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Music in the Balkans

JIM SAMSON

Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2013

xiv + 729 pp., ISBN 978-9-0042-5037-6, €157.00 (hardback)

Music in the Balkans is an important book that, like its subject, defies easy categorisation. Ambitious in its scope, it repeatedly crosses ethnic, national, religious, historical and disciplinary boundaries in what amounts to an idiosyncratically structured yet comprehensive historical treatment of the transmission, development and interaction of a wide range of musical traditions and repertoires—sacred and secular, agrarian traditional and urban popular, Christian, Muslim and Jewish, Ottoman and Western art, to name only some of the broader categories that it embraces—in South East Europe. Indeed, what distinguishes this book from most prior scholarship on music in this region the catholicity of vision cultivated by its author, Jim Samson, an eminent musicologist who is perhaps best known for his work on Chopin. Samson displays sensitivity both to commonality and difference as he casts light on a region 'visited by musical styles whose centres invariably lay elsewhere' (p. 662) as its peoples have been affected over time by migration, imperialism, nation-building, displacement, religious change, and modernisation. What emerges is a Balkans characterised by various forms of mediation conducted at levels ranging from the individual to the trans-national that he conveys through references to 'bridges' and states of being 'in between' or 'in transition'.

The book contains twenty-five chapters grouped into five sections: 'Balkan Geographies', 'Historical Layers', 'Music in Transition', 'Eastern Europe', and 'Global Balkans'. Near the beginning of each section Samson establishes an interpretive context with references not only to modern academic critical theory, but also to works of literature and visual art. The case studies that follow are based not only on a magisterial synthesis of a vast bibliography in multiple languages, but also the author's own interactions with Balkan musicians and academics. Although the text is supported with a helpful glossary, the book includes only a small number of visual images and Samson does not illustrate his musical points with notated, let alone recorded, examples. Since it is highly unlikely that any single person will be familiar with all the music discussed, readers may want to employ YouTube and other internet sites to track down, for example, Croatian oratorios of the mid twentieth century.

The book's opening section 'Balkan Geographies' establishes its geographical, political and ethnic and frameworks. For the purposes of this study, Samson defines the Balkans as encompassing essentially the peoples and lands of the modern states of Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Romania and, with the partial exception of Slovenia, the former Yugoslavia. Within these boundaries he recognises the existence of numerous secular and sacred traditions with diverse origins that have interacted over time within overlapping cultural zones of various sizes. The empires that have ruled or bordered the Balkans, namely those of Rome, Byzantium, the Ottomans, and the Habsburgs, and the city-states of Italy, formed the largest of these zones. Cities are recognised as sites of particularly intense mediation between agrarian, urban, regional, national and supra-national musical traditions. With regard to the latter, Samson is careful to note the influence exercised at various times by relatively distant cultural centres located in, for example, the Berlin, Paris, Prague, Russia and America.

'Historical Layers' addresses relationships between musical practice and identity within and across the nation states that emerged from retreating imperial powers during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He begins with chapters that define in turn the geographic reach and musical characteristics of the cultural ecumenes that were legacies of Byzantine, Ottoman, Habsburg, Venetian and British rule, thereby providing backgrounds for such developments as the coalescence of rebetika as a distinct repertory after the Greco-Turkish population exchanges formally agreed in 1923. Approximately at the midpoint of this section Samson begins to arrange his material chronologically and by nation. He sustains this pattern

of organisation throughout most of the book's remaining three sections, which sequentially address music in the Balkans between the two World Wars, during the period of Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, and after the fall of Balkan Communist regimes. As he proceeds towards the globalised present, Samson devotes ever more space to the making of folk, popular and art music in urban settings, noting in particular their appropriations of older regional traditions.

Portions of the subsections on art music—arguably the Balkan repertoires that have been most poorly served by scholars and performers residing outside the region—read somewhat like encyclopaedia articles due to their litanies of composers and representative works, but these lists always serve as a point of departure for case studies of composers that are well chosen and engaging. In particular, Samson shows how the contributions of certain key individuals related to broader musical and ideological trends manifested in a range of genres at national or international levels. He often then goes a step further by offering, with great erudition and empathy, critical reflections on the aesthetic and ethical merits of the music under discussion. The pioneers of Western art music in the Balkans Samson judges to be mainly of historical interest for the institutional foundations they laid. Amongst subsequent generations of composers he discerns figures of brilliance and originality whose music it is 'entirely appropriate to discuss... alongside the canonical figures of European modernism' (p. 325). The neglect of all but few of these composers outside of their native lands (Georges Enescu and Iannis Xenakis being the two significant exceptions) he blames in part on the chauvinism of critics based outside of the Balkans.

Not only is it impossible in a short review to offer a comprehensive critique of how Music in the Balkans represents all of the traditions covered in its 729 pages of text, but this is a task best suited to a team of specialists. In their absence and by way of a conclusion, I offer only sample observations regarding a couple of areas overlapping directly with my own work. The vast topic of Orthodox liturgical music is given generally good but uneven treatment. Efforts to systematise and modernise (especially through harmonisation) received Balkan traditions of chant are addressed comprehensively even as continued creativity within the central traditions of Byzantine chanting is neglected. Samson states that 'there were no implications for doctrine' surrounding the creation of an independent Bulgarian Church, despite the fact that a synod held in Constantinople in 1872 explicitly condemned attempts to reshape church governance in accordance with modern nationalist theories as an ecclesiological heresy of 'ethno-phyletism'. On the other hand, Samson's synthesis of vast quantities of information about demotic, liturgical, popular, art and 'popular art' traditions music in the modern state of Greece is exemplary in its coverage and critical discernment. Displaying the historiographic knowledge of an insider, he deftly situates Greek developments within wider contexts in ways that are indicative of how this book advances scholarly understanding of music in the Balkans through its transcendence of ethnic, national and disciplinary boundaries.

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