

7.1. Street musicians: the strategies of mastering the social space of St. Petersburg

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Abstract

The key question of this article is how street musicians choose places for playing music and master the urban space, adapt it for their needs, how they interact with police and other actors in urban public spaces. One of the tasks of this study is to find out whether buskers form a community with a common identity, social bonds, mutual assistance and exchange of experience.

Keywords: street musicians, urban public spaces, social space, professional community, community of practice, spatial strategies.

Introduction

In contemporary sociology the topic of street performance as a social practice is not sufficiently developed. Today, in the Russian science there is no much research directly related to the sociological analysis of the street musicians' activities, as well as their ways of mastering and adaptation of urban space for their needs. The study of this issue is very promising, because the street music performance is an integral part of the street culture, transformation and development of urban space.

Today, the big cities are perspective platforms for self-expression and self-realization of street musicians, and also for their informal economic activities. However, the Russian street musicians have to face serious problems related to the fact that in our country the activities of street musicians are prohibited and are defined as illegal business and the existing street performers are still marginalized in the eyes of the society and the state. Nevertheless, the number of street musicians is not reduced, and new generations of buskers choose this type of the activity.

Despite the legal and social barriers, street musicians today are spread around almost all the districts of St. Petersburg. They carry out their street musical performances in the underground crossings, subway trains, at subway stations and around them. They play in gardens and parks, squares, and especially in various tourist areas.

The key question of this research is how street musicians choose their places for playing music and master the urban space, adapting it for their needs, how they interact with police and other actors in urban public spaces. One of the tasks of this study is to find out whether buskers form a community with a common identity, social bonds, mutual assistance and exchange of experience (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Research objectives

The focus of my research is in the street musicians' strategies of mastering the urban social space. In order to identify and analyze these strategies, I decided:

- to create a social portrait of the modern street musician in St. Petersburg;
- to study the strategy and tactics of buskers;
- to trace the connection of communicative and creative practices of street musicians in St. Petersburg;
- to define the geography of the places for street musicians' performances;
- to describe the ways of using, mastering and adaptation the urban social space by street musicians.

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Theoretical framework

In the theoretical analysis I did the brief retrospective overview of the main approaches to the study of the categories of space. It showed that the interpretation of this phenomenon in the scientific discourse has undergone some serious transformations. In earlier concepts of determination of the space the importance of geographical location was underlined (Simmel, 1996), physicality and a close physical presence of people in the space (Lefebvre, 1991), but now due to the development of communication technologies, this localization of socio-spatial relations receded into the background. The later concepts of space can detect spaciousness in its sociality, and the human interaction becomes the key aspect of the analysis. The space is considered a dynamic structure that is located in the formation of social practices, and at the same time serves as the context and resource creation and institutionalization of these practices.

One of the main tasks of my research was to determine the processes of mastering and adaptation of the city's physical space by street musicians according to their needs. Processes of musicians' interaction between each other in the aforementioned space. In the course of theoretical analysis, I also appealed to categories "strategy" and "tactics" (Certeau, 1984) and showed that the spatial strategy of the actors can be both instrumental and (only partially) reflexive, deeply immersed into the fabric of everyday life, but the tactics are always situational, flexible, changeable and often serve to overcome the pressure and control of "strong" groups with considerable political and economic capital (city administration, police force, etc.) (Bourdieu, 2007).

Methods

The main research methods are:

- Unstructured observation, in order to secure the social relations and creative practices of street musicians as well as their ways of mastering the urban social space
- Semi-structured interviews with the musicians, needed to gain a better understanding of their work and commit their personal perception of street playing practices.

Sample

I didn't know where I'll search for the informants, and I joined the community "Buskers" in the social network "VKontakte" and was looking for informants there. Also I posted an announcement about my research on my "wall" and my friends reposted it. It gave good results musicians started to write me and to offer assistance. They also could give me phone numbers or links for their friends, other musicians. Because of the limited access to the field, I tried to interview all the musicians who agreed to cooperate. In the group of informants observed a strongly marked gender disbalance: most of my informants are men. But I wanted to know what is "female point of view" about the practice of street playing music. So then I specifically focused on the searching for female musicians, and conducted interviews with four female informants. I focused on the maximum variation sampling strategy, tried to reflect the variety of combinations of age, gender, educational level, history of the coming to the street playing music.

Social portrait of street musician

This particular empirical study represents the effort to design the social portrait of the modern street musician in St. Petersburg. It has been shown that street musicians are generally young people, predominantly male and almost all buskers are the migrants from other smaller towns of Russia. All the musicians have an elementary or general education, but the majority of it is not connected to music. At the same time, all the respondents did not work according to their specialization, as the different stages of the biographical trajectory they have opted for music lessons, including the street playing music, as the main areas of activity. For most of them it is the main source of income.

Some buskers have elementary music education - music school, or secondary – Secondary music school. Several informants have finished higher music education. Some of buskers learn to play musical instruments from more

experienced buskers. It is the reason of appearing of smaller communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), where there is a constant mutual learning through communication and joint work.

Community entry and the first performance experience

At the beginning of the study I formulated the hypothesis that in order to become a street musician, people need to overcome certain entry barriers. I assumed that the street musicians are a rather closed community with a strong hierarchy, rigid control over the "spots", possibly even with criminal protection. This hypothesis is not supported by the collected material. In contrast, among buskers community described as a fairly open and flexible, it does not interfere with the informants constructed rigid assessment criteria "true professionals", contrasting them with untrained newcomers stigmatizing the profession in the eyes of the urban public.

Motives of joining the profession of my informants were different: some of them began to busk because of the economic insolvency; someone - to overcome the fear of the public, considering performances in open urban areas an extreme workout, as a kind of rehearsal under stressful conditions; others began working on the street playing music from gambling interests, trying to empirically determine whether these performances are able to bring at least some money.

Collected narratives are full of informants' memories about the first experience of playing in urban public spaces in general and in St.-Petersburg - in particular. For the first time coming out to play on the street, most of the informants did not know what to do and how to behave. Most often, they chose a place where they previously observed a performance of other street musicians and bands. Informants, who have already had experience of the street playing music in their home towns, after moving to St. Petersburg, were not sure that the whole process is arranged here in the same manner as at their places of origin. Therefore, preparing for the first performance, they consulted with their friends, street musicians, who have already lived in St. Petersburg for a while and have the necessary experience. They usually tell newcomers what to fear and what to do in a particular situation, where to find profitable place for playing, and also explain the rules that they need to know for using playing spots. Informants, who have nobody to ask for advice, just go outside, stand in some place and start playing. Later, gradually joining in the buskers' environment, they "acquired" useful connections. During communication with their colleagues they learn the rules of street musicians behavior or acquired "field" experience while being in the need to spontaneously react on unusual, sometimes critical situations.

Informants also note that the first experience of street playing music was connected to considerable difficulties and acute emotional experiences, "I was standing, I noticed that my knees were already shaking. Then I started to sing by my own, I have such a jim-jam, like I am dancing" (*Misha, 29 yo*). Experience of the first performance as the first entry into the environment in general, can be described as a kind of initiation ritual, as long as it is accompanied by specific tests: overcoming anxiety, presentation tactics, reflection of the public and its requests. Subsequently, the practice of street playing is unusual and at first causing difficulties for fitting in as musicians, being included into street musicians environment, following the routine of the street musician lifestyle.

My informants told that their first experience playing outside was in the period when they weren't enough professional in music: "In my first time I earned exactly one ruble. Really. One ruble. The stranger approached me, put the ruble and said, "You play as long as you stand until you play good." put the ruble and said: "That is enough for you." And I knew maybe three tunes, so ... " (*Ivan, 29 yo*). Gradually, however, they increase the claims to their own professionalism. Therefore, the informants are very concerned about the abundance of half-taught musicians on the streets: they believe that these people damage the image of the profession of a street musician, create a false impression of the street musicians as stupid slackers "First of all, you should learn how to play the instrument you chose. After that, you should play about a year, or year and half. Because today we have a big fashion for African drums, djembe. And the people think that it's so easy and after two weeks of play they try to earn some money with it . They don't keep pace, they have beat deafness and play something monotonous" (*Mark, 21 yo*).

Community image-building

Informants told me stories about the musicians who use alcohol or drugs while they play music on the street. It also creates a negative opinion about street musicians in general. My informants make a clear "us and them" distinction between themselves and musicians who are usually being drunk at work. They are subject to condemnation,

negative stereotyping and exclusion from the community: "... I do not like these, in fact, very much because they are very spoiled view of street musicians, because I consider unacceptable playing drunk, etc. The musician should look beautiful, good, and that causes approval from the others. That such people do not cause approval. No, sometimes in the subway people like this tried to follow me for play with me, but I let them know that I don't want them go with me" (*Artyom, 22 yo*). "Listening to Russian rock performed by a drunken boy on the street, believe me –it's below average" (*Ivan, 29 yo*).

The behavior of musicians depends on the space in which they are located. Based on the specific space, street performers produce a variety of strategies and tactics of self and vary his repertoire, focusing on the opportunities and constraints dictated by the material performances scenery, and the type of audience, quantitatively predominant in these decorations. Relative importance and recognition, received from the public, depend on the needs and demands of the street musicians.

The mastering of space

The particular study determined the geography of the street musicians' places of performance. The most popular of them are located in the center of the Saint-Petersburg (Nevsky Prospekt, the space near the metro station "Plushchad Vosstania" (near the shopping mall "Nevsky Center"), the area near the shopping mall "Galleria", the arch of the General Staff Building, the colonnade of the Kazan Cathedral, Malaya Sadovaya Street). These places are attractive for tourists and ordinary citizens due to its "centrality". Not as popular, however no less cash place is a square in front of various metro stations, both close to the city center and located on the outskirts. In the subway there are attractive places for playing music: Green Line stations -"Mayakovskaya" and "Gostinyi Dvor", the crossing – "Nevsky Prospekt – Gostinyi Dvor" and the train between the stations "Mayakovskaya" and "Gostinyi Dvor".

When street musicians choose the spot for musical performance, they take into account factors that contribute to the success of their activities. Thus, the proposed spot must be filled by potential listeners (high-footfall areas): "The ideal is when people do not particularly stand but go somewhere. That's perfect. They all came to your spot, listen and go further. And when the people assemble the crowd, they do not give money. They listen, stand for a while – and that's all" (*Arina, 25 yo*); have good acoustics, "When you play in good conditions, in places with good acoustics, you immediately feel different, and you realize that you really hear everything - it sounds very cool" (*Egor, 22 yo*); possibility to avoid extraneous noises, "preferably away from the road and some repairs, because it can be affected by noise, uproar" (*Misha, 28 yo*).

Lack of elements stigmatizing the space: "Of course, yes, the presence of all sorts of dirty homeless people, it's not pleasant. This naturally scares people" (*Sergey, 19 yo*); and the remoteness of the site from the concentrations of law enforcement are also important factors for space selection: "And now, we can't play on the Griboedova Channel, almost no one plays: since last year, in my opinion, there lived the assistant prosecutor" (*Ivan, 29 yo*).

Relationship between buskers and audience

Tactics that street musicians use to communicate with the public, are formed gradually, as their experience playing in the streets or in the subway. Musician, first coming to play in the city space, still does not know how the audience will react to his performing activities; he can figure it out by trial and error. Over time, it develops a set of sustainable patterns, to which musicians regularly resort.

Getting ready to go out to the streets or in the subway, the informant chooses clothes that fit to play on a particular spot. Shoes should be comfortable, as you have to walk a lot, as is the case with musicians who play in the subway trains, or standing for a long time, if a musician playing in subway stations or on the street. The clothes, too, the musicians prefer convenience. The appearance of street musician must be neat and presentable, as the musicians position themselves as artists. In the collected narratives informants emphasize that musicians do not have to look like a beggar "... I try all kind of show that I'm good at, and I don't beg. I'm good" (*Arina, 25 yo*). At the same time, if musician has expensive electronic gadgets, he tries not to show them, as this may cause an undesirable impression among the public and limit the earnings.

Female musicians can afford to wear high-heels for performances in the streets: they explain that it is encouraged by the public - attracts more attention and is approved. Girls try to emphasize their femininity, use a

lot of make-up, wear jewelry: "... Preferably more light clothes, all kinds of bijouterie, carefully made up, ... and then, yes, if you look great, it is also affects a lot. Various skirts. We figuratively call it the "woman suit". It plays the huge role" (*Arina, 25 yo*).

Informants speak disapprovingly about the musicians who are going to the public, dressed in dirty and messy clothes. According to them, these performers create the negative perception of street musicians from the public.

In the course of their business musicians try to avoid any conflict situations as often as possible. They are aware that their activity is not completely legal, and participation in conflicts can only exacerbate the sanctions that are already directed against them. In order to avoid contacts with proper authorities (such as police), street musicians realize particular special tactics prior to their performance. In the subway, they usually give the priority to beggars and small traders. Musicians are usually trying to avoid the problematic situations of any kind, in order to integrate in the profitable structure of opportunities, that metropolitan may offer. At the same time they can be very creative: jump from one train to another, know how to avoid an encounter with proper authorities (e.g. police, metropolitan services), choose a specific time for the performance to achieve the most valuable public, and leave just before the police patrol appears. Their spatial tactics are often guided by local knowledge gained from their long experience of street playing.

Musicians also refer to some facts of threats and violence that come from different individuals. Sometimes it happens with the use of cold weapon and firearms. It usually happens when those individuals claim that they don't like how musicians play. Informants characterize these people as mentally unstable, drunk or on drugs. In such cases, fearing for their life and property that these people are threatening to break, musicians try to resolve the conflict peacefully, by finishing playing and leaving to another place: "we were playing, some dude comes around and gets his huge knife out (shows the size of the knife): "Right now, I pierce your f***** drums." I say, "Oh, it seems to be a cold weapon that you have there... I don't really want to play anymore" (*Vanya, 22 yo*) "Once I had a gun pointed at my face, when I played... Probably he didn't like something". (*Ivan, 29 yo*).

However, these situations with acute aggressive reaction of the citizens is quite atypical for the big cities: the musicians got used to the indifference due to the anonymity and social norms of non-interference. Generally, people are rarely included in the situation that is taking place in public spaces. However, the stories that informants told me, show that every rule has the exception.

As in the street and in the subway, people who like street music, express their appreciation with applause and generously reward the labor of musicians: "A couple of people even clapped, and one woman shouted "Bravo!" (*protocol of observation, 23 February 2014*). "A woman ran up, thanked the guys for the playing music and gave them 100 rubles ... The crowd clapped, shouted "Bravo!" and started throwing all the money in the bag" (*Protocol of observation, 12 April 2014*).

Street musicians, who constantly play in the same place at the same time, note that they are able to recognize familiar people in the crowd that regularly pass by this place during working hours of the musician: "Olga pointed me at two young girls, she explained that they go to ballroom dancing classes. I asked how she knew it. Olga said that they always go there at this time, and once they talked about going to ballroom dancing" (*Protocol of observation 05 May 2014*). Thus, the anonymity of urban public spaces is partly broken to the extent that the musicians and their audience become "familiar strangers" (Milgram, 1972). Recognizing a visual introduction, some musicians and members of the audience nod to each other, and even say "Hello!", "a middle-aged woman came and said," Hello, oh, it sounds good today," - she threw 50 rubles in the package, and walked further, Olga played and couldn't answer her, but smiled. Later I asked Olga who was this woman. She said that she didn't know, but she sees her often and greets" (*Protocol of observation, 16 May 2014*).

Some street musicians have their regular listeners: they are recognized on the streets and ask when will be the next "live" performance: "... they saw me with drums somewhere and asked:" Are you going to play this evening on the square near Galeria-mall? I want to come with my wife" (*Vanya, 22 yo*). "... Strangers come to me and say:" And... I'm sorry, but are you going to play music tonight?" (*Ivan, 29 yo*).

The object where people throw money is usually a hat, or musical instrument case, or simple plastic bag. People throw not only money, but also all that the public want to share with street musicians: food (in harvest season it can be suburban fruits and vegetables), cigarettes, alcohol, even drugs. Some girls, especially if they like a street musician and they want to have a romantic acquaintance, throw in the hat with money notes with compliments, or their phone numbers: "The girl who was listening to the musicians thanked them and gave Sergey the note:

"You are very cool! Thank you for making my evening *drawn heart* ". 50 roubles were wrapped into the note. Timofey said: "It is a pity that she didn't leave her phone number" (*Protocol of observation, 12 April 2014*).

Men give flowers to female musicians and even kiss the hand as the sign of acknowledgment. Some members of the public try to make their acquaintance and / or insist on tactile contact that is not always welcomed by actresses: "They kneel down, kiss hands, well done to them! .. If they actively start to molest, they are also can be aggressive, I try to be polite, but I can be really rude too" (*Oлга, 48 yo*). "I'm usually not a timid girl, but I do not know how to fight, but with my 48 kilograms difficult for me to prove my point. But usually it ends up that I'm just looking. Teacher education makes me an advantage, and they shut up. If they do not, then I start to "treat" (*Arina, 25 yo*). However, such collisions are an integral part of the public spaces of the city, with their open, public, social and cultural diversity.

Often people offer cooperation to the street musicians in other urban areas, for example, musicians are sometimes invited to perform at the office corporate parties, in restaurants, at weddings, birthdays, "Well, just got caught in the subway, on the street: somebody liked, how we play, and the next day I give my phone number to someone, if you would be interested - call" (*Vanya, 22 yo*). Sometimes, citizens are asked to help in solving their personal problems: "The man in the subway came to us and said:" Guys, could you help me to save love? "We:" What's the price? "He had two denominations: 500 rubles and 5000, he gave 5000. And we went to play under the windows, it was autumn, cold, but we played" (*Roman, 27 yo*). Some people offer professional cooperation to buskers: for example, one of the informants was invited to play at the «Theater of Musical Comedy» and on television. Therefore, many street musicians carry business cards in such cases: "We are giving a business card. I have the card of my own, our project, here's what we have with Roma, the group is done, we regularly receive cards" (*Ivan, 29 yo*). Thus, the street playing music may in some cases serve a starting point for cooptation into the professional music community of the city.

Many listeners asked the musicians to sing or play something on their order, while offering an additional fee, but they do not always agree. It sometimes occurs that the listener is asked to play a piece that the informant does not know or cannot go to pick up a tune by ear. But most of the citizens ordered the works that informants do not like and do not match their musical styles. However, an urgent need for money can sometimes outweigh the private disagreement of musician and make him go against his principles. Among the most popular orders there are different songs from Russian rock and famous thieves' song - "Murka".

Rules of community

In an environment of street musicians there are unwritten rules of cooperation to avoid unpleasant situations related to the competition for the space of performance. Among these are:

- the regulation of the use of each priority area: "Sergey (My informant) came to Masha and asked her when she will finish her performance. Masha said that at 10 pm" (*Protocol of observation 16 May 2014*);
- the need to prevent other buskers about premature change of location "Musicians were angry with Masha because she had not called him and gave place to accordion player. They began to call her. Masha said that she was taken to the police, and it was not possible to call" (*Protocol of observation 16 April 2014*);
- avoidance of competition by choosing a place to play out of earshot of other street musicians: "We go out of the train, guys looked is there cops on the platform and is there anybody played at the station, stood against the wall and started to remove the instruments and tune" (*Protocol of observation 12 May 2014*).

Despite the competition, widespread manifestations of mutual aid and support takes place among buskers. In this environment, the prevailing model of flexible connections, allowing buskers to navigate the changing conditions of performance quickly and successfully adapt to them. The complex structure of strong and weak ties arising between the musicians, along with general social practices, similar interests, expertise and methods of preparation and transfer of new knowledge, the construction of asymmetric relation "professional - client" (the musician - the public) and a clear self-identification It lets talk about the street musicians of St. Petersburg as a specific professional community, "tied" to the urban physical space, and included in the urban social space.

Conclusion

In the course of research, I realized the overall stated goals and objectives. I described the basic aspects of street musicians practices and their everyday life, analyzed the relationship between musicians, public and other actors of social space in St. Petersburg, for example, with other street musicians, beggars, small traders, police. I found and analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of communication of street musicians' community members. I also found and described the system of the unwritten rules that street musicians usually follow in order to use their performative places. Compliance with these rules help to avoid competition and determines the peaceful existence of buskers as the community.

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