

Yugoslav music diplomacy in the 1960s and 1970s— the cases of Esma Redžepova and the band Magnifico

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Can musical diplomacy improve international understanding? How can music contribute to cross-border interaction and intercultural communication? When was music included in economic diplomatic relationships? These are the questions that guided us in the research process to our results.

One of the starting points in the discussion about diplomacy and music is that music assists in diplomatic activities by accompanying ceremonies and celebrations, providing the atmosphere for important meetings, conferences, informal negotiations or inspiring an international order based on a harmonic model. In fact, similarities come into sight between these two areas: diplomacy, just as music, is mainly about practice. “It assumes experience-based know-how and a disposition and temperament reinforced by habituation of education all of which constitute [...] a way of being,” as Jean-David Levitte (French representative to the UN in 2000–2002, and Ambassador to the US in 2002–2007) compares the diplomat to an artist who must exercise his scales by accessing all information resources set at his disposal.¹

This research derives from Milton Cummings’s definition of cultural diplomacy as the exchange of ideas, values, information and other aspects of culture, with the ultimate goal of fostering mutual understanding. Cummings’s definition thus includes cultural relations and intercultural exchange.² There are several conceptions about when music becomes part of international and intercultural relations. They rely on an expansion of musical material: sounds and voices are not limited to music per se. Therefore, music and also lyrics suggest an extension

¹ Cécile Prévost-Thomas, Frédéric Ramel, “Introduction: Understanding Musical Diplomacies—Movements on the ‘Scenes’,” in *International Relations, Music and Diplomacy. Sounds and Voices on the International Stage*, edited by Frédéric Ramel, Cécile Prévost-Thomas (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1–2.

² Milton Cummings, “Cultural Diplomacy and the United States Government: A Survey,” in *Americans for the Arts*, June 26, 2009, <https://www.americansforthearts.org/by-program/reports-and-data/legislation-policy/naappd/cultural-diplomacy-and-the-united-states-government-a-survey>.

of strategic figurations. Recent analyses about music and international relations discuss the meaning of the self and the otherness.³

Along with intercultural relations in diplomacy in the sense of cultural diplomacy, I also use the term musical diplomacy in this research. The purpose is to examine how musical diplomacy sets the diplomatic scene by leading conducts and diplomatic relations on the basis of music.⁴ For this purpose, I will analyze two topics: (1) Esmā Redžepova and the Stevo Teodosievski Ensemble—here, musical diplomacy focuses on the economic and cultural aspects in particular—and (2) Magnifico and Esmā—here, cultural transfers and musical practices, which although recognized as Mexican or Roma, respectively, were in fact used by Yugoslav musicians for foreign policy (in other words, Yugoslav diplomacy toward the countries of the Non-Aligned Movement). The scene goes beyond the location or performances, it is also about the distribution or promotion of a musical style with the purpose of fostering intercultural exchange and good relations. At the same time, the focus is on analyzing the relationship between diplomacy and music in the policies of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) toward the countries from the Non-Aligned Movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

The aim is to examine how music serves as a tool of diplomacy. Music and sounds are thus at the front line themselves, for example, when music becomes a diplomatic topic on the agenda of bilateral and multilateral diplomatic meetings or collaborations.

In his introductory remarks to a 2004 lecture under the title “Why Music Matters,” Kofi Annan said: “In a world of diversity where often values clash, music leaps across language barriers and unites people of quite different cultural backgrounds. And so, through music, all peoples can come together to make the world a more harmonious place.”⁵ With these words, the UN Secretary-General underlined the potential of music to raise faith and understanding. According to him, music can transcend geographical, cultural, political and economic barriers. Unfortunately, Kofi Annan is a rare example of people who acknowledge the potential of music for international cooperation and understanding.⁶

The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was among the founders of the United Nations and also one of the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement. Yugoslav

³ Prévost-Thomas, Ramel, “Introduction: Understanding Musical Diplomacies—Movements on the ‘Scenes,’” 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵ Kofi Annan, “Music Unites People of Different Background,” Introductory Remarks at the Lecture on “Why Music Matters” by Leon Botstein. United Nations Headquarters, New York City on November 8, 2004. According to Mary Einbinder, “Cultural Diplomacy. Harmonizing International Relations through Music,” (MA Thesis. Gallatin School of Individualized Studies, New York University, 2013), 4.

⁶ Einbinder, “Cultural Diplomacy,” 4–5.

president Josip Broz Tito, as the key figure in the promotion of Yugoslav official policies, supported musicians, music associations and institutions in the global promotion of Yugoslav musical culture. In 1949, only a few years after new Yugoslav state was established, Tito told a conference of music delegates in Bled: “Yet, I still believe the world would be a better place if people spent more time making music.”⁷

Both statements, Annan’s and Tito’s, lead this paper to argue for the promotion of musical diplomacy as a tool for harmonious diplomatic relations. The concept of “harmonizing international relations” was developed by Mary Einbinder in her research on cultural diplomacy. She argues for the promotion of music as an instrument of cultural diplomacy for improving intercultural communication and cooperation between the peoples of the world.⁸

Yugoslav diplomacy mostly focused on trade, economy and cultural exchange. As a part of regular diplomatic activity, cocktail parties or receptions were frequently organized in Yugoslav embassies, particularly around national holidays, such as Republic Day (November 29), or during foreign diplomatic visits. In the memoirs of diplomat Mihailo Stevović, who worked at the Yugoslav embassies in Rome, Washington and Tripoli, we can read that sometimes the receptions marking a particular event would be divided between two separate venues. For example, two Republic Day receptions were organized in Tripoli in 1975: one for Yugoslav citizens at the Yugoslav Club, and the other one in the residency of the Yugoslav Embassy for Yugoslavs and foreigners—members of the diplomatic corps.⁹

Josip Broz Tito was one of the initiators of the Non-Aligned Movement. His ideas and personal contribution, his close collaboration with Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Egyptian President Gamal Nasser, and later also with Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah, Indonesian President Sukarno and other politicians, were all pieces in the mosaic that took shape as an integral political platform of non-alignment in Belgrade in the September 1961. From its very beginning, non-alignment was not a policy of status quo, but rather a policy of change. It was geared in the direction of: ensuring that there would be no more imperialist conquests, no more colonial or neocolonial forms of dependence; preventing a further expansion of the bloc division of the world and the establishment of their spheres of influence; opposing all other kinds of political hegemony, foreign domination, intervention and interference in the affairs of other countries.¹⁰

⁷ See Zija Kučukalić, “Josip Broz Tito 1892–1980,” *Zvuk* 1 (1980): 3.

⁸ Einbinder, “Cultural Diplomacy,” 2.

⁹ Mihailo V. Stevović, *Diplomatija i demokratija* [Diplomacy and Democracy] (Belgrade: Prosveta, 2000), 211–212.

¹⁰ Josip Vrhovec, “Tito, Non-Alignment, Contemporary Times,” in *Tito—Non-Alignment—Contemporary Times*, edited by Bojana Tadić, Vladimir Falatov (Belgrade: Josip Broz Tito Memorial Center, 1989), 13–15.

Tito's voyages from the mid-1950s onward were also a preparation for the foundation of the Non-Aligned Movement. The first two visits to Asia and Africa were in 1954 and 1958. And Nehru and Nasser were received on the Brijuni Islands (also known as Brioni)¹¹ in 1956. Tito's further major voyages to Asia and Africa took place at the beginning of 1961. As a result of these trilateral meetings, the second conference of the Non-Aligned Movement was held in Cairo in 1964. The whole period between the three trips was filled with bilateral or multilateral contacts, where connections and friendship developed with statesmen of the Third World. In this time, Tito developed his views about the need for better coordination of actions of Third World countries, and the trips are also known as journeys of peace.¹²

Musicology journal *Zvuk* honored Tito after his death with a series of texts dedicated to his legacy in music, particularly his appreciation of singers. It is known that no ceremony or reception was held in Belgrade or on the Brijuni without singers performing. Among such musicians were Miroslav Čangalović, Biserka Cvejić, Radmila Bakočević, Marijana Radev, Vladimir Ruždjak and Tito's favorite singer Mario Del Monaco.¹³

But regular musical performances at political and diplomatic events in Yugoslavia are not only important as intercultural communication in the direction of musical diplomacy. According to John Blacking, this attitude also reflects one of the chief functions of music to "promote soundly organized humanity by enhancing human consciousness."¹⁴ Thus, musical diplomacy should be analyzed through the lens of constructivism, which accepts the idea that international relations are created by norms and ideas, and the international structure leads actors to redefine their interests and identities in the process of interacting.¹⁵ In the diplomatic relations of Yugoslavia with the countries of the Non-Alignment Movement, the economic and political activities were in interaction with music. This leads us to the discussion on the diplomatic aspects of the activities of Esmā Redžepova, the Stevo Teodosievski Ensemble and the group Magnifico.

¹¹ The Brijuni are a group of fourteen small islands off the Croatian coast in the northern Adriatic. In the time of the SFRY, Tito made the islands his personal State Summer Residence. Apart from the regular political meetings, he also hosted a number of film stars at the summer residence at Brijuni: Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, Sophia Loren, Carlo Ponti and Gina Lollobrigida.

¹² Stanislav Stojanović, "Tito's Contribution to the Origination and Development of the Non-Alignment Idea and Policy," in *Tito—Non-Alignment—Contemporary Times*, edited by Bojana Tadić, Vladimir Falatov (Belgrade: Josip Broz Tito Memorial Center, 1989), 76.

¹³ Slavko Zlatić, "Tito i muzika," *Zvuk* 1 (1980): 5.

¹⁴ John Blacking, *How Musical is Man?* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1974), 101.

¹⁵ Einbinder, "Cultural Diplomacy," 18.

Esma and the Stevo Teodosievski Ensemble

Esma Redžepova-Teodosievska (1943–2016), was born on August 8, 1943 in Skopje in a very diverse family. Her father Ibrahim was a Catholic Roma, her mother Kanija a Muslim, and her parental grandmother Esma was an Iraqi Jew. As a student in the 1950s, Redžepova participated in a few school talent competitions, such as “Mikrofonot e vaš” (The Microphone is Yours) and a school competition in Saraj (a neighborhood in Skopje). Based on the very positive reception in these competitions, Redžepova was offered to record a song for Radio Skopje—the most important media for the recording and promotion of music in this part of Yugoslavia at that time. There, she was heard by Stevo Teodosievski (1924–1997), who played in the orchestra of Radio Skopje, and he decided to invite Esma to join his ensemble as a singer. From the 1960s until the end of the 1980s, Esma and Stevo Teodosievski lived in Belgrade. In 1968 they got married and soon went on their first big tour to Australia. Redžepova’s most recognized songs include “Chaje Shukarije” (Beautiful Girl) and “Zašto si me majko rodila” (Mother, Why Was I Born). Her beauty, charm, striking voice and performance skills quickly made her famous across Europe and the world.¹⁶

Redžepova first sang for Tito in 1961, when he was hosting Indonesian President Sukarno in Belgrade. The same year, she also sang when the Non-Aligned Movement was established in Belgrade. She regularly performed for Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi at his official visits in Belgrade and his summer visits to the Brijuni. Throughout the 1960s, she also very often performed at receptions for politicians and diplomats on the Brijuni. Usually she would give her records to the guest politicians as gifts. Tito especially advised Redžepova to be very kind at Gaddafi’s visits.¹⁷ In the TV show “Balkanskom ulicom” (Up the Balkan Street) with hostess Vesna Dedić, Redžepova spoke about her collaboration with Tito. At one of Gaddafi’s visits to Brijuni, Tito approached Esma and said to her: “Let’s go to work and earn something.” At the end of the visit, a weapons sale contract with Libya was concluded. Tito said that only the two of them had worked that day and earned something, so only they deserved double servings at dinner.¹⁸

In the 1960s, Esma and her ensemble performed a lot in Israel (charity concerts), then in Mexico, Pakistan and Iran. They even did a show at the Olympia in Paris in 1966, and there is an anecdote about this trip. At the same time when Esma and her ensemble arrived at the airport in Paris, French President Charles de

¹⁶ Slave Nikolovski-Katin, *Esma Redžepova-Teodosievska* (Skopje: Makedonska iskra, 2015), 1–20; Garth Cartwright, “Esma Redžepova obituary”, *The Guardian* (December 14, 2016): <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/14/esma-redzepova-obituary>.

¹⁷ Nikolovski-Katin, *Esma Redžepova-Teodosievska*, 12, 32, 264.

¹⁸ “Balkanskom ulicom, TV show. Interview of Vesna Dedić with Esma,” <http://www.rts.rs/page/tv/sr/story/20/rts-1/74013/balkanskom-ulicom-esma-redzepova.html>, 2009.

Gaule was returning from Moscow. His plane was late and the airport was crowded with journalists. While waiting for a live TV transmission from the airport, the French national TV put on Redžepova's songs, and one journalist even wrote that de Gaulle promoted Esma Redžepova.¹⁹

In her interviews, Esma constantly stressed her admiration for Tito, and the importance of Yugoslavia and Tito's policies for the development of culture and prosperity of the state.

Look, I adored Tito. I loved his policies. When we sang abroad, people knew where we were from when we said his name. I was growing up at the time and I can't say it was bad for me. You know, I sang at the first Non-Aligned Conference here in Belgrade. Me and the Branko Krsmanović Choir. Afterwards, Indira Gandhi said she wanted to meet Esma Redžepova, so general chaos ensued. It was a big problem how to arrange this meeting because it was out of protocol, so—among other things—they re-paved the street where I lived, even though it was paved. These were very beautiful and important things that I experienced, and it was an honor.²⁰

Esma was also available to participate in unplanned meetings or protocol events on the highest political level.

I was often with Tito on his boat, going to different places where he was staying around former Yugoslavia. And whenever he was receiving someone, they would find me, wherever I was at that moment. I remember having a concert in a casino in Bosnia, and they came and took me to Dubrovnik.²¹

The diplomatic musical activities of Esma and her ensemble can be divided into two groups: within Yugoslavia and on the international scene, mainly in the Middle East and Asia. During their career, the relationship of Esma and Stevo with India become very important for them. It was not just about their participation in diplomatic ceremonies and enhancing cooperation between India and Yugoslavia. It was also about the musical closeness between the Roma and Indian music and culture, as well as developing a better understanding and mutual respect for musicians and for the audience.

After touring Australia in 1968, the Teodosievski Ensemble went to Bombay, India, and held a concert for the Yugoslav consulate and the Yugoslav workers there (mainly construction workers). The concert for the diplomatic corps was

¹⁹ Nikolovski-Katin, *Esma Redžepova-Teodosievka*, 194.

²⁰ Jelena Grujić, "Pesma može sve. Intervju Esma Redžepova [A song can do anything. Interview with Esma Redžepova]," *Vreme* (October 28, 2004): <https://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=394924>.

²¹ "Pevala je Titu i Gadafiju: Esma je bila svetska zvezda ali uvek se vraćala u Skoplje [She sang for Tito and Gaddafi: Esma was a world star, but she would always return to Skopje]," *Kurir* (December 11, 2016): <https://www.kurir.rs/stars/2583879/video-pevala-je-titu-i-gadafiju-esma-je-bila-svetska-zvezda-ali-uvек-se-vracala-u-skoplje>.

at the Hotel International. After that, they visited India two more times. One was the performance at the First Festival of Roma Music in Chandigarh (March 1976), where Esma was proclaimed the “Queen of Roma music.” In that period, they once again met with President Indira Gandhi, who prepared a reception for them and they performed a concert at the presidential palace.

The initiative for Esma and Stevo to perform at the first Chandigarh festival came from Mr. Weer Rajendra Rishi, who came to Belgrade from India in 1974 to become the director of the Roma Institute there. At the time of the second International Roma Festival in Chandigarh in 1983, Esma and the Teodosievski Ensemble also performed at celebration in honor of the birthday of late Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in his native town Allahabad.

In the mid-1970s, Esma and the Stevo Teodosievski Ensemble held long tours and numerous concerts in the Middle East. For example, they performed for three months at the Miami Hotel in Tehran. In the same period, they performed at diplomatic meetings at the Yugoslav Embassy in Tehran. Marking International Women’s Day (March 8) in 1975, they held a concert at the Yugoslav Embassy, with Farah Pahlavi, wife of Iranian Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, attending as a special guest.²²

Throughout their careers, Esma and Stevo received honors, awards and presents from politicians such as Tito, Gandhi, Saddam Hussein, etc. In their home in Belgrade, they were visited by important politicians, like the previously mentioned Indira Gandhi. Esma and Stevo received Tito’s golden and silver medals for the development of Yugoslav culture²³. Their most active and important period in terms of diplomatic musical performances were the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1990s, Esma and Stevo moved from Belgrade to Skopje, to the so-called Home of Humanity and Museum of Music of Esma and Stevo Teodosievski. She continued to be active not only with concerts but also with charity activities and campaigns for children and women. Esma Redžepova-Teodosievka died on December 11, 2016 in Skopje.

The band Magnifico

Magnifico was a band founded in Skopje in 1959 that was active until 1990. The idea to form this band came from the high popularity of Mexican films throughout Yugoslavia in the 1950s, such as *Un día de vida* (starring Columba Dominguez) and *Serenta en México* (starring Rosita Quintana). Also adding to the popularity of Mexican music in this period were concerts by Mexican musicians in Yugoslavia: Trio de Santa Cruz, Trio Barbosa, Los Panchos, etc.²⁴ This new wave of Mexican

²² Nikolovski-Katin, *Esma Redžepova-Teodosievka*, 58–66, 196.

²³ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁴ Pantelej-Panče Kočovski, *Ansamblot Manjifiko. Mit, legenda ili realnost* [The Ensemble Magnifico. The Myth, the Legend or Reality] (Skopje: Magor, 2013), 21–22.

music in Yugoslavia was known as “Yu-Mex”—the term refers to cover versions of Mexican music or a mix of Mexican music and local Yugoslav popular music and languages. In 1948, when Yugoslavia decided to choose its own direction and not follow the Soviet Union, Yugoslav Communist Party and Tito opened Yugoslavia more to the West, which meant freer presence of popular culture or rock and roll in public life.

“This rupture left the country in a very difficult position, in the middle between the Eastern bloc and the West,” says Slovenian author Miha Mazzini, whose novel *Paloma Negra* is set in the glory days of Yu-Mex.²⁵ This period of change, or movement from the Eastern Bloc into the new phase of Yugoslav policies of non-alignment between the East and the West fit well with the popularity of Mexican movies and music at the time. This popularity peaked in the 1950s and 1960s, and with the late 1960s Yu-Mex music went into a rapid decline. Rock music became the dominant interest for young people.

The most consistent members of Magnifico were Panče Kočovski, Nevenka (Arsova) Kočovska, Krsto Taušanov and Dimitar Tomov. In its run, the band performed a total of over 3700 concerts on all continents, published 28 EPs, 5 LPs,



Figure 1. The band Magnifico in the 1960s. *MKD.mk*, <https://www.mkd.mk/kultura/muzika/ansamblot-manjifiko-kje-dobie-nagrada-za-zivotno-delo-na-zlatna-buba-mara-na>.

²⁵ Pablo Esparza, “In mid-’60s Yugoslavia, mariachi music was really popular.” *Pri* (September 25, 2017): <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-09-25/mid-60s-yugoslavia-mariachi-music-was-really-popular>.

4 cassettes, 1 video cassette, 1 CD and 1 DVD. Their repertoire consisted mainly of Latin American music, as well as adaptations of evergreens and Macedonian folk tunes. Magnifico participated at diplomatic receptions in Belgrade when the guests were from Mexico. Original clothes from Mexico were procured for the band, specifically through the Mexican Embassy in Belgrade. It was often not advertised at Magnifico's concerts abroad where the band was from, so it was mistaken for an authentic Mexican one.²⁶

The ensemble Magnifico performed at many state-organized events in the 1960s and 1970s. The most prominent performances of this sort included: three times at the annual Diplomatic Hunt near Novi Sad; a concert as part of the artistic program accompanying the official visit of Mexican President López Mateos to Belgrade; and a one-hour performance for Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito and his wife Jovanka in Skopje, which was also attended by the political elite of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia (see Figure 2).²⁷

The statements of politicians about Magnifico confirm the harmonizing aspect or purpose of music in diplomacy:



Figure 2. The band Magnifico with Tito and Jovanka after one of the Diplomatic Hunts, 1960s. *MKD.mk*, <https://www.mkd.mk/kultura/muzika/ansamblot-manjifiko-kje-dobie-nagrada-za-zhivotno-delo-na-zlatna-buba-mara-na>.

²⁶ Kočovski, *Ansamblot Manjifiko*, 30–50.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 274.

With Magnifico, my country and my continent have become one artistic and diplomatic institution richer.

– Delfín Sánchez Juárez, Mexican Ambassador to Yugoslavia (1961–1965)²⁸

I adore Magnifico and the unique alto of Nevenka.

– Jovanka Broz²⁹

As always, the ensemble Magnifico was once again magnificent.

– Josip Broz Tito³⁰

I'm looking forward to the ensemble Magnifico visiting my country and other countries of the Latin American continent to impress the audience as the ensemble already impressed me.

– López Mateos, president of Mexico³¹

Conclusion

The activities of the music ensembles of Esma and Stevo Teodosievski and Magnifico bring to light the importance of musical diplomacy Yugoslavia pursued in its international diplomatic relations with the countries of the Non-Aligned Movement. The most suitable theory of international relations in the context of music and diplomacy is the creation of platforms for intercultural dialogue in the process of bilateral or multilateral exchange.

Not only did the performances of Esma and the Stevo Teodosievski Ensemble and of the band Magnifico have a significant positive impact on the improvement of intercultural dialogue between countries from different historical and political areas, but they also partly contributed to the economic diplomacy of Yugoslavia in the countries of the Middle East. This is particularly evident in the role of Esma Redžepova as a performer and a part of the diplomatic protocols during formal receptions.

As previously mentioned, this research supports the acknowledgement of the potential and value of music in harmonizing international relations. As constructivists state, “the international system only exists as a common understanding among people.”³² This perspective confirms, the contribution of musicians and their concerts, as well as their role in the active and productive diplomatic relations pursued by the SFRY in the 1960s and 1970s.

²⁸ Ibid., 277.

²⁹ Ibid., 278.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 277.

³² Einbinder, “Cultural Diplomacy,” 18.

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