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NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR ROMANIAN FOLK ENSEMBLE PERFORMERS: HOW THE AVAILABILITY OF MODERN TECHNOLOGIES HAS CONTRIBUTED TO 21ST CENTURY FOLK PERFORMANCE STRATEGIES IN TIMIȘOARA

Abstract: This paper will focus on contemporary folk music and dance practices in the Romanian region of Banat. It considers how folk performers living in the city of Timișoara are taking advantage of new opportunities for folk performance provided by modern media and technologies, thus enabling them to increase their visibility and produce performances which fit into contemporary situations. It will conclude that the utilisation of these technologies has enabled folk performers to simultaneously engage with notions of modernity and nostalgia in the eyes of their audiences and maintain a prominent profile in regional *Bănățeni* identity.

Key words: Romania, Banat, music, dance, song, media, technology, visibility, modernity, nostalgia.

This paper will focus on contemporary folk music and dance practices in the city of Timișoara, in the Romanian region of Banat. Romania, as other countries in Eastern Europe left the communist period with a legacy of state-funded folk performance ensembles. These ensembles provided a livelihood to a substantial number of folk musicians, vocal soloists and professional dancers. In the turbulent years that followed the change in regime, funding for many of these

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ensembles was withdrawn as government cut back on folk activities that brought back memories of state control and propaganda, although folk musicians and singers continued to perform at private functions. Twenty years on in Timișoara, folk music, song and dance still plays a major role in local community events and in the social lives of many *Bănățeni*. Social dancing takes place at community and private events, and there are many active folk ensembles. Folk performance is featured in the majority of municipal events, and is included in news broadcasts on local TV as well as on TV channels specifically dedicated to folk music performances, such as Etno and Favorit TV, which are available in every household.

Folk music in Banat today incorporates elements of Romanian village music, Serbian music, and influences from Roma musicians. Until the second half of the 20th century violins were the preferred instrument, then woodwind formations based on alto and soprano saxophones and taragot¹ began to dominate popular music, virtually displacing the violin as the lead melody instrument. This woodwind style is still the mainstay of wedding music in Banat, but has evolved to include accordions with keyboard accompaniment. Over the years the music played in Romanian Banat has maintained strong reciprocal influences with music from Serbia. During the last ten years of the Ceaușescu regime what was termed as *Muzică Sârbească* became very popular at weddings and parties and was sold on cassettes produced by illegal recording studios in Timișoara.² This genre evolved from Yugoslav newly composed folk music³ but continues to be performed in Timișoara by professional musicians and singers with Romanian, Serbian and Roma backgrounds who make their living from private functions. Many of these individuals are also attached to the local Romanian folk ensembles, where they perform music and song with characteristic Romanian styling.

In this paper the authors will look specifically at folk performers living in the city of Timișoara who are involved in the 21st century folk music and dance scene described above. We will focus on the folk dancers, musicians, singers and administrators who work in conjunction with *Timișul* Ensemble based at the municipal culture house where the authors have been undertaking fieldwork during the past five years. Many of these individuals have been involved in folk performance activities since the communist period and have continued their careers by taking advantage of new opportunities for folk performance provided by modern media and new technologies.

1 The introduction of the taragot is attributed to the Roma musician, Luța Ioviță

2 Margaret Beissinger, 'Muzică Orientală: Identity and Popular Culture in Post Communist Romania', in: Donna Buchanan (ed.), *Balkan popular culture and the Ottoman ecumene: music, image, and regional political discourse*, Lanham, MD, Scarecrow Press, 2007, 107.

3 Newly composed folk music (NCFM) consists of popular songs composed in the style of Yugoslav traditional music, played with modern instrumental arrangements (Ljerka Rasmussen, *Newly composed folk music of Yugoslavia*, New York, Routledge, 2002, 12).

Modern media, new technologies, public and private events

Modern media provide an invaluable tool for the promotion of events involving folk music and dance, and new technologies contribute to the production of these events. Folk producers use both these tools to enhance the visibility of their enterprises within the community. The notion of visibility as a tool for analysis in ethnomusicology was introduced by Slobin in 1993 and the authors consider that this notion is useful when considering the use of new media and technologies in connection with folk performance. Slobin⁴ sees visibility as 'the quality of being known to an audience', and he suggests three levels for the visibility of music. The authors would term these levels as local, translocal⁵ and transregional or global. In this paper they consider Slobin's notion of visibility in connection with the agency necessary to achieve this in 21st century folklore production. In the case of *Timișul Ensemble*, the organisers and performers are primarily concerned with the visibility of the ensemble at the local and translocal levels, with only very limited ambitions in reaching a global audience. They make good use of local media and new internet technologies in order to achieve the maximum visibility possible at these levels in order to achieve what Slobin terms as their 'validation through visibility'.⁶

Timișul Ensemble receives funding from the city hall for its activities. In return for this the director of the municipal culture house and the artistic director of *Timișul Ensemble* ensure that the ensemble plays a prominent role in cultural activities in the city. Folk performance forms part of most major local events. Some of these occasions are dedicated specifically to folk performances, in other cases folk performance forms part of the overall programme. The culture house staff arrange for these events to be publicised in local newspapers both in print and on the internet, and maintain close relations with local and national television and radio channels, thus ensuring that these events are included in broadcasts, both within news bulletins and in those dedicated to folk TV programmes.

The culture house organises two major folklore events each year, the annual international *Festivalul Inimilor* and the folk performance that takes place as part of the city *Ruga* (saint's day). *Festivalul Inimilor* first took place in July 1990 at the instigation of the artistic director of *Timișul Ensemble*. This five day international festival is centred around a commemoration of the 1989 revolution in Timișoara. The folklore display on the occasion of *Ruga Timișoarei* first took place in 1995 and now occurs annually on the second weekend of September. Both these events

4 Mark Slobin, *Subcultural sounds : micromusics of the West*, Hanover, NH, University Press of New England, 1993, 17..

5 Slobin uses the term 'regional' but refers to this in a non-geographical sense to include groups of people who are linked, including diaspora communities. The authors prefer the term 'translocal' as used by Andy Bennett and Richard Peterson (*Music scenes: local, translocal and virtual*, Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 2004) to avoid confusion with a geographical region.

6 Mark Slobin, op. cit.; Ibid. page 21.

are large scale public folklore displays which are held in *Parcul Roșilor* in the city centre. The performances take place on a specially constructed stage and are open to all, with no entrance fee being charged. The pleasant ambiance in the park, supplemented by the many beer and barbecue stalls, makes an enjoyable evening for locals, some of whom sit on park benches to watch the entire evening's programme while others take a gentle stroll through the park and stop by the stage to watch for a while. *Festivalul Inimilor* includes performances by folk ensembles, vocal and instrumental soloists from Banat, together with ensembles from other regions of Romania and visiting groups from all over the world, whereas the *Ruga* performance is a showcase of vocal soloists from Banat with a short performance by the dancers from *Timișul* Ensemble and associated children's ensembles.

As both of these events have become annual fixtures since the change in regime they have been organised under modern commercial constraints. The city hall allocates funding towards the organisational costs and private sponsorship is sought to supplement this, with the logos of those businesses who contribute being prominently displayed on the festival banners and in the flyers and programmes. The organisers ensure that both events are advertised through the local media for; as Ronström comments such media liaisons raise visibility both of the specific event and of 'the whole genre that is displayed'.⁷ Press conferences are held in advance in order to increase public awareness and audience attendance. In both cases the events begin with a procession of the participating groups in costume accompanied by musicians, starting in the city centre and ending at the stage in the park, which is accompanied by news photographers and TV cameramen. The public profile of *Timișul* Ensemble is strengthened by maintaining close collaboration with the highest profile folk singers in Banat, and this is most evident in the *Ruga* performances.⁸ As the artistic director of *Timișul* Ensemble commented in an interview⁹; 'great singers always bring audiences to the festival'. Performances by *Timișul* Ensemble regularly include names such as Andreea Voica, Stana Izbașa and Carmen Popovici-Dumbrava, all of whom have a large following in both the local and translocal Banat music scenes. These vocal soloists combine their work as individual artists performing on national Romanian TV and at private functions, with appearances at *Timișul* Ensemble functions and performances.

Timișul Ensemble also features prominently in many municipal events in Timișoara, such as Romania Day celebrations on 1st December, municipal Christmas festivities, the annual wine and food festivals and local district festival days. The majority of these performances take place locally within the city of Timișoara but there are also occasions where their role as municipal cultural ambassadors leads to translocal performances of *Bănățeni* identity during tours abroad and

7 Owe Ronström, *Revival reconsidered*, The World of Music International Institute for Traditional Music, Institute for folk life research, Stockholm University, 1996, 3, 5–20.

8 Thirty two singers accompanied by three groupings of musicians took part in the 2009 *Ruga* performances.

9 Interview held on 12 March, 2010.

cultural exchanges. The availability of internet technology increases the possibilities of setting up these cultural exchanges. Over the last twenty years *Timișul* Ensemble has travelled to the US and Canada regularly to perform for the diaspora Romanian communities in Chicago, Los Angeles, St Paul, Minnesota and Toronto, and in March 2009 *Timișul* Ensemble travelled to Poland to perform at the Romanian Cultural Centre in Warsaw.

The daily working lives of the musicians who are employed as members of *Timișul* Ensemble's folk orchestra has not changed fundamentally over the last twenty years. These individuals divide their time between folk orchestra performances and private events, such as weddings, parties and other family celebrations, where they play as soloists or part of small groups. Their main source of income is from private bookings which they obtain mostly through personal recommendation, but their employment with the ensemble provides them with a state pension. During private performances they demonstrate the versatility of their skills as regional musicians by playing a mixture of music including Banat folk music, *Muzică Sârbească* and modern popular music, depending on the mix of the audience.¹⁰ As soloists most of the musicians play only music from Banat, although *Timișul* orchestra plays suites from all regions of Romania.¹¹ At private events the musicians are often joined by a smaller group of dancers from *Timișul* Ensemble (around 3-4 couples), who perform several dance suites as a short cabaret style performance. Membership of one of these sub-groups provides a means of earning extra income for ensemble members, many of whom are students.

Public folk performances and folk music and dance at private events do not differ so much in the repertoire performed but more in the ambiance. At specific folk events the responsibility for creating this ambiance falls to the ensemble's artistic director, who makes detailed plans to ensure a varied mix of items and methods of presentation. The performances they create have to incorporate nostalgic elements that will resonate with their audiences, and act to strengthen local feelings of identity, but conversely they have to be connected to the modern world, making use of modern technologies and presentation skills in order to avoid being viewed as outdated and kitsch.

Modern technologies in stage and TV folk performance

Modern technologies are extensively used in the production of contemporary folk performance. The authors would hold that this usage contributes to the production of performances which fit into contemporary situations by simultaneously engaging with notions of modernity and nostalgia in the eyes of their

10 Stokes comments on similar abilities among Black sea musicians (Martin Stokes, 'Place, Exchange and Meaning: Black Sea Musicians in the West of Ireland', in: Martin Stokes (ed.) *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*, London, Berg, 1994, 105).

11 *Timișul* Ensemble has one trained multi-instrumentalist who plays the standard Romanian pieces from other regions, as well as being a regionally famous musician.

audiences. The musicians and singers who perform with *Timișul* Ensemble use increasingly complex electronic sound amplification systems. This allows the sounds from a wide range of instruments to be balanced to create the quality of a CD in a live performance, for example, balancing the sound level of the violins against the woodwind section in the Banat folk orchestra formation.¹² In order to achieve this sound quality at large scale public events additional setup time prior to the performance is essential. The municipal culture house employs several retired dancers to fulfil the roles of moving equipment to the venue, setting up the tent for the sound desk, hanging large speakers high above the stage and arranging the computerised lighting system. A further team of sound engineers works during the event regularly adjusting and rearranging microphones, and balancing the sound on stage, especially during the short change over periods between items. This arrangement is similar to the procedures at a professional pop music concert, thus putting the folk festival on the same level as this type of event. In the case of *Festivalul Inimilor* and the *Timișoara Ruga*, the use of modern equipment enables the sound from the stage to be heard over the whole park (and much of the city centre!). The volume of the sound is often a little too loud for those sitting close to the speakers, but is more acceptable to the younger generation whose ears are accustomed to louder amplification.¹³

The daily TV transmission of the national folk festival *Cântarea României* ranks high among the most criticised memories of the Romanian communist period. Despite this, folk performance is still highly visible on Romanian TV, with two channels dedicated to this 'genre', Etno and Favorit TV, together with regular programmes on Romanian national TV (TVR) and other channels. Programmes on the dedicated folk TV channels follow a standard format referred to as 'tableau' by folk choreographers. The folk related ambiance is created either within a studio or a folk restaurant or in an 'idyllic rural' open air setting. The majority of items broadcast are vocal solos, although these are interspersed with some instrumental solos and short dance suites. In the case of vocal solos, the singer takes centre-stage, sometimes with other singers 'hanging round', the musicians stand in a group playing music, and a small number of dancers perform arranged 'social dancing'. The dancers from *Timișul* Ensemble regularly take part in this style of programme and the dancers see their visits to TV studios as part of their work with the ensemble. In Romania the use of playback is accepted as a regular element of folk TV broadcasts although there is much debate and different opinions regarding its use. The TV companies prefer to use a recorded backing track

12 At *Festivalul Inimilor* in 2009, the song and orchestral items were pre-recorded at the request of the TV broadcasting company, however, the dance items were played live, but there was no audible difference in sound.

13 This over-amplification has been a common problem with contemporary folk performance since the late 1980s. Buchanan comments that a performance by the Pirin Ensemble in 1988 in Bulgaria 'was amplified almost to the point of distortion' Donna Buchanan, op. cit.; Ibid. page 268.

as they consider this ensures a consistent sound quality in their performances. The musicians, singers and choreographers treat this with resigned acceptance, referring to playback as 'the perfect performance', whilst some of the musicians seem to have difficulty remembering exactly what rifts they played on the backing track when miming to their own music! Conversely the dancers cannot be 'playback-ed' and so remain an essential element of this modern version of folk performance. These folk TV channels are especially popular among elderly urban residents in Romania as their productions aim at invoking nostalgia for an idealised Romanian past. However, the younger artists and ensembles actively participate in the recordings, the TV in the municipal culture house generally is tuned to one of these channels, and the younger audience for such recordings is evident on YouTube, where extracts from these shows are posted.

Although the majority of folk TV programmes are recorded in advance, in the summer months live broadcasts take place from major events. Last year, the artistic director of *Timișul Ensemble* negotiated with Favorit TV to broadcast 'live' from *Festivalul Inimilor* for six hours on two evenings. In order to do this the TV crew set up two platforms for the TV cameras in prominent places in the centre and to the side of the stage to ensure a clear view of the proceedings. This blocked the prime viewing spots for the audience members who were also prevented from accessing vantage points close to the stage for their own photography or video recording. It also resulted in the momentum of the evening performances being broken approximately every thirty minutes while the TV channel had a 'commercial break'. For the organisers the resulting TV coverage provided heightened visibility for *Festivalul Inimilor* as a leading Romanian festival event and also provided good quality recordings that now rank highly on YouTube searches.

Virtual Banat – on line folk performance

During the last two or three years, a vast number of videos of Banat folk music and dance have become available on the internet. Some of the Romanian TV companies regularly post videos of their broadcasts of folk performances on their own websites¹⁴ and many individuals have posted videos onto YouTube and other internet video sites. These videos are either recorded from the television folk TV broadcasts or else are private videos taken at both public events and private parties. The YouTube videos available that include *Timișul Ensemble*, or their members doing private events, are posted either by one or two of the musicians who have a YouTube channel or several unconnected individuals with a personal passion for folk music,¹⁵ or an invited guest at a wedding or other family celebration, who was responsible for creating future nostalgia among those who attended the

14 For example TVR www.tvr.ro and Tele Europa Nova, <http://telenova.ro/>.

15 For example YouTube users Palconi and Banatzanul.

event.¹⁶ This same future nostalgia is also kindled by the large numbers of photos of folk performances that individuals have posted on social networking sites such as Facebook and Hi5, folk ensemble web sites and in internet photo albums.

The posting of these videos and photos on the internet for others to watch indirectly enhances the prestige of events by increasing their visibility. In the past videos of folk festivals and ensemble performances within Romania were scarce and usually recorded on handheld cameras so they were of poor quality. The quantity of uploaded videos of recent events, the number of hits recorded on each video, and the ages listed on the relevant YouTube users' profiles, suggests that the consumers of this style of folklore production are young adults as well as the elderly, who spend many hours watching folk TV channels. Feedback on these virtual performances is also documented in the comments section under each video on YouTube and in internet blogs discussing local events. Folk performers can use this modern internet technology to increase their personal visibility by regularly uploading videos of their performances. Many of the musicians also use these videos to assess their own and other musicians' performances. The musicians who are employed by *Timișul* Ensemble are often found in the foyer of the municipal culture house, or in the artistic director's office critically watching folk TV or using the wireless internet to watch performance videos on YouTube.

Conclusion

The above discussion has considered the ways that the availability of modern technologies has contributed to contemporary folk performance strategies in Timișoara. Those individuals who work with *Timișul* Ensemble as ensemble directors, choreographers, musicians, singers and dancers use a range of modern technologies both during their contemporary performances and as a means of making their performances visible to local and translocal audiences via the media of print, internet and television. Those responsible understand that performances which fit into contemporary situations have to simultaneously engage with notions of modernity and nostalgia in the eyes of their audiences. Thus, the authors would conclude that the utilisation of modern media and new technologies by the major players in this field has enabled folk performance to maintain a prominent profile in regional *Bănățeni* identity.

16 Timothy Cooley suggested this possibility of creating future nostalgia in his account of a Polish Gorale wedding in *Making music in the Polish Tatras : Tourists, Ethnographers and Mountain Musicians*, Bloomington, Indiana

Лиз Мелиш и Ник Грин

НОВЕ МОГУЋНОСТИ ЗА РУМУНСКЕ ИЗВОЂАЧЕ НАРОДНЕ МУЗИКЕ: КАКО ЈЕ ДОСТУПНОСТ САВРЕМЕНИХ ТЕХНОЛОГИЈА ДОПРИНЕЛА РАЗВОЈУ СТРАТЕГИЈА НАРОДНОГ ИЗВОЂЕЊА XXI ВЕКА У ТЕМИШВАРУ

РЕЗИМЕ

Рад се бави праксама савремене народне музике и плеса у румунској регији Банату. Аутори рада провели су пет година бавећи се теренским истраживањем у Темишвару. Пратећи недугу историју народног извођења у румунском Банату, посебну пажњу посвећују народним извођачима овог града, укљученим у рад ансамбла *Timișul*, који делује при Градском Дому културе.

У раду је објашњено на који начин појединци користе савремене медије и нове технологије у народном извођењу. Савремени медији постају веома значајно средство за промоцију догађаја који укључују народну музику и плес. Ансамбл *Timișul* финансиран је од стране Градске скупштине; за узврат, директор Дома културе и уметнички директор Ансамбла старају се да обезбеде истакнуту улогу ансамбла у свим важнијим локалним догађајима, од оних окренутих претежно фолклорном извођењу, попут фестивала народне музике или градске славе (*Ruga*), до оних чији саставни део може бити народна музика. Ови догађаји редовно су оглашавани у штампаним и интернет издањима локалних новина, и одржан је добар однос са локалним и националним телевизијским и радио станицама, што осигурава присутност у билтенима и емисијама посвећеним народној музици.

Савремене технологије екстензивно се користе у продукцији фолклорних извођења у Темишвару. Музичари и певачи који изводе са *Timișul* ансамблом користе све комплекснији систем озвучавања, а пракса коришћења *playback*-а у телевизијским и радијским преносима прихваћена је у Румунији као начин одржавања доследног квалитета звука. Оваква употреба савремених медија и технологија анализирана је у односу на идеју видљивости, какву поставља Слобин¹⁷, узимајући у обзир начине на који њихова употреба омогућава музичарима извођења која су у складу са савременим тренутком, истовремено покрећући однос према модерности и носталгији код публике. Употреба помињаних технологија омогућава да фолклорно извођење задржи истакнуту улогу у профилисању регионалног *Bănățeni* идентитета.

17 Mark Slobin, *Subcultural sounds: micromusics of the West*, Hanover, NH, University Press of New England, 1993, 17.