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## **“We are not a Female Band, We are a BAND!”: Female Performance as a Model of Gender Transgression in Serbian Popular Music\***

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### **Abstract**

Instrumental performance, leadership, and authorship by women in music has historically been subjected to various repressive regimes, while many of the prejudices and restrictions regarding female musicking can still be discerned in contemporary popular music practices in Serbia. These mechanisms have been transferred into contemporary music with different ideological and stylistic inclination, such as *indie* music cohorts and folk- or tradition-based genres and scenes. The structural preconditions that articulate the subject position of female instrumentalists, regardless of genre or the scene they belong to are the lack of history of female playing and the requirement that they reach the supposedly higher standards of male musicians. This article starts with a brief genealogy of female instrumental music performance from late socialism to the diversity of contemporary popular music in its present neo-liberal context. Against that background it interprets the disciplining mechanisms restricting female musical creativity and performance, addressing the issues of identity and power through female agency in music.

### **Keywords**

Serbian popular music, indie scene, agency in music, gender, female players

### *‘Wrongdoing’: The Historical Background of Female Instrumental Performance*

During the course of the ideologically turbulent twentieth century, the most popular position for Serbian female musicians remained steady: in terms of holding social power, gaining visibility in the public sphere, and having success in breaking social bonds and gender stereotypes, the most favored role was that of a singer. Women band leaders, and especially female instrumentalists belonging to diverse popular and amateur folk music scenes, were rarely seen or were treated as exceptions (cf. Ненић/Nenić 2015). If a female

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singer was constructed in popular cultural imagination as the epitome of hyper-femininity, with more-or-less highlighted desirable sexual traits (which led to her being simultaneously praised and despised as a shameless public woman, *puella publica*), a female instrumentalist was seen as a transgressor adopting more ‘male’ traits, and therefore served as a less appreciated model of identification.<sup>2</sup> As in many world cultures, female mastery of certain, highly valued musical instruments, often connected with the public display of manliness, was regarded as unacceptable behavior (Koskoff 1995; Doubleday 2008), and the Balkans were no exception to that, since historically many female instrumental musicians who played traditional folk music instruments were deliberately neglected in cultural and professional discourses on music during the nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries (Ceribašić 2004; Nenić 2013). For, example, women playing the *gusle*, a bowed lute associated with Serbian national culture, heroism and masculinity, were frequently labeled as ‘only’ or ‘first’ of their gender by ethnographers (cf. Антонијевић/Antonijević 1960; Станић/Stanić 1977), although, in fact, they were not so rare (Ненић 2015).

The historical attitude that women were not supposed to master musical instruments associated with men continued to serve as an unspoken, yet material discursive rule in modern popular and alternative (‘underground’) musical practices, starting from Yugoslav communism<sup>3</sup> and continuing until the present. Female instrumentalists belonging to pop and rock bands who “dared” to play so-called male instruments (electric guitar, bass guitar, drums), were often confronted with the stance that the most desirable role for a woman was that of singer, whereas instrumental performers, especially in alternative, rock-based genres, were neglected, or as Hellen Reddington put it regarding the role of female players in British popular music scene, “written out of rock history” (Reddington 2004: 143, 146 et passim).<sup>4</sup> This was partly due to the long-standing cultural *dispositif* that linked the ideal of womanhood to intimacy, the privacy of the home,

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<sup>2</sup> Musical genre, particular historical context and prevailing ideological setting defined different, more and less desirable roles of female instrumentalists.

<sup>3</sup> During Yugoslav communism there were notable female instrumentalists who did gain popularity, such as Radojka Živković, a harmonica virtuoso and a distinguished performer of a prevalent modernized form of *folk music* (Serbian “narodna muzika”). However, those musicians were usually framed as isolated ‘cases’ of women who were strong or talented enough to escape the supposed burden of their gender, and often close male figures (father, a relative, or in Živković’s case, a husband) served as patrons or close partners who would mentor and/or justify female presence in otherwise male domain.

<sup>4</sup> Reddington specifically refers to the female position in punk and rock scene of the 1970s England; however, her findings and conclusions are very much correspondent with the situation in fragmented and commercially guided musical scene of transitional neoliberal Serbian society at the moment.

and to behaviors that were not perceived as provocative, overtly individualistic or gender-bending. For example, Yugoslav *new wave*<sup>5</sup> and alternative rock of the 1970s and 1980s produced several female instrumental performers and strong authorial figures. Yet, despite their acknowledged talents and skills and relatively large fan bases, these artists did not always gain the same popularity and attention in everyday, historical and expert discourses on music as male musicians did. Even famous performers such as Margita Stefanović, a keyboard player and back vocalist for the cult Yugoslav band EKV (Ekatarina Velika) were treated differently from their male counterparts, as their musical output was often described as first and foremost feminine. For example, in the introductory part of the interview with Stefanović (1989) the renowned rock critic Petar Popović portrays her as an excellent musician, stressing that “her fragile appearance disguises the most interesting person of female gender that this scene has. (...) The way she sacrifices herself to music, the education that separates her from the prejudices regarding the erudition of the rock players, the knowledge that gives her confidence and a dose of *fatal mystique* (author’s cursive) that she emits as a woman, together form a sum of reliable forces that are at work inside Ekaterina” (Popović 1989).

The dominance of masculinity in Yugoslav rock culture and the discursive regimes of power that favored male playing required that the supposedly gendered nature of female musical performance must be marked as such (in this case, by acknowledging gender and underlining the feminine qualities of her visual appearance and of a supposed cohesive role in music-making, instead of praising the actual attributes of her musical and stage performance). This was especially evident in official discourses, such as rock journalism, that often swayed between the attempt to evaluate female musicians regardless of their gender and gender-related depictions of their appearance and sound. For example, *Džuboks*, one of the most influential magazines devoted to pop and rock culture, gave positive remarks to Opatija-based all-girl newcomer band Cacadou Look by describing them as five ‘lovely’ (Serb. “ljupke”) girls who “also play good”, but whose playing lacks “some strength and vigor”, concluding that it is possible that “the future of rock’n’roll belongs to women” (Stefanović 1985: 12). Another moderately successful ex-Yugoslav all-women band, Boye (a pun, meaning “colours”, Serb. *boje*) from Novi Sad, put a suggestive phrase “The first true female sound” (Serb. “prvi pravi ženski zvuk”) on the cover of their first single, thus indicating that the gendered approach to music from a female position could mean something powerful, instead of evoking common tropes of female sensibility.

<sup>5</sup> New wave (Serbian “novi talas”).

Although male band mates supported fellow female musicians, and the groups with more female members organized communication on different terms than in all-male settings, the competitive model of culturally praised boyishness still prevailed. Female instrumentalists would often encounter disbelief as to whether they ‘really’ played their recorded parts, or if they were beginners, and their lack of skill would be attributed to the ills of their gender. Just before they entered their studio recording session, members of Cacadou Look were asked by the producers of their first album (two well-known male rock musicians), whether they had indeed performed on the demo tapes (Janjatović 1987). Srđan Gojković-Gile, frontman of the cult Yugoslav band Električni orgazam, was surprised that the playing of their first bassist, Marina Vulić, on their first album, sounded better after almost three decades: “I thought that Marina was barely able to do the bass. In hindsight, I think that she played superbly. (...) Now, when you listen, there is some feeling behind that bass. You see that she was up to the task, in the initial phase when we were a punk and new wave band” (Arežina 2010).

Either way, the discursive constructs regarding femininity pervaded public presentation of female instrumental performance and its evaluation by both audience and experts. Apart from hyperfemininity as a ‘proof’ that a woman was still conforming to her gender role, and despite the transgressive act of ‘male’ instrument-playing, there was another possibility: to resolutely occupy the ‘male’ role as a gender-bending woman, or simply as a woman who does not care whether her appearance and behavior falls within the socially accepted limits of ‘correct’ gender. In their music videos, members of the all-female punk group Boye appear without makeup, dressed in typical rock manner, with their hair either messy or short, and their sound is harsh and strong, with quick guitar riffs and flat, unemotive vocals.<sup>6</sup> Other musicians, like Slađana Milošević, a Yugoslav/Serbian performer from the 1980s who is still active today, have shown how gender is actually a construct, a disguise: in Milošević’s particular case, by broadly fluctuating from overly feminine looks and sound (e.g. her famous duet with Dado Topić *Negde izvan planeta / Somewhere Beyond the Planets*) to androgynous, camp aesthetics characteristic of the eighties.

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, another model of identification in this case is to completely ignore the norm, e.g. not to fall in the trap of ‘feminine’ versus ‘virile’ woman, by behaving and doing (music) as if the gender binaries are imagined, mere constructs that haunt the collective imagination. But although a single performer might confront gender obstacles in her personal behavior and narratives, the final product – sound, image, iconic status – is always-already grasped by the cultural mechanisms that guarantee the ‘correct’ reproduction of gender binaries.

The opposed poles of hyperfemininity and transgression form a position in discourse that could be traced back to pre-industrial rural musical practices, where the treatment of women who played folk instruments (*frula*, *gusle*) in the public culture often employed that very same figure as an excess, hyperbole of an idealized gender: a good player daring to touch a ‘male’ instrument was either a mannish woman transgressing the ‘natural’ limits of her gender, or a woman of the highest female virtue who was not merely a player, but a literal embodiment of the collective spirit, the Nation. In both instances, however, female musicians were bracketed as exceptions and cut from the processes of music’s transmission and building of representative historical legacy (Nenić 2013: 90–91). Although during communism the fading rural folk music traditions and their offspring in the shape of state-sponsored *folklore* performances did not exert a considerable influence on popular musical practices (especially on the genres belonging to youth subcultures that were perceived as ‘imported’ from the West), the firmly rooted discursive rule that the male supremacy over certain musical instruments must be guarded was easily transferred to the sphere of Yugoslav popular culture. For example, in a 1990 interview Margita Stefanović insisted that her responsibility was to be ‘behind’ as a support during the musical performance,<sup>7</sup> and quickly brought up the issue of the player’s gender as a focal point that obscures other qualities of the acts on the stage:

“I am a female. I am still a female that always stands first. When you see me on the stage, you always see me as a female that plays in some band, and then later you listen to what I play, or listen to what happens next” (Glavan 1990).

Female and male performance, leadership and authorship were not assessed using the same criteria and that mechanism continued to work even in the most emancipated socio-musical milieus of the late capitalist societies. The main obstacles for female performers seeking to pursue long-term musical projects were different values and expectations attached to the performance, accompanied, as Robertson points out, with less access to public space and especially to domains of power (the best positions in bands/orchestras, the roles of decision

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<sup>7</sup> She and the interviewer differently describe (or disagree over) her role: while he tries to compliment her by naming her as the “cohesive force” of the group and pointing out her strong background in classical music (e.g. by using the description “basso continuo”, referring to her performance), shortly afterwards she claims that her role is to provide the background to other performers who could then freely express themselves. It is interesting to compare the very terms they use: while Stefanović says that she is “the ground” (Serbian *podloga*), the interviewer corrects her by using a more flattering word “foundation” (Serb. *osnova*), to what she reluctantly agrees.

makers, material sources linked to music performances, etc; Robertson 1989: 242–43). Some performers, like Slađana Milošević, have been well aware of that fact. For example, Milošević's long and extensive experience of being an author in a male-dominated alternative music scene has led her to propose a concept of a "male woman" as a new 'female archetype' (Milošević 2012), meaning: an active woman, or a female artist who refutes compulsory gender regimes.<sup>8</sup>

Serbian popular music scenes changed considerably after the breakup of the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, being ripped out of the fabric of Yugoslav culture and significantly impoverished during the transition towards post-communist nationalistic society. Its gradual recuperation since the end of the nineties saw the renewal of some old and introduction of many new genres and global trends. After losing ground in the nineties to vastly popular mainstream phenomena such as turbo and pop-folk, many socio-musical formations have been reestablished in the wake of the new millennium, mirroring similar global processes, while at the same time reworking (and reshaping) local heritage of folk and popular music.<sup>9</sup> While the number of female instrumentalists and band leaders is increasing, the role of a singer again appears to be more prominent, due to its historical ubiquity, and also to the retraditionalization of gender roles in Serbian society that took part during the nineties. Women occupying other roles in music-making (e.g. musician, band leader, DJ, composer, sound producer, multi-instrumentalist) still appear to be only partly visible and less favored in popular discourses. For example, the Serbian world music scene that arose in the mid-1990s was initially built around the worship of unconstrained, past-related female *voice*, and only during the last decade female instrumentalists (mainly *frula* and *kaval* players) started to populate its niches, albeit rather shyly. Various events and institutions supporting the practices of folklore and neo-traditional music also started to include female players, and sometimes the considerable interest of girls and young women to play certain instruments stands in stark contrast with their invisibility in the official mechanisms of representation.

<sup>8</sup> In Milošević's words, "we live in a space where a woman is not given an opportunity to lead. She is always 'behind the stage', so I saw many times in my life and career that men take over my works, my credits, obstruct me when I would initiate new tendencies – from music, to all kinds of art that I was involved with, to politics, or, social activism that I dedicated a large part of my life to. Men always thought that they are the ones to be the leaders, and that the women cannot be the visionaries, creators of new theories, geniuses" (Jokić 2013).

<sup>9</sup> For example, the world and ethno music extensively borrowed from residual rural folk music practices of Serbia and Balkans, rejuvenated pop music spilled over national borders gaining pan-Balkan stardom in many cases, and musical subcultures inclined towards social criticism (rock, punk and hip-hop/rap), also regained popularity in old and newly formed alternative cultural spaces.

At the same time and as a part of opposite trend, new musical subcultures sprang up, many connected to political and social activism, highlighting numerous issues such as multiculturalism and trans-regionalism in the Balkans (world music and its derivatives) or representation politics such as LGBTQ rights, gender bending and female power (post-rock and new punk, electro-synth pop, folktronica etc). Some female performers who sing and play gradually gained popularity that reaches beyond subcultural *indie* spaces towards more mainstream media and public, thus defying the stereotypical image of a woman solely as a singer, such as the Belgrade-based electrorock band E-play or the ones that successfully pursued international careers, such as the blues guitarist Ana Popović. However, even in the highly successful instances of female performers, their gender is at least subtly marked, as if there is a need to constantly be reminded of the musician's biological sex, of the invisible remains of physiology and 'nature' that allegedly protrude into the very materiality of music. In a recent interview with Ana Čurčin, a singer-songwriter and guitarist oriented towards Americana, the interviewer stated that it is not usual to encounter a woman playing guitar: “A girl and a guitar, that is an uncommon sight here – does it take more courage to perform as a singer-songwriter (Serb. *kantautor*) than to perform in a band?” (Jakobi 2013).<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the growing number of female instrumentalists, singer-songwriters and band leaders, despite their underrepresentation in mainstream media, prompted several new initiatives, projects and cultural hubs to create programs with a gender balance, or specifically to draw attention to female creative work in music and gather and empower female musicians.

While the mainstream institutions and media have been slow to recognize female performers that not fit into the desired frame of gender-appropriate behavior, grassroots cultural movements and non-governmental sector grasped the opportunity not only to be the first to focus public attention on female musicianship in various popular,

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<sup>10</sup> Several interviews with Ana Čurčin actually included the statements on her gender or the questions highlighting the role of femininity in her *oeuvre*. Although the tone of those interviews was overtly positive, the lingering idea that the female performance on soloist music instruments is exceptional and/or rare relies on the material-discursive rule that women are not fully capable of taking part in certain social and artistic practices. The regulative measures (disregard, punishment) from previous social formations are, thus, replaced with more 'positive' reactions, such as a constant surprise over female engagement in supposedly unusual cultural domains; yet the highlighting of difference is still a foundation of the discourse on female musicianship. For example, in one interview it is stated that “Ana is a *competent guitarist* [my italics] who used some strange instrument in the shape of the ball, some kind of vibraphone with metal keys and resonating box” (Vlaktić 2013). The very necessity to stress that the performer is indeed “competent” disguises well-known ideological presupposition that female musician must ‘prove’ to the male standard.

*indie* and folk-based genres, but to do so by crafting ideologically careful tactics, opening up an arena where different approaches and self-definitions of femaleness in art were allowed to interact, both in terms of self-representation of performers, and of discursive means. One of the most successful initiatives of this kind, *Femix – the mix of female creativity*, was launched in 2010 and continues to promote female artistic practices by means of festival events, concerts and live performances, internet radio, Femix Info web portal that gathers information on contemporary female musicians from Serbia, and by publishing their music on a series of compilations labeled *Femixeta*.<sup>11</sup> Other institutions and programs like rock, new and world music festivals (*Vračar rocks*, *Ring Ring*, *Todo Mundo*) or Radio Belgrade's Studio 6 also provided an open ground for performance and cooperation of different female artists that cuts across genre and cultural cohort's borders. Some of the recent events in 2015 that proved how quickly the status of female playing is gaining more popularity and space include *Studio 6*'s opening of a new, annual season of prestigious live broadcasts that featured Ana Čurčin, the fifth compilation of female authors and bends, *Femixeta 5.0*, that was successfully promoted at Belgrade's *Mikser* festival, or the workshop led by young female drum players for girls, held in July 2015, in Belgrade's Dom omladine (Youth Centre), as well as in towns of Smederevo and Pančevo.

So, after a long history of exclusion from both public spaces and representational discourses in the cases when women engage in cultural work traditionally associated to male domain, female authors and musicians started to get more support as artists and, in certain cases, also as *female artists*. However, the gender regimes reproduced through the social organization of artistic practices as well as through the images and values intended for the act of consumers' enjoyment were not simply replaced by better solutions or wiped out. The limits concerning female playing of allegedly male instruments in Western popular music had been established since the very beginnings of rock subculture, by women being primarily situated behind the scenes, and appearing as singers-songwriters or players more prominently only since the 1960s, with their success being related to their looks, or the 'fact' of protection by male partners-musicians or patrons (Stilwell 2004: 448–449). The new ideological formations in popular culture enter the arena of social antagonisms where the mechanisms of dominant culture<sup>12</sup> still solidify more or less strict gender borders,

<sup>11</sup> For the description of their work see <http://www.femix.info/files/portfolio/femix-portfolio2010-13.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> The dominant image of female music performer as highly sexualized, feminine singer seductively performing folk-pop is massively promoted by powerful media industries such as Grand Production, and the women belonging to alternative, subcultural musical

forcing female artists in ‘atypical’ roles to constantly defy repressive measures and prove themselves facing the sometimes unspoken and invisible, but very material wall of supposed gender limits inherited from the recent past.

*‘Display’ and Obstacles of Gender vs. Female Agency Through Music in Contemporary Serbian Folk and Alternative Music Scenes*

For female musicians I collaborated with on various occasions while researching female instrumental musicianship there are two structural preconditions that shape them as subjects under the practice: being deprived of history (not knowing their ancestresses) and belonging to musical subcultures outside mainstream. While the first mechanism continues to produce ideological illusion that successful female performers are the ‘first’ or ‘only’ of their kind (Nenić 2013: 90) and puts them repeatedly in a position of ‘gender pioneers’ in their chosen musical domain, the other – belonging to contemporary subculture with a supposedly more diverse ideological background and flexible attitudes toward gender display – feeds the impression that the women’s struggles to become recognized as musicians and to be treated as equal would surpass previous discursive and material burdens imposed on female creativity in music with more ease. However, the situation is usually more nuanced as the power struggles and positioning within the music scenes still rely on the unspoken notion that there is indeed such a thing as gender-related proper behavior in music. I want to further explore the interplay between social constraints inherited from the (recent) past,<sup>13</sup> and the power to do/change things, or holding of agency by women, specifically through the contemporary material-discursive practice of music in Serbia. I specifically focus on female instrumentalists who play various Western contemporary and Serbian folk music instruments (guitar, bass guitar, drum set, kaval, frula, tambura) that are usually associated with masculinity, and who sometimes also hold the position of a bandleader, thus additionally challenging gender prejudices against female musicianship. Although my present analysis relies on personal and media narratives and performances of female musicians belonging to folk-based and *indie* scenes that

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movements get considerably less attention by mainstream media.

<sup>13</sup> Aside from already mentioned ideas that a woman who plays ‘male’ folk instrument is an exception (either unusual or a mannish, virile woman) inherited from preindustrial rural musical practices in the Balkans, such constraints include, for example, a long-time favoring of *kafana* singer as the model of female public music performance in Yugoslav socialism (Hofman 2010), or the despise of female instrumentalists who took part in interwar *kafana* music performance in Serbia, as musical know-nothings who got public attention due to their looks (cf. Dumnić 2013: 84–85).

rarely get in touch,<sup>14</sup> the mechanisms of female suppression and of ‘correct’ gender reproduction are still strikingly the same.<sup>15</sup> The major structural precondition that prevents women from taking part in supposedly male domains of musicking could be located in discursive practices of everyday life, where patriarchal production of gender binaries labels some behavior as appropriate, and some as questionable for women. This produces both repressive (“women should” or “should not”) and compensatory measures (the acts of underlining femininity in order to nullify the possibly dangerous effects of transgressive acts of playing).

While the repression in today’s discursive practices of music-making and consumption rarely takes the form of a direct ban, it usually consists of underestimation, and sometimes mockery and insults in the popular press, video-sharing websites, social networks and, most importantly, on the ‘zero level’ of everyday life, in the communities of musicians and fans. The players and band leaders I talked to cite facts such as being paid less, having to constantly demonstrate that they are able to play ‘like men’, being pushed to the margin of important events, not receiving support when pregnant, amongst other difficulties. Official cultural politics is rarely gender-sensitive, and major music festivals such as EXIT include a relatively small number of female performers in the lineup, while smaller, local festivals like Šabac’s summer festival or Subotica’s Trenchtown appear to be somewhat more open towards female musicianship (Gubaš and Nikolić 2013: 5-7). Snežana Popović from the punk band *Vibrator u rikverc* (“Vibrator in reverse gear”) explained the lack of all-female bands by emphasizing the role of the male scorn that female musicians usually encounter: “the girls start, but then they get Youtube comments like ‘go ahead, return to the kitchen’ and similar, they break up and give up” (cited according to Gubaš and Nikolić 2013: 12). A woman with an instrument is frequently referred to as a false pretense, someone who just ‘poses’ with it in order to look interesting and different, while lacking any real player’s skills. This is

<sup>14</sup> As the discursive measures that contribute to public image of female instrumental musicianship materialize through different social apparatuses and situations – mainstream and alternative media, Internet social hubs, everyday communication between musicians, fans and cultural workers, and so on, I wanted to include those different means of organizing female experience in my analysis, instead of methodologically focusing solely on one mode of inquiry (ethnography, discourse and media content analysis). The research I conducted thus included personal recorded interviews with a dozen female instrumentalists belonging to different genres of contemporary Serbian popular music, distribution of questionnaires to several female performers, participant ethnography of female musical performance, analysis of media content.

<sup>15</sup> This, of course, points to a larger (and older) social system of patriarchy that, as a deeply rooted ideology, still impregnates political, social and economic changes of contemporary society.

inextricably linked with an attitude that women must prove themselves to a supposedly male standard of music-making and production.<sup>16</sup> More specifically the female player is reminded that she should sound like a man, either by being advised to ‘alter’ her playing to be more energetic and ‘male’-like, or by being commended for “sounding like a male player” by other male players, audience members, and power holders such as music producers and critics. Sometimes even women who play instruments that don’t hold a status of being equated with symbolic representations of masculinity, like kaval in Serbian neo-traditional, world and ethno music, get direct negative comments by fellow male players, by being reminded that they wouldn’t be able to reach the supposedly highest ‘male’ rank of playing (Nenić and Tomić 2013; Nenić and Pavlović 2015).

In their research of young female Serbian players belonging to various alternative and *indie* music genres, Gubaš and Nikolić (2013) classify this sort of comparison among the most frequent stereotypes connected to female playing, in various forms like “she has a good *groove*, yet a woman!” or “she plays like a man”, these phrases being reported by women musicians themselves.<sup>17</sup> The announcement of the concert event *Women Play Everything!* organized in May 2015 in the cult rock venue of Dom Omladine (Youth Center, Belgrade) asserts the following: “Guys, step back, the scene has been taken over by girls armed with instruments and dangerous voices. The stage is reserved for all-girl bands that would prove to the audience that they can play all!”<sup>18</sup> The cult show *Jelen Top 10* that aired on national television RTS featured a number of female performers coming from various alternative, rock-oriented genres. Yet, when introducing *Vibrator u rikverc*, the show producers stated that “the local rock scene rarely sees an all-girl band (...) Members of this ultimately female punk band will convince us that their looks should not fool the audience, because ‘they can challenge any band’”. This type of discourse surrounding female creative acts actually feeds and naturalizes the viewpoint that women are not quite compatible

<sup>16</sup> There are indeed examples when women are employed as sexy looking “posers” on stage: however, these cases are not a norm, and the disbelief that women can play as good as male musicians has a different motive – namely, to defend male supremacy in popular music-making and performing.

<sup>17</sup> Research by Femix festival highlights several factors that female musicians cite as the culprits of their current unsatisfactory status, such as a lack of visibility and the image of a woman as “an ornament on the stage”, but also the lack of solidarity between female musicians themselves, and the pressure of being marked by one’s gender that redoubles the efforts to prove the opposite, that a woman can be equal or even better than a male player (Gubaš and Nikolić 2013: 18).

<sup>18</sup> In other words, the discursive strategy is to convince the readers that the writer of the introductory note and the audience actually *share* tacit opinion that women usually can’t play as well as men, which featured bends would (hopefully) disproof.

with good playing and, moreover, that female musicians are rare, and always in the situation to prove their ability to perform.<sup>19</sup>

The same standard was also reported during my research with young female musicians of *world music* and ethno music scene: whether they played *kaval*, *frula*, *gusle* or some other traditional instrument, they would be compared to the best male players as a gesture of praise, complimented by other players, their teachers and seniors that they play “like a man”, or they would instead be reminded that they could not reach the rank of male musicians no matter how much they tried. Sometimes, though, by being aware that their gender situates them differently, female musicians choose to ‘wear it’, sometimes even purposefully acting out and magnifying desirable female gender traits during the stage performance. This act might be seen as being in compliance with dominant cultural vision of femininity, but also as quiet subversion, a refusal to ‘become like a man’ in order to prove oneself as a musician.

Staša Koprivica, a theatre director, musician (voice, guitar, ukulele) and the front woman of the alt rock band Fandango reasoned that female instrumental playing is a sort of attraction, because the audience still judges female musicians by their looks: “the all-girl factor is still very much manipulated on the music scene, which directs much attention to the bands that are not too interesting or worthy”, adding that this creates a positive discrimination that is “equally bad as classic discrimination” (Nenić and Koprivica 2015).<sup>20</sup> Answering the same question, Julijana Jovanović, a successful *tambura* player and the leader of La Banda band based in Novi Sad, pointed out that her opinion on whether female playing is still something new or strange differs from the viewpoints of audience and general public: “People see us as something new, unusual, specific, sensual, sophisticated, cultural, nice... we use that as an image, and I am well aware that due to that image we get a chance to play at corporate gatherings and similar paid gigs. It happened that we were booked for a gig only because we were women, although they did not know what we played or how we sounded” (Nenić and Jovanović 2015).

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<sup>19</sup> So the allegedly flattering tone of the event’s introduction actually disguises the old stereotypes.

<sup>20</sup> The first part of this article’s title is taken from a Facebook description of *Fandango* band, “We are not female band, we are a band”, which is, according to Koprivica, a statement expressing her refusal to be treated as something specific, in her words, “a circus attraction”, simply due to being a woman. She accurately describes the elusiveness of the ideological invitation to restate the femininity as something unusual in musical practice: “When we were establishing the band, we were relying very much on the fact that we all are women, and that it would be a plus in attracting the audience. We grew tired of that later” (Nenić and Koprivica 2015).

The norm that women are not meant to play instruments culturally strongly associated with masculinity leads to the question as to what kind of power women do possess in terms of self-definition and what sort of change they make, or contribute to. Is there indeed a freedom of choice, or are female musicians, female artists, always-already caught into the representational web that secures the meaning of their acts by endlessly entwining the string of common signifieds supposedly reflecting one's gender? In examining this issue, I have chosen to employ the concept of *agency*, often defined as a capacity of a person to make her own choices and to act upon them within the constraints of a given social structure, and of gender as an act on the (social) stage in the Butlerian sense of a series of performative acts that create an illusion of the gender “essence” (Butler 1988). More specifically I will refer to the notion of a *resistant agency* as a sum of doings that carries the seeds of transformation beyond a personal level, in the form of individual acts that do not necessarily seek to change social and political apparatuses but instead, as Kathryn Abrams points out, target “social interactions, cultural representations, or uses of language as well” (Abrams 1998: 832).

This type of possessing the power to build one's own identity and make changes in the world was analyzed in relation to music in various societies and contexts, regarding different identity positions: Sonja Lynn Downing's research on girls' and women's gamelans, for example, showed that children do possess agency despite different expectations by their teachers and other figures of authority, leading her to conclude that “girls and young women are asserting agency by challenging previously accepted gender divisions, stereotypes, and associated musical and physical styles of playing” (Downing 2010: 56). By moving beyond personal identity and personal fulfillment, and entering the realm of sonic, visual and overall discursive representation, female performers, then, reach beyond themselves and (supposedly) stir some changes, being intended or not. One of the most obvious effects of being a successful female instrumentalist or strong author in the leading position could be labeled as offering a spot for identification-interpellation: as a figure rising from the mixture of discursive layers, material acts and flow of sounds and images endowed with different, frequently mutually contested meanings, a public female performer allows other women to positively identify with her.<sup>21</sup> Thanks to the possibility to ideologically evoke, interpellate

<sup>21</sup> One particular female blogger who recently attempted to start a band, wrote about how Ana Stanić, famous pop singer and guitarist, inspired her to take the instrument: “There was nothing special in [that] video, a blonde who carries the guitar around the town... *A guitar*. The guitar was what I noticed the first. I can now say that as a less than four-year-old kiddo, I found the girl with the guitar very likable. I realized that the girl with a guitar is a rarity only when I grew up, even that she is an opposite of

other people, and especially those sharing at least one important structural identity position (e.g. gender), female music-making and performing can be said to have a specific agency, endowed with the potential to transform the ideological status quo of male supremacy. Simon Frith, for example, observes that the silencing of women in rock in Western culture is rarely a product of a direct ban on performing and experiencing music: by being subtly put aside, left out when the musicians on stage address the audience, female fans and future musicians are situated differently than their male counterparts (Frith 1988: 468). The material presence and *signifiante* of music acts by women, opens a gap in the weaving of the identificatory matrix, as a place of utterance for sonically-mediated female subjectivities to emerge.

In contemporary folk-based music, the tendency is also that girls and young women, who might as well have had male role models, sometimes specifically seek a female model as a confirmation that the successful and continuous female playing is actually possible. I interviewed several young *frula* players during Serbian Prislonica festival in 2013: when asked to pick other performers whom they admire, the girls referred to the “celebrities” or to their male teacher, but also named the older girls they know, as close role models (the ones who have already won prizes at *frula* competitions, and thus hold a star status in their generational cohort); some would also name Radojka Živković as important folk music performer, although her instrument was the accordion. In the case of rock-based genres, female performers acknowledge the powerful influence of female role models with more ease, as several moderately visible instrumentalists and bands with female members achieved moderate to high popularity in the eighties and nineties. Multi-instrumentalist Ivana Medić, who played alternative rock music during the 1990s and in the first decade of the new millennium stated: “I have always found interesting the bands who had female members – Boye, Katarina II (Ekatarina Velika), Oružjem protivu otmičara, Veliki prezir, Jarboli, E-play, etc. I thought that the girls were supposed to be on stage, and I identified with them in some way” (Nenić and Medić 2015). Her co-player Jelena Janković-Beguš acknowledged the importance of female figures like Margita Stefanović, although she pointed out that her own style of interpretation was more influenced by male keyboardists of ex-Yu progressive rock (Nenić and Janković-Beguš, 2015). Other rock performers also evoke local bands with female members as important examples they could relate to, frequently

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the stereotype of a boy with a guitar, who is a true heart throb. Due to that video, to Ana Stanić, and to the fact that my brother owned a guitar, my wish to play was born” (<https://ultimateblueand.wordpress.com/>).

citing Boye as the first reference. Rock and ethno music performer Tatjana Radić Milutinović (Amon Din, Razvigore, Poslednje more) has explained that the reason why she enjoyed Boye’s music partly lies in fact that she could mirror herself in their position: “It is an impression that you are on your own when you see that there is someone like you” (Nenić and Radić Milutinović 2015), while Zoe Gudović (Charming Princess), pointed out that, apart from music, her interest in the work of local female rock bands like Boye or PMS also included the wish to learn more about their motivation, difficulties and whether their music indeed produced some changes on some level (Nenić and Gudović 2015).

Another possibility is that the female performer envisions herself as a possible role model. Young rock and alternative musicians often declare that inspiring other young women to actively take part in music making and performing, ranks highly among their goals (Nenić and Replicunts 2015). In the case of world and ethno music, female instrumentalists in Serbia find it hard to relate to older female performers, as in rural traditional music (from which the local world and ethno scenes have borrowed heavily until recently) female players were either hidden, or represented as uncommon. Katarina Pavlović, the leader of the world fusion band Čudesmo who sings and plays flute, kaval and Australian didgeridoo, spoke on how her public figure seems from the inside and outside perspective:

“My main task is not to be a singer and a flautist in the band (...) It is interesting, to be a leader, and for me it is important to show that the men are not the only ones to do everything in this world, to challenge the women to do something more. I feel nice being a woman who builds something of her own and that is very important for me. I do not want to be a passive person who must be told what and when to play” (Nenić and Pavlović 2015).

However, often a relation to a female model is more complex, as there is a mix of disbelief in female playing instilled by dominant culture, and the personal relation of trust and appreciation and/or enjoyment. Julijana Jovanović, for example, stated that her music school *tambura* teacher (also a woman) did not abide completely by the rules of traditional playing, as she opted to teach the students to pluck the strings with plastic plectrum, instead of one made of horn.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> The cultural formula for disbelief in female agency requires that the same acts, like the use of new or technically improved tools, are differently judged based on the performer’s gender: when, for example, famous *frula* player Bora Dugić technically alters traditional *frula*, that is perceived as an improvement, and not as an aberration of long-standing tradition. Yet Jovanović, according to her personal narrative, sees the female-to-female transfer of playing skills as something positive, despite the temptation to conform to the dominant discourse that places female musicianship lower than male

Jovanović pointed out that she felt ‘guilty’ for not following the style of Vojvodina’s *tambura* tradition. Having learnt to use the horn pick by the time she enrolled at university, however, she realized that her teacher had “really taught [her] the skills” (Nenić and Jovanović 2015). This young player actually tried to establish all-female groups on more than a few occasions (either based on *tambura* playing or rock), before finally succeeding with La Banda, a band with a traditional assembly of musical instruments (*tambura prim*, *kontra*, *basprim*; cello, double bass, drums and a vocal) and a repertoire based on popular jazz and swing tunes, evergreen, pop hits and film soundtracks (Nenić and Jovanović 2015). Since their music does not always fit into official and implicit standards of neo-traditional playing of Vojvodina and the surrounding regions, where tradition still lives on, together with the “wrong” genders of performers, La Banda frequently plays in promotional, non-competitive parts of festivals, competitions and other *tambura*-related events.<sup>23</sup>

The model when female musicians are included, but subtly pushed to the margins of official events was evident in earlier socio-musical formations. Several performers that I talked to did not feel that their gender ultimately defines their creation, performance and enjoyment of music: yet, they all agreed that the way they were *seen* or situated depended on the public perception of them as gendered persons, and acknowledged historical discourses that treated female instrumental music performance as something extraordinary and rare (Nenić and Replicunts 2015; Nenić and Janković-Beguš 2015; Nenić and Koprivica 2015). For example, members of all-girl punk rock/queer punk band Replicunts, while having different opinions whether their music and stage acts have been measured against the backdrop of their gender, agreed that the female instrumental rock performance was historically deprived due to the relative smaller number and specific framing of female performers: “If female bands were indeed seen as unusual, I think that it was due to their minority status. Today, that is not unusual anymore, let alone original” (Nenić and Replicunts 2015). The smaller number of female musicians, however, isn’t only a product of their supposed weak interest in playing: they are, rather, subjected to subtle, but effective discursive measures that place them differently in a given sociomusical field from the very beginning. During fieldwork with several older women who play *gusle* in a traditional manner, I realized that the common place in their narratives is the situation when they were *invited* to play, but after the official part of the concert evening, behind the stage. This kind of framework situates female presence

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‘standards’ and also calls for the self-devaluation of female musicians.

<sup>23</sup> Of course, the band sometimes successfully competes and wins prizes as well.

as something elusive, as an excess that must be placed properly either in private or semi-public space in order not to jeopardize the hegemonic status of male performing.<sup>24</sup> Sometimes, however, the dynamics works the opposite way: after the official events finish, the informal communication that comes afterwards is the real place where the relations of dominance and of power are negotiated. After our first talks, Jovanović found it important to mention that sometimes in situations where members of the tambura orchestras spontaneously perform after stage events, her band would be challenged to perform *kafana* songs and thus to prove if “they really can play”.<sup>25</sup> Again, the division between public and private space is at work here, because *kafana*, old-time Balkan pub is usually a place where men discuss politics, drink alcohol and exchange rude jokes – in other words, for behaviors considered “impolite” for women. So, by being challenged to perform the *kafana* musical repertoire, the members of La Banda are actually invited to pass the last *rite de passage* into a true musicianship judged by male standards, at least as seen from the side of dominant cultural pattern.

In contrast to that, though, there is actually space and time for female agency to emerge through the practice of music, a powerful spot that might uncast a spell of compulsory gender behaviors, despite the obstacle of being seen as ‘unfitting’: the very act of performance on stage and the feeling of togetherness and of freedom to temporarily ‘let go of identity’ it creates. Jovanović has stated that, although she and her band co-performers may appear modest and sometimes feel unsure about their choices, when joined together in La Banda they feel and act ‘like goddesses’ (Nenić and Jovanović

<sup>24</sup> Male hegemony over certain instruments and musical practices does not mean that there are no men (friends, relatives, fellow players, etc) who praise and support female musicianship, which actually happens quite frequently. In other words, hegemony of maleness in instrumental music performance is the structural precondition of playing that interpellates men as successful and model musicians and ideologically cements that subject position on a level of regulative and everyday discourses, while at the same time working to prevent women from entering the social space ‘designed’ for men. This ‘impossible’, yet effective division between ‘real’ people (men who support female playing) and the ‘invisible’ norm (a mixture of disciplining rules, images, everyday behaviors and narratives that work together to prevent female playing) could be illustrated with an excerpt from my conversation with Staša Koprivica. Answering the question whether the gender of a performer influences relations with other musicians and the audience, she stated: “It surely does. As a frontwoman of the band I had to constantly prove that I have enough vocal and physical strength to withstand the 2–3 hour long yelling, to more or less charm the audience, and yet not to be reduced to a likable girl who looks nice on stage. I never had a problem with the colleagues from the other bands and the other participants of the gigs and the festival we attended because I am a woman, on the contrary: our whole band mostly received a kind of a quiet respect, even admiration, because we do not follow the usual paths” (Nenić and Koprivica 2015).

<sup>25</sup> Email communication with Jovanović, 27<sup>th</sup> March 2015.

2015). The interpersonal dynamics developed through the group performance proved to be an empowering environment for other female performers, too, in a wide range from folk music based groups to alternative, political acts of female rock and neo-punk bands.

One distinguished case of the latter was Charming princess, an all-female feminist punk band formed in 2001 and lead by frontwoman Zoe Gudović, feminist and lesbian rights activist and artist. She described a variety of identitarian positions negotiated between band members in following manner: “The situation in the band was interesting. I am a lesbian atheist, and the drummer was, for instance, a religious believer and churchgoer, more ‘sharp’<sup>26</sup>-oriented, which some might connect to the *nazi* story. (...) We successfully created a melodic *hard-core, punk* band, with one rap song that functioned superbly!” (Vilenica, Marković and Đorđević 2011). The successful crossing of borders was not solely confined to relations inside the band, but instead poured out to external, more public-oriented domains. In Zoe’s view, the result was that the people of different ideological and backgrounds and identity positions were able to communicate successfully at least for a moment that was mediated by a musical performance:

“That feeling, when five women appear on the stage and sinisterly play some *punk* with full blast, while being very meaningful and articulated in what they speak, and then they see the audience of a bunch of nazis, gays and lesbians who all dance together. After the gig I was approached by people who are *nazi*’<sup>27</sup> and who would ask me ‘Are you a lesbian?’ Yes, I am. That was a breaking of silence, even in music” (ibid).

It follows that the material act of producing sound on stage constitutes the conditions for the resistant agency to take place. The “wrong” gender of the performers paradoxically opens a possibility of advanced communication and transgression of boundaries as a metonymy of social relations on a larger scale: if the women could occupy a subject position not meant for them and thus cross the (imaginary, yet material) gender border, then why shouldn’t other subjects under various ideological regimes also – at least, for the moment – ‘forget’ the dull call of interpellation, and join the contingent collective glued by music, roaming free for a brief moment in a shared soundscape? The cohabitation of both – i.e. the restrictive grasp of gender regimes through music, and the liberating effect that the acts of transgression bring about – actually calls for a finer understanding

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<sup>26</sup> SHARP is an acronym for “skinheads against racial prejudice”, a branch of punk and skinhead subculture that opposes racism.

<sup>27</sup> In this context, *nazi* is a colloquial term used to refer to various groups and individuals who identify themselves with the radical right positions.

of music as a social practice that simultaneously works “as a regime of self-creation (subjectification) and as a tool of resistance to those regimes” (Rice 2007: 28). Gender is not only reproduced and contested, but instead used in many complex ways in music, and musical acts delivered by “crossing” gendered positions always-already prepared to utter in a certain way hold a special status not only for the ones who perform the crossing, but for the wider community as well, sometimes by publicly loosing of bounds and staging the interplay of constraints and freedom. As E-play vocalist/bassist Maja Cvetković stated while explaining why the audience would greet her with initial silence: “They are, in fact, stunned to see a woman on stage who also yells... and then they figure it out, and then they feel terrific”.<sup>28</sup>

### *Conclusion: Old Obstacles, New Possibilities (E)Merge*

The growing presence of female instrumentalists, band leaders and all-girl bands in Serbian non-mainstream music scenes creates the promise of a new, more receptive climate for female art, while some of the deeply seated cultural prejudices, stereotypes and mechanisms of suppression based on gender work in the opposite direction. The still-effective regulations that push out female performers on the border of a particular musical practice or mark them because of their gender, could be explained as an inheritance from the past, a residual element in contemporary music serving to avoid possible threats to hegemony of the figure of male player in popular music. Another explanation for the endurance of genderism in popular music culture could be that the erasure of women from official historical and cultural narratives prevented today’s players from learning about previous experiences of female musicians that could serve as their role models, placing them instead in an a-historical, solitary position of an eternal exception. The ‘either – or’ character of the present-day placing of women players into the position of ‘being like a man’ or, instead, ‘being a super-feminine woman’ in public discourses and representations, works as a disciplining measure aimed against transgressive behaviors that shake gender binarism. Many female musicians that I talked to recognize the fake character of that dilemma, hoping instead for a gender-free or at least more relaxed gender-related setting in contemporary music. I do not wish to end this article in an overly celebratory tone: although the models of female agency I analyzed are very real and perhaps palpable in their reach beyond the close circles and small musical scenes, their actors still have to expand their social capital in order to shake off

<sup>28</sup> Cited from the interview with Cvetković for the show *Gruvanje* (Radio-television of Vojvodina), [http://gruvanje.rtv.rs/gruvanje/intervjui/ene-u-muzici-rokenrol-je-stvar-izbora\\_684/](http://gruvanje.rtv.rs/gruvanje/intervjui/ene-u-muzici-rokenrol-je-stvar-izbora_684/), accessed 14<sup>th</sup> August 2015.

hegemony. In other words, the transgressiveness of musical acts by women should become a thing of the past, if the notion of gender as an identity “condition: is to be left behind, in a world free of binaries that still quietly, but powerfully seize creative freedom”.

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*Ива Ненић*

## МИ НИСМО ЖЕНСКИ БЕНД, МИ СМО *БЕНД*: ЖЕНСКО ИЗВОЂАШТВО КАО МОДЕЛ ТРАНСГРЕСИЈЕ РОДНИХ УЛОГА У СРПСКОЈ ПОПУЛАРНОЈ МУЗИЦИ

(Резиме)

Свирање инструмента и заузимање истакнуте позиције попут вође састава донедавно су претежно биле привилегије резервисане за мушке извођаче на сцени популарне ауторске и клупске музике у Србији, док је улога певачице традиционално привилегована као примарни модел идентификације за женске извођаче. На такву расподелу утицао је родни диспозитив према којем је свирање инструмента активност примерена мушкарцима, док је одговарајући медиј женског музичког изражавања – глас. Такође, чак и уколико су високо видљиве, као у случају певачице, жене у вокално-инструменталним или инструменталним саставима ретко заузимају позицију предводника или преговарача, захваљујући традиционалном, хетеронормативном схватању понашања својственим одређеном роду. Порекло ове норме може се потражити у српској традиционалној музици, у којој су жене као свирачице (и посебно као свирачице унутар састава) системски маргинализоване, али и у утицају модела из глобалне популарне културе пристиглих током XX века, где су жене-вође бендова (и инструменталисткиње) далеко малобројније у односу на певачице, које глобално представљају високо популаран и културално пожељан модел.

У протеклој деценији у Србији се појављује више музичких пројеката и иницијатива у којима доминирају жене, или где су жене у лидерским ролама у позицији да одређују интерну динамику рада састава, као и да директно учествују у процесима преговарања поводом музике унутар жанровско-културалне кохорте и сцене којој припадају. Било да се ради о all-girl саставима (квартет The Frajle, тамбурашки састав La Vanda, рок група Fandango) или групама које предводе бенд лидерке (етно/ворлд пројекат Чудесмо Катарине Павловић), интензивнија видљивост жена у „нетипичним” улогама говори о процесима трансформације у популарној музици, у којима се диверсификују, пропитују и/или прекорачују модели одговарајућих родних понашања. У раду ћу анализирати утицај родних норматива на стратегије које извођачице примењују у позиционирању свог рада на савременој музичкој сцени, те потенцијално другачије облике сарадње и расподеле моћи које развијају унутар састава у корелацији са индивидуалним поетикама, музичким жанром, и културалном кохортом у оквиру које се крећу.

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