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REKINDLED *KAVAL* IN SERBIA IN 1990s AND
KAVAL AND *NEY* IN SUFI TRADITIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST:
THE ASPECTS OF MUSIC AND MEANINGS¹

In this paper, the emphasis is placed on the parallel in the understanding and perception of playing of long ductless half-transverse flutes in Orthodox Christians and Sufis. The paper was based on observing and studying of living musical practice of the *kaval* in Belgrade, Serbia, in a specific context enabling specific perception of playing it. Speaking of Serbia, it is about the area of the central Balkans, where there is a plentitude of indigenous traditions which have been preserved till the present date and where different influences have been crossing over. Here also the cultural identities of the Mediterranean, of the East, and of the Central Europe have been negotiated over a long period of time.

There is extensive ethnomusicological literature on the mutually related instruments *kaval* and *ney*. Both instruments belong to the group of long ductless flutes, widespread in the area of North Africa, south-west and central Asia as well as Asia Minor, and south-east Europe (Basten, 2003: 4). The *ney* or *nay* is encountered as two types of the instrument, Persian and Turkish, it occurs in the territory almost identical to the area of the Islamic culture, and is more specific for the urban settings (Basten, 2003: 4). By today, not only *ney* music, but Sufi music in general, due to its perception in terms of aesthetic value, found its place within the discourse of *World Music* and popular music genres (Bohlman, 2002: 56; Peterson, 2008). At the territory of the Balkans and in Turkey, the *kaval*² is primarily associated with rural, cattle-breeding music tradition. The broad geographic area of occurrence and plentitude of varieties of these instruments point to the assumption that their ancient origin lies in the old cultures rose on these territories (Basten, 2003: 3-6).

On the other hand, the existing data on the *kaval* in the territory of former Yugoslavia does not provide a full answer to the issue of its occurrence in traditions of different ethnic groups in the country. Namely, it is well-known that it occurs in Macedonia and Serbia, that it is played by Macedonians and Albanians, but it is almost unknown that this instrument is also a part of Serb music tradition, in the territory of Kosovo. Research aimed at that direction has been initiated only as of recently, and this paper is one of its results (Zakić, 2012). This text was immediately caused by a phenomenon that the interest in playing the *kaval* in Belgrade was brought to light in the context of active work on restoration of Orthodox, Byzantine church art (Jovanović, 2012). It happened during the period of severe political, economic, and ethical crisis in the country, which, as in similar cases world-wide, initiated questioning of the identities embraced till that moment and the need to establish new ones (Todorova, 2006: 15, 128). The phenomenon this is about initiates discussions on establishment of new borders of identity; they surpass the state, national, or ethnic, even confessional borders, as this paper tends to show. The interpretations of the protagonists of this phenomenon, I obtained as a participant-observer (Cooley and Barz, 2008: 20), gaining personal experience in encountering members of the community, and through interviews and relying on Martin Clayton's precepts on the importance of the mean-

ings of music as “perceived” by listeners themselves (Clayton, 2001: 5). Thus, it has been pointed to new aspects in the research of long ductless flute playing, because they open an interesting topic of its understanding in the context of Orthodox religion, especially if compared to playing instruments of the same kind, *ney*, in Sufis. In their narratives of their personal inclination to instruments of the kind, members of different religious groups state similar formulations of perception of their music, sound and ethos. This makes Macedonian *kaval* playing one of the most intriguing and most inspiring indicators of the connection between music cultures of the east and central Balkans and south-west Asia.

Circumstances Causing *Kaval* Rekindling in Serbia

The factors influencing the bringing to life of *kaval* playing in Serbia are as follows: restoration of Byzantine church art, especially chanting; search for personal, national, religious, and cultural identity of a group of individuals, highly educated artists; and availability of recordings of Macedonian *kaval* players. The initiative to make the *kaval* topical was born among the members of Belgrade congregation of artists and chanters “St John of Damascus”, whose leading idea was to restore Orthodox Byzantine art: icon painting, fresco painting, and church chanting. Since 1993, there are two choirs within the congregation; the male and female chanters, who learned to chant after the Byzantine model, after the contemporary neumatic notation, taking active part in chanting during church services (audio ex. 1). Besides affiliation to Serbian Orthodox Church, the identity of promoters of Byzantine chanting also implied affiliation to a broader transnational community of Orthodox peoples through the ecumenical identity (Jovanović, 2012).

The *kaval* was brought to life in Belgrade thanks to “interactions of specific individuals” (Stock, 2001: 5) who, same as the other citizens of the country, had been undergoing the difficult time of crisis, and, seeking for the way to express their own identity and creativity, had to make decisions in terms of both personal and music choice. The fresco-painters and members of the choir listened to the audio recordings of the best *kaval* players from Macedonia and in 1994 started building the *kaval* themselves and playing it. In this, as well as in their repertoire, they enthusiastically followed their Macedonian models, as knowledge on the *kaval* in Serb tradition was unavailable to them at the time. Their favourite melodies were improvisations in free rhythm – *ezgije*, where the sound and nature of the *kaval* could be fully exercised (audio ex. 2). The awareness on the religious, cultural, ethnic and regional closeness of the peoples of Serbia and Macedonia, along with Byzantine chanting, was of crucial importance, to confirm affiliation to common religion and unique cultural surroundings.

Kaval playing in Belgrade of the time I observe, as musicologist Biljana Milanović wrote, as “the medium not only reflecting and encoding meanings related to identities, but also participating in the creation thereof” (Milanović, 2007: 125). The Belgrade *kaval* players in the 1990s performed only privately and on occasions which could be called public; in the close vicinity of some Belgrade churches, after services in which the choir would perform. Besides church and folk singing, this spontaneous playing had the role of an important emotional and cohesive element among the members of the group, where their personal identities interacted. We can say that the sound of the *kaval* in this context represented a point of emotional encounter, opening the sphere of contemplation in the situation after the religious service as a specific extension of the liturgical experience of the community. This collective emotional experience consisting of a multitude of individual experiences might be compared to the experience of group listening of *rāg* play, in which the listeners can be observed as

“bounded entities” (Clayton, 2001: 3, 6). The aim was to reach internal tranquility in the conditions of close war destruction and general crisis and it was of exceptional importance for the members of the community.

Musical-Textural and Structural Elements Linking Byzantine Chanting and Macedonian *Kaval* Playing

As a rule, *ney* playing in Sufi tradition is monodic; if several players are involved, they play either in unison or in heterophony (Baines, 1991: 234). On the other hand, Macedonian *kaval* playing and Byzantine chanting are similar in several important aspects. Interestingly, it was the members of the choir who were attracted to the Macedonian *kaval* and who became permanently attached to it just because of the structural elements of Macedonian music which indicate to a large level of similarity with Byzantine chanting. These are as follows:

Texture: Both in Byzantine chant and in Macedonian *kaval* tradition, the texture is two-part, with the main melody and the drone.

Though the *drone / ison / isokratima* is widely present in autochthonous folklore traditions of the Balkans, and of South Slavs as well (Traerup, 1981; Vukičević-Zakić, 1994/1995), it could be said it is not a part of common Slavic heritage (Pashina, 2009) and its presence in Macedonian *kaval* play and in Byzantine chant should rather be brought into connection with Eastern music traditions. Here according to Rudolf Brandl, it is understood as the constructional, arrhythmic, changeable bourdon (Brandl, 1976: 10). In Byzantine chanting it was interpreted by Orthodox theologians as the “mystic depth of inexpressibility” (Lazić, 1984: 240); beside this description, we shall also mention the view of theoreticians in Indian tradition: it has been described as the “timeless absolute” (Brandl, 1976: 2), or a device which, from the starting point of tuning before the play, has been “thoroughly fixed in the listener’s mind”, who senses that “the melody is already present in the drone” (Clayton, 2000: 1-2).

Non-tempered intervals: By changing the intensity of air emission, the *kaval* may generate tones of different pitches with the same finger position. This provides a wide range of non-tempered intervals, specific to Byzantine chanting, but also scales in traditions of Balkan and numerous eastern ethnicities.

Scales: The practice of Belgrade players, which implies experience in terms of listening, chanting and playing, confirmed that the scales Macedonian *ezgijas* were founded on are fully compatible to the modal system of standardized scales of the Byzantine chanting tradition: diatonic, chromatic, and enharmonic.

Melody and form: The composing principle based on melodic and scale principles bearing a certain ethos, occurs at the territory ranging from the Balkans to India. This is the so-called “maqam-principle” (Szabolsci, 1959), principle of form building, inseparable from melody formulas and scale systems (Powers, Widdes, 2001: 830). In Byzantine tradition, the pattern / mode is called *echos* (ἦχος), in the Middle East it is called *maqam/meqam*, in India it is called *raga*. Though we still do not have the proof for it in the concrete results of any comparative analysis, there are grounds for the assumption, that the principle of modal scales with more or less variable tones is present both in Byzantine chanting and in playing of the Macedonian *kaval ezgijas*. Here are also obvious similarities between the principles of melody construction in Macedonian *ezgija* and in Indian *rag*: melodic development relies on the main tones in the scale, including the principal tone, the fourth and the fifth

(Clayton, 2000: 25), which is in *ezgija* often supported by changing of the drone.

It is well-known that, apart from the two-part bourdon structure, all the aforementioned elements also occur in the music produced using the *ney* in the practices of Sufis in the Middle East.

Meanings

Liturgical music of the Orthodox and Moslems originates from ancient times and its sources may be found in the cosmological teachings of the old East, which were important for development of several cultures of the Orient, including the eastern Orthodox singing (Petrović, 1982: 3-5). Certain papers point to six millennia of history of culture in the Middle East, crossroads of various influences through history and mutual contacts of the cultures of Greece, Iran, Caucasus, India, even North Africa and the Balkans, with foundations in cultures of old civilizations (Czekanowska, 1981: 159-161, 214-5, 218, 415). The teachings of Islamic philosophers and Orthodox theologians are in agreement that music is a powerful means of expression and the confession itself. In Islam, "the selection of melody, lyrics, and instruments to suit the needs and the occasion was a matter of serious studying, depending on whether the occasion related to joy, sadness, illness, etc." (Hamidullah, 1982: 200; Reinhard, 1969: 64-67, 71-2). On the other hand, the Orthodox are strictly of the opinion that the Holy tradition also reflects through church art, i.e. the icon and singing, which is why certain structural and tonal properties of Orthodox singing must reflect a higher meaning, a message from the holy fathers. The *Octoechos* modes understands ancient *Ethos-doctrine* (Petrović, 2004: 211) which is of great importance for individual efforts of the believers for directing in self-improvement.

Although neither official Christian nor Moslem tradition allow for use of instruments in liturgical service, in the cases of *ney* and *kaval*, there are reasons for studying of these instruments in the context of religious life of their players.

The topic of the importance of *ney* playing in Sufis is relatively familiar in ethnomusicology. Philosophers and artists of Mevlevi³ order provide detailed interpretations of the connection between spiritual life and personal development with sound, i.e. the art of music, which, among other things, includes playing the pipe (Ševalije, 1981: 187, 188). Persian philosopher, theologian, lawyer, mystic and poet Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi depicts in his poetry the basic meanings ascribed to the *ney* in Sufi tradition: sadness due to separation from the source ("non-changeable essence") (Basten, 2003: 6), aspiration to purification for the purpose of fulfillment with the Spirit of God and joy due to the hope that the strength of one's search will result in becoming one with the Creator (Rumi, 2007: 86).

I am speaking about the meaning of *kaval* playing in Serbia in the context of religious understanding and perceptions solely based on direct experiences of the small number of champions of the rekindling of the instrument and their narratives. They are also devoted to religious art and are its proficient connoisseurs, icon painters and fresco painters. Here I will provide a review of their understanding and perceptions, expressed in their narratives, so that they can be compared to the Sufi ones, as testimonies on the place of the instrument of this type in the life of the religious of the two confessions.

For the protagonists of rekindling of *kaval*-playing in Serbia, Orthodox Christians, liturgical chanting, icon painting, fresco painting and *kaval* playing are all the manners to express the fullness of creation, gratitude, and attempt to reflect the image of God⁴. They partially agree with the Sufis in terms of perception of its sound: they describe it as "invoking" (Serb.: "позивни"), "congregational,

conciliar, calming, and relaxing” (“саборан, сабиран, смирујући и опуштајући”); it brings one to the state similar to the one “when attending liturgy” (“битисања на литургији”), it constitutes “certain praying atmosphere in any manner” (“део неке молитвене атмосфере на било који начин”; underlined by J. J.). For them, *kaval* playing provides an “image of the Heaven” (“прслику Раја”) and enables the “encounter of the beings in love in Christ” (“сусрет бића и љубави у Христу”). Playing the *kaval* claims for “purification from passions / negative emotions” (“очишћеност од страсти / негативних осећања”). In Serbia, *kaval* is sometimes denoted as the instrument which has the ability to *speak*, which has a direct parallel in the perception of the *ney* among Sufis, but also with the perception of the sound of ductless flutes in ancient peoples. Individual Orthodox Serbs interpret this saying that “when this instrument starts speaking, it says “Thanks to Thee, O Lord” and “Praise be unto Thee, O Lord” (“тај инструмент, кад проговори, каже “Хвала Ти, Боже” и “Хвалим Те, Боже”).

One more intriguing question arises from some of the narratives of Belgrade *kaval* players. Among the players who are, at the same time, icon-painters and fresco-painters, a position occurs that *kaval* playing must not be deliberate, haphazard, but subjected to rules, same as the icon; that *kaval* playing should not be illustrative, but rather iconic, so that it could “contain in itself” (“садржи у себи”) a thought or an idea. This is why means of expression should be “simple so that it is possible to express something inexpressible yet of essential importance” (“једноставна да би се постигло нешто што је неизрециво, а суштинско”). This opens up a large topic of the semiotic of *kaval* playing, as (following Uspenski’s writings) a sign with independent, autonomous meaning, as well as a text – set of signs (Uspenski, 1979: 252-253). This reaches into the so far non-researched area of decoding the specific language of music practices in the playing of Orthodox Christians and Sufis. Specific place in this subject provides the phenomenon of drone and its significance as a textural element that provides specific features to the musical structure.

Conclusion

Important feature of *kaval* ethos in the context described obviously is complementary to the characteristic of Mevlevi music. It might be said that the role of *kaval* sound in these circumstances provided a role of *communion*, rather than *communication* within the group of players and listeners – just as described by During for the effect of *ney* playing among Mevlevi (www.crem-cnrs.fr/membres/j_during_1992_what_is_sufi_music.pdf P. 278). The other important features of both Macedonian *ezgijas* on *kaval* and Mevlevi melodies on *ney* have also been detected, according to During’s observations; these characteristics are: slow tempo, complex, long and varied rhythms, closed repertoire, traditional instruments, mental pray (by the participants), discretion, moderated expression, calm, meditation and (above already mentioned) communion (www.crem-cnrs.fr/membres/j_during_1992_what_is_sufi_music.pdf P. 279). Furthermore, the listeners’ experience in musical event of *kaval* play in Orthodox Christian context – the phenomenon of mutual recognizing in common direct emotional and spiritual experience – might be regarded as close to one during Mevlevi *sema / sama*, which also has been characterized as meditation itself (Vlaeva, 2006: 421; Qureshi, 2006: 1). This could be further compared with the perception described in the context of Indian music: the music’s value considered as the *state*, achieved through better performances, and thus the listeners “being absorbed in an ongoing state of *rāg*-ness – one which tends towards *timeless*” (Clayton, 2000: 26).

Rekindling of the *kaval* in Serbia is important as a confirmation of Ihor Maciewsky's thesis on importance of traditional music forms as a way of struggle for existence under restrained living conditions (Maciewsky, 2007). Also, in Serbia, thanks to the inclination towards the *kaval* and Byzantine chanting, elements of non-Christian music cultures, as parts of broadly perceived "eastern" music, were also perceived as "own", in the attempt to reach fullness of own identity in a broader cultural area. Interestingly, here Macedonia once again played the role of an intermediary in the transfer of cultural trends in the Balkans (Valchinova-Chendlova, 2000: 76).

The given data about the perception of the *kaval* play in Serbia are, as far as it is known, the only ones noted among the Orthodox Christians so far, connecting the wind instrument sound and meanings with the ethos of the Orthodox doctrines and arts. They introduce a new insight in East Mediterranean musical culture(s) in general, striving for the revision of the attitude that this cultural basin generally opens the "questions arising from Islamic attitudes towards music" (Bohlman, 2002: 56). These data are also welcome for the reflections about nowadays recognizable Byzantine cultural sphere in the Mediterranean (Koço, 2006: 245-6) and they indicate to the possibilities of new comparative approaches. On the other hand, the fact is that the musical style this text is about is found in many musical traditions of Middle East, not only on ductless flutes, but also on instruments of different kinds; only among Caucasian peoples, there are melodies of this kind played on *duduk* (Armenians, Georgians), *kavali* (Lazetians), *acharpan* (Abkhazians)⁵ and other, as well as in the Balkans – *kaval* (Albanians and Turks) and *floghera* (Greeks and Aromanians).

It is also extremely interesting that the described reception of *kaval* play among Orthodox Christians could provoke a discussion about the mutual relationships between mystic experiences in Orthodox Christianity, Sufism and Hindu religion, in whose musical practices we find similar elements and similar types of perception. In all three religious systems, achieving the unity with God has been considered to be the highest goal of the faithful. This unity is supposed to be realized in his/her own "coming to perfection, which is inseparably tied to the thoughtful structure as a characteristic for certain religion, which can be realized on the level of inner, spiritual dimension of the human being" (Keller, 1987: 11).

On a broader level, the perception of sound and impact of instruments in the group of long ductless flutes have on players and listeners alike, should apparently be connected to very old, primordial impulses which must have chronologically preceded interpretations within individual religions which followed. Other researchers have also noted that this kind of instruments are "archetypal" and thus might evoke a "transcendental dimension" (During, 1992: 278; Basten, 2003: 12). It is important to note that the bearers of this practice in Belgrade kept faithful to original impulse and motivation up to nowadays, realizing the importance of such approach for achieving harmony between their personal and religious identities. For them, this harmony would be permanently disturbed if they would make an additional "step" in their way of playing from traditional towards popular music (compare: Bohlman, 2002: 21). Statements of Belgrade players who became familiar with instruments of the type partly thanks to the patterns within the system of Byzantine chanting tradition vastly enrich the knowledge on the ethos of such instruments play and provide the opportunity for further comparative research.

Notes

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² About the name of this instrument, Mr. Ivan Kostić, Arabist from Belgrade, said: “From the verb لاق (root: word ل و ق [qw’l]) which means *to say, to tell, to narrate* comes from the word لاق (pronounced literally *kaval!*) with regular male plural لاق, which means *folk singer (or poet), reciter*”. Many thanks to Mr. Kostić for this information; it shows that the origin of the name for the instrument *kaval* is practically the same as of the name of Pakistan Sufi musical genre *qawwali* (www.sjsu.edu/people/shantanu.phukan/courses/157/s1/Ernst%20-%20Sufi%20Music%20and%20Dance%20.pdf P. 186).

³ The Mevlevi Order is a traditional Islamic Sufi Way.

⁴ It is important to emphasize that the protagonists of this practice in Serbia stated their perception of *kaval* playing fully ignorant of the meanings ascribed to the *ney* in Sufi practices. Nevertheless, there are few editions in Serbia that contribute to understanding Sufi doctrines; for example, translation of Khazrat Inayat Khan’s book published in 2004 (Inayat Khan, 2004).

⁵ For the information about wind instruments connected to melodies of this kind in different Caucasus traditions I cordially thank to my Georgian colleagues Nino Makharadze and Ketevan Baiashvili.

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Audio Examples

Audio example 1. Female choir "St. John of Damascus", *Cherub Hymn* (fragment), First mode of Byzantine *octoechos*. Recording from the liturgy in church St. Alexander Nevskii, Belgrade (21 September 1994).

Audio example 2. Predrag Stojković and Vladimir Simić, *Ezgija* on two *kavals*. Recorded on the concert of the ensemble *Iskon*, Ethnographic Museum, Belgrade (5 December 1998, rec. by Zoran Jerković).