making practices with outcomes similar to those described above by Bohlman.¹ With church community and family constituting primary points of reference, their additional diasporic concern, of maintaining identity and nurturing unity in a new land, only compounds this emphasis on unifying community and reinforcing a distinct identity through song. During my fieldwork in northern Mexico in 2006, however, the significance of home music among Mennonites was shown to be more complicated than narratives of family unity, didactic function, and diasporic theories of connection would imply. In fact, while many spoke of domestic song in terms of didacticism and building family cohesion, equally prominent were narratives of private, individual, or familial (and often secretive) defiance of community norms through song. Illicit musical activities, from clandestine listening to German hymns on a gramophone to the covert playing of polkas and rancheros on harmonicas, guitars, and accordions, have been important for members of Mexico's conserving communities, despite their being *verboten* (High German; forbidden) by church leaders.

Old Colony Mennonites who left Canada for Mexico in the 1920s sought to return to a system of living in community under the *oole Ordnung* (Low German; "Old Order"), a system led by church elders and one that forbade the playing of all musical instruments both inside and outside of the church.² Proscriptions against certain types of music grew from its association with worldliness, pride, and modern technologies, and included audio-players, radios, musical instruments, and in some cases, the singing of anything but the unison unaccompanied *lange Wies* (Low German; "long way" or "long melody") used in worship.³

While most conserving churches in northern Mexico have broadened their definitions of what constitutes acceptable musical practice in recent decades (or at least chosen to ignore musical prohibitions), memories of forbidden song and narratives of hidden instruments remain. It is these narratives and their tendency to complicate assumptions of religious unity in diversity through music that form the basis of this paper. I draw specifically from interviews with Mexican

Mennonites who are, or were at one time, affiliated with the Old Colony Church in Mexico. Using narratives of illicit music making in domestic contexts, I explore the usefulness of an individual-collective dialectic around musical experience among conserving Mexican Mennonites, and question assumptions of conserving Mennonite unity that are based on adherence to strict moral codes.

Further, by exploring the functions and ideas articulated in narratives about secret musicking,⁴ I consider the implications of musical defiance in communities in which obedience and discipleship are at the centre of belief and faithful living. While I do not equate agency with self-determination for conserving Mennonite groups,⁵ I contend that by challenging norms of conformity, Mennonites in domestic contexts demonstrate agency in identity creation, an agency that holds significant implications for how individuals, families, and church communities are understood. “Music” in the family is not straightforward in Mennonite Mexico.

Defining “Musik”

During my initial inquiries into home music among Mennonites in Mexico, the dialogue would often go something like this:

JK: Did you have music at family gatherings in the past?

I: No! Never. We never had *Musik*.

JK: What sorts of things did you do when the family came together?

I: We’d eat together, and *spat’sea*. And we’d always sing. We’d sing and sing and sing!⁶

The dismantling of my question’s basic assumptions is telling when exploring domestic song in Mexico. At one level, the misunderstanding of music/*Musik*’s definition demonstrates differing linguistic conventions and the importance of vocabulary and ethnoaesthetics in some aspects of ethnographic study.⁷ Whereas Lois Ibsen al Faruqi has written that most English-speakers understand music to include “all types of aural aesthetic expression, regardless of their function or the context of their performance” (1985, 6), many conserving Mennonites understand “music” (hereafter *Musik*), to denote the use of instruments with or without singing. Returning to the work of al Faruqi, it becomes apparent that divergent understandings of musical

terminologies are not unique to German-speaking Mennonites. Of Arabic *mūsīqa* she writes,

The term *mūsīqa* has had various connotations in Islamic history; but only when used in the loosest sense has it been regarded by members of Muslim society as synonymous with [English uses of] the term “music”. ... Instead, in most instances, it applies only to certain secular musical genres of the culture. (1985, 6)

Both *Musik* and *mūsīqa* demonstrate that the direct translation of the English “music” to another language and cultural context does not assure its equivalent usage. That I was not asked what I meant by “music” when speaking with Mennonites in Mexico implies a discrete separation between conceptions of instrumental performance and unaccompanied song. *Musik* was not general, but specific. It referred to a particular mode of performance, and was associated with particular proscriptions. At the same time, it called forward narratives that challenged those proscriptions and drew attention to the unique place occupied by *Musik* and song in the region.

In this paper, I use “musical instruments” to encompass the broad corpus of instruments that have been associated with prohibited musical practices in conserving Mennonite communities, be they traditionally conceived instruments (violins, harmonicas, guitars, etc.), or mediums for electronic sound production (radios, cassette players, gramophones, etc.). Further, *Musik* is used in reference to prohibited musical practices among Mennonite groups, usually involving instruments, and is in this way distinguished from my use of the English “music.”

Narratives

LW: And then I remember he, he had *Musik*, but it was under the bed. [Laughs]. A gramophone. ...

JK: Did you ever get to hear it playing? Or how did you know it was under the bed?

LW: Because, we lived in Campo 82, and at that time there was no highway from Santa Rita to, to Rubio. So then uh, mostly we would come one day before Christmas, stay with our grandparents, and then in the evening my dad and my grandfather, they would, they had *Musik* over there! [Laughs].

... Then the other day when the family came together, it was, I saw where my grandfather put it – under the bed. (L. Wolf 2006)

“Under the Bed”

Stories of illicit musical activity abound in the narratives of Mexico’s conserving Mennonite families. While idiosyncratic protagonists wound up in plots of alleged secrecy are frequently described, their respective idiosyncrasies bear noteworthy resemblances. Only one generation ago, *Musik* was hidden under the covers, under the bed, or behind the barn; church elders voiced the prohibition, while church members monitored it; and those found in breach would receive a visit from church leaders at which time offending instruments were removed or, more likely, destroyed. Notably, the concealment of instruments was not merely the practice of rebellious individuals; in nearly every account, the narrator’s home was a quietly defiant exception to the rule.

Home is often conceived as a space separate from the church. Referencing his fieldwork in German American Lutheran communities in the 1970s and 1980s, Bohlman observes that “the home was the locus of piety, distinct from the church” (2006b, 249). Despite this separation, Bohlman recognizes that religious experience extends beyond liturgies and organized religious institutions (2006b, 233), and suggests the importance of individual experience in so-called private spaces:

In contradistinction to the communal performance of music in the public sphere, many musical practices exist only in the private sphere, in pietism and prayer, in the performance of the individual. (2006b, 239)

In many ways, the suggested relationship between private and public spheres articulated here resonates with rural Mexico and ideas around Mennonite *orthopraxis*.⁸ Kelly Hedges has articulated a tendency among Old Colony Mennonites “to designate all events and practices into either an ‘everyday’ or ‘Sunday-like’ realm” (1996, 12). She suggests that church services, weddings, baptisms, and funerals, for example, are Sunday-like (Low German; *sindeosche*) whereas visiting, gossiping, and other everyday (Low German; *auldeosche*) activities are connected to the domestic domain (1996, 15).

While Hedges’ focus is on language use in *sindeosche* and *auldeosche* realms, her work nevertheless informs this study. It identifies a public-private distinction in conserving Mennonite lifeways and implies the separation of church and domestic spheres. Unlike Bohlman’s example, however, this distinction does not assume the

“individuality” of private experience and it is at this juncture that narratives of covert musicking among conserving Mennonites require closer consideration. For Bohlman, dialectics of private and public worship, individual belief and community cohesion, are conceived alongside one another (2006b, 239); family is not vital to this conversation. In Mexican Mennonite communities, on the other hand, the consideration of family is imperative. In contexts where church community and extended family frequently overlap, distinctions between family, church, and home are difficult to render. Even if “home” is understood to be a private space, social relations between and among family members “publicize” domestic contexts in ways that complicate private-public and individual-collective dichotomies. This is not to say that these distinctions do not exist, but rather that their conception as discrete and intrinsic binaries is misleading. It ignores the central place of family in related negotiations.

But how do these theoretical ideas play out in stories of domestic *Musik* in northern Mexico? While attempts were made to confine secret musicking to the walls of the family home, narratives, like the one that introduced this section, reveal their invariable complications. In instances where *Musik* was permitted in the home, its presence was often protected by unspoken codes of silence; individuals sharing a three-room house with ten siblings could not easily conceal instruments from one another, but they were not mentioned in public. Discussing the presence of guitar and accordion music in her Old Colony home while growing up, Maria Schmitt recalls,

Oba eena räd daut kjeenmol üt. Ekj jleew nijch daut de Elleren mol han je'sajchtet, daut eena nijch sull daut aundre wäjchs fe'talen; Oba, eena säd daut kjeenmol nijch wua. (2006)

[But one didn't discuss it. I don't believe that my parents ever said that one shouldn't talk about this (*Musik*) elsewhere. But one didn't ever talk about it anywhere.]

Franz Dyck recounts a similar experience:

Mein Vater hat immer Instrumenten, ein wenig. Er hat nicht gut gelernt, aber ein wenig. Er sagte nicht dass ich nicht sollte, aber er gab mir nicht Geld zum einer kaufen! [Laughter]. (2006)

[My father always had instruments, a little. He was not well-learned, but a little. He never said that I shouldn't (have an instrument), but neither did he give me money to buy one! (Laughter).]

And for Abram Wolf:

Von ein Teil von den Ältesten waren sie verboten. Aber, mein Vater fragte nicht ob alles, ob das verboten war oder nicht.
(2006)

[By one group of the elders they were forbidden. But my father did not ask if everything, if it was forbidden or not.]

Because family relationships and living arrangements change over time, however, unspoken rules around home *Musik* could not be taken for granted. Lisa Wolf is an interpreter at the *Museo y Centro Cultural Menonita, A.C.* and a descendent of Johann Wiebe, the Reinländer bishop who was instrumental in establishing the Old Colony church in Canada. While her grandparents migrated to Mexico as Old Colonists in the 1920s and her father was an Old Colony educator for some years, Lisa's parents later left the Old Colony church to join the *Kleine Gemeinde* over disagreements around education and High German pronunciation. Lisa, who remained a member of the *Kleine Gemeinde* church until approximately 2005, remembers easily the humorous and at times complicated place occupied by *Musik* in her family's past. The narrative about her grandfather's gramophone, previously cited, is only one of many formative stories tied to music in family life. As Lisa's narrative continues, multi-generational living arrangements challenge conceptions of the family as an independent and self-contained unit. Despite the existence of care facilities for the elderly in Mexico's Mennonite colonies, it remains common for parents to live with their children following the death of a spouse, or when no longer able to care for themselves. For Lisa, this practice transformed her experience of musical practice in the domestic domain:

LW: Then very soon my grandma lived with my family, because my grandfather passed away, died, and then, eh, my mom never wanted that my grandmother would know that I had a guitar. So – [laughs] about in the evening, from when it was dark outside, I had to, I walked out, um, behind the stable. That's where I was practicing guitar. [Laughs].

JK: And did your grandmother ever find out?

LW: No. [Laughs]. (2006)

In many ways, so-called individual acts of defiance against a collective church body would have been impossible without the negotiations

that occurred in the in-between spaces of home and family. In Lisa's case, "home" was an exception to *Musik's* prohibition, so long as her conserving grandmother remained absent. However, the unspoken disapproval of Lisa's grandmother was enough to curtail *Musik's* presence in the home for as long as she lived there:

JK: So you had, did you have any instruments in your house, or was that *verboten*?

LW: In my family it wasn't *verboten*. Aah, no I had an older sister, she plays accordion, and I have one brother, he plays guitar. Yeah, we did it before my grandmother moved to our home.

JK: OK. And then after she did, then you just wouldn't play any of those instruments around her?

LW: Actually we would play on Sunday when she went to [visit] – to my uncle. [Laughs]. (2006)

This negotiation alludes to the significance of generational differences in determining appropriate musical practice in the domestic sphere. Lisa's mother is comfortable with allowing Lisa to play the guitar at home so long as her own mother remains unaware; the restriction of Lisa's guitar playing is implemented by her mother, but instigated by her grandmother. In this sense, Lisa's mother acts as a mediator between Lisa's *Musik*, and the "old ways" represented by her grandmother.

Despite the generational differences implied in this narrative, however, musical defiance was not only practiced among conserving young people. Both the involvement of Lisa's mother in enabling her guitar playing, and Lisa's earlier narrative about the gramophone beneath her grandfather's bed, suggest otherwise. The socializing patterns in many conserving villages contributed to musically defiant song practices among youth, but these patterns were in many cases enabled by spoken or unspoken parental consent.⁹

In instances where musical instruments were allowed in the home, their parameters of use were often complex. During an interview together with his son, Johan, Peter Heide describes his first harmonica, and the stipulations around its acquisition that were laid out by his own father:

PH: I laid it down on the table in front of him – that was at dinner time – and he looked at it that way, and he turned it

around, and he said, “Take it away, I don’t want it over here.” After and I was smiling so much, and [acting] all my best, and then he said, “Yeah, you can have 14 pesos, but DON’T play in the house. Please, don’t bother nobody with that.” Oh, I was so happy. [Laughter].

So, OK, then we had a *Stroodäl*–

JH: Pile of bales –

PH: That weren’t bales, that was the old time where they had –

JH: Just straw, uh, the story of Joseph in the Bible where they –

JK: Oh yeah, yeah. Were they – sheaves?

JH: That’s right. Sheaves. They would just pile up the sheaves.

PH: Then I went, and made myself a hole in there, and I was – whoa whoa whoa whoa – I was sixteen years old. (P. Heide and J. Heide 2006)

The image of Peter playing harmonica in a pile of straw is not only an amusing example of “private” music making taken to the extreme; his narrative draws attention to the negotiations around instrument use in conserving Mennonite families. Peter’s music making was a personal but paternally sanctioned activity, an individual defiance enabled by familial consent. Whether Peter conceived of his harmonica playing as a form of rebellion or not is unclear in his narrative. His willingness to conceal his *Musik*, however, suggests that he well understood its prohibition.

Attempts to maintain musical secrets among extended family members, however, were not always successful. Johan and Tina Peters both grew up in conserving households, joining a *Conferencia Menonita de México* (CMM) congregation only after they were married.¹⁰ Johan recalls:

JP: I was a small boy, and we lived down, close to Steinreich. And one day my parents went to Cuauhtémoc and they left us with the grandparents. They lived here in Camp 22, and they had a two-storey house.

TP: Upstairs?

JP: Upstairs. And then there was a little hole there in that, *enn dann* [and then] me, and I think my brother was around, or maybe mostly me –

TP: Jake?

JP: I think it was mostly me, *na dann* [well then], we start singin' up there.

TP: Upstairs.

JP: What we know. We start singing and auu, they were listening and they like it sooo much. And-a, and they were listening and how we were singing and, “How you can sing that well?” And I was a small boy I said, “Well we got that *Grammafoonschiew hat* [record that has] all the songs in it.” “*Grammafoonschiew?* Haa.” And they didn't know what to say. And after that when we went home I told my parents that. “Hey, you shouldn't have said that. Now we're going to be in problem.”

TP: Parents don't want them to have the *Musik* at home –

JP: Like the gramophone. They didn't know, I didn't knew they couldn't have that! That they don't allow that.

TP: That was private, right? [Laughs].

JP: Because I was still a small little boy. [Laughs].
(Johan and T. Peters 2006)

Whereas Bohlman posits a metaphorical relationship between American church and family, the link is tangible among Mexico's Mennonites; church members *are* family members. Familial exemptions to church rules around music thus become complicated, as there is no decisive point at which “familial exemption” ends and “community accountability” begins. As Johan's narrative continues, a further twist in this reading of illicit musicking is introduced. The offending songs performed by Johan and his brother are identified as German gospel hymns:

JP: “Can you sing the songs again?” I know I remember that one was “*Gott ist die Liebe*,” [“God is love”] and the other was

“*Singe mir es noch einmal vor*” [“Sing it again to me”]. Those are the songs what was on there [the record]. ...

JK: So grandparents didn't think it was good to have a gramophone at home?

JP: No, I think that was bad, but they really loved those songs. ... (2006)

Johan did not bring musical instruments into his grandparents' house, nor was he singing Spanish *rancheros*. Here, the singing of “*Gott ist die Liebe*” by young Mennonite boys to their grandparents is transformed from a metonym for conserving religious life and multi-generational unity, to the betrayal of a family secret. This narrative forces the recognition that not all “defiant musical acts” were intentional challenges to community norms. That is to say, Johan and his brother were not engaging in a subversive plot to undermine church leadership; they were singing gospel songs to their grandparents. Still in this instance, hymns are transformed from vessels of spiritual nourishment to symbols of disobedience, with the potential to incite controversy at both familial and church levels.

Intentionally Un-covert

The previous narratives paint a portrait of careful musical defiance, balancing unspoken domestic resistance with community accommodation. Not all church members, however, were equally cautious. David Peters, a pastor at the CMM church in Burwalde recalls his father's unconventional profession as an Old Colony electrician and mechanic and explains some of the unorthodox benefits of his father's work:

DP: Mein Vater hatte das gelernt. Er repariert sie, solche Dinge, zu seiner Zeit. Als ich klein war da waren immer nicht, nicht zwei-drei in der Schmiede, da waren viele!

JK: Gramophones?

DP: Ja. Gramophones und Radios die die Menschen aus dem Ranchos, die Mexikaner brachten die weil mein Vater war der einzige in der Umgebung der solche reparierte. Und dann, noch, wir – Wann wir selber nicht hätten gehabt, dann taten wir doch immer hörchen! Da waren immer solche in unser, in unser Heim. (2006)

[DP: My father had learned that. He fixed them (gramophones), such things, in his time. When I was small there were not just two or three in the workshop, there were many!

JK: Gramophones?

DP: Yes. Gramophones and radios from the ranchos, brought in by the Mexicans, as my father was the only one in the area who fixed such things. And so, even if we didn't have our own, we could listen anyways! There were always such things in our, in our home.]

For David's father, Jacob Peters, challenging the status quo began at an early age and was in keeping with his own family history:

Ekj ha äwent – woo soll ekj sajen – en Grammafoon, to jane tiet, aus ekj so 'en nata Jung wea, also dan wea doa noch nijch dise elektronische, da wea – [laughs], da wea dee met de Fada, opp' too trajkje, jo? Enn hea, nü aus et Oolt Kolonier wearen dee wearen soo seeja fe'boten de Mü'sikj, oba ekj wea emma soo seeja doabenn enn ekj kunn, enn de Foda, hee wea uck nijch soo seeja Oolt Kolonie. [Laughs]. Oba, dan moak ekj mie eent. (2006)

[I have even – how should I say – a gramophone, at that time, when I was a young lad, but there was not yet this “electronics,” it was – (laughs), it was (made) with a spring, to wind it up, yes? And here, among the Old Colony music was so very forbidden, but I was always so involved (with music), and father, he was also not so very Old Colony. (Laughs). But, then I made one (a gramophone) for myself.]

In later years, the apparent inconsistency between Jacob's work and his participation in the Old Colony church did not trouble him, as his primary concern remained the care of his family. In his own words,

Ekj haud en grootet Mechanic Shop. Wie deeden Motors re – rebuilden, krakjt endoont woat doa kjäm, auf daut en Tractor wea opp de picke, ooda auf daut oppe Rad wea, ooda aufs daut en Koa wea, ooda auf daut en Truck wea, en dan jeft daut Probleem bie de Oolt Koloniesche Je'meende, dan kjriejch ekj Probleeme met dee. Dan säd ekj de Oolt Koloniesche Je'meende auf, weits? “Büte jie welle mie feeden dan et's goot,

oba wenn ekj mie soll selwst miene Familje feeden, dan, dan lot mie schaufen soo aus ekj kaun." [Laughs]. (2006)

[I had a big mechanic shop. We rebuilt motors, for whatever came – whether that was a tractor with picks or rubber tires, or if it was a car, or if it was a truck, and that caused a problem with the Old Colony church, I ran into problems with them. Then I left the Old Colony Church, you know? "If you want to feed my family then that's fine, but if I should feed my family myself, then let me work the way I can." (Laughs)].

In some ways, the paradox lived by Jacob Peters is anything but paradoxical. It is clear that expected patterns of Old Colony behavior were defied; Jacob's very livelihood depended on forbidden instruments and machines. That he learned his trade by correspondence with the aid of audio language-learning programs, and that much of his clientele came from outside the Mennonite colonies, only exacerbates this seeming incongruity. However, as his encounter with church leaders demonstrates, Jacob's understanding of "church" assumed the primacy of community; when community censure around his work was not accompanied by community support in the physical nurturing of his family, he changed his church affiliation.¹¹

Defiance is Not Always Amusing

Allusions to foiled attempts at secrecy and the comical aftermath surface repeatedly when speaking with Mennonites of conserving roots. Recollections of illicit *Musik*, however, are not always the food of nostalgic reminiscence. Frank Neufeld remembers a strict upbringing as the son of an Old Colony deacon, and the absolute prohibition of *Musik* in his childhood home.¹² This censure extended beyond musical instruments and radios to include the singing of anything but *lange Wies*. While other song forms were not explicitly forbidden, Frank recounts that "if father doesn't sing, the children won't sing either" (2006).

Despite prohibitions, Frank also remembers playing the harmonica as a youth, while Tina (Frank's wife) notes the ease of concealment enabled by its small size. When he was fifteen years old, Frank secretly purchased his first harmonica, and practiced alone while plowing the fields. The secrecy of practicing far from listening ears is not unlike other narratives about illicit musicking and its place "under the bed." For Frank, however, the purchase of a harmonica was not sanctioned by his parents; the instrument remained a secret. By playing in the

fields, he was not only being discreet to avoid awkward neighbourhood gossip and church reprimand, Frank was disobeying family protocol. The resultant anxiety that he describes holds little resemblance to the laughter of previous narratives; Frank burned his harmonica under the weight of his guilt.

What is it that makes this story tragic, and those told by Lisa Wolf, Peter Heide, and Johan Peters amusing? The strength of the ambiguously delineated “family” is perhaps significant here. Old Colony youth become responsible to Old Colony leadership only after baptism. Before this time, it is parents who are responsible for their actions and discipline. Whereas many parents allowed some form of defiance towards the prohibition of *Musik*, this was not universally so. Revisiting the relationship between individual church members and the church community, Frank’s narrative demonstrates the significance of interweaving alliances in how *Musik* is experienced by individuals. Here, Mazo’s writing about Molokan American experience is apt:

[T]he collective experience and the experiences of the individuals are completely interdependent, if not altogether inseparable. Anyone willing to approach a living culture as a dynamic, complex, and dialectic phenomenon is confronted with this multidimensional dilemma. (2006, 84)

For Frank Neufeld, the interdependence of individual and collective experience resulted in anxiety around owning a harmonica. Whereas previous examples of covert home musicking included parental sanction, Frank’s story does not. While he does not mention being discovered by parents or church leaders, the inseparability of individual, familial, and church protocol in Frank’s understanding of musical propriety meant that he could not find humour in his own defiance. Without the mediation of family, in its many complex configurations, the dynamic and often playful negotiation of individual defiance within the greater church community did not occur, and Frank experienced anxiety rather than amusement.

Conclusions

Studies of musical engagement in religious and diasporic communities frequently address the ability of music to build unity among diverse members. Differentiation of experience in these contexts is accounted for by recognizing the unique personal experiences of individuals that comprise these bodies. In narratives of secret musicking from northern Mexico, however, these assumptions are challenged

by the inter-relatedness of individuals as family and religious groups. While the singing of *lange Wies* provides an example of church-sanctioned collective song, other forms of musical expression (“sacred” or otherwise) were forbidden in living memory, and their performance occurred in defiance of church protocol. Further, despite the frequency with which narratives of forbidden *Musik* involve an individual protagonist covertly practicing her art, these narratives describe more than personal experience within a collective church body.

A recognition of tensions between individual and collective or private and public spheres is important in studies of religion and music, but in the context of Mennonite Mexico, a binary perspective causes us to overlook the complex web of relationships that constitutes an ambiguous, yet significant, in-between space of negotiation: the home itself. By providing a domestic “exception to the rule,” defiant musicking families confounded stereotypes of compliant conserving church members, and dialectics of individual and collective in church worship experience.

While I do not suggest the inherent futility of an individual-collective dialectic, in this instance the negotiations and renegotiations of power, meaning, and the very construction of agency and experience – to use Sugarman’s terms (1997, 27) – are not confined to it. In this configuration, or rather, among these diverse configurations, church is not a locatable collective consisting of individual members, but a body of believers variously knit as families, friends, peers, and community members, together forming the “precarious church.”¹³

By recognizing this, the significance of “home” becomes obvious. Tensions around negotiations of music performance and meaning, around individual and group identity within Mennonite church community, and around the vocabularies used to describe it involve decidedly more conversations than a binary framework allows. Here, the family mediates between individual and collective spheres, affecting both individual expression and community participation.

These narratives, then, become more than reflections of lived experience for individual Mexican Mennonites. Defiant musical practice alone does not equate with agency; however, the continuous spoken and unspoken negotiations and renegotiations of individuals within families, families within communities, and villages within churches, speak to music’s social effects (Sugarman 1997) among Mennonites in northern Mexico. For many of these Mennonites, the secret making of *Musik* in their homes was directly linked to the “construction of agency and experience,” and implicated them “in continual renegotiations, not only of their musical practices, but also of the relations of power that organize their society” (Sugarman 1997, 27). In turn, bonds between family members were in many cases reinforced. Individual narratives

are not merely idiosyncratic recollections, but recall musical participation that challenged expected behaviours in the past, and that confound attempts to essentialize Mennonite community life and religious experience in the present. While most, but not all, narratives point to a resulting unity, it is neither stationary nor predictable. Despite the apparent quietude of the dissention enacted within musicking Mennonite families, it nevertheless functions towards a peculiar vitality. Paradoxically, these examples of familial agency within the church structure – subversive acts of covert musicking – become vital to the very church they defy.

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Notes

- ¹ I use *conserving* here to refer to Old Colony-derived Mennonite groups like the Old Colony, Reinlander, and Sommerfelder churches in Mexico. My use of this designation follows that of John Friesen, who writes of Old Colony, Reinland, Sommerfeld, Zion, Interlake Mennonite Fellowship and Chortitzer churches in Manitoba: “They are conservative in what they accept of the lifestyle of the

society, and usually adopt some visible features, like head coverings, as signs of distinction from it. However, the designation ‘conservers’ might be even more appropriate since each of these churches sees itself as trying to ‘conserve’ or continue their Anabaptist Mennonite heritage. Innovation and change is not their goal” (2004, 141).

- 2 Kelly Hedges defines *oole Ordnunk* as “the ‘tradition’ which, among other things, specifies inter-Mennonite and Mennonite-outsider economic and social relations; structures a colony political system divided into what the Mennonites consider secular and religious branches; provides rules regulating the adoption of technology; dictates dress and occupation norms; categorizes ethnic and other systems of identification; constructs and maintains certain institutions such as church, school, marriage patterns, a widows and orphans fund, and fire and disaster insurance schemes; and structures an ideology of language and literacy” (1996, 6-7). In short, it “provides the tools and mechanisms for cultural reproduction” (1996, 6).
- 3 Various hypotheses have been put forth about the regulation of music in Old Colony churches (Burkhart 1952a, 1952b; Letkemann, 1985; Martens 1972; Quiring 2003), however it is generally understood that modern innovations like radios and audio-players were distrusted for their association with secular society. Further, individual performance in worship (vocal or instrumental) was seen as a distraction from collective humility before God. The heterophonic *lange Wies*, on the other hand, requires collectivity in both transmission and realization. “Long” melismatic melodies are transmitted orally, led by *Vorsänger* (High German; “front singers”) who are chosen by the congregation, and are difficult to sing alone; one might argue that the learning, maintenance, and performance of *lange Wies* in some ways parallels the emphases on community and perseverance in conserving Mennonite life.
- 4 My use of “musicking” is based on the work of Christopher Small, who has argued for the conceptualization of music as a verb rather than a noun: “*To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance.* That means not only to perform but also to listen, to provide material for performance (what we call composing), to prepare for a performance (what we call practicing or rehearsing), or to take part in any activity that can affect the nature of that style of human encounter which is a musical performance” (1999, 12 italics his). For conserving Mennonite families, then, “musicking” refers not only to the playing of specific instruments, but to actions and negotiations within the family unit that engage and enable musical activities.
- 5 This danger is carefully articulated by Kerry Fast in: “Religion, Pain, and the Body: Agency in the Life of an Old Colony Woman,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 22 (2004): 103-129.
- 6 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine. Victor Carl Friesen (1988), Herman Rempel (1995), and Jack Thiessen (2003) have all made significant contributions to the field of Mennonite Low German; still, its orthography is not fixed. In my interview transcriptions, orthography is based on that used in Rempel’s Low German-English dictionary, *Kjenn jie noch Plaut Dietsch*, and, to a lesser extent, Thiessen’s *Mennonite Low German Dictionary/Mennonitisch-Plattdeutsches Wörterbuch*.
- 7 In her ethnography of song among Prespa Albanians, Jane Sugarman outlines the parameters of *ethnoscience structuralism* and *ethnoaesthetics*, complementary approaches to ethnography that she suggests constituted an “interpretive paradigm” for music ethnography in the latter twentieth century. Whereas ethnoscience structuralism places the fieldworker in a position of interpreting musical performances as texts that evoke and confirm community values, beliefs, and patterns of community, ethnoaesthetics accounts for the lived experiences of individuals, based on their own verbalized accounts of links

between music and non-musical domains. Ethnoscience structuralism and ethnoaesthetics get at *implicit* community meanings and *explicit* descriptions of personal lived experience; however, Sugarman contends that the interpretive paradigm they comprise is insufficient. Because ethnoaesthetics depends on vocabulary, it cannot get at implicit meanings; conversely, the “reading” of performances as implicit expressions of community values risks an interpretation of culture as static and unchanging (1997, 24-26).

- ⁸ In his work with Canadian Mennonite domestic architecture, Roland Sawatsky has used the concept of *orthopraxis*, or “correct practice” to refer to a Mennonite emphasis on discipleship in religious expression. This is contrasted with *orthodoxy*, or “correct belief” (2006).
- ⁹ According to interviewees in Mexico, youth dances among conserving Mennonites were common one generation ago, but are no longer a socializing outlet for Mexico’s Mennonite young people. In the past, dances were held in the homes of Mennonite youth on Sundays while parents were visiting in the community. While these dances were not explicitly condoned, neither were they restricted.
- ¹⁰ The CMM was founded in 1991 (Quiring 2003, 76), and consists of three churches in Chihuahua (state): Blumenau (Manitoba Colony), Burwalde (Swift Current Colony), and Steinreich (Nord Colony). Unlike most conserving Mennonite churches in Mexico, CMM churches emphasize assurance of salvation in their ministry, and participate in evangelism both in and outside of the colonies. For conserving Old Colonists, on the other hand, faith is enacted in daily acts of community faithfulness. Church members do not presume to know what lies ahead, but have hope in God’s grace. It has been argued that the welcoming of excommunicated Old Colonists into CMM churches has weakened the ability of the Old Colony church to discipline, and thus to restore right relationship among, its members (Quiring 2004, 87). Given these basic differences in worldview, it is not surprising that the decision to move from one church to another is significant among Mexico’s Mennonites.
- ¹¹ That Jacob was not excommunicated for his stance suggests that his priorities were not entirely incompatible with those of church leadership at the time.
- ¹² Frank (pseudonym) left the Old Colony church at age eighteen and joined a CMM congregation. Names “Frank and Tina Neufeld” are pseudonyms, used at the couple’s request.
- ¹³ I use “precarious” after Chris Huebner in *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity* (2006).