

# THE COMPASS REVISITED: REWRITING HISTORIES OF MUSIC IN THE SOUTH\*

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*Ivan Moody*<sup>1</sup>

CESEM – Centro de Estudos de Sociologia e Estética Musical, Universidade  
NOVA de Lisboa, Portugal

Received: 15 September 2018

Accepted: 1 November 2018

Original scientific paper

## ABSTRACT:

The history of music in the countries of Southern Europe has, in general, been examined either from the West or from the East. This has had to do with traditional and uninvestigated assumptions of divisions on religious and linguistic grounds, amongst others, and a lack of familiarity with the relevant literatures which it self derives in large part from a lack of familiarity with the relevant languages. Thus, there has been very little comparison of aesthetics in the context of emerging or newly-established nations, and the vital and simultaneous investigation of modernism in those countries, that takes into account both the countries of the Mediterranean and of the Balkans, rather than viewing them as peripheries and discussing them almost exclusively in relation to a theoretical centre. In a number of recent publications and papers, I have aimed to break down some of the seboarders precisely by confronting the question of tradition and modernism and by comparing and contrasting the music of the Latin/Roman Catholic South-West with that of the Slavic and Greek/Orthodox East, at the same time endeavouring to discuss this problem in a very broad sense, which I believe to be necessary in establishing the groundwork for future investigation in this area. In this article I discuss this approach and examine the problems inherent in its implementation, given both the need for breadth of historical and geographical vision (i.e., denationalizing music histories) and for the avoidance of a musicology of cliché, born of ideology rather than unbiased curiosity.

KEYWORDS: Southern Europe, the Mediterranean, the Balkans, East-West, music historiography

\* An earlier version of this paper was read at the conference *The Future of Music History* at the Institute of Musicology, Belgrade, Serbia, 30 September 2017.

<sup>1</sup> [ivanmoody@gmail.com](mailto:ivanmoody@gmail.com)

One of my research interests over the past few years has been an attempt to discover connections between the countries of Southern Europe in terms of their musical culture – my initial thoughts on this were presented as a conference paper, subsequently published, entitled “Turning the Compass”:<sup>2</sup> One of the chief motivating elements in this has been the fact that I live in the westernmost part of Southern Europe, just outside Lisbon, and have undertaken considerable research into the music of what one might describe as the Latin South, and, at the same time, have spent a large part of my career as a musicologist working on music from the Orthodox world. One of the consequences of this apparent dichotomy was to encourage me to think laterally, to try to find connections across the geographical boundaries that seemingly define these two categories of research, in part in order to satisfy my own personal curiosity as to why these two things should seem to me to have some connection – or else to refute such an idea completely – and in part because no such research has ever seriously been undertaken, though it is my intention to remedy this situation with a substantial project devoted to this Mediterranean-Balkan theme over the next few years.<sup>3</sup>

The latter fact means, of course, that there are few bases, no givens and nothing to take for granted. In researching this probably unending and certainly unfinishable project, I came upon some valuable clues as to possible avenues of research – to which I shall return – but came upon a much greater absence of thought about the subject. Why should this be? Certainly in part this is attributable to a lack of familiarity: a lack of familiarity of researchers in the Latin South with the music of the Balkan South, and vice-versa. This has to do with differences in culture, and specifically a lack of mutual interest and knowledge on the part of these different geographical areas – and this can be taken down a level or two, as the general lack of interest of Croatian musicologists in what happens in Serbia, or that of Spanish musicologists in what happens in Portugal demonstrates. And when I refer to culture here, I mean a wide array of different things, including the obvious contrasts between Latin and Eastern, Latin and Slavic, Catholic and Orthodox. But this is to see things only through a negative prism, as it were; if we choose to avoid those obvious evaluative approaches and begin to think laterally, drawing a line that might begin for not entirely arbitrary reasons in Portugal and continue Eastwards through Spain, and jump, perhaps landing occasionally in France, to Italy, and thence to the countries of the former Yugoslavia, to Bulgaria, and to Greece, what insights might we attain that reinforce or contradict the knowledge (and the prejudices), we already have built on established taxonomies? How might we find a way of investigating possible connections between these areas without being in thrall to extant categories of musicological investigation and falling victim to the imposition of fashionable ideologies that do not necessarily relate to them? In other words, how might one retain one’s independence in a field that promises new results but that has no established theoretical framework?

2 Ivan Moody, “Turning the Compass”, paper read at the International Conference *Beyond the East-West Divide: Balkan Music and its Poles of Attraction*, Belgrade, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 26-28 September 2013; later published in a revised version as Moody 2015: 46–55.

3 One of the first results of this research may be seen in Moody 2017: 29–41.

One way to guarantee defeat is by deploying particular fields of knowledge without flexibility. For example, to argue that a multi-layered study of this kind should include, say, some knowledge of post-colonial studies<sup>4</sup>, is common sense. Post-colonial studies have a great deal to teach us with regard to, for example, the “colonies” that made up the former Yugoslavia. But to insist that such studies, with their methodological presuppositions and - let us call them what they are, in any discipline - commonplaces and clichés be foundational in this kind of undertaking is to limit the possibilities of expansion and broadening of vision that might arise were a less restricted and restrictive approach to be taken. What is needed is a vision in which a new area of research is proposed, and in which, obviously, the researchers involved are clearly shown to be competent through their previous work, but which does not limit itself initially to particular theoretical or methodological frameworks in order to be seen to be fashionable and/or acceptable to particular grant-awarding bodies. This, however, is a systemic problem, and one unlikely to be solved by my complaining about it here in a sympathetic environment of broad-minded musicologists, a description amply proved by the very title of the conference at which the original version of this text was given.

Nevertheless, if we wish to go beyond national borders and chronological limits, it is necessary to find a way to speak about different cultures in a simultaneous fashion without indulging in any kind of cultural imperialism or cultural relativism. In principle one might think this easier in a purely European context than in one that requires Europeans to find a useful way of discussing non-European cultures (and vice-versa). However, as the divisions I mentioned earlier, Latin and Eastern, Latin and Slavic, Catholic and Orthodox, indicate, things are not so straightforward. When we also take into consideration the ambiguous relationship that the Balkan countries have always had with Western Europe, things become more complicated still: it is only very recently that commentary on Balkan culture in general has received any genuinely sympathetic coverage by Western authors.<sup>5</sup> There is the idea that Greece is perhaps not Europe at all<sup>6</sup>. There is the pan-Slavist movement and its complicated relationship with the Russian Empire. There is the much less-discussed concept of pan-Iberianism<sup>7</sup>. There is postsocialism<sup>8</sup> and postfascism<sup>9</sup>. Europe has its own micro-cosmic empires and colonies, and therefore certainly its own possibilities for imperial and post-colonial, politically contextualized studies.

4 Particularly significant in this field are Chakrabarty 2008 and Bohlman 2013: 255–276.

5 Of enormous significance in this regard are Samson 2013; and Rice 2015: 11–26. Though studies in Byzantine chant lie somewhat to one side of what is under discussion here, it is also important to make mention of Lind 2012.

6 This idea is placed in historical context in Todorova 2009: 42–45.

7 This is the political idea of unifying all the nations of the Iberian Peninsula. Further on this, see Sardica 2014: 55–70, as well as Sabaté and Adão da Fonseca 2015.

8 Significant here is Vesić et al. 2015.

9 See, *inter alia*, Freedon 2001, especially chapters 7 and 8; Forlenza and Thomassen 2011: 263–281; and Tamás 2000.

In the second of the notes accompanying the call for papers for the conference at which the original version of this paper was given<sup>10</sup>, headed "De-nationalizing music histories", I was encouraged to read the following questions:

- 1) Might we challenge the practice of writing national histories of music, and explore instead the commonalities that arise from shared cultural substrata, common imperial legacies, the lure of modernity, and (paradoxically) the rise of nationalism itself?
- 2) Might we explore more fully a historiography of periphery, acknowledging chauvinism where we find it?
- 3) Within national histories themselves, might we liberate the regions at the expense of the charismatic cultural capitals, and do adequate justice to mobility and migration flows?

Of these three questions, it seems to me that the second is that where most progress has so far been made, the idea of centres and peripheries having begun to be gradually eroded from many sides, and, especially noteworthy, from the "periphery" itself. Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman's article "Music at the Periphery under Conditions of Degraded Hierarchy between the Centre and the Margins in the Space of the Internet", published in 2012, is particularly significant in this respect, extending as it does the deconstruction of the ideas of centre and periphery into the new context provided by the digital age: "[...] in such situations", she says, referring to the centre's constant awareness of itself as its own self-definer and consequent positioning of the periphery, neither did the centre forget that the periphery actually displayed its creativity and innovativeness upon the centre's professional musical foundation, its results or at least certain starting points and incentives, as its ontological premise. And that was – and in the psychological sense it still largely is – enough for the periphery to remain the periphery 'forever', even when it essentially enriched the musical centre or, in fact, grew into its fresher and more innovative alternative (Veselinović-Hofman 2012: 32).

This observation is of the first importance. That is to say, if the periphery disregards its contribution to the centre and rejoices merely in its having made that contribution but continues to consider itself the periphery, we are scarcely further on than we were before the question of the validity of the terms "centre" and "periphery" was raised in the first place.

And that first question, regarding that complicated intersection between the rise of the nation-state during the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the "lure of modernism", is precisely something that *is* a phenomenon of the "periphery". It is only with an apparently strong nation-state, with a clearly defined set of cultural presuppositions and a fine sense of its own cultural achievements that one can encom-

<sup>10</sup> International Conference *The Future of Music History*, call for papers, <http://www.music.sanu.ac.rs/Dokumenta/Skupovi/2017FutureOfMusicHistory.pdf>

pass modernism as, perhaps, part of an evolving narrative, or else as a shocking reaction to those very cultural achievements, part of an attempt to undermine good taste, education and possibly civilization itself. If a national identity has not yet been established, or has only been established very recently, and the history of the “fine arts” goes no further back than the eighteenth century or so, modernism seems much less shocking, especially if taken within the context of some kind of revolutionary politics.

This is arguably the case with Bulgaria and Serbia, say, but not so with Italy, whose legacy of art music goes back much further and was absorbed into what we now view as Italian culture when the country finally became unified in 1871. Greece is a still more complicated case, having, as it does, the longest musical legacy of any European country, but not becoming the country we now know by that name until 1832. The problem of the continuity of that legacy is another aspect of the problem: ancient Greek music is transcribable and performable, but its connections with Byzantine chant, and the further ramifications of Ottoman court music, and the question of the development of Western music education in the Greek world, are all facets of a prism that fits even less well into the round hole of conventional historiography than the square peg of a “central” European country. Even with slightly more “obvious” historical timelines – in the sense that they are more conventionally related to the “centre” – as in the cases of Spain and Portugal, it is only recently that the narrative of a gradual decline after the flourishing of polyphony in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the revival of fortunes late in the nineteenth century, has come to be viewed as a drastic simplification, in large part simply because so much of the music between these two chronological points has become available for performance and study.

The third question swings the compass round yet again, moving the lens so that it focuses upon regions, thus making peripheral capitals central: “Within national histories themselves, might we liberate the regions at the expense of the charismatic cultural capitals, and do adequate justice to mobility and migration flows?” This is an essential part of the task, and it must be done simultaneously with the liberation of the periphery writ large from the centre writ large, because cultural traffic has always flowed where it will, and regions have often been more receptive to trans-national currents than the “charismatic cultural capitals”, and this phenomenon is contemporaneous with the self-identification of those capitals as both peripheral to elsewhere and as important as centres themselves. It is enough to look at the cultural history of any provincial city to prove this point.

To find a way forward, then, I would argue that we must, in the first place, not be constrained by pre-ordained models of discipline but must, in the second place, have the flexibility to make use of them when they offer us a glimmer of light into the vast topic before us. Such a broad approach has been used with the greatest success by Jim Samson in his book *Music in the Balkans* (2013). Indeed, I recall that when he announced the beginning of that project, at a conference in Belgrade in 2007, I wondered how on earth it could be done, so vast was its scope. The answer was in fact a question, one that is to be seen on the book’s back cover: “This book asks how a study of many different musics in South East Europe can help us understand the construction of cultural traditions. It crosses boundaries of many kinds, political, cultural, repertorial

and disciplinary” (Ibid.) And there it is: this book of 667 pages is in fact a question. If we, as music historians, remember that all we are doing, and all we can do, in dealing with broad themes is asking questions, we will assuredly find answers, and those answers will cross many, many boundaries.

In conclusion, and at the risk of being thought trendy (or rather, at the risk of being thought to be someone who would like to be thought trendy), this seems a good moment to quote Foucault. In the introduction to his *L'Archéologie du savoir*, in his discussion of the functions of history, Foucault said the following:

To be brief, then, let us say that history, in its traditional form, undertook to 'memorise' the monuments of the past, transform them into documents, and lend speech to those traces which, in themselves, are often not verbal, or which say in silence something other than what they actually say; in our time, history is that which transforms documents into monuments. In that area where, in the past, history deciphered the traces left by men, it now deploys a mass of elements that have to be grouped, made relevant, placed in relation to one another to form totalities. There was a time when archaeology, as a discipline devoted to silent monuments, inert traces, objects without context, and things left by the past, aspired to the condition of history, and attained meaning only through the restitution of a historical discourse; it might be said, to play on words a little, that in our time history aspires to the condition of archaeology, to the intrinsic description of the monument (Foucault 1982).

If, then we have moved beyond the “memorization” of the monuments of the past and its attendant consequences, how might we leap on to Foucault’s bandwagon (admittedly a wagon that passed through as long ago as 1969) and deploy masses of elements in order to form totalities? How might we arrive at an “intrinsic description of the monument”? My reaction is to let the bandwagon roll past: there is no reason why, even while desiring to make silent monuments speak, and while keeping an eye on academic trends and recently-invented disciplines, we cannot maintain our independence in terms of an altogether more instinctive approach to what was once history and is now -ology (and once again I applaud the organizers of the conference at which this paper was first given for using the term “music history”). Let us never forget that music history – or even musicology – is a creative discipline.

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## ИВАН МУДИ

## ПОВРАТАК КОМПАСУ: ПИСАЊЕ НОВИХ ИСТОРИЈА МУЗИКЕ НА ЈУГУ

## (РЕЗИМЕ)

Историја музике у земљама Јужне Европе углавном је досад проучавана из перспективе Запада или Истока. Оваква ситуација узрокована је, између осталог, традиционалним, подразумеваним и никад преиспитаним поделама дуж религијских и лингвистичких координата, али и непознавањем релевантне литературе потекле из ове географске регије, што је, пак, у највећој мери продукт непознавања јужноевропских језика. Услед тога, готово да нема компаративних естетичких студија између нација које су настајале на почетку двадесетог века и успостављале сопствене верзије модернизма, а које би обухватиле земље Медитерана и Балкана; уместо тога, ове области се углавном сагледавају као "периферија" Европе и естетичка разматрања су усмерена готово искључиво на њихов однос према теоријском "центру". У својим радовима објављеним и презентованим током протеклих неколико година поставио сам себи за циљ да срушим ове баријере, тиме што суочавам, у најширем смислу, питања традиције и модернизма и паралелно изучавам музику латинско-романског, католичког југозапада и словенско-грчког, православног југоистока Европе. Сматрам да је овако широко постављена дискусија од пресудне важности за будућа детаљнија истраживања ове географске регије. У овом чланку разматрам меродавност оваквог приступа и осврћем се на проблеме који произилазе из покушаја његове имплементације, имајући у виду како потребу за ширином поставке историјске и географске визуре (укључујући денационализацију историје музике), тако и за избегавањем музиколошких клишеа, проистеклих из идеолошких поставки и тиме некомпатибилних са непристрасном истраживачком радознаношћу.

Кључне речи: Јужна Европа, Медитеран, Балкан, исток-запад, музичка историографија