

**MUSIC and DANCE
in SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE:
NEW SCOPES of RESEARCH
and ACTION**

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THE ESTABLISHING OF A PROFESSIONAL FOLK ORCHESTRA IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD IN BELGRADE¹

This paper aims to illuminate on how the institution of the folk orchestra in Serbia was established using archive material. The folk orchestra, as a specific instrumental formation for accompaniment of popular folk songs and the performance of dance music, is part of the urban legacy all over the Balkans, mostly connected with the context of taverns. The period focussed on is between the World Wars because of the creation of the "Folk orchestra" and the "Tambura orchestra" on Radio Belgrade, as those were the first ensembles that were both professional and folk. Namely, Belgrade has been the centre of music broadcasting and musicians networking in the country, so those ensembles became official and the examples for later musicians. The main criteria of professionalization are: the establishing of musicians' guilds, their education and payment, the media representation of the band, and the professional status of musicians with respect to their ethnicity and gender.

Keywords: Serbia; professionalization; folk orchestra; urban music; historical popular music.

Since the inception of the discipline until the present day, ethnomusicological research in Serbia has thoroughly covered rural folk heritage that is considered as musical folklore. Various ritual, regional, structural characteristics of traditional music have been studied, mostly those related to vocal practice, while specific archaic instruments have also been examined. However, the phenomena related to urban musical heritage, also regarded as folk in a wider reception context, has been left on the margins of scientific interest. Aside from several publications [for example Dević 1963; Golemović 1997; Vidić-Rasmussen 2002], neither is the meaning of "folk music" problematized, nor is the performing structure of non-rural musical folklore analysed in depth. This paper deals with instrumental folk music ensembles, whose performances have been standardized in the context of urban folk music. Namely, during this period, the term "folk music" has had ambiguous meanings (a similar situation is still present today): rural is officially treated as a high value practice; and urban or vernacular is intended to entertain a wider audience. It should be mentioned that there are several ethnomusicological writings about particular instruments associated with popular folk music (for example for violin [Marković 2010], *tambural*/*tamburitza* [Forry 2011], accordion [Ivkov 2006]), but there are no papers devoted specially to urban musical ensembles. Despite that, the urban folk orchestra is an important phenomenon widespread all over the Balkans [for example in Bulgaria see Vlčinova-Čendova 2000], and it should not be marginalized in ethnomusicological observation because the orchestra in general is a socially relevant institution: "Orchestras are groups of people working toward common purposes; they constitute parallel organizations with similar structures and are maintained by similar beliefs and expectations on the part of composers, performers, patrons, and audiences" [Spitzer and Zaslav 2004:35]. Moreover, a folk orchestra is musically relevant because it standardized aspects of performance (opposed to improvisation as a soloist principle) and established the repertoire of folk music.

The period that is considered here as the most important for the establishment of professional folk music ensembles in Serbia is the period between the world wars, but earlier examples of folk orchestras will also be mentioned, as the ultimate institutions of

folk music performance. It should be mentioned that there is continuity between the interwar folk orchestra practice and earlier playing groups, and also with the ensembles that were active during and after World War Two. The area that has been researched is Belgrade, the capital of Serbia and the meeting place of musical practices from the southern and northern parts of Serbia, and also the centre of folk music broadcasting, and the place for performances of eminent musicians from different Balkan areas – in other words, an important place for the networking of professional folk musicians. It can be said that the practice of urban folk music performed by specific ensembles emerged in Belgrade in the period up to World War Two, and later on that practice became the basis for a new genre of the so-called "old urban music" (*starogradska muzika*). The term "folk orchestra" is used to describe instrumental ensembles that accompanied urban folk song melodies or played urban folk dances of the time. The typical arrangement of the instruments is: double-bass; group of the instruments for the rhythmic-harmonic accompaniment (plucked instruments such as guitar or *tambura*, sometimes accordion, piano, zither), and melodic line (violin, *prim*, sometimes flute, clarinet). As will be explained below, there are several types of these orchestras, mostly based on regional differences – although string (bowed) and *tambura* (plucked) orchestras were the most representative.

The basic material that is analysed for this paper is the administrative data about musicians collected by the Ministry of Education of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, preserved at the Archive of Yugoslavia; data about Radio Belgrade from the legacy of Petar Krstić, archived at the Institute of Musicology SASA; data about taverns collected by the Belgrade city administration, preserved at the Historical Archive of Belgrade; the magazine "Radio Belgrade: radiophony illustrated weekly" (Radio Beograd: nedeljni ilustrovani časopis za radiofoniju), published from 1929 to 1941. For this paper 78 rpm gramophone recordings and catalogues are also used – some of them were recorded before World War One, but became largely popular in the interwar period due to being broadcast on Radio Belgrade. Also precious recordings are reviewed of the American pianist – Esther Jonsson Garlinghouse from the Indiana university archives of traditional music who did fieldwork in the Balkans in 1940s.²

Research on folk orchestra professionalization is possible using the examples of ensembles which performed in the urban areas. This paper is guided by Donna Buchanan's definition applied to the post-World War Two state cultural societies, which explains professionalization as "an aspiration toward the West European standards and structures of art music performance practice, [...] accompanied by a concomitant institutionalization of musical styles through the establishment of a hegemonic cultural administrative network comprising political organizations" [Buchanan 1995:381]; and by Bernard Lortat-Jacob's idea that "[...] a musician becomes professional when he is remunerated for his playing", which is followed by specific social relationships with the group who pays him [Lortat-Jacob 1981:187]. The criteria that are considered as fundamental for the professionalization of a folk orchestra in Serbia are: economic value of performing, performing in a public place/venue, audience reception, administrative visibility, guild association, the musicians' education, gender roles and inner organization among the members of an ensemble (leadership and specialized engagement in the group), ethnical affiliation of musicians, frequent family branding of an orchestra, media representation of a band and the group's official status.

Moreover, it is possible to isolate the parameters related to music that are influenced by professionalization and that actually meant westernisation of the musical accompaniment. Namely, the appearance of a string orchestra (especially of bowed instruments) as a basis for a folk music formation, can be interpreted in relation to the

emerging of a classical music orchestra, where the first sign of institutionalization was the definition of stringed instruments of the violin family as the nucleus [Spitzer and Zaslav 2004:20]. Other criteria of professionalization are: use of industrial instruments, regulation of tuning and ornamentation, configuration of the parts with a particular role (rhythmic, harmonic and melodic) and finally the enlargement of the troupe by doubling instruments within the parts and in the long-term, contribution to the standardization of the repertoire.

According to today's practice, it is assumed in this research that all orchestras that publicly performed urban folk music were paid and recognized by the audience as professionals – that is they were members of the staff (the activity of tavern musicians in Yugoslavia after World War Two has been recently interpreted as affective labour [more in Hofman 2014]). For folk musicians in the Balkans, the most prominent performance venues were the taverns [see Dimov 2012], the most important to consider in Belgrade were the taverns (*kafane*) in Skadarlija street, today's representative "bohemian quarter" with a nostalgic atmosphere of "old Belgrade", Belgrade of the time that is in focus here. The musicians' activity was visible to the authorities, so they had to have a licence to present music and they had duration and volume limits and if they disrespected local rules, they were penalized [for example, "To live in Belgrade" (1937) 2008: 492–493].

The question of licences for musicians is especially interesting because it was regulated by a State institution (the Ministry of Education) and musicians' guild associations. In Belgrade "The society of musicians, tambura, accordion and other players and male and female singers in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia" (Udruženje muzikanata, tamburaša, harmonikaša, svirača, pevača i pevačica Kraljevine Jugoslavije) was established in 1929, and also concurrently "The alliance of folk musicians and singers in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia" (Savez narodnih muzikanata i pevača oba pola na teritoriji Kraljevine Jugoslavije) – their status was not binding, but it was a sign of institutionalization. The Society had its own rules, and it had the following goals: the establishment of a professional musicians' organization, "folk and international music and dance cultivation", "confrontation to illegal work" [Central directory of the Society of musicians in the Kingdom Yugoslavia 1929: clause 6], education, job market for the musicians, social care for its members. The joint requirement was the decision that music making would be the only job, after passing the introductory exam, while the members could remain in the Society as long as they were active and had paid membership. The Society also had its bulletin (named *Muzikant*), but it was not preserved.

The internal organization of roles among members of an ensemble was also important, even in family orchestras there was a division between players and bandmaster, the most experienced musician had the greatest responsibility. In order to get the licence for leading, bandmasters needed to pass the exam in front of the jury consisting of three members, the deputies of the Ministry of Education and the Society, and one musician. The candidate needed to bring his own repertoire and to have at least three years of experience for qualification. In the theoretical part of the exam, the candidate was tested in the understanding of scores, instruments and arranging. In the practical part, the important requirements were "the performing style of certain pieces, independent tuning and general musicality" [Kovačević 1931: clause 2]. Nevertheless, the State administration was aware that it was impossible to make such an 'expert exam' an obligation, because there were numerous musicians who were musically 'non-literate', but worked as professionals. Here terminological difference between 'professional' and 'professionalized' seems useful, introducing education as the criterion of professionalization. In Serbian, there is difference between *muzičar* and *muzikant* that

depicts this (it was also valid at that time) and it actually implies difference between artist and entertainer.

"The alliance of the musicians of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia" ("Savez muzičara Kraljevine Jugoslavije") was the organization with a longer tradition than the previous one as it was authorized for salon orchestras. For granting the licences, the Alliance collected data about the candidates' previous music education, 'main music expertise', venues where the candidates performed, number of orchestra members, number of pieces in the repertoire. According to the records from the examinations, there were musicians ranging from self-taught to those educated at a conservatory. When analysing the requirements for musicians, it is obvious that professionalization of a folk orchestra meant adjustment to Western harmonization, orchestration and literacy.

The purpose of regulation of professional folk music performances in the cities, precisely in Serbian taverns, was mostly economical – musicians without licence were of a lower quality, but also a lower price, so it threatened the guild system. Related to that is the issue of gender roles in the orchestra – male musicians were against the preferential treatment of female singers (some of them pretended to be instrumentalists) because they were hired because of their good looks. The other issue for professional folk musicians was the technological development of music reproduction devices, because it was a cheaper solution for the owners of the taverns. As it is known, similar debates are lively even today. An interesting topic in researching professional folk orchestras is the Roma origin of numerous musicians, which also was the preferred music style of the time. "Gypsy orchestras" modelled on similar Hungarian or Romanian ones were very popular, but criticized in academic discourse: "Stop near taverns in Dorćol, Vračar, Savamala or in smaller towns, and listen to so-called professional lady-singers [...]. Nonsenses, ambiguous and often banal words, with wild rants, or with indecent and pretentious mixture of deflections of trashing of our and alien melodies and their arrangements [...]" [Đorđević 1926:1]. One of the most important aspects of their musicianship was improvisation, which was achieved mostly by changing melodies, in the process of variation. They were some of the first local popular bands, with gramophone recordings and star singers (for example Sofka Nikolić) and even the first ensembles that performed folk music at Radio Belgrade were the so-called "Gypsy orchestras", with prominent bandmasters such as Dušan Popaz, Paja Nikolić, Šandor Radu, Ante Grujić and others. [for more about tavern musicians in Belgrade before World War Two see Dumnić 2013b].

Finally, the crucial moment of institutionalization of the folk accompanying ensembles was the late interwar period, when the Folk Radio Orchestra and the Tambura Radio Orchestra were founded at Radio Belgrade. Before their formal appearance, numerous groups consisting of different instruments were occasionally broadcasted from the taverns (for example broadcasts from "Moskva" with bandmaster Kučera, "Građevinska kasina" with Stevica Nikolić, "Dva jelena" with Dušan Popaz, restaurant "Zanatski dom" and others). The Folk Radio Orchestra, officially appearing in the programs since 1937, had two prominent personalities and probably double leadership – guitar player and singer Sima Begović was present with his various ensembles from the beginning of the Radio Belgrade program in 1929 (he also collected the songs he performed with his sister on Radio Belgrade [Begović 1938]). On the other hand, there was Vlastimir Pavlović Carevac, a violinist who was the leader of the orchestra after World War Two and the creator of the specific "radio folk music style", that is arrangements for a dominantly string orchestra which accompanied specific local tunes [more in Obradović 1997]. The basis of the interwar Folk Radio Orchestra was: three violins, viola, cello, double-bass and guitar. It is interesting that the musicians were

notable Belgrade intellectuals, music amateurs (as Carevac later on defined them). The Tambura Radio Orchestra, founded as a standard formation by *prim* player Aleksandar Aranicki in 1936, was meant to satisfy the music taste of the performers from Vojvodina, but they often played repertoire from Bosnia, too. This orchestra got excellent reviews at the time [see Vukdragović 1983:64], because it consisted of the best *tambura* musicians. At the end of this review of radio folk musicians, it should be mentioned that standard accompaniment for the show was the accordion (one of the most prominent players was Milan Dimitrijević Cincarče) [for more about folk ensembles on Radio Belgrade program before World War Two see Dumnić 2013a].

The four recorded examples listed below give an illustration of the differences between the aforementioned types of ensembles, (these tunes are famous as folk even today, but their origin and characteristics are a topic for separate research):

1. famous singer Mijat Mijatović with the (Gypsy) orchestra of Stevan Nikolić ("Imam jednu želju") [Peter Zrinski 2009], as representative of a Roma tavern orchestra;
2. *tambura* orchestra "Jorgovan" ("Nove đuvegije") [Steven Kozobarich 2011], as representative of a *tambura* orchestra from the beginning of the twentieth century;
3. Radio Belgrade Folk orchestra of Vlastimir Pavlović Carevac ("Stara čuburka kolo", 1962) [devovanje 2015], as representative of a standard professional folk orchestra of high technical quality;
4. Milan Dimitrijević Cincarče and Žika Mali ("Sadila moma lojze") [Steven Kozobarich 2014], as representative of a folk song accompaniment on the accordion.

To conclude, it should be mentioned that professional musicians were the axles of networking urban music traditions and that their mobility contributed to the similarities of the Balkan folk music practices. It needs to be emphasized that professionalization of a folk orchestra in Serbia was mostly affected by institutionalization of the Radio Belgrade ensembles – the Folk Radio Orchestra and the Tambura Radio Orchestra. Aside from the high technical quality of playing, those orchestras became the standard for performing style and repertoire and mediators of professionally arranged folk music 'authenticity' for a wide audience and at the same time, they were tools for accommodation of the institution of orchestras, as a product of 'higher' culture, for the masses. The interwar legacy of the folk orchestra was a very stable basis for the existence of accompanying ensembles after World War Two, which will be considered in future research.

Endnotes

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2. The copy of the latter is available for research to the associates of the Institute of Musicology SASA thanks to a kind donation by the musicologist Sanja Grujić-Vlajnić, Ph.D.

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