

Traditional and Contemporary Elements in Albanian Folk Music

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Abstract

This study is an account of characterizing traditional and contemporary elements in our popular folk music. It is stressed that some of the forms containing elements of the old musical tradition are pertaining to work, the calendarian cycle, the farming tradition, the ballads, the legendary epic ones, the love songs, etc. Also discussed is the distinction that has emerged in the recent musical tradition as a result of the use of electronic devices.

These distinctions as segments of the recent creations in our folk songs can be seen in many artists of the present and are achieved by mixing the elements of our ancient tradition with elements from other countries, so that there is influence of Orient, Turkish – Arab, Roma, Greek and Slavic music.

In addition the novelties in Albanian musical creativeness are discussed, which, compared to European one, have specific elements. Some professional estimations with critical connotations about negative features of present folklore among are also being done.

Key Words: tradition and contemporary, Albanian folk music, poly-meter, pulsation, tradition elements, work, - calendarian cycle and tradition music, habits, rituals, habits, pagan elements, music instruments, electronic tools

The majority of similar forms of folk music, while from a variety of Albanian regions, all have similar features. They vary, however, depending on their geographical location, and somewhat on the level of cultural development or sophistication (be it historical or cultural). Within the mountainous regions of Albania, tradition is well preserved because of its inaccessibility to the rest of the world. As such, their musical forms are purer and older than those

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of traditions of the plains. Within the plains are many younger forms of music, which were developed as a result of the expanding culture of farmlands. These agriculturally oriented villages were also highly influenced by the traditions of the nearby cities. Out of the older traditions we see traits that are inherent in all types of this genre, coupled with more modern trends in such a way that advances the creation of Albanian folk music.

Under the breadth of Albanian folk music appears homophonic music inspired by yearly holidays (i.e. "Songs of Versa", "Song of St. George", "Jeremiah", "Saint Kola", "Saint Ilia", and many others). It is also seen in the pastoral songs of the mountain farmer, such as "The song of the Shepherdesses" – with their fingers on their throat and the "Mountain Songs" or "Songs above the Shoulder", as they are referred to in certain parts of northern Albania and Kosovo such as 'Malësia e Shalës së Bajgorës, Rugova, Opoja, Malësia e Madhe e Shqipërisë Veriore' etc. To this day, these songs survive in a very archaic fashion, but are considered to be some of the earliest pieces of music. For the most part, most of this music remains untouched from the time of its conception.

Ballads, as well as legends and epics (of which it is said are made up of ten syllables, yet in fact are heterogeneous and follow no rule, sometimes going up to 14 syllables, but have been made into 8 and 10 syllable lines) are also considered to be part of the old Albanian folk tradition. These songs, with time, have served as models for the creation of songs with historic themes, known as "songs of the fireplace", which, apart from very few zones that have kept the *Lahuta*, could not keep its original form because of the use of the traditional instruments, the *Çiftelia* and *Sharkia*, which have diatonic intervals and tonal elements that are very different from the *Lahuta*.

Most of the characteristic elements of our traditional music have been kept in our love songs and the rituals and traditions of wedding music.

The love lyrical songs¹, to this day have kept their old traditional form, which means they are interpreted as a solo,

¹ For more in depth information about the lyrical love songs: Bahtir Sheholli. "Mbi disa karakteristika poetike-muzikore të këngëve tona të dashurisë", in *Gjurmime Albanologjike- Folklor dhe etnologji*, nr.IX. Prishtinë: 1981. p. 76 - 98.

without any other instrumental sounds, or with the addition of our traditional instruments such as: *Gajde*, *Kavalli*, and/or *Fyelli* especially in the mountain side, or as an ensemble of two singers with the addition of *Çiftelia* and *Sharkia*. Even though when listened to they have a stable tonal system, which comes from the good collaboration of the song with these traditional instruments and the practice of singing in unison: with the acoustic measuring of the tonal level, it can be noticed that their intervals still belong to the traditional level so called "natural",² something that the old instruments are limited from free placing of the frets of *Çiftelia* and *Sharkia*.³

In some parts of Albania, polyphony is the norm. We should mention that multiple-voice singing started in the Opoja region, where there is a characteristic heterophony that is not very noticeable, and it goes further north into Tetova, which is in the Zajazi region, and then it moves down into Prespa where it changes into a crystal clear style of diaphonic as well polyphonic music. It then traveled into the Librazhd region, Pogradec, Kolonje, Mallakaster, Korce, Berat, Vlore, etc. Our multi-voice creations, in terms of identification criteria, classification as well as geographic layout, (according to a well-known Albanian ethnomusicologist, Benjamin Kruta) are divided into four main variants. From a specific and original diaphone and heterophony, it evolves into three- and four- voice polyphony, with or without instrumental accompaniment.⁴

As far as the musical style is concerned, studies show that Albanian lyrical love songs are mainly divided into three main types which are: creations sung by women, creations sung by men, and creation sung by men and women together.⁵ Many important songs of the Arberesh of Italy and specifically the Arberesh of Calabria are considered to be a variation of the first type.⁶ Meanwhile, in Kosovo, these songs, because of well-

² With the notion "natural level" we mean the traditional tonal level - untempered.

³ Bahtir Sheholli, art. cit. p. 80.

⁴ Benjamin Kruta: *Polifonia dyzërëshe e Shqipërisë Jugore*, Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë, Instituti i Kulturës popullore, Tiraë: 1989, p. 25-32.

⁵ Spiro Shituni - Agron Xhagolli, *Këngët polifonike labe*, Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë, Instituti i Kulturës Popullore, Tiranë: 1986, p. 7.

⁶ Benjamin Kruta, op. cit. p. 31.

known cultural and historic reasons, were sung separately by men and separately by women.

In the lyrical songs of the female tradition, the wedding songs are dominant, which in many cases are spontaneous improvisations, always based upon the traditional models, both in the textual and musical sphere. They are sung a Capella, or with the rhythmic accompaniment of a *Tepsi*, as in Rugova and its surroundings, or with *Def* or *Dajre*, as they call this traditional instrument.

Albanian folk songs, as of late, have been experiencing changes in both the way they of singing and also considering instrumental accompaniment. These changes were made possible by the new orchestral formation of traditional instruments (*Çifteli*, *Sharki*, *Fyell*, *Def* etc). Clear instrumental melodies interpreted in solo or orchestral form, and also many other forms of songs and melodies as of late have been followed by a mixed orchestra of traditional instruments with the classic instruments such as the violin, harmonica, clarinet and especially the guitar.

For many centuries Albanian folk music has kept its original form from infiltrations and influences of other cultures. This is supported by the old forms, which have been continuously saved up until the last century. They, among other things, help in segregating and recognizing the unique and original elements, not only in our music creations, but in the spiritual creations of our people as well. The creators of our folk music, use the traditions of early music as their base, it always served them as the main model and support, there was an in-tune melting of the music, poetically and psychologically.

Changes in the tonal level (Musical Level) which are done based upon the tempering of the traditional levels (as a definition of contemporary within Albanian folk music, in their modern day vocal-instrumental tone, have, among other things, created the new content and meaning of the forms in terms of the Albanian music language overall. By doing so, we see new specific forms of music which are not being created in proportion with existing traditional elements.

With the changes in the technology and techniques, we see changes in the creative world of the folk music performers. In

specific relations of the traditional and modern music, the modified forms have drastically changed the creations of Albanian folk music, changing it in almost every aspect. Thus, the old musical instruments, handmade by the self-taught maestros where the craftsmanship and creative ability is never absent, are not suitable for the music. They can no longer accompany the new creations, elaborated from the tonal tempering and diatonic intervals. In relation to this it should be mentioned that even though you could still play the old traditional melodies with these tempered instruments, during the performance they lose most of the micro-interval characteristics and come close to the structures of the new tonal intervals, within the diatonic structures. In this case, naturally, it leads to creations of tonal level, in relation to melodies in which we see a strong process change and a transformation from archaic expression to modern expression occurs. Even though many characteristic melodic-rhythmic and poetic elements have been changed entirely, there are cases where these creations have been enriched to the necessary level from specific creations based on the traditional folk music.

In modern times, these changes have been stressed, starting with the disclaimer of the afore-mentioned tonal level, to the disclaimer of the musical language and the overall traditional form, to the disclaimer of the traditional folk artistic style inherited. So we see negligence towards the inheritance of the true folk music. In many cases this happens because the creators of these new forms, for the sake of the modernization and because of the lack of ability to create true modern work, tolerate and adopt foreign forms of musical creations, hence we have the inevitable influence upon the overall Albanian folk music genre. Some of the creators we have today consider these changes to be normal, even though they do not help the overall advancement of their folk music. As such they cannot innovate within the music with true Albanian elements. Through these and other acts, the modern creators have resulted in losing the prestige of the predecessor folk creators that were anonymous; by titling and losing the anonymity these composers are creators of a new "age".

Some of the creators of the modern folk music, through models of melody-rhythm changes and formal structural changes, new creations, passed as creations of folk influence, which are created by borrowing and compiling foreign cultures, try to pass them as forms of the new style. In place of qualitative innovation, these new forms of creation of folk music have something uncertain about them, something that does not sit well with the elementary aesthetic norms of true folk music.

The changes that have been made in the past 20-30 years, referring to the creations of the new modern folk music, initially dealing with the context of musical sound, namely the tempering of the tonal level, with the interpretation and musical communication. Modern folk music creations have changed because of the fabrication of some of the traditional music instruments and because of the usage of the electronic elements, which produce unnatural sounds, such as the keyboard, electric guitar etc. This new form of musical expression, among other things also influences the life of the villagers, in which case we see the desire to enmesh the traditional with the modern, and in many cases even with the city music. In many cases this is usually possible by the creations of the orchestra with newer instruments such as *Çiftelia*, *Sharkia* and tempered *Fylli* of the bloc-flute type.⁷

A number of cultural activists, because of personal interest, are making increasing changes and modifications to the instruments of musical expression, all in the name of a positive modern experience. These creators bring unnatural "modern" innovation and obstruct a continuous evolution in this field. Thus, ever since the break up of ex-Yugoslavia, and pluralist changes in Albania, especially after the 1990's, in the name of the "needs" of the masses, by making fictions artistic, evolving and by basing themselves in the hierarchy of the tonal tempering across the Europe, they work into their creations a

⁷ For more in depth see: Bahtir Sheholli: "Mbi traditën dhe krijimtarinë e re vokalo-instrumentale në folklorin muzikor shqiptar", in *Çështje të studimeve albanologjike*. Materials from the scientific symposium, organized by the Institute of Albanology in Prishtina (20 and 21 December 1985, p. 329 - 336, Prishtinë: 1987, vol. II.

specific system of melody and harmony, and it goes as far as the usage of the electronic element. Thus, they base themselves in a structure and type of music that has resulted in suspicious musical semantics.

In this way, the high expressive tension and the fixing of the folk musical expression (which overall has a sound based in melody-rhythm, technical and borrowed from other cultures), contain the expressive breakup of the overall melody and rhythm, emphasized in the treatment of the solo vocal pieces and with its instrumental often times following Serbian, Greek, Turkish and, even more often, Arabic sounds. These are apparent in the melody-rhythm moves which are dominated with specific combinations of musical instruments and those of the oriental dancing known as "Belly Dancing", of the Greek dances that are known as "syrtos", or elements of solo melodies, known as "gazelle" which are nothing more than improvised melodies made more lovely by combining them with oriental melody-rhythm, with prolonged seconds, which are unmistakable traits of foreign musical levels. The metro-rhythmic type of this melody as well as the specific treatment of its instrumental following, which in these creations is based in the ability of usage of these known musical instruments, or so called "classic" and "electronic", created the sound of the Turkish-Arabic orchestra, Greek, Serbian, etc. These types of creations, which do not present good innovations to our folk music, most of contemporary Albanian creators, from both sides of the border, even after all the negative remarks, are being consequent to it more and more. This type of creation, with its principals that means specific integral organization of musical subject, and in its tonal and melody-rhythm ties, most of these creators, slowly but surely are integrating and using elements of the above mentioned nations. These creations, with its sound objects through the mentioned vocal and instrumental expression, pose a real threat to creation of true folk music. By avoiding the furthering of what can be considered true folk music, the above-mentioned creations multiply as musical "definitions". These are well known stereotypes for melody, rhythm and orchestral harmony, as elements that have been there from its beginning to the now-days where they are

predominant. The simpler elements of these innovations, as well as the coloring of this tonal tempering and the entire musical form, are a matter of infiltration, changes and modifications of the entire Albanian folk music creation.

The mentioned changes in these new creations, thanks to such experiences as segments of the modern among Albanians, are present among many professional creators on both sides of the border. With their participation as "original authors" in many music festivals, these "innovations" are considered by them as something that is acceptable by the masses and they work hard to affirm and treat them in the same level as the existing categories of traditions.

These actions, in the name of modernizing the folk music creations, contemporary performers try to pass as creations that have a base in the autonomous Albanian folk music. These are done mainly by enmeshing motifs of the old Albanian folk music with that of the other nations. The result of this is a creation of poly-meter that, in fact has a pulse of the folk rhythm of the combined rhythmic masses. Such as 2+3, 3+2, 3+4, 4+3, 3+3+3 etc. as well as the exposition of the consonant intervals in the vertical of the melodic entirety of the structure of the third, the sixth etc. which, in many cases, are presented in the row of characteristic sounds which serve as effective ornaments of the melodies of the combined instrumental following even with classical instruments or tempered wind instruments etc.

Nevertheless there are creators who have acted more in line with the characteristic elements and forms of our folk music. In some cases they even refer to the elements and forms of the traditional folk music, The National Rebirth (and of the XVIII century and beginning of XIX century), and especially when the songs are based in Historical theme. Through these actions the Albanian folk music adds another dimension towards making sure the continuity of the all-Albanian folk creations to this day. This is valid for the works, mainly, the focus of the sound group is revealed in the rhythmic parts in many different colors in the melodic aspect or in the organization of the intervals and accords in the instrumental following. Recently, through Sharkia, where the string is replaced with a thicker one - a

guitar string, or through Uti, in Albania they have created motifs and formality pieces that differ from the earlier music forms. The melody-rhythm aspect as well as the tonal impression of the folk music is closer to the more developed artistic music. That is done through different colorings of the melody, with more developed accords and harmony, closer to contemporary melodies.

Some recent works, the musical language of which has support on the more modern developments, among others things, are also an important contribution towards tendencies mentioned before. By not avoiding the traditional form of work, by not doing as the rest of Europe in the field of tonal and rhythmic change, these creators have taken an orientation based on some elements and facts of the past.

Orientation along the musical tradition, as a form of musical thinking and expression, in cases where its melody-poetic base is presented different and artistically less powerful, after all, could not possibly present a high grade development face in today's musical development. Besides that, this phenomenon is an example of musical poetry which is created by the aforementioned influences of free picking of the factors of elements of the past musical traditions and tendencies to fully create an individual style. In such cases we see a tying of the traditional works with the new vocal and instrumental forms which hold elements of solo interpretation and public concert. Thus, through an enriched improvisation, or motorization as a midpoint of the development of the traditional and harmonic content, which are close to the problems of the present, we see the creation of the sounds of accords and intervals which are tempered, this as a wide spread form of the musical knowledge of our now-day performers.

From this we conclude that the present creator of the poetic music, by crossing elements of the traditional, with "European" modern elements, what was created was a selfish-individual type of folk.

So, in the melody of the newer songs with wider ambits and with a more colorful modal-tonal decoration, in which most of the new performers are based on, besides the intentional change of rhythmic and melodic orchestral following, there are

also elements that are causing the creations of newer forms of the folk music creations, which are more expressive as a technique. However, with the changing of the internal factorial structure of the newer music, with borrowed elements this gives a strong punch to the earlier experience and development that was quite positive. By increasing the distance from the traditional wills left behind, the songs of the newer performers, through the unclear motive expression they create quasi-modern models, and come out as stressed non-plastic lines of the melody, many times with consequences of the tonal level and unprofessional musical harmony.

From the specific coloristic quality resulting from these forms they have established similar elements with that of elaborated folk music.

The technical orchestral enrichment, with electronic instruments, in many cases has redefined the vocal-instrumental sound, as a pre-requisite to the changing of the traditional natural melody in the changed and tempered type of city songs.

As long as their musical language is based in the European style treatment of the musical tone, it is becoming a habit more and more to use the European music tonal base, something that also implies to contemporary pop music, and as a symbol of the meaning content and formality laws, it also implies to the traditional music.

A modern creation, in its consequent meaning, can be seen among creators who through the modality of earlier creations, gradually are going back to the true traditional, as a creating orientation, which is being done based in the cross-over of modern expression with Albanian folk.

All the mentioned levels of the folk music differ from each other in the way they cross over the traditional with the modern. The evocation of past categories and the development of the modern experience, in essence, because the transformation of the poetic music forms of the past.

Precisely, all this is proof of the existence of the modern Albanian music. So, in the process of creation of the Albanian folk music as of late, besides what has been said what are also very important are the unconscious creations of the so called

“composers”, often without elementary music knowledge. Gone to and stuck in the “crack” between the conscious and unconscious, between the instinct and the inclination to be in the center of attention, a number of “creators” of our now-day folk music, many times approach it with complexes. In addition to this, it should be mentioned that the performers of the new folk music, should not point their interest only toward the theme, but toward content as well, and the selected form types and the quality of the artistic value experience.

It should not go without mentioning that besides the freedom songs we see the appearance of songs about the current Kosovo happenings - songs that fall under historical cycle, for the war of KLA and its heroes, which, among others, are expression of the overall atmosphere of the entire nation. In this case then, the reasons of the modern, for which was discussed earlier, in essence, would have a psychological, social and aesthetic source that would derive from the everyday happenings.

The synthetic sound of such songs, as a modern, in the past few years, is done in a “orchestral” system in a form of digital and analog form programmed in a keyboard or, singing, with acoustic effects, rhythms and types of music done in a computer in many cases. In relation, it should be mentioned that, the tying of different sources of sound, in this case does not mean only the acoustic realization, but also through forms of creation that come out and expand with atmosphere gradation and sound color. This relation expresses experiences of relations between the living sound material and its perspective synthetic.

It’s known that throughout the territory where Albanian folk music is created there are a lot of performers that try to speak through a new musical language. They try to bring innovations in the qualitative-artistic aspect in this field, with which, even when they are unable to bring unheard and unknown elements, at least can witness and strengthen the melody-rhythm vitality of forms which have been in this field in the past.

A large number of these authors are creators who have put stylistic and melodic-rhythmic principals at the base of true national folk music. Therefore, at the same time, as in the forms

of the city folk music, same as with the well known “folkloric” music, there is at the present a lot of offspring from the primate of the modern expressed through the ties of the archaic with the new ones, which are for example, songs of a folkloric character with folk orchestra with classical instruments. In this relation, we should remember the earlier songs of our famous singers, who with a new following, not only with traditional instruments (*Çifteli, Sharki, Fyell, Def, Tupan*, etc.), but combined with an electric keyboard and other classical instruments (violin, clarinet, electrical guitar etc.). They had a stimulating effect in strengthening the innovations and developments of a new music style in the city folk music. But this phenomenon, which had presented new sources, especially after the creations of orchestras with tempered traditional instruments, known as an “Orchestra of *Çiftelia*”, surely still has not presented more developed forms with new elements.

The appearance of such forms in Albanian folk music, of the “city” tradition, warns us of the position that the Albanians seem to be in, which is that they believe only the appearance of value has true clear musical meaning. Meanwhile, the creations that belong to folk music in conceptual arts and process development, in many cases go past their boundaries, because the musical material is shredded to an elementary factor. These factors of non-modern musical expression, of the now-days, as seen in audio and video cassettes, radio and private TV stations in Macedonia, and especially in the Albanian TV station, many times have no separation of the needed modern elements, or any kind of organization of the technical elements and the musical DNA of the creation of new Albanian folk music. Therefore, the musical substance itself does not bring innovations into this field. Innovative is only the way it’s applied, as a way that sees its perspective in a simplification of the “composition”, which because of the lack of paradoxical content, many times surpass the boundaries of the artistic value.

The new innovations in Albanian folk music, which up to a certain point hold to the attributes for creations of folk music (even though in many cases they lack the elements of the necessary, melody-rhythm forms and necessary style), should

be freed of conceptualism and processing to treat them. Contemporary avant-garde innovations should not be searched for in specific creations, but in new forms of high-grade and specific elements of modern innovations and not the Albanian music originality.

Another characteristic phenomenon is seen with the forms of creation of comedy sketches in videos and videocassettes, in which the music is generally present in a structure where it's not a primary, but a secondary element. In such cases, a number of these creations are a disgrace to musical artistic value. This, I would say, is negative, in the entirety of what is called form or artistic value. It speaks loud and clear that the perspective of the modern activity within it, is still undefined.

In a state of crisis with these "innovations", after the 1980's, a number of creators appear as saviors of the development and cultivation of the modern music elements created earlier by professionals, who held positions of avant-garde in folk music creations through out. Even though, these creators for a long time made no efforts of showing a modern professionalism of expressive elements. As with the gained impression that their status gradually, of an artistic creator, became like a social organism that "develop" musical culture that is identified with the level of a poorly skilled "cafe" singer and creators of the mentioned "trend". That which has been developed and considered as a modern innovation, many times fell to a paradoxical position - in identification with "trend" or "demand" by the masses. Rarely, there was any hesitation that in the name of modern "innovation" and "imposed" demand, to create and put out to sell something that could be anything, but not forms that come close to the original Albanian melody-poetics.

Conclusions

The modern characteristics of Albanian music creations, different from the European development, has a lot of specific elements, even though many times meet the criteria of innovative techniques and composing tools, as elements that have to do with its essence - in the finding of new elements,

from the internal and external movement, it, taking into its entirety, in many cases is not typical and original. In relation to this it should begin with the way the innovations are presented, from the fact that they were rarely manifested in a simple form, namely, they were done by compiling and borrowing, as public proclamations or warnings by a group of creators or professional composers who have not developed and cultivated autonomous musical creations and more original. The people who study this have criticized the appearance of this phenomenon. They have even come up with a qualitative solution. Regarding this we have as a witness their reactions and writings regarding this phenomenon, which can be used as a program, or pointers towards the creations of forms and aesthetic value of the new Albanian music. Apparently, they had a goal together - the affirmation of a new creative style in the name of artistic hesitation, also they, had intentions of using technical innovations, but unluckily this idea and direction did not come out as realistic for the continuity of this development, therefore they were unable to organize it based on strict principal organization or as a possibility of rapid development of musical compositions of these times.

Now institutionalized in an unfair manner, the Albanian folk music of the last century has found itself in a very banal field, achieved by the formal changes mentioned earlier- of the tone and the melody-rhythm elements of the foreign cultures.

It should be mentioned that the positive influence in the improvement of the creative quality remains to be seen with time, for which we need a more active participation by all the institutions and individuals that practice this soul artistic creations.

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