

The Flemish Lions Singing: Community imagination and historical legitimisation of nationalism at the 76th Flemish National Song Festival

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to examine how music is used as a tool to express political claims as well as to strengthen the collective consciousness of the Flemish nationalist movement in the context of the 76th Flemish National Song Festival (*Vlaams Nationaal Zangfeest*, VNZ). The VNZ is a music festival focused on preserving and spreading the cultural heritage represented by vernacular, popular, and historical repertoires of Flanders, the Dutch-speaking community of Belgium. This festival, rather than being simply a cultural event, is a political meeting of Flemish nationalists, where music is used to gather people and to express this political embeddedness. The author's objective in this paper – drawing on a relational approach that sees music as a socially embedded practice whose political meaning is defined within the relations occurring in live performance – is to shed light on the way in which music participates in the collective imagination of the Flemish community in ethnic terms and contributes to the diffusion and legitimisation of the political issues of Flemish nationalists. To this end, the paper firstly outlines the conflict between the Dutch and French-speaking communities in Belgium, the modern Flemish movement and the potential role, in this context, of a social practice such as music. In this part the theoretical perspective and methodology are clarified. In the second part the show is analysed through an ethnographic approach based on direct observation, non-directive interviews and textual analysis of songs. The paper concludes by highlighting how music provides the Flemish movement with a framework through which political issues are articulated and people's commitment to the ideals of Flemish nationalism are displayed.

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DOING MUSIC IN A DIVIDED SOCIETY

BELGIUM'S COMMUNITY CONFLICT

The history of Belgium as an independent state has always been characterized by the conflictual relationship between the Flemish and French communities claiming subnational autonomy and even independence (Martiniello, 1998). For a long time French was imposed as the only official language and a cultural movement seeking the recognition of Dutch appeared in the mid-1800s. This heterogeneous movement composed of intellectuals, writers and poets gave birth to several groups and associations promoting Flemish culture. Music, along with poetry and literature, was among the main means through which Flemish cultural identity was defined and reinforced. After World War I, this movement turned into a political organization. Along with the language question, radical activists started to demand social equality and greater political autonomy (Swyngedouw, 1995). The country's cultural differences, combined with the growing socio-economic imbalances between Flanders and Wallonia (the French-speaking part of Belgium), fostered the political discourse of the Flemish movement.

Major political forces responded to these voices with progressive state reforms in order to pacify potential conflicts (Martiniello, 1993). In 1962, Dutch was legally recognized as the official language of Flanders, the northern part of Belgium, and a language border cutting the country in half horizontally was marked out. A process of structural devolution started a few years later, culminating in 1993 with the last constitutional revision that transformed Belgium into a federal state with three language communities (French, Flemish and German) and three political regions (Wallonia, Flanders and Brussels). The communities have responsibility for 'person-related' matters such as health care, social policies, education, language and cultural policies. The regions have jurisdiction over so-called 'space-bounded' questions such as the economy, the environment, and infrastructure.

This institutional recognition in territorial form of distinct cultural identities based on language has, however, neither resolved nor mitigated the political tensions and problems of cohabitation within the national state. National unity remains problematic and claims for autonomy still exist in both regions. Nowadays, Belgium is described by political scientists as a 'disunited' federation (Dieckhoff, ed., 1996) whose political life remains conflictual. Although there is reciprocal recognition between the two communities, the establishment of two different political environments as a consequence of the federalization determines an evident lack of dialogue and the communitarization of every public question (Swyngedouw, 1995). Most of the problems that the country is called to solve are seen as the impact on national politics of the limited autonomy of the regions; most of the solutions proposed or adopted are the expression of a single part of the country, often in contrast with the other one.

In the last twenty years, as an effect of federalism, new political spaces for political forces demanding further state reforms and more autonomy have been opened. At

the same time, right-wing parties have arrived on the political scene in Flanders and fostered conflict that assumes an ethno-nationalist dimension (Spruyt, 1995). The Flemish movement, rather than leaving the field of culture, is enhancing a strong sense of pride among Flemings in their cultural identity, historical heritage and ethnic peculiarities. Currently, the militant wing of the movement is dominated by a network of aggressive organizations such as the extreme-right party *Vlaams Belang* ('Flemish Interest', VB) the action group *Voorpost* ('Outpost') and the *Nationalistische Studentenvereniging* ('Nationalist Student Association'), but also by the nationalist mainstream party *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* ('New-Flemish Alliance', N-VA). These organizations aim to establish a Flemish autonomous republic stressing the need for autonomy in economic, welfare and social security questions. However, as well as the typical forms of nationalist construction (Barth, 1969; Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Anderson 1991), their discourse relies on a very strict definition of the Flemish people according to a particular idea of *kulturnation*. In their ideology, the political community of Flanders would be connected with a particular ethnic group. Contemporary Flemish nationalism postulates that the structural connection between the Flemish cultural community and the political region is a historically coherent fact. The political discourse often moves from an economic to a cultural axis in order to legitimate itself and to locate a more popular consensus; cultural practices, as usual, play a crucial role in the ideal construction of nationalism in this context.

A RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON MUSIC

In the last few decades, Flemish traditional music has seen a vibrant revival involving artists such as Miel Cols, Eddy Wally, Wannes Van de Velde, Willem Vermandere and many others. A renewed interest in folk culture led to the organization of festivals and thematic events focused on the protection and circulation of Flemish historical repertoires. As it has not had its equivalent in Wallonia, this revival process is strongly anchored in a local rather than national dimension.

The VNZ is a music festival aimed at preserving and spreading the cultural heritage represented by vernacular, popular and historical Flemish repertoires. The first edition, directed by the singing teacher Willem de Meyer, dates back to the early 1930s. As one of the most active supporters of Flemish music, de Meyer gave birth to the *Algemeen Nederlands Zangverbond* or ANZ ('Dutch Music General Alliance') marking a strong connection between this association and the festival. The 76th edition took place on March 3, 2013 at the Lotto Arena, an indoor events hall located in Antwerp. Everything, from art direction to financial support, was provided by the ANZ in partnership with local activities and sponsors. This association describes itself as acting on behalf of Flanders with the aim of promoting Flemish musical traditions, fostering the cultural symbolism of Flemish music and preserving the local music heritage for future generations.¹ Its action is not limited to the organization of the festival: it also focuses on collecting and digitizing scores as well as on supporting small labels, advertising concerts and selling albums and books. Being part of the *Overlegcentrum van Vlaamse Verenigingen* ('Consultation Center of Flemish Associations', OVV), the ANZ, however, is something more than a cultural

¹ <http://anz.be/over-ons/>

cooperative, at least in concrete terms. With the understanding that the OVV aims, in turn, at developing the Flemish identity in social, cultural, economic, environmental and political domains,² the associations included in this network represent the extra-parliamentary side of the contemporary Flemish movement. In fact, the political direction of the ANZ is quite evident and it is no surprise that its president Erik Stoffelen is involved in different groups and associations whose tasks go beyond cultural proselytism. While he is active in preserving and re-evaluating Flemish music, Eric Stoffelen is also an active member of the *Aktiekomitee Vlaamse Sociale Zekerheid*, the Flemish Committee for Social Security,³ which is another nationalist association that, as its name suggests, has little to do with culture. In this framework, an event such as the VNZ is clearly imbued with political rather than simply cultural value. Music, offering a sense of the subjective in the collective (Hall and du Gay, 1996, p. 110), is used here to symbolize the Flemish collective identity whilst providing a sense of place that involves notions of difference and social boundary (Stokes, 1994, p. 4), separating Flemings from other groups. But it also exceeds its aesthetic limits (Said, 2008) in this representation; it overcomes any historical, textual or formal meaning as its significance is defined within the interaction of the issues and powers of the socio-political environment in which it occurs. Even if music's contents are often located as much in the expressive form as in the lyrics, in this festival the songs proposed are less meaningful in themselves than the live performances in which their meaning passes through processes of negotiation and re-invention. Although this meaning has been defined by the author, the singer or the producer, the political context within which the music is embedded may redefine and change it or even invent a new sense. This festival is a total social performance (Eyerman and McCormick, 2006) as it is a moment that fuses together the different elements characterizing the symbols and the actors involved, as well as the powers acting in the context of the *mise-en-scène*. It is an empirical situation of music-in-action in which musical objects are used as social texts representing shared values and collective memories. This paper aims to observe the ways in which these are mobilized to create spaces for experimentation with political projects (Acord and DeNora, 2008).

METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

According to the relational perspective that inspires this work, music's meanings lie in action rather than in object (Small, 1998). Methodologically speaking, this means that we need to do more than report the words spoken or the lyrics sung. Traditional musicologists remain focused on the textual dimension of music, but the limits of such an approach are clear in this case study. From the perspective of cultural studies, on the other hand, the audience and all the dynamics of reception are at the centre of music analysis. Most of the time, the actual behaviour of the actors involved in the performance as well as their mutual interaction are underestimated by theorists, and there is still contention as to how best to approach music studies (Bennet, 2000). In the case of the VNZ, it is the relationships between text, context and people that provide the show with the social and political symbology we aim to describe. For this

² <http://ovv.be/page.php?ID=3>

³ <http://www.akvsz.org>

reason, we need to acknowledge the other gestures and forms of expression that constitute the event (Street, *et al*, 2008) and our approach has to integrate text (the music itself), context (the contingent situation of music's production or consumption), and action (the situated act of performing and interpreting meaning) (Eyerman and McCormick, 2006, p. 122).

The next section is titled 'Phenomenology of the Performance' in order to stress the analytical perspective lying at the heart of this case study. Phenomenological analysis is, according to Schutz (1967), observation of the social world as it is constructed and interpreted by people in their everyday lives. Music performance is a social fact, a lived experience whose constitutive processes, elements and meanings are always socially formed (Goettlich, 2014), and which therefore needs to be analysed socially.

In light of this, we describe and analyse two dimensions of the VNZ: firstly, the context with all the characteristics of the location, the setting, the symbols and, above all, the interaction between these elements and the people. This is a very ethnographic dimension based on direct observation of the situations before, during and after the show, and non-directive interviews with the audience. Secondly, we analyse the performance as a complex of texts, focusing on the speeches and the lyrics, and in particular on their social-contextual meanings. This dimension is based on textual analysis of the songs performed, the opening speech and all the other texts included in the libretto.

PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE PERFORMANCE

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The total political connotation is immediately evident, along with strong territorial and lingual identifications. The first impression is of the arena being decked out in yellow and black, the two colours of the Flemish flag, while the audience is welcomed by a few booths promoting the most cherished issues. Many activists discretely distribute flyers demanding a friendly separation of Flanders from Wallonia, while a group of youngsters from the *Nationalistische Studentenvereniging*, just as discretely, sell (neo)Nazi gadgets and xenophobic stickers against the accession of Turkey to the European Union (Figure 1) or even against dreadlocks (Figure 2).

Figure 1: xenophobic sticker against the accession of Turkey to the European Union



Figure 2: xenophobic sticker against dreadlocks

Among others, there is a delegation of the *Taal Aktie Komitee* ('Language Action Committee') whose merchandise explicitly calls for language laws to be respected. The most popular gadget is, however, a yellow coaster with an ironic slogan. Under a representation of a Flemish lion with a cow's udder is written '*ceci n'est pas une melkkoe*', a translingual syllogism meaning "this is not a milk cow" (Figure 3), evidently arguing against the exploitation of Flemish resources by the rest of the country.



Figure 3: the same design printed on a flyer from the nationalist satirical magazine '*t Pallieterke*

There are also some books for sale including very explicit titles such as '*Immigratie-invasie: de nieuwe kolonisatie*' ("Immigration-invasion: the new colonisation"), or '*De Ordelijke opdeling van België*' ("The orderly division of Belgium"), all published by Uitgeverij Egmont, one of the main sponsors of the event as well as the official publisher of the Flemish nationalist movement. Space constraints prevent us from questioning the subjects of these books any further. However, this colourful welcome highlights how the VNZ immediately appears to have a strong political connotation that is not directly related to the music itself but revolves around a set of meaningful dynamics that make this performance a moment of total signification. These elements may be seen, using Ervin Goffman's terminology, as located in 'micro-territories' of signification included in the 'macro-territory' of the representation (Goffman, 1959).

Getting into the arena allows one to have a wide view of the stage. The public occupies the upper and lower terraces decorated with Flemish banners and flags, overlooking a large square area dedicated to dances and parades. Beyond this area, a stairway goes up to the main stage which accommodates a symphony orchestra and a large choir. On the left hand side there is a smaller stage with electric instruments. The age of the singers seems to be quite advanced, like the audience sitting on the lower terrace. Upstairs there are more families, kids and some small group of students wearing hats and stripes of the above mentioned *Nationalistische Studentenvereniging*, difficult to distinguish from a large delegation of the *Vlaams Nationaal Jeugdverbond* ('Flemish National Youth League') in uniform. We look undeniably out of place, and in spite of a very relaxed atmosphere, one of them, a girl in her twenties, soon approaches, asking us in English to show our tickets. They are obviously valid, and she seems to be embarrassed by our replying in Dutch. We have been the objects of curiosity for a while, but no one else has approached us.

The concert consists of six different parts introduced by an overture and ending with a grand finale. Everything is organized in a one-hundred-page libretto whose cover image, also used for the posters, is a map of Flanders stylized with musical notes. The title is '*Vlaanderen@detoekomst.vl*' ('Flanders @ [at] the future') written like an e-mail address with the invented 'vl' domain. An evident desire to improve youngsters' participation, or at least to use these symbolic elements in order to refresh the fashion of the event, is at the base of the whole performance, even if it seems to be in contradiction with the mostly traditional and historical repertoire that the audience is supposed to enjoy. '*Toekomst*' ('future') is one of the most frequent words indeed, as a leitmotif that persuades people to look forward and not to give up the struggle for autonomy in a temporal perspective. The libretto is quite ambiguous in itself, being composed of pages of advertising alternating with music scores and texts. On the one hand, advertisements for Flemish activities, shops, meetings and events give the impression of a very strong and carefully bounded community involved in the organization, or at least in the financial support, of the festival. On the other hand, one can see the symbolic magnification of the musical art liturgically represented in its most sophisticated form of 'written music'. Even if most of the audience is probably unable to read them, the musical scores represent a tangible cultural heritage to be preserved. And at the same time they work as a symbolic device to legitimate music according to the categories of common sense, relocating a repertoire of traditional songs in the aesthetic sphere of high culture. This dynamic is quite evident in the words of B.M., a 41-year-old woman from Antwerp attending the show:

[...] it is great to see our fathers' and grandfathers' songs celebrated, isn't it? I think this is a big preservation opera... it is not about stupid stuff... it is about traditional music written on music paper! We have a very rich culture that has been forgotten for far too long... We have to make an effort to diffuse it, above all among youngsters⁴. *Antwerp – 10/03/2013*

⁴ All the following non-directive interviews have been collected during several meetings in the aftermath of the festival, with the support of multimedia and textual material. For reasons of narrative style, the conversations are reported using present form, in order to give the impression of happening during the show.

This particular feeling, the need to unfold and endorse cultural heritages perceived to be in danger, is another key point of the event. In fact, both aesthetic and symbolic elements seem to hover between past and present, or perhaps more accurately between a rich golden age of high moral principles to be restored, and a new autonomous path to be taken in order to break free from the country's unitarian perspective that is considered to threaten these values.

The show is introduced by the Theban trumpets of the *Katholieke Studenten Actie* ('Catholic Student Action') from Oudenaarde, whose fanfare makes a solemn interlude that will play several times throughout the exhibition. After the first six songs performed by the orchestra and choir, with a modern dance interlude of the students from *Dance@cademy*, the claims of B.M. find support in the opening speech given by Erik Stoffelen, even if the issue of heritage preservation through concrete actions shifts from a cultural to an explicitly political axis:

Flemish friends, the celebration of our 75th anniversary is still fresh in the memory of many. We will continue and we continue to do it now because the Flemish movement remains necessary. There must be an unbounded Flemish voice that continues to follow the interests of Flanders critically.⁵

Afterwards, the will to be up with the times suddenly mingles with a harsh and direct disapproval of the current political situation and decisions:

The motto of this Song Festival is: *'Vlaanderen@detoekomst.vl'*. We deliberately chose this for a modern motif, leaving nothing to be desired for clarity. In these times of crisis, it is more important than ever that Flanders takes the reins in its hands. It is evident that we get just peanuts from this sixth state reform.⁶ Even more, many impure concessions were eagerly set in concrete in our suffocating, strictly delimited constitution.

Towards the end, the political critique becomes more explicit in its denouncement of a state of institutional and cultural hegemony of the French-speaking community and finally refers to other political systems from which it takes its inspiration:

The public prosecutor in Brussels must now belong to the French language group. Nowadays, whoever has a Dutch degree cannot be prosecutor or labour officer in Brussels.[...] The Flemish order rightly calls this discrimination. Even more this is pure racism! Where is the Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism to denounce this? [...] Our prosperity and well-being are at stake. Our future lies more than ever in Flanders. The extension 'vl' in our motto symbolizes our value and attention to Flemish symbolism and above all our faith in a Flemish state. We urgently want a two-letter extension such as Denmark, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and many other self-conscious nations, that proves that they are not too small to cap their own raising.

It is clear that music moves to the background since it is no longer mentioned. This speech revolves, indeed, around two main ambiguities when considered in relation to

⁵ All translations from Dutch are the author's.

⁶ Here the reference is to the most recent of the six state reforms that transformed Belgium from a unitary to a federal state. The sixth reform was established after the 2011 political crisis and 541 days of negotiations during which Belgium was left without government.

the official cultural aims of the festival: firstly it relies on political propaganda more than cultural promotion; secondly it refers, at the same time, to a historical memory to be preserved and principles of modernity to be pursued. The central themes, linking past and present, are always the questions of independence and the making of a Flemish state. At this moment of the discourse, music seems to be nothing more than a pretext to introduce the discourse about common history and collective memory, or to warrant the authenticity of Flemish culture and traditions. However, the audience does not seem to be disturbed by these contradictions and happily applauds the speech.

The show goes on to another part titled *'Dit is een lied voor de mensen van morgen'* ("This is a song for the people of tomorrow"), another six-song set in which more space is dedicated to dancing. Apart from any aesthetic or technical judgement, the involvement of non-professional dancers coming from a locally identifiable school is definitely meaningful at the symbolic level. The *Dance@cademy* has proudly brought its young students from the region of Antwerp to the Lotto Arena, making tangible the sense of locality and collective commitment. The participation of groups and institutions symbolically and materially linked to the territory determines direct recognition of the collectivity to which the audience probably belongs. It marks the passage from an imagined to a materially represented community. In this sense, the performance becomes participatory (Roy, 2010a, p. 153) to the extent that the distinction between performer and audience dissolves as the former are recognized as part of the latter. This feeling is noticeable in the opinion of D.G., a 48-year-old man from Mechelen:

[...] they [the dancers] are good despite being so young, and it is good to have seen their effort to entertain us... you have to consider that they are coming from a little village not so far from my own home, so I would not be surprised to recognize some of their parents. This show is definitely about us. *Mechelen – 13/04/2013*

Direct recognition of the individuals and groups involved in the show is important in promoting collective experience grounding collective identity and in providing a sense of belonging to something greater than the individual. As Ron Eyerman pointed out in outlining the role of face-to-face musical experiences in the making of white power movements, music is central in itself to getting the message out, but collective experience is the core of collective identification inasmuch as it may be more the product of less explicit means than text-based ideological messages (Eyerman, 2002, pp. 449-450).

The youth atmosphere pervading the show is a little bit forced as it gives the impression of a middle-aged audience enjoying the dance exhibition of their own offspring. However, this continues through the third part whose six songs are performed by an electric band playing on the smaller stage. The first piece is sung by a pretty girl in her teens cheered by a small crowd of teenagers at the foot of the stage, but the aesthetic symbolism becomes political once more when a Flemish lion is projected onto the back of the stage while the band is playing a song titled *'Vlaanderen'* ("Flanders"). This part of the show is quite modern in terms of aesthetic and style, with the band performing most of songs.

The orchestra resumes in the fourth part, and the audience becomes more actively engaged. Before the last song there is a long introduction performed by the Theban trumpets of KSA whose themes are repeated back by the public. When the bands of KSA and VNJ arrive on stage, the atmosphere becomes more solemn. The *Jeugdmuziekkapellen* ('Youth Music Bands') parade in close military order all over the arena, wearing their uniforms and displaying the banners and flags of their organizations. This showcase of discipline seems to fascinate the public inasmuch as it symbolizes the embodiment of particular values and principles which supposedly underpin the Flemish identity. As B.M. again says:

Have you seen those guys? I mean the parade, it was stunning! They have played very well... it is not so easy I suppose. You may enjoy this thanks to their hard work and tough preparation [...] it's worth passing down these values to the youngsters, because when we are talking about our identity, our well-being, and our future we are definitely talking about them. *Antwerp – 10/03/2013*

Once again the representation assumes symbolic meanings as it is perceived as an ideal demonstration of good society coherently attributable to a form of local identity. Fusing socialisation and ideological discipline, the parade demonstrates to the audience common values in the same way as the *Grand March* expressed, for example, the virtues of a good Fascist in the context of right-wing movements (Macklin, 2013). Probably to fade down this solemnity, the following performer is the comedian Karel Declercq, doing fifteen minutes of situational satire about politics and society, including an acclaimed imitation of the socialist and French-speaking Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo.

After another modern dance interlude, the sixth and last part seems to be a key moment in the symbolic economy of the whole performance. This is the appearance of Miel Cools, pioneer of the Flemish *kleinkunst* (a sort of cabaret, a very popular genre in Flanders, Germany and the Netherlands, mostly performed by solo artists singing in Dutch and playing acoustic guitar): he is celebrated as a true idol with a standing ovation. The VNZ honours him with a large group of children coming and going for about ten minutes, bringing roses to compose a big bouquet. Cools' greatest hits are accompanied by the public singing together and clapping their hands; the atmosphere is nostalgic and informal at the same time, with the artist making jokes despite his poor health (he will die three months later). The collective historical memory embodied in the public figure of the artist is celebrated in this moment of participation. Miel Cools and his locally successful songs are proudly acclaimed as a concrete heritage to protect and to connect to younger generations. The celebration goes beyond the artist himself who becomes a symbol of the older generation that can teach good values to youngsters, as well as of the chronological continuity of the community. Speaking of this, a 24-year-old student from Leuven named A.M. says:

I didn't really know Miel Cools... I mean I have heard some of his songs sometimes and I liked them [...] it is a little bit old for me, I mean it is not my favourite genre, but I think I have to respect it anyway, because it is part of the history of our people. I am here not only to enjoy myself but also to learn something about my own culture... the culture that represents us. *Leuven – 14/05/2013*

The will to imagine a community to belong to becomes pre-eminent in the grand finale. After a lively medley performed by the musicians all together, the public stands paying homage to three *Nationale liederen* ('National songs'): the former South African national anthem 'Die Stem Van Suid-Afrika' ("The Call of South-Africa"), the national anthem of the Netherlands 'Wilhelmus', and the Flemish official anthem 'The Vlaamse Leeuw' ("The Flemish Lion") sung with the right hand over the heart. This moment represents the acme of the imaginative apparatus implemented in this total performance. As A.M. highlights:

I am feeling incredibly emotional now because it is about us [...] you are not Flemish and you maybe don't understand, but I can see my folk here in the flesh... what the politicians talk about is here standing up and singing together! *Leuven – 14/05/2013*

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The VNZ is, even textually, still an ambiguous performance. The first text of the program is a sort of poem written by Pieter Bauwens, editor-in-chief of the pro-independence journal *Doorbraak* ('Breakthrough') in the guise of a political propagandist. Similarly to the opening speech given by Erik Stoffelen, this text deals with music only in order to take opportunities to outline political questions. However, while the opening speech barely refers to the VNZ as a cultural historical moment, this poem only mentions music when asking if the festival should be a moment of happy celebration or, because of the politically constrictive situation of Flanders, it should not:

Welcome
 To the 76th song festival.
 we are together to sing festively
 but is this the time for merry tunes?
 [...]
 This is a time
 that a Flemish minority still rules,
 that francophonie still dictates
 and sneers at Flanders and the Flemings
 in the hope that the mood/vote⁷ (re)turns
 for the conservation of this chained land.

Moving forward, after a passionate critique of the King, who like a 'medieval satrap' does not recognise his bastard children, the discourse returns to music assuming the traits of a direct call for independence:

This is *the* time
 to sing.
 The song of different, the song of better,
 the song of future,
 the song of ruling times.
 The song of Flemish independence!

⁷ The Dutch term 'stemming' is used with the double meaning "mood"/"vote".

However, after these explicit references, the discursive order switches from being politically aggressive to melancholically nostalgic. Everything, from titles to lyrics, seems to rest between explicit expressions of pride and metaphoric references, revolving around iconographic descriptions of beautiful landscapes and a virtuous folk, combined with mythological references to battles and battle cries.

The first part of the show concerns lyrics describing villages and landscapes, nostalgic memories of bucolic tales and life stories, talking about Flanders as a forgotten paradise (*'Vlaanderen mijn land'*, "Flanders my Land") or as "the land of silence and peaceful nature" (*'Vlaanderen'*, "Flanders"). But there are also two texts, *'Klokke Roeland'* ("Bell Roeland") and *'De Blauwvoet'* ("The Blue Foot"), written by Albrecht Rodenbach, iconic author of the 19th century Flemish movement. *'Klokke Roeland'*, one of the most acclaimed songs, celebrates the famous bell of Ghent and the Flemish folk heroes Jan Yoens and Jacob van Artevelde whose bodies "still vibrate hearing the bronze voice" of the *'Klokke'*, and it ends with the battle cry *'luide triomf in Vlanderland!'* ("loud triumph in Flanders!"). *De 'Blauwvoet'*, chosen as the hymn of the 19th-century student movement calling for the pre-eminence of Flemish language against French-speaking academic institutions, emblematically starts: "now the song of Flemish sons". This song sounds like a national anthem in the version performed at VNZ, and it is still very popular among youth associations such as the KSA and the VNJ as it represents the collectivity of the *Algemeen Katholiek Vlaams Studentenverbond* ('Catholic-Flemish Student General Association'). However, it is actually well known among Flemish students in general, and is sung at meetings and parties. Despite the noble historic and symbolic value represented by this song, it is therefore a very transversal object in the fragmentation of Flemish youth culture, and it is related more to the goliardic traditions of multi-ideological student groups than to nationalist ideologies. The words of P.J., a student at the *Vrije Universiteit Brussel*, describe feelings about this song that are far from unequivocal commitment to politics or nationalism:

I don't really think most of my friends know well the history [of this song]. I have never been a member of student associations so far, but I do know that it is a student hymn, let's say [...] we sing it walking around the city and drinking together for the students' parade. Many students just sing it together to have fun, and this is not as bad as it seems to be. It is a good way to stay tuned together anyway. *Brussels – 14/06/2013*

The difference between the modes of circulation of this song among students, and the surplus of meanings that it assumes when performed in a context such as the VNZ, also shows the contradictions between the Flemish movement in its historical-ideological inception on the one hand, and the current political discourse of nationalists on the other. This traditional song is linked to common uses that are part of Flemish youth culture. But the meaning is here contextually attributed and enhanced by the performance as it serves to represent the historical source as the basis for the building of political claims. The second part of the show seems to run along similar lines to the first. The iconographic description of landscapes becomes more nostalgic, portraying progress as destroying "what yesterday was", complaining about

fish dying in “the poisoned seas”, or farmers watching “the television quiz and living in concrete boxes” (*Het dorp*, “The Village”). One of the most interesting texts is *In Vlaanderen blinkt hemel blauw* (“In Flanders the blue sky shines”) written by Guido Gezelle, another iconic author for the 19th century Flemish movement. This song is not so different from the others describing beautiful scenery, but the ending recalls the question of language:

My Flanders speaks its own language;
God gave each country its own,
and, let her be rich, let her be bare:
she is Flemish and she is mine.

The original text has been cut, but this passage remains to symbolize the diachronic continuity of the claims between past and present. Despite the fact that Flanders institutionally achieved language autonomy more than fifty years ago, this reference gives the audience the impression of an endless struggle, a traditional struggle we may say. As B.M. states:

[...] our people have always fought for independence, first of all for language independence, and here is a one-hundred-and-fifty-year-old poem to testify to this. We have to keep up the struggle until Flanders has national autonomy from Belgium [...] because Flanders is not a region, it is more than a community, it is a nation.
Antwerp – 10/03/2013

The ideology at the base of this lyric is seen in continuity with the concrete political claims of today. And the words of B.M. reflect the contradictory use of music and musical cultures to support political actions in the context of this performance. The discursive order naturally shifts from a cultural to a political axis, creating anachronistic links between 19th-century romantic nationalism and 21st-century cultural-economic nationalism.

As described above, in the third part the orchestra is replaced by an electric band playing on the smaller stage. This group of songs, relying on pop harmonies and timbres, sounds different from the rest of the show. The lyrics are focused on love themes, referring to beloved women (*Magie and Jij bent de zon*, “You are the sun”) or places (*Brussel*). The most interesting text, from our point of view, is the song *Vlaanderen* written by the *kleinkunst* artist Paul van Vliet in 1981. It is not an accident that one of its verses is the title of this part of the show: *Ik voel mij in Vlaanderen zorgeloos, ik voel me in Vlaanderen vrij* (“In Flanders I feel carefree, in Flanders I feel free”). In this text there is continual reference to the virtues of Flemings as reserved but sincere and free people, but a more direct complaint suddenly appears when looking outside the community:

[...] in Flanders my sadness merges imperceptibly
with the ancient desire
that in Flanders was suspended
in villages and towns
with rich but heavy past
that Brussels (does not or) hardly mentions.

In this passage, the history of Flemings is told as being neglected by the central State, and the whole song seems to rely on those elements that deal with the identification of the community itself, and the parallel identification of what is outside its limits, in this case the political authority of Brussels.

Historical symbolism frames the fourth part. It starts with a song named *Jutho, vooruit en dapper* (“Jutho, onward and brave”) about the famous ‘*Guldensporenslag*’ (“Battle of the Golden Spurs”) fought on July 11, 1302, official celebration day of the Flemish Community, between the French feudal army and the militia of the Flemish cities that rose up against Philip IV. The text epically tells of the feat of the hero Willem van Saeftinghe “who came from Ter Doest” to unsaddle the French captain Robert II of Artois from his horse. This iconic battle is also remembered in another piece titled *De trommel slaat* (“The drum beats”), a folk song saying, among other things, that “the future belongs to us, boys. We are going to hit the enemy and collect golden spurs”. But the most interesting piece of this part is perhaps *Wij zijn bereid* (“We are ready”) composed by Jef Tinel, a well-known composer who directed the VNZ several times between 1939 and 1966. The verse *Vlaand'ren wordt groot* (“Flanders is great”) gives the title to this part of the festival. Looking at the lyrics, it is interesting to note that the subject ‘*Vlaanderen*’ here has actually replaced the original ‘*Dietsland*’ (“Dutchland”), which was the imaginary state of all Dutch-speaking people claimed by the political movement named ‘*Groot-Nederland*’ (“Greater-Netherlands”) that emerged at the end of the 19th century in Europe. The choice to change subjects may be seen in two ways: to bypass the stigma of collaborationism carried by this movement, but also to create a sense of historical and ideological continuity of Flemish nationalist thought.

It is interesting to note how the language issue recurs in the following part, according to a different discursive register and to meta-textual references, together with claims for freedom. On the one hand, there are romantic verses saying “my language is the sun of my garden, my language is a song of May” (*Het lied van Nele*, “The song of Nele”); on the other hand, there are passionate mottos claiming: “fight for your rights, your freedom and your language! [...] you knew the power of your oneness” (*Heropstanding*, “Resurrection”), or arousing people to sing together “my Flanders above all, that's the chorus, it is the love song that I will never forget [...] And banging sounds: shield and friends, and I see my Flanders free” (*Mijn Vlaanderen heb ik hartelijk lief*, “My Flanders I have dearly”).

Houden van kun je bij Miel toch wel leren (“Love, you can surely learn from Miel”) is the moment dedicated to Miel Cools' repertoire. The texts of the four songs performed deal with the main themes that we have analysed so far. *Een soldaat van Napoleon de Grote* (“A soldier of Napoleon the Great”) is a war tale in which romantic images are no longer about battles and conquests, but are dedicated to the nostalgia of “a small town where we never came [...] and the girl of my heart”. *Boer Bavo* (“Farmer Bavo”) describes the virtues of the folk telling the story of a farmer who “paid taxes to the fatherland [...] went to mass every Sunday [...] worked fervently throughout the year [...] cared for his exemplary family”, but he actually has a dissolute life at night. This double face is told through ironic metaphors

according to the style of *kleinkunst*: Bavo “[...] pinched the kittens at night”. However, the central theme is still love, loudly celebrated in the hit ‘*Houden van*’ (“Love”) whose chorus “love, love, it is not very often [...] but no man can do without it” is sung by the artist together with the audience and choir. Nobody seems to question the fact that in the libretto, between the texts of ‘*Boer Bavo*’ and ‘*Houden van*’, there are some aggressive banners of the NSV and the ethno-nationalist group *Voorpost* with propaganda urging people to join them “[...] in the offensive” and to raise funds for their activities and formation (Figure. 4). This apparently ambiguous detail is, however, in line with the symbolic dichotomy of the whole performance.



Figure 4: propaganda flyer from 'Voorpost'

The grand finale's atmosphere relies on a sort of liturgical tribute to the ‘*Nationale Liederen*’ (“National Songs”). The first song is ‘*Die Stem van Suid-Afrika*’ (“The Call of South Africa”), the former South African anthem written in Afrikaans. More than for its literal meaning, this hymn is interesting to analyse because it is actually performed in its most contested version. ‘*Die Stem van Suid-Afrika*’ was the national anthem from 1957 to 1994. In 1997, after the abolition of apartheid and the change in regime towards a multicultural and democratic society, South Africa adopted its new hybrid anthem that includes the five most widely spoken languages of the country. The choice to perform only the first verse of the apartheid era's anthem is probably a provocation more than a concrete political act, but it deals with symbolic meanings to the extent that this final part of the show aims at broadening the sense of community of Dutch-speaking countries beyond the territorial limits of Flanders.

The second piece is a verse from ‘*Wilhelmus van Nassouwe*’ (usually known just as the ‘*Wilhelmus*’), the national anthem of the Netherlands:

My shield and reliance
are you, o God my Lord.
It is you on whom I want to rely,
never leave me again.
I may remain pious,
your servant forever,
and defeat the tyranny,
which pierces my heart.

The text here is more interesting because of this reference to a given state of oppression to fight. Like many anthems, the *‘Wilhelmus’* is about a struggle to achieve national independence. It is of little importance that Willem van Oranje did not actually fight against the King of Spain for the interests of Flanders; the language continuity between Flanders and the Netherlands is enough to overcome any historical incongruity, and to strengthen the causal nexus between ethnic, cultural or lingual homogeneity, and national political independence.

The last hymn is, obviously, *‘De Vlaamse Leeuw’* (“The Flemish Lion”), official anthem of Flanders. The two stanzas and chorus are more explicit than any comment:

They will never tame him, the proud Flemish Lion,
Even if they threaten his freedom with fetters and with shouts.
They will never tame him, as long as one Fleming lives.
As long as the Lion can claw, as long as he has teeth.

Time devours cities, no thrones will ever last,
Armies may go under, but a people never dies.
The enemy comes marching in; surrounded by mortal danger
We laugh at his anger: the Flemish Lion is here!

They will never tame him, as long as one Fleming lives.
As long as the Lion can claw, as long as he has teeth.

However, the nexus between these words and the political issues of Flemish separatism may be read, once more, as the result of an ideological invention. The Flemish anthem, noticeably, is a nationalist battle song. But the national feeling that it arouses has nothing to do with the current questions of Flemish nationalism. In the song, the enemy, even though French-speaking, is France, the historical enemy, the one from the Battle of the Golden Spurs (1302). The text written in 1847 by Hippoliet Van Peene does not refer to the separation of Flanders from Belgium, and no reference is made to Flanders as a nation, a country or even a territory. It is not possible, indeed, to extrapolate the original meaning of Van Peene’s song from the historical context in which it emerged as a Flemish patriotic song and as the symbol of the Flemish movement. Hippoliet Van Peene, certainly a Flemish rather than a Belgian patriot, wrote the anthem at a time when the struggle of the movement was based on the emancipation of Flemings from the political, social and cultural domination of French-speaking elites (Willemsen, 1969). However, this had a

completely different meaning at the time, and was not in contrast with the existence of a unitary Belgium⁸.

In spite of this textual historical inconsistency, the song is used in a way and in a context that empowers its meaning with a sense of continuity between the 14th-century battle for the political emancipation of the Flemish States (the epoch to which the lyric refers), the 19th-century struggle for the socio-cultural emancipation of Flemings from the French-speaking elite (Hippoliet Van Peene's epoch), and the claims for political and economic independence of contemporary separatists. *De Vlaamse Leeuw*' is presented to the audience as a proof of the existence of a historically continuous and culturally and linguistically homogeneous Flemish Nation, and works as a material and symbolic source on which to anchor a process of construction of authenticity. In this regard, A.M. Says:

Things like this testify to our state of oppression. We are actually a nation but no one recognizes us to be so, and we are supposed to be a region. But I was wondering: how could a region proudly have a national anthem? It doesn't make sense, don't you think? *Leuven – 14/05/2013*

CONCLUSIONS

The VNZ represents an event where music is not just an occasional and entertaining practice, but rather takes an important role in the political life of Belgium. Culture and cultural preservation do not seem to be the vocation of the festival in itself but rather a means to an end. Music provides a base on which political actions, such as the territorial independence of Flanders or the struggle against the centrality of a Belgian state perceived as hegemonic and constrictive, are articulated. Flemish nationalism is the framework within which the show, with all the actors involved, the different kinds of music, the material-aesthetic devices and the actions performed, is embedded. The *mise-en-scène* aims at representing a homogeneous community whose values are pure and sacrosanct. But the object to be preserved is neither a particular musical repertoire nor the Flemish cultural heritage as such. The live show appears to be a total aesthetic experience providing collective memory, showing the common values of a social group and spreading awareness of the place to which it belongs (Stokes, 1994). Music is here exploited according to its meaningful symbolism, as artificial aesthetic classification and material source that serves to anchor political action to an appropriately displayed history. The show provides, in fact, a dynamic nexus between oleographic descriptions, epic stories and political claims for independence, manipulating the symbolic value of traditional songs to implement confrontational political actions (Mattern, 1998).

The community is the object to be preserved and empowered in its capacity to achieve its aims. The cultural peculiarity of Flemings expressed through music legitimises all the concrete actions to be undertaken for the sake of its political autonomy. Flemish nationalists seem to be conscious of the most powerful effects that live music has on the structuring of collective ideologies. The VNZ is a place in

⁸ It is generally known that the Flemish Movement assumed a real political dimension only in the interwar period (see for example Willemsen, 1969; De Schryver, 1973; Hermans, 1992). Following the politicisation of the movement, a radical anti-Belgian wing began to separate itself from the pro-Belgian majority (Vos, 1998).

which music leaves the field of entertainment to be endowed with political value as well as exploited for its power of social tuning (Roy, 2010b, p. 94), and these dynamic actions rely on both textual and contextual dimensions. On the one hand, any form of textual communication expresses direct political commitment in the same way that the contextual use of these texts is embedded in a political ideology. Even if they do not have explicit political direction, the texts get their meaning from and are politically empowered by the contextual situation of the performance regardless of historical coherence. On the other hand, both the collective memories recalled in the lyrics and the contextual situation of singing together, joining arms or recognizing the performers as members of the community, affect the dynamics in which people are connected to each other and the way they feel as part of the Flemish ethnic imaginary.

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