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TRADITIONAL SONGS AND THEIR MESSAGES IN THE CORONA PERIOD: AN EXPERIENCE FROM SERBIA

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Abstract: Folklore in so-called secondary oral tradition, i.e., in its 'neo-traditional' forms, has significantly changed its performing contexts in relation to the original context of traditional songs. In Serbia, traditional melodies gained new lives primarily in urban environments – at concerts, public and, more rarely, internal/private ceremonies, and at performances connected with church holidays. In these situations, the favourite pieces were those that were considered attractive to listeners because of their specificities in structure, form, melodic and chord/harmony characteristics; the functional aspect of songs became primarily aesthetic. However, during the Covid pandemic in 2020 the experience of the female vocal ensemble Moba from Belgrade, Serbia, showed that the function of songs may return to its ritual sense. In this period, the repertoire of the group was enriched by songs that regained the feeling of togetherness with colleagues and singers from other countries, since the direct contact with them was almost disabled. New experience was gained during preparations for the concert, which is analysed in this article according to the concept of "time, place and metaphor" suggested by Timothy Rice (2003). During this period, also partly due to the songs' structural elements and their original genres, the songs regained their original functions. This phenomenon might also be observed in the light of *universal structural patterns* and archetypes that conduct and arrange every human activity, according to synthetic anthropological research based on the results of the work of Levi-Strauss, Jung, Eliade, Propp, and others.

Keywords: community, Covid, performance studies, message, Moba vocal group, neo-traditional singing, ritual function, entertainment, Serbian traditional songs, universal structural patterns

INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

This article is dedicated to the topic of messages that performances of traditional songs might carry nowadays,[1] in times of pandemic, and is based on the first-hand experience of the author in the female vocal ensemble Moba in Belgrade, Serbia. This article is also the author's personal contribution to the group's work during the pandemic. The purpose of this study is to offer an answer to questions about the specific ritual messages of traditional songs which have been rediscovered today and have become relevant as a way of opposition to the painful and dangerous times of the pandemic. The article may also be seen as a response to reflections and suggestions of "time, place and metaphor" given by Timothy Rice in his article "Ethnomusicology in times of trouble" (2014), as well as to a paper specifically dedicated to folklore during the pandemic by Smiljana Đorđević Belić (2022). Taking all these insights into account, my task is to contribute to the subject of the increased importance of rituals, rituality, and ritual music in extraordinary, critical life conditions.

Vocal group Moba was founded in 1993 by two ethnomusicologists – the author of this article and Dr Sanja Ranković – and has been led by them until today. The aim of the group is to perform "rural traditional songs of Serbs in Serbia and in other regions where Serbs live or used to live",[2] that is, from different geo-cultural regions and with different stylistic features, and to share specific musical forms with the audience. In 2020, the year to which this article refers, the group consisted of seven active members, preparing a concert under the heading "Musical journey with the group Moba: Female folk songs in the traditions of Serbian and other European peoples" (see Figs. 1–2). The conductors of the group also have wide experience in practical pedagogic work, teaching Serbian traditional songs.

A general question might arise about the function of traditional songs in their public performances in "original" forms. Namely, traditional rural songs, with their roots in rituals with specific aims are now sung at concerts, in generally entertainment-conditioned contexts, and are thus in a substantial functional opposition with their own nature. In my opinion, exactly this opposition and a kind of unnatural symbiosis need a special scholarly attention. Aside from possible seeing it through the aspects of *time, place, and metaphor* of their performing (Rice 2003; see also Zakić & Rakočević 2012), it might also be explained through the writings of one of the most significant researchers in the field of performance studies, Richard Schechner.[3] According to him, reflections on the performing aspect of traditional music today might be founded on the dichotomy *ritual-efficacy* vs. *theatre-entertainment*, applicable to any culture (Schechner 2002: 613–614, 624). This method is, in the author's opinion, also

applicable to all cases of performances of traditional songs and experiences shared by ethnomusicologists-practitioners all over Europe, especially among those who study *ethnomusicology at home* (see Stock 2008: 12).

Figure 1. *Poster advertising Moba's concert held at KC GRAD on 20 December 2020 for the purpose of recording and YouTube broadcasting. Design by Jovan Gligorijević.*

Figure 2*. Moba group after the concert in December 2020, from left to right: Ana Milosavljević (professional dancer), Dragana Jović (linguist), Jelena Martinović (ethnomusicologist and actress), Jelena Jovanović, Sanja Ranković (ethnomusicologists), Dr Aleksandra Pavićević (ethnologist and anthropologist), and Maja Stojanović (ethnomusicologist). Photograph by Marta Janković.*

When speaking of the Covid pandemic time, ethnologists have confirmed that in situations of uncertainty in the past, with "empowered danger for people, cattle and crops, so, in conditions when the community's integrity is disturbed to the greatest extent" (Bandić 1978: 117), rural communities had a strong need for integrity, which was achieved through ritual practices. This way the community needed (/needs) to "alleviate increased insecurity and uncertainty; to prevent amplification of inner conflicts in a community ... in more difficult life circumstances" (ibid.: 116). Singing on such occasions might be designated also as singing in the state of emergency, with a conscious or subconscious intention to bring back formulas and sounds that used to play a significant role in providing well-being of the traditional communities. The hypothesis that is going to be elaborated in this article is that today this function of songs might also be valid about live singing and communication through living sounds and songs that people share in "contact" communication, not through digital devices.

This study could be regarded as a result of different approaches, chosen according to specificities of the subject and of the given context.[4] A synthesis of the basic ethnological knowledge, performance studies, and newer achievements in ethnomusicology and anthropology – autoethnographic/self-reflexive research, artistic research, and applied ethnomusicology experience – has been made. This methodological direction might also be seen as a turn from the lenses of contemporary methods applied to contemporary phenomena in today's reality of life, to those of "classical" ethnological and anthropological knowledge of historical traditional societies, and to a cooperation of these two aspects.

The auto-ethnographic/self-reflexive approach in this study is based on the sense of this notion from the 1970s: with the aim of researchers to "conduct and write ethnographies of their 'own people'", with undoubted and foregrounded "inclusion and importance of personal experience in research" (Adams & Ellis & Jones 2017: 1). It is about the intention derived from the auto-ethnographic research to "show people … the meaning of their struggles" (ibid.).

These approaches were not chosen in advance, but the reflexions produced by the author's inner personal processes led to the conception of this article. Hence also a need for another tool applied here, artistic research in a self-reflective approach, since the main observations in this article come initially from parallel performing and reflecting on musical experience, not from a rational scholarly approach. The performer/author is engaged in this research, making her position "reflexive", as well as that of the insider/outsider and of the observer/observed, including "music-based research methods" (Mani 2017: 246).

The main topic of this article might be regarded as a continuation of Rice's remarkable article "Ethnomusicology in times of trouble" (2014), with the aim to "accumulate more case studies of music in times of trouble", especially when

it is about the music in times of disease (Rice 2014: 199) – as a case study this might enlighten the topic from one more point of view. Moreover, the activity that is going to be presented in this article can be interpreted as a resistance to the danger of disease – not through medical knowledge, but through a combination of ethnomusicological knowledge and musical practice, which might evoke spiritual and emotional (self-)healing, starting from the emotional level and from the artistic action as explained by Charulatha Mani (2017: 249). The premise is that such a practice might be suggested as a ground for a "new … mode of cultural and social behaviour" (Rice 2014: 199), derived from the explicit ethnomusicological knowledge, personal life, and performing experience.

The social and musical scope of Moba's work could be regarded as an example of "collectivities and forms of self-organization [which] continue their work in the often less visible zones between the public and the private" (Vujanović & Cvejić 2022: 14–15). Moba's work, in this particular case and in general, has been directed mostly to small-scale audiences that encompass our friends who share the same musical taste and sensibility, other performers in Serbia and abroad, fellow ethnomusicologists, fellow singers, and pupils. So, the context which is referred to in this article is also of a limited scope.

It is important for this study that the case elaborated here originates in Serbia – a country in southeast Europe, on the Balkan Peninsula, with the majority of South Slavs of Orthodox Christian faith. Serbian people survived the troublesome twentieth century,[5] which ended with the disastrous breakup of the common country, Yugoslavia, and NATO bombing its successor, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, i.e., Serbia and Montenegro.[6] After two decades of the twenty-first century with changed political settings, marked by assurance that the country will reach its prosperity, the Covid pandemic occurred, with its overwhelming threats. One can only imagine how social stability has been endangered and why the individuals suffer(ed) for many different reasons.

MOBA, ITS WORK, THE AUTHOR'S PLACE IN IT, AND RITUAL NATURE OF TRADITIONAL SONGS

It has repeatedly been stressed and discussed in literature how the "secondary tradition", for example, neo-traditional approach (Zakić & Nenić 2012: 170) in interpreting traditional songs, as a kind of revitalisation (Åkesson 2006: 1), has fostered the contemporary life of songs, mostly within substantially changed contexts, and has consequently changed the function of this music into primarily aesthetic one. As in other countries, in Serbia these songs are also performed mainly on the stage – at concerts, festivals, public (and, more rarely, internal)

ceremonies, which are often connected with church holidays. These situations generally turn the function of this music into aesthetic one (as also in Poland; see, e.g., Grochowska 2017: 68), so the songs for the public performances are most often chosen according to this criterion. Their musical qualities respond to general contemporary musical taste, partly formed through the influence of commercial musical genres popularized by the media; these are songs that are considered as musically attractive and cathartic, lyrical by their content, and talk about love, nature, are humorous, or narrative.[7]

By the year 2020 Moba had already had a rich performing experience in Serbia and abroad. We had sung not only in towns, but also at concerts and festivals in the countryside, partaking in the same events with traditional singers, and learnt about the original, natural functions of the music we shared with them in different situations. On all these occasions, and generally, cultivating types and styles of Serbian rural traditional singing from different geo-cultural regions, Moba has had significant experience with different musical folklore genres, and also with ritual year cycle songs (see Jovanović 2016a), but they are generally much fewer in the group's repertoire. Still, according to the group's general exposure to the public and their presence in the media (which the group has not insisted on throughout its activities) and according to specific experiences, in my opinion, Moba's activities are directed more to efficacy than to entertainment.[8] The idea has been to transfer the unique experience of these intervals, chords, atmospheres, and moods (ethos), not to make the audience entertained. All the time we have been faithful to the songs themselves, not considering the stage appearances as crucial to present ourselves as singers or artists (see Jovanović 2016b).

Aside from tending to reinterpret successfully the right stylistic features and expressions in interpretations, the group does its best to find a clue for successful and functional communication with the audience. The group has gained important experience, taking part in the same events with the older generations of singers at village gatherings and festivals. After a reasonable course of time, we managed to notice something important: the older generations used to communicate in other ways than we did, in not concert-like, but in participatory contexts (see, e.g., Cambria & Fonseca & Guazina 2016).

There have been two layers and two kinds of aesthetics specified in Serbian rural singing tradition: two-part or one-part songs of the *newer vocal / musical layer* (so-called *na bas*), and songs that belong to the *older vocal / musical layer*. The *newer* Serbian rural songs are in homophonic texture, the scale close to diatonic, and with perfect fifth in cadence. They respond to the common contemporary way of thinking and understanding the world;[9] their main function is entertaining and enjoyment, and less that of ritual. So, it is

obvious that folklore in contemporary "secondary oral tradition" exists in its modern cultural and social positions and roles. In new contexts of its public and private performances, the favourite pieces appeared to be those most attractive to listeners, accepted through their aesthetic function. However, new experiences suggest there is a need for reconsideration of these premises, parallel with the one about the notion of old ritual musical patterns in a contemporary context. On the other hand, songs of the *older* Serbian vocal layer, culturally and functionally closer to ritual genres (usually recorded in the field with clear ritual functions), are generally more rarely present in the programmes of public neo-traditional performances. The fact is that old ritual songs seem to be expelled from repertoires spontaneously, particularly those that belong to the annual ritual cycle (related to the seasonal cycle of the farmers' year), due to their hermetic character and communicative codes that relate to the specific way of communal listening and understanding. Of course, there are some rare exceptions, programmes and conceptions which focus on the old-time/archaic, ritual-like songs, for example the festival The Oldest Songs of Europe (*Najstarsze pieśni Europy*), the International Summer School for Traditional Music (both organized by Fundacja Muzyka Kresów, Lublin, Poland),[10] and artistic multimedia projects of the Artship Foundation (San Francisco) and Halka Gallery (Istanbul).[11] These projects cultivate and favour a specific musical sense, as well as a general interest in ancient folklore formulas (in music and other traditional arts), which reflect natural mathematical orders and patterns, such as symmetry and the golden ratio that may be found in traditional music forms; unfortunately, ethnomusicological studies of a wider interdisciplinary approach that would show these connections are clearly quite rare.[12]

Having in mind that "[n]o performance … is pure efficacy or pure entertainment" (Schechner 2002: 622), and, on the other hand, on the premise that the ritual nature of traditional songs is determined by their musical structures and semantics, I would formulate the main thesis of this study: generally, human contexts in which songs are performed could be regarded as potentially ritual ones, and music within them might be a powerful tool of a ritual way to provide a good effect on the performers – and on their audience.

In numerous thorough analytical ethnomusicological studies, it has been shown and proved that the archaic ritual songs themselves carry a certain potential as parts of rituals. Furthermore, as it is supported by scholars in the field of performance studies, musical rehearsals are regarded as "liminal phases of rituals", and therefore, potentially ritual situations. According to Schechner, "the workshop-rehearsal phase of performance composition is analogous to the liminal phase of the ritual process" (Schechner 2013: 66; Deriu 2013: 23). Within this thesis, we may also consider and observe rehearsals for public performances

of traditional songs. Moreover, the statement about the notion of performance as an event speaks in favour of it: "The understanding of ritual and play, as processes applying to a wide range of human activities … is a crucial point in Performance Studies and a very important development in the social sciences" (Deriu 2013: 23); there is no reason to exclude the phenomenon of performing traditional songs from these findings. On the other hand, traditional musical pieces, having their origin in symbiosis with rituals, carry specific power as their elements, potentially applicable in different times and contexts, even (and why not?) nowadays. "Rituals are performative: they are acts done; and performances are ritualized: they are codified, repeatable actions" (Schechner 2002: 613). Moreover, "[a]nthropologists … argue … that theatre … exists in every known culture at all times … . These activities are primeval, there is no reason to hunt for 'origins' or 'derivations'. … Sometimes ritual, sports, and the aesthetic genres … are merged, so that it is impossible to call the activity by any one limiting name" (Schechner 1988: 6).[13] Concerts of traditional music may be regarded as *performative representations* that fulfil not only the need for a functional ritual, but also for entertainment, mediating also elements of nature through them (Schechner 2002: 615). Also, Moba's performances might be observed as events that occupy the middle between aesthetic and social drama: "ritual performance... is especially powerful because it equivocates, refusing to be solely aesthetic (for looking only) or social (wholly committed to action now); rituals participate both in the aesthetic and the social, drawing their power from both and operating within both" (Schechner 2002: 629).[14] Moreover, it is a fact that arts and rituals developed and existed one next to the other through history, so the aspects of the primary aesthetic nature of Moba's work coincide also with the ritual function and aesthetic of the songs.

It is not the case that our rehearsals and the sequence of chosen songs followed any firm pattern, as traditionally structured rituals do (Todorović 2005: 20–22, 449–469); still, some elements of our work may seem to show a connection with *universal structural patterns* (ibid.). These kinds of reflections, in tendency to a synthetic approach to musical structure and function in this article rely on findings of renowned world anthropologists and psychoanalysts, synthesized in the works of Serbian ethnologist and anthropologist Ivica Todorović, who writes:

> *For a methodological approach, … extremely important are the results of investigations of such authors as Claude Levi-Strauss, Vladimir Propp, Carl Gustav Jung, and Mircea Eliade, who moved the limits of knowledge in a qualitative, i.e., in a substantial sense. Exactly the works of these four authors represent examples of a fascinating intellectual breakthrough into*

> *the world of seemingly chaotic facts that succeeded in detecting a complex and hidden order – based on very particular laws.* (Todorović 2005: 24–25)

The limits of the scope of this article do not allow wider explications of these statements, but there are references to sources at all the places relevant to the present occasion.

Relying on theoretical findings in Todorović's synthetic works, I will share my observations, based on ethnomusicological knowledge and practical performing experience, as well as experience of being in different situations with gathering people who can sing. The main thesis is that every human gathering or action, having its focus, produces a resultant of more directions of will, acts, thoughts, and emotions, shared by a community of a smaller or larger scale at a particular moment. This resultant has its character, its questions, its hidden or shown joys and/or fears; all of these tend to find their resolution in a common act – one of which could be, and often is, a song or a dance, with a specific character, ethos, and the kind of structural codes that respond or answer the questions and/or needs of the community. Through a catharsis of commonly performed songs or dances, a kind of answer, or consolation is provided to community's questions, fears, thoughts, etc. In such a way, songs might become powerful means of a transformation of the reality so as to "bridge" troublesome situations or emotions. This way the songs gain the roles of the old-time ritual songs. Some contemporary situations might show not only the need for such ritual situations, but also the (real?) effects of songs to resolve them, so that the songs overtake, or regain, a real ritual function in given circumstances. That is exactly what this article is about: its aim is to give a comment to the present-day activities and events connected to "secondary tradition", i.e., its "neo-traditional" forms, in the pandemic conditions that affected our lives.

SHIFT IN 2020: PLANNING A CONCERT IN THE CONDITIONS OF THE PANDEMIC

In early 2020, the group came up with the idea to prepare a concert which would represent Serbian songs and traditional songs of other peoples – songs that the members of the group (primarily myself) received, i.e., learnt from our colleagues during meetings abroad: at workshops, or just listening to them. These were songs from Moba's journeys in Epirus (Greece), North Macedonia, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, and from individual acquaintances from Istria (Slovenia), Russia, Ukraine, Latvia, and Georgia. The concert with such a programme was

scheduled for December 2020.[15] A short time after that, in March, the pandemic was proclaimed.

The pandemic made an immense impact on the quality of our lives. It is not necessary to recall the stressful new reality of isolation, avoidance of close contacts and expressions of closeness with dear people, which marked the period of springtime 2020, when the first preparations started. It is already well-known that at this moment series of reactions on the public level, particularly small-scale societies/communities, as well as on personal level occurred, producing feelings of "general … existential fear, inability of planning and uncertainty, … which turned into a state of prolonged anxiety" (Đorđević Belić 2022: 192). Especially discouraging for musical gatherings was "fear of demonised otherness (embodied in the virus itself, as well as in those infected with the virus)" (ibid: 192). In these circumstances, specific *communavirus* appeared, redefining individuals and communities (ibid.) and, as reactions to the new situation, specific forms of behaviour emerged.[16]

Preparing our concert in the settings of a widespread illness was a task that we ourselves were not sure how to deal with. In any case, the first step was putting on paper ideas of particular songs, thinking of them and listening to them internally, but still without any rehearsals, being cautious because of the disease. It was my task to take care of the repertoire, programme, and method(s) of teaching my colleagues different new singing styles – as well as different two- and three-part textures and canonical forms.[17] The course of preparations was guided by my personal choice of songs, and in fewer cases by preferences of my companions, relying on our intuition in the need for specific contents and musical sensibilities. The concert programme was based on our usual practice: the concept was not rationally or scholarly structured but followed the criteria of similarities and differences in music and in contents of songs from Serbian as well as other traditions. At first, we wanted to show the similarities in the musical structure and musical character of these pieces. This approach enabled a new perspective to all songs. At the beginning, we could not know about the outcome – whether the concert would really take place and even whether the whole group would participate in it, due to general uncertainty within each day. And from this uncertainty, from day to day, following the task of drawing up the programme, I found and then kept a *thin line* of thinking and inner reflection about particular pieces tied to specific annual cycle periods and holidays that were coming into our reality. Still, as the year went by and the spring set in, the ideas started to be formed about certain songs that would answer our needs of this specific *time of trouble*, including those with certain ritual functions.

Since we were not able to travel, and we intensively missed our contacts with colleagues abroad, our concentration spontaneously turned to invoking

memories of our encounters with them and the songs we had heard from them or shared with them. For us singing their songs had the meaning of our endeavour to regain the community, and hence to revive the feeling of strength in togetherness through a specific repertoire that we started to build. In due course of time, due to the lockdown, me and my colleague, ethnomusicologist Branko Tadić, were unable to travel and join our friends abroad, including my travelling to Poland in summer. So this concert was also a kind of substitution for travelling that we were deprived of.

After an unsuccessful and frustrating attempt to sing together via electronic devices during the early spring of 2020, we decided to start with live rehearsals, fully having in mind the potential danger and risk of such a plan. Since we wished and hoped to stay safe and healthy, we were cautiously looking for a solution to realise our idea to rehearse and to be together despite the difficult conditions, against the expected way of behaviour, i.e., against the expressed doubt that "music will be produced in such settings" (Rice 2014: 192). This situation of life threat, of avoiding contacts, and togetherness in living sound and living voice situations (Jovanović 2017), according to our previous singing routines was something hostile, and it demanded a kind of defence from it. Now it is clear that in our case music was a tool of oppression and resistance to the pandemic.

Thus, when warm days in early summer arrived, Moba's rehearsals started after a long break. Now, if we take into account the previously presented premise and perceive our rehearsals as a liminal part of the ritual, we could also look at them through the lenses of *time, place and metaphor* (Rice 2003). Namely, the *places* where we did our work were suited for avoiding being infected by the virus – both indoor and outdoor. The indoor space was a very spacious room and we (usually four of us) took seats in corners, quite far away from one another, making it impossible for our aerosols to mix. The outdoor space, however, was definitely our favourite locus solution: the terrace on the top (eighth floor) of a residential building: in the open air and from high above the town and other people a beautiful view of the town and the river offered a significant relief for us in many senses.[18] In both places the only "physical contact" between us was through the sound that we produced.

The *time* of our rehearsals was late spring, the whole summer and early autumn, afternoons and dusks. Gatherings for us also meant daily breaks after working time, terms for contemplation and ending of the day in a pleasant mood with the familiar ones, doing something that released from worries and provided a kind of escape from harsh everyday threats. Being in the open air, we had a strong feeling of being de-located from usual, common, endangered spaces and contexts. And the most important thing: these rehearsals, with

chosen traditional songs that speak about goodness, about health, about transcendent situations directed to the divine, gave us a feeling of real consolation and catharsis.

We had no trouble learning the foreign repertoire; nor did we have a feeling of uncertainty in *embodying the otherness*; the process of learning/passing on the songs from me to the group floated easily, with enthusiasm.[19] It was also a kind of present to the group, or a confession, with all these beautiful melodies and contents that I showed them for the first time. Having in mind all the psychological burden of fear and anxiety, this context might also be read as a space for a handover that might not be repeated in the future: we were not sure whether we will still be healthy even tomorrow, and whether at any moment any of us could catch the virus. For this one strong reason, songs were shared with ease, widening the scope of listeners and receivers of universal messages, like a part of my own musical heritage, received through calmness, in communities filled with confidence and devotion to traditional songs. Maybe it was also an idea of sending a message of a small-scale action for feeling safe, encouraged, accepted, and healthy, enhanced with traditional songs of our people and of the peoples among whom we had good friends.

Thus, it might not be surprising that gatherings for singing in such conditions were motivated by intuition as a form of *archetypal mythological context* (Todorović 2005: 456; see Jung 1996 [1964]: 56, 72–88) that used to serve, and might do so today, as a life-defence device, used throughout history as a powerful weapon against harm to the community. This way, the new situation affected Moba's concert plan even in a positive way, since the new context and surroundings of work on our new repertoire significantly differed from the usual.

In early summer another aspect occurred: in live singing situations, songs appeared to us in a new light with their contents, ethos, and messages. Existing in their living sound again, they ceased to be just specific examples of different peoples' traditions, but they spontaneously turned, semantically and musically, to important parts of our lives in current surroundings. It turned out that the most reliable conception might arise also from the songs' original functions/genres, due to the knowledge and experience of culturally similar festive occasions of the countries and peoples belonging to Balkan, Slav, Mediterranean, and (Indo) European cultural context. Thus, the new criterion for choosing songs led to the aim to create a programme with living eloquent and pictorial testimonies of the messages that we were about to tell the audience through the songs. The criterion of the messages was also a challenging one, since it was closely connected with their inner structure, genre, and semantics.

The above-mentioned concert was held in December 2020, in the empty hall of the KC GRAD (European Centre for Culture and Debate) in Belgrade (Fig. 3).[20]

Figure 3. *Empty chairs at KC GRAD, December 2020, before the recording of Moba's performance. Photograph by Marta Janković.*

PLANNING OF THE CONCERT PROGRAMME AND NEW EXPERIENCE WITH RITUAL SONGS

The beginning of springtime inspired my work on the first of the chosen songs from the foreign cultures. Since the beginning of the Covid period in March, its course overlapped with spring and all-encompassing blooming and growth, and, as we as living beings naturally felt, rising hopes for the best course of events, as a great encouragement coming straight from the nature. This part of the year initiated a need for a reliable, generationally confirmed, solid backbone for hope and faith like a kind of battle for survival in our life in isolation. From this circle of thoughts and impressions, as the introductory song to our "excursion" to other traditions – not in the sense of the concert programme, but in the sense of priority to rehearsals, I chose a Latvian three-part spring and summer song "Zīdi, zīdi, rudzu vuorpa" (Bloom, bloom, rye ears), which I had learnt from my dear colleague Zane Šmite from Riga during a summer seminar in Lithuania in 2019. I recorded all the three parts of the song with all the lyrics and sent it to my fellow singers, so that they could practice singing it.

The strong ritual content of this song may be "read" from its musical structure and form, as well as its immensely warm and effective ethos. There are similarities on many levels between this song and variants of Serbian old ritual

songs from southern (Metohija region, town Prizren) and southeastern Serbia (Leskovac region) for Easter and Pentecost; especially the similarity in their original ritual functions added a specific quality to the act of singing it right there, right then. The similarities are as follows: with songs from Metohija – in content, metro-rhythm, versification, partly in form, and partly in melodic motifs (Georgevitch 1928, ex. 410); with songs from Leskovac, ritual *kraljice* (queens') songs for Pentecost – in metro-rhythm, versification, and form (Petrović 1989, ex. 44). All Latvian and Serbian variants mentioned here have a symmetry in form, including refrains that are in concordance with the length of the sung verses. A significant difference is revealed in texture: all Serbian variants are one-part/unison, *queens'* songs are sung antiphonally, with short two-part moments in the overlapping of starting and ending melostanzas, but the Latvian song is three-part, which was quite a new experience for Moba. This texture gave a significant new "colour" to well-known patterns and hence it was very attractive to be learnt and sung. Besides, there are similarities in its content with the Serbian one from Metohija, which encompasses a mythical place of a room/tower with three gates.[21] For me personally, this song had and still has a meaning of an intimate *welcome* to the spring-summer period. As an invocation for the summer part of the year, this song in Moba's interpretation gained its full potential when we managed to learn it better, exactly in the middle of summer 2020. Audio example 1 shows one of our first attempts to sing it together (with some obvious flaws of the interpretation, typical of the process of work).

Example 1. *"Zīdi, zīdi, rudzu vuorpa" (Bloom, bloom, rye ears), Latvia* (Moba, August 2020).[22]

Another musical folklore genre that appeared as highly needed and welcome during the process of our work in the Covid period was toasts (Serb. *zdravice*) – sung good wishes for a long and healthy life, with lyrics "Many Years" as a refrain (originating from Greek *Εις πολλά έτη*). As a way to defend from the disease and also from fear – to revive, to regain strength – we included songs with those lyrics in different languages: Church Slavonic and Georgian. This genre also meant an encouragement for/from dear and loving fellow singers, and/or also as a response to a recorded singing message that we received that summer from our colleagues from Poland in times of being apart. Thus, following the wish to toast to ourselves, to our dear ones, to colleagues from whom we had learnt it, and to our community as a whole, we prepared two variants of "Many Years".

The first one was "Mnogaya leta", in the Church Slavonic language, in three-parts, according to the recording that ethnomusicologist Anna Koropnichenko from Kyiv, Ukraine, had made in Makarovskyi region, village Nizilovichi, Kyiv vicinity.[23] This magnificent piece is also characterised by the perfect symmetry of (4-part) form, and of melody that gradually develops in consistent second movements, which produces an effect of high dignity, and with several climaxes at places that could represent the golden ratio in form. My colleague Branko Tadić and I received and learnt it at the (already mentioned) Summer School in Poland. In summer 2020, after receiving a greeting from Poland – a video with this song and our names mentioned in it – I could not help but teach Moba to sing it and make these emotions and good wishes physically present in sound here, in Belgrade, at the peak of summer, with all its brightness and joy, and to pass on to us the encouragement of the community that had presented it to us. We also included a slight change in the lyrics, so as to address Mr. Jan Bernad from Lublin. The characteristic feature that we especially wanted to revive may be heard in audio example 2.

Example 2. *"Mnogaya leta" (Many years), Kyiv vicinity* (Moba, August 2020).[24]

The same motive to sing a traditional toast in times of pandemic made us eager to learn also a three-part variant of "Many Years" from eastern Georgia. This song I learnt from my Georgian colleague Nataliya Zumbadze during a conference in London in 2001, and after that I also listened to it several times in Tbilisi, at symposiums on traditional polyphony (in 2010 and later). Good wishes, including the ones for good health, seem to be the right gift in times of pandemic. The way Moba learnt it (also from me) might be heard in audio example 3.

Example 3. *"Mraval zhamieri" (Many years), eastern Georgia* (Moba, September 2020).[25]

Lithuanian archaic polyphonic songs *sutartinės* are a musical tradition that impressed us very much. We all agreed one of them had to be presented at the concert. I learnt a *sutartina* with the first verse "Trepute martela" (Jump up, sister-in-law) from my colleague Daiva Vyčinienė[26] during a workshop at a conference in Dnipro (Ukraine) in February 2020; it is about the cultivation of flax. Such contents coincide with a similar motif in a cycle of Serbian traditional Midsummer songs. We practiced this *sutartina* with great enthusiasm, feeling it to be familiar to Serbian and Balkan second chord sounds and finding calm-

ness in its ancient ritual melody, hoping to achieve a specific ethos through the song. In this song the form of a canon throughout the song, which does not exist in Serbian older tradition, was new to us. The notion of "being in accordance" / "getting along" (Lith. *sutarti*) in *sutartina* singing, with matching solo parts in intonation, timbre, rhythm, and character, brought a new experience to the group, since Serbian old-time songs with second chords (traditionally emically considered *beautiful*) have different performing laws and demands. Besides, our choice to sing this song was also followed by a wish to share such singing experience with our colleagues in Lithuania and in a way to ask them for help *in times of trouble* through a ritual song with a similar function and aesthetic norm. The way Moba did it can be heard in audio example 4.

Example 4. *"Trepute martela", northeast Lithuania* (Moba, November 2020).[27]

Another example of Moba's remarkable acquaintance with *others*' traditions was that of Epirotan multipart songs, which encompass traditions in Greek, Vlach (Aromanian), and Albanian languages and their variants. In summer 2001, during the festival Poliphonikou tragoudiou (Polyphonic singing) in Epirus, Greece, we were listening to many live performances of such songs. Being inspired by (as we considered it) "magical" Epirotan vocal and instrumental music within the landscapes and soundscapes of that area, we learnt a song from this tradition from our friend and singer Maria Tsukala from the group Haonia from Athens. This tradition is particularly interesting for us because of its common features with South Slav/Serbian older bourdon and heterophony (two- and three-part) singing (for more details see Golemović 2014). Especially during the summer of 2020 this song carried for us a significant remembrance of Epirus, its people, its music and dances, which we loved to reveal again, as shown in audio example 5.

Example 5. *"Yani mou, to mandili sou" (My Yani, your handkerchief), Epirus, Greece* (Moba, November 2020).[28]

Being inspired by singing in the open air, on the top of the high residential building, we chose some songs as closing ones for our rehearsals (as events with a kind of ritual meaning). As the best common choice, according to the pandemic situation, we considered a lyrical Serbian song of a newer vocal layer from western Serbia, "Mog pauna glava bole" (My peacock has a headache). The older variants of this song used to be sung in unison or in heterophony

in vernal rites and at weddings, imitating a peacock with a mimetic dance for fertility. But in the last decades of the twentieth century it was traditionally transformed and kept alive as a song of a newer rural style. The content was changed from the previous form that accompanied the mimetic dance to a lyrical song, and this was followed by a change in the structure: the old ritual refrain was significantly prolonged and became a real melodic and textual climax of the song. The changed content calls the dear one(s) for healing, for being healthy, for recovering from disease, and there is a promise that there will be someone around to help them get well; there is also a nuance of mild irony and humour in the lyrics. The structure, form, free rhythm and cathartic melody with bourdon-like accompaniment (keeping the link with old-time singing) produce an effect of a call and invocation of encouragement and healing.

After summer dusk, when the sun had already set and darkness had fallen upon the city, we enjoyed singing this song from high above, loudly and in high intonation, with a full strength and dynamics, like sending a message to all our fellow citizens – as a good wish to stay healthy, and maybe even as a call to join us so as to defeat the illness. We did not know whether anyone heard us and whether we had any audience; anyway, for us, it was a nice form of relief from the isolation. This song may be heard in audio example 6.

Example 6. *"Mog pauna glava bole" (My peacock has a headache), western Serbia* (Moba 2001).[29]

CONCLUSION

The central issue in this article is the possibility to re-actualize the ritual function of songs through applying ethnomusicological knowledge, singing practice, and art dimension of the singing act and to discuss whether the re-actualized ritual function might lead to individual and group self-healing and self-help *in times of trouble*. This particular experience described and discussed in this article shows that the messages of old ritual songs in neo-traditional performances are topical again as tools in life-threatening conditions, with all their crucial musical and semantic features. Hence, in this case, our experience is that the function, once changed from ritual to aesthetic, within the context of danger and closeness of life threat, in need of introspection in silence (as stated in Žebeljan 2021 [2017]: 343) and penitence instead of fear, might regain its ritual function once more.[30] Within the conditions of the pandemic, there also

appeared "an opportunity for transindividual social transformations on micro- and macroscales" (Vujanović & Cvejić 2022: 15). This was exactly the case with Moba's members and with me personally.

Verbal and musical phrases in traditional songs, not seeming existentially significant in usual conditions, might become apparent and clear in the changed context of life threat, as signs for the way to continue living and being peaceful, grateful, and joyful, despite serious difficulties. In this light, we reveal messages while singing, making them topical *here* and *now*, and reviving them on aesthetic and ethic levels. Getting in touch with songs of different folklore traditions appears to be a result of the awareness of the universality of the qualities described above, or we might say, a result of the universal value/virtue. Here we come to the point where we could draw a parallel between this particular case and a concept of ritual behaviours during the traditional rites, with the aim to find possible traces of *universal structural patterns* and archetypes. According to the results of the analyses conducted in other segments of (Serbian) traditional ritual life, this bond between rituals and universal natural laws has already been elaborated (Todorović 2005, 2009). Carl Gustav Jung and Claude Levi-Strauss show in their works that "a claim that myth matrix, universal structure of thinking, archetypal reality, and spirit that is self-realizing through culture are not just abstractions, but very specific categories of reality" (Todorović 2005: 377, 388).

Applying traditional ritual musical codes from different cultures might lead to a new, universal, or at least bi-cultural or poly-cultural rituality. Charulatha Mani has said: "When cultures come in contact, there is friction, but the same friction can give rise to warmth" (Mani 2017: 252) – which I think applies very well to Moba's work discussed in this article. What is particularly interesting is that the old-time/archaic traditional ritual musical formulas both from one's own and from foreign cultures might even interfere, which could be said about Indo-European, East European, and Slavic cultural and musical context. This experience might also be of wider significance, since all the nations and communities in their musical past have had musical patterns with a potential for such effects, and ethnomusicologists-practitioners are the ones who have the keys for those. Such a topic demands a much broader space and probably cannot fit in the frames of this single study. But the objective of this article is to direct scholars'/ethnomusicologists' attention to this particular aspect of regarding traditional songs in their new life nowadays, especially in hard times caused by different reasons.

The traditional songs that we deal with are chosen according to their functions, and according to their aesthetic value as musical pieces. Here we also understand their regularity in form, where symmetry, the golden ratio and other

factors occur; mathematical and geometric principles in musical structure, but, above all, in the human mind and also in culture, are stressed by Levi-Strauss: "in his works he tells about the way our mind functions in … all the fields of culture, finding geometrical order, in accordance with the attitude that myths act in a special, could be said in a perfect way, without people being aware of it, as the mind 'has its reasons not known by man'" (Todorović 2009: 15; Levi Strauss 1966: 190). These principles of the human brain enable remembrance of elements of oral cultures and communication through these codes (Paich 2014: 11, 32–33).

In the conditions in which the pandemic "suspended the global temporality" (Vujanović & Cvejić 2022: 15), the music, i.e., traditional songs fulfilled the gap of isolation and anxiety and provided a more calming course of time with a strong feeling that seemed not to be visible/felt/experienced so clearly before.

In commentary to this case study, leaning on Timothy Rice's concept, the aspect of *metaphor* might be read as follows: "music is a symbolic system or text capable of reference not only to already existing music but also to a world beyond music" (Rice 2003: 166). This statement, applied to research in this article, refers predominantly to the function of ritual songs which, above all, shows the power to revive the feeling of community, of togetherness, especially in the cases of physical distance. Besides, it seems that this event remains in the long-term memory as a lasting experience, exactly as it was put by Jan Bernad: once being in an embrace of common singing, people remain there, in the common sound, no matter how much time might pass (personal communication, 2008). The second reference to Rice's *metaphor* provides the function of ritual songs as having the power to revive one's existence in a specific time of the year, celebrating vitality and sharing the nature's power (as also stated by Titon 2021: 1). Lacking the support of the former everyday commodities (which we usually take for granted), the fundamental human needs and emotions have come to the surface again. In such circumstances, (traditional) songs with their specific structural elements from the past might just cease to 'decorate' special moments in our lives but might start to regain their substantial meanings. This makes Moba's songs at rehearsals and concerts ritual, as Richard Schechner has said: "If the performance's purpose is to effect transformations, to heal, or to appease or appeal to transcendent Others … to get 'results', then the qualities listed under the heading 'efficacy' will most probably prevail" (Schechner 2002: 622); choosing some songs of ritual meaning, putting them in the concert programme as a "redressive action is what is done to resolve the crisis" (Schechner 2002: 626). This might be a general new (universal) context for new supposed life of traditional songs and for a new function of "reading" traditional ritual songs.

Having all this in mind, we could also consider the notion of ethnomusicologists' / neo-traditional singers' highest "cultural competence", as articulated by Ewa Grochowska (2017: 67), with their potential strong impact on human social/communal and individual situations and relations.

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NOTES

[1] The notion of *messages* was suggested by the title of the symposium organized by the Literary Museum in Tartu, Estonia, in 2020 (see https://www.folklore.ee/regilaul/konverents2020/, last accessed on 1 October 2024), on which occasion the first draft of this study was presented.

[2] See https://www.rts.rs/page/radio/sr/story/1466/radio-beograd-3/3458667/studio-6--zenska-pevacka-grupa-moba.html, last accessed on 1 October 2024.

[3] Colin Turnbull's contribution (e.g., 1990) is also important in the study of this topic.

[4] The author cordially thanks the anonymous peer-reviewer of this article as well as colleague Dr Liina Saarlo for her support and unconditional understanding during the long course of this text preparations in times of trouble.

[5] On Serbian history during the two world wars see, e.g., Fryer 1997; Živojinović 2015, as well as the editions by the Genocide Victims' Museum in Belgrade (https://www.2.muzejgenocida.rs/sr/izdanja-muzej-zrtava-genocida-beograd/books-in-english, last accessed on 1 October 2024).

[6] On the breakup of Yugoslavia, see, e.g., Woodward 1995; Zimmermann 1999 [1996].

[7] The main reason these songs spread among the young singers is that the teachers themselves, including me, choose them as good, effective examples of particular ethnic tradition(s); they rarely deal with ritual genres, being themselves distanced from this kind of folklore expression. This statement is based on the author's own work experience with singers at the International Summer School for Traditional Music, organized by Fundacja Muzyka Kresów from Lublin, Poland (the author was engaged as the instructor for Serbian traditional songs twelve times in the period 2006–2019). See, e.g., https://niematerialne.nid.pl/Aktualnosci/details.php?ID=1956, last accessed on 1 October 2024.

[8] During a concert within the festival Baltica 2002 in Vilnius, a member of Moba, D. Jović, could not participate in the group's singing because of her illness, and she was present in the audience. After the concert, she said to us: "All performers were doing their best to be cheerful, smiling, to make their appearances communicative, attractive for the audience. Only you and the North American Indians were deadly serious while singing/performing. That was a very remarkable difference." And that is true; we always considered our songs, especially those of older tradition, as musical pieces that demand special attention that has been far away from entertainment.

[9] Examples of such attractive Serbian love songs are the ones that appeared in CD editions of young performers in Poland and in Lithuania. They were accepted so well because of their universal musical language, which was also the main reason that my colleague Branko Tadic and I were showing and teaching them at seminars abroad (primarily in Poland): "Tri devojke zbor zborile" (Three maidens had a talk) from West Serbia, a newer musical style, performed by Polish singers B. Drozd and E. Kurilyk in neo-traditional, a cappella manner (Drozd & Kurilyk 2018, No. 12) and "Sinoc sjala jedna zvjezda mala" (Last night a small star was shining) from Bosnia, a newer musical style, performed by ensemble Sen Svaja from Lithuania (Sen Svaja 2018, No. 4).

[10] See https://kurierlubelski.pl/jan-bernad-z-osrodka-rozdroza-dla-muzyki-punktem-wyjscia-jest-cisza/ar/13538120?fbclid=IwAR34fx88x7inhHK-nBGad4RijJC5vhIEkQpbps8QItfGYTVfMixzDCl3Xtk, last accessed on 1 October 2024.

[11] See, e.g., https://youtu.be/ShT-87R5iCY, last accessed on 1 October 2024.

[12] As an example of a highly successful model of interdisciplinary ethnomusicological approach to ritual songs, with insights into astonishing correspondence in result of archaeological, historical, ethnological, and linguistic findings is the book *Sutartinės* by Daiva Račiūnaitė-Vyčinienė (2002). An excellent approach with both ethnomusicological and semiotic analyses is adopted by Mirjana Zakić (2009) in the book *Ritual Songs of the Winter Season*.

[13] Rehearsals themselves are also seen as universal human activities, as follows: "rehearsing or in other ways preparing actions; and making ready places where people can gather to perform and witness performances, are all integral to being human" (Schechner 2002: 614).

[14] Here is the definition of ritual performance by the Museum of International Folk Art, which refers to Moba's work and, probably, most neo-traditional ensembles led by ethnomusicologists throughout Europe: "Ritual performance is one way that people connect with the sacred realm to bring overall wellness to their lives. … To some, ritual performance is prayer. To others it is a way to express religious or cultural heritage or to affirm one's devotion by carrying out a particular commandment and

practice. Dance, complex musical scores, sacred sounds, repetitive beats, and shamanic movements are considered here" (see https://www.internationalfolkart.org/exhibitions/sacred-realm/ritual-performance/, last accessed on 1 October 2024).

[15] The group gained financial support from the Ministry of Culture of Serbia for concert preparations.

[16] One of them is the appearance of vernacular *folklore of the pandemic* in which it is even "possible to recognize deep folklore matrixes" (Đorđević Belić 2022: 191–193).

[17] The group's work has generally been based on the knowledge and skills of its two founders and conductors; on this occasion the main responsibility of choosing the repertoire and shaping it in musical sense were on me, so I did my best to dedicate myself to the task and to fulfil it with the engagement of vocal, reflexive, ethnomusicological, and aesthetic experience.

[18] I find it quite appropriate to say: our common feeling up there might be compared to what was expressed by Apostle Peter during his stay on Mount Tabor with Christ the Lord and with Jacob and John, Moses and Elias after Transfiguration: Lord, it is good for us to be here! (Mt 17:4).

[19] It seems important for this article to indicate the root of this word: "from Greek *enthousiasmos* (ἐνθουσιασμός) – 'divine inspiration'; *enthousiazein* – 'be inspired or possessed by a god, be rapt, be in ecstasy'; *entheos* (ἔνθεος) – 'divinely inspired, possessed by a god'; *en* (ἐν) – 'in' + *theos* (θεός) – 'god'; see https://www.etymonline.com/word/enthusiasm, last accessed on 1 October 2024.

[20] The recording of this concert is available on the YouTube Channel of the KC GRAD (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVbE2IZY-gQ, last accessed on 1 October 2024).

[21] In the Latvian variant, through the first gate the Sun is rising, through the second the Sun is setting, and through the third a girl is passing, with a myrtle garland on her head. In the Serbian variant, the first gate is of gold, the second is of pearls, the third is of scarlet; in another variant, the first gate is of marble, the second of pearls, the third of gold; in some variants, the fairy who built the tower is sitting on the third gate (Pitulić 2018: 95–97).

[22] Available in the online version of the journal at https://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol94/audio/example1.m4a.

[23] A published performance of this song is on a CD of Anna Koropnichenko's students' vocal ensemble Otava, named *Forgotten Songs of Kyiv Region* (2005).

[24] Available in the online version of the journal at https://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol94/audio/example2.m4a.

[25] Available in the online version of the journal at https://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol94/audio/example3.m4a.

[26] Moba got acquainted with this tradition and the Lithuanian group Trys Keturiose performing it at the festival Baltica 2002 in Vilnius, Lithuania. This encounter strongly encouraged Moba to keep singing songs of the older Serbian tradition.

[27] Available in the online version of the journal at https://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol94/audio/example4.m4a.

[28] Available in the online version of the journal at https://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol94/audio/example5.m4a.

[29] Available in the online version of the journal at https://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol94/audio/example6.mp3.

[30] Such a phenomenon has already been noticed in Serbian traditional practice, namely in the case of brass music, whose function shifted twice throughout the twentieth century: from ritual to aesthetic and back to ritual; see Golemović 2006: 221, 222, 224.

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