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(NEW SERIES)**

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MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS**

Edited by Gisa Jähnichen
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Danka Lajić Mihajlović

Gusle-making in Serbia between Tradition and the Market*

The place of gusle (a one-stringed bowed instrument) among the Serbian traditional instruments is on the one hand determined by its subordinate role in the vocal-instrumental performances of epics, and, on the other hand, by its prestigious status in the national culture owing to the overall significance of this genre.



Figure 1: Gusle from the beginning of the 20th century (the Collection of the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade); Figure 2: Gusle from 1934 (the Collection of the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade); Figure 3: A contemporary gusle (a private collection).

Despite the long-lasting tendency of reshaping the traditional music idioms and their integrating into the popular and the world music genres under the influence of media and cultural policies, the gusle has still preserved its dominantly traditional function and, consequently, its basic ergological features.² Still, a thorough analysis shows there are differences between old and new pieces of gusle. The older ones from museums' collections are of a

* The paper was written as a part of the project *Serbian Musical Identities within Local and Global Frameworks: Traditions, Changes, Challenges* (ON 177004), funded by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

¹ All figures are used by courtesy of the respective institution.

² Lajić Mihajlović, Danka (2011). *The Presence of Rural Musical Instruments in Serbia Today: The Case of Gusle*. *Studia instrumentorum musicae popularis II* (New Series). Edited by Gisa Jähnichen. Münster, MV Wissenschaft, 49–60.

quite small size and simple in their appearance,³ while the newer examples display a range of distinctions (see Figures 1–3).

The relevance of research of gusle-making was pointed to not only in the material changes in the instrument itself manifested accross time, but also in the earlier literature of ethnographic kind. At the beginning of the 20th century, researchers have observed that many guslars – gusle players i.e. singers to the accompaniment of the gusle, used to make instruments both for themselves and the young apprentice musicians, but have also registered the presence of specialized gusle makers who, because they learned the necessary skills and techniques and owned the adequate tools, produced a high quality gusle pieces intended for sale.⁴ Notwithstanding, gusle-making did not draw attention of music sholars even when the discipline of ethnomusicology was established in Serbia after the World War II. Their focus was only on instrument`s ergological features together with the practice of gusle-playing which were discussed in detail in national and international circles.⁵ Ethnomusicological approaches from the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century mostly deal with musical practice and, hence – with music and musicians, putting the phenomenon of instrument-making on the margin. Gusles as a part of traditional epic performance practice were also examined from the perspective of communication theory⁶ which, once more, left the topic of instrument making unexplored. Therefore, the 2017 Meeting of the ICTM Study Group on Musical Instruments and its main theme served as an impetus for the research of this missing aspect.

³ Митровић, Мирослав (2014). *Где сви ћуте оне говоре. Гусле етнографског музеја у Београду*. Каталог изложбе. Београд, Етнографски музеј у Београду. [Mitrović, Miroslav (2014). *They speak where everybody is quiet. The gusle of the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade*. The Exhibition Catalogue. Belgrade: The Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade.]

⁴ During the research of *gusle* and *gusle* players in Pirot area (Southern Serbia) in the interwar period, ethnologist Mitar Vlahović remarked the following: Tana Stoja Đ. Pešić, 72 years old, made his own *gusle* when he was very young; J. P. Ilić, University professor from Dojkinci, recalled that his fahter, Petar, built *gusle* (*guslu*) for him as well as for his relative; Jovan Kostić Savin (died around 1910 in his 40s) sung beautifully with *gusle* and played *gajde* [bagpipes] and *covare* [traditional end-blown flutel] and made all these instruments by himself; a carpenter from Brlog made artistic type of *gusle* that expanded in Montenegro in recent past. Влаховић, Митар (1936). *О гуслама и гусларима у пиротском крају*. Гласник Етнографског музеја у Београду, књ. XI, 142–160 (Summary in German). [Vlahović, Mitar (1936). *О гуслама и гусларима у пиротском крају*. Glasnik Etnografskog muzeja u Beogradu, XI, 142–160.]

⁵ Dević, Dragoslav (1975). *Gusle und Lirica, zwei chordophone Bogeninstrumente in Jugoslawien*. Die Geige in der europäishen Volksmusik – I Seminar für europäishe Musikethnologie (St. Pölten, 1971), Wien: Verlag A. Schendel, 38–47.

⁶ Лајић Михајловић, Данка (2014). *Српско традиционално певање уз гусле: гусларска пракса као комуникациони процес*. Београд: Музиколошки институт САНУ. [Lajić Mihajlović, Danka (2014). *Serbian traditional singing accompanied by the gusle: The Guslars` practice as a communication process*. Belgrade: Institute of Musicology SASA].

Throughout history, the appearance of the gusle has varied under the influence of changing physical contexts – the space in which singing with the gusle accompaniment took place.⁷ While the small-size instruments with feeble sound were appropriate for small, private spaces such as rooms of rural homes, the playing of the gusle in public, in taverns and later on concert halls, caused innovations of their construction and used materials towards enhancing the sonority. Furthermore, the gusle were also affected by the transformation of the ‘epic singing style’ that involved the introduction of embellished melodic parts into dominantly recitative lines.⁸ It caused more frequent choosing of a higher vocal register (i.e. louder, forced singing) and, consequently, a need for a more voluminous instrumental part to be a ‘sound mask’ to the vocal, as it was traditional function. The influence of the emerging recording industry in the process of gusle changing should not be overlooked either.⁹ The rustling, the flageolet-quality sound of the gusle was not adequate for commercial gramophone records, which led to demands of more articulate playing and the instruments with a higher tuning and sharper sounding.

Simultaneously with incentives resulting from shifts in musical performance practice, gusle have been undergoing modifications owing to the appearance of new materials and technologies. For example, thin synthetic cords proved more resistant than horsehair fibres when subjected to greater tension and pressure of the bow in gusle-playing. In addition, the use of special chemical emulsions hastened the curing of the leather required for the resonating box. Finally, the development of woodworking machines not only accelerated the whole manufacturing procedure but also allowed precise replication of an instrument’s form.

Besides all that, gradual marginalization of the practice of singing accompanied by the gusle bring down the instrument’s function to the material symbol of national tradition – an ‘identity icon’ and simultaneously promoted it as a souvenir or memorabilia kind of commodity.

My research findings on the gusle-making practice show the diversity of used technologies together with the palette of individual methods and personal motives confirming that the role of the craftsman has still remained crucial. Hence, the special focus in this paper will be put on the broader problematization of this practice. I will try to point to the distinctions in gusle-making as a result of the diversity of approaches to instrument’s construction

⁷ Lajić Mihajlović, Danka (2014). Op. cit. 169–172.

⁸ Ibid.: 335–338.

⁹ Лајић Михајловић, Данка, Ђорђевић Белић, Смиљана (2016а). *Певање уз гусле и музичка индустрија: гусларска извођења на првим грамофонским плочама (1908–1931/2)*. *Музикологија* 20: 199–222. [Lajić Mihajlović, Danka and Djordjević Belić, Smiljana (2016). *Singing with gusle accompaniment and the music industry: The first gramophone records of gusle players’ performances (1908–1931/2)*. *Musicology* 20: 199–222].

as well as to its function and market placement. For that purpose, I will introduce three different cases that exhibit characteristics I find paradigmatic for contemporary gusle-making practice as well as the instrument's role in Serbian society of today.

Dragan Kujundžić (born in 1960 in Topolovac, lives in Zrenjanin, Vojvodina – Northern Serbia) is educated as a “woodworking technician” and specialised in making furniture and parquet laying.¹⁰ Besides, he is also a gusle-maker and gusle player. He explains his interest in this instrument with his family roots – namely, before settling in Vojvodina, his parents were living in Herzegovina (today a part of Bosnia and Herzegovina), famous for its epic singing tradition with gusle accompaniment. When he was a teenager, he started to learn singing with gusle by himself. Since then he became a regular guslar and one of the founders of the Cultural-Artistic Guslars Association ‘Petar Perunović Perun’. He does not consider himself an able guslar owing to the stage-fright he experiences when performing in public. Owing to his woodworking craft Mr Kujundžić showed interest for gusle-making, making his first gusle when he was in his early 20s. So far he made more than 200 pieces. For Mr Kujundžić, gusle-making is a pastime, as well as being a supplementary source of income. He makes as many gusle as his primary, more commercial work allows him to. Therefore, he can be considered a semi-professional gusle-maker. Mr Kujundžić chose the traditional method of manufacturing, which involves manual tools and, in turn, makes the process slow and more expensive (see: Video example 1). Nevertheless, he is proud of his approach assuming that the instrument's “soul” is stripped off when built with the machines. Discussing the methodology of gusle-making Mr Kujundžić emphasizes the importance of the quality of wood (he assumes white maple as the finest), the size of the stump (he finds it more appropriate to make the instrument from the quarter of the stump instead of a half of the stump due to the better density structure of wood), the level of dryness of wood (he prefers the simple molding of the instrument followed by drying which accelerates the whole process). As a guslar, he is focused primarily on the quality of the instrument's sound which, as he pointed, led him to manual approach to gusle-making assuming that the noblest examples of gusle found today are built in this manner. Besides, he is also interested in the ornamentation of gusle which can be related to his semi-professional work with woodcut icons. In this process he also uses some more complex solutions such as placing the ornaments on each side of the neck with remarkable visual effects. He sells his instruments mainly abroad using his family and friendly connections with the Serbian diaspora.

¹⁰ Interviews with Dragan Kujundžić from 11. November, 2008, and 25. February, 2017.

Milić Šaponjić (born in 1966 in Radijevići, lives in Atenica near Čačak, Central Serbia) holds many awards from national guslars competitions, being also a highly appreciated gusle-maker. He sees the gusle as the most important thing in his life.¹¹ He did not have a role model in his nuclear family, but his uncles were guslars and kept pieces of gusle at home. Therefore, his first direct contact with gusle as an artifact happened when he tried to repair the uncle's instrument. Even before that, Mr Šaponjić was a great enthusiast for singing with gusle which he learned by himself. The knowledge he gained in the school for machine technicians encouraged him to make an attempt at gusle-making. His first instrument was, as he recalls, of moderate quality. Later on, he dedicated himself fully to this craft working patiently on improving the necessary techniques and skills. Although he shows a two-fold interest in the gusle – as both player and builder – it can be concluded that building the instruments is his main occupation. Since he is not working in other spheres, he can be considered a professional gusle-maker who constructs in average ten instruments per month. Mr Šaponjić estimates that he has made more than 2000 instruments in his career as craftsman. He insists on the use of high-quality wood (Video example 2), but asserts that the overall excellence of the instrument also depends on other materials, particularly on the characteristics of the leather used for the covering of a resonating-box. He considers himself an expert in the domain of leather curing continuing the tradition of the late Drago Kuburović whose instruments are judged as some of the most sophisticated amongst those used by contemporary guslars. He buys processed horsehair (from Mongolian horses) for bows and fishing lines for cords. The price of the instrument depends on its ornamentation. Unlike Mr Kujundžić, Mr Šaponjić believes that the use of machines does not affect the quality of instruments in a negative way. Moreover, he thinks that modern machines allow making plausible copies of well-built instruments which contributes to the quality of their mass production.

The third example refers to the manufacturing practice of Dragan Jovanović from Novi Sad, Northern Serbia. Besides gusle, he also makes frulas (end-blown flutes) and traditional costumes. His manufacturing is completely market-oriented: Mr Jovanović uses his own Internet site to advertise his products and sell them online both in Serbia and abroad, and therefore his site is in Serbian and in English.¹² This clearly shows that his work is oriented towards fans of world music and tourists rather than aimed at gusle-players in Serbia and the region. In addition to that stands the fact that he does not sell his instruments on small fairs organized as a part of regional and national festivals of gusle player around Serbia. Besides, in his Internet site he highlighted the fact that his gusle possess “many important and famous

¹¹ Interview with Milić Šaponjić from 5. March, 2017.

¹² <https://www.frula.info/gusle-prodaja/>; Accessed: 4. May, 2017.

people”, specifying some famous politicians and entrepreneurs. It is peculiar that Mr Jovanović does not mention in that context distinguished and awarded gusle players, which leads to conclusion that his instruments may have primarily a commercial use as souvenirs or memorabilia. This can be confirmed by the fact that Mr Jovanović has created an online gusle-playing course, focusing primarily on the rendering of instrumental parts without singing, probably owing to the fact that he is not a guslar in a traditional sense i.e. that is not experienced with performance of narrative texts accompanied by the gusle. Finally, the distinctiveness of Mr Jovanović approach to gusle-making is reaffirmed with the research experience of the author itself: unlike the other informants who contributed to the investigation of the diverse aspects of practice of gusle playing in Serbia including gusle-makers, he set certain conditions for his interviewing which could not be met.¹³ Therefore, the exploration of his practice was reduced and based on the data available on the Internet. Since one of the aims of this paper is to problematize approaches to the practice of gusle-making, this type of ‘selfpresentation’ had been enough informative and stimulating.

As Kevin Dawe points out advocating a cultural study of musical instruments, ‘musical instruments exist at an intersection of material, social, and cultural worlds where they are as much constructed and fashioned by the force of minds, cultures, societies, and histories as axes, saws, drills, chisels, machines, and the ecology of wood’.¹⁴ The described distinctive approaches to gusle-making (on conceptual level) stand in correlation with the changes in tradition of singing with the gusle accompaniment and therefore the repositioning of the instrument in the culture. Although gusle are still used primarily to accompany the singing of epic poetry in a traditional manner, the solo type of this performance practice contributed to its remoulding initiated by the development of music industry. The significant part in this processes belonged to the festivalization of traditional music performance practices including singing with gusle which stimulated the professionalization of the bearers of tradition. Institutionalized competitive relations of guslars¹⁵ contributed to

¹³ Mr Jovanović asked for a printed certificate of his collaboration in the scientific project of the Institute of Musicology SASA. It is an unusual expectation for the research practice in Serbia and the Institute of Musicology SASA does not possess similar kind of certificate. As he explained in the telephone conversation, he needed this certificate as a reference for his work. It is important to note that Mr Jovanović does not consider himself a craftsman – instead, he wants to be regarded as a manager in the sphere of culture.

¹⁴ Dawe, Kevin (2003). *The Cultural Study of Musical Instruments*. The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction. Edited by Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, Richard Middleton. New York and London: Routledge: 275.

¹⁵ The first official gusle players competitions were organized in the interwar period, cf. Lajić Mihajlović, Danka (2016b). *The institutionalisation of guslars practice and the tradition of singing epic songs with the gusle in Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav contexts*. Music in Society. The Collection of Papers. Edited by Fatima Hadžić. Sarajevo: Musicological Society of the

raising standards of performances. It encouraged the focusing on development of vocal and instrumental techniques and other skills as well as the improvement of quality of the instrument. Consequently, it led to the specialization in the process of gusle-making. In other words, the roles of gusle players and gusle-makers¹⁶ has become divided which explains the fact that nowadays the majority of distinguished gusle players purchase the instruments from experienced craftsmen, while gusle-makers are performers of different levels – some of them cannot even be classified as guslars. The ethical code, typical for the earlier practice of singing with gusle including the making of the instrument was suppressed owing to the influence of market relations in the sphere of traditional music. This process was lightened by Timothy Rice in his explanation of the third metaphor on music – “music is a commodity”.¹⁷ In his opinion, commodification of the tradition changed traditional social structures¹⁸, and consequently the tradition itself. As traditional performing became a commercial act, the gusle-makers felt free to transform their artifacts into commodity objects.

The commodification of gusle came in parallel with their ‘passivization’ – a reducing to material symbol. This dimension was also important for its traditional function in the past which is confirmed by many sources. According to them, gusle were treated as relics being kept on the walls of gusle players' homes next to the icons (portraits of saints who in Orthodox Christianity have the role of protecting the family and home).¹⁹ The fading of tradition of epic singing with gusle emphasized its symbolic relevance and, hence, contributed to the change in instrument's visual appearance. More elaborate ornamentation became a demand and, at the same time, a challenge for craftsmen who gradually changed the focus from woodworking to woodcut. Although the idea of building an instrument as a means for music performance was still dominant among gusle-makers its visual aspects gained an unprecedented significance. Besides applying the more complex combinations of traditional zoomorphic symbols and newer anthropomorphic elements, the modern

Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Academy of Music, University of Sarajevo, 410–428.

¹⁶ It is important to mention that parallel to the expansion of literacy among the population of Serbia, in the 19th and, particularly the early 20th century came the division of roles of authors of poetic and music parts of epic forms. *Gusle* player became simply musician, singer and player who only works with the music dimension while performing the existing, authorized text of an epic poet, see in: Lajić Mihajlović 2014, 74–75.

¹⁷ Rice, Timothy (2001). *Reflections on Music and Meaning: Metaphor, Signification and Control in the Bulgarian Case*. *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 10/1: 21–24.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 28.

¹⁹ Лалевић, Миодраг С. (1935). *За песмом по Васојевићима*. Прилози проучавању народне поезије II/2: 241–260. [Lalević, Miodrag S. (1935). *Za pesmom po Vasojevićima*. *Prilozi proučavanju narodne poezije* II/2: 241–260.]

craftsmen strive for innovations which sometimes lead to dysfunctionality of instruments. Extravagant appearance of gusle not only proves the skillfulness of a craftsman, but also contributes to the increase of their material value. The importance of symbolic instead of performing function of gusle is also suggested by the applied materials, above all the synthetic cords.

Gusle are rarely made as mere souvenirs which can be concluded by their dimensions and/or type of construction. It is interesting to note that there are no examples of gusle, either as instruments or any kind of replica, in souvenir shops in Belgrade. Even in the finest shops of that kind, such as the one that belongs to the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade, the cultural institution with national relevance and the head office of the Center for intangible cultural heritage, only frulas are sold although gusle are also inscribed into the official Registar of national cultural heritage of Serbia. The marginalization of gusle on the souvenir market can be related to their marginalization in the contemporary cultural policy and practice, including the media. Besides, as one of the shop workers observed, there are not many noteworthy small-size models of gusle available while the larger pieces are too expensive for a souvenir. Apart from that, the playing of gusle is more demanding in comparison to the playing of aerophone instruments since it includes the acquiring of skill of simultaneous singing and playing, which makes them less appealing. The negative effects of the instruments' complexity both in construction and playing technique for their preservation are observed on the examples of other traditional music instruments in Serbia such as gajde.²⁰

Concluding Remarks

As a part and a symbol of the practice which under the influences of cultural policies and music industry was oriented to "the keeping of traditional idiom", more "museumized"²¹ than "modernized", gusle are constructed today primarily as music instruments. The gradual modifications in the sphere of performing, new technologies and new materials did not thoroughly affect its ergological features and methods of building. The changes can be noticed in the degree of use of woodworking machines, importance of wood-drying technologies and, finally, the approach to leather curing. Although the proponents of the traditional manual method of manufacturing and the supporters of a technologised gusle-making process have opposing views on

²⁰ Jakovljević, Rastko (2013). *Master's Work: Constructing a Music Instrument as a Material, Cultural and Social Object*. *Studia instrumentorum musicae popularis III* (New Series). Edited by Gisa Jähnichen. Münster, MV Wissenschaft, 155–166.

²¹ Nettl, Bruno (1992). *Recent Directions in Ethnomusicology*. *Ethnomusicology: An Introduction*. Edited by Helen Myers. New York–London: W. W. Norton & Company, 382. 375–399.

the issue of the products' sound quality, it seems that both approaches result in the expanding range of the quality of gusle's sound. In other words, the advocating of particular method is related to the importance of the gusle-making practice in a life of the particular person. The automatization of the most demanding parts of the process of gusle-making – the drying and moulding of wood – enables profiting by the 'mass' production. On the other hand, for those who choose manual approach with an accent on their symbolics the ornamentation is especially important. Time and skill invested in the process, especially in the woodcut, increases the price of such gusle pieces. Experienced gusle players are able to recognize the quality of the instrument from the first contact, but it could be subjective evaluation, while the wider consensus on the value of certain pieces is usually established in the course of time. The reputation of such pieces grows gradually despite their aesthetical characteristics.

The practice of singing with gusle is fading with the disappearance of its bearers. Thus, there is a continual decline of demand for new pieces of gusle of very good quality. Their still strong symbolizing of the musical tradition contributes to the making of gusle as real instruments. The market value depends on the current standard of living. Finally, the marginalization of gusle as a result of overall deterioration of epic singing tradition influences their status in the souvenir market – their unrelevance and a product without commercial potential. Gusle hold certain economic and symbolic value only among the circle of gusle players and their supporters. Therefore, the majority of contemporary gusle-makers do not expect serious profit from their craft. In other words, approaches to gusle-making practice stand in correlation with their general reception which explains the domination of traditional view – the one that stresses the subservient role of the construction of instruments to the practice of singing of epic poetry with gusle. The commercialization of this practice resulted only in the increase of production of gusle as a symbolic, "silent instruments".

Similarly to the politics of insisting on "unchanged" transmission of gusle playing practice, a too "restrictive" approach to the gusle-making has ambivalent effects. On the one hand, the ontological value of gusle as "musical sound sources"/"sources of musical sound" is being preserved. On the other hand, by "defending" gusle from commercial use in the sphere of tourism one of the possibilities for their preservation is lost. It seems that there is a potential in the making gusle as souvenirs, both in the "classical" approach of remodeling the material prototype and through the fruitful merging of the traditional, manual method of their construction with the concept of revitalization of relations of people and nature, important in tourism industry. It is a counterpart to the idea of popularization of singing with gusle through workshops and seminars. Participation in particular activities, here gusle-

making, is an important part of the strategy of promoting intangible cultural heritage which proceeds from the the UNESCO 2003 Convention. The cooperation with expanding tourism industry has a great potential for the preservation of the intangible cultural heritage.

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