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**THE BALKANS IN A NARRATIVE ABOUT *WORLD* MUSIC IN SERBIA**

**Abstracts:** The topic of the Balkans appears in the narrative about ethnic (World) music. Some musicians associate their groups and works with the Balkans, giving them names featuring the word Balkan. The Balkans is used to connote a whole array of values: antiquity, authenticity, naturalness, spontaneity, the combination of religious and folk culture. Music critics, organizers of music events featuring the representatives of ethnic music, as well as the very musicians of such orientation, claim that they want to improve the picture of the Balkans, which is full of negative stereotypes. Positive stereotypes, most notably the stereotype about the music of the Balkans as an expression of the multiculturalism of that region, are created for that purpose. However, in such an attempt one boundary has not been transcended, namely the boundary between the supposedly authentic music of the Balkans and oriental music elements, which are still considered as alien to the Balkans.

My paper is dedicated to a discussion or, to put it more scholarly, “discursive practice”, about ethnic or *world* music. Naturally, this discursive practice accompanies music practice and music production and appears in the form of comments, reviews, interviews with musicians with respect to concerts or music editions classified into ethnic or *world* music. Specialized sites and archives of online media on the Internet enable, on the basis of sufficiently rich material, the identification of the principal motives and principal topics in a narrative dedicated to it.

One of these topics is the Balkans. First of all, it figures in the name of this music. It is popularly called the music of the Balkans, it is offered by that name. Three ethnic music bands in Serbia feature Balkan in their names: Sanja Ilić's *Balkanika*, Slobodan Trkulja's *Balkanopolis* and Jovan Maljaković's *Balkan salsa bend*. Several compositions of ethnic music also relate to the Balkans through their name: Ognjen i prijatelji (*Ognjen and Friends*) have *Balkan rumba*, Bora Dugić has *Običan balkanski dan* (*Ordinary Balkan Day*) and Darko Macura has *Po Balkanu* (*Across the Balkans*). One of Slobodan Trkulja's CDs is entitled *Let iznad Balkana* (*Flight Over the Balkans*), while Sanja Ilić named his first album of ethnic music *Balkanika 2000*.

In these cases the word Balkan is undoubtedly used less as a geographic specification and more as a metaphor, as a word connoting a specific quality of music denominated by the Balkans. Thus, for example, the name Balkan suggests the idea that the music designated by it is very old, ancient. That quality is evoked as something in itself understood, something given in the very name of Balkan, so that the only possible discussion is about where, in which music, with which musicians this antiquity so peculiar to the Balkans, so expected of the Balkans can be found. It is present in the music of Braća Teofilović (*Teofilović Brothers*) who in one source call themselves the “only true performers of the ancient Balkan vocal music”. This antiquity is also understood as a comparative

advantage, particularly with regard to America. “Every song by the Teofilović brothers is older than the most recent world empire”, reads the preface to their album *Čuvari sna (Guardians of a Dream)*.

The antiquity of the Balkans is also something it keeps in its vivid memory, something its musicians revive in an exciting way. Hence one of the concerts of Slobodan Trkulja, founder of the group *Balkanopolis*, was described in one review as “an amazing experience even for those who otherwise do not listen to ethnic music, because you are simply captivated by the primeval sounds in Trkulja’s arrangement”.

Similarly, the Balkan appellative brings to music thus designated also a promise of the quality of authenticity. It suggests that it is the case of a music close to nature, which originated in listening to its sounds. It is also music most commonly performed on instruments that preserve their closeness to nature through their names and the material from which they were built. Ethnic musicians often play on acorns, šupeljka, kaval, cevara, pipes, horns, bagpipes, double flutes, duduk and some other instruments made of wood, leather and other natural materials. A metaphor for cultural roots materializes in music-making on primitive Balkan wooden instruments. That is, one might say, playing on a metaphor.

The significance of the instrument-metaphor is also evident in that some concerts of ethnic music include instrument viewing. “There were times”, says Sanja Ilić, “when people approached us after the performance to talk to us about the songs, but also about the instruments on which we played”. As far as I know, instrument viewing has been so far only characteristic of gusla concerts.

The authenticity of Balkan music is also manifest through emphasizing the natural merging of that music with the player, not only his spirit, but also his body, or rather, his throat. Singer Biljana Krstić attests to this: “Indeed”, she says, “when I sing these songs” – she is referring to the songs from the album *Bistrik* – “my throat is opened differently. I am not fixing anything, like this or like that. The song simply seems to be singing itself. The music I sang earlier did not allow me to do that. What I have here is a certain strange contact, a touch, something special happens. Even when I have a sore throat, I don’t have a problem singing ... My throat opens by itself, as though I had been born with that.”

Balkan authenticity also means spontaneity, unrepressed emotions, a temperament that goes to extremes in joy and pain alike. The author of an article on the ensemble *Ognjen i prijatelji*, founded in 1998 by clarinetist Ognjen Popović, says that “what we have here are extremely talented musicians in search of an authentic music of the Balkans, who managed to reach a high standard and present a specific vision into which they have woven everything this region has to offer: rebelliousness, grief, unfettered temperament and *joie de vivre*.” (J.D., “Bunt, vapaj i radost življenja”, electronic magazine *Balkanmedia*, June 26, 2003).

The Balkan attribute for this music suggests that it is music preserving the tradition of Byzantine Orthodox music, principally vocal music. For, as one of the Teofilović brothers said, “The

Byzantine chant left a mark on the musical heritage of the region”. Associated with this tradition even more so than the Teofilović brothers is Pavle Aksentijević. In an interview published in the Internet magazine *Balkanmedia*, he was presented as “an authentic explorer – restorer and interpreter of the sound of medieval music writings”. (Dijana Maksimović, “Jednostavnost i lepota pojanja”, *Balkanmedia*, March 17, 2003).

The most interesting idea here – that the Balkans is the place where religious and folk cultures have been successfully and harmoniously blended – is Orthodox and folk music tradition. Sanja Ilić supports this idea, for example. He says he was first interested in “church chants”, which led to the creation of his composition *Hilandar (Chilandar)*. Then he realized that the sacral and the secular are intrinsically associated in the Balkans, which made it was easy for him to combine them in his music. His testimony on preparations preceding the creation of the numbers on the album *Balkanika 2000* is also interesting: “After a year of reading various books on the Balkans, Byzantium, on ‘the Byzantine commonwealth’, and listening to many old recordings from the Balkan region, eventually I had a clear idea about what ultimately came out as *Balkanika 2000*.”

The interfusion of Byzantine church and folk music of the Balkans is something Darko Macura aims to stress when playing on an instrument called *diaulos* – it presumably means double flute – that he himself made according to a painting of that instrument which can be seen on some medieval frescoes in Serbian monasteries. Accordingly, a promotional photograph showing him in a monastery with frescoes in the background is available on his website. Bora Dugić came up with a similar idea. He, too, found his main instrument, the pipe – five pieces at that – in a monastery, at Lelić, though not on a painting, but among the items belonging to the legacy of Nikolaj Velimirović.

All these qualities that are associated with the Balkans in a narrative on ethnic or *world* music, namely antiquity, authenticity, naturalness, intractability, harmony of the spiritual and the secular... have existed in a repertoire of stereotypical notions of the Balkans that was formed much earlier, whose content, genesis and application is nowadays discussed in an abundance of books starting from *Imaginarni Balkan (An Imaginary Balkan)* by Marija Todorova. Naturally, the stereotypes in question are positive, for we should not forget that an imaginary Balkan is made up, perhaps even more so, of negative stereotypes. Here, too, the Balkans is exotic, although in a pleasant, serene way.

There have also been attempts to present new, ethnic or *world* music of the Balkans as living proof that the negative stereotypes surrounding the Balkans are unfounded, or at least one-sided. This music, supposedly, nowadays bears witness that the Balkans is not a scene of discord, dissension, intolerance and hatred, but, quite the contrary, that it is a region whose cultural tradition, most notably musical, is entirely focussed on interfusion and collaboration of the various peoples who live there. Therefore, the Balkans is also offered as a metaphor for multiculturalism at work. For instance, the musical programme of the Budva Grad Teatar (Theatre City Budva) Festival in 2001 was entitled

*Zvući Balkana (Sounds of the Balkans)*. The brochure of the programme reads: “The sonic riches and the specificity of Balkan expanses are proof that the Balkans is not just a ‘powder keg’, but also a forgotten fountainhead of music culture and tradition that transcends the boundaries of national states, languages, confessions”.

However, in the image of the Balkans that is evoked, or rather, constructed by narratives about ethnic music in Serbia, one boundary has not been exceeded, namely the boundary between the allegedly authentic Balkan culture and music and the cultural and musical Orient. The presence of the latter in the Balkans is, in keeping with the worst Oriental preconceptions, still denied or explained as something forced on or alien to or as something that is on the other side of every culture. Musical traces of the Orient are identified only in neo-folk music, today’s turbo-folk, a genre that is denied not only artistic value but also any connection with culture whatsoever. “That is not our music”, says Vlada Aksentijević. “It is music composed for a development-challenged people, more precisely, for a people with a benumbed consciousness. That sound of aggressive, alien, Asiatic music has accompanied all our downfalls and it seems to have been created to prepare the people for all the bad things that happened to us”.

Bora Dugić at one place praised the “Balkan amalgam” which “brings a fantastic richness of folklore” and he says “it is all the same to me whether it is Macedonian, Bulgarian, Romanian, or Serbian music.” But there is no room for Turkish music in that amalgam. “If you brought an Englishman to our flea market to hear the music that is aired”, Bora Dugić recounts in an interview, “and if he had to guess the country he was in by what he was hearing, he would without a second thought bet on – Turkey! The Englishman would lose only his bet, whereas we would lose our national identity.”

All in all, in the field of meaning in which the Balkans signify a metaphor one can detect certain new elements in the narrative on ethnic music in Serbia, feel the influence of today’s politically correct speech on multiculturalism, but still elements adopted from the previously formed repertoire of stereotypical notions that the term Balkans activates prevail.

One must also point out that stereotypes surrounding the Balkans, which are at work even today, as demonstrated by Marija Todorova, are generally not of Balkan origin, but rather, that they appeared outside the Balkans, mostly in the West, only to be subsequently embraced by the Balkan states as well. Ethnic music, *world* music, lives off the good reception that music bearing the Balkan signature, the Balkan label has abroad, off the power of a non-Balkan audience’s belief that the ethnic music of the Balkans will provide it with a feeling of authenticity, originality, spirituality, emotionality and everything else available in this music offering, either explicitly or implicitly.

I do not know how large the ethnic music audience is in Serbia. I only know that it consists mostly of educated people in the cities, the social elite. The wider audience, by the look of things, is still sinfully enjoying Balkan music with Oriental spices.

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Translated by Dušan Zabrđac