

ROMA MUSICAL CULTURE ON THE BALKANS: MUSIC AND MUSICIANS, INSTRUMENTS AND ENSEMBLES, FACES AND IMAGES¹

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Abstract

Elucidating the Roma music and musicians in this paper is exposed on the more general picture of the historical destiny and the current-day situation of the Roma communities in South-eastern Europe. Analyses on the Roma musicians and their music have several aspects. The Roma musical culture on the Balkans is being traced in several directions. One of them leads to the question about the musicianship as a traditional Roma occupation that has developed throughout history in changing social-economic conditions and cultural traditions. Another aspect of reflection is associated with the boundaries and content of the term "Gypsy/Roma music". It is emphasised that there is no uniform musical language, style and identity shared by all Roma people throughout the world, but there exist musical similarities which are explained through lineal relationships. Special attention is paid to role of the professional Roma musicians within the Balkan musical traditions. Marking off the significant contribution of the Roma musicians for the development of the local musical cultures on the Balkans, it is emphasised that they have ambivalent role in these processes because, on one hand, they are keepers of the tradition and on the other – instruments of the change. Typical for the musical practice of the Balkan Roma instruments and ensembles are outlined. Several aspects concerning the attitudes towards the Roma via images of the Roma music on the Balkans that stimulate a great deal of associations are examined.

Key words: Roma music, Roma musicians, Roma musical culture on the Balkans.

INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, Gypsy musicians have managed to achieve a status of outstanding interpreters both of their own music and of the traditional kinds of music of those others among whom they live.

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The music as a Gypsies' way of life is an original specific language, memory, means of self-identification and ethnic survival in an alien hostile environment.

The Balkans (South-Eastern Europe) are, by mere concurrence of circumstances, a space where the nomadic Gypsies/the Roma people managed to settle and came into interaction with the local population's culture, thus producing a specific musical culture – both ethnic proper (i.e. music for themselves) and shared (i.e. music for the others). The notion of Balkan Gypsy/Roma music is hard (or perhaps impossible) to be defined uncontroversially or explicitly. The challenges may be spotted right from the beginning, i.e. from the definition of the toponym 'the Balkans', and that may be a result of both the dynamism of the historic/geographic and geopolitical conditions and a pile of constantly accruing and multiplying Balkanisms. The entity called "Roma musical culture on the Balkans" is also multilayer, it has its specificities in the historical development and the modern dynamics of relevant processes.

The clarification of Gypsy/Roma music and musicians on the Balkans, which comes as a task of this research, will be displayed using the background of a more general picture of the historic destiny and today's situation of the Gypsy communities in South-Eastern Europe. Numerous is the Gypsy population living on the Balkans and this population is a complex and heterogeneous community both in terms of its own self-determination and in terms of their perception of the surrounding population. A reservation thereto must be made here that both terms, i.e. "Gypsies" and "Roma people" will be used in the text, to designate a particular specific type of community despite the fact that, as at today, any such use of the above terms is still controversial (a possible discussion may emphasise or take different directions, among which we must consider the fictitiousness and speculation essence of a generalising term such as "Roma people", which has been promoted by activists of the Roma ethnic movement; imposing of some external criteria: political correctness, nationalism of the Diaspora) part of the Gypsies/ Roma people have a different preferred ethnic self-awareness and oppose themselves to the above ethnonym).

As early as the beginning of the 1970s was the time when the term "Roma people" started being introduced with the idea of overcoming a set of negative stereotypes and a historic stigma in terms of the Gypsies and for the sake of unification of the Roma communities around the world and forming Gypsies' political representativeness. It is still unknown how much such legalisation and imposition of the politically correct term "Roma people" in public discourse has contributed to reducing the opprobrious discrimination vs. the Gypsies or to their community and solidarity awareness on an ethnic ground.

THE ROMA MUSICIANS AND THEIR MUSIC

The issue of the musician's craft as a traditional Roma trade and occupation has found its answers in a series of scientific studies. According to Rudolf Brandl, this is a hard service occupation, which, however, is relatively quite well paid, which the ethnic majorities (due to various religious reasons or reasons relative to their social statuses) are unwilling to practice. The profession of a musician enables (thanks to portability/transportability of the instruments) a mobile location of a job and a rapid shift of whereabouts [Brandl, 1996: 10].