

**Music and dance
in Southeastern Europe:
New scopes of research
and action**



ICTM Study group
on music and dance
in Southeastern Europe

Editors: Liz Mellish, Nick Green and Mirjana Zakić

Faculty of music, Belgrade

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

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**ANNUAL CONCERTS OF A CULTURAL-ARTISTIC SOCIETY IN SERBIA:
THE CLASH OF TWO DIFFERENT CONCEPTS OF
PROFESSIONALIZATION¹**

In this paper two concepts of professionalization are observed within a unique cultural context: the annual concert of the cultural-artistic society (KUD) in a small town in central Serbia. It is about the conception 1) of folklore in choreographies, and 2) of a neo-traditional approach to rural folk songs. The former conceptual direction has a long tradition in Serbia and criteria of professionalism in this respect are well established and confirmed through long lasting practice. The latter, relatively new (from the 1990s onwards), is still missing firm criteria for professionalization on the same level as the former one. Different elements of aesthetic and ethic goals are elaborated, as well as the demands of the audience for each of the two conceptions. In this case, through KUD activity, two different cultural patterns in contemporary Serbia may also be seen.

Keywords: Serbia; Topola; cultural-artistic society; choreography; neo-traditional.

When we are discussing the concept, or understanding the notions 'professionalization' and 'professional', interesting contributions for the discussion might be derived from observing a single performance event where the two program and aesthetic concepts meet. One of these concepts is traditionally well-established, socially and culturally recognized, and the other is still seeking the directions in basic organizational and logistic support.

The subject of this article, which could also be understood as a case study, has emerged from author's practical experience through engagement as ethnomusicologist and as a vocal pedagogue (in the process of informal musical education) in a cultural-artistic society (in further text: KUD), [see Marković and Hofman 2006] "Oplenac" in a town Topola in central Serbia, for more than a decade (since 2002). The experience for the paper relies on relatively long-term experience of participation and observation (both from the positions of 'insider' and 'outsider') in a working process and in direct contact with singers and dancers in the KUD, as well as with its audiences and with the citizens of Topola; it also comes from the author's active role in preparing the annual concerts of the ensemble. Its topic could be also easily compared to other phenomena of this kind in Serbia and, most likely, in other east and south east European and Balkan countries.

Since the musical phenomena elaborated in this paper primarily illustrates the cultural formations [Shepherd and Wicke 1997:33], the problems that have been pointed out are most closely connected to the questions of music in the cultural context(s), its role in (self-) identification of the social groups and in the expression(s) of the collective identity/identities [see Trimillos 2004:32]. It is also of interest when we discuss the place of music in the field of "sociology of aesthetic pleasure" [according to Hennion 2003:83]. Within such an event as the annual KUD's concert a "formidable diversity of cultural relationships" have been observed, as well as the fact that "[t]he emotions engendered and engaged through the act of ensemble creation and participation are profound and volatile" [Solis 2004:2]. Through this article, it is also possible to point out the deeper understanding of different cultural spheres within the same nation and ethnic context. At the same time, the subject of the paper intertwines both with subjects of applied

ethnomusicology [as explained in Jovanović 2010], and of performance studies, with their great potential in the ethnomusicological research process [Witzleben 2010].

As the sources for writing this paper, besides the author's experience in direct involvement in the working process in the KUD and the published literature, several interviews were made with the participants – choreographers, singers, dancers, and ethnomusicologists-practitioners, as well as organizers of the cultural events in Topola. Also, the filmed material – recordings of the annual concerts from 2005 to 2014 have also been used as the basis on which the assumptions and conclusions are founded.

The annual concert of the KUD "Oplenac" is one of the most significant social events in Topola. It is characteristic that the concert shows the achievements and skills following the model of the concert programs of the professional, National Ensemble Kolo from Belgrade and it gathers representatives of all generations in the audience. It is also an important element of local prestige: the dancers – pupils of the primary and secondary school (and also the guests that are not residents of the town any more), aged from five to approximately twenty five – are 'the best children' in town: good pupils, preparing to enter the university in bigger towns (or students) and so to get the opportunity to leave their hometown (because they can, unfortunately, hardly can find a prospect there for further education, as well as for any job). Observing these programs, it could be said² that the young demonstrate publicly that they overcome the boundaries of their position in a small, town; they are looking for the way to prove themselves as skilled and successful, following, as it seems, the metaphoric pattern of the appearance of the show as equal to those from a big town and the artists of the Kolo ensemble, in all their power on the stage.

Such an approach to the program has been followed in many KUDs in Serbia, especially those whose artistic directors are professional dancers, and especially if they are dancers in the Kolo ensemble. It means that the artistic director applies his/her methods and aesthetic criteria that are closely bound to those of the highest professional level and aesthetic demands connected to the professional stage performances, as a paradigm for professionalism in the folklore-based program of KUDs in Serbia, despite the fact that the conditions for work in KUDs are far away from professional ones.

On the other side, in KUD "Oplenac" (as well as in many other ones in Serbia) an ethnomusicologist-practitioner has been engaged as a vocal pedagogue, with the aim of working on the reinterpretation of Serbian (and, from recent times, also other) traditional repertoire in the frames of a neo-traditionalistic concept (a term used according to Zakić and Nenić [2012:170]). Such a practice has been taken over from the one of the Kolo ensemble that included such a program since the 1990s and became a model for the local ensembles in this respect. The case of KUD "Oplenac" is specific because the vocal pedagogue is also a mediator of traditional music of the region from older to younger generations (since the natural chain of carriers of the tradition has been broken for several decades). So, the role and the position of an ethnomusicologist in this context has been specific in many ways [as also explained in Trimillos 2004:37–47].

When we are discussing professionalism, it is important to stress that in Serbia, in the case of folklore in choreographies, this idea is clear and defined; opposed to the case of the work of ethnomusicologists–practitioners on traditional repertoire in its 'pure' forms which is still in the process of definition; it is the same case with methods of this kind of work itself. Besides, one of the significant elements of the concept of professionalism – the financial support for the work – is not always defined. There are cases when this kind of understanding is considered as implied for the choreographers, but not always, and not in the same measure, for the ethnomusicologists who work with singers. It is also such an experience that, generally, the non-educated, but skilled and well known participants get

much more respect, expressed in financial and in other ways, that the educated ones [see more in Zakić and Rakočević 2012].

A brief analysis of the two main program concepts in Topola will help to establish certain directions in understanding their 'clash' at the annual KUD's concert.

The case of the folklore in choreography

In the case of the folklore in choreography, following the model of the Kolo ensemble and according to aesthetic criteria applied in its programs, the main goal is an attractive stage show, or a successfully achieved 'spectacle'.³ This kind of direction in the work has a long history that can be followed from the romantic times, and through the 20th century, especially in communist and socialist countries, including ex-Yugoslavia [Steszewski 1991; Noll 1993; Maners 2001]; it has been led mainly by socio-political demands and from publicly proclaimed values (theorized also as "national-popular collective will" [Gramsci 1971:131]). Its aesthetics are partly inherited from the petit-bourgeois understanding of the concept of culture and art, prevailing in the communist and socialist ideology; this conception abandons rural folklore in its 'pure' forms and avoids direct, strong expressivity that comes out from it. It is important to stress that this role of folklore in choreographies and such 'spectacles' in stage performances is still very important in contemporary Serbian society [see in more detail Golemović 2006:224].

The criteria for good choreographic stage presentations lie in general rules and demands of the stage; besides the dance and music, there are the effects of makeup, hairstyle and costumes, the whole stage organization and the stage lights. The main goal of the performers is to "shine on the scene".

In the program of concerts of this kind, the role of vocal neo-traditionalistic performances is indicative itself: in most cases (so to say 'traditionally') appearances of the singers have been needed primarily to fill the time – while the dancers are changing their costumes between two choreographies. For that reason, this part of program has been often (non-officially) considered as the program of the "second class", and so have been its performers – the ones who (as it has been also 'traditionally' considered) never gain such an applause as the dancers do.

Neo-traditional performances

The conception of neo-traditional performances, which often include the ethnomusicologists' engagement,⁴ became topical in Serbia during the 1990s (though in other European countries similar events took part earlier [Åkesson 2006:3]), with the introduction of urban vocal groups (Moba in the first place), that became a model for similar experiments in smaller towns and in villages. The aim of this conception was to achieve 'authenticity' (understood as a synonym to similarity with a type of expression found in rural folklore) in reinterpretations of traditional songs and to bring them back to life (though primarily separate from their original context, as now performed on stage).

As the discussions and experience show, one of the most important conditions for 'good' performance of traditional repertoire is – being deeply in the traditional sounds, listening and contemplating, being immersed in that sound (this mental and professional direction, as Iva Nenić wrote, "requires some previous listening experience and a profound acquaintance with a folk song's aesthetics" [2009:72]); it is about a view which understands a specific contemplative approach. In this respect, the role of ethnomusicologists as mediators of the music tradition gives understanding of many experiences that have not been so transparent, and demands specific ways of explanation and methods of work with the ensemble and with each member individually. It is not only about the rehearsals themselves, but also about a kind of wider transmission, "learning a

culture" or, at least, learning how to think about the culture [Solis 2004:4], messages that the ethnomusicologists gained through their field work and through their direct acquaintance with the older bearers of the tradition. It is also specific ethnomusicological knowledge that makes these experts aware of the importance of keeping the musical elements "as they are", without the intention to change them (on purpose and significantly). The awareness of specific contexts for the songs, and knowledge about their musical features, give proof that the ethnomusicologists-practitioners are professionals of a specific kind. The 'craft' that they provide for the singers simply cannot be replaced by any other kind of knowledge.

An extremely important point in discussion is the fact that the show/spectacle seems to be an element completely absent in the neo-traditionalistic performance of *a cappella* songs. Even on the contrary: in this case, rather than complete silence among the listeners, instead noisy ovations is one of the criteria for a good performance (as stated by one of the citizens of Topola whom I interviewed [Jovanović 2010:169]).

In most KUDs in Serbia, it is the usual practice that the traditional songs chosen for the program should contribute to the effect of a stage show, so they need, in the first place, to be "cheerful" in character (in Serbian *vesele*) and attractive at the first listening – in "major" tone, in diatonic scale and in lively character [see more about this aesthetic attitude in Jovanović and Ranković 2013]. Songs of another kind, that are more "meditative", are mostly the songs that belong to an older vocal layer (with second chords and non-tempered intervals) so are not considered as suitable and are often avoided so not performed within such programs. However, this is a more difficult repertory for singers: it demands maturity of voice and of personality, good technical predispositions, and seriousness in listening and apprehending specific features of the vocal expression. It is very important and extremely significant for further investigations that experienced singers are aware of the fact that excellent performances can change the stereotype and contribute to the concert programs with the quality and attraction of another, special kind.

Specific aesthetic demands also distinguish these two concepts of performances. In the case of choreographies, the point is in showing the external power of the stage appearance. In the case of neo-traditional performances, the appearance understands a moment of introspection, personal calm and peace. In the focus is the concept of transmitting the message through singing, instead of self-promotion and external "shine"; maybe there is also room to speak of a specific kind of modesty as one of the demands in this respect.

Generally, for traditional songs it might be said that the need for their reinterpretation in KUDs has been successfully carried out mostly by the efforts of the individuals (singers and vocal pedagogues-ethnomusicologists) who maintain their personal enthusiasm about this. It has not been the institutional financial support that mainly helped their efforts. On the contrary: several active and experienced performers in Belgrade confirmed in interviews that, in their opinion, the key point in the question of being a professional in the neo-traditional concept corresponds to the 'relation to traditional song' that relies on the personal affinity and understanding. It is indicative that, as a rule, both in professional and in amateur ensembles good performers of traditional songs are relatively rare. Since in a mixed program traditional songs *a cappella* have often been even seen as confrontational with the main trend of choreographed dances, it turns out that in this genre the singers are often strong, outstanding individualities.

To achieve a high level of performance of traditional songs, it is considered important for the singers to 'dive' into the spirit of this repertory, to dedicate all their time and personal interest and energy. It is not always easy – for in some cases, even the term

'professional' is used in wrong sense, having in mind 'quick, instant' preparations for the concert with many imperfections due to the lack of time for real 'diving' into the songs.

In Serbia the criteria of 'professionalism' has not yet been clearly established in the neo-traditional approach to traditional music. According to the previously elaborated aesthetic values recognized as important, the way of achieving a level of "professional" in this respect seems to be mainly in the process of development. It is likely that more concentrated experiences exchanged among colleagues, probably in the near future, will successfully lead to establishing these criteria.

For these reasons, and in such a context, the primary aim of the permanent battle of the ethnomusicologists is to show the aesthetical and ethical values of this music, but also for the full recognition of their specific knowledge and experience of the culture that has been in the focus of their investigations – through fieldwork, research, and through their practical approach as musicians – as worthy in all respects as highly professional. All participants in the process of the revitalization of folklore musical forms agree that a place for traditional music as a legitimate genre must be found among the many others that gain much more attention and support of every kind.

Endnotes

1. This paper was written as a part of the project *Serbian Musical Identities within Local and Global Frameworks: Traditions, Changes, Challenges* (no. 177004) funded by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Serbia.
2. This assumption is the author's intuitive conclusion, given here as the impression based on long-lasting observer's experience with music in specific social and cultural relations [according to Hennion 2003:83], as well as on some indicators in the interviews made for the purpose of this paper.
3. M. Lukić Krstanović defines spectacle as follows: "[t]he spectacle is a notional construct whose aim is to merge various terms under the label of the omnipresent stage/screen. When we say *spectacle* we mean image, sound, grandness and dynamism. [...] The adjective *spectacle* expresses dramatic effect of something that is exciting, extraordinary, often with elements of provocation and incidents" [2010: 274].
4. The author's experience in teaching the traditional singing is based on the East and Central European practical and pedagogical approach [Ambrazevičius 2012], applied to specificities of Serbian vocal tradition.

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