

Transition and Resilience in Music: Insights from Folk Bals

Introduction

In the past decade, the relationship between musical practices and ecology has been a growing research area. In a pioneering paper, Jeff Todd Titon presented music as a renewable »biocultural resource« and proposed to address its sustainability in ecological terms.¹ Later, several works stressed the material conditions of music-making and its entanglement with not-so-renewable production chains² and carbon footprint.³ In the meantime, the

¹ Jeff Todd TITON, Music and Sustainability: An Ecological View Point, *The World of Music* 51/1 (2009), 119-37.

² Jacob SMITH, *Eco-Sonic-Media* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015); Kyle DEVINE, *Decomposed: The Political Ecology of Music* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2019).

³ Catherine BOTTRILL, Diana LIVERMAN and Max BOYKOFF, Carbon Soundings: Greenhouse Gas Emissions of the UK Music Industry, *Environmental Research Letters* 5 (2010), 014019; Andrea COLLINS and Crispin COOPER, Measuring and Managing the Environmental Impact of Festivals: the Contribution of the Ecological Footprint, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 25/1 (2017), 148-62.

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Abstract – Résumé

By observing the practice of folk bals in Belgium, we explore the possibility of a musical culture in line with the transition project. Folk bals are modern dancing events inspired by pre-industrial rural festivities. The transition initiatives movement aims at transforming local societies through bottom-up initiatives in order to reach a higher resilience in response to future environmental and social shocks. We derive six features that appear to characterize resilient musical practices: (1) low ecological footprint, (2) increasing of social well-being, (3) socially-oriented economic models, (4) traditional or local anchorage, (5) recurrence and fun, and (6) degree of participation.

Keywords: Music • Dance • Belgium • Europe • Tradition • Transition • Resilience • Sustainability • Ecology • Environmental humanities • Ethnomusicology

field of ecomusicology emerged and sought to highlight the interactions between »music, nature, and culture« and the need for a move from »anthropocentrism« to »biocentrism« in both music and music research.⁴

However, few of these works have attended to existing social movements and their dynamics, privileging instead qualitative approaches, materialist stances or philosophical frameworks inspired by deep ecology. Conversely, scholarly contributions on music in relation to social movements have rarely addressed ecological concerns – with notable exceptions in studies on indigenous peoples.⁵

In this work, we focus on the »transition initiatives« movement, initiated in England by Rob Hopkins' work, and its connections with the practice of folk bals (dancing events with traditional inspiration) in Belgium. We argue that, despite their seemingly apolitical atmosphere, folk bals share with the transition initiatives a common ethos and illustrate one possibility for a sustainable and resilient musical practice. Our primary ambition is not to celebrate these events as such, but to exploit our familiarity with them in order to derive some key considerations to address when thinking music in relation to transition initiatives and resilience.

Our familiarity stems from twelve years of participation in folk bals in Belgium as dancers, dance teachers, and event organizers, enriched by thirteen semi-directed interviews with other dancers and organizers. In ethnomusicology, holding an »insider's« perspective may be considered either an asset or a limitation. However, as some scholars have noted, this form of autoethnography tends to be the rule rather than the exception in the discipline, as a majority of ethnomusicologists appear to carry out fieldwork in their home societies.⁶

We embrace here the perspective proposed by the Indigenous scholar Clint Bracknell, according to whom working on one's own community may »serve the heterogeneity of music research« by embracing an affective scope that reconfigures – rather than annihilates – objectivity,⁷ away from the environmentally costly imperative of investigating distant communities.⁸

⁴ Aaron S. ALLEN and Kevin DAWE, *Current Directions in Ecomusicology: Music, Culture, Nature* (London: Routledge, 2015).

⁵ E.g. Tina RAMNARINE, Acoustemology, Indigeneity, and Joik in Valkeapää's Symphonic Activism: Views from Europe's Arctic Fringes for Environmental Ethnomusicology, *Ethnomusicology* 53/2 (2019), 187-217. See also Tore STØRVOLD's ecocritical work on Icelandic music and environmental activism, *Dissonant Landscapes: Nature and the Musical Imagination of Iceland* (PhD thesis: University of Oslo, 2019).

⁶ Jonathan STOCK and Chou CHIENER, Fieldwork at Home: Asian and European Perspectives, in: *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, eds. Gregory Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 108-24.

⁷ Clint BRACKNELL, 'Say You're a Nyungarmusicologist': Indigenous Research and Endangered Song, *Musical Australia* 37 (2015), 201.

⁸ Catherine GRANT, Academic Flying, Climate Change, and Ethnomusicology: Personal Reflections on a Professional Problem, *Ethnomusicology Forum* 27/2 (2018), 123-35.

We start by providing a brief presentation of folk bals, as they take place in Belgium (a rather undocumented topic in the literature), and of the »transition initiatives« movement (a fairly well-documented topic). We then proceed by highlighting six characteristics that may guide scholars and musicians to think about the resilience of musical practices, with folk bals as a guide, and conclude with a discussion on the potential of musical practices for societal change.

Folk Bals

Folk bals are festivities generally gathering between 50 and 200 persons, during which musicians play music inspired by traditional repertoires, while the audience performs corresponding dances. They are organized according to a fixed pattern usually consisting of three phases: (1) an initiation, during which the basic steps of the dance repertoire are taught, (2) the bal itself, during which one or, more often, several bands perform dancing music, and (3) a »jam session,« during which the musicians among the audience gather at the center of the room and keep playing for another 30 minutes or hour. In some bals, only the second phase is present.

Although a renewed interest in the practice of traditional dances emerged as soon as the interwar period in France, folk bals emerged during the 1970s, along with the so-called »folk revival« movement and in relation to the May 1968 events. Its inspiration lies in the pre-industrial festivities that punctuated the ancient peasant life. Musical and dancing repertoires were collected among the elders and adapted to a new context and audience. In particular, the dances were selected to be easily accessible and a common European repertoire emerged over the years.⁹

Today, this common repertoire cohabits with local variations. In Belgium, most dances performed in folk bals are not local (exceptions include *maclotte de Steinbach*, *arède di Malempré*, or *menuet de la chaîne*). Instead, they come from a wide geographic area stretching from the British islands (e.g. reel) to Poland (e.g. mazurka) and from Scandinavia (e.g. polska) to Italy (e.g. *tarentelle*). The dances can be divided into three categories, according to the pattern formed by the participants: circle dances (e.g. *rond Saint-Vincent*), chain dances (e.g. *gavotte*), and couple dances (e.g. polka).

⁹ François GASNAULT, Les enjeux de la danse dans les réseaux « revivalistes » français, *Danse(s) et Politique(s)* 4 (2016). <https://journals.openedition.org/danse/1185>; Yves GUILCHER, *La danse traditionnelle en France : d'une ancienne civilisation paysanne à un loisir revivaliste* (Parthenay: FAMDT, 1998); Valérie ROUVIÈRE, *Le mouvement folk en France (1964-1981)* (Master's thesis: Université de Versailles, 1996). http://ekladata.com/boEC-g_j746lMQ6e-UBPu4NiV0c/lemouvementfolk1sur4.pdf. In French-speaking Belgium, a founding event was the festival of Champ, organized in 1972.

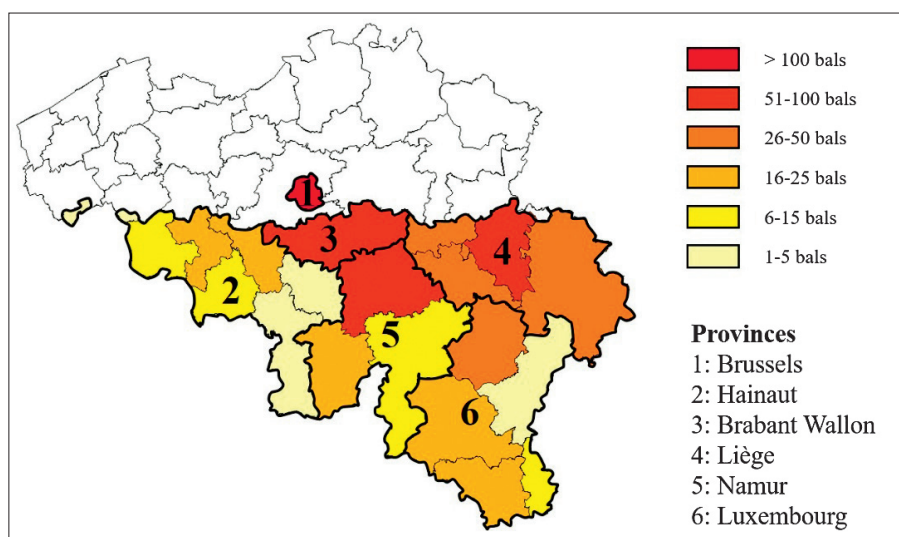


Fig. 1. Number of folk bals per year in the FW-B (2015-2016), based on data from *Canard Folk*

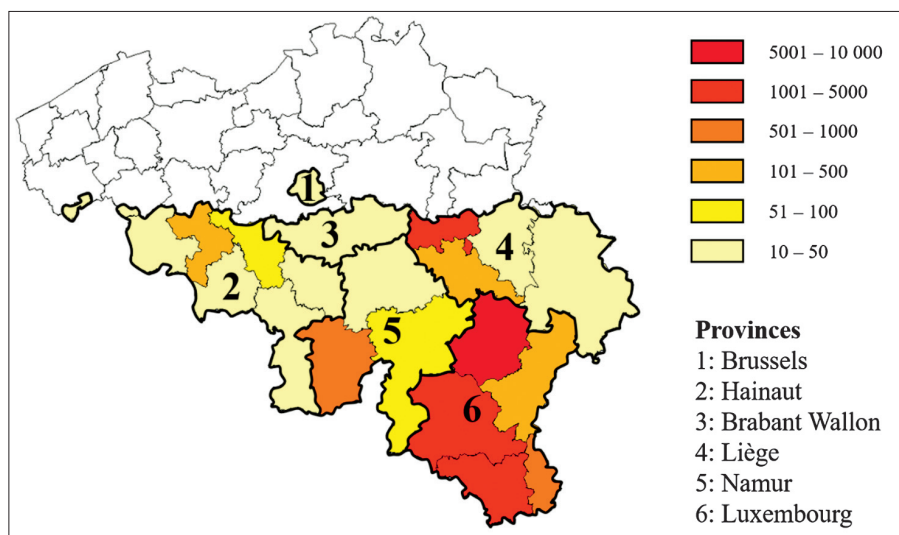


Fig. 2. Number of folk bals per one million inhabitants per year in the FW-B (2015-2016), based on data from *Canard Folk* and *Statbel*¹⁰

¹⁰ <http://statbel.fgov.be>.

Our investigation focuses on French-speaking regions of Belgium, namely Wallonia and Brussels (hereafter »FW-B« for *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*). Folk bals in these areas have known a decline during the 1980s and a renewal in the 1990s and 2000s. Data from the »*Canard Folk*« cultural agenda suggest that the number of folk bals in the FW-B has increased by 64 % over the last 8 years. Today, they constitute the liveliest musical tradition of rural inspiration in Belgium. In 2015 and 2016, there was on average of 1 bal per day occurring in Wallonia and 0.5 bal per day in Brussels, in addition to several festivals occurring during the summer (cf. Fig. 1). When observed in relation to population size, the highest density of bals is observed in rural areas like the province of Luxembourg (cf. Fig. 2).

Transition Initiatives

As the anthropologist Arturo Escobar noted, the concept of »transition« is differently addressed in countries from the North and the South.¹¹ While the South has articulated its transition discourse on a critique of developmental models inherited from the 1980s and ideals inspired by indigenous input like the *Buen Vivir* or »Gross National Happiness,« the North has focused on a critique of economic growth and a quest for resilience as an alternative to sustainability.¹²

A keystone in the latter region was Rob Hopkins' publication of *The Transition Handbook*,¹³ although the movements' origins may be traced back to the emergence of permaculture in the 1970s or the Club of Rome's *The Limits to Growth* Report.¹⁴ In his book, Hopkins introduces the issue of transition in relation to the »Hydrocarbon Twins,« namely climate change and peak oil. According to him, cutting carbon emissions is an urgent but insufficient objective. Attending to the peak oil forces us to picture what a world without cheap oil might be like, and to anticipate its likely arrival.

With these ideas in mind, Hopkins sketches three scenarios for the future: (1) *adaptation*, supposing that human societies somehow get out of trouble, for example through a »technological miracle;« (2) *evolution*, supposing a »change of mindset« that would make us better equipped to endure the shocks to come; and (3) *collapse*, supposing a violent disruption of the social order. In order to nurture

¹¹ Arturo ESCOBAR, Degrowth, Postdevelopment, and Transitions, *Sustainable Science* 20/3 (2015), 451-62.

¹² In practice, numerous scholars use the term »sustainability« in echo to the ideas of the transition movement or even as a synonymous of »resilience.« Consequently, we do not consider these as opposed concepts in the following pages.

¹³ Rob HOPKINS, *The Transition Handbook. From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience* (Dartington: Green books, 2009).

¹⁴ Donella H. MEADOWS et al., *The Limits to Growth* (Universe Books: New York, 1972).

what he considers the most promising scenario, »evolution,« he puts the concept of *resilience* to the forefront.

Resilience is defined as the capacity to endure shock and continue to flourish. In relation to the Hydrocarbon Twins, it implies reducing our dependency on cheap oil and »building ways of living that are more connected, more enriching and that recognize the biological limits of our planet.«¹⁵ Resilience must in this regard be distinguished from »greenness« – Hopkins mentions New York City as an example for places with relatively low carbon footprints, but high dependency on hydrocarbon resources.

Transition initiatives may take a variety of forms, such as shared food networks, permaculture courses, movie screenings, local democracy experiments, repair workshops, alternative currencies, social economy, or reflection groups on various societal issues. All of these take the form of bottom-up initiatives designed to transform the conditions of living in the »here and now« and inspire governing powers to take corresponding actions, without waiting for the latter's leadership.

As the scholar Sara J. Wolcott noted, transition scholars have been less inclined to suggest musical or cultural initiatives than social or economic ones.¹⁶ Hopkins himself gave little clues on this, although he contends that the transition is as much about »reclaiming culture« as it is about using solar panels.¹⁷ Consequently, further reflections on the possibility of a musical culture in line with the transition's project would contribute to a more holistic perspective and offer guidelines to musicians and scholars to rethink the sustainability of their practices.

In the following sections, we highlight the following issues that a resilient musical practice would have to tackle: (1) limited ecological footprint, (2) increase of social well-being, (3) subordination of economic factors to social needs, (4) traditional and local anchorage, (5) recurrence and fun, and (6) participation.

1. *Limited Ecological Footprint*

The most obvious characteristic of a resilient musical culture is the need for limited ecological footprint and sober hydrocarbon consumption. A study of carbon emissions in the British musical industry evidenced that live performances tended to have three times the impact of recording and publishing records; among these emissions, 43 % were due to audience travel, in particular by car.¹⁸

¹⁵ R. HOPKINS, *The Transition Handbook*, 91.

¹⁶ Sara J. WOLCOTT, *The Role of Music in the Transition Towards a Culture of Sustainability, Empowering Sustainability International Journal* 3/1 (2016), 1-19.

¹⁷ R. HOPKINS, *The Transition Handbook*, 253.

¹⁸ C. BOTTRILL, D. LIVERMAN and M. BOYKOFF, *Carbon soundings*.

Another study¹⁹ indicated that the emissions depend on the number of visitors and the location: urban venues are more easily reached by public transport than isolated villages. According to the author, attempts at reducing this impact by promoting the use of rail, coach, bus, and bike tend to have little success, as these are only used by about 7,5 % of visitors.

Chris Gibson and Colleen Wong also noted the duration of events as an important factor: if transportation does have a heavy ecological impact, life on a festival still tends to be less demanding in terms of energy than staying at home, especially among students who use little amounts of water and spend nights in camping areas rather than hotels.²⁰

To what extent folk bals are here exemplary is uncertain. On the one hand, numerous bals take place in rural areas most easily reached by car. On the other hand, rural events tend to attract mostly local people who have less distance to cover than they would for a major festival as the ones considered by the above studies. In some cases, the bals take place outdoors, on the public square of a village or town, and are specifically designed to involve the local inhabitants. Furthermore, carpooling is often organized in rural areas, either by the event organizers or by the dancers themselves. Folk bals also tend to take place early enough in the evening, so that in urban areas at least, participants may use trains or busses to return home. Quantitative investigations would be necessary in order to assess to what extent these features significantly contribute to reaching low emission levels.

Importantly, Andrea Collins and Crispin Cooper also stress that current assessment techniques of carbon emissions in live performances tend to ignore the impact of sponsorship.²¹ In this regard, folk bals appear more obviously exemplary, due to the lack of encouragements to consumption, as pointed out by the following interviewee: »In most parties, brands are displayed, everything is done to make us consume. In folk bals, in many regards, we favor moderation« (JF, dancer).

The *in situ* energy consumption is generally limited to sound equipment, the lightning of the room (which is often quite dim), and the refrigeration of drinks. Even in the heart of winter, heating is generally ensured by the dancers themselves. However, what matters here is not so much the average quantitative consumption of folk bals, but their resilience in response to energetic impacts. On one occasion, we observed a bal in Louvain-la-Neuve where a power cut occurred. As a solution, the musicians left the stage and occupied the center of the room in order to be better heard, and the bal went on. If anything, the power cut appeared

¹⁹ A. COLLINS and C. COOPER, *Measuring and Managing the Environmental Impact of Festivals*.

²⁰ Chris GIBSON and Wong COLLEEN, *Greening Rural Festivals: Ecology, Sustainability and Human-Nature Relations*, in: *Festival Places. Revitalising Rural Australia*, eds. Chris Gibson and John Connell (Bristol: Channel View Publications, 2011), 92-105.

²¹ A. COLLINS and C. COOPER, *Measuring and Managing the Environmental Impact of Festivals*.

to enhance the convivial atmosphere of the event. In this particular case, we had to use candles to lit the room; in theory though, a bal could take place in the afternoon or outdoors and require no extra lighting.

Part of the resilience we observed then was due to the use of non-electronic instruments. In many cases, these are hand-made. To what extent this is an advantage with regards to »greenness« is debatable. As Kyle Devine noted, instruments made locally out of raw materials like wood may turn out to be less sustainable than large-scale chains of production.²² A closer inquiry would be needed to assess this suggestion in the specific case of folk bals. However, regardless of the ecological impact of hand-made instruments, they may be preferable with regard to resilience, as they favor practical skills and local production over global musical markets.

2. Increase of Social Well-being

The transition movement grants a particular attention to social links, networks of solidarity, inclusion, and diversity, as key factors for resilience. To state that folk bals contribute to this effort may appear as a truism, as most musical practices indeed seem to »enhance feelings of shared experience, attachment, and solidarity towards other human beings.«²³ This propensity to increase social well-being is so widespread that it is frequently advanced as a likely evolutionary origin for human musicality.²⁴

In folk bals, this feature is not merely incidental but explicitly expressed by the participants. Among our interviewees, one of the most recurring terms we heard was *conviviality*, along with *encounters* and *solidarity*. According to some of them, this conviviality is due to the structure of dances, in particular those taking place in circle formation and where the participants switch partners along regular patterns. Dances performed in chains by holding the neighbors' hands or little fingers, as in the Breton *an dro*, are also noteworthy. In these choreographies, every dancer holds her or his neighbors with the little finger while moving sideways, thus forming a line that meanders across the dance floor. Anyone can join or leave the chain at any time and the movements are thus made that any wrong step by one of the dancers remains relatively unnoticed and corrected by the overall movement of the chain.

According to other interviewees, the conviviality of bals also stems from the limited alcohol consumption. As far as we could assess, all bals include a bar

²² K. DEVINE, *Decomposed*.

²³ David HESMONDHALGH, *Why Music Matters* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 87.

²⁴ E.g. Steven MITHEN, *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind and Body* (London: Phoenix, 2005).

offering alcoholic drinks. None of the interviewee criticized this; as one of them noted, »it takes courage to be on the dance floor, and sometimes, a little drink can help. But it would not look right if a group of people started drinking shooters« (J-P, organizer). Another dancer noted that this limitation allowed for a more healthy balance between partying and working than the one she experienced in other festive settings. Moderation thus joins the transition movement's emphasis on the health of communities, as an important factor of resilience.

The intergenerational quality of folk bals was also highlighted by interviewees; indeed, some bals involve children, teenagers, adults, and elders dancing together. Opportunities for social and physical contacts between children, adults of all age, and elders are rare enough in contemporary Belgium to be noteworthy. However, to what extent the inclusion goes further is uncertain. According to one interviewee, »a folk dancer is a white, bearded man with sandals, light trousers, a raw umber-colored shirt, badly arranged hair, no watch, a naive smile, someone very pleasant who does not exhibit her or his wealth« (JF, dancer). Another stressed that »there are few Africans when you compare with the Belgian population« (Alexandra, dancer).

Interestingly, this lack of diversity was also observed among transition initiatives groups, likewise predominantly »highly educated, middle class, and white.«²⁵ This correspondence between actors of transition initiatives and folk bals correlates with the fact that the latter appeared in Europe in the 1970s, at the same time as permaculture and possibly within the same category of population. Whether other audiences could be massively attracted to folk bals remains an open question. For the time being, lack of social diversity appears to constitute one of the most striking limits of folk bals in terms of resilience.

3. Subordination of Economy to Social Needs

The two aforementioned characteristics rest upon a third one: avoiding cultural policies oriented towards economic profit and privileging economic factors as a *means* for increased social well-being. Folk bals constitute here an interesting model, since all the organizers present in the FW-B are either »ASBL« (*Associations Sans But Lucratif*, i.e. »associations without lucrative purpose«) or *de facto* associations of volunteers. An interviewee, member of an important bal organizing group in the region of Liège, stated the following: »Our main goal, as organizers, is to create parties where we can have fun. But it is also about transmitting a traditional cultural heritage and making it accessible to all« (Mathieu, organizer).

²⁵ Mena GROSSMANN and Emily CREAMER, Assessing Diversity and Inclusivity within the Transition Movement: An Urban Case Study, *Environmental Politics* 26/1 (2017), 162.

This interviewee further stressed the necessity of offering bals with low entry fees in order to allow people with low incomes to participate. However, the amount of this fee may vary from one event to another. A significant proportion of bals are free of charge; they are then funded through subsidies or the sale of drinks. Others have a free participation fee (the dancers choose themselves how much they want to pay) or a modest price for Belgian standards (1-5 €), while the most expensive, which usually take place in Brussels, may cost up to 20 euros.

Folk bals are generally organized on a relatively small budget, between 500 and 3000 euros, allowing it to take place through investments of individual organizers or local subsidies.²⁶ However, a budget of 500 euros would generally imply that the musicians play for free, which is hardly an ideal situation if a sustainable community of skilled folk musicians is to be maintained. In most cases, this is the only source of income that musicians obtain from their activity, as copyrights are rarely relevant. Indeed, the music played is generally either part of a traditional repertoire or original compositions deliberately left unregistered. Collective ownership is thus favored above individual profit.

The independency vis-à-vis copyright collection societies also contributes to the fact that investments made for the organization of folk bals tend to remain on a short-circuit level, in line with some transition initiatives – in particular those oriented towards local currencies. As an interviewee stated, »we think 'local,' we try to find local providers, local products...« (Simon, organizer). However, remaining within local economic networks throughout the event would require further reflection on the issue of transportation and the role of oil companies and the automobile industry.

Finally, folk bals correspond with the transition movement's inclinations in using mixed economic regimes: market activities such as the sales of drink are not prohibited, but they coexist with non-market economic input, such as subsidies and volunteering.

4. *Traditional or Local Anchorage*

In a paper on music and economic degrowth, Makis Solomos stressed the need to revert a historical tendency to emancipate »art« from »craft« (*artisanat*) and to celebrate the figure of the artisan and peasant.²⁷ European folk music, inspired by pre-industrial rural repertoires, here appears as a promising starting

²⁶ These numbers were obtained by contacting four major folk bals organizers in Wallonia. Costs among other associations, and in particular in Brussels, may differ.

²⁷ Makis SOLOMOS, *Musique et décroissance. Une première approche*, in: *Art i decreixement / Arte y decrecimiento / Art et décroissance*, ed. Carmen Pardo (Girona: Documenta universitaria, 2016), 97-112.

point. Surely, as Sara J. Wolcott noted, a resilient musical practice should go beyond reproducing »ancient wisdom,« as the Earth is changing in unpredictable directions.²⁸ The potential of folk music as a vector of »authoritarian and anti-democratic ethos« has also been stressed.²⁹

However, folk bals appear to bypass these issues by taking traditional repertoires as a mere source of inspiration for practices relevant to the present situation. The selection of a repertoire of dances simple enough to be quickly learned and enjoyed by dancers is in this regard exemplary. Due to this selection, the *local* dimension of folk bals appears rather ambiguous. Indeed, whether one participates to a folk bal in Belgium, Wales, Sweden, or Italy, one is likely to encounter the same dances with minor variations (e.g. *scottish*, *chapellose*, *bourrée*). Yet, these dances generally cohabit with a few regional or local dances (e.g. *danse du ramon*, *arède di Malempré* in Wallonia).

More importantly, the precise origins of dances do not appear to be a central matter of concern among dancers and their guesses are generally wrong, which is partly due to their confusing names: the dance named »scottish« is not Scottish, the »polska« is not Polish, and whether the »Circassian circle« has any connection with Circassia is doubtful. Furthermore, there appears to be little awareness among dancers in the FW-B about a transnational, European community of dancers beyond Flanders and France. For example, few of them seem to know that events similar to folk bals are performed in Great Britain, Portugal, Hungary, or corresponding practices in North America.

Consequently, dancers appear to have an ambiguous conception of their practice when it comes to local belongings. On the one hand, they appear committed to local and regional communities of dancers, while on the other hand, they have no pretension to know the origins of dances or to perform genuinely local repertoires – in contrast to folkloric dance groups committed to historical repertoires, such as the *Réveil Ardennais* in Wallonia. Thus it comes as no surprise that far-right ideologies and discourses on ethnic identity do not normally come up in folk bals, although this absence is also a specificity of the political cultures of Wallonia and Brussels.³⁰

In terms of repertoire and local anchorage, folk bals thus join Rob Hopkins' recommendation of deriving inspiration from past cultures without romanticizing

²⁸ S. J. WOLCOTT, The Role of Music in the Transition Towards a Culture of Sustainability, 11.

²⁹ Sacha KAGAN and Volker KIRCHBERG, Music and Sustainability: Organizational Cultures towards Creative Resilience: a Review, *Journal of Cleaner Production* 135 (2016), 1487-1502.

³⁰ Christophe TRASNEL, Entre unité et diversité. Le discours identitaire du mouvement souverainiste au Québec et du mouvement wallon en Communauté française Wallonie-Bruxelles, *Lien Social et Politiques* 53 (2005), 93-104; Andrea REA, Immigration and Diversity, in: *The Brussels Reader*, eds. Eric Corijn and Jessica van den Ven (Brussels: VUB Press, 2013), 246-68.

them, acknowledging the fact that our more or less distant ancestors tended to be more skilled, more practical, more devoted to local economies.

Another area that would deserve close investigation is the role of gender and the extent to which contemporary dancers are emancipated from pre-industrial models. We observe that some patterns favoring gender discrimination still appear dominant: the task of inviting a partner is often assumed by male dancers, which may lead some female participants to spend long periods of time without dancing, even if they want to. Dances performed in couples, such as the waltz, are often led by men, unless the woman is significantly more skilled. Finally, while it is frequent to observe two women dancing together as a couple, men rarely dance together or do as a humorous gesture – except in a few dances like the *bourrée*, where the partners do not normally touch one another.

Thus, traditional models of folk bals still maintain an anti-equalitarian influence in some regards, although all our interviewees noted an evolution, with progressively more women taking initiatives such as inviting male partners, leading dances, or inviting men to perform traditionally female moves (e.g. turning under the partner's arm). This may be one of the main current weaknesses of folk bals with regards to resilience and local democracy, and something that dancers should remain attentive to.

In a paper entitled »Reclaiming the Commons,« Christopher Smith goes further by presenting the revival of folk music on local scales as a reaction against the »confiscation of commons« initiated by the enclosures movement in sixteenth-century England.³¹ According to him, this confiscation had a significant impact on music through professionalization and the resulting decline of self-based, home-based, and community-based creation of cultural capital. Smith illustrates his attempts at resisting this evolution by telling his own experience of initiating folk music workshops in various towns in the United States. Rob Hopkins likewise insists on the need of »reskilling« communities by reclaiming some of the knowledge that »our grandparents took for granted.«³²

Thus, while it is likely that resilient musical practices could stem from other sources of inspiration, those derived from pre-industrial models appear particularly in line with the orientations of transition initiatives, as they summon an imaginary of community-oriented and pre-industrial festive cultures that should be adapted to contemporary social aspirations.

³¹ Christopher SMITH, Reclaiming the Commons, One Tune at a Time, *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua* 10/4, 9-20.

³² R. HOPKINS, *The Transition Handbook*, 232.

5. Recurrence and Fun

Our contention is that, in order to have a significant impact on the social aspirations of participants, musical practices aiming at resilience should occur on a regular basis and be fun enough to attract a committed audience.

Gibson and Wong suggested that festivals could induce sustainable behaviors if they are set in a natural environment that they explicitly celebrate, for example by organizing them at the time of flowering of a particular plant, as is the case of the Yellow Gum festival in Australia.³³ Joseph Wasylycia-Leis articulated his own reflection of music and transition on a series of annual festivals taking place in Canada.³⁴ Others, like François Ribac, attended to punctual events, such as an exhibition in Paris by Bernie Krause, featuring soundscapes from different parts of the world.³⁵

The frequency of folk bals in the FW-B, with the possibility of dancing almost every evening in Wallonia, appears more promising as a means of »educating society on economic decisions and lifestyle practices that challenge the status quo and can galvanize shared identity and political consciousness,« as Wasylycia-Leis puts it.³⁶ This frequency could be enhanced by organizing regular folk bals, ideally funded by public subsidies and taking place outdoors in public squares, in order to attract a larger and more diverse audience. These could take place every month, or at the time of seasonal changes, and reinforce senses of belonging to local communities.

One of the assets of folk bals, in contrast to Ribac's examples, is that they are *festive*. As such, they are designed to be fun and focus on immersion in social interactions. Ribac emphasizes the interest of art exhibitions where human and non-human creativities are entangled as a contribution to the transition movement; Bernie Krause's »biophonies« indeed appear as much composed by animals and places as they are by Krause himself. However, transition initiatives tend to privilege the immediacy of local community building over philosophical questionings on the nature/culture divide or a quest for an animist ethos, important as these latter aims may be with regards to sustainable futures. Sara J. Wolcott likewise celebrates experiments in musical creativity with a group of non-musicians from Chennai.³⁷ Interesting as her account may be, these experiments remain punctual, with little possibilities to scale up and no indication that the experiment will be reproduced.

³³ C. GIBSON and W. COLLEEN, *Greening Rural Festivals*.

³⁴ Joseph WASYLYCIA-LEIS, *Celebrating Community: Local Music Festivals and Sustainable Relocalization in Southern Manitoba* (Master's thesis: University of Waterloo, 2016).

³⁵ François RIBAC, *Narratives of the Anthropocene: How Can the (Performing) Arts Contribute towards the Socio-ecological Transition?*, *Scene* 6/1 (2018), 51-62.

³⁶ J. WASYLYCIA-LEIS, *Celebrating Community*, 181.

³⁷ Sara J. WOLCOTT, *The Role of Music in the Transition Towards a Culture of Sustainability*.

Developing musical practices that are fun and ensuring that they become habitual may require keeping them simple, by drawing upon festive models that are close enough to mainstream activities to be appealing to the population and financially accessible.

6. Participation

A key ambition of the transition movement is to empower citizens to take part in the organization of social life through grassroots decision making. Experiences of »participatory democracy,« where participants hold open discussions about issues pertaining to their communities, constitute recurring cases of transition initiatives.

In music research, the issue of participation has been explored by Thomas Turino in a book entitled *Music as Social Life*. In the framework he proposes, »participatory music« is opposed to »presentational music« and defined as follows:

Briefly defined, *participatory performance* is a special type of artistic practice in which there are no artist-audience distinctions, only participants and potential participants performing different roles, and the primary goal is to involve the maximum number of people in some performance role.³⁸

Surely, as some scholars have noted, all musical practices imply some degree of participation and the artist-audience distinction is never total.³⁹ However, one must also acknowledge a difference of degree in participation. By speaking of »participatory performance,« Turino refers more specifically to practices where the listeners also participate to the *sound* and *motion* of the musical event, resulting in heightened social interactions. According to him, these constitute »the most democratic, the least formally competitive, and the least hierarchical« forms of music-making.⁴⁰

Turino's proposition is a useful guide to consider music, and folk bals in particular, as transition initiatives. The heightened degree of concentration on other participants is necessary in order for the dances to occur smoothly. Even the dances performed in couple require continuous attention to one's partner, but also an awareness of what other couples are doing and how to navigate the dance floor.

Folk bals also join Turino's framework in privileging the activity of dancing over the creation of an end product. The music performed in folk bals is rarely

³⁸ Thomas TURINO, *Music as Social Life. The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 26.

³⁹ S. KAGAN and V. KIRCHBERG, *Music and Sustainability*; F. RIBAC, *Narratives of the Anthropocene*.

⁴⁰ T. TURINO, *Music as Social Life*, 35.

bought in CDs or listened to at home. One of our interviewees, a regular folk dancer, even described the music as »boring« in itself. During the bals, it generally serves as a means rather than an end and the quality of musicians is usually judged by their capacity to induce participation and joy in the audience. Virtuosity is rarely valued, among dancers and musicians alike. However the situation may vary from one event to another: some bals, in particular those taking place in Brussels, may have a relatively elitist quality, with professional musicians and high dancing skills among the average participants.

An important element of folk bals also lies in the event's overall immersive atmosphere. While it is always possible to observe the dancers from the outside, listeners remain immersed in an atmosphere of warmth, chattering, movement, and music common to the dancers and always runs the risk of being invited – a request that, in lack of a good excuse, one should normally accept. The music itself, and the sound of the accordion in particular, tend to draw what Turino calls a »wall of sound« typical of participatory practices, where individual skills are merged in an overall collective sound involving also the audience's noises.⁴¹

As Turino stresses, participatory music also requires a balance between complexity and accessibility; the event must afford renewed challenges for expert dancers while keeping a place for beginners to join in. Part of this issue is answered by the usual organization of an »initiation phase« at the beginning of the bal. The steps of most dances are easy enough to be learned in a matter of minutes, after which the dancers will progressively reach more fluidity and find renewed fun in learning variations.

Whether this results in a musical culture that is »less complex« than presentational music will evidently depend on how one defines »complexity.« Following Sacha Kagan and Volker Kirchberg's reflection on music and sustainability (who are themselves following the philosopher Edgar Morin), complexity may be considered not as »sophistication,« but as »rooted in the processes of life and most strongly expresses itself in the ordinary, the everyday and the experiential.«⁴² As such, it may be a central feature of musical practices in line with the transition movement.

Finally, we observe a particularly low degree of functional specialization in folk bals, as the roles of musicians, dancers, volunteers, and organizers are interchangeable throughout the evening, and in particular during the jam session that usually concludes the event.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴² S. KAGAN and V. KIRCHBERG, *Music and Sustainability*, 13.

Discussion

Folk bals, as they take place in the FW-B, reveal at least six features of resilient musical cultures:

- The ecological footprint, with particular attention to transport, their degree of promotion of consumption, and their resilience in response to lowered energy input.
- The capacity to increase social well-being and enhance feelings of solidarity, with particular attention to the degree of diversity of the public involved, for example in terms of generations, social class, gender, or ethnicity.
- The economic strategies adopted, with particular attention to the question of profit, accessibility of events, the use of short-circuits, and non-market inputs.
- The traditional and local anchorage, with particular attention to the need for questioning ancient models.
- The recurrence of events and their entertaining character, with particular attention to festive models likely to attract a diverse public.
- The degree of participation, with particular attention to social interactions, the place of virtuosity, the event's atmosphere, and its accessibility.

This is not intended to be a normative set of rules. Our aim is rather to provide a list of issues that scholars, musicians, and transition actors could take into account in order to articulate music and transition in creative ways.

We do not either intend to present the folk bals of the FW-B as a model that could be exported as it is. Not only do they present several weaknesses, such as the lack of social diversity, but their »transition-like« characteristics, such as the absence of nationalist ethos, may also be due to the specificities of regional contexts. Our mere contention is that folk bals in the FW-B have something to teach us about what a sustainable musical culture in the spirit of the transition movement may be like.

As we write these lines, the COVID-19 pandemic is developing globally and invites us to add one consideration: while folk bals present resilience in a low-carbon scenario, their promiscuity implies that they cannot offer alternatives during sanitary crises. This aptly illustrates how folk bals or similar practices are, in themselves, insufficient to ensure a resilient musical culture. Following Rob Hopkins,⁴³ we argue that »diversity« should remain a leading principle. The issue then is not to identify an ideal practice and promote it, but to multiply the possibilities of musicking in sustainable and enriching ways.

⁴³ R. HOPKINS, *The Transition Handbook*, 78.

Concluding Remarks

As a way of concluding, one may wonder what degree of »efficacy« musical practices like folk bals may have with regards to societal change. On this issue, it is noteworthy that their participants in the FW-B do not appear to consider their practice as a political one. As one of our interviewees stated: »I do not think it is a place where you should display your political ideas« (Louise, dancer). Thus, at this stage, the political power of folk bals probably lies in pragmatic, embodied dimensions, rather than explicit and articulate discourses. Like the festivals investigated by Joseph Wasylycia-Leis, folk bals could be defined as »living laboratories;« they open a liminal time and space where new modes of sociality are experienced.⁴⁴

In other European regions, this potential has been more explicitly articulated. In Brittany (Northwest France), *fest-noz* (a regional variation of folk bals) are currently organized according to a convention that guarantees (1) action against climate change, (2) preservation of the environment, (3) social cohesion and solidarity between territories and generations, (4) personal development for every human being, and (5) dynamics of development in line with responsible modes of production and consumption.⁴⁵ This list reflects in part the one we proposed in this paper.

Whether folk bals should become more »politicized« is questionable. The transition movement itself tends to keep some distance from traditional political activism in terms of »right-wing/left-wing« belongings, power relations, or social class struggles, privileging instead the construction of practical alternatives.⁴⁶ Furthermore, instrumentalizing music for political purposes may constitute a risky endeavor. As Sara J. Wolcott stressed, music deserves better than to be »trapped« in sustainability performance criteria; music »has a life of its own and does not conform to two-dimensional reports.«⁴⁷

However, we contend that an increased awareness of the commonalities between practices like folk bals and transition initiatives may prove mutually enriching and contribute to the emergence of novel and more resilient musical alternatives.

⁴⁴ J. WASYLYCIA-LEIS, *Celebrating Community*, 180-81.

⁴⁵ Cf. *La Charte des festivals engagés pour le développement durable et solidaire en Bretagne*. <http://www.lecollectifdesfestivals.org/collectif/lassociation/la-charte/>

⁴⁶ Philip BARNES, Transition Initiatives and Confrontational Politics: Guidelines, Opportunities, and Practices, in: *Western Political Science Association 2016 Annual Meeting* (San Diego, 2016). [https://wpsa.research.pdx.edu/papers/docs/Transition%20initiatives%20and%20confrontational%20politics%20\(Barnes\).pdf](https://wpsa.research.pdx.edu/papers/docs/Transition%20initiatives%20and%20confrontational%20politics%20(Barnes).pdf)

⁴⁷ S. J. WOLCOTT, *The Role of Music in the Transition Towards a Culture of Sustainability*, 15.

*Sažetak***Tranzicija i fleksibilnost u glazbi iz vizure narodnih balova**

Počevši s opažanjima o narodnim balovima u Belgiji istražujemo mogućnost glazbene kulture vezano uz projekt tranzicijskih inicijativa. Narodni balovi su moderni plesni događaji nadahnuti predindustrijskim ruralnim svečanostima. Usredotočili smo se na francuske govorne regije Belgije, odnosno područje na kojemu su obojica autora bili djelatni dvanaest godina. Pokret tranzicijskih inicijativa ima za cilj transformiranje lokalnih društava s inicijativama 'odozdo' kako bi se postigla veća fleksibilnost u odnosu na buduće društvene i ambijentalne šokove. Pristupamo im na određen način putem temeljnog rada Roba Hopkinsa.

Iz naše ankete izvukli smo šest obilježja za koje smatramo da karakteriziraju fleksibilne glazbene prakse. Taj popis ne smatramo setom preskriptivnih pravila niti veličanjem narodnih balova po sebi, nego više kao niz ključnih ishoda koje bi znanstvenici, glazbenici i sudionici tranzicije trebali uzimati u obzir kako bi na kreativne načine artikulirali glazbu i tranzicijske inicijative.

Obilježja koja ističemo su: 1) potreba za niskim ekološkim pritiskom i elastičnošću kao odgovor na nisku ulaznu energiju; 2) potencijal za uvećanje društvenog blagostanja i solidarnosti; 3) uporaba posebnih gospodarskih strategija (privilegiranje neprofitnih, netržišnih i vezujućih alternativa); 4) lokalno i tradicionalno sidrište događaja; 5) njihov opetovani i zabavni karakter; 6) stupanj sudjelovanja koji pružaju publici.

Zaključujemo s raspravom o učinkovitosti glazbe kao vektora društvenih promjena i sa sugestijom da se povećana svijest puka o glazbenim događajima poput narodnih balova i tranzicijskih inicijativa može očitovati međusobnim obogaćivanjem i pridonijeti pojavi inovativnih i fleksibilnijih glazbenih alternativa.