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AUTHENTICITY OF THE DERIVATIVE: RE-CONTEXTUALIZING THE ORAL HERITAGE OF THE BALKANS

ABSTRACT This text identifies different segments of musical identity, meaning, and socio-cultural value of compositional works influenced by oral tradition of the Balkans. Through detailing some of the elements of the oral culture that have had a great influence on the author as a composer and a performer, it also discusses some observations on the ways in which the Balkan oral tradition and its derivations are perceived in the region today. Through discussing other artists with a similar approach to oral tradition, this text also explores the problems of constructing artistic identity and the meaning of a creative practice in relation to the socio-cultural environment of its origin. Socio-cultural environments are established through exploring the writings of the authors who depict the spheres of history, culture and music in the Balkans.

Key words: Balkan, tradition, traditional music, oral heritage, electro-acoustic music, music technology, vocal improvisation, storytelling

I style the orality of a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print, 'primary orality'. It is 'primary' by contrast with the 'secondary orality' of present-day high technology culture, in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print.

(Ong 1982, 11)

This paper discusses particular segments of the oral tradition of the Balkans that were, I believe, crucial in the formation of my current musical language. To the extent it relates to some of my recent compositions, 'The Balkanites' (Backović 2013) and 'Nigredo' (Backović 2010), I will also mention

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authors and artists with whom I share the interest in the oral tradition (its artistic re-interpretation in particular), and in the process, hopefully highlight some of the creative approaches to oral tradition in general.

As Lawson has remarked, there is a certain irony in discussing the orality through the technology of literacy, but it is inevitable (Lawson 2010). Oral tradition preceding literacy and technology was, and still is, a reflection of the unique human need to preserve important and valuable facts and skills, ranging from different kinds of craftsmanship to historical and other kinds of information important for the survival and identity of the people. It has served to aid collective memory, synchronise movements during the work, and it has played an important part in the festivities or hours of rest. Since in the past there were no ways to record the information, folk tales, history and songs were passed by word of mouth from generation to generation. In Serbia and the surrounding countries they were often sung by skilled *guslars*, performers of epic poetry. Other examples of oral practices that influenced me include storytelling, as well as traditional styles of *a cappella* singing², but I was especially intrigued by *guslars* for two reasons: firstly, there was a conscious act of performance that resembled artist-audience relationship; and secondly, a significant amount of music improvisation (although melodically and rhythmically limited by decasyllable). Both of these take significant part in the process of creating/structuring of my works and, after listening through several performances of *guslars*, I found correlations in the ways words, as a set variable, influence melodic and rhythmic movement in improvisation.

The context of this practice has, of course, changed over time, illustrating well the process of separating rural and urban cultures. Matija Murko draws a comparison with the modern world in regard to the functionality of *guslars*' activities, observing that the "national epic poetry was and is – for the nobility, the middle class, and peasantry – what concerts, theatres, and other amusements are for us". In Dalmatia a peasant told him this: "You people in the city, you have your music, and we have our songs" (Murko 1990, 116).

2 A good example of re-contextualizing oral tradition is the project "La Mystère des Voix Bulgares", a Bulgarian female choir performing contemporary arrangements of traditional songs. See La Mystère des Voix Bulgares 2015.

This tradition had an important impact on the preservation of tales, but as a composer I became interested in the sonic and musical qualities of the *guslars'* performance: the rhythm of the decasyllable, the improvisation within the limitations of a given structure, the minimalistic choice of notes combining into a vocal – instrumental melody with mantra-like qualities. I am inclined to believe that the musical elements of the *guslars'* song were functioning as a mnemonic aid, making it easier to memorize and recall phrases when fitted into the rhythmical structure of decasyllable. During her research on *guslars'* musical memory, Danka Lajić Mihajlović observed that the *guslars* who store a larger number of melodic patterns are able to memorize new melodic content with more ease, also noticing that

”in the course of formation of mental representations, guslar’s in their memorisation strategies combine auditory and tactile (kinesthetic, motoric, and muscularly) memorization” (Lajić Mihajlović 2012, 78).

In his compilation of short essays on Serbian ethnomusicology, Dimitrije O. Golemović points out several interesting traits of traditional songs that I found applicable to my some of my works as well, although to a different extent. One of them is the unity of poetic and melodic elements (Golemović 1997, 5). He witnessed the singers’ surprise when asked to distinguish between them, reflecting on the fact that the word for ‘lyrics’ actually does not exist. It is simply *pesma* – song. This is one of the main reasons for choosing voice as the main carrier of musical activity in the composition *The Balkanites* (Backović 2013) – the fact that the lyrics and melody could be freely improvised in an attempt to depict a certain emotional state.

Of course, this is not the absolute rule among the singers Golemović interviewed, but it does reflect the predominant attitude among them. Additionally, what we consider today to be a song in comparison with the times before the arrival of technology differs significantly. In rural society, people were singing when tending sheep or crops – it has often been an aid to work, and these songs were not usually sung outside the context of those particular activities. There were also ritual/religious songs and all of these were divided between the sexes – certain songs were forbidden for women,

while others were reserved exclusively for them, like laments, *tužbalice*³. J. M. Foley mentions the research of his colleagues Barbara Kerewsky Halpern and Joel Halpern in Orašac and the surrounding areas, which spanned over two decades. Through extensive experience, they knew about the recurrence of laments in regular intervals for many years after the funeral of a deceased person, as well as the prohibition of watching the video recordings of the lament (Foley 2002, 195). Each lament required preparation, and the presence of a woman who knew the deceased and was usually an acquaintance or a part of the family circle. Interestingly, the songs had a predetermined social function, and it could rarely be heard outside the context that demanded it. Some villagers believed that it would bring misfortune to sing songs, especially the ritual ones without a real demand (some of them were highly specialized, like the ones that were invoking rain). This is to be expected, as ritual singing was often syncretistic, performed alongside dance and ritual acting. However, over time and due to social changes, technological advancement and the activities they were closely connected with, these songs began to disappear from social practice, losing gradually their original social and religious role.

As Golemović stresses, the nature of traditional forms of singing was changing slowly, and not in great measure (Golemović 1997, 23). Without the means to record a song, any person who learned it tried to imitate the singer and memorize it as best as possible. Improvisation as we know it today was not part of the oral practice. However, Golemović pointed out the occurrences and melodic changes that *could* be named as improvisational: ornaments as melodic variation, especially in the melismatic⁴ type of song; a heterophonic⁵ type of singing; fitting different lyrics onto an existing melody, and of course the failing memory of the singer often forced him to improvise.⁶ Some of these

3 Lament is an improvisational form of singing that is performed by women at funerals, expressing the pain and loss on behalf of family and friends.

4 Melisma (Greek: μέλισμα, melisma, song, air, melody; from μέλος, melos, song, melody), plural melismata, in music, is the singing of a single syllable of text while moving between several different notes in succession.

5 Greek, *heteros* - other; *phōnē* - voice. Heterophonic music usually refers to at least two performers singing or playing variations of the same melody at the same time.

6 There is an interesting pilot study by Danka Lajić Mihajlović focusing on the musical memory of the *guslars* and the factors influencing it (Lajić

improvisations I have incorporated in *The Balkanites* (Backović 2013). Aside from *sevdalinka*, the genre that influenced me the most is lament⁷ (*tužbalica*, *kukanje*). Lament has melodic traits, as well as tonal instability and lack of fixed concept within the narrative that makes it the most variable style of traditional singing. It also incorporates falsetto notes and sounds that do not represent singing in the traditional sense, therefore coming closer to the contemporary idea of vocal improvisation.

Due to the lack of comparative research, it is hard to generalize about the melodic, rhythmic and harmonic traits that different countries in the Balkans might have in common. The oral traditions of the Balkans are mostly based on modes⁸ and most of them did not originally have a conscious harmonic dimension. Even in cases when the songs were harmonized within the Western tonal major/minor system (especially the urban “remixes” of traditional music), their modal nature has often remained obvious. However, using the word “modes” inevitably points towards ancient Greek scales and is potentially misleading. It is true that most of the songs that were written down could be interpreted within the Greek modal system, yet there is research (Pennanen 2008) that clearly point out to a different interpretation: the Ottoman culture and music has had a major influence on the region and its musical heritage – no other influence apart from the 19th century Western classical music, and later on, contemporary genres like pop and rock has had the same impact. Therefore, modes are here used in the broadest possible meaning: to distinguish between the major/minor system and everything else.

Irregular rhythms are another trait that I consider characteristic of the music of the Balkan region. There is an abundance and variety of rhythmic-melodic structures, ranging from the songs performed completely *ad libitum* to the ones with metrical divisions that the Western music practice

Mihajlović 2012, 67).

7 Laments usually start with a high-pitched note and going lower, often in glissando, which resembles cries.

8 In the theory of Western music, mode (from Latin *modus*: measure, standard, manner, way, size, limit of quantity, method) (Powers 2001) generally refers to a type of scale inspired by the music theory of ancient Greece.

is familiar with (4/4, 3/4, 6/8 etc). However, as Nice Fracile observes, the asymmetrical, irregular rhythms (among them, *akşak*, commonly found in Turkey) represent some of the most distinctive and vital features of the Balkan musical traditions (Fracile 2003). Greece, Bulgaria and Turkey remain the three Balkan countries most abundant with asymmetric rhythms. Especially in Bulgaria, instrumental (dance) music often does not fit with just one, but is made of several different asymmetrical rhythms. Often we can find melodies that have structural subdivisions that could look like this: (2+3 / 2+2+3 / 2+2+2+3) where one normally has to learn the melody by heart first before being able to determine the rhythmical subdivisions. Songs and instrumental pieces like these inspired me to try vocal improvisation that focused on minimal melodic movement but which had a complex rhythmical dimension (Backović 2014, 91). This brought an interesting change in my perception of these rhythms. After many recording sessions and listening back to recordings I realised that the most complex rhythmical structures that emerged through the improvisational process were not deliberate; to pinpoint the rhythmical subdivisions I had to analyse them in the same manner I would use to approach traditional music. After that, I tried to listen to this music without forcing the awareness of the rhythmical layer; as a result, my perception of musical phrasing was more complete and I believe consequentially closer to the cognitive processes involved in creating/performing of my original work.

Some of the other traditional elements I found influential (particularly concerning my singing style when improvising) are typical of some parts of the former Yugoslav countries like the Dinaric Mountains and Istria (Croatia). Istria has its own style of vocal ornamentation and singing that clearly sets it apart from the Anatolian tradition. I have been listening to recordings of this music for years, and analysing the vocal improvisations in *The Balkanites* helped me to see how much I was influenced by this music. This style of singing is known for non-tempered singing, two voices sometimes moving in parallel seconds (often thirds and sixths in Istria), and the presence of the chromatic scale in melodies, occasionally pentatonic (as in Međimurje, Croatia). This type of singing is more archaic than the music that originated under the influence of the Ottoman culture.

These were some of the most prominent elements of content and practice of Balkan oral tradition that I could, so far, identify as influences. However, modern recording and sound manipulating technology is what made it possible for me to approach this heritage both as a vocalist and a composer, and to create soundscapes that (without actual musical quotes) still rely on particular heritage. Content transformation through improvisation and technology became part of the creative process that established itself as a bridge from collective oral heritage to individual music language. Nonetheless, the original and most common use of technology as a recording device changed the nature of oral tradition; it transformed it into “material”, “content”, therefore placing it out of context of its original use. I am inclined to believe that a significant part of the “authenticity” of oral heritage depends on the context, on the fact that information is transmitted orally. As Clanchy observed about the writing:

”Writing anything down externalized it and – in that process – changed it and falsified it to some extent. ...Writing was untrustworthy in itself, and furthermore its use implied distrust, if not chicanery, on the part of the writer. An honest person held to his word and did not demand written proof” (Clanchy 1991, 193).

The advent of recording technology, however, enabled the emergence of “stylised” music, “composed in the manner” of traditional music. In Yugoslavia, the introduction of radio and the production of recordings of stylised traditional music reflected the changes that were already happening in the society as a whole, highlighting the disparity between rural and urban cultures and ways of life. The urban folk music of Yugoslavia is a phenomenon well known to researchers of the popular culture of the Balkans. The popularity of this genre today remains immense, even outside the national borders. The usual perception of this music among researchers of the ‘90s is often such as described by Ljerka Vidić Rasmussen:

”Implicit in the term ‘newly-composed’ are novelty, temporariness, bricolage and kitsch; that is, a lack of historicity, stylistic coherence, and aesthetic/ artistic attributes” (Vidić Rasmussen 1995, 242).

She also gives the example of *Južni Vetar* (*Southern Wind*), an enormously successful band that really is a perfect example of this mixture – a fusion of oriental influences in singing style with what was considered the modern technology at the time. In her words:

”The orientalism of *Južni Vetar* was manifested primarily in the performance styles of its singers, featuring highly melismatic treatment of tunes, nasal timbre (evocative of Islamic religious practices), and rhythmic variety in the form of mixed metres such as 7/8 and 11/8. Contributing to the definition of style was a showcasing of up-to-date recording technology; the singers’ parts are electronically processed and mixed along with various reverb effects, polyphonic intermingling of electric guitars, and drum machine” (ibid., 248).

This fusion, and the fact that dissolution of the former Yugoslavia defragmented its vast cultural space was what kept turbo-folk so successful over the past two decades (Višnjić 2009, 44) and I was exposed to both in great measure, as I spent my formative years in Belgrade of the 1990s. However, the nature of music technology, in terms of its use primarily as a recording and sound-manipulating device, has not essentially changed since the 1990s. It is a thought-provoking fact that many of the turbo-folk attributes mentioned above could be also found in my work; although the results greatly vary, the source and the available technological means are the same.

It is obvious that, with the adoption of technology, every single country in the world went through some mode of transformation of oral heritage, where the “authentic” elements were combined with new sounds and, in the process, taken out of their original context. What makes this interesting is how commercial thinking changed the perception of what is “traditional”. “People” became “audience”, pop elements were introduced and the concept of a “pop idol” applied to this fusion. As Vidić Rasmussen noted, music became a commodity, a thing to be consumed.

When talking about oral tradition today, it is important to mention some of the contemporary approaches to keeping oral tradition alive. I have been fortunate to discover an author and storyteller Jelena Ćurčić whose effort to make the Serbian tradition more accessible outside the borders of the former Yugoslav republics resulted in a book *Serbian Fairy Tales* (Ćurčić 2013). While researching

different archetypal characters present in the Balkans, the insight into her work and perception of the oral tradition became an enormous inspiration. Jelena Ćurčić is a London-based storyteller, fusing contemporary and historical fiction of her own making with myth and legend passed down through the rich Balkan tradition of storytelling, developing performance language that is highly engaged with the audience and the community. Her book, *Serbian Fairy Tales* was inspired by the 2012 bicentenary of the first publication of Grimm's Fairy Tales. Her current performance format is named *Vila's (Fairy's) Mountain* (Ćurčić 2012), a storytelling performance based on the Serbian fairy tales.

While reading her book, I realized that Jelena's and my work, although different, might have some similarities. Firstly, although in different fields, we were both approaching oral tradition in a creative fashion, as performers; and secondly, Jelena Ćurčić was born and brought up in Yugoslavia and she witnessed the violent, decade-long break-up of the country at the end of the 20th century. After gaining her degree in English Language and Literature, she moved to London in 2002.⁹ After meeting her in January 2013, she agreed to do an interview. I hoped to unravel some of her motivations and influences, her background and her perception of oral tradition in the contemporary world with an aim of comparing them to mine (Backović 2014, Appendix I). One of the key points I focused on were the re-contextualisation of oral tradition in the modern era, and the fact that culture and heritage are often turned into data, digitalised "content". In her words:

"On the one hand, digitised world and fast-flow information sharing create new platforms for storytelling – a different kind of storytelling, a quick, 140-character-long kind (there are some trends for short-story writing via Twitter feeds!). News feeds do the same – they cramp a whole story into a headline, or a tag line. Everything is moving so fast, we are bombarded with information and our concentration spans, as a result, have shrunk considerably. But while the emergence of new platforms and new ways of sharing our stories is a positive thing, what's lost in the process is the art of story telling. The telling has shifted to almost bullet-pointing a story. That's why I do what I do – I believe that it's important to revive the good old art of storytelling, of telling and, even more importantly, listening – to stop and to

9 All biographical information provided by Jelena Ćurčić.

listen for more than the average 4 minutes a person allocates to reading a, say, news story – to encourage people to stop and to listen for 10 minutes, at least, an hour, preferably!” (Backović 2014, 117).

What I realised after interviewing Jelena, was the importance of the fact that we belonged to the same generation, both of us born in the same town and witnessing the same events that changed our country forever - especially its transformation from a vast pool of cultural diversity and experiences into a small space that suddenly became the horizon of most people’s cultural experience. These events formed us and influenced our choices as artists who today live and work outside our native country. Possibly because of all this, I perceive Jelena’s approach to oral tradition as similar to mine: markedly outside the national and political considerations, and, through engaging with the heritage of one group of people, trying to reach towards what she feels as universally human. While watching Jelena’s performance, it was obvious that it was more than an attempt to re-create the original practice and context of oral tradition; she was weaving her life story into it and forging her own path from the collective heritage towards the individual expression. Through showing the way in which these stories became part of her life, she pointed the ways they could also be inherited by the audience. When asked about the storytelling as part of the modern experience, Jelena pointed out:

”In our image-satiated, news-bombarded, short-attention-span age, storytelling, I believe, provides a kind of haven. I believe in and am dedicated to the positive impact of the arts, and storytelling has the power to educate, to inspire and to change lives. It reminds of the things that bind us together as human beings, it provides a safe environment for sharing, and for connecting, and for enhancing our lives through re-imagining and re-structuring the narratives we tell ourselves, as well as the ones we hear. It also helps preserve the language and emphasise its beauty and the use of spoken communication – it is no secret that a deficit in oracy among school children exists, directly as a result of the tech-oriented age we live in. I see storytelling as a direct contribution to addressing this deficit” (Backović 2014, 120).

This is exactly what I hoped to achieve in my performances – often, after concerts, members of the audience expressed their interest in particular oral tradition that compositions stem from, as well as mentioning what other

traditions they could “hear” in the performance – ranging from Asia to the Middle East, obviously depending on their previous music experiences, cultural heritage and background. I discovered through practice that this particular transformation of oral tradition into individualised sonic language, although dependent on technology, (or maybe precisely because of it) places this communication within the format accessible to contemporary audiences.

Another artist who has greatly influenced my work is Lisa Gerrard, the composer, musician and vocalist whose explorations of different oral traditions and styles of singing, and especially her use of voice as an active agent in the compositional process, have always resonated with my own music experiences. Lisa, like Jelena, has a creative and free (although different) approach to oral tradition.

Lisa Gerrard is an Australian-born vocalist and composer best known as a member of the music group Dead Can Dance. I would like to point out some of the characteristic ways in which she perceives music and her own voice that have greatly helped me to contextualise my own work within certain existing creative practices. She is well known for singing in her own invented language; and here she sums up well why she often chooses to sing without words in any particular language:

”Gerrard ... has often sung in a curious, non-specific language; resulting in a suitably inclusive form of expression. ‘When I was growing up, you didn’t get Irish people speaking Italian or Greek or anything like that, so my experience of hearing these other languages on a daily basis meant I could just listen to the tones and patterns and there was a kind of music to that in itself.’ She adds, ‘The Irish have a strong tradition of story-telling and so to me singing without using words to tell a story was such an exotic idea.’” (Dead Can Dance 2012).

In my own compositions, this “singing without words” came from trying to create space for expressing the non-verbal meaning in music; to help melodic and rhythmic patterns form themselves into structures through improvisation, rather than focusing on the meaning of the lyrics and conveying the message through the words. Gerrard also puts a lot of emphasis on the intuitive, instinctive, and improvisatory when she talks about music creation and structuring:

”You call upon the power of your instinctive ability to open up the pathways of - I’m not sure what they are - but the pathways that allow you to communicate through music and respond to harmonies and create the architecture” (Lyndal Martin 2012).

And in the paragraph below, she partly reveals the motivations behind this non-verbal communication and her use of voice; although our musical journeys are different, I found some correlations between the ways we approach communicating with the audience:

”I want to unlock my musical centers and my voice and remain more abstract where I’m not telling people what I think, but I’m opening a pathway to the heart so we can connect with an emotional bridge” (ibid.).

And finally, how she sees her exposure to different musical and cultural influences resonates perfectly with how I perceive my connection with the Balkans, its multitude of nationalities and cultures, and my experiences with this heritage as an artist. In her words:

”This might sound strange but this is almost about our cultural heritage, not only as Australians or as Antipodeans, but as human beings. We’re connected to everything culturally and the thing is – there’s this discovery that we make through music that voyages into another culture. When you live in a place like Australia – if you’re *really* tuning into the frequencies that are coming out of the ground – then you’re taking on the responsibility of the maybe six or seven different nationalities” (Mugwump 2012).

Lastly, in the sense of musical language and treatment of voice, I believe there are many similarities to be found – such as predominantly modal melodies, improvised vocal harmonies, and singing style derived from a variety of oral traditions, including the Balkans. Although this text does not primarily focus on contextualization of my work through comparative study, it was extremely useful to read the words and listen to the music of the one author whose approach to creating music is similar to mine.¹⁰ Trying to

10 A good example is her composition “The Unfolding”. Singing in non-specific language, modal melodic and vocal harmonies.

pinpoint these parallels helped me to articulate better which aspects of my own work might be worth investigating.

To conclude, although different, both of these artists are, I believe, reaching towards expression of the universal human experience. In Jelena's words:

”Above and beyond introducing the Serbian storytelling tradition or anything relating to the specific, Serbian context, a key aim of my Serbian Fairy Tales project has been exactly this: to show, through storytelling, how deep down, on the level of myth and legend, fairy tales and folklore, which many (if not all) cultures have at their foundation and which form an integral part of their heritage, we are all the same” (Backović 2014, 120).

I had the same aim: to discover or create that space beyond the traditional and derivative, where the freedom of the artist and his or her authenticity as such are not only allowed – but welcome.

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Sažetak: Tekst se bavi identifikovanjem različitih segmenata muzičkog identiteta, značenja, i socio-kulturne vrednosti autorskog dela pod uticajem oralne tradicije Balkana. Kroz diskusiju elemenata ove tradicije koji su najviše uticali na autorku, tekst se dotiče i različitih percepcija oralnog nasleđa Balkana danas, uključujući i rad drugih umetnika sa sličnim kreativnim pristupom oralnoj tradiciji. Socio-kulturni okvir je uspostavljen kroz osvrt na radove autora koji se bave istorijom, kulturom i oralnom tradicijom Balkana i njenih derivativnih oblika.

Ključne reči: Balkan, tradicija, tradicionalna muzika, oralno nasleđe, elektroakustična muzika, muzička tehnologija, vokalna improvizacija, pripovedanje