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SINGING TO THE ACCOMPANIMENT OF THE GUSLE IN SERBIA: A LIVING ANCIENT PERFORMING ART

A story about singing to the accompaniment of the gusle, an element of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of Serbia inscribed in the Representative List of the ICH of Humanity in 2018, particularly regarding its safeguarding, is an illustration of the close connection between traditional folk art, education and science.

In Serbia, the gusle – a simple, folk, single-stringed instrument – primarily accompanies songs about events from the legendary past, both from the distant and near history, of mythical and historical heroes. The key actor is the guslar – an epic singer who accompanies himself on the gusle; the persuasiveness of the performance depends on

his creativity and charisma (cf. Djordjević Belić, 2017). However, the presence of an auditorium – a social context – is an essential condition for this communication with ritual elements (cf. Lajić Mihajlović, 2014). The song-message performed by the guslar contains the historical memories and life experience of ancestors. Thus, the guslar becomes an intergenerational mediator and educator of the audience. Consequently, such art practice contributes to cohesive relationships in the community and becomes a constructive part of its identity.

The musical component is determined by the relationship between the voice and the gusle; the instrument functions as a ‘sound mask’, which is the reason it is tuned to match the vocal range of the guslar, while the contemporary performance aims towards the unison of the sound, which might give the impression of the instrument being subordinated. However, by ensuring the continuity of the sound (and while the singer takes a break), it is precisely the instrument that is imperative for underlying the temporal dimension of



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Types of the gusle with different ornaments

the performance. Moreover, the overall expressivity is also influenced by the construction of the instrument (with a single string), the materials from which it is made (especially the strings, i.e. from horsehair) and the archaic way of playing (in a single position, often with only three fingers), resulting in a narrow range, an untempered scale, and the flageolets' tonal timbre.

In the past, singing to the accompaniment of the gusle was a completely oral tradition – the guslar himself improvised both the poetic and musical content during the performance, and the transfer of this artistic skill took place unmediated. The playing technique was learned by observing experienced guslars and trying out the memorised movements. On the other hand, the ability to create and perform the song was acquired with frequent and focused 'active' listening, memorising the plot of the poem, noticing the constructive elements and the principles of their combination, as well as their setting to the music, all of which is developed through performances, i.e. by communicating



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Members of the Martać family, v. (village) Plavkovo, Southwestern Serbia

with the audience. The more intensive development of literacy and, later, the dominance of the written word over the oral culture ushered, above all, the creation of collections of recorded texts – as cultural artefacts (albeit impoverished for an important musical dimension) – and a further affirmation of this practice by the researchers – writers, which can be regarded as the beginning of this legacy's protection. The highest credit for introducing the value of Serbian singing accompanied with the gusle to a broader public goes to Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (1787–1864), a pioneer of Serbian folkloristics. With his collection of *Serbian Folk Poems*, he made it possible for Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and the other greats of the European cultural scene to become familiar with Serbian epic tradition which, in turn, influenced its additional specific assessment in the domestic environment. Moreover, the printing of epic poem collections, along with the widespread literacy of the population, led to their more significant influence on the quality of the practice of singing with the gusle. Namely, the effort to memorise and

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perform fixed texts led to a gradual disappearance of the guslars' creativity in the poetic realm – with the guslars becoming primarily musicians – i.e. the creators-performers of a vocal-instrumental 'piece' set to the existing poetic template, while the task of writing new epic poems was assigned to the poets. Nevertheless, traces of the complex abilities of guslars from the epoch of oral tradition are still found in some contemporary guslars and epic poets.

Further development of the specific relationship between studying and protecting singing with the gusle as a folk art is followed through the efforts to record the sound dimension of the performance via audio recording, when this technological innovation became a part of the research methodology; M. Murko, G. Becking, W. Wunsh, G. Gesemann, M. Parry and A.B. Lord were among the first ones who made sound recordings of singing with the gusle (cf. Lajić Mihajlović, 2014). Furthermore, as a cultural expression that was of particular importance to the Serbian people, singing with the gusle was promptly included in the domain of the music industry through discography, public concerts and competitions, as well as the mass media. A record of singing with the gusle is found among the first commercially released 78 RPM shellac records in the Southern Slav region in the beginning of the 20th century (Lajić Mihajlović and Đorđević Belić, 2016), and the first mass regional competitions for guslars were organised in the 1920s (Lajić Mihajlović, 2016). As a symbol of traditional culture that was supposed to be bypassed on the path towards "a new culture of a new society of the new multinational state", according to the government of the Socialist Yugoslavia to which Serbia belonged after World War II (and additionally as a symbol of the particular ethnic Serbian culture), the gusle experienced strong marginalisation as an 'unwanted heritage' on the one hand. On the other hand, as a means of expression that was close to the people, singing with the gusle was used to promote the new politics and its ideology by means of a new repertory – about the heroes from the immediate (partisan, communist) past, including the contemporary events at that time. As expected, the newer generations of guslars slightly transformed the inherited artistic expression under the influence of the media and commercial culture in the changed circumstances of life, in urbanised villages and industrialised cities. The war events that followed the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s were reflected in the content and in the aesthetics of singing with the gusle. However, the return to peaceful life brought the rehabilitation of the 'classic' repertoire and style of guslars.

Although during the Yugoslav period the guslars' art drew the attention of scientists dealing with traditional culture, the 'wartime guslars' scene' and its

production from the end of the 20th century were particularly attractive to researchers. It is interesting to note that certain anthropological criticisms have even condemned the entire practice of singing with the *gusle* (cf. Trubarac Matic, 2018), which additionally influenced the negative reception of this practice among the public. Therefore, it can be observed that the praxis of singing to the accompaniment of the *gusle* in Serbia in the beginning of the 21st century was heavily loaded with wartime rhetoric and nationalism, with a rather poor balance considering a small number of younger *guslars* in comparison to the number of *guslars'* societies. Certain circumstances during the beginning of the 2000s would become important for the rejuvenation of the *guslars'* ranks and the 'replenishment' of the atmosphere among them.

Although, as previously mentioned, the tradition of epic poetry has been the object of attention of both foreign and Serbian researchers for more than two centuries, the paucity of complex approaches required by the folklore expressions of the syncretic nature, as a consequence, emphasised the artefact – the epic poem itself – at the expense of the performance and, ultimately, of the people whose cultural trace and part of cultural identity it is. By virtue of a set of circumstances, mutually independent but synchronously realised field research works on the *guslars'* practice from the perspectives of ethnomusicology and folkloristics resulted in the creation of an informal network of scientists and *guslars*, individuals and institutions interested in preserving the art of singing with the *gusle*. Within this network, the most important place is occupied by the *guslars'* societies assembled under the Association of *Guslars'* Societies of Serbia, as well as the state-funded research institutes, and above all the Institute of Musicology SASA and the Institute for Literature and Art in Belgrade. Through their research projects and the collaboration of scientists with *guslars'* institutions, a documentation base was set up, which turned out to be extremely important for later endeavours. Namely, the initiative to introduce singing with the *gusle*, together with other traditional forms of musical



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Participant of the Festival of young guslars/gusle-players (Kraljevo, Serbia, 2011)

expression, in the system of state music education, followed by the accession of Serbia to the UNESCO Convention on ICH (2010) and the inclusion of singing with the gusle on the ICH National List (2012), provided the opportunity to work in an institutionalised manner in the field of preserving singing with the gusle. The education of young guslars within music schools has proved to be extremely demanding, both in terms of organisational circumstances (such as the formal legal status of folk guslars as teachers and so on) and that of the curricula, which includes projecting the dynamics of progress, criteria of assessing students' work, and harmonisation with other subjects in the framework of education in classical music (cf. Lajić Mihajlović, 2012).

Similarly, the registration procedure to be included in the National List did not go entirely 'smoothly'. In this regard, what caused controversy was the fact that the local communities of the practitioners – the guslars and their societies – were insufficiently informed about the principles of the ICH Convention, the inventory procedures, the rights and duties of the signatories with regard to the consent of the communities, as well as the initial inexperience of the proponents in the implementation of the Convention by competent state institutions. Nevertheless, an overwhelming satisfaction prevailed because singing with the gusle was already added to the National List in the first cycle of entering the elements. It turned out that this was very important for both the respect and self-esteem of guslars as well as for those who were able and obliged to help protect this type of expression. Since then, a series of projects have been realised with the idea that singing with the gusle should be rejuvenated in the media, that it should be presented appropriately and that the methodology of learning to sing with the gusle should be improved. In the sphere of promotion, the epilogue of the first season of the TV show *I Have Talent* in Serbia (TV RTS 2012) played a major role, with the victory of young musicians, the sister-brother duo Bojana and Nikola Peković, who played the gusle and the accordion. This 'glocal' combination, initiated by the producers, turned out to be exceptionally attractive, especially as a young girl found herself in the traditionally male role of the guslar. Although female guslars are also mentioned throughout history, this event had a significant impact in boosting interest in the gusle among the younger generation, including girls. Of course, media promotions have been undertaken by renowned guslars. The increased interest of the guslars' guild community, as well as a wide circle of lovers and devotees of this art, to add their heritage to the ICH list was the main reason for the nomination of singing with the gusle to be enrolled in the UNESCO Representative List (2017).

Although Serbia's nomination correctly indicated that geocultural zones wherein singing with the gusle is found do not coincide with contemporary

state borders, its addition to the said list, as a result of Serbia's success in cultural policy, was followed by a negative media campaign in some neighbouring countries. An additional problem emerged owing to the inadequate and essentially unprofessional reporting and reaction of the Serbian mass media. Although one can assume that all this had to do with the current political relations between these states and day-to-day political events, the reality is that singing with the gusle – in spite of all of its artistic qualities and educational values, coupled with the label of the representative element of the ICH of humanity – is not seen as worthy of media attention. In particular, it is not sufficiently attractive for the front pages and breaking news, where it appears primarily in sensationalistic anti-commercials of culture.

Several tasks are placed in front of all those who care about the preservation of singing with the gusle as an ancient art with specific aesthetics and extraordinary educational value. It is necessary to work on encouraging the current guslars and educating new ones, in order to popularise the gusle as a sound symbol through new music genres but, above all, to try and preserve the fundamental thread of heritage, of the expression that has been validated through the psychological-emotional effect of 'amplified words'. The archetypal humanistic values that gusle refer to are the basis for cultural diplomacy; the comparably large number of examples of the epic heritage of mankind presented in UNESCO's ICH list indicates the potential for comparatively established representations of this kind of heritage at international concerts and festivals. In times of virtual collectivism, peer violence and surrogacy, the affirmation of a real community, of close kinship and friendships, of an ethical code of conduct defined by the principles of honour, truth loving and loyalty through singing with the gusle possesses a powerful cultural and educational potential. Seen precisely in this way, singing with the gusle is an ICH of utmost importance not only for Serbia but also for the entire contemporary world.

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