

Miklós Both, Mátyás Bolya

POLYPHONY PROJECT: A COMPLEX FRAMEWORK FOR MUSICAL FOLKLORE COLLECTION

Introduction

Every day, we encounter the following terms: digital revolution, information explosion, digital competencies, networked content development, socially beneficial, knowledge-based society, open-source approach. In the meantime, global cultural trends zoom by in rapid succession, shrinking earth into a tiny glass ball in which every cultural phenomenon is accessible, bringing the intellectual diversity of humanity within arm's – a click's – reach. Vestiges of traditional cultures on the verge of extinction all around the globe may serve as points of reference for preserving cultural identity and facilitating orientation within this space.

Is it possible to collect these mementos in the arena outlined above? Is it possible to do all of this using state-of-the-art technology, elegantly crossing the boundaries of science and dissemination, research and education? Can local values be introduced into international cultural space? And last – can all of this be accomplished in the eleventh hour?

The *Polyphony Project* provides a tangible, modern answer to these questions. This project is an unparalleled initiative with the mission of documenting endangered traditional cultural heritage. The exceptionally high quality of film and sound recording, coupled with the visual concept providing the framework, allows for a faithful representation of the extraordinary atmosphere of the locations while preserving a kind of socio-cultural record.

Perfected through years of preparation, project leader Miklós Both's concept is a best practice with a creative team, scientific quality assurance, state-of-the-art IT background and a network of international relations behind it. The *Polyphony Project* stands for an international team as well as a complex archival and publishing framework. All of this is accomplished using the most modern technologies while mobilising the best experts in each specialised field. The result is a transparent, reliable system that controls and manages the entire work process and is capable of tackling high workloads, thereby saving decades of laborious efforts.

Timeline on the project development

- *Miklós Both, founder of the project, begins collection in 2014 across Ukraine.*
- *By 2016, he has recorded 500 songs with parallel sound and video footages.*
- *In 2016, folk music researchers Susanna Karpenko and Illya Fetisov join the work.*
- *In 2017, with the support and expertise of Pro Progressione, preparations begin for the Creative Europe Programme. Colleagues from the Ivan Honchar Museum and Centre of Folk Culture join the project, providing a background for research and organising field work under the leadership of Myroslava Vertiuk. This is when the French theatre troupe di mini teatr led by Boris Dymny also joins the project, taking on the artistic preparation of the concerts and presentations related to the project.*
- *Led by Gábor Horn, the Hungarian IT team develops the skeleton of the database. In developing its content, the experts of Ivan Honchar Museum are joined by Mátyás Bolya, head of the Folk Music Archives at the Institute for Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Research Centre for Humanities.*
- *In 2017, the project is granted support by the Creative Europe programme of the EU, as cooperation project, and Pro Progressione takes on the project management for the initiative; this is the beginning of a long partnership to reach out for further international possibilities.*
- *Launched in May 2018, the online database (polyphonyproject.com) releases 1200 songs and receives extensive local and international press coverage and acclaim.*
- *In 2018, the project is introduced with great success at the World Music Expo (WOMEX), Las Palmas, fostering new partnerships and collaborations.*
- *Polyphony Non-profit Ltd. is founded to provide long-term legal and infrastructural background for the initiative.*

- *In 2019, the project applies for Erasmus+ in partnership with the Institute for Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HU), Ivan Honchar Museum and Centre of Folk Culture (UA), Taideyliopisto – Sibelius University (FI), Piranha Arts – WOMEX (DE).*
- *The project is commissioned to develop an online database for the Ethiopian folk music and folk dance archive collected in 1965 and preserved at the Institute for Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.*
- *By 2019, the team has recorded about 3000 songs as well as interviews and dances across 120 villages.*

Field Work

We could see that one of the project's main pillars is the technical realisation of the collection in the highest possible quality. Fieldwork essentially consists of two important stages: relying on the network of relations. First, it concentrates available local and material knowledge and, then, it transports the technology to the site. The process is demonstrated below based on the praxis of the aforementioned collecting trips across Ukraine.

The first important question regarding the concept of fieldwork was how to make studio-quality recordings while preserving a familiar and safe environment providing latent inspiration to the performers. These two aspects are seemingly contradictory, as to satisfy the first one, the performers should be transported, and to satisfy the second one, the equipment should be transported. The team decided to go with the latter option, despite



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the fact that a locally assembled studio is a much greater burden on the participants of the expedition and post-production alike.

As both pre-organising and logistics require extensive resources, the most important factor in the field is time. Efficient work can only be carried out with a small team. Therefore, the number of expedition staff

never exceeds five: a researcher from the Kiev partner institution, a researcher from the given region, and two technical crew members. This may be augmented by a guest who takes part in collecting as an observer, mostly also a researcher or media worker.



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Once on site, the team selects a location for the recording, usually the local culture house. Setting up the equipment, placing the lights and microphones, cabling and furnishing the site takes about an hour. During this time, the performers arrive – in Ukraine, for special historical and social reasons, mostly elderly women. Collecting starts with the list of tunes compiled on the basis of the researcher's preliminary survey. Sound recording is carried out using distinct microphones for each performer. This technology allows for the subsequent accurate reconstruction and study of the musical texture.

Each recording is made up of two parts: recording the music and recording the data. Recording the music stands for simultaneous sound and video recording with a strict protocol for handling files, implemented in field work as well as post production. The file handling protocol is also valid for data recording, which can be divided into two parts: 1) technical data of the collection, such as place and time as well as the identification of each performer; and 2) verbal record of the context of the recorded material. Data recording is carried out using an offline computer system developed specifically for this purpose.

The methodology and infrastructure developed along these lines make the work of the *Polyphony Project* team more efficient and secure than any prior

solutions. The team spends an entire day on average in a village, allowing for a collecting rate of one locality per day.

Online Publication

After the stages of collecting, processing and archival comes publishing. Final materials ready to be published are prepared in the course of post-production; data is arranged into a unified database by researchers and IT professionals. A data record attached to a recording contains a lot of information in addition to performer data, song lyrics and the geographical coordinates of the collection site as well as scientific classification. All of this information is accessible through a public online interface. The open access website is based on a complex database engine that manages a system of criteria much broader than suggested by the displayed elements and is compatible with the most exacting scientific standards.



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The polyhierarchical system of descriptive folklore data can be managed with complete flexibility. Therefore, the final structure of metadata is always determined by the material to be processed. This structure is the basis for the complex search engine of the public interface. Recorded data include the genre of the given tune, the context of the performance and the themes and motifs defining the content of the folklore text. The folklore text is also made available on the interface after thorough linguistic correction and proofreading, in the original language (in Cyrillic letters as well as transliteration) and in the translations. The recorded musical descriptive data allow for comparative analysis and the display of relations.

The Polyphony website features two unparalleled developments. Dynamically interlinked with the database, the map is capable of displaying the accurate geocoded location of each collection and listing the result of any filtered search. Another key development is the option to interactively play the audio material recorded in several distinct tracks. The built-in multitrack player can

be operated by the user: the tracks can be played in arbitrary arrangement, at separately controlled volumes.

The website's design and content sharing concept clearly indicate that this is not merely a publishing platform targeted at a narrow professional elite. Cited earlier as one of our goals, social embeddedness also means that one of the project's primary goals is to address the 'layperson' who uses his or her culture on a daily and first-language basis to address and, thus, activate our unconsciously nurtured, dormant cultural foundation, our collective knowledge.

Plans for the Future

The *Polyphony Project* started as a private initiative, then continued its operation in the scope of an EU-funded project. With the conclusion of the Creative Europe Programme, the appropriate organisational and financial form for carrying on the project is the question to be answered. The favourable international reception of the project has yielded several collaborating partners, directions for development and specific commissions – beyond continuing our work in Ukraine – in Hungary and internationally alike. In the course of the next stage, we will be working to integrate the technologies of the 21st century – in part already in use and in part newly developed – in music education, using these tools not only in direct music education but also putting our traditions in a wider context. The pilot project will begin in Finland, Hungary and Ukraine, developing methodologies for professional music teachers to foster their capacities in working with the young generation and, thus, support future society's interest in traditional music and traditions as such.

Our future plans rely on two factors: whether social embeddedness will indeed be achieved – in other words, whether the project's results will permeate the cultural bloodstream – and whether the project will be capable of serving as a model to be followed.