



BEYOND THE EAST-WEST DIVIDE
Balkan music and its poles of attraction

Edited by
Joana Medić and Katarina Tomašević



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Belgrade, 2015

Cover image: An extract from *A New Map of Turkey in Europe, Divided into its Provinces, from the Best Authorities* by John Cary (1754–1835). Prepared in 1801.

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Jelena Jovanović and Sanja Ranković

**Reception of Serbian traditional rural singing in
‘the West’, ‘the East’ and beyond: the experiences of
neo-traditional ensembles from Belgrade¹**

This chapter is an attempt to contribute to the latest research trends in European ethnomusicology by looking into the issue of a relationship between the terms *music* and *familiarity* (Stobart 2013). Stobart offers an innovative approach to this issue in the light of a direct experience in intercultural contacts and intercultural listening from the perspective of researchers and performers of traditional Balkan music. This topic concerns with the aspects of reception of *familiar* or *unfamiliar sounds* of Serbian rural vocal music, depending on the cultural milieu in which they have been presented.

Since the 1980s, there has been a growing interest for performances of traditional rural songs in urban conditions (Nenić 2009), especially for their concert performance (Åkesson 2006: 3). In this respect, the neo-traditional vocal ensembles have played a decisive role since they, according to Tamara Livingston, follow a concept of music revivals defined as ‘social movements which strive to restore and preserve traditional musical systems believed to be disappearing or completely relegated to the past and which are therefore to be brought back from archive and collective memory’ (Nenić 2009: 73; Zakić and Nenić 2012: 170). This tendency was reinforced in many countries during the 1990’s ‘with the rise of identity politics’ (Stobart 2013: 117). In Serbia, or to be precise, in Belgrade, this type of activity commenced with the foundation of a female vocal group ‘Paganke’ [Pagan women (1983)], while

¹ This chapter was written as part of the research project *Serbian musical identities within local and global frameworks: traditions, changes, challenges* (No. 177004 (2011–2014)) funded by the Serbian Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development.

traditional rural/country singing has also earned substantial popularity thanks to the work of singing group 'Moba' [Husking bee (since 1993)], as well as the Ethnomusicology Department at 'Mokranjac' Music School in Belgrade (the establishment of which, in 1995, introduced traditional singing into the framework of Serbian educational system). Both authors of this chapter played important roles in these developments. Together, we founded the singing ensemble 'Moba', remaining its members and artistic directors until the present day, while we also participated in creating a curriculum for traditional singing to be studied a high school subject. Sanja Ranković also established the Ethnomusicology Department at 'Mokranjac' and became its first teacher; she remains active with the School as a performance instructor. Moreover, she has been a Professor of traditional singing at the Belgrade Faculty of Music since 2011; in 2015 this subject became compulsory for all ethnomusicology students.

Since we, as performers, are in 'a relationship to the body of music / the style *and* the process / the movement' (Åkesson 2006: 8) and, in turn, these are 'part of this process themselves', this study is based on our 'insider' viewpoint. Also, this chapter is a contribution to other, relatively recently established sub-disciplines: *ethnography of performance* and *ethnography of experience* (Kisliuk 2008: 193).

The ensemble 'Moba' gathers together women and girls with university education. Three of them are ethnomusicologists (two of them hold a PhD degree in ethnomusicology), one member holds a PhD in ethnology and anthropology, another one is an ethnomusicology student, whereas other members come from different walks of life. On the other hand, the vocal ensemble of 'Mokranjac' music school consists of female students aged 15–23, belonging to different social classes and coming from Belgrade and other parts of Serbia.

'Moba' usually performs in small groups (2–6 singers), sometimes accompanied by one or two instrumentalists. When performing abroad, 'Mokranjac' school ensemble usually gathers 5 to 14 singers and instrumentalists. The repertoire of both ensembles comprises songs that belong to traditional rural culture, preserved by being orally transmitted to the present day. The concert programmes of both groups include the songs of chronologically older and younger rural vocal layer originating from all Balkan regions where the Serbs live, or used to live. Both groups make efforts to faithfully interpret these songs, that is, as close as possible

to the original model. The orientation of ensembles that are the subject of discussion here, as Iva Nenić succinctly explains, ‘requires some previous listening experience and a profound acquaintance with a folk song’s aesthetics’ (Nenić 2009: 72). Several ethno-musicological studies reported on the activities of ‘Moba’ (see, for example, Mijatović 2003; Jovanović 2005), especially an article dedicated to ‘heuristic traits of the concepts of traditional music and dance in contemporary Serbian culture’ (Zakić & Rakočević 2012). The importance of the group’s engagement for public presentations of Serbian culture abroad was well noticed by linguists (see Ratković 2013).

Beside the musical events that they organise in Serbia, the vocal ensembles ‘Moba’ and ‘Mokranjac’ also present their repertoire abroad. Since the artistic directors of both ensembles are ethnomusicologists, a deliberate attention is paid to the educational side of their performances so that the audiences may have an insight into a vividly heterogeneous musical images of Serbian rural vocal practice. Their programmes are conceived with an intention to be at the same time informative (i.e. to present characteristic vocal dialects and forms of vocal practice) and attractive, so that their dynamics may contribute to forcibleness of certain styles and examples, following either the principle of contrast or similarity. That implies that songs of various character and musical texture, including semantics, ethos, and emotional tension, are combined in a concert programme. It is customary that a song consisting of chords based on the interval of second is followed by melodies/tunes in which harmonies based on the intervals of thirds and fifths prevail. Relying on the pitch of specific songs as a criterion when creating concert programs is of secondary importance: the predominantly high-pitched songs are usually performed either at the climax of the concert or at its end, but sometimes even at the very beginning of the concert, with respect to the entirety of the concert programme.

The duration of the performance is changeable, depending on the organiser’s requirements; it can last from 10 to 90 minutes (compare to Ober 2007: 72). In order to achieve a greater comprehensiveness of the programme during the longer performances of both ensembles, instrumental music is inserted between two *a capella* performances, alongside dances accompanied by singing or playing instruments; moreover, the ‘Mokranjac’ ensemble achieves additional contrast and

enhances the attractiveness of its stage performances by wearing different folk costumes.

The act of uprooting rural vocal practice from its ritual context and original habitat in order to present it on the stage resulted in the fact that specific traditional texts become exposed to the audience for evaluation. The very fact that in the case of neo-traditional ensembles, the primary way of presentation is a stage performance, and not the original context in which the songs had originated, implies conforming to formal requirements of concert performances regarding the overall concept, duration, the use of traditional costumes etc. All of these are aimed at maintaining a better communication with the audience, as well as meeting their expectations with respect to the type of repertoire.

We will now focus on the issue of reception of the repertoire that the aforementioned ensembles present abroad, that is, to the members of other national, ethnic and in particular, cultural matrixes. It is commonplace that the issue of aesthetics of music in some cultures actually corresponds with the issue of cultural constructions, and so is the fact that aesthetic appraisal and valuation stem from the social and cultural environment, hence the musical expressions and experiences of *familiar* or *unfamiliar* are also socially constructed (Stobart 2013: 111, 118, 119). It is also shown that certain learnt perceptive dispositions, including different bodily responses and hearing habits (Ibid.: 124, 126, 127) participate in different responses to the music. On the basis of both positive and negative experiences that the two ensembles had while abroad, it is possible to discern what other cultures recognised as ‘culturally unfamiliar sounds’ (Stobart 2013: 112), that is, ‘desirable’ or *culturally correct* (Ober 2007: 73). When the listeners cannot recognise certain expression patterns, it may provoke the feeling of insecurity and disorientation, further leading to a negative perception (Ibid.: 110). It is also interesting to what extent the grasping of musical messages from other culture is possible and which segment of Serbian vocal practice is familiar to whom. Moreover, much more complex issues could be raised in relation to ‘agency, opportunities, motivations of the listeners, identity, power, politics, ideology, and gender’ (Ibid.: 110), however these exceed the scope of this chapter.

Since we are discussing intercultural contacts here, a fundamental question to be raised is related to the possibilities of surmounting cultural

and musical barriers, as well as to the permeability of the barriers in the case of Serbian rural vocal tradition (compare to Zakić 2012: 1). On the basis of the selected case studies, we will present the ways in which Serbian vocal practice, as a part of Balkan musical tradition, communicates within other cultural matrixes in Western and Eastern Europe and in the Balkans.

The questions thus raised address an issue of *aesthetic valuation* within the framework of traditional music, valuation parameters, as well as the manner of pronouncing the ultimate *value judgement*. Traditional music performed in concerts implies the relationship between the performer and the audience in the same context as any other musical genre. Contemporary studies in aesthetics and communication consider every musical or artistic event as a communicative act that ultimately pronounces the aesthetic judgment as an intellectual category. A positive or negative judgment with respect to a performance of traditional music arises. The aesthetic evaluation made by the listeners is the result of a specific interrelation that is established among the properties of the musical form, the artist's specific inspiration, artist's performing skills and the audience's own experience. It is necessary to identify and define *aesthetic experiences* as indicators of responses to a certain musical text (Đemidok 1984: 56) in order to enable a listener to make an aesthetic valuation of a specific traditional musical text. In this case, the aesthetic experience can be measured by describing certain affective gestures and emotional responses and pronouncement of listener's verbal, aesthetic judgments. The cornerstone of this approach is Meyer's discourse on emotional response to music (Meyer 1986: 22) which is defined by:

- self-observing descriptions of listeners and their verbal reactions, and
- the behaviour of both performers and audiences and the psychological changes that accompany music cognition.

The methodological procedure applied in this chapter stems from the fact that this is the very first contribution that examines the reception of Serbian traditional music abroad. Hence this is a pioneering step in envisaging the communicative potential of Serbian traditional singing and a fundamental premise for future reasoning on the subject. It is important to highlight that at the time when the specific cases, which will be discussed later on occurred, we did not yet have an idea to write an article

on this topic. However, we were aware of the reception of the music that we performed: we noted and memorised the audience's responses and individual comments. Furthermore, it was already then that we shared our experience and discussed it with the listeners, so we learned about the aspects of reception that were completely new for us at the time. Owing to the fact that among the members of the ensemble 'Moba' there are ethnomusicologists and anthropologists, we analysed and discussed certain situations and shared our impressions over a period of time. Our several days long stays in other communities in particular contributed to creating a general impression on the intensity, presence or absence of cultural contacts and processes that take place in relation to this contact. Therefore, the participant-observer position of the authors of this text in this respect can be considered only tentatively.

Psychology of music also attempted to define musical meaning, but was often criticised. Leonard Meyer specified three basic fallacies of these studies, all of them mutually related: hedonism, atomism and universalism (Mejer 1986: 20). Even though researchers sometimes interpret emotional responses to a particular musical stimulus as inadequate for an objective interpretation of the meaning and impact of music, nevertheless, they have been inevitable in narratives looking into the reception of musical text (Ibid.: 16–35). Recent studies indicate that 'emotions play a crucial role in the "surfacing" of individual and collective bodies' (Ahmed 2004: 25); according to Ahmed, emotions 'work to align individuals with collectives – or bodily space with social space' (Ibid.: 26), and take part in 'what we feel about the others is what aligns us with a collective', which takes into account the 'emotionality of texts' (Ibid.).

We will now analyse several cases that point to specific phenomena in the processes of reception of Serbian traditional rural music by foreign audiences. The cases illustrating positive and negative reactions on the level of collective will be scrutinised; it is necessary to mention that these are the most striking, paradigmatic cases. It is important to highlight that individual responses largely corresponded the collective ones; in other cases, individual reception substantially differed from the collective judgment. Situations featuring negative reactions proved indicative suggesting the existence of cultural barriers that emerged when a particular part of the repertoire was being performed. With respect to a type of response, described in this paper, the following cultural units may

be recognised: those of Western Europe, Eastern Europe and the Balkans, and the Mediterranean. In addition, one of the conclusions to be drawn here is that the members of today's younger generation, being heavily influenced by the Internet and the media, are more inclined to participate in intercultural interactions. However, an important question is raised here: to what extent is the 'foreign' musics that they hear from the radio, TV and other media actually perceived as something 'familiar' (Stobart 2013: 123).

The West

In 2003, the female singing group of 'Mokranjac' Music School took part in *Voix mêlées* festival in Paris, held at the Conservatoire Hector Berlioz. The idea of the organisers was to prepare a musical and cultural event for their students, giving them a chance to get acquainted with diverse music practices. The concert was attended not only by students of the Conservatoire, but also by their parents and many others. The programme included songs of both older and recent rural practices, singing with the accompaniment of the *gusle*, as well as instrumental compositions for *frula* (an end-blown flute with 6 fingerholes) or *gajde* (bagpipes). The audience response was utterly positive: each song was followed by thunderous applause. At the end, the audience was standing and applauding for a long time whereas the performers returned to give multiple encores.

The East

The female singing group of 'Mokranjac' music school had a remarkable experience in communication and cultural contact in a small Russian town of Kozalsk where a competition in traditional singing of Orthodox countries (Russia, Ukraine, etc.) was held in 2012. The competition was specific in a sense that the participants were supposed to sing one song of ecclesiastical content and another from the realm of traditional singing. The audience consisted of members of various generations, but all of them belonged to Russian urban society. For the competition, songs of a wide ambitus were chosen because they enabled dynamic shading and were reminiscent of Russian songs in terms of their structure. Songs in non-tempered tuning system were avoided as well as the songs based on the intervals of seconds, considered by Sanja Ranković as inadequate, due to presenting a greater challenge for intercultural listening (as indicated

also in Stobart 2013: 118). This tentatively chosen repertoire was well received by the listeners who responded with ovations and acclaim, but also individually, with verbal and nonverbal expressions of other kind. Some listeners approached the members of the jury demanding that the Serbian singers win the first prizes. Immediately after the performance, in the backstage, the girls received many gifts from their admirers: flowers, chocolate and other, while after the announcement of the winners (since they won two first and one second prize) a long-lasting photo shoot with the audience of all generations ensued.

An example of negative response happened during a ceremonial opening of the International seminar for Russian traditional singing that was held in Podolsk, Moscow region, in January 2007, under the auspices of the Centre for traditional culture 'Istoki'. The seminar was named international: it summoned Russian ensembles from various towns and regions in Russia, as well as the neighboring countries (mainly former Soviet republics in which the Russians nowadays constitute a national minority group). Jelena Jovanović was the sole representative of other ethnicities at this seminar (or at least she was the only one introduced as such). On the occasion of ceremonial opening, it was planned that each of the twenty-ish ensembles-participants introduce themselves, firstly by a welcoming address of an ensemble director and then by a performance of a song. Therefore, Jovanović had an opportunity to introduce herself as a soloist, which was an exception compared to other participants who all sang in groups. Although she had reckoned, just as Sanja Ranković did in the above described case, that in such a situation the best effect could have been achieved with a song of a wide range and diatonic tonal structure, she made a decision not to cater to the audience's taste and to do the opposite, at her own peril. She made a personal choice by choosing one of her favorites, and, simultaneously, one of the most striking examples of archaic solo singing from Central Serbia (the region of her intensive field research). The song in question was *Čarna goro, puma li si lada* [Magic mountain, you are full of shade] – a traveller solo song, belonging to the older rural vocal layer, and, at the same time, an example of a virtuosic, demanding performance, with respect to the non-tempered tone scale of a relatively broad range, abundant in ornaments. The choice of this song was therefore somewhat provocative.

The audience responded with silence and obvious bafflement. The song was so different from what they had heard before and afterwards; compared to all others it sounded off-key, in a voice impostation that emanated significantly different aesthetic criterion regarding the quality. A tepid applause showed bewilderment and disapproval together with moderate hubbub that accompanied the ending of the song. It is a specific example of a ‘musical incorrectness’ in a context in which the central place was dedicated to the affirmation of a national identity through music; maybe it could be said that this performance even compromised ‘cultural and perceptual consensus and stability’ (Stobart 2013: 111). For a while, an issue was raised on how the presence of such a considerably different element among them could be justified. Such singing was collectively perceived as ‘unskillful’ or even ‘unattractive’ (though individual reactions showed there are also another ways of intercultural listening).

The Balkans

The cases of both positive and negative audience feedback/responses were recorded when ‘Moba’ performed at the festival *Polifoniká tragóúdia* [Polyphonic songs] in Epirus, Western Greece, in the summer of 2001. The concerts were held over seven evenings in various villages and smaller towns, in the open air, usually at central squares and in amphitheatres. The audience consisted of the local inhabitants, mainly the Greeks, but in some places, depending on the population structure, there were also the Aromanians [Vlachs] and the Albanians. It comprised people of different generations, usually families. These concerts signified a kind of cultural, but also social summer happenings: performers coming from those very places also participated at the concerts.

The main programme included songs from the Epirus region, so the idiom of this region was prevalent, whereas the key element of these encounters was communication within the codes of musical tradition between the performers and the audience. This was confirmed by the unequivocal signs of approval coming from the audience, their loud and apparent response to the lyrical content or reactions to some particularly good song performances. In such a context, the repertoire of ‘Moba’ was a thematic and structural breakthrough and thus presented a potential challenge before the listeners. It turned out that the community had an

intensive emotional response to one particular song, so the organisers requested that it be performed every night, in each of the places visited, as they recognised that the communicational code of this song was the closest to the traditional music idiom of the Epirus region. It was the song titled *Ova brda i puste doline* [These hills and deserted valleys] that belongs to the category of *hybrid* forms, a fusion of older and more recent singing, coming from central Serbia (Šumadija). The ‘links’ with Epirotan idiom were found in tonality, a relatively narrow tone range in intervals that are close to diatonic, an occasional appearance of a unison and a major second in melodic stanzas and in cadences, a free (*rubato*) rhythm; so, it could be seen that several important *familiar sounds* were present that provided the positive reception. It could also be said that the supposed *unfamiliar* within the same song was framed, or balanced, by the *familiar*, thus providing feelings of security, control, and orientation (Stobart 2013: 110, 131).

Nevertheless, on this very occasion, a negative response from the audience came when a duo of the ‘Moba’ ensemble sang a song *Žaspala Joka Bogutovka* [Joka Bogutovka has fallen asleep], an example of old diaphonic, heterophonic-bourdon singing that originates from North-Eastern Bosnia. Apart from being sung in full, high voice, a distinctive feature of this song is a sharp contrast between, on the one side, the parts featuring long-lasting chords in seconds, untempered singing and ‘clucking tones’ as embellishments, and, on the other side, a long sliding *glissando* on the final tone of each verse; this *glissando* is a ‘trademark’ of such songs. ‘Moba’ decided to include it in the programme because we wanted to bring something brand new into the repertoire chosen for that evening. The audience, accustomed to diatonic structures, with far more ‘lyrical’ content, responded to such a ‘wild’ song firstly with silence and afterwards even with laughter. It is peculiar that they did not feel like hiding their reaction, as they reacted naturally, which clearly showed how inadequate was the performance of such a song in their cultural surroundings.

Conclusion

The case studies presented here reveal that the reception of Serbian rural vocal practice, that is, the extent to which recipients can accept *unfamiliar sounds* varies, depending on the context and traditions of the community where cultural contact occurs (Stobart 2013: 110).

Western European audiences perceive Serbian rural singing as something 'other', different from their own, and therefore 'exotic'; this refers to the elements that are considered to be entirely 'non-Western' (we use this term tentatively, as its usage has arguably been susceptible to criticism; Ibid.: 111–112). It pertains to the musical phenomena that are more challenging for listeners during intercultural listening (Ibid.: 118); this particularly refers to older rural vocal forms in which specific musical structures (e.g. untempered scales, the intervals of seconds, texture etc.) prevail. It is precisely that 'distinctiveness' and the skill of a performer that Western European audiences recognise as signifiers of foreign traditional music. It is exceptionally interesting that the same qualities are unveiled by Loran Ober in the reception of Indian music in the West European cultural milieu (Ober 2007: 154).

Audiences in Eastern Europe and the Balkans respond most favorably to the songs which bear a close resemblance to their own musical practices; the reason for this lies in the fact that in such cultural environments, traditional music is still recognised as a significant element of culture. The cases described as negative responses indicate an emergence of *cultural noise* in the reception of *unfamiliar* Serbian singing in such surroundings.

On this occasion, the focus was on the reception of Serbian traditional rural vocal music in Europe. We have not taken into account experiences with non-European audiences whatsoever that could indeed point to a broader, more globally oriented stratigraphy of the elements of Serbian tradition.²

Along with the development of the Internet technology, traditional music has become more available, which resulted in the widening of the circle of those who know and admire this music genre, but whose critical view has become substantially sharper and who have formed their aesthetic judgment. This particularly refers to members of younger generations in different parts of Europe and in the Balkans, too. In a quest for their own identity, they reach out to various kinds of traditional music, therefore to Serbian music too, as they find support for modeling of their

² This topic merits further investigation. For example, on one occasion we heard two interesting, separate remarks made by an American and an Indian listener who, independently from one another, reached a similar conclusion – that Serbian rural singing could best be compared to Indian vocal tradition.

own music taste and identity exactly in the traditional music elements (Laušević 2002). Given the aforementioned considerations, it can be said that the interest in 'foreign' traditional music implies that its fans have reached the elements of universality in it, even though they are expressed through diverse forms in each society respectively (according to: Dumont 1966: 16). Save these, we could have particularly taken into consideration types of responses of different audience groups (depending on age, education, gender etc.) towards traditional singing forms.

The cases described above should not be taken at face value. A future research exclusively focused on these problems will, complemented with new methodological procedures and the experiences of colleagues from abroad dealing with similar issues, provide more accurate answers to the complex set of questions on intercultural relations. Moreover, research shows that a gap between academic and practical activity may be bridged by an ethnomusicologist's engagement (Sheehy 1992: 335). Therefore, ethnomusicology can be active, socially responsible and productive in equal measures.

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