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7. The Vision of the Balkans in Musical Culture

Between Viennese Operetta and Eurovision

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Abstract

This article addresses the representation and conceptualization of the Balkans in musical culture since the nineteenth century. It argues that typical strategies of (self-)exoticizing and the approximation of dominant musical tendencies promoted Balkan musical uniqueness by underlining its naturalness and authenticity and are part of the legacy of nineteenth-century ideological and musicological theories. A few carefully selected examples, namely, Viennese operettas, popular films by Emir Kusturica, and Balkan performances in the Eurovision Song Contest (specifically the 2007 winner Marija Šerović's "Molitva" ["Prayer"] which transcended religious and ethnic boundaries in its appeal), will demonstrate the primary types of narratives used to depict Balkan music to the outside world.

Keywords: Balkan, musical culture, Viennese operetta, Eurovision, Gypsy music

Introduction

The goal of this article is to demonstrate how the Balkans have been represented and conceptualized in the realm of musical culture since the nineteenth century. It does not provide a concise history of music in the region, nor does it aim at characterizing musical practices one encounters there. Rather, on the basis of a few carefully selected examples that take into consideration different musical genres, contexts, etc., the paper examines the types of narratives used to capture the spirit of the Balkans for listeners throughout Europe.

The main assumption driving this paper is the hypothesis that the actual place and role of the Balkans on the musical map of Europe should be, on the one hand, regarded as part of the legacy of the nineteenth century ideology that favored nation-states, and on the other hand, the product of the nineteenth century academic system in which musicology became an academic discipline. This article concurs with Todorova's claim that the Balkans "can be approached and interpreted through the notion of historical legacy, which is intimately intertwined with the character of the Balkans as a region and, thus, linked to its concreteness" (65).

Preliminary Observations

Musically speaking, the Balkans are primarily associated with the carnivalesque type of singing and music-making characterized by an authentic and natural festivity practiced for autotelic purposes of the sort often associated with South East Europe's Roma culture, popularly (if not politically correct) known as "Gypsy" music.¹ At the same time, Balkan music has been categorized as mystical, alluring, somehow tempting, difficult to grasp or define. Several distinctive sounds, technically known as sonic markers, are associated with that type of primal Balkan sensibility, including complex rhythms (Blom: 2-11; Hendler: 149-83), unique singing practices such as polyphonic *ganga* encountered in rural areas of the Balkans, and the use of certain musical instruments such as used by *trubači* in their brass bands; the *gusle*, a one-string kind of fiddle; or chordophones such as the *saz* and the *šargija*. Many of the region's instruments were inherited from Ottoman times, when Janissary bands used loud wind instruments like the *zurna*, an instrument similar to the Western oboe, but with a fuller, more cutting sound, and the *boru*, a type of trumpet (Locke: 116). These types of instruments were also preferred by the the military musical bands, the *mehter*, which also featured double-reed *shawms*, large drums, and cymbals. Music served military purposes and soon became treated in symbolic terms, as it was intended to represent the Ottoman state to outsiders (Ágoston and Masters: 406).

Another factor strongly associated with Balkan music is its dance beat as a feature embedded in its primal character. For example, the typical *čoček*, a Balkan dance especially popular among Muslim Roma and Albanians, is characterized as "an improvised dance, utilizing hand movements, contractions of the abdomen, shoulder shakes, movement of

¹ "Gypsy" is a term traditionally applied, today often pejoratively, to the Roma population, also of South East Europe. For purposes of this paper it refers, however, to the popular cultural appropriation of Roma music as the so called "Gypsy" music – as referred to in this paper – is an artistic and intellectual construct popularized in the nineteenth century Europe, associated with the Roma (formerly-called "Gypsies") but functioning in the public space and addressed to the general public.

isolated body parts such as hips and head, and small footwork patterns, . . . clearly an heir to the dances of the Ottoman *çengis*, but its subtlety and restraint distinguish it from contemporary belly dancing” (Silverman: 127). At the same time, these ancient rural associations are discussed as exemplified by tamburitza songs about rustic life, or other, more melancholic songs such as the folk *sevđalinka*, associated with the death of someone dear and beloved.

Balkan Music and Nineteenth-Century National Music

It is difficult to talk about prevailing aesthetics that could be applied to Balkan music, where robust dances accompany melancholic songs, but what unifies these different traditions is their specific classification as “semi- exotic,” regarded as Oriental to the European ear. This perception of the Balkans is connected with the historical heritage of the region, which from the sixteenth century to the 1880s straddled the military border between the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburgs, stretching from Galicia to the Adriatic Sea (Heuberger: 35). Thus, the Balkans served as a bridge between East and West (Bakić-Hayden and Hayden: 4), with a similar type of collective imagination applied to Balkan music.

In the nineteenth century, when the science and historiography of music (*Musikwissenschaft*) was officially introduced into universities, it was immediately affected by the geo-political division of the Balkans. European musical cultures were effectively drawn into the debate by means of literature, the press, and other means, based on the hierarchy of values and norms preferred by each particular nation. For example, the supremacy of German-speaking musical circles was strengthened by Wagnerian attempts at reviving Teutonic mythology, which contributed to the musicological development of academic works. Within the framework of German-centric musicology, numerous attempts were made to define phenomena occurring on the fringe of the mainstream, or outside its scope, and consequently the concepts of so-called national schools and national styles were concocted. However, as Dahlhaus has noted “the concept of national schools . . . implies . . . that national is an alternative to universal. The term national school is a covert admission that the phenomenon it describes is peripheral” (89). National developments occurred in Scandinavian countries, Russia, and in the Polish and Czech traditions, but the Balkan region in this nineteenth-century debate was overlooked and never negotiated. Musical practices of the Balkans – collectively representing an ideological concept rather than a particular nation – were ignored or, to be more precise, categorized as exotic. The image of the “Oriental” was oftentimes associated with so-called “Gypsy” musicians, whose vision – “passionate, virtuosic, earthy, and definitely not serious – contrast starkly with the more elevated and modern German” (Hooker: 6).

In nineteenth-century musicology, artistic music alone was the subject of research, while European folk music (as well as other musical cultures encountered across the world), were of interest to ethnologists, more specifically, ethnomusicologists. Consequently, on the basis of a particular view of its past, the Balkan region was perceived musically as being an exotic realm. This vision was reflected in several musical works of the time, and especially so in operas and operettas. For example, Mozart’s 1790 opera, *Così fan tutte*, which is accompanied by a Da Ponte libretto, features two exotic figures described as Albanians or Turks. Certainly neither this nor any other opera’s (or operetta’s) oriental heroes should be regarded as the source of

actual information,² but as the nineteenth-century German historian and writer Freytag observed, the audience had its own expectancies and a certain knowledge of history, which, while confronted with the libretto, should not be discounted; what the public needed was at least the illusion of plausibility (163). Strohm states that for centuries operas (and operettas) served as a popular source of historical information for the audience (2).

Unfortunately, it was only at the beginning of the twentieth century that Balkan composers started seeing their musical interventions depict their own traditions with some accuracy in theatrical plays.³ This was obviously the result of the political, historical, and cultural situation of the Balkans, in which artistic productions served primarily national purposes.⁴ Hence, during the long nineteenth century, Serbs, Croats, Slovenians, etc., all vassals of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, were represented by Austrian composers and characterized in Viennese operettas. In 1885, Johann Strauss II's *The Gypsy Baron* served up a sliver of history by making references to the 1717 Battle of Belgrade, a skirmish that had been fought during the Seventh Ottoman – Venetian War (1714–1718). This particular operetta, which was considered a “musical monument to the Austro-Hungarian Empire” (Traubner: 111), was meant to stimulate civil attitudes within the dual Empire, populated by Austrians and Hungarians, but also Romanians, Germans, Slovaks, Serbs, Croats, Ruthenians, Jews, and Roma (Gergely and Szasz: 111). The operetta narrated the story of their encounters, initially hostile, but gradually becoming friendly.

Between East and West, the Authentic and the Invented

It is clear to see that within the Western gaze, the Balkans represented exoticism, especially in light of the Roma population, popularly called gypsies, which widely populated the region. Contemporary Viennese musicologist Marković, originally from Belgrade, underlines the fact that the specificity of Balkan musical culture should be located at the intersection of Orientalism and Occidentalism. Although both aspects seem equally compelling, the Oriental flavor of the Balkans resonates especially well with the tendency toward self-exoticizing, which in the twentieth century several Balkan countries seized as a chance for self-promotion. This, as Kaminsky suggests was deepened by the fact that ethnic cleansing taking place in the Balkans of the 1990s made it even more difficult for average Europeans to differentiate between various Balkan identities, let alone their musical traditions (146). However, what remained unchanged from the nineteenth century was the tendency to link authenticity with exoticism – even barbarian features in music – supported by claims of

² This idea was heavily criticized already in the seventeenth century by the French author and cleric François Hedelin d'Aubignac who disdained the idea of going to the theatre in order to learn history (Bajer: 133).

³ Other popular genres of artistic music composed in the Balkans, next to short theatrical plays with music, included *lieder*.

⁴ It is worthy of note that the first Montenegro opera, *Balkan Empress (1881–1884)*, composed in Kotor in 1890 by Italian composer Dionisio de Sarno-San Giorgio, set to music the drama of King Nikola I Petrović-Njegoš based on folk tradition, legends, and some historical evidence.

Balkan naturalness⁵ versus artificiality encountered in Western European musical artistry (Romanou: 101-17).

In modern times, this “naturalness” has been internationally promoted within the framework of the renowned European Song Contest.⁶ Musical performances representing the former Yugoslavia, at that time in the post-1989 reality of independent Balkan states, have often been viewed in terms of practices aimed at representing the Balkans as a musically distinctive entity. One of the most heated discussions centered around Marija Serifović’s “Molitva” (“Prayer”), the winning song at the 2007 Eurovision Song Contest, whose musical and non-musical message did not escape the attention of international listeners. As Bohlman notes, “Molitva” displayed “an aesthetic of hybridity, borrowing sounds and images from Balkan *sevdalinka*,⁷ and the more international ballad and chanson styles of an earlier era of the Eurovision. Formally, “Molitva” conformed to all the standard conventions of successful Eurovision songs” (Bohlman: 39-67).⁸ What mattered most for Eastern viewers was Marija’s powerful voice, as much as the choice of the religiously-charged title that deeply moved both Orthodox and Roman Catholic listeners. Western commentators quickly discovered the aesthetics of camp in the performance, but this attitude may be interpreted as an appropriation of the song – ascribing it to Western tradition by applying Western aesthetics to its interpretation.

This oscillation between East and West in the conceptualization of Balkan music is connected with the fact that even so-called Balkan identity is regarded as a highly contested concept, blurred by geographical constraints of what actually constitutes the Balkans, as well as by the region’s artificially concocted genesis. In addition, various sonic markers associated with the Balkans seem to blur the differences between particular identities on both covert and overt levels. However, at the same time they serve as a heuristic device enabling categorization of the Balkans as a potent source of extremely rich and diverse musical traditions, heavily influenced by Turkish elements, where church and folk music were predominantly cultivated (Velimirović: 1704). Hence, although some musicologists complain that Balkan music has been represented almost exclusively by traditional, sometimes neotraditional (e.g., “turbo-folk”) music, and rarely by formally artistic, especially contemporary classical music (Marković: 1), it seems that this impression is a natural outgrowth of the nineteenth-century tendencies, which simply deepened in the late twentieth century and is still observed nowadays. While “a huge gap separates the imagined Oriental music from what Ottoman *makams* and their folk equivalents actually are and how they function” (Pennanen: 146), even today Balkan music

⁵ For example, in Austria during the 1990s, “Balkan music was increasingly regarded as a vital and authentic form of pop music” (Gebesmair: 99).

⁶ Established by the European broadcasting companies, the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) originated during the Cold War era in order to promote the idea of shared European values; hence, the ESC is a symbolic contact zone among European cultures, an annual mega-event where the meaning of Europeaness is negotiated, contested, enacted, and promoted. See Tragaki.

⁷ *Sevdalinka* is a kind of emotional, melancholic folk song that often describes sad subjects such as love and loss, the death of a dear person, or heartbreak.

⁸ The ABBA popular song form that underlies almost every genre and style of Eurovision song repertoires works neither particularly well nor particularly poorly in “Molitva.”

seems to epitomize the “East-West dichotomy” which “had been established long before any Balkan nationalism came into being. In the beginning the Balkans were considered as little more than an integral part of the East: the East . . . of that West’s imagination” (Scopetea: 171).

The Place of Romani Music

In the twentieth century, a gradual shift of meaning attributed to the label “popular Balkan music,” or “Balkan beat” took place, incorporating music performed by local Romani communities. Although many Romani musicians became very active in the late twentieth century, gaining considerable recognition, they are known to have been ever open to musical novelty, adjusting their performance to prevailing trends and modes. Traditionally, Romani musicians address their music towards non-Romani (*gadje*) audiences. One of their favorite strategies for pleasing the public is to absorb sonic markers preferred by their listeners and making them their own. For example, during the 1980s, in Bulgaria, so called “Gypsy musicians,” while officially eschewed, came into demand when they revised their wedding repertoires. In Kosovo, in the 1990s, the international hit “Lambada” was popularized by Romani musicians, who altered the rhythmicity of the song (Petan: 117-30).

The late-twentieth century representation of music by Balkan Romani may be divided into two categories: scholarly and popular. The former can be found in books and articles by ethnomusicologists like Silverman and Petan, who present detailed analyses of Romani music practices from Macedonia and Kosovo respectively. In the popular stream, the Internet and cinema are perhaps the most powerful sources promoting the unifying image of Balkan Romani music, resulting in a rather fuzzy picture of the restless “Gypsy” – an entertainer and successor of the great Romantic vision of Romani musicians (Piotrowska: 1-11).

Different Genres

The fusion of folk and popular music that occurred in the Balkans during the early 1990s was preceded by years when rock music and what we might tag “Ottoman-sounding music” were not welcomed in the former Yugoslavia. Hence, the resurrection of Ottoman sounding traditions – *chalga*, for example, a popular folk genre inspired by dance music peppered by local influences and cultivated especially in Bulgaria, can be connected with the feeling of nostalgia and longing after the bygone period, seen as a reaction against the Soviet supremacy that ended with the fall of the Iron Curtain (Kurkela: 145-46). Generally, the rise to prominence of Balkan pop music (being basically the fusion of various genres) as witnessed in the post-Soviet Balkan states is oftentimes linked with political changes that followed Yugoslav wars (Galijaš: 273-93). For example, Serbian “turbofolk,” also known as “Serbwave,” was associated with ethnic separatist propaganda during the Milosevic regime (Kaminsky: 147-48), while the popularity of Goran Bregović’s music, which also incorporated folk and rock elements, was treated as more politically vexed, interpreted as an attempt to please European listeners and sometimes open to interpretation as anti-nationalistic (Gordy: 130-44; Gourgouris: 336-38).

Similarly, *manele* – popularly referred to as the Romanian *chalga* – can be seen as an overt celebration of national traditions. The genre alludes to the local tradition of Romani bands known as *tarafs*, mixing Turkish, Bulgarian and other influences. Gypsy musicians of the

region, famous for their resilience and their ability to adapt, became notable as representatives of Balkan “ethno” music. Flexible as it is, Romani music soon started to function as a symbol of the musical Balkans. Romani bands such as Taraf de Haidouks seemed to carry forth the myth of authenticity, causing nostalgia after long gone, authentically rural life. Additionally, one must also mention Esmā Redžepova (1943–2016), a Macedonian vocalist celebrated as Queen of the Gypsies, among famous Balkan Romani performers.

The Role of Cinema

The European career of the Balkan Beats⁹ is linked with parties organized in Berlin in the early 1990s, in which this mixture of traditional sounds and modern electronic offered an alternative to Western music. The genre resonated well with German listeners frequenting dance clubs, for whom political connotations were of less importance than sheer sonic qualities (Dimova: 226-28). At the same time, cinematic music and films played an important role in the promotion of Balkan Beats by orchestrating certain images that amplified their image. In cinema, it was Gypsy music that became representative of Balkan culture by inspiring the popular imagination. For example, internationally acclaimed Serbian director Emir Kusturica featured the music of Goran Bregović in his *Time of the Gypsies*, about Roma, and *Underground*, which was about Serbs (A. Marković: 116). In these films, as well as in *Black cat/white cat* (1998), music becomes a part of diegesis: it characterizes (perhaps even represents) the Balkan style of life. In order to achieve that effect, the director juxtaposed different musical styles, or referred viewers to the tradition of Gypsy music-making (e.g., in *Underground*) in order to characterize the Balkan sonic landscape (A. Marković: 109-11; Szeman: 100).

The cinematic trope of Gypsy bands can be perceived as an attempt to represent the Balkans in the exotic, mystical vein; however, at the same time, their portrayal works to connect outsiders with the Balkan world. After all, Romani musicians are not just encountered in the Balkans. Wherever they are allows viewers to peer into imagined Balkan space to savor the “quasi-fantastical character of that Romani world” as featured in these films (Clark: 232-33; Lee: 136). That type of accessibility is negotiated partially in relation to the old tradition of appropriating the world of Romani, treated as the figment of romantic imagination (Kaminsky: 145). The Roma – as people without a state, eternal wanderers – thus represent all Balkan people of the 1990s, deprived of the rights to claim their homes. Hence several authors argue that Romani music became symbolic for the Balkans, for “just as the Balkans can function as a source of archaic ‘folk’ identity for Europe as a whole, so in turn can the Roma grant an ethnocultural core to the imagined Balkan identity” (Kaminsky: 148). Known for their ability to fuse various influences and blur the distinctions between different styles, Roma represent the crossing of borders, confusing meanings and enabling people of different ethnicities to access and enjoy the same music, all the while making this music internationally renowned.¹⁰

⁹ The term “Balkan beats” was coined by Robert Šoko, who accordingly titled his “iconic compilations, which remain a blue print to nowadays Balkan Beats genre” (see *Manifesto*).

¹⁰ Discussing the popularity of Balkan music in Austria, Gebesmair notes that all events explicitly referring to “Balkanmusik,” “Gypsy music,” or “Balkan Brass,” Balkan nations, or the names of Balkan artists, were all counted as “Balkan events” (95).

Balkan music was enjoyed not only in western Europe – especially in Berlin – but cherished in eastern Europe, especially Hungary, known for its distinctive Gypsy music traditions.

Concluding Remarks

How can we conceptualize the phenomenon of the Balkans in musical culture by taking into account the above-mentioned strategies of (self)exoticizing, approximating the dominant musical tendencies (Eurovision), and promoting its musical uniqueness? The Balkan world has been examined through the prism of authentic folk, rather than artistic music, for which the late twentieth century witnessed the dominant tendency of offering new musical products – sonically distinctive and instrumentally unique. Thus, the Balkans became associated with the fusion of various elements, especially folk and pop, but also with brass bands, Romanian folk bands, and so on, offering a danceable, easy to consume, but ever very attractive repertoire.

Indeed, the international popularity of the Balkan Beats, as well as the revival of Balkan Romani musical traditions and neo-klezmer music, seems not only to epitomize Balkan distinctiveness, but also helps to create a new musical identity. Some authors claim that these musical styles emerged as challenges to a certain essentialism, to relegate particular national/ethnic identities in the times of great political upheaval and concomitant cultural change (Lipsitz: 50–68). Some might argue that indeed several “artistic innovations were simply repackaged or reframed in order to be perceived as legitimate forms of expression and in order to succeed on majority markets” (Gebesmair: 94), while others observe that the Balkan music became part and parcel of the larger category of so called world music,¹¹ as it “generated itself and will only survive in cosmopolitan culture” (Manifesto). While this transition toward world music can prove lucrative for future prospects, it is still deeply indebted in the Balkan past, where oftentimes Romani musicians branched out to include different styles from neighboring regions, quickly reacting to technological novelties and advancements, actively searching for new platforms for disseminating music. Romani music constitutes a key component of the cultural, commercial, perhaps even political network of a given region, being its own “communal property” (Cartwright: 13). Indeed, “the Balkan people lived in a multicultural milieu long before it became fashionable in the West” (Jezernik: 7), and their history, and especially musical culture was co-created by the Roma, who, is as often underlined, always “win at music” (Carthwright: 12).

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¹¹ Discussing the most recent history of the Balkan music, Samson calls it “Global Balkans” (549-668).

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