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**‘A representative of Western culture’,  
‘a true Slavic artist’, or ‘a Yugoslav legend’?  
Đorđe Marjanović between Yugoslavia and the USSR**

In this chapter I wish to discuss the issues related to those former-Yugoslav cultural practices that have been regarded as being between (or beyond) the poles of East and West, by looking into the life and career of Đorđe Marjanović as a case study, since he is one of the most famous Yugoslav pop singers of all time and a representative figure of Yugoslav culture. This essay deals with the twofold and ambiguous reception of Đorđe Marjanović’s performances both in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. Starting from the recent developments of popular postcolonial musicology and sociology of popular music, I analyse the data found in the printed and online press, Internet forums, fan pages and similar online sources.<sup>1</sup> I also refer to a very informative book edited by Dimitrije Panić (2001) which contains the singer’s recollections, as well as texts taken or transcribed from the newspapers, radio and TV shows and interviews.<sup>2</sup>

I began this research wishing to provide an overview of the entire period in which Marjanović was active, but I decided to focus on the period of his greatest popularity – the 1950s and 1960s, but taking into consideration the changes that happened later. I am not discussing how Marjanović was situated between the concepts of East and West, but

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<sup>1</sup> Marjanović’s official website <http://www.djordjemarjanovic.com/> and Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Djordje-Marjanovic-%C4%90or-%C4%91e-Marjanovi%C4%87/143289395741251> contain reliable information and photos that could not be found elsewhere. The Facebook page is edited by Marjanović’s friend and fan from Russia, to whom Marjanović’s family gave a number of original documents and other sources.

<sup>2</sup> Since Marjanović had a stroke in 1990 his speech and singing have been somewhat affected. He considers this book to be an autobiography that he narrated to his friend Dimitrije Panić.

rather asking what were the conditions for creating such labels, with respect to his performances and his overall position in the Yugoslav pop scene of the time. I will start by overviewing the singer's career; then, I will discuss the issue of Marjanović's role in the development of Yugoslav 'zabavna muzika'; finally, I will focus on the notions of 'East' and 'West' as related to his career and highlight the moments that were recognised by the press as being 'Western' or 'non-Western'.

### **The story about Đorđe**

Đorđe Marjanović (1931) is one of the most famous Yugoslav *schlager* singers.<sup>3</sup> His official biography is a romanticised 'sob story' about a poor guy from the sticks studying pharmacy in Belgrade, living in squalor, doing numerous jobs to survive and singing occasionally, mostly at student dance parties (Savić 2007). However, he was talented enough to be noticed and asked to perform as a guest at the concerts of already famous musicians Dušan Jakšić and Zorana-Lola Novaković, after which he started appearing at a number of festivals. Furthermore, Marjanović appeared in the film *A whistle at 8pm* (Zvižduk u osam, 1962), which divided audiences and critics. Having released his first album in 1959, which sold 11,000 copies in its first month, in a country where there were no more than 20,000 gramophones at that time (Ivačković 2013: 26), Marjanović attracted hordes of fans thanks to his participations in popular Yugoslav music festivals, most notably the Opatija Festival.<sup>4</sup> He was never praised for his voice or the songs he performed, but he attracted fans with his dynamic performance style and physical gestures on stage that were not typical for the time, at least not in Yugoslavia.

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<sup>3</sup> *Schlager* is a German term for a type of popular music, usually referring to highly sentimental ballads with simple melodies and melancholic romantic lyrics.

<sup>4</sup> The Opatija Festival, founded in 1958, was the premier showcase for Yugoslav popular music, attracting composers, musicians, singers and songwriters from the entire federation; it was the first all-Yugoslav popular music festival. Its location also had a geopolitical significance; situated in a region that had been a part of Italy, the Opatija Festival symbolised the intensification of cultural relations between Yugoslavia and the West in the 1950s, and it was even modeled on Italy's leading popular music festival in Sanremo (Vuletic 2011: 270).

**Yugoslav cultural politics**

In the 1950s Yugoslav popular music culture developed by means of local festivals, radio programmes and recording industry. At that time, popular music was usually referred to as ‘dance’, ‘entertainment’ or ‘light’ music, with jazz, pop and, by the end of the decade, rock and roll, the styles of that were popular both in Yugoslavia and around the world. However, the development of Yugoslav popular music was not conditioned solely by international cultural trends, but also by domestic and foreign policies pursued by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. Through its cultural, economic and foreign policies, the party sought to define Yugoslavia’s position in the international relations during the Cold War, develop a sense of Yugoslav identity among its multinational citizenry, and rebuild and modernise the country that had suffered some of the greatest losses in Europe during World War II. However, it was the Yugoslav communists’ behavior in international affairs that was politically decisive for the development of Yugoslav popular music in the 1950s. The most important event was their split with the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites in 1948, when the Communist Information Bureau expelled Yugoslavia from its ranks and withdrew all of its economic and technical aid after Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito refused to submit to Soviet political domination. Soon afterwards, the party abandoned a Soviet-style cultural politics that had condemned popular music as a cultural, political and social threat from the West, and it opened Yugoslavia to Western cultural influences, as it sought economic and political support from the West (Vuletic 2008: 861–862). Hence, during the 1960s, 1970s and the 1980s Yugoslavia was more open to the West than the other socialist countries, going through the process of ‘Americanisation’ (Vučetić 2012).

Popular music developed thanks to the infrastructure consisting of radio programmes, festivals, record companies and entertainment magazines that were set up in the late 1950s and launched the careers of Yugoslav popular music artists who served as domestic alternatives to the Western ones. As observed by Vuletic, unlike some of their counterparts who had been unable to advance their popular music careers in the previous decade due to limited opportunities and financial constraints, the economic growth and expansion of cultural industries in the late 1950s provided them with a framework through which their work became increasingly professionalised (Vuletic 2011: 277).

Yugoslav popular music scene was characterised, on the one hand, by composition and performance style that was recognised as ‘typical,’ ‘expected’ or even ‘appropriate’ for Yugoslavia, and, on the other hand, by music labeled as being under ‘foreign,’ ‘Western’ and ‘inappropriate’ influence. Rock and roll reached Yugoslavia via foreign radio stations and gramophone records that were brought in from the West. The end of the 1950s witnessed the first instances of rock and roll influences, and in the 1960s a large number of beat bands appeared on the Yugoslav music scene, becoming enormously popular with the younger generations. Rock bands attracted public attention, which was followed by the emergence of the first rock music magazines, radio and TV shows (Vučetić 2006). Rock and roll influences are also noticeable in the performances of some *schlager* singers, including Đorđe Marjanović.<sup>5</sup>

While the acceptance of Western cultural influences in the 1950s had numerous positive effects on the perception of Yugoslavia in the West, it was not entirely unproblematic in the Yugoslav cultural sphere. As the agents of foreign policy were softening their attitudes towards Western popular music, Yugoslav cultural and political elites continued to question its impact as it achieved increasingly widespread popularity throughout the country. On the one hand, these elites tolerated Western popular music as the government sought assistance from the West and regarded it as a symbolic marker of openness and modernity. Yet they also had to confront it with the cultural loyalties of Yugoslav citizens at a time when they were attempting to develop a Yugoslav transnational culture, which was meant to bond all of Yugoslav nations and nationalities without suppressing their individual cultures, as epitomised by the official slogan of ‘brotherhood and unity.’ Throughout the 1950s these elites called for the development of a genuinely Yugoslav popular music culture with domestically produced songs that would meet popular demand for entertainment and better reflect the everyday life in Yugoslavia, but also remain in accordance with the state ideology (Vuletic 2008: 861–862).

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<sup>5</sup> Marjanović’s repertoire included *schlager* and *canzone*-like ballads, Russian songs, as well as faster rock and roll dance songs.

### **Marjanović as a ‘Western social phenomenon’**

The reception of Đorđe Marjanović’s performances in both Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union was ambiguous. Nowadays he is famous, respected, known as a ‘legend’ of Yugoslav *schlager* scene and commonly referred to as ‘the most popular Yugoslav singer of all times’ (Ivačković 2013: 23) and ‘an urban legend’ (Savić 2007: 11). Marjanović was initially criticised in Yugoslavia as a ‘social phenomenon’ that could not be ‘an idol’ to Yugoslav youth with ‘his questionable voice and behavior’ (Panić 2001). Marjanović’s performances included spontaneous body movements, dancing and coming down from the stage to the audience; these gestures were ecstatically adored by the audience and sometimes publicly marked as ‘European,’ but mostly construed by the critics as a ‘Western import,’ an example of ‘bad taste’ that represented ‘a step towards anarchy and undermining of socialist values’ (Panić 2001). However, in the Soviet Union, the same behaviour brought Marjanović the recognition of being both ‘a true Slavic artist’ with ‘heart and soul’ and a performer who represented ‘a window towards the West’ (Panić 2001). Unlike in Yugoslavia, in the Soviet Union the ‘Western’ quality in Marjanović’s performance was something this singer was highly praised for. However, the critical reception in Yugoslavia would not last; at some point, Marjanović became synonymous with Yugoslav pop culture as its most recognisable star. While it may seem that it was a sudden change, I will argue that it was a continual and ambivalent process of labeling him both as problematic and as a phenomenon that would become one of the most quintessential and well-known Yugoslav brands.

What was it that made Marjanović so provocative and even problematic in the eyes of the exponents of Yugoslav state ideology? The reviews regarding his performances from the beginning of his career commonly contained statements such as: ‘he threw his jacket into the audience and it just happened, the king was born’ (Panić 2001). The critics wrote that he had no vocal talent while the audience supported him claiming that there was no similar phenomenon in the world. Historically, he was the first singer in Yugoslavia who took the microphone into his hands and moved freely on the stage. He was dancing, jumping and sitting, which was highly uncommon at that time. In 1961, at the festival *Žlatni mikrofon*, Marjanović did not receive any awards from the jury, which led to the first peaceful demonstrations in Belgrade. Members of the

audience reacted angrily, left the concert hall, found Marjanović, carried him on their shoulders and protested in the streets. The whole *Zlatni mikrofon* event was interrupted. Terazije (a central Belgrade street) and the Marx and Engels Square (in front of the hall *Dom sindikata*) were blocked because ‘đokisti’ [Đoka’s fans] protested against the decision of the jury. Eventually, according to the reports, Marjanović sang together with 7,000 people in the streets (Panić 2001).<sup>6</sup>

From that moment, the Western component panned by critics was recognised not only in his very performance, but also in the fact that he had hordes of adoring fans, received numerous letters, had a fan club and was fawned over by women.<sup>7</sup> This audience reception was influenced by Western models such as Elvis Presley or the Beatles. In addition, his jumping around the stage was not approved and was seen as inappropriate, and his very acceptance by the audience was regarded as a bad influence, especially on women who ‘lost their minds’ because of him.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in this case, the label ‘Western’ mostly referred to a supposed Americanisation, which was regarded as something that should be under control. Marjanović was openly mocked by the press, which even contained suggestions that he should go back to study pharmacy and leave the microphone to those who can sing (Panić 2001). For instance, the newspaper *Komunist* criticised the music scene in August 1965, pointing to Marjanović and demanding that the scene should be watched carefully so that the performers with ‘good taste’ could be separated from those with ‘bad taste’. In April of the same year, regarding the news that the fan clubs

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<sup>6</sup> See also: ‘Demonstracije na Terazijama.’ <http://www.djordjemarjanovic.com/biografija/4.html/>

<sup>7</sup> The advances in the Yugoslav popular music industry between 1957 and 1961 were also reflected in the emergence of entertainment magazines whose content focused on popular culture, and which promoted popular music artists by means of articles and photos. With the emergence of this visual medium, the physical appearance of domestic popular music artists became an increasingly significant factor in their appeal, as illustrated magazines and, later, television shows brought images of them to a growing number of consumers (Vuletic 2011: 276).

<sup>8</sup> Marjanović’s effect on women has been often commented on. It was claimed that there was ‘hysteria’ in the audience in his concerts and that women considered him to be a ‘supernatural being’ and ‘God-like creature’ (Ivačković 2013: 23).

of ‘dokisti’ had been spreading throughout the country,<sup>9</sup> a worried author in *Borba* asked ‘why aren’t there fan clubs of [Petar Petrović] Njegoš, [Ivo] Andrić or [Miroslav] Krleža in this country.’<sup>10</sup> In the 1960s Marjanović was also singled out as a representative of a melodramatic or pathetic style, poor taste and wrong (read: Western) values (Panić 2001).

### **Marjanović as ‘a true Slav’**

Marjanović was not the only Yugoslav singer who performed in the Soviet Union; in fact, there had been many concert tours, usually given by a few Yugoslav performers together. Nevertheless, he quickly stood out as an individual artist, attracting attention that was different from that usually given to Yugoslav artists. Since his first performance in the Soviet Union in 1963, Marjanović gave concerts annually, often as a part of the group tours of Yugoslav musicians, but he also gave solo concerts (Luković 1989: 86–87). It has been stated that he was accepted in the Soviet Union as one of ‘their own’, the acceptance helped by the fact that he married a Russian woman and his first daughter was born there, so that he was regarded as a ‘Russian son-in-law’. Even the officials, such as the minister of culture, claimed that ‘we, the Slavs, have our own music scene’ whilst referring to Marjanović (quoted in Panić 2001). For instance, a 1963 article in *Pravda*, a Kiev newspaper, reported on the sincerity of his performance, as well as his talent and excellent voice (Ibid). His gestures were interpreted as Italian, and his spontaneity as French. Furthermore, Marjanović was labeled (very differently from how he was perceived in Yugoslavia at that moment) as the pride of Yugoslav *zabavna* music, as a typical socialist artist and as a ‘socialist God’ in numerous Moscow reviews.<sup>11</sup> Thus, he was marked as ‘Yugoslav,’ ‘socialist’ and ‘Slavic,’ and his passionate singing and

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<sup>9</sup> The clubs were founded in Belgrade, Niš, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Sarajevo, Titograd, Kotor, Dubrovnik and many other cities. The Belgrade fan club alone had 10000 members.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in: ‘Kritičari i kritizeri.’ <http://www.djordjemarjanovic.com/biografija/7.html/>

<sup>11</sup> I could not find many reports on how Marjanović’s success in the Soviet Union was perceived in Yugoslavia; from what I could gather, it was either mentioned neutrally or ignored. As to Marjanović’s colleagues, it is alleged that his enormous success was received reservedly and even dismissed as not being truly important.

stage behaviour were regarded as the expression of a ‘Slavic soul’.<sup>12</sup> Seemingly in contradiction, he was also seen as ‘a window towards the West’, since he performed in the way that had not been seen in the USSR before.<sup>13</sup> However, Yugoslav cultural products were generally popular and appreciated throughout the Eastern Europe as they were experienced as ‘windows’ to modern art currents of the West (Marković 1996: 471).<sup>14</sup> Paradoxically, in the Soviet Union Marjanović was the Western ‘window’, Slavic ‘soul’, Russian ‘son-in-law’, and generally seen as ‘their own.’ Within a couple of decades, he entered the Russian elite, socialised with academic citizens, ministers, and artists, and was widely recognised as a true star in the USSR. In 1968 he was awarded a prize for improving the international relations between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup>

### **The making of a Yugoslav legend**

Finally, I want to discuss how Marjanović gradually became a Yugoslav brand. I would like to point to three moments. First, the fact that he was not officially accepted in the beginning did not affect his popularity, which led to a dichotomy between the official critique and his actual popularity. Second, he rose to fame at the time when Tito’s statement about the type of music, a genre (such as jazz) or anything else that he liked or disliked could lead to a change regarding the given phenomenon (see Vuletic 2008: 868–

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Prva ruska iskustva.’ <https://www.facebook.com/notes/djordje-marjanovic-%C4%91or%C4%91e-marjanovi%C4%87/prva-ruska-iskustva/148010145269176>.

<sup>13</sup> In addition to his own songs, he also performed popular songs recorded by The Beatles and Bob Dylan, as well as French and Italian traditionals. Thus, his repertoire attracted a special attention in the USSR, being interpreted as a tool that enabled the Soviets to see through the Soviet musical curtain and entertain in the way that had not been familiar to them before. They were ‘ecstatic’ because of his songs and his ‘light gymnastics’ on the stage. See: ‘Prva ruska iskustva.’ <https://www.facebook.com/notes/djordje-marjanovic-%C4%91or%C4%91e-marjanovi%C4%87/prva-ruska-iskustva/148010145269176>

<sup>14</sup> Marjanović’s international achievements followed in the footsteps of one of Yugoslavia’s first musical exports, Ivo Robić, who began a successful career in the West Germany in the late 1950s. His biggest hit *Morgen* (1959) was censored in Yugoslavia when Radio Zagreb refused to broadcast it because the lyrics ‘Morgen, Morgen, wird das Leben endlich wieder schön’ [Tomorrow, tomorrow, life will finally be beautiful again] were deemed ‘revanchist’ (Vuletic 2008: 872–873).

<sup>15</sup> ‘Na Istoku ništa novo.’ <http://www.djordjemarjanovic.com/biografija/6.html/>

869). This was precisely the case with Marjanović. In the 1970s, he performed many times in official events that honoured Tito and it was also often remarked that Tito's wife Jovanka Broz highly appreciated and enjoyed his songs, often giving him official support in the public sphere. In 1972 the state awarded him a silver medal, which marked an official acceptance of his work at the highest level. Between the 1960s and the 1980s Marjanović evolved from being perceived as a problematic Westernised singer with a bad voice, to being acknowledged as a Yugoslav legend (Panić 2001).<sup>16</sup> Finally, Marjanović's personal brand reached its final stage – he was 'exported' to the 'real' West. Namely, Yugoslav press started reporting on his international success and it was occasionally mentioned that even American press wrote about him, and that Italians regarded him as a Yugoslav hippie.<sup>17</sup>

**Conclusion: Marjanović as a quintessential Yugoslav product, a true (Slavic) legend or an 'urban myth?'**

The case of Đorđe Marjanović should not only be regarded as being in-between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, but can also be interpreted as a symptom of Yugoslav culture as a complex, multilayered and often compromising culture between East and West and, in addition, as a symptom of changes that were taking place from the early 1950s to the 1970s. In the 1950s Tito called for the educational measures to be used to persuade young people to be less fond of jazz and the ruling party's cultural politics continued to both emphasise the educational function of culture and, in musical life, prioritise the development of genres that it considered to be more enlightening than entertaining, such as classical music. There were, however, tendencies that urged the party to pay more attention to the ways that Yugoslav citizens were entertaining themselves, particularly through their consumption of popular music. In time, the construct of Yugoslav popular music was gaining more importance for the production of the state ideology (Vuletic 2011). The role of music at that

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<sup>16</sup> At that time, he was giving as many as 11 successive concerts in the Belgrade concert hall *Dom sindikata*.

<sup>17</sup> For instance, in 1969 Italian papers *La stampa* wrote about 'a young Yugoslav' who was 'an idol for the Soviets' and 'looked like a hippie' and his performances were considered to be equal to the ones by the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan and other Western stars (Ivačković 2013: 38).

time was more than just a cultural phenomenon. Music was a legitimate means of political and social change (Vučetić 2006: 71).

Even though Yugoslav musical scene witnessed many examples of the censorship, and in the 1950s the officials exerted their influence on one of the most successful Yugoslav pop singers of any era, Marjanović still became one of Yugoslavia's most popular musical exports. By the late 1950s, the institutional foundations for a Yugoslav popular music culture were set: radio and television stations, festivals and record companies were ready to produce and promote the soundtracks that would accompany the subsequent decades of Yugoslav history. At some point, Yugoslav cultural and political elites accepted popular music as an essential element of their citizens' cultural and social life. 'Young people should have fun,' as Tito stated in 1964 regarding the development of jazz and rock and roll in Yugoslavia (Tito 1978: 130). However, as the continued censorship of popular music would show, popular music was not only for 'fun' and it remained an arena for the negotiation of cultural and political identities in Yugoslavia. According to certain interpretations, official Yugoslav politics made a change when decided to tolerate the 'decadent sounds' and to allow different pop-music genres, including the potentially problematic ones, to flourish without much interference from the regime (Vuletic 2008: 874). In this respect, a variety of pop-music genres shared a socially and politically important feature: the capacity to group people in categories other than the national ones (Ramet 1994: 5). Thus, a broader platform of identification emerged, appearing depoliticised and providing a field of experience shared transnationally. Yugoslav *zabavna muzika*, as well as rock and roll from the 1970s onward, were among the most enduring transnational frameworks of popular culture, creating the feeling of being a part of a common Yugoslav pop culture (Pogačar 2008: 820–821). Moreover, Marjanović was seen as a result of the urbanisation of Yugoslav society, a 'forerunner' of rock and roll in general or of certain musicians that were not known in Yugoslavia, such as Elvis Presley (Savić 2007: 15).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Luthar argues that the political and economic processes in Yugoslavia were accompanied by social and cultural transformation, including a rearrangement of social groups, so that differentiation, urbanisation, and industrialisation brought with them new modes of community, new forms of social etiquette in the cities, and a distinctive new sociality, as well as new forms of self-understanding and self-cultivation and individuality (Luthar 2006: 236).

In addition, Marjanović became an ‘urban legend’, since he is sometimes connected with the entire process of the rise of urban culture in Yugoslavia (Pogačar 2008). For example, the very first graffiti in Yugoslavia was allegedly spray-painted by his fans on the building where he lived (Savić 2007: 15).<sup>19</sup>

When the time was ripe and the institutional field was set, this singer transformed from a problem into a brand. While his position had originally been construed as something strange and subversive in the Yugoslav culture, after he was accepted by a collective conceptually known as the Yugoslav youth<sup>20</sup> and began to be seen as relevant for Yugoslav society and culture, he was incorporated into the official discourse as something representative and typical for Yugoslav popular culture. Hence he became a symbol of modernisation, Westernisation (seen in a positive light) and urbanisation of the Yugoslav society. He has held that status until the present day and there remain many potential avenues for the construal of the ‘phenomenon Marjanović’ in scholarly discourses.

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<sup>19</sup> The graffiti entailed the statement ‘Đoka fans of the world, unite’ – an ironical rephrasing of the famous slogan ‘workers of the world, unite,’ which can be construed as ‘a penetration of the urban culture and its ironical discourse into the capital’ (Savić 2007: 15).

<sup>20</sup> According to Laughey, understanding youth as a social rather than biological concept is reinforced by the changing historical values, beliefs and attitudes of the young members of a society. The concept of ‘youth’ is actually a relatively recent one and it has been regarded as relevant in the research of popular music practices (Laughey 2006: 5–6). Here I wish to point to the importance of the concept of the Yugoslav youth as the one in relation to which the entire popular music culture was shaped.

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