

FOLKLORE MUSIC IN A GLOBAL VILLAGE: 'IRISH SERBS' IN BELGRADE TODAY

Abstract: During the 1990s people in Serbia were becoming more and more interested in Serbian folk music. At the same time, a vivid interest in folk music of other, often very distant nations, was present. Moreover, bands were formed in which Serbian musicians played music of various genres inspired by folklore of other nations. The presence of Irish folklore music on the Serbian music scene (bands: *Orthodox Celts*, *Irish Stew of Sindidun*, *Tir na n'Og*) are in the focus of this research.



Keywords: Irish folk music, 'Irish Serbs', 'Orthodox Celts'

During the 1990s an increase of interest in Serbian traditional music could be observed in Serbia.¹ At the same time, the traditional music of other, often very distant nations attracted the attention of a number of people. On the global level it was a period that saw the rise of the genre of 'world music'.² An interesting feature of the that decade in Serbia was the emergence of music bands in which musicians of Serbian nationality performed music inspired by the tradition of other nations. The presence of Irish folklore music at the Serbian music scene (*Orthodox Celts*, *Tir na n'Og*, *Irish Stew of Sindinun*) is in the focus of this research. Irish music is popular worldwide, so that in various countries there are bands in which people of non-Irish origin perform

1 See: Dimtriје O. Golemović, *Čovek kao muzičko biće*, Beograd: XX vek, 2006; Jelena Jovanović, 'The Power of Recently Revitalized Serbian Rural Folk Music in Urban Settings', in: Annie J. Randall (ed.), *Music, Power and Politics*, New York and London: Routledge, 2005, pp. 133–142.

2 See: Ivan Čolović, *Etno-priče o muzici sveta na Internetu* [Ethno-stories about the world on the internet], Beograd: XX vek, 2006; Jasmina Milojević, *World music – muzika sveta* [World music – music of the world], Jagodina: World Music Association of Serbia, 2002; Димитрије О. Големовић [Dimitrije O. Golemović], 'World music', in: *Нови звук* [Novi Zvuk] 24 (2004), pp. 41–47; Младен Марковић [Mladen Marković], 'World contra ethno... Против као и обично' [World contra ethno...Against as usual], in: *Нови звук* 24 [Novi Zvuk], (2004), pp. 48–51.

Celtic folk music. In this paper I shall investigate the situation in Serbia.³ This paper was written on the basis of field research carried out through interviews and free talk with musicians that are occupied with this music and its audience. I am very grateful to all those who helped this project to be accomplished successfully, especially to Mr Aleksandar Petrović, singer and frontman of the group *Orthodox Celts* who gave me most of the data.

A question is raised, what created the interest in this kind of music. Before 2004 not even a Consulate of Ireland existed in Serbia. There was no organized campaign that would create any interest in Ireland whatsoever. Anyway, the first music band that performs Irish traditional music in Serbia, *Orthodox Celts*, was formed in Belgrade in 1993.⁴ On 17 March of the same year, the band gave its first performance in the space of the British Council in Belgrade. Very soon it became one of the most attractive and most active concert bands in Serbia. The musicians of the band created a special mixture of the traditional Irish music and the elements of pop and rock. The band has seven members: Aleksandar Petrović-Aca Seltik (leading vocal), Ana Đokić (violin, back vocals), Nikola Stanojević (violin), Dejan Grujić (bass, back vocals), Vladan Jovković (guitar, back vocals), Dejan Lalić (Irish tenor banjo, mandolin, octave mandola, guitar, Scottish bagpipes, jew's harp, back vocals), Dejan Popin (tin whistle, low whistle, back vocals), Dušan Živanović (drums, percussion, bodhran, accordion, back vocals). They started as an acoustic band (violin, banjo, mandolin, pipe and accordion). Later they added traditional rock instruments, i.e. drums, bass and rhythm guitar, and keyboard if necessary.

When asked 'Why you chose the Irish folk' the member of the band replied by the counter question 'And why not?' They said that that was the kind of music that attracted all of them.⁵ The first contact with Celtic music Aleksandar Petrović had indirectly through the music of bands *Led Zeppelin*, *Deep Purple* and mostly *Thin Lizzy* – especially through the song *Black Rose* which contains several passages taken from various Irish traditional songs. The single *The Wild Rover* of the band *The Pogues* from 1985 had a crucial influence. He was exalted by music that was punk, folk, rock, and in a way old town music at the same time.

It is surprising that *Orthodox Celts* have never been to Ireland, mostly because of financial reasons, and because it is not profitable for any organizer in

3 This paper is the result of the work on the Project no.147023 – *Ethnicity: Contemporary processes in Serbia, neighboring countries and diaspora*, financed by the Ministry of Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

4 www.orthodoxcelts.co.yu; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orthodox_Celts

5 www.balkanmedia.com/magazin/1602/orthodox_celts_napredni_irski_folk.html

Ireland to bring such a big band. Their first album was released in 1994. The sound of the fourth album that was released in 2002 is different from the others. Irish folk music is dominant in it, but more keyboards and electric guitars were added. In the first albums the band almost exclusively performed Irish traditional music, while later they added their own compositions. The music was composed by Ana Đokić, arrangements were made by all the other members, and lyrics were written by Aleksandar Petrović. All the songs are in English. The members of the band also composed a few instrumental pieces. Several music videos were recorded. The album *A Moment Like The Longest Day* is special because there is only one traditional song in it, only as an instrumental. The group has a permanent co-worker, Kolet Yoanida (an Irish woman married to a Greek from Cyprus). She had found their first album by chance and she liked it a lot, so she sent them a few lyrics.⁶ They performed on every important domestic festivals and manifestations, like: 'Belgrade Beer Fest', 'Exit', 'Dani piva' [Days of Beer] in Zrenjanin, 'Dani vina' [Days of Wine] in Vršac, 'Guitar Festival' in Zaječar, they had a concert in the Belgrade Sava Center in 2000, etc. They had also numerous concerts in Serbia and nearby countries. In Herceg Novi in 2000 the band won the prize *Zlatna sirena* [Golden Siren] for their album *Green Roses* in the category of the best ethno-album. In 2003 they won the prize 'Beovision' for the album *A Moment Like The Longest Day* for the best edition in foreign language. Discography: *Orthodox Celts* (1994), *The Celts Strike Again* (1997), *Green Roses* (1999), *A Moment Like The Longest Day* (2002), *One Two Five* (2007). In 2003 the song *Far away* was released on the compilation *Respect-Folkus On Reconciliation: Rock For Peace* at which they were the only non-Irish band.

Although the band *Orthodox Celts* is in the focus of this paper as one of the most popular bands in Serbia, and not just in the genre of traditional music, I think that it is necessary to mention some other Serbian bands that perform this kind of music as well. Those are *Tir na n'Og* and *Irish Stew of Sindidun*.

The band *Tir na n'Og* was founded in Belgrade in 2000.⁷ The band was named after the imaginary land of eternal youth *Tír na n'Og*. At the beginning of their career, except for the Irish folklore music, they played music of *The Pogues* and *Young Dubliners*. The members of the band were coming and going, I will name here one of the band's structures: Jovana Vujnović (vocals), Jovan Dragumilo (guitar and vocals), Miroslav Kočić (violin), Damir Žigić (drums) and Ranko Radovanov (bass guitar). This band has songs in Serbian and English language on its repertoire. English and Serbian punk and folk elements are present. The

6 www.gitara.co.yu; <http://blog.myspace.com>

7 www.tirnanogmusic.com; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tir_na_n%27Og

first album was recorded in 2006, under the name *Tír na n'Og*. They recorded three music videos for the songs *Brodovi* (Ships), *Danny Boy* and *River*.

The band *Irish Stew of Sindidun* was founded in 2003 in Belgrade (often just Irish Stew).⁸ In the beginning they played Irish traditional music. Their music could be characterized as a light punk rock, inspired by Irish folk music and other genres. The band mostly performs their own songs, but also does covers of Irish traditional songs and songs by *The Pogues*. In 2004 the band got an audience reward on *Demo Masters Tournament 2004* organised by Radio Belgrade 202 and the award of the *Demo Maraton 2004* organised by the Belgrade Youth Cultural Centre. The members of the band are: Bojan Petrović (lead vocals, tin whistles), Nenad Gavrilov (acoustic guitar, backing vocals), Ivan Đurić (banjo, electric guitar, backing vocals), Ana Mrkobrada (violin), Aleksandar Gospodinov (bass guitar, backing vocals) and Marko Krasnić (drums). The first album under the name *So Many Words...* was recorded in 2005. It featured nine original tracks and three covers of Irish traditional songs. Promotional videos were recorded for the tracks *Puzzle Of Life* and *Why*. There are ten original tracks and two traditional covers in the second album *Dare to Dream*, recorded in 2008. Discography: *So Many Words...* (2005), *Dare To Dream* (2008).

These bands, especially *Orthodox Celts*, are very popular throughout Serbia. Their audience not only loves the music, but identifies itself with the Irish, drawing a parallel between the Serbian and Irish people. Serbs had always liked Celts and Irishmen, even before Irish music was played in Belgrade, so it had a good background. Namely, according to the observation of Serbian ethnologist-anthropologist Mladena Prelić,⁹ in the 1970s and the 1980s there were stories at the level of ethnic stereotypes that Irishman, i.e. Celts have a similar mentality as Serbs, in contrast to the 'cold' Englishmen. 'Serbian Irishmen' are great admirers of the Irish culture. They feel a deep connection between, as they say, 'the tormented countries Serbia and Ireland'. At their concerts the enthusiastic people in the audience jump during every performance singing lyrics in English by heart. They are dressed characteristically: guys wear jerseys of *The Celtic F.C.*, and girls wear mini-skirts and army boots. At one concert journalists noted the presence of a guy who wore 'perfectly ironed kilt and was jumping in the front rows'.¹⁰ Admirers of this music wear sometimes also IRA badges. Spilling beer at concerts is obligatory, which creates the atmosphere similar to the one in Irish pubs.¹¹ It is also a fact that café bars in the style of Irish pubs

8 www.irishstew.net

9 www.etno-institut.co.yu

10 www.nadlanu.com

11 www.nadlanu.com

exist throughout Serbia. In A. Petrović's opinion the similarities between Serbs and Irishmen could be summarized in this way: 'We have brown and black hair like Irishmen. It is a misapprehension that all of them have red hair and that they are spotty. Irishmen are totally the same as we are: an Irishman works when he has to work, likes drinking and partying without letup. Both Serbs and Irishmen like to get drunk, "here and now". An Irishman whom I met once told me: "We are completely the same. We like to drink, to eat and to score three away goals."'12

Some might think that these musicians are receiving some help from Ireland, because they are active in promoting its culture. However, there have been neither help from Ireland nor any contacts whatsoever. That didn't prevent the members of the band *Orthodox Celts* to initiate the founding of the Association of Serbian-Irish friendship. Thanks to these musicians a great interest in the football team *Celtic F.C.* and the beer brand *Guinness* has been seen in Serbia. According to Aleksandar Petrović's testimony a musician can't live on these two music genres. Apart from singing in the band, he has two other jobs (he has been a sound engineer in Radio Belgrade for 19 years, and in addition to this he is an editor and a host of the radio show 'Ćoškarenje' on Radio 202). This can be explained by the too small market for rock music, which means that almost all activities are based on enthusiasm. A. Petrović could never understand the expansion of techno music in Serbia. In one of the previous interviews he said: 'We are a nation that likes melody, and techno doesn't have it. I cannot classify techno into music, because it doesn't contain a melodic base. There is a rhythm, ok, let's get high with trodons and alcohol and not think. Everything comes to: don't think or you will become dangerous.'13

For almost fifteen years 'Belgrade Celts' have been celebrating the Irish national holiday St. Patrick's Day with music of the band *Orthodox Celts*. Saint Patrick is the protector of Ireland, well-know for his role in the Christianization of this island. He lived in the fifth century, and died on 17 March 461.¹⁴ The celebration of St. Patrick's Day is a world phenomenon, and for the past few years has been lasting longer and longer in various countries. It had started as a one-day ceremony, and has reached five-day-duration because of great interest. The most numerous celebrations take place in New York. Since 1992 St. Patrick's Day has been celebrated in Moscow with a great street parade, as one of the many holidays.¹⁵ People wear green clothes on this day because the

12 www.balkanmedia.com/magazin/1602/orthodox_celts_napredni_irski_folk.html

13 www.gitara.co.yu/9.html

14 <http://wilstar.com/holidays/patrick.htm>; www.history.com

15 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Patrick's_Day

holiday takes place on the wake of the spring's arrival. It is considered to be one of the holidays for celebrating the spring awakening. From 14 till 22 March 2008 the band *Orthodox Celts* was on a tour named *St. Patrick's Day* in towns Niš, Kragujevac, Zrenjanin, Novi Sad and Belgrade. The concert in Belgrade was organized in Dom Sindikata Hall on 17 March, the birthday of the band, since their first concert was performed on the holiday of this saint.

In the conclusion it is necessary to point out that the members of the band *Orthodox Celts* are not playing Irish, i.e. Celtic music as a *foreign one*. The band *Orthodox Celts* is the example of the mix of national consciousness and cosmopolitanism. The celebration of St. Patrick's Day has two levels – *exterior*, at which St. Patrick's Day is celebrated, and *interior*, at which the band's birthday is celebrated. Similarly, the story about the Celtic music in Belgrade also has two levels. To an observer from outside a band that performs Irish, i.e. Celtic traditional music in Belgrade appears like a band that performs foreign music – from the Serbian point of view. That is the reason why I used the method of getting to know the situation from the inside, so I asked Aleksandar Petrović what attracted him to Celtic music and what was his experience with it. The answer was that he didn't regard Irish folk as somebody else's folk, but as his own. He said that in those melodies he recognized something that expresses his feelings: 'I felt that I had to do it, because it is a part of me.' He experiences Celtic music as Serbian¹⁶ and explains that by the fact that Celts once inhabited this area in the past.¹⁷ One part of them moved away and another one was assimilated here and that is why common roots in music and culture exist. A. Petrović declares himself Serbian, and a nationally conscious person. He sings in English because he doesn't speak Irish. One street salesman told him that he should sing in 'our (Serbian) language', and he replied: 'Well, I already sing our native stuff!'

16 <http://www.novosti.rs/code/navigate.php?Id=10&status=jedna&vest=118702&datum=2008-03-28>

17 About Celts in the South-Eastern Europe see: Jovan Todorović, *Kelti u jugoistočnoj Evropi*, Dissertationes VII, Beograd 1968; Fanula Papazoglu, *Srednjobalkanska plemena u predrimsko doba*, Sarajevo 1969; Dragoslav Srejšević, 'Kulture gvođenog doba na tlu Srbije', in: *Istorija srpskog naroda I*, Srpska književna zadruga, Beograd 1994.

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