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## THE TAMBURITZA EXTRAVAGANZA AND ITS “EVOLUTION” IN THE AMERICAN TAMBURITZA MUSICAL ECOSYSTEM\*

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ФЕСТИВАЛ *THE TAMBURITZA EXTRAVAGANZA* И НЕГОВА  
„ЕВОЛУЦИЈА” У МУЗИЧКОМ СИСТЕМУ АМЕРИЧКЕ ТАМБУРИЦЕ

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### ABSTRACT

The Tamburitza Extravaganza, a musical event in the United States organized by the Tamburitza Association of America (TAA), has presented tambura-based ensembles for over 50 years. At the event, American stylistic variants of Croatian and Serbian music are performed to exuberant diaspora audiences, and musicians are honored for sustaining tamburitza music. Drawing on the author’s experience as an Extravaganza performer, interviews with TAA members, published TAA documents, and published tamburitza sources, the Tamburitza Extravaganza is analyzed as a *sui generis* music festival using the musical ecosystem model.

KEYWORDS: Tamburitza (ensembles), Croatian diaspora in North America, Serbian diaspora in North America, musical ecosystem, sustainability.

### АПСТРАКТ

*The Tamburitza Extravaganza* [Тамбурашка екстраваганца], музичка манифестација у Сједињеним Америчким Државама коју организује

\* For the purposes of preparing this study, current and former TAA Board members generously shared their experiences and recollections: Richard Krilich, Kathy Katich Zust, Daniel Ovanin, and John Morovich. Nikola Krčadinac also shared his experiences as a dance instructor and attendee. I would like to express my sincere gratitude for their assistance and friendship.

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Тамбурашка асоцијација Америке (ТАА), већ више од педесет година представља тамбурашке саставе. За заинтересовану дијаспору се у оквиру манифестације изводе стилизоване америчке варијанте хрватске и српске музике, а музичарима се одаје почаст за очување тамбурашке музике. На основу искуства аутора као извођача који је наступао на овом фестивалу, интервјуа са члановима ТАА и објављених докумената ове асоцијације, као и других објављених тамбурашких извора, *The Tamburitza Extravaganza* се у овом тексту анализира као *sui generis* музички фестивал уз помоћ концепта музичког екосистема.

Кључне речи: тамбурица, тамбурашки ансамбли, хрватска дијаспора у Северној Америци, српска дијаспора у Северној Америци, музички екосистем, одрживост.

## INTRODUCTION

The Tamburitza<sup>2</sup> Extravaganza, a musical event organized by the Tamburitza Association of America (ТАА) – a nonprofit, community-based organization – has presented performances of tambura-based ensembles<sup>3</sup> for over 50 years. “Ganza” (as it is affectionately known by attendees) is unique in several dimensions; as a specific performance occasion for tambura-based ensembles, as a socio-cultural event for Croatians, Serbians, and non-Slavic guests in North America; as a musical event organized by musicians and carried out in the context of diaspora social life but outside the American musical industry; and as an expression of trans-generational values in contemporary diaspora communities. Although it resembles a music festival in its presentation of performing musicians, the term ‘festival’ appears nowhere in ТАА documents nor in promotional information about this *sui generis* event.

Using the model of musical ecosystems, this study considers Ganzas and the ТАА from a historical perspective, seeking to understand the motivations and guiding principles for their establishment, the impact of these principles over the last 50 years, and their prospects for the future. Special consideration is given to the ТАА mission for the sustainability of American tamburitza music.

2 ‘Tamburitza’ is the conventional American spelling (it has been included in North American dictionaries for at least 30 years) of the Croatian and Serbian term ‘tamburica’, the diminutive form of ‘tambura’. Croatian and Serbian Americans have altered the spelling of common Croatian and Serbian words to make them easier to pronounce by English speakers. Thus, it is common in tamburitza settings to see ‘tamburash’ for ‘tamburaš’ (a tamburitza musician, plural ‘tamburashi’) and ‘brach’ for ‘brač’ (the tenor melody instrument).

3 Tambura refers to a family of a Balkan long-necked lutes; see Vukosavljev (1990), Leopold (1995), Ferić (2011), Forry (2011), MacMillen (2012), and March (2013).

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As defined by Schippers and Grant (2016, 333), musical ecosystems<sup>4</sup> permit us to approach "music cultures as ecosystems ... [providing] dynamic model for understanding and supporting sustainability".<sup>5</sup> In their "Ecosystems of music" illustration (341), the factors or forces active in a musical ecosystem comprise a template for all such elements that must be considered in a holistic view of musical cultures. I interpret 'musical ecosystem' as the sum of interrelated processes that enable a given musical practice and the musical expressions to which they give rise: all expressions of musicking,<sup>6</sup> such as melodies, rhythms, repertoire, instruments, musical style, modes of listening and learning, and occasions for music and dance.

We can consider musical ecosystems on multiple levels. On a national or regional level, a musical ecosystem could represent all the processes and products that comprise multiple musical practices in North America. On the level of a specific genre or musical practice, a musical ecosystem could represent all the processes and products that comprise American tamburitza musicking.

This study concerns the related musical ecosystems of North America at large and American tamburitza practice, with a special emphasis on the infrastructural processes that support musical organizations. In Schippers and Grant's five-domain framework (Ibid.), the "Regulations and infrastructure" domain identifies several factors or "forces" that can affect the sustainability of a music practice, including "Music institutions and organizations", "Places to perform and create", and "Grants, awards, sponsorship and subsidies". These three factors, as expressed by the TAA in the Extravaganza, are the focus of this study. The technical musical dimensions of tamburitza musicking – in particular, of the distinctive American tamburitza style and the song and dance repertoire in which it is manifested – are summarized for contextual understanding, but a detailed musicological analysis is beyond the scope of this study.<sup>7</sup>

This study is based on the author's experiences with the Extravaganza since 1977 as a performer and TAA member, on interviews with TAA members, and on published TAA documents, as well as on other published tamburitza sources. My perspective is hence at once an outsider's and an insider's: as an outsider, I came to tamburitza music as a non-Slav engaged in ethnomusicological research; as an insider, I have performed as a tamburash at community events for over 40 years.

4 This study draws on the work of Schippers and Grant (2016) to elucidate a framework for the analysis and support of traditional music practice. Other contemporary efforts, such as the Center for Music Ecosystems (2023), seek to identify and strengthen factors that promote social change and foster sustainable development locally, nationally, and globally. The use of the ecosystem analogy in applied ethnomusicology has been present since the early 1970s (Titon 2009).

5 Grant (2018) defines "music sustainability" as "the ability of a music genre to endure, without implications of either a static tradition or a preservationist bearing".

6 For the purposes of this study, the term 'musical practice' covers all the activities that would be subsumed in Small's (1978) notion of "musicking".

7 The five-domain framework provides a rich model for understanding all aspects of a musical practice. While factors of all domains are present in American tamburitza practice, only infrastructural aspects are analyzed in this study.

## CROATIANS AND SERBIANS IN NORTH AMERICA

Croatian and Serbian immigrants were present in North America by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it was the mass migration period of 1870 until 1924 that led to the establishment of Croatian and Serbian communities that remain active.<sup>8</sup> Most were from Austro-Hungarian territories: principally from the Dalmatian coast and Dinaric hinterlands, with smaller numbers from Slavonia, Vojvodina, and Bosnia.

Over time, first-generation immigrants formed community institutions to help new arrivals and foster mutual aid. Serbian Orthodox and Croatian Catholic churches were established, as were mutual aid societies such as the Croatian Fraternal Union (CFU) and the Serbian National Federation (SNF). In addition, numerous private enterprises, in the form of saloons and boarding houses, provided practical assistance and formed the basis for the new communities.

The original cultures of first-generation immigrants were transformed in North America. Although basic national and confessional allegiances remained – Croatian national identity and Catholic faith, Serbian national identity and Serbian Orthodox faith – regional cultural affiliations became weaker over time.

In the period between the two World Wars, the second diaspora generation maintained and strengthened community organizations. Although the rate of immigration dropped dramatically, communication with the homeland areas was improved. Croatian and Serbian communities became close during this period, due to a common language and cultural values, and to the common experience in densely populated immigrant neighborhoods of the mining and industrial areas of the American Midwest.<sup>9</sup> There were generally warm relations between Croatians and Serbians, intermarriage was common. It is still common to hear people who grew up in this environment speak of “our people” or “our Slavic people”, meaning mostly Croatians and Serbians.

New Croatian and Serbian immigrants after World War II arrived without this sensibility and often with an active antipathy. Their arrival caused changes in some communities, which tried to accommodate the new arrivals while keeping the earlier sense of goodwill. In some cases, the new arrivals formed their own communities or instigated a reorientation of existing ones. New immigrants continue to arrive, joining existing communities and in some cases finding marital partners from the existing communities. Changes in immigration notwithstanding, the common social and cultural experience of Croatian- and Serbian-Americans of the second and third generations in North America has led to the sense of a shared Slavic culture. This sensibility has given rise to a distinct North American tamburitza practice.

8 For more information about Croatians and Serbians in North America, see Bodnar 1985, Govorchin 1961, Kisslinger 1990, Lukić-Krstanović and Pavlović 2018, and Prpić 1971.

9 The principal cities, with their surrounding areas, were Pittsburgh, Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee, Cleveland, St. Louis, and Toronto.

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In the mass migration period, most Croatian and Serbian immigrants came from homeland regions where tamburitza was popular (March 2013, 85). The evidence of tamburitza ensembles<sup>10</sup> from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is sparse, but it shows that tamburitza ensembles were already present in North America, playing instruments that had been manufactured both in Europe and in the United States. By World War I, two trends in tamburitza ensembles were evident in North America, just as in Europe: 1) larger ensembles (roughly 6 or more) of amateur players, often organized by community institutions, playing from notated scores, and 2) smaller ensembles (5 or fewer, often known as 'combos' or 'bands'<sup>11</sup>) of professional or semi-professional players, self-organized, often playing by ear. These trends are still visible today, and they are not mutually exclusive; many tamburashi play in both types of ensembles. Smaller groups were able to travel and perform on tour, reaching Croatian and Serbian communities in remote areas.

After WWI, tamburashi also had increasing opportunities to perform on the radio and to make commercial recordings. Both European and "Yugoslav-American" recordings were available to tamburashi and listeners, the first American recordings being made by the Columbia and Victor companies in their "ethnic" series (Spottswood 1990); a few musicians recorded and distributed their records privately. After WWII, with the advent of 33 RPM records, Slavic American firms and individuals began recording and distributing their products on a larger scale.

## STYLISTIC DIFFERENTIATION IN AMERICAN TAMBURITZA PRACTICE

By the 1940s, Croatian and Serbian immigrants had adapted certain infrastructural aspects from the "American musical ecosystem" – especially the business practices and institutions of music performance venues, instrument manufacture and sale, and media production and distribution – to support musicians, systems of cultural transmission, and the values underlying the emerging American tamburitza musical practice. As Richard March deftly put it, "the tamburitza tradition took on American ways" (2013, 111). TAA members and TAA documents refer to this as "our tamburitza culture."<sup>12</sup>

10 The history of tamburitza ensembles in North America is summarized from Kolar (1975), Forry (1981, 2000), Opacich (2005), MacMillen (2011), and March (2013). It can be assumed that early immigrants brought or made soloistic tambura in America, but soloistic tambura playing has not been a sustained tradition.

11 Immigrant musicians have been involved with American vernacular music since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the vocabulary of jazz, country, and rock music has crept into the speech of Croatian- and Serbian-American musicians. For example, 'combo' or 'band' (small ensemble), 'gig' (paid engagement), 'sit in' (play at someone else's gig), and 'jam session' (play together informally).

12 For example, Ray Ranic (b.1952) – a tamburash and TAA Hall of Fame member since 2010 – referred to one of his mentors as "the epitome of preserving our Tamburitza culture" (Ranic 2019). The

The American tamburitza practice displayed distinctive musical characteristics, which I call the “American tamburitza style”; this style remains popular. Nonetheless, two other stylistic variants are now present as well, which I call the “European tamburitza style” and “hybrid electric tamburitza style”. All are accepted in Croatian and Serbian communities, and at the Extravaganza.

The American tamburitza style<sup>13</sup> can be distinguished from its European counterpart regarding instruments, repertoire, and performance practice. These characteristics are most prominent in combo settings although they are also present in orchestral settings, particularly instrument tuning and technique. Musicians in the American style play instruments that were made in North America by American-born and American-trained luthiers. As with their European counterparts, American tamburitza instruments are now uniformly Sremski system: chromatic frets, 4 courses of strings tuned in fourths. However, American melody instruments are usually tuned a whole step lower than their European counterparts, and their structural design is more like that of guitars and mandolins. A significant distinction between American and European instrumental techniques resides in plectrum usage. The American style uses mass-produced nylon or plastic guitar picks, while the European style uses custom-made picks of horn, bone, or hard plastic in oblong form.

The combination of instrument construction, lower string tension, and plastic picks gives American-style ensembles a different overall sound, a tone color that is generally more rounded and somewhat softer than the European instruments. Many of the large American orchestras have collections of these instruments, so that young musicians in the junior tamburitza groups still begin to play on American instruments. However, no one is making new American-style instruments, and anyone wanting a new tambura usually turns to current makers in Croatia and Serbia.

The increasing availability of recordings by modern European small ensembles in the 1970s proved to be a turning point for American tamburitza practice. One American musician in particular – Jerry Grcevich (b. 1951), a Croatian-American tamburash from Pittsburgh – mastered the Romani style of the Janika Balaž (1925–1988) orchestra, and through his recordings, teaching and personal appearances, helped make current European styles available to American tamburashi and listeners.

The hybrid electric tamburitza style emerged in the early 1970s when several groups began to incorporate amplified tamburitza instruments into bands with electric guitars, electric bass, keyboards, and drums.<sup>14</sup> A number of contemporary Croatian-American bands play in this style as well.<sup>15</sup>

promotion and preservation of “our tambura culture” is a criterium in the “Tamburitza Hall of Fame Nomination Form” (TAA 2023b).

13 See also Forry (1981, 2000) and March (2013).

14 Trubaduri of Pittsburgh was one of these bands; they remain popular. <https://trubaduri.com>.

15 Hybrid electric tamburitza bands are also increasingly popular with Croatians in Europe, and their music is popular and influential with younger Croatian Americans. One popular hybrid Croatian band is Gazde, who was sponsored for a North American tour in 2023 by the CFU. <https://cfu.org/event/gazde-live/>.

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Accordions are frequently encountered in tamburitza bands of all three styles. Although the accordion has become central to traditional and popular folk music in all South Slavic areas, the popularity of the accordion among Slavic-Americans was influenced by immigrant American polka traditions.<sup>16</sup> Later generations of accordionists in tamburitza bands have been influenced by several other national styles, especially those of Serbia, Bosnia, Macedonia, and Bulgaria.

## OCCASIONS FOR TAMBURITZA MUSIC IN NORTH AMERICA

As in those parts of Croatia and Serbia where tambura music is popular, in America there are family and community events where tamburitza is played as an ancillary component of the activities, but there are also events for broader social groups where tamburitza is the featured activity.

Weddings continue to be an event where tamburitza music is an important part of the proceedings. In North America, tamburitza is most often heard in wedding receptions, sometimes in rotation with other music (such as pop/rock bands or DJs). In earlier times, when the shared Slavic culture was stronger, it was common for tamburashi to play for other family events, such as *slavas* (family saint's day celebrations), baptisms, high school or college graduation parties, anniversary parties, and occasionally for memorial services. Tamburitza music at these events is much less common now.

Community events where tamburashi were customary, if not obligatory, were organized by fraternal organizations, churches, and private businesses such as bars and restaurants. They included New Year's parties (both Croatian and Serbian), church picnics, fundraising events, national holidays, and many others. Many are a variant of "SerbFest" or "CroatiaFest", although most are open to non-community members as well. A particularly American occasion for tamburitza continues to be community sporting events organized by fraternal organizations; for example, bowling and golf tournaments, and winter skiing excursions.

The most significant tamburitza events in North America are the Tamburitza Extravaganza organized by the TAA, and the Junior and Adult Tamburitza Festivals organized by the CFU, both active on a nationwide basis since the late 1960s. The CFU Junior Fest and Adult Fest are annual events that showcase tamburitza orchestras;<sup>17</sup> 16-40 members in the adult orchestras, and in some cases over 100 in the junior orchestras. In both cases, combos might be invited to play for after-parties, and participants are encouraged to get together for informal jam sessions. Nonetheless, the focus of the events is tamburitza in an orchestral setting. Each year, the Junior Fest invites a prominent tamburash to direct the joint performance, which can include over 500 participants. These directors are often directors of local ensembles and in some cases are also prominent combo musicians and members of the TAA Hall of Fame.

16 Slovenian-style polka style, as popularized by Frank Yankovich (1915–1998) after World War II was particularly influential. See Greene (1992), Keil et al. (1992), and March and Blau (2015).

17 <https://cfu.org/about-cfu/history/>. See also March (2013).

Several regional tamburitza festivals have appeared over the years, but none have had the longevity of the Ganza and CFU festivals. Tamburashi are also invited to non-Slavic regional and national festivals of traditional music. For example, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington D.C.<sup>18</sup> has featured American and European ensembles on several occasions.

### THE TAMBURITZA EXTRAVAGANZA AS THE PRINCIPAL EVENT OF THE TAMBURITZA ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

The Tamburitza Extravaganza was first held under that name in St. Louis Missouri in 1972. It was organized by a group of friends who later constituted themselves as “The Tamburitza Association of America” (TAA). The TAA exists mainly to organize Ganzas and the associated activities, especially awards and recognitions, associated with them. Over the years, there have been a few publishing projects (for example, Brankov 1998 and *The Tamburitza Times*, TAA 2012); however, the TAA leadership has consistently decided to focus on Ganzas.

The TAA is structured as a non-profit corporation. Its governing body, the TAA Board of Directors, is composed mainly of musicians who are elected by TAA members at the annual TAA membership meeting (held during Ganzas). Most Board members have organizational experience, for example, as employees or owners of businesses, civil servants, or teachers. All Board members volunteer their time, in addition to their regular employment (unless they are retired).

Membership in the TAA is offered without restriction for a minimal annual charge. Most of the members are Croatian and Serbian Americans, but there are a few members from outside the Croatian and Serbian communities, mostly those who were introduced to tamburitza through recreational folk dancing and Balkan music seminars (cf. Laušević 2007). TAA membership is required to perform as a musician at a Ganza, but it is not required to attend.

Although its members and attendees mostly come from Croatian- and Serbian-American communities, the TAA and the Ganzas are not ethnic events per se. The TAA Board has made explicit decisions to maintain the Ganza program and goals without reference to politics or nationality questions. The “Credo of the TAA” (from an issue of the *Tamburitza Times*<sup>19</sup>) states:

Our unique organization ... has no ethnic boundaries for its membership, knows no prejudices, does not involve itself or its members in matters of foreign or domestic policy, and does not practice religious discrimination of any kind. (TAA 2012, 2)

18 <https://festival.si.edu/about-us/mission-and-history/smithsonian>.

19 The *Tamburitza Times* newsletter is a bi-annual publication of the TAA since 1986. It is available to TAA members in print and online formats.

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The first Ganzas took place in a single evening, but they are now 5-day events with multiple activities, held in a different city every year. To accommodate large numbers of out-of-town visitors, concerts, and banquets, the Ganzas are held in large hotels. They tend to be held in cities with large Croatian or Serbian communities; it is often community members who actively plan and carry out individual Ganzas, with advice and oversight from the TAA Board.

The TAA Board and the local committees are responsible for creating a budget for each Ganza. Expenses are financed from three sources: 1) ticket sales to the events, 2) sponsorship, and 3) advertisements in a program booklet. Attendees usually purchase a "package" that allows them to attend all activities, although they could purchase tickets for individual activities instead.<sup>20</sup> In recent years, different levels of sponsorship have been offered, both to attendees and non-attendees. Because the TAA is a non-profit organization, all donations are tax-deductible; many TAA members donate regularly. The TAA also solicits sponsorship through corporate grants; for example, many American businesses have programs for tax-deductible contributions to cultural organizations.<sup>21</sup>

A "program booklet" is distributed each year to Ganza attendees. In addition to a listing of activities and awards, it is a major source of sponsorship revenue. Local businesses are solicited for advertisements; they are often owned by Croatians and Serbians with connections to the tamburitza community, and it is an opportunity for them to show their ongoing support. Each participating combo is required to purchase a full-page ad; they usually consist of band pictures and messages of congratulations to award winners. However, many attendees also purchase ads; congratulating award winners, announcing upcoming events, and remembering deceased musicians and friends. The program booklet is a valuable souvenir for Ganza attendees.

The participating groups are combos of 3–7 members playing in diverse styles. All are amateur or semi-professional; opportunities for full professional employment as a tamburitza musician are rare in America. There are occasionally larger groups (10 or more) but the focus of the Ganza is small groups, as opposed to the CFU tamburitza festivals, which feature orchestras of adults and children. Until recently, musicians were not paid for performing at Ganzas, although the TAA Board is usually able to reimburse expenses for travel and accommodations. However, depending on the band's style of interaction with attendees, bands can earn hundreds of dollars in tips.

The main Ganza events continue to be 1) "break-out rooms" or "becar suites" in hospitality suites, 2) dance parties, 3) the TAA "Hall of Fame" and awards banquet, 4) the Extravaganza concert, and 5) other scheduled and spontaneous musicking.

One of the most distinctive features of Ganzas is the "breakout room" venue, which is held in the "hospitality suites" offered by most hotels for business or social meetings. On Friday and Saturday nights, 4–6 of these hospitality suites are organized as breakout rooms, in which rotating rosters of bands play in blocks of

20 For the 2023 Ganza, the standard package costs \$145. <https://www.tamburitza.org/2023-ganza-registration>.

21 <https://www.tamburitza.org/2023-extravaganza-details>.

45–75 minutes, often until the early morning hours. Breakout rooms are also called “becar suites”,<sup>22</sup> a reference to the raucous party atmosphere that prevails. As one musician and attendee said on social media, “it is here that spectators can get ‘up close & personal’ with their favorite groups, as they can stroll from room to room, listening to the various orchestras”.<sup>23</sup> For many musicians and attendees, the breakout rooms are the high point of the Extravaganza.

The vocal repertoire is mostly songs in Croatian and Serbian, but it is quite diverse, including older songs of rural origin, older urban songs (*starogradske pesme*, see Dumnić Vilotijević 2019), “newly composed folk songs” (*novokomponovane narodne pesme*, see Vidić-Rasmussen 2002) from the last 50 years, and newer songs from singers whose recordings feature tamburashi. Some tamburashi and attendees will emphasize regional songs; for example, from Dalmatia, Lika, Hrvatsko Zagorje, Slavonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Vojvodina. Some groups will also sing pop songs in other languages, for example, classic country and rock songs, Italian pop songs, and urban Macedonian songs.

Hall of Fame membership and other awards are given during the Extravaganza at the Hall of Fame and Awards banquet. In addition to Ganza musicians and attendees, family members and friends may also attend the formal banquet. Recipients are introduced by TAA Board members and are expected to give an acceptance speech. The speeches are often prepared in advance and the delivery is emotional, expressing their gratitude to family and friends who supported their tamburitza career, and their humility in being honored in the context of American tamburitza tradition.

The TAA defines and presents annually the following awards (TAA 2023c): the Hall of Fame, which “commemorates those persons who have distinguished themselves as being extraordinary musicians and/or ambassadors of the Tamburitza” and exemplifies highly regarded musicianship and respect for the tradition; the Founders Award, which recognizes achievements of young tamburashi under the age of 30 and thereby provides an incentive to young people to maintain the tradition; the President’s Award, which recognizes contributions to the organization, such as work by local committee members, and thereby provides an incentive to participate in TAA activities; the 50- and 75-Year Anniversary awards, which honors and encourages longevity of commitment to tamburitza music; and the Memorial Scroll of Honor, which recognizes tamburashi who have passed away in the last year and emphasizes multi-generational continuity of the tradition.

Tamburitza music is essential to the Ganza dance activities, which feature “kolo dancing”; Croatian and Serbian circle and round dances based on rural models that have evolved separately in North America.<sup>24</sup> In addition to a repertoire of about 30 dances known by Croatian and Serbian immigrants of the mass migration generation

22 Often translated as ‘reveler’, ‘playboy’, or ‘wild and crazy’ guy, ‘becar’ (‘becar’ in North American usage) is often used to refer to people and gatherings, emphasizing loud singing, alcohol consumption, and (mostly male) comradery. See Simić (1969), Forry (1981), and March (2013, 176–78).

23 <http://www.forum.tambura.com.hr/showthread.php?p=19367>

24 See also Dunin (1979) concerning the dance culture of South Slavs and Laušević (2007) concerning the recreational folk-dance movement.

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(Crum 1993), attendees have also learned homeland and other international dances in their community cultural organizations and at non-Slavic recreational folk dance gatherings. A ballroom is usually set aside at Ganzas that is dedicated to dancing, but dancing can also take place in the breakout rooms and spontaneous gatherings.

Ganza concerts afford bands the opportunity to play a focused set of 15–20 minutes, often of pieces that they would not play in the break-out rooms or dance parties. The concerts take place in a large hotel banquet hall that has been reconfigured as a concert venue, with a stage, sound system, lighting and video systems, and rows of chairs. Unlike conventional festivals where concerts are the central event, the Ganza concert is one of several events, and for many musicians and attendees, not the most important one.

Ganza organizers aim to have tamburitza music playing throughout the day and night, not just at the principal events. To accomplish this, bands are scheduled to play in the hotel lobby and hotel bars and restaurants, in addition to their other appearances. However, spontaneous jam sessions can also take place at any public venue in the hotel.

Attendees have a diverse set of experiences with tamburitza music. Because many Croatian and Serbian Americans played in junior tamburitza groups as children or continue to play as adults, many Ganza attendees are current or former tamburashi. Most attendees are active participants, singing along with their favorite songs, dancing their favorite dances, and in some cases, participating in the raucous "becar" activities.

The music presented at Ganzas thus has, in terms articulated by Thomas Turino (2008, 23–27), aspects of both "participatory and presentational performance". While the participatory activities tend to be more popular and generate more excitement – in interactions between musicians and attendees in becar suites, dance spaces, and informal music making – the presentational activity represented in the concerts is also popular and well attended.

### THE "MISSION" OF THE TAA AS EXPRESSED IN TAMBURITZA EXTRAVAGANZAS

In the Ganza's predecessor events, there was a general desire for musicians and audience members to revel in tamburitza music, with much music making in a short period. This exuberance is still present at the Extravaganza, and it is captured in the TAA Mission Statement as "to provide a fun, educational, and entertaining experience to the people of the world"<sup>25</sup>

Nonetheless, there was also a sense at the early events that tamburitza represented something valuable that should be preserved. Lou Cavic (1916–1985), the founder of the Extravaganza and the TAA, "hoped the organization would serve as a catalyst

25 "The people of the world" accords with the TAA Credo. It also reflects the founders' initial aspirations to attract non-Slavs to future events.

for the preservation and promotion of the Slavic culture and tradition”.<sup>26</sup> Thus when Cavic and his associates created the TAA in 1974 to manage Ganzas into the future, this language was enshrined in the TAA Bylaws as its objective:

The object of this association is to promote the growth of said association through the preservation and promotion of our tamburitza music [and] our Slavic culture, past, present, and future... (TAA 2023b).

The TAA also publishes a Mission Statement on its website, which (in addition to “fun and entertaining”) includes the objective: “We exist to promote the preservation & evolution of tamburitza music...” (TAA 2023a). The notion of “mission” is especially appropriate for tamburitza music. In its sense of “an organized effort [...] for the enlightenment of a community” (Online Etymological Dictionary 2023), it recalls the efforts of Pajo Kolarić and Franjo Kuhač, 19<sup>th</sup>-century cultural evangelists who promoted tamburitza as the musical symbol of Illyrian national awakening (Bezić 2001, 98; Forry 2011, 59–63, 142–44; March 2013, 50–55). An earlier version of the Mission Statement referred to “preservation and *elevation*”; in its sense of “raising something to a higher position”, “elevation” also captures the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romantic impulse among South Slavs to exalt *narodna umotvorina* (“folk creation” or “folk-lore”).<sup>27</sup> Younger Board members, with their current experience in dynamic business environments, called for “elevation” to be replaced by “evolution” in their desire that the TAA should adapt to remain effective. The mission of the TAA has thus been expressed using the following terms: *promotion*, *elevation*, *preservation*, and *evolution*. Taken together, these formulations of TAA’s purpose – especially the more recent term “evolution” – display the TAA’s ongoing concern for the sustainability of American tamburitza practice, as well as the sustainability of their organization. In the American tamburitza musical ecosystem, the terms articulate approaches to tradition and change, important underlying values of the American tamburitza practice, and embody these values in the corporate infrastructure of the TAA musical organization. In turn, the Extravaganza, sustained by the TAA, provides a dynamic musical occasion in which the evolving American tamburitza practice can be expressed. The Tamburitza Extravaganza is thus both a significant cultural event and a means for achieving the objectives identified by the TAA.

## HOW THE TAA FULFILLS ITS MISSION THROUGH THE TAMBURITZA EXTRAVAGANZA

What is not defined in the Mission Statement or Bylaws is “tamburitza music” itself. That is, what aspects of tamburitza music are to be promoted and preserved?

26 TAA history is excerpted from the TAA website (<https://www.tamburitza.org/aboutus>) and supplemented by the recollections of long-time TAA Board member and historian Richard Krilich (personal communication, August 2023).

27 This was the term used by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, the most important reformer of the modern Serbian language and folklorist, according to Bošković (1984, 320).

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What actions are to be taken? The decisions of the TAA Board over the years have focused TAA efforts on these themes: presenting tamburitza music in a combo (small group) setting, honoring established and emerging tamburashi, and presenting only American tamburitza music.

Tamburitza combos are selected based on an application process that is overseen by the TAA Board (TAA 2023d). It aims to achieve a balance of styles, experience, and location; for example, new groups composed of younger musicians are given preference, and an effort is made to include groups from throughout North America.

Combos who played at the first Ganzas all played in the American tamburitza style. Beginning in the early 1980s – particularly through the performing and teaching efforts of Jerry Grceвич – European tamburitza style was heard more frequently. Many of the prominent younger Croatian musicians now play European style. For the last 10 years, about one-third of the bands appearing at Ganzas have been European-style bands, and there is usually at least one hybrid electric band.

Over the years, a few TAA members have lodged complaints that accordions, violins, and other instruments are not tamburitzas and should not be permitted at Ganzas. The TAA Board and other members have dismissed these complaints in favor of an inclusive definition of “tamburitza music”.

Beginning with the earliest events, Lou Cavic was resolved to honor exceptionally accomplished tamburitza musicians who had served as teachers and models for younger tamburashi by recognizing them in the TAA “Hall of Fame”, which honors “those persons who have distinguished themselves as being extraordinary musicians and/or ambassadors of the Tamburitza” (TAA 2023c). Candidates can be nominated by any member of the TAA and are evaluated on the extent of the candidate’s popularity, experience, and influence, especially as a recording artist, composer, or teacher. While a deliberate effort has been made to recognize musicians of the older generations who played in American tamburitza style, younger musicians who play in European and hybrid electric styles are also being recognized.

The Lou Cavic Founder’s Award honors “young people who have demonstrated an outstanding devotion to the preservation of tambura music and Slavic culture” (TAA 2023b). Most of the past Founders Award winners remain active in the TAA. In 2012, one of the first Founders awardees, Joe Kirin Jr. (b.1963), was inducted into the Hall of Fame; since then, many of the new Hall of Fame inductees are former Founders Award winners. Whenever possible, Founders Award recipients are given an opportunity to play at Ganza events.

Tamburitza enthusiasts in North America have increasing access to tambura music in the home countries, and some of the music performed at recent Ganzas has also been performed in European festivals by American tamburashi. However, European artists have only rarely been invited to play at Ganzas, as opposed to tambura festivals organized by the CFU, which has organized travel and performances by Croatian groups from Europe.

Similarly, Hall of Fame awards have been limited to tamburashi who have been active in North America; this includes a small number of musicians who were born in Croatia or Serbia but later immigrated to and were active in North America. The only exception in the Hall of Fame is the celebrated Romani musician Janika Balaž, who was recognized for his exceptional influence among American tamburashi.

## GANZAS IN THE CURRENT AMERICAN TAMBURITZA ECOSYSTEM

As the American tamburitza musical ecosystem evolved over the years, the Ganza became one of the most prominent occasions for music in a tamburashi's or tamburitza fan's world. Music produced and supported on this occasion was also valued in other community events, and the honor and prestige afforded by Hall of Fame membership was recognized in Croatian- and Serbian-American communities and beyond.

Nonetheless, the place of the Ganza in this evolving musical ecosystem has shifted. This is most visible in Ganza attendance, which has dropped off in recent years on the part of both tamburashi and attendees.

For musicians, the Ganza is now just one of many occasions for tamburashi to play. With increasing economic pressure – both for musicians' fees and expenses associated with engagements – many musicians have become more selective about the gigs (engagements) they take. Even the notion that the Ganza is a gig represents a change. For many musicians, past and present, Ganza was in a special, privileged category; except in unusual circumstances, a musician would always seek to attend the Ganza, and while some remuneration could be expected — especially from tipping in the “becar suites” — financial considerations were not foremost. In recent Ganzas, the TAA Board has made efforts to pay musicians in addition to covering expenses, in an effort to continue attracting the best bands. In effect, the status of the Ganza has fallen somewhat in the comparative context of the American tamburitza musical ecosystem, although it remains important. Similar social forces are at work among attendees. Despite efforts to attract younger Ganza attendees, the median age of audience members has been rising. Not only are the older attendees more sensitive to rising travel costs (although the TAA makes every effort to keep hotel prices low), but many are also no longer able to travel. In addition, a general decline in levels of volunteerism has made it difficult to support community activities of all kinds (Beaty et al. 2023).

The nature of the Croatian and Serbian diaspora communities has also changed. “Our Slavic culture”, originating in the years before World War II, has become diluted as community members in increasing numbers have moved out of the core diaspora communities, and found new social relationships and families outside the communities.

And as in society at large, the COVID-19 pandemic was disruptive in 2020, and post-pandemic recovery has been slow. Nonetheless, interest was such that the TAA produced a “virtual Extravaganza” in 2020; many bands contributed videos and it enjoyed widespread audience support.<sup>28</sup>

Musical tastes are also evolving in Croatian and Serbian diaspora communities. The American tamburitza style, which still forms the core musical offering at Ganzas, is now one of several styles available at community events. At contemporary Croatian-American events, European tamburitza and hybrid electric styles are increasingly

28 2020 Virtual Tamburitza Extravaganza. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TAjsrle4QDE>.

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heard, and in recent years, tamburashi have sometimes been supplanted by DJs or by musicians playing only modern instruments. At contemporary Serbian-American community events, the musical component can consist of some combination of American-style tamburitza, contemporary Serbian folk and popular music played on modern instruments, and recorded music to accompany folk dance performances. However, to recent Serbian immigrants who have become involved with Serbian-American communities, as well as to some fourth-generation Serbian-Americans, tamburitza "is not our music", as some believe that it is exclusively Croatian music.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

For over 50 years, Ganzas have occupied a unique and privileged place in the American tamburitza scene, with their emphasis on small ensembles, the shared musical style of Croatians and Serbians in North America, and recognition for the individuals who created and maintained this style. In so doing, they have contributed to the sustainability of American tamburitza practice by providing a stable annual venue for performances in the style, honoring the leading artists in the style, and promoting tamburitza for future generations. The TAA is the *de facto* institutional patron of American tamburitza practice for combos.

However, the musical landscape of Croatians and Serbians in America, as well as the broader American musical landscape, has evolved over the years. Consequently, the TAA Board continues to ask itself: Are the activities of the TAA – especially the Extravaganza, the Hall of Fame, and the Founders Awards – sufficient to fulfill its Mission Statement to "promote the preservation & evolution of tamburitza music"? Should the TAA engage in activities apart from those taking place once per year at the Extravaganza? Could the TAA cooperate with other institutions to encourage young people – musicians, dancers, and other community members – to attend Ganzas and take part in Ganza activities? What else could be done to sustain tamburitza music? Is the TAA in its current configuration aligned with contemporary social and cultural institutions and processes?

Schippers' and Grant's characterization of a musical ecosystem highlights the forces in the ecosystem that are amendable to appropriate intervention. This concern is shared with other approaches to musical ecosystems in applied ethnomusicology; how to overcome the challenges of promoting traditional musical practice in the modern world? In the Extravaganza, the TAA has created and maintained a vehicle to promote American tamburitza music as a sustainable living tradition. Given the successful activities of the past 50 years and institutional awareness of current challenges, we can be guardedly optimistic that the TAA will continue its mission, and that the Extravaganza will continue to celebrate the cultural and musical value of tamburitza music in America.

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МАРК ФОРИ

ФЕСТИВАЛ *The Tamburitza Extravaganza* И ЊЕГОВА „ЕВОЛУЦИЈА” У МУЗИЧКОМ СИСТЕМУ АМЕРИЧКЕ ТАМБУРИЦЕ

(РЕЗИМЕ)

*The Tamburitza Extravaganza* [Тамбурашка екстраваганца], музичка манифестација у Сједињеним Америчким Државама коју организује Тамбурашка асоцијација Америке (*The Tamburitza Association of America* – ТАА), већ више од педесет година организује наступе тамбурашких састава за заинтересовану хрватску и српску дијаспору. Користећи музичке екосистеме као модел за описивање услова који стварају и одржавају музичку праксу, ова студија се бави сродним музичким екосистемима Северне Америке уопште и америчке тамбурашке праксе, с посебним нагласком на инфраструктурне процесе који подржавају музичке организације. Заснована је на искуству аутора као извођача који је наступао на фестивалу *The Tamburitza Extravaganza*, интервјуима са члановима ТАА и објављеним документима ове асоцијације, као и другим објављеним тамбурашким изворима. Тамбурашка музичка пракса у Северној Америци настала је у хрватском и српском имигрантском искуству, са осећајем заједничке културе који је створио јединствен, амерички тамбурашки стил. Неке од прилика за извођење тамбурашке музике у Северној Америци заједничке су са приликама у домовинама, али је неколико нових проистекло из искуства дијаспоре, од којих је једна управо *The Tamburitza Extravaganza*. Сваке године од 1974. ТАА организује ову манифестацију у другом америчком граду. Ови догађаји се одвијају у великим хотелима који омогућавају паралелни ток више активности, укључујући формалне и неформалне наступе, церемонију доделе награда ТАА „Галерија славних” и признања младим музичарима. Циљеви и задаци ТАА су садржани у „Мисији организације”, која прецизира да ТАА треба да „промовише очување и развој тамбурашке музике” и „пружи весело, образовно и забавно искуство”.

Фестивал *The Tamburitza Extravaganza* је настао на основу утемељених процеса америчког музичког екосистема. Екосистеми настављају да еволуирају, те се и позиција овог фестивала у америчком тамбурашком музичком екосистему мења, па отуда жеља млађих организатора ових догађаја да нагласе „еволуцију” као један од циљева ТАА.