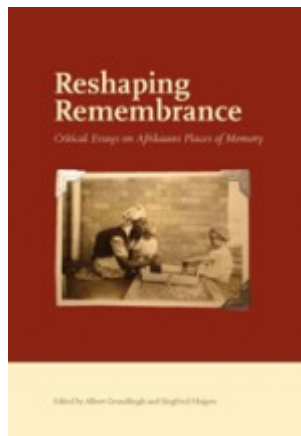


# Reshaping Remembrance ~ Boeremusiek



*In the twenties and thirties traditional boeremusiek was played widely throughout South Africa. Many evenings the sounds filled houses and public places, sounded out over our land and gladdened the hearts of Boer people.[i]*

1.  
On 18 January 2001, I am sitting in the lounge of Professor Stanley Glasser in his house in London. Glasser is the retired Head of Goldsmiths College, University of London, and an expatriate South African. We talk about South African composition, and the imperative for South African composers not to compose European music for South Africa, but rather South African music in which Europe could be interested because it is South African. Glasser advances the notion of a kind of composition engagée. He asks where the desire is to hear the sounds of the land, where the intimate engagement with the music of the people is to be found. And then he says:

*Go to a Vastrap and see what you can do with it. Go to a Vastrap evening in Nelspruit or wherever. And see what it means, the dancing, the life, it's all part of the music ... I'm talking about if there's a dance in Nelspruit on a Saturday night and all the farmers are coming in and the locals are coming in and there is a boereorkes. Where are you guys ... do you ever roll up to that sort of thing? No. It's the composer who has got to do that. It's all very well to take poems by Van Wyk Louw or Leipoldt and set them. You could set it twelve tone, whole tone, keys. Whatever you like. It doesn't matter what you use, but it's the feeling you have that's got to be very attached and respectful to the community as opposed to the university, I may put it that way. I used to live in Bethel, going to a dance in the local hall, with a Boereorkes playing. It was so lively and everybody was in a good mood and you'd see African children looking through the window and everybody was enjoying it in their own way.[ii]*

'You guys'. The musicologists. The academics, including and especially Afrikaners, in the suburbs and the universities. The only paper on boeremusiek at a local academic conference for music researchers ever heard by the present writer, was in Pretoria in 2002. The secretary of the local boeremusiek club addressed delegates at the invitation of Professor Chris Walton, a born Englishman who had recently arrived from Zurich to take up the Headship of the Department of Music at the University of Pretoria. Walton found boeremusiek fascinating, partly because of the significant similarities between the local sound and the folk music equivalent in Switzerland. It was a memorable occasion, not only because the paper was so interesting and the presenter very knowledgeable, but also because of the reactions of the small audience consisting of academics and music students. As the presenter demonstrated, on one of the concertinas he had brought with him, a retired English-speaking professor from the University of the Witwatersrand started moving to music, looked merrily to her neighbour and asked: 'Where are the days?' If the music had continued for a little while, I am convinced that she would have started to dance. The Afrikaans students and academics cringed in their seats in the lecture room. Boeremusiek is not Culture (with a capital 'C'). It is a little low, a little feeble, a little simple, a little direct, a little too close to our uncultivated needs and past.

It is therefore hardly surprising that there are no entries on boeremusiek in Jacques Malan's *South African Music Encyclopaedia*. There is no reference to boeremusiek in Jan Bouws's *Komponiste van Suid-Afrika* [Composers of South Africa] (1971), Bouws's *Die Musieklewe van Kaapstad 1800-1850 en sy verhouding tot die musiekkultuur van Wes-Europa* [The Musical Life of Cape Town 1800-1850 and its relationship to the musical culture of Western Europe] (1966), Peter Klatzow's *Composers in South Africa Today*, or in any of the twenty-five editions of the *South African Journal of Musicology* (SAMUS), or any of the congress proceedings of the then *South African Musicological Society* or the *Ethnomusicology Symposium*. Nothing either in *Ars Nova*, *Muziki*, *The Journal of the Musical Arts in Africa* or *Musicus*. The 'sounds that filled houses and public places' in the twenties and thirties clearly did not reach universities, at least not in the form of published research, research papers or documents. Academically institutionalized musicians and researchers never made this 'place' their own. The boeremusiek that 'gladdened the hearts of Boer people' is not the music of the Afrikaner intelligentsia. **[iii]**

2.

Conviviality is perhaps too light-hearted a description of the function implied here. Boeremusiek is a performance practice, a form of musical expression that links closely with memory as a performative entity. It recalls and carries memories, even maintains them. Boeremusiek is perhaps the most exemplary form of cultural expression connected to Afrikaners that can claim to maintain the collective memories of a 'group' in this way, without also imparting to the group political, social or racial definitions. In Japie Laubscher's *Ou Waenhuis* ('The old barn'), the concertina playing has a meticulous, pernickety quality, just like Japie's thin moustache. It is very different from Manie Bodenstein's broad, lyrical sound in *Lentebloeisels* ('Spring blossoms'), or Dirkie Smit's unsteady rhythm in *Mielieblare* ('Mealie leaves'). In his *Jampot Polka* ('Jam pot polka') on the accordion, Nico Castens is a virtuoso performer who can do absolutely everything and with intense energy alternates each repeated fragment with small appoggiatura's, syncopated beats or changes in articulation. The sorts of memories that Mieke Bal calls 'cultural memory' are inherent to these sounds.

The spirit of cultivation that characterized the Afrikaner in power misunderstood this energy of boeremusiek. For the Afrikaner concerned with Culture, boeremusiek was a matter of identity, of tradition, of cultural distinctness. It is therefore not strange that the FAK (Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniginge, translated here as Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Societies) Music Commission considered the matter of the 'quality of boeremusiek' in 1953. The minutes of that meeting read as follows:

*It has transpired from discussions that there is no clarity about what 'Boeremusiek' and a 'Boere-orke' ['Boeremusiek band'] really means. Originally, the bands now called 'Boere-orkeste' used to provide the accompaniment to dances. Later, they were also used at Boere events, where the term 'Boere-orke' seemed to originate. The problem of the SABC [South African Broadcasting Corporation] is that listeners are asking for more 'Boeremusiek'. [iv]*

The Gallo-music archivist and David de Lange expert Rob Allingham describes boeremusiek as follows:

*As I've come to understand it, boeremusiek is not just any type of Afrikaans music - in the minds of most of its fans (and detractors), boeremusiek can be typically categorised as an instrumental dance genre which, more often than not, features the concertina as the principle instrument to render the melodies. (There*

*are 'modernised' boeremusiek variations where the melodic leads are played with a piano accordion or even electric keyboards but the concertina, although originally of English origin, is so imbued with Afrikaner-ness in the minds of most boeremusiek fans that it has become a virtual cultural touchstone.) Another defining element is the repertoire: boeremusiek melodies draw almost exclusively on Dutch-German- French sources or sometimes, Cape Coloured/Malay influences. The characteristic off-beat rhythm that came to dominate the genre from the fifties onwards derives directly from the Cape goema-based rhythm - prior to that, the rhythm patterns were also Dutch-Germanic.***[v]**

Allingham ends his e-mail to the current writer by saying that David de Lange would not normally be described as a boeremusiek musician, as he sang instead of playing an instrument. And yet, in his book *Tradisionele Boeremusiek*, Piet Bester devotes a long section to De Lange.**[vi]** It is this uncertainty with regard to genre definitions (not unique to boeremusiek and applicable to most if not all popular music culture) that points to a living, fast-evolving practice rather than an expression in dialogue with tradition. The estrangement between a South African academic musical discourse and boeremusiek is confirmed in Piet Bester's rich notes on boeremusiek as a musical practice of autodidacts:

*One day [Hansie van Loggerenberg] heard a black man play a concertina and he stepped up to listen more closely. The Black played only one tune on an old boere concertina, but Hansie became interested. After the Black taught him a bit, he bought his own concertina and not long after he could play Sarie Marais fluently.***[vii]**

At the age of six, Fanie Bosch exchanged some of his best doves for a ukulele. After that, he also taught himself the pump organ, guitar and banjo: 'Fanie says that he never had any lessons or teaching and that he had to struggle on his own to master the concertina.'**[viii]** Oom (Uncle) Nelie Janse van Rensburg was taught the concertina by his uncle, Kerneels Pienaar, whose sheep he tended during the winter in Swaziland: 'Uncle Nelie kept his blood warm with the soft, melodious sounds of his boere concertina'.**[ix]**

Boeremusiek cannot be reduced to a nationalist discourse. There is something provisional, unregulated, spontaneous, unwritten about boeremusiek.**[x]** One day, when Fanie Bosch was busy recording an LP, ... a new tune came into his head. When the next number had to be recorded, he gave the orchestra the rhythm and the key in which he wanted to play and

*launched into the new piece. He says that it went surprisingly well and the piece was recorded without a single mistake. His banjo player, old Banjo Botha, was apparently almost crazy with frustration. He just failed to understand how something like that could be done!***[xi]**

Hendrik Susan apparently composed the number *Ons lag, sing en dans* ('We laugh, sing and dance') only minutes before a performance.**[xii]** It is the same Fanie Bosch of the improvised recording who, after he had lost two digits of his right index finger, had to do a radio broadcast with a bandaged finger. He then composed the *Seervinger wals* ("Sore finger waltz").**[xiii]**

3.  
*Die Seervinger wals*. Boeremusiek titles represent an Afrikaner topography far removed from the triumphalism of Afrikaner monuments, statues, theatre complexes and sport stadiums. And it is a topography that stirs memories rather than encourages historical reflection: *Soepvlees-polka* ('Soup-meat Polka'), *Lekker Kafferbier* ('Tasty Kaffir Beer'), *Pinana Booi* ('Banana Boy'), *Kamiesberg settees* ('Kamies Mountain Settees'), *Jou Flerrie* ('You Flirt'), *Eensaam wals* ('Lonely Waltz'), *Dik Dawid settees* ('Fat David Settees'), *Die Soebat wals* ('The Pleading Waltz'), *Lentebloeisels* ('Spring Blossoms'), *Pannekoek wals* ('Pancake Waltz'), *Ou Willie se vastrap* ('Old William's Vastrap'), *Rietspruit Galope* ('Reed Stream Gallop'), *Die Blomkool polka* ('The Cauliflower Polka'), *Die Skelmvy-wals* ('The Slap-and-tickle Waltz'), *Vaalhoed* ('Faded Hat'), *Eensaamheid* ('Loneliness').

The titles refer to food, places, love, seasons, people. The references are far removed from the exclusivities that would characterize the Afrikaner community during its years in power. We find in these titles a subtle evocation of mood and an artless poetry of existence. Karel Schoeman writes about his visits to the Free State farm of Dot Serfontein and her family:

*... what I now recognize clearly as influences, are the historical and genealogical interests of Dot's husband and the boeremusiek that he played from records. I remember one particular visit when we only departed late on that Sunday afternoon from the farm. Sitting in the back seat of the car during the long return journey to the city I saw the dusk-encroaching veldt pass by with the maudlin music inseparably a part of it: 'Eensaamheid' ['Loneliness'] by Sewes van Rensburg is particularly clear in my memory. The name, no longer the tune. First the emotion, then the rhythm and then the images and the words fit: it was that evening in the car on the road back to Johannesburg that the passage came to me*

*that I used in 'n Lug vol helder wolke [‘A sky with clear clouds’], ‘The silence and loneliness were intertwined in the sound of their words and weighed on the spirits; their music spoke of their isolation and deep silence, and of infinite space around every word and each flickering candle in the dark.’ [xiv]*

Although Schoeman writes that it is the name of the music that lingers - ‘Loneliness’ - it is impossible to separate the ‘maudlin music’ from his observations. The fact that Schoeman can’t remember the tune, but instead distinctly connects the music to the dusk-encroaching veldt separating the farm and the city, tells us something about the kind of memory work performed by boeremusiek. The representation of the past in this music is not direct, but spatially concrete, emotionally highly tuned and historically informed.

Not only the names of boeremusiek numbers evoke, create, imply the ‘isolation and deep silence, and ... infinite space around every word’, but also the names of people who made the music. Jewish names appear in the band lists. Names like Saul Benjamin (Boy) Solomon, Harry Bartz and ‘a Jew, Postma, who also played the violin’. [xv] English names too like William Schreiner (Willie) Cooper and Morgan O’Kennedy. And then the names of bands and groups: Die Soetspelers (‘The Sweet/Good Players’), Die Vyf Vastrappers (‘The Five Vastrappers’), Die Vier Transvalers (‘The Four Transvalers’), Die Vyf Voortrekkers (‘The Five Voortrekkers’), Die Vyf Dagbrekers (‘The Five Day Breakers’), Die Vier Hugenote (‘The Four Huguenots’), Die Ses Hartbrekers (‘The Six Heart Breakers’), Die Baanbrekers (‘The Pioneers’), Die Hoogekraal Orkes (‘The High Kraal Orchestra’), Die Vier Staatmakers (‘The Four Dependables’) and Die Naglopers (‘The Night Riders’), described by Rian Malan as follows:

*[To my mind De Lange is by far] the most compelling figure in the history of Afrikaans popular music. His music is electrifying. His banjo player was Coloured in days when that was unthinkable. He danced and drank like a demon. He screwed everything that moved. His band was called the Naglopers ... How cool can you get? [xvi]*

4.  
Boeremusiek was, surprisingly perhaps in the light of the rigid paternalism of the governing Afrikaner, a music also practiced by women. There was Cissie Cooper who played the piano and sang, Carolina Leeson who played the piano and dreamt the melody of *My mooi Carolina* [‘My pretty Carolina’], [xvii] Lettie Palm who played guitar, piano and concertina, Anna van Loggerenberg who played the

drums in the band of her husband, Hansie. Many women played in Pietie le Roux's Stellenbosch-boereorke: Laetitia Louw, Elise van Vuuren, Bettie van der Merwe, Annette Scheepers, Ena Krige, Lena Theron, Martha le Roux, Hester le Roux, Petra Schoeman, Rykie Smit, Anna Minnaar, Dux van Niekerk. **[xviii]** And then there is the extraordinary tale of Jo Fourie, born in Zwolle in the Netherlands in 1884. In 1934 she created her own boereorke in the Groot Marico and began to notate all the boeremusiek tunes she encountered. After her husband's death in 1939, and after her children were married off and had left the house, she began travelling though the country to find all the old and almost forgotten tunes and songs. She was particularly interested in old people who could still play or sing these songs. In the back of her car she had an old duet concertina, because many of the old people no longer had an instrument on which they could play. This quest lasted almost eleven years ... **[xix]**

It is an indication of the disregard for boeremusiek in intellectual discourse that Jo Fourie is not recognized as South Africa's first female ethnomusicologist. Stories such as these collected by Piet Bester call for the kind of historical treatment enabled by the rhetoric of fictional narrative. It emphasizes, once again, something about the kind of collective cultural memories activated by boeremusiek.

Who listens to Boeremusiek today? And what do they hear when they listen to it? One of the most beautiful stories written by Piet Bester in his ethnographic treasure trove *Tradisionele Boeremusiek* is the story of Sakkie van Wyk. His father Gert, a good violinist, farmed on a piece of land called Morkanie, close to Schweizer Reneke. Gert stopped making music after the death of his two daughters and thereafter also forbade his sons, Sakkie and Gert, to play any dance music. Gert was so talented that he could make the most beautiful sounds by blowing into the spout of a coffee kettle. Apparently the sounds thus made sometimes sounded like a violin, and sometimes like a saxophone.

The two boys secretly acquired a concertina and a guitar and started practicing in the veldt, far from the house. The instruments were hidden under a large halved paraffin drum under a bush on the bank of a small stream. **[xx]**

Hidden instruments. Secret musicking. One thinks of old instruments that can no longer be played by young people. Concertinas, banjos, accordions, pump organs. And then one thinks of empty dance halls, hotels, bars, empty barns, farm houses,

recording studios. One thinks of the clerks, hospital porters, teachers, farmers and mine captains that Piet Bester writes about. There is a hidden history in these things, in the spaces where this music sounded and in the colourful lives of the musicians. This is neither the canonized history of Western art music in South Africa, nor the now dominant history of jazz and other forms of black music performance. Boeremusiek is a kind of secret music, connected to a silenced history in an ever more competitive South African historiography. It calls for curatorship because of the pasts it allows, in ever diminishing degrees, to infiltrate the present.

## NOTES

- i. Lourens Aucamp cited in Piet Bester, *Tradisionele Boeremusiek: 'n Gedenkalbum*. Pretoria: Afrikanervolkswag (1987), unnumbered page 'Voorwoord'. Translated from the Afrikaans. All translations from the Afrikaans are by the present author.
- ii. Interview with Stanley Glasser on 18 January 2001 at his home, 46 Weigall Road, London.
- iii. There are exceptions to this generalization. Professor F.E. (Charles) Fensham was well-known in boeremusiek circles. Later State President C.R. Swart composed the Maluti song and there is a photograph of him in Piet Bester's *Tradisionele Boeremusiek* where he plays his traporreltjie (pump organ) (see p. 125). When Anton Hartman remarks that 'even the symphony orchestra' can't play the Zoutpansberg se settees like the Vier Transvalers (see p. 27 in *Tradisionele Boeremusiek*) this observation only serves as an illustration of the chasm between high and low musical culture.
- iv. Minutes of the FAK Music Commission's meeting held on Saturday 25 April 1953 in the FAK offices in Johannesburg. Translated from the Afrikaans. See PV 1/2/3/4/2/2/1, INEG, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein. Five 'solutions' were also suggested by the Music Commission, including that Anton Hartman would draft a statement on boeremusiek which would be published under the name of Stephen Eyssen 'to stimulate further discussions and criticism'.
- v. E-mail to the current writer, 20 February 2007.
- vi. Piet Bester, *Tradisionele Boeremusiek*, 50-53.
- vii. *Ibid.*, 54. Translated from the Afrikaans.
- viii. *Ibid.*, 138. Translated from the Afrikaans.
- ix. *Ibid.*, 146. Translated from the Afrikaans.
- x. Boeremusiek is a performative culture that survives mostly through oral



transmission. Piet Bester writes in *Tradisionele Boeremusiek*: 'Of course Hansie [van Loggerenberg] could read music ... The most of the old Boere musicians and even many performers today were not as privileged. '; 56. Translated from the Afrikaans.

xi. Piet Bester, *Tradisionele Boeremusiek*, 140. Translated from the Afrikaans.

xii. *Ibid.*, 66.

xiii. *Ibid.*, 139.

xiv. . Karel Schoeman, *Die laaste Afrikaanse boek: outobiografiese aantekeninge* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 2002, 399. Translated from the Afrikaans.

xv. Piet Bester, *Tradisionele Boeremusiek*, 206. Translated from the Afrikaans.

xvi. Letter of Rian Malan on Sênet, 3 July 2006. Translated from the Afrikaans. See also the significant body of correspondence between Rian Malan, Rob Allingham, CIA and Puris that appeared on LitNet about David de Lange at <http://www.oulitnet.co.za/senet/default.asp>. This 2006 correspondence is dated 14 June, 15 June, 26 June, 3 July, 10 July, 1 August and 2 August.

xvii. *Ibid.*, 17.

xviii. See list in Piet Bester's *Tradisionele Boeremusiek*, 61.

xix. Piet Bester, *Tradisionele Boeremusiek*, 130. Translated from the Afrikaans.

xx, *Ibid.*, 150.

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PV 1/2/3/4/2/2/1, INEG, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein.

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