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What’s in a picture? Or, rather, what is in a musical note?

For the music collected and transcribed by the students of MU493 (Sounds of Maine: Research Methods and Practice in Ethnomusicology), these notes have encompassed a migration history and legacy fraught with joy, hardship, tears, and camaraderie. These are the songs performed by Les Troubadours, a Franco-American women’s choir based in Lewiston, Maine, whose members students interviewed throughout the course of the spring semester, transcribing the songs that have been primarily maintained through oral tradition and compiling them into a songbook and website.

I was deeply moved with our encounters with these women—a former nun, a young mother who came to Maine from Québec in the 1950s not speaking English, another who sang Franco tunes deep into the night to alleviate her anxiety when her teenage son was out. These women all had a toughness that was counterbalanced with a vibrant joie de vivre that proved irresistible to myself and to the students. On our first field trip, the women met us with open arms, hugging each of us in turn and speaking a combination of French and English excitedly. Sitting around a long table at the Franco-American Collection at the University of Southern Maine, the women discussed their lives and soon invited us to sing the music that had been so deeply entrenched in their lives.

As the students got to know their interlocutors, it became evident that the act of singing Franco tunes together had played a critical part in bringing each woman joy, in several cases even lifting certain members out of depression. To witness such a notable correlation between music and well-being, especially among an elderly group of women from an ethnic community that has been historically marginalized, was inspiring. Indeed, more so than with traditional classes, this kind of “living class” allowed students to engage with the human condition on a very real and tangible level. Having direct interaction with these singers also enabled students to encounter little-known, local, and even family tunes often written out of history (such as lullabies and children’s songs) and to delve into the intersection between this repertoire and the multivalent migration histories and experiences of people of French descent in Maine.

In addition to conducting interviews, the MU493 students transcribed a number of songs they heard in their fieldwork, translated the songs’ texts into English, and, staying true to the mutable nature of oral tradition, arranged one of the songs (the lullaby “Ferme tes jolis yeux”) to their liking, performing it for the choir as part of the public presentation of their work. With the input of the choir members, the students then compiled this material into a final project that would be of use to the choir. Part of this project entailed a physical songbook, which presents a material object embodying the choir’s oral tradition while also providing a written musical score for those not familiar with the repertoire.