

CONTEMPORARY URBAN FOLK MUSIC IN THE BALKANS: POSSIBILITIES FOR REGIONAL MUSIC HISTORY*

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ABSTRACT:

Starting with Maria Todorova's landmark study *Imagining the Balkans* (Todorova 1997), numerous authors have raised their voices against stereotypical images of the Balkans. Over twenty years after the publication of this book, the term "the Balkans" seems to have lost some of its negative connotations related to wars in favour of characteristics with positive overtones, such as the Balkan peoples' *joie-de-vivre* and entertainment strongly related to music. The areal ethnomusicology drawing from fieldwork throughout the Balkan peninsula has been a fruitful topic for numerous local and foreign ethnomusicologists and the very term "the Balkans" has raised a special interest in the ethnomusicological research of "outsiders", as well as in the music industry.

This paper is written from the perspective of an "insider" ethnomusicologist from the Balkans. I raise the question of the definition of the "Balkan" popular music label and discuss its main structural characteristics. I offer a new possibility of (re)considering a specific musical genre of the region based on the research of urban folk music practices. I present characteristics of urban folk music practices from the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century in the countries of the Balkans, with special attention paid to their common aspects. Also, contemporary urban folk music, which is often criticized as a specific popular music form, is considered.

KEYWORDS: The Balkans, music stereotypes, ethnomusicology, urban folk music, popular music

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In this article I will talk about preliminary steps for wider research – the history and ethnography of popular folk music of the Balkans. I will reflect on the musicscape (socially, culturally and aesthetically organized soundscape) of the Balkans which currently may be considered as the most common, even from the ethnomusicological point of view. I am talking from the perspective of an “insider” ethnomusicologist from the Balkans (to be precise, from Serbia) and I argue that “Balkan music” is a term of the global popular music industry (not of ethnomusicology and even not strictly of local popular music markets, where recently it has acquired a different meaning related to the space of the former Yugoslavia). The structure of this paper is the following: I will give a very short overview of the extensive literature about the notion of the Balkans, emphasizing ethnomusicological literature relevant to this topic. I also underline the question of the definition of the “Balkan” popular music label and isolate its main structural characteristics. Finally, I offer a new possibility of (re)considering a specific music genre of the region based on research into urban folk music practices. My aim is not to neglect Balkan music stereotypes hitherto related to today’s popular music industry, but to call for a joint (ethno)musicological research of a common, pan-Balkan heritage, which was marginalised in scientific discourse because of its orientation towards national heritages, built from rural musical folklore, since the nineteenth century. This means thinking beyond current national borders, but also moving borders of topics and tools in Balkan ethnomusicologies.

CONCEPTS OF THE BALKANS IN LITERATURE

GENERAL CRITIQUES OF THE CONCEPTS OF THE BALKANS

Starting with Maria Todorova’s landmark study *Imagining the Balkans* (Todorova 1997), numerous authors have raised their voice against stereotypical images of Southeastern Europe, i.e. the Balkans. As is known, her work was grounded in Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (Said 1978), the book which revealed the metaphor for the Eastern “Other” suppressed by the hegemony of West. In Todorova’s work, the Balkans is interpreted as a European “inner Other”, i.e. an incomplete East and at the same time an incomplete West. It is very important that she emphasized the role of the Ottoman legacy in the region, and we can add the perspectives of general Mediterranean and Slavic connections (more in: Medić and Tomašević 2015), but also of Byzantine and Austro-Hungarian empires to the history, and, today highly relevant, Yugoslav heritage and diaspora contexts (and all of the aforementioned mega-categories, as well as national markers, could be topics for significant debates in our disciplines). As Milica Bakić Hayden wrote (Bakić Hayden 1995), the Balkan in Europe is in the process of “nesting orientalism”, which means that the Balkan as a metaphor is not geographically fixed, but it is always more eastern than a particular country (in Bakić Hayden’s case, Yugoslavia). Todorova observed the Balkans as the margin of Europe, and Katherine Fleming (Fleming 2001) emphasised its liminality. From various perspectives, it can be concluded that “the Balkans” is a metaphor (cf. Bjelić and Savić 2002). Nevertheless, the Balkans, in today’s political discourse on South-Eastern Europe and in

the works of numerous researchers, is viewed as a crossroads between the East and West in Europe, with the connotations both of the meeting and the clash of cultures.

Almost twenty years after the publication of Todorova's book, the term "the Balkans" seems to have lost some of its negative connotations related to wars in favour of characteristics with positive overtones, such as the Balkan peoples' *joie-de-vivre* and their aptitude for entertainment, which is strongly associated with music. Various researchers from the realms of literature (e.g. Goldsworthy 1998), film (Iordanova 2001), dance (Dumnić 2009) and music (Marković 2013) have contributed to the problematization of the Balkans. After the acknowledgement that the Balkans is an imaginary symbolic place, there are three important steps. The first is a deconstruction of negative representations of the Balkans which originate mostly from the nineteenth-century foreign travelogues and the twentieth-century histories — these regard the Balkans as a violent and uncivilised place, previously under Ottoman then under communist rule (i.e. the Eastern enemy), and also as a territory of small nationalistic states which fell apart through war. The second is a repercussional construction and perpetuation of (pseudo-)positive stereotypes about the Balkans – that it is actually an "ethnographic museum" on the periphery of Europe with colourful folklore, ecstatic experience and finally wild entertainment – aside from food and drink in this basically touristic approach, an extremely important role is played by folk music. These stereotypes are called "(pseudo-)positive", because their final goal is usually the commodification of folklore, although they *are* positive (in comparison to the previous group) and have a huge impact on international visibility and, consequently, the development of humanistic disciplines and folklore in the region. These two kinds of stereotypes originate in the extra-Balkan, "Western" discourses. The third step in the consideration of the music of the imaginary Balkans is autobalkanism, i.e. an internalisation of stereotypes, so nowadays we have the topic of the Balkans with the meaning of the feeling of inferiority towards the West (Todorova 2006: 96), but also as a part of a cultural policy in representative strategies (more in Dumnić 2012), especially popular music industry and entertainment in tourism. All three types of approach bring their own metaphorical soundscapes of the imaginary Balkans. In the spirit of postcolonial studies, Todorova asked the question whether it is possible that the subalterns might speak for themselves and whether the impossibility of self-presentation makes them oppressed (Todorova 2006: 33), so this article is motivated by that thought – speaking about the Balkans from the Balkans, but also for the Balkans.

THE BALKANS IN ETHNOMUSICOLOGY – A VERY GENERAL OVERVIEW

The areal ethnomusicology drawing from fieldwork throughout the Balkan peninsula has been a fruitful topic for numerous local and foreign ethnomusicologists and there are several significant publications on this topic (cf. Peycheva and Rodel 2008; Lajić Mihajlović and Jovanović 2012; Samson 2013). The very term "the Balkans" has raised special interest in the ethnomusicological research of the "outsiders" (especially from English- and German-speaking disciplinary traditions). Ethnomusicological research has dealt with

rich folk music heritage, so every national ethnomusicological “school” is doing collecting work in the field, transcription and analysis, classification and comparison, organological and contextual interpretations – there are numerous (valuable) contributions on the various aforementioned topics. Thus, in ethnomusicology there cannot exist only one imaginary musicscape of the Balkans – it may be any ethnic local rural (usually ritual) practice vocally and/or instrumentally (one might think here of various folk instruments) performed monophonically or (more “exotically”) as multipart music, often within a narrow melodic range and with specific rhythms (e.g. *aksak*), with possible accompaniment, such as (chain-)dance. Ethnomusicology in the region has developed rapidly since the period after World War II, and was influenced not only by the “Eastern” paradigm (present in communist countries), but also by the “Western”, so there are not only ethnographical and analytical methodologies employed, but also anthropological and critical studies based on local/regional material. Despite their different languages, ethnomusicologists in the region now collaborate under the umbrella of the International Council for Traditional Music (especially at the biennial conferences of the Study Group for Music and Dance in South-Eastern Europe since 2008, cf. <http://www.ictmusic.org/group/music-and-dance-southeastern-europe>), mostly in English; and there are valuable publications which thematized important common topics about music and dance (such as tradition – transition – revival, media, governmental policies, educational systems, terminology, crossing national borders/intercultural communication, improvisation, professionalization, inter/postdisciplinarity in ethnomusicology and ethnochoreology, Southeastern Europe in the post-1989 era, audio-visual ethnographies, myths and rituals, migrations, carnivals and masquerades and sustainable development).

“BALKAN MUSIC” IN THE POPULAR MUSIC MARKET

The Balkans were interesting for the international music and dance market in the first half of the twentieth century; for example, there was the record label “Balkan” and also the *kolo* dance scene in the United States of America (cf. Laušević 2007). Stronger interest in the Balkans has coincided with the breakthrough of the popular music label which refers to it in its name and which has acquired a well-rounded discourse and a set of folk representations of the Balkans. By supporting the Balkan stereotypes described by Todorova, this music has found its place in the world music market predominantly outside of the Balkans (but with an impact on the music recorded in the Balkans) and it largely commodifies the imaginary Balkan soundscape. In her dissertation about Balkan music stereotypes, Aleksandra Marković pointed out several steps in the stylistic diachrony of the “Balkan music” label: *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares* in 1970s (which introduced “village heterophonic singing” [Marković 2013: 59] and actually represented the Balkans as a peasant place), then, the popularity of Romany musicians from Esmā Redžepova onwards (who are appreciated as wild, skilful, mysterious, exotic /Marković 2013: 61/), the wave of post-2000 Romanian brass bands and the Guča Trumpet Festival in Serbia (“genuine madness” [Marković 2013: 61–62]) and finally danceable *Balkan Beat* (a combination of electro-

tics and live instruments which stresses the metrical component, partly parodic and suitable for internalization; and it may be added here that it is different from the rather artistic *Balkan jazz*). From my research into Balkan sound images in Serbia, the essential characteristics (impossible-to-avoid stereotypes so far!) are: trumpet accompaniment, emphasized *es-tam* (fast double) or *aksak* (7/8, 9/8) rhythm, appearances of the *hijaz* tetrachord, the timbre of backing vocals typical of the singing manner of the Central Balkans, singing in Slavic or Romany languages. Aside from that, diaspora communities from the Balkan countries (especially from the former Yugoslavia – guest-workers and refugees; finally EU citizens) increased the visibility of the Balkans in their new European surroundings and created a nostalgic soundscape of their homelands. Nowadays, *their* Balkan music refers mostly to the one I am discussing here, music *in the Balkans*, which indicates that the label “Balkan” (Goran Bregović, Emir Kusturica, Boban and Marko Marković, Fanfare Ciocarlia, Gogol Bordello, DJ Shantel, Balkan Beat Box etc.) is not made for them (although contemporary “Balkan music” uses some structural elements of that newly-composed folk music), but predominantly for foreign fans of particular performers and “hybrid authenticity” (in Alexandar Marković’s words [2015]).

URBAN FOLK MUSIC OF THE BALKANS

With this article I want to call for ethnomusicological research of the urban folk music of the Balkans, and its possibility is encouraged by the existence of proceedings (Shupo 2006) concerning various folk music phenomena in urban settings, from different researchers, localities and times, and then by the similar aspirations of colleagues in Bulgaria which are related also to “Balkan fusion” in the domain of world music (e.g. Dimov 2001, Statelova 2017), and with inspiring work which emphasized the cultural, social and political aspects of regional/national popular folk music of ethnomusicologists interested in the Balkans (e.g. Rice 2002, Stokes 2010, chapters in Buchanan 2007). I will present the historical background related to this idea, and my suggestions for further research possibilities. An illustrative example of pan-Balkan music heritage is the popularity of the song *Uskudara* (in the Serbian version *Ruse kose, curo, imaš*), but the main question should not be where are the Balkan and who exclusively owns (or does not own) that particular song (as in the famous Adela Peeva movie *Whose Is This Song?*) – given the lack of evidence, these are out-dated and often endless debates. I propose synthetic and comparative research dealing with omnipresent phenomena, which is currently not researched in terms of historical traces, geographical dispersion, musical structure, local connections and adaptation, although its social meaning has been valuably researched (e.g. Vidić Rasmussen 2002, about newly-composed folk music).

By the syntagm “urban folk music” I mean “the other” folk music from the usual ethnomusicological point of view – not rural musical folklore, but regional popular folk music which can be traced from the nineteenth century, which is an amalgam of local rural folklore practices, Eastern and Western influences and which is conditioned by

production, reproduction, dissemination and consummation via mass media and live performances. Its synonyms all over the former Yugoslav countries may be *varoška* or *sevdalinka* (depending on the context). The definition of popular music by Bruno Nettl was important for this research: “1) it is primarily urban in provenience and audience orientation; 2) it is performed by professional and trained, but normally not very highly trained musicians who usually do not take an intellectual view of their work; 3) it bears a stylistic relationship to the art music of its culture, but a lower degree of sophistication; 4) in the twentieth century, at least, its diffusion has been primarily through the mass media of broadcasting and recording” (Nettl 1972: 218). My work was devoted to urban folk music before World War II in Serbia, i.e. early popular music, and the subsequent genre after the War (and today), *starogradska muzika* (old urban music), and now I am broadening my research to the post-war genre *novokomponovana narodna muzika* (newly-composed folk music), so my examples are from that area.

The material that I researched relating to aspects of *starogradska muzika* genre includes popular sheet music (editions by Jovan Frajt from Belgrade and “Nota” from Knjaževac) and sound editions – the available discography of 78 rpm and LP gramophone records (such as “Edison Bell Penkala”, “Jugodisk” from Belgrade, “Jugoton” from Zagreb, “Diskos” from Aleksandrovac), radio broadcasting programmes before World War II (according to *Radio Belgrade Illustrated Weekly*), but also personal field recordings of performances (from taverns in Skadarlija), as well as material for contextualization such as various printed/electronic media narratives, official archival documentation from Belgrade, published memoirs and personal in-depth interviews with prominent musicians.

With the analysis of discography, scores and appendices for musicians’ licences I defined the repertoire. I isolated the songs and their particular structural characteristics may be compared with other national urban folk music practices (cf. Dumnić Vilotijević 2018). I also revealed who were the key persons and institutions that created the policies and the body of urban folk music before World War II – i.e., music publishers, bands with leaders, composers, poets, popular singers (cf. Думнић 2016), because those results may be important not only locally, but also for the research of musicians’ networks and musical influences and relationships in the region. A huge debate may be raised related to the topic of influences and their markers, and especially about the role of Romany musicians and their polymusicality. Urban folk music from Yugoslavia was, on records and in radio programmes, always labeled “folk music” (eventually “Serbo-Croatian” or “Serbian” was added). The only different marker was “Gypsy”, which had a special marketing value for the fans (in terms of authenticity and virtuosity), but at the same time it was criticized as kitsch (just as in today’s discourse). From the interwar period a strong influence of jazz music began to be felt; professional musicians were performing folk, jazz and classical music within their repertoire. At that time, the influences which were criticized were Romany (meaning Eastern, but also nomadic), Spanish (Southern), Hungarian (Northern), a pressure to modernize (i.e. Western), but also the context of tavern (*kafana*) performance was very disputable. As demonstrated in great detail in the books by Lozanka Peycheva (1999), Svanibor Pettan (2010) and Carol Silverman (2012), contemporary Romany musicians are an important factor in the region because of their

mobility, “polymusicality” (the *alaturka* and *alafranka* dichotomy is a good metaphor) and their highly appreciated way of playing (in terms of technical virtuosity and melismas), as was also the case in the past.

To summarize my musical analysis (it is known that lyrics were usually about love, but in some cases also patriotic) of a possible “new” concept of the Balkan musicscape: the tunes were cantabile and wave-like, with a large range (up to a tenth), double or triple bar measures, simple rhythm (sometimes *parlando rubato* or *aksak*). Harmonies were simple also: non-dense chord progression (tonic, subdominant, dominant sphere), diatonic modulations to the closest tonalities, sometimes with mutations. Accompaniment was simple, but its texture depends on the ability of the pianist or the orchestra. When we speak about the genres of urban folk music after World War II, *novokomponovana narodna muzika* and a reaction to it, *starogradska muzika*, their characteristics are very similar (especially in *starogradska* which refers to the urban folk music before the War), and the main differences are the result of the aspiration towards following progressive tendencies in global popular music (metro-rhythm from particular popular dances, vocal timbre and ornamentation technique, orchestration, which demands electronics and loud sound systems).

Performances in a particular context lead to the fact that these simple characteristics acquire complexity (in terms of orchestration, variation and improvisation), but also the affective potential on the audience who experiences it and participate: that context is the tavern. My research is also dealing with the dynamics of performances, in which we can trace principles of macro-form building in particular tonalities and metro-rhythmical patterns, poetic themes, but also in the interaction with the audience, which is based on remuneration (Dumnić 2017); this is a completely pan-Balkan performance context.

Why is the potential of Balkan urban folk music recognized here? There is a tradition of regional popular music, different from Western/global popular music, which synthesizes various local musical practices, emphasizes the overcoming of national borders, and which is widely accepted, practiced and transmitted in the region. It can be concluded that the pan-Balkan urban folk music tradition is a form of lyrical love song harmonized and orchestrated in a “modern”, i.e. Western, i.e. actually Central European way, but based on national language, particular scales, metro-rhythms, melodies, melismas (which are often associated with Eastern, i.e., Ottoman-derived, heritage, especially the augmented second in melody). Also, more attention should be paid to the potential of contextually similar regional phenomena. I found similarities between urban folk music practices in Albanian urban songs, Bulgarian urban songs (very similar characteristics according with the comparison in the work of Nikolay Kaufman /Кaufman 1968/), Greek *rebetiko*, *Magyarnota*, Macedonian *čalga*, Romanian Romani music, Slovenian old popular music, Turkish *fasıl*, even Prague songs, musical practices of Jews, Romani and Russians at the Balkans. According to my comparative research into the ethnomusicological literature about regional urban folk music practices, urban folk music in the first half of the twentieth century in Belgrade took not only the contexts of performance and distribution, but also the instrumentarium, ensemble models and musical pieces (or their parts). On the example of the song *Uskudara* and its national variants, Donna

Buchanan concluded: “First, while most of the renditions have resulted from intercultural contact, their significance lies elsewhere, in their stylistic content, which documents the changing social, political, and economic circumstances of one or another Balkan people over the past century. (...) Second, in contrast to this strongly asserted diversity, the popularization of a single song in so many venues also reveals circuits of Balkan interchange well-established prior to those of contemporary global media. Conversely, similar circuits are also informing the mass-mediated, stylistic interculturality permeating today’s Balkan ethnopop genres, whose significance is linked in part to the re-positioning and re-defining of the Balkans, as region and states, within the New Europe” (Buchanan 2007: 3–4).

The history of regional folk music had an interesting development after World War II. In the second half of the twentieth century, urban folk music in Yugoslavia (not only Serbia) rapidly evolved into a genre of *newly-composed music* (more in: Dumnić Vilotijević forthcoming). A division of repertoires among the Yugoslav republics, provinces and regions which had their own *melos* (emic musicians’ term for musical style) became very important. The relation of the rural and the urban in urban folk music in socialist Yugoslavia was explained negatively among contemporaries, as being a cultural contamination of the village and at the same time by the industrialization of society, whose consequence was a massive migration from villages to cities, where newcomers brought in their musical habits and tastes. From the 1960s-1970s the accordion began to suppress string and *tamburitza* orchestras, and from the 1980s onwards the influences of global popular music from Turkey, Greece and Bulgaria became very strong. And it is important that in the case of Serbia, it is not only about received influences, but also about influences from within it. Unfortunately, extreme political circumstances in Yugoslavia led to the politicization of the genre of newly-composed folk music as an artistically valueless escapism from the reality of war and isolation (often named in the literature from 1990s as *turbofolk*), in spite of leading to the insiders’ comparison with similar genres in neighbouring countries. As is explained in the books *Manele in Romania* and *Etnopopbumot*, the genre of newly-composed folk music was very influential during the communist period in Romania and Bulgaria, so music was made which imitated it. What is also known is that today the most popular performers buy music for songs from composers across the Balkans whose work is known in all Balkan languages (including Greek and Turkish), so in this genre a common future history will be possible as well.

Finally, I would like to point to the parallels with other countries in the region, which are nowadays obvious in the cases of Bulgarian *chalga* and Romanian *manele* – “Balkan ‘Oriental’ ethno-pop”, as Margaret Beissinger called it very recently. I will cite observations of ethnomusicologists Anca Giurgchescu and Speranța Radulescu with which I agree: “Seen from the objective distance that an ethnologist attempts to maintain, *manele* (and we can say every contemporary urban folk music genre, M.D.V.) are the cumulative product of Romania’s Balkan-Oriental past (we may add urban, M.D.V), the nationalist cultural policies of the communist regime (in Yugoslavia/Serbia the situation was different, M.D.V), Western cultural pressure, accelerated globalisation, and the wild capitalism marring the country in the last two

decades, including the unclear social relations it has generated. *Manele* are not simply music but rather a complex, syncretic phenomenon, borne from the fusion of a relatively new vocal and instrumental music on the one hand, and specific lyrical verses, dance, gestures, speeches, clothing, visual symbols, and patterns of behaviour during its production on the other” (Giurchescu and Radulescu 2016: 4). I see this as good platform for future joint research (both historiographical and ethnographical).

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION

To conclude with an open call for discussion: may the Balkans be presented in a different way, opposite from already-researched rural music practices and contemporary music industry, and can urban folk music be an additional soundscape of the imaginary Balkans? With the research into new sources relating to this omnipresent music, I say yes. What should be done is to prepare collaborative historiographies, ethnographies and music analyses in order to compare findings. I argue that special attention in this type of research should be devoted to aspects of popular discographies (especially of historical commercial sound carriers) and to an understanding of the dynamics of performances, especially in the tavern context. One of possibilities for enabling regional history and the future to cohere may be in researching the common tradition of urban folk music.

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МАРИЈА ДУМНИЋ ВИЛОТИЈЕВИЋ

САВРЕМЕНА УРБАНА НАРОДНА МУЗИКА НА БАЛКАНУ:
О МОГУЋНОСТИМА ЗА РЕГИОНАЛНУ ИСТОРИЈУ МУЗИКЕ

(РЕЗИМЕ)

Књига Марије Тодорове *Имаинарни Балкан* (Todorova 1997) била је стожер бројних потоњих текстова који су се противили стереотипизацији Балкана. Више од двадесет година након њеног објављивања делује да је појам „Балкан“ изгубио део негативних конотација који се односио на ратове у корист оних с позитивних призвуком, као што су *joie-de-vivre* Балканца и забава која је снажно повезана с музиком. С друге стране, ареална етномузикологија која се ослања на теренска истраживања широм Балканског полуострва плодно је истраживачко поље за бројне локалне и иностране етномузикологе. Затим, сам је термин „Балкан“ пробудио интересовање више етномузиколога „аутсајдера“, као и музичке индустрије.

Овај рад написан је из визуре етномузиколога „инсајдера“ на Балкану. Постављено је најпре питање дефинисања музичке одреднице “Балкан” и дискутоване су њене основне структуралне карактеристике. Коначно, понуђена је нова могућност разматрања специфичног регионалног музичког жанра заснованог на истраживању градских народних музичких пракси. Представљене су карактеристике градских народних музичких пракси од друге половине деветнаестог и прве половине двадесетог века у земљама на Балкану, с нагласком на њиховим сличностима. Такође, сагледана је и специфична форма популарне народне музике која је често критикована — савремена градска народна музика.

Кључне речи: Балкан, музички стереотипи, етномузикологија, урбана народна музика, популарна музика