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***World music in the Balkans and the politics of
(un)belonging***¹

The distinction between cultural traditions and legacies perceived as ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’, whether real or imagined, had a substantial impact in the development of contemporary *world music* in Serbia and throughout the Balkans since the 1990s (Čolović 2006; Nenić 2010). Historically, narratives, values and interpretations surrounding this ‘West vs. East’ dichotomy as well as ‘West/East vs. local’ set of social and cultural relations, changed considerably and had no fixed or single meaning, due to various ruling ideological formations that brought profound changes in the context of the tumultuous history of the Balkan societies. However, since the nineteenth-century formation of the nation-states in the Balkans and their gradual modernisation, Western features were predominantly presented as progressive and more desirable, while, on the other hand, Eastern (Oriental) elements were perceived in the dominant cultural and political discourses as detrimental remnants of the past Ottoman rule.

In terms of the symbolic geography, ‘Orient’ served as an ambiguous construct representing alien, exotic and sometimes despised (backward and ‘old-fashioned’) cultural Other (Said 1977), at times seen as a threat to the establishment and protection of ‘pure’ national cultures in the Balkan peninsula. Yet it was an inextricable part of the Balkan culture and history that was and still is hard to erase from collective memory and everyday enactment of certain cultural practices that persisted despite the efforts to thoroughly modernise Balkan societies. The ‘insertion’ of this foreign

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element within the bodies of allegedly ‘pure’ national cultures directly relates to the very ambiguity of the Balkans in terms of an imagined sociocultural space. As Maria Todorova puts it, this position could be described as ‘in-betweenness of the Balkans’ that draws precisely from the ‘East-West dichotomy’ (Todorova 2009: 18), and it also relates to the conceiving of Orient in terms of a ‘nesting Orientalism’ (Bakić-Hayden and Hayden 1992: 4), namely a tendency to view regions, cultures and religions ‘to the south and east (...) as more conservative or primitive’ (Ibid).

The distinction West/East translated into discourses surrounding musical practices as *alaturca* vs. *alafringa* (it. *alla turca*, literally ‘in Turkish style’; *alla franga* – in Western or European manner; for further discussion see Pettan 2007: 371–372 et passim): while the *alaturca* concept referred to the overall influence of Oriental culture and music within Balkan cultures,² it also signifies the common heritage of Balkan people(s), a shared reference point that nowadays – in the context of rediscovery of the common sentiments, intentions and goals taking place in the post-Yugoslav space, could serve as a basis for the ‘preservation and renewal of human musical resources’ (Pettan 2007: 375), and, if one may add, for the wider rekindling of the forgotten or ignored parts of shared collective memory in the context of reestablishing cultural and other links beyond national borders of the Western Balkans, and the Balkans in general. The so-called ‘Oriental’ features of music were commonly associated with the Ottoman legacy in Balkan cultures throughout the twentieth century, and even the most basic musical and stylistic elements, such as an augmented second or melismatic singing were often essentialised and turned into embodiments of loathed cultural Other. Sometimes the ubiquity and popularity of those ‘foreign’ elements led to scholarly quests to find and document their ‘true’ (e.g. national or racial/Slavic) source and disclaim

² The negative connotations of *alaturca* expression, and more broadly, of the Orient as a cultural construct, are related to a purist search for the intact or ‘most authentic’ national tradition, characteristic of several historical ideological formations: the establishment of the national cultures in young nation-states of the Balkans and the reshaping of the tradition towards more ‘Western’ features during the nineteenth century; the ‘return’ of the threatening cultural Other in terms of ubiquity of Serbian and Balkan pop-folk polygenre named ‘turbo folk’, based on tunes, scales and citations of popular music of various Eastern origin in the late twentieth century.

their Oriental origin. Certain musical traits were presented as if they had not stemmed solely or originally from Turkish culture during the longue durée of the Ottoman rule in the Balkans: for example, Bosnian scholar Vlado Milošević argued that highly ornamented and melismatic singing was not only typical of Islamic musical traditions, but also of the Byzantine, Serbian and Greek Orthodox chants, boldly concluding that the Oriental traces in the folklore of Balkan peoples are a product of belonging to the ‘Levantine circle’ (Milošević 1964: 13). Milošević was not alone in limiting the scope of possible or real Oriental influences: some prominent members of the early generation of folk music researchers who established the canon of national musical cultures in the Balkans were also questioning the origin of the elements of Ottoman legacy in music.³ Croatian scholar Franjo Kuhač claimed that the augmented second⁴ was not a typical trait of Arabic and Turkish music, but an authentic feature of ‘Slavic minor scale’ and the music of the Southern Slavs: ‘not knowing that the augmented second is a attribute of Slavic music, the Turks and Slavs of the Mohammedan faith utilise it abundantly, reasoning that it is the most suitable expression of the melancholy and the courtship [*ašikovanje*]’ (Kuhač 1898: [19] 193).

East, West and world music in the Balkans

The attitude towards the Oriental cultural influence in the Western Balkans became an issue once more at the very end of the twentieth century when, after the violent break of the SFR Yugoslavia, each of the newly formed nation-states sought to rekindle its ‘forgotten’ or ‘most authentic’ musical and cultural heritage. Singer of Neo-byzantine and Serbian Orthodox chants, Pavle Aksentijević, for example, regarded

³ For a detailed and critical discussion of representational discourses of local scholars regarding *sevdalinka* song, see Pennanen 2010.

⁴ In urban Balkan traditions, the melodic step of an augmented second is indeed often a trace of a *maqam* scale: many popular songs of urban origin most probably are reworkings of the popular tunes of Oriental origin, and therefore, they represent the shared regional inheritance from the period of the Ottoman Empire. However, one must be cautious not to fall into the trap of essentialism and to project some ‘cultural essence’ on a simple musical feature that solely (that is, isolated from the intramusical relations of a given piece/repertoire and also wider extramusical context) does not represent a pure embodiment of some unchanging and predetermined Culture, whether foreign or one’s own.

‘Oriental elements’ in music as something that degraded Serbian cultural heritage, and many members of the middle upper class in Serbia during the nineties condemned the popular music genre of *turbo folk* precisely on the same grounds (Đurković 2004; Nenić 2005). Yet one cannot pin down the conceptual network of ‘West’ and ‘East’ as a fixed set of images, associations and attitudes, since the meanings fluctuate in overlapping neo-traditional and *world music* genres that occupy the same (conceptual) space.

The meaning of these labels also changed considerably in the course of the last two decades, with the rise of the *world music* subculture in the post-Yugoslav space. *World music* scenes in the newly-established countries of former Yugoslavia emerged around two separate ideological pillars during the nineties: one direction led to the revival of rural folk music as an emblem of regional and national identity, and another towards blending of ‘strange and forgotten’ music sounds with contemporary music genres, in a fashion typical of transnational *world music* superculture at the time. Both trends were actually in line with the dominant politics of Balkan post-communist states, where the processes of reinvigorating separate and distinct national and ethnic identities by reaching to the past, also included the competition in terms of being the first to sell out the image of ‘exotic Balkanness’ to the West and the rest of the world. However, as *world music* cultural formations in the Balkans initially did not belong to the mainstream culture (and frequently opposed models and values of the 1990s regimes), world music movements took a different approach towards musical traditions and their various elements than dominant cultural mechanisms did. The music – be it ‘ethnic’, traditional or simply old, was constructed in terms of authenticity and celebrated as the *exemplum primum* of the distant past, the often romanticised *long-ago* that had more appeal to the audience than the more recent historical periods right before and during the rise of communism.

During the last decade, a new generation of neo-traditional artists and amateur performers turned their attention to the research and promotion of regional urban and folk music with a visible Oriental influence. As a part of the region’s historical legacy, this kind of music was underrepresented in the early days of local *world music* rise, as the scenes were chiefly focused on the authenticity, universality and ancientness of the village folk traditions. In contrast to that, a performative claim that ‘our music’ is actually all historical and contemporary music enjoyed by

intertwined communities of the Balkans, has recently gained much popularity among the regional world music audiences. This change of attitude is linked to the revivals of local traditions such as Bosnian *sevdalinka*, popular songs from Vranje region in Serbia, Jewish musical heritage (to name a few), or to the new fusions of local traditional folk music with middle- and far-Eastern sound that, for example, explore mutual grounds of modality and the *maqams*. If a rough periodisation could be made, the short history of Serbian and, partly, ex-Yugoslav *world music* formations could be divided into three periods. The initial phase in the mid-1990s was characterised by a search for the roots of national culture, with a substantial focus on rural folk traditions. At the time, *world music* scene functioned as a subcultural space, and to an extent, also as a form of counterculture. The early 2000s brought an appropriation of *world music* by the mechanisms of dominant culture, resulting in the commodification and the emergence of a prominent concept of *ethno music* that drew heavily on popular arrangements of rural folk music traditions. The last and ongoing phase of *world music* development led to a tighter networking of *world music* scenes in the Balkans. This fragile, yet thriving transregional network functions as a multicultural and intercultural space where not only musical forms of rural traditions, but also other, previously neglected parts of musical historical legacy such as the urban music with visible Oriental influence, receive more attention.

Starting approximately from the turn of the century, the otherwise insulated world music initiatives and industries of former Yugoslav countries opened up to collaboration. Individual performers began to work together and both well-known alternative festivals and newly formed world music venues drafted artists from the neighbouring countries, under the slogan of a common Balkan heritage and shared passion for the rediscovery of the roots. Two processes are at work here: linking across the national borders of ex-Yugoslav cultural space, with the institutions such as *Ring Ring* festival (Belgrade, Serbia), *Druga godba* and *Terminal* festivals (Ljubljana, Slovenia), *Ohridsko leto* festival (Ohrid, Macedonia), *Ethnoambient* (Solin, Croatia) that promote transregional cooperation, and bottom-up networking that involved both various artistic collaborations and the growing interest of local audiences for *world music* and ethno artists from the neighboring countries (for example, the recent and ongoing collaboration of Bosnian *sevdalinka* performer Damir Imamović and

Serbian singer of traditional music Svetlana Spajić). This newly formed interest actually marks a subtle, but important turn in the dynamics of the *world music* scenes of the region. The trope of ancientness and the affirmation of national identity in music declined, as they became just a few among several ideological discourses of Balkan *world music* socio-cultural formation. The change in the audiences' taste and the official politics of media apparatus gradually redirected the attention towards the parts of music heritage that displayed the traces of multicultural past of the region. That change was marked by several overlapping processes:

- the process in which the hegemonised forms of local, regional, national folk and post-folk music are challenged and redefined, in the passage from the economically and politically shattered late post-communism to the present-day neoliberal economic and political transition;
- the ongoing process of reconnecting the peoples of the former Yugoslavia on the grounds of shared historical instances of popular folk music (that had been neglected during the last two decades in order to affirm separate national cultures);
- the process of making visible musics of diverse ethnic and other minority groups.

All the aforementioned processes rely on the idea of a shared cultural experience and sometimes take the form of social activism by promoting the ideology of multiculturalism or even taking the side of the nascent political options, such as the New Left movement in several former Yugoslav states. This emerging structural juncture of musical practices, new cultural sentiments and worldviews opposes both the mainstream politics and the dominant paradigm of musical 'rediscovery of the roots' across the national borders in the Balkans. In order to describe this change more accurately, one may employ Raymond Williams' famous coinage 'the structure of feeling', the term chosen over more convenient phrases such as 'world-view' or 'ideology' in order to describe those impalpable but effective meanings, values and behaviors that are actively put into practice and made a part of a shared social experience (Williams [1977] 2009: 132). The 'structure of feeling' is an active process of choosing and living certain elements of social and cultural life characteristic of a generation or a period, 'a specific structure of particular linkages,

particular emphases and suppressions' (Ibid.: 134). So the recent turn in the growing sphere of Balkan world music, where different genres of traditional music that contain more 'Oriental elements' began to outpace previously popular rural traditions, materialises specific version of the Balkans-as-interculturalism, that stands in opposition to the dominant ideologies of insular national cultures. As such, Balkan world music network indeed carries the seeds of an emerging 'structure of feeling', linking altered cultural conceptions of 'Us' and close and distant 'Others'.

New approach to the past – new visions of the future

Novi sevdah

The transregional popularity of the Sarajevo-based singer Damir Imamović and his 'Sevdah takht' trio could serve as a good reference point for the new affective turn towards previously despised Oriental elements within Balkan music heritage. The rekindled popularity of *sevdah*, in terms of the contemporary reworking of *sevdalinka* genre, sprang during the last decade in Bosnia and very soon spread all over the Balkans. The performers of *novi sevdah*, as it is popularly labeled, belong to a new generation of traditional music performers that extensively research *sevdalinka*, pursue long-term artistic projects and sometimes also strive to do social activism through music. Imamović performs *sevdalinka*, Bosnian and Balkan popular urban song whose melody, arrangements and lyrics express or bring about a concept called *sevdah*: the complex emotional state of intertwined love, longing and sorrow.

Damir Imamović comes from the family of *sevdah* performers, as his grandfather Zaim was a highly popular singer of *sevdalinka* in socialist Yugoslavia, and father Nedžad, an excellent instrumentalist, also took a part in the development of the genre. Damir's *Sevdah takht* trio (with Serbian bass player Ivan Mihailović and Croatian percussionist Nenad Kovačić) plays contemporary *sevdah* or 'fusion sevdah' as they sometimes call it. Their music inherits traditional styles of *sevdalinka* by paying meticulous attention to the smallest stylistic details especially in Damir's vocal renditions, but also re-frames the songs by adding careful cross-genre imprints (jazz improvisation, folk fusion, guitar rock, blues) to classic *sevdalinka* repertoire (Plate 1). In a recent conversation, Damir stated that, although *sevdah* is most often associated with the Muslim people of Bosnia, it does not exclusively belong to a single ethnic community, since this trend

of claiming the sole rights over the music became particularly strong during and right after the 1990s. Instead, it is the music of socially deprived classes and groups, ‘the music of humiliated and insulted’, to use his exact phrase.

Plate 1. *Damir Imamović performing alongside Hašim Muharemović, a renowned Bosnian saz player (sazlija), performer and the author of many sevdalinka songs. Photo by Almin Žrno.*



Imamović acknowledges different historical shapes that the *sevdalinka* tradition took, from love songs with a strong Oriental features, to folkish popular songs ‘for the people’ popularised by state radio and television during the communism, to present-day *new sevdah*, that structurally comes close to the status of similar *world music* genres already rooted in some folk traditions, such as *fado*. *Sevdah* is thus no longer a single genre (if it ever was), but a layered body of overlapping historical variants, put into place by the processes of selective tradition that successfully combine and alter the idioms of ‘Oriental’, ‘Occidental’ and ‘ours’ in different sociocultural formations. That being said, the labels of ‘Oriental’, ‘Western’ or ‘Balkan’ still play an important role in *sevdah* tradition and also serve as powerful

social and cultural lenses that have a considerable impact on the imagining of 'Us' and 'Others' in post-Yugoslav societies. But, their meaning is relational, changing and also able to be charged with different ideological contents. As Damir Imamović points out, when musicians from the West play with him, they frequently highlight his 'Oriental' identity in music, while to the Eastern musicians' ears he sounds 'too white' or 'too tempered' (Nenić 2013). But the audiences of the former Yugoslavia that today listen to new *sevdalinka* do not highlight either its 'Oriental' or 'Westernised' features: rather, they regard it as a form of shared regional legacy that is also a strong and nowadays readily evoked symbol of the happier and not-too-distant past.

Sevdalinka, just like some similar Balkan forms (urban songs from Vranje, Serbia; urban *chalga* music of the Balkans) often carries the traces of Turkish and Arabic *maqamat*, and sometimes the structures of maqams such as *hijaz* and *nikriz* are easily discernible. In order to disassociate *sevdalinka* from present-day ethnic appropriations, Imamović first turned to the less known or even deliberately neglected part of the *sevdah* heritage, and then started to experiment with the traditional forms firstly by trying 'Western harmonies', and then by exploring the *maqam* potentials of *sevdalinka*. However, both approaches proved not to be sufficient, so Damir came to the conclusion that the Balkan *sevdah* tradition is 'a kind of *maqam* thinking within the tempered context' (Nenić 2013). This kind of interplay between the tropes of East and West is evident in the contrast between the name and structure of his music group: while *takht* is a term for Middle-Eastern ensemble consisting of 2 to 5 musicians, Imamović's trio comprises acoustic guitar (instead of Bosnian *saz*), electric bass and a whole variety of world's percussions. But the choice of *takht* is not merely a return to Eastern roots of *sevdah* music: the structure of trio and the way music is conceived also has to do with something very local, namely with the return to the chamber atmosphere of *sevdalinka* before its transformation into local pub (*kafana*) song in the interwar period.

By insisting on *sevdah*'s intercultural roots and the equal importance of its various historical layers, Damir Imamović's Sevdah Takht creates a unique reading of well-known local tradition, a reappropriation charged with a new ideological content. For a large part of its audience, *new sevdah* springs from the gap between the bitter reality of 'deprived' people of post-Yugoslav nation states and the strong sentiments evoked by the shared

popular culture of the Balkans frequently associated with the 'happier times' of the Yugoslav socialism. In their reception, Orient is no longer a synonym for worn out or despised spectre of a foreign culture that had violently invaded our own. This turn surely has seeds of something new, as the fear of Oriental features lingered throughout the twentieth century: Damir stresses out that some of the early *sevdalinka* sub-genres were put aside in the sixties and seventies, precisely because of their 'Oriental' character. For example, uneven rhythms were frequently erased, although they seemed to be an important part of *sevdah* legacy (Nenić 2013). In the early music folklore studies, uneven rhythmical patterns and the intervals such as the augmented second were treated in the prevailing positivist discourse of the time as musical features that denoted a direct link to Oriental or Ottoman music. However, the ascent of *world music* in the Balkans during the 1990s gave a new glow to the aforementioned elements, turning them into something uniquely local, but with a hint of an internal exoticism that still resides in the popular trope of 'Balkan music' as an eclectic 'melting pot' of musical cultures. Finally, a new ideological and material turn, as practiced by Damir Imanović, consists of acknowledging and praising the links with the Oriental traditions, but at the same time discovering the abundance of local (Bosnian and neighboring) traditions and the re-polishing of their unique and less known features.

The interplay of old and new tropes of West, East and local is especially evident in Sevdah Takht's popular song and music video 'Razbolje se lijepa Hajrija' [The lovely Hayriya was taken ill]. Released on Imamović's ninth and the band's first album *Sevdah takht* (2012), the song and the accompanying artistic video quickly went viral and gained much popularity throughout the region. The song about the girl Hajrija who is tended by three young lads has been a part of the *sevdalinka* repertoire for a long time. A famous interpretation of the song was recorded in 1976 by Himzo Polovina, Bosnian popular singer, composer and devoted collector of songs belonging to the *sevdalinka* repertoire. His interpretation echoes the character of then-popular song interpretation style nurtured by radio institutions with the singing in soft voice and modest use of vibrato at the end of the verse. Instrumental accompaniment is predominantly in minor mode and there are changes in meter between 2/4 and 3/4 measure. In Sevdah Takht's rendition, the underlining harmonies are completely

changed when compared to the versions that were popular before the 1990s: while Himzo Polovina's song leans toward well-established practice of radio arrangements of folk songs, Imamović's accompaniment echoes the modal atmosphere of *maqam*, thus evoking both the neglected history of *sevdalinka* and the present-day popularity of Oriental and middle-Eastern music. More specifically, the melody derives from the *maqam hijaz*, with the characteristic augmented second between hyperfinalis and the third step of the scale: a feature that is both in popular and scholarly discourses often cited as an epitome of the Oriental influence on the Balkan folk music (Plate 2). The even metrical distribution is transformed into the complexity of changing rhythmical patterns within the 8/8 bar, and the rhythmical division of 3 + 2 + 2, sometimes labeled as 'Oriental' in musicians' jargon, is highlighted (Imamović 2013). Singing also changed from the soft *naïveté* of Polovina to Damir's tighter vocal rendition, achieved by an Eastern technique called singing 'on the hard palate', according to the singer (Nenić 2013).

Plate 2. *Members of Sevdah Takht performing in Split (Croatia) in 2013. Photo courtesy of Damir Imamović / Facebook.*



Instead of a typically Yugoslav version of the oriental modernism characteristic of the *sevdalinka* repertoire before the 1990s, Imamović's interpretation comes close to a postmodern bricolage, where the tropes of Oriental and Western are infused with a new meaning, while stepping back in favour of celebrating the locality and hidden potentials of ideologically different readings of *sevdalinka*. However, not only are the melody and the arrangement significantly transformed, but the changes in tone and mood also take place in the overall cultural pretext of the work, transforming its ideological basis into a statement of contemporary rendering of tradition and, at the same time, the *re-reading* of the very same tradition in non-canonical manner. The playful sexual overtones already present in the original lyrics are additionally highlighted by the visual means, as in the music video, the role of Hajrija is cast as an urban girl who walks, rests and does fire *poi* art.⁵ Her intense stare into the camera and the way she is dressed and styled suggest that she belongs to an urban alternative subculture; moreover, her mimic and style suggest also an identity out of the traditional gender patterns, the identity that might be perceived as queer or even post-gender. So this 'new vision' of female sexuality and identity radically breaks with the patriarchal trope of humble pretty girls, and also shows that the 'postmodern' identities, sometimes mocked or despised as imports from the West, go along well with 'our' heritage.

I shall conclude by briefly returning to some of the remarks previously discussed. The tropes or constructs of 'Eastern', 'Western' and 'local' and their employment in discourses surrounding musical practices of the Balkans might seem elusive and hard to pin down, in contrast to the common idea, found both in non-critical scholarly interpretations and in everyday discourses, that the divisions between 'East and West' are easily drawn, both in cultural and musical terms. However, the elusiveness of the concepts is not a problem of ethnography (or a product of poor theory, for

⁵ [Lovely Hayriya was taken ill / Beneath a lilac and a walnut tree.
All the young lords visited in turn / But three young gallants kept on coming.
The first one told her: / 'Hayra, does it hurt?!' / The second: 'I'd suffer instead of you!' / The third: 'I'd die for you!'
Lovely Hayriya replied: / 'Neither suffer nor die for me, / Take off that shirt and lie beside me! / Seems like I'd be feeling better'.]
(Translation partially based on 'A green pine...', E. D. Goy, 1990; Source: Damir imamović's Facebook account.)

that matter), but a consequence of the fact that such discursive constructions tend to get anchored in a prevailing ideology while at the same time the actual social practices nurture several competing meanings that are overshadowed by a dominant metaphor, and therefore sometimes omitted from the 'official' cultural and academic accounts of music. My case study, envisioned as a sketch of a recent historical turn that takes place in world music formation throughout the post-Yugoslav space, hopefully shows that the imagery of East and West is evoked by both relying and contesting the common cultural habitus, when different readings of 'Us', 'Others' and 'Others-as-us' create a new ideological point not only for reshaping the well-known music such as *sevdalinka*, but also for reenacting different identities and affections not confined to the solitary spaces of post-war national cultures. Hence the metaphorical play of '(un)belonging': I believe that this new turn, this budding 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1977) within the *world music* network in post-Yugoslav space, weaves a new tapestry of both old and much-worn tropes as well as the new ones, thus allowing new political, identitarian and cultural possibilities or 'realities' for the people of the Balkans.

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