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SERBIAN FOLK BALLADS AND ETHNOMUSICOLOGY
– A MISSION IMPOSSIBLE –
**(A Contribution to Solving the Question of Origin and
Typology of Serbian Narrative Songs)**

Abstract: Narrative songs, whose fundamental characteristic is a melostrophe that is variable in terms of its length and formal structure, have so far remained on the margin of serious examinations in Serbian ethnomusicology – most likely due to their paucity and unfixed musical-formal and melodic-rhythmic structure. Following a brief outline of the history of research into Serbian narrative songs, this study deals with the question of their origin and offers a proposal for their typology, based on the author's analytical-comparative analysis of all published examples. A discussion of terminology and genres concludes this paper and sheds light on the reasons why examinations of Serbian folk ballads relying on the genre as a poetic rather than functional or music category cannot be a precondition for valid scientific results.

Key words: ballads, narrative songs, macro-form, variable melostrophe, dramaturgy of narrative content, melodized declamation, gusle epic, improvisation, genres, terminology.

The specific narrative songs, whose melostrophe varies in terms of length and formal structure and which is almost always performed solo, have been recorded throughout the wide territory of almost all of eastern Serbia and Vojvodina, and to a lesser extent in Donja Jasenica, Mačva, Sandžak, around Kraljevo, in the region of Kosmet, Jablanica and Bujanovac.¹ In general, the melostrophe of these songs is shaped simply by sequencing a variable number of sung verses, that is, without repeating the previously stated text.² The dramaturgy of narrative content directly conditions its length: it follows, i.e., corresponds with the internal semantic-syntactic segmentation of poetic text into groups composed of a variable number of verses, each expressing a rounded out dramatic-narrative unit.³

¹ Here we refer to eastern Serbia in the broadest sense, i.e., the territory between the rivers Velika Morava and Južna Morava and Serbia's borders with Romania, Bulgaria and Macedonia.

² This mainly refers to the repetition of parts of a verse, which is seldom the case with these songs but is otherwise typical of other vocal forms of the entire South Slavic heritage. For more information about this distinguishing feature of our tradition and about the analytical-formal problems it causes, see the study by S. Radinović, *Zakonmernosti melopoetskog oblikovanja srpskih narodnih pesama kao osnova za metodologiju formalne analize*, PhD thesis, defended at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade in 2007, manuscript.

³ The key step to take in future examinations of the specific procedures of shaping the melostrophe of narrative songs is to focus attention on the number and arrangement of different thematic materials, on the forms of cadencing and the forms of closing the melostrophe at one or both ends. Gaining such an insight requires detailed formal analyses, which were of no major importance at the given time. At this moment, however, we could point out the fact that in the formal shaping of narrative songs many local and even individual performing-stylistic specificities should be factored into the analysis. Also, the dominant and generalized pattern of their formal structure could be represented by the formula I ||:M:|| T (designed on the basis of Asafyev's famous triad, in which I stands for initial,

Songs with such formal structure, which is, as mentioned, conditioned by both structure and content of an (astrophic) poetic text in verse form, have long been familiar to ethnomusicologists, primarily owing to Filaret Kolessa and his detailed study of the Ukrainian *duma*, accompanied by playing the *kobsa*. In his 1910 study, Kolessa introduces the term *free structure*⁴ for *duma*, while for the same form Alisa Elscheková proposes the term *variable strophic form*, placing it between *verse forms* and *stable* ('real') *strophic forms*.⁵ Stojan Džudžev observes that similar examples in Bulgarian music-folkloric material have *uneven strophic form* and also points out that it is conditional on the narrative flow of the poetic text.⁶

To this day ethnomusicologists have not paid much attention to such forms in Serbian vocal tradition, most likely due to the scarcity of these songs – of which there are only about hundred – compared to all recorded material.⁷ Moreover, the 'floating' formal structure of these songs and the distinctive variation, improvisation and individuality of their performing style – all of which commonly accompany their interpretation – did not seem to provide enough research impetus for earlier collectors. We are sometimes deprived of even basic observations or positive records based on which formal and other specificities of this vocal category could be identified.⁸ The rare forays of Serbian ethnomusicologists into this matter should certainly be linked to said factors, too.⁹

The first passing comments did not become available to the public until mid-20th century. The earliest comes from Živojin Stanković and is included in his observation on the so-called *popevačke songs* from Negotinska Krajina, related to *gusle* singing and performed at family

M for medial and T for terminal section). The symbols for repetition, which are attached to the symbol for medial section, point to a variable number of its repeating, which is conditional on the number of poetic verses the singer builds into each melostrophe.

⁴ 'The characteristic features of the free rhythmic and melodic structure of the recited songs are so distinct that this structure can at once be easily distinguished from strophic songs... While the music strophe in regular songs imposes its fixed scheme on the text, it is only when the *kobsa* player is performing his recitation that he is shaping the form's physiognomy by adapting it to the recitation, with both elements, poetry and music, being equally treated in the formal shaping. That is the root of the main distinction between a *duma* and a song.' This explanation by Kolessa was quoted from: A. Elscheková, „Motiv-, Zeilen- und Strophenform (Begriffsklärung, Analyse und Klassifikation)“, Analyse und Klassifikation von Volksmelodien (Bericht über die 3. Arbeitstagung der Study Group of Folk Music Systematization beim International Folk Music Council vom 24. bis 28. Oktober 1967 in Radziejowice), Polska Akademia Nauk – Institut Sztuki, Krakow, Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1973, 131, 153.

⁵ Ibid., 153–155.

⁶ S. Džudžev, *Bългарска народна музика, том II*, София, Музика, 1975, 272–276.

⁷ It is estimated that some 7000 examples of Serbian songs exist in published written sources with another several thousand in various manuscripts and record library archives.

⁸ A similar relationship to this type of song has been noticed in Bulgarian ethnomusicology. Cf.: S. Džudžev, op. cit., 273.

⁹ Only a handful of studies explicitly dealing with this type of song have been written. Cf.: S. Litvinović, „Balade u donjem Banatu“, *Sveske* (Pančevo), 2000, god. X, br. 51–52, 209–218; S. Rakočević, „Narativne pesme u kolu u orskom nasleđu dinarske zone“, *Dani Vlade S. Miloševića (Banja Luka, 11. april 2002) – zbornik radova*, Banja Luka, Akademija umjetnosti – Banja Luka, Vedes – Beograd, 2002, 87–108; I. Maksimović, *Melopoetske*

patron saint feasts.¹⁰ Next came Bartók's somewhat more detailed descriptions of four *female songs*, which he classified as *free strophic structures*, from a group of seventy-five songs he selected from Milman Parry's collection, minutely transcribed and appended to his seminal study of the morphology of Serbo-Croatian folk songs.¹¹

However, the unusual form of these examples was not given much consideration in Bartók's study. Pointing to the importance of further research, the author merely outlined their basic characteristics: the balladic content of texts, the symmetrical octosyllabic as their poetic-metric basis, *parlando rubato* interpretation, men as performers in all four cases (and the related question of genre classification), the presence of gusle accompaniment in one of the examples, the distinct variation of a number of sung verses among adjacent melostrophes, conditioned by the text's content, and the constants in terms of arranging different thematic material.¹²

A brief but highly significant comment was made by Miodrag Vasiljević while advancing his theory of tonal bases in an anthology of songs from Kosmet:

As regards gusle melodies, it is interesting to note that this collection includes certain melodies originally sung to the gusle, but which are now completely free of the gusle sound and which people sing without any accompaniment. In these melodies we can distinguish two varieties: the *Dinaric* and the *Vardar-Morava*. The Vardar-Morava variety represents a specific transitional form between Šop and Dinaric varieties. The subject will be further discussed in the ensuing volumes of this anthology.¹³

As with many other subjects he broached, Vasiljević did not have enough time to devote himself to the issue at hand, so we cannot exactly know which characteristics he was referring to regarding each of the aforementioned varieties. In spite of this and the fact that said comment does not refer only to narrative songs, we have a number of reasons to be certain of the lucidity of Vasiljević's observations, as will be seen below.

osobenosti balada jugoistočne Srbije, University graduation paper, defended at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade in 2004, manuscript.

¹⁰ Ž. Stanković, *Narodne pesme u Krajini*, SAN, posebna izdanja, knj. CLXXV, Muzikološki institut, knj. 2, Beograd, Naučna knjiga, 1951, 72. (As is well known, Stanković gave the manuscript of this collection to Serbian Royal Academy as early as 1951)

¹¹ Cf.: B. Bartók, *Yugoslav Folk Music*, Vol. 1, New York, State University of New York Press, 1978. (Bartók's work was completed in 1942 and first published in 1951)

¹² *Ibid.*, XXIV, 21, 65-66. Given that Parry recorded all four examples among Muslim populations outside Serbia (in Livno, Kulen Vakuf and Bare), the question remains whether they belong to the wider context of Serbian or Croatian tradition.

¹³ M. A. Vasiljević, *Narodne melodije koje se pevaju na Kosmetu – Jugoslovenski muzički folklor I*, Beograd, Prosveta, 1950, 344.

Examples of the first type, those which would have been classified under Vasiljević's *Dinaric variety*, are markedly prevalent in Serbian narrative songs (example 1). So far they have been documented throughout the entire territory specified above, except in the region of Kosmet, Jablanica and Bujanovac.¹⁴ These songs bear a close resemblance to gusle vocal-instrumental forms, from which they probably originated.¹⁵ This is confirmed not only by records from field

¹⁴ The following is a list of examples found in the sources used: **Vojvodina**: Lj. Miljković, „Muzička tradicija Fruške gore“, *Rad XX kongresa SUFJ (Novi Sad, 1973)*, Beograd, SUFJ, 1978, 77–89, 11; N. Fracile, *Vokalni muzički folklor Srba i Rumuna u Vojvodini (komparativna proučavanja)*, Matica srpska, Odeljenje za scenske umetnosti i muziku, knj. 2, Novi Sad, 1987, 88, 89, 93, 95–98, 186, 187; D. Stevanović, *Narodno pevanje Srba u Kovilju (prilog proučavanju muzičke tradicije Šajkaške)* (University graduation paper, defended at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade in 1987; manuscript), 3, 16; M. Marković, „Vokalna tradicija srpskog življa u Sivcu“, *Zbornik Matice srpske za scenske umetnosti i muziku* (Novi Sad), 1988, br. 3, 23–59, 37, 38, 49, 53, 56, 94; S. Litvinović, op. cit., 1–3; **Eastern Serbia**: Ž. Stanković, op. cit., 72; V. Đorđević, *Srpske narodne melodije (predratna Srbija)*, Beograd, 1931, 88, 176; K. P. Manojlović, *Narodne melodije iz Istočne Srbije*, SAN, Posebna izdanja, knj. CCXII, Muzikološki institut, knj. 6, Beograd, Naučna knjiga, 1953, 132, 177, 186, 220, 233, 239, 266, 274, 279, 311, 317; M. A. Vasiljević, *Narodne melodije leskovačkog kraja*, SAN, Posebna izdanja, knj. CCCXXX, Muzikološki institut, knj. 11, Beograd, Naučno delo, 1960, 117, 128, 129, 202, 206; Lj. Miljković, *Banja (rukopisni zbornik) – Etnomuzikološke odlike i zapisi arhaičke i novije vokalne i instrumentalne muzičke tradicije sokobanjskog kraja*, Knjaževac, Nota, 1978, 136–139, 153, 225, 226, 251, 267, 273, 289; D. Dević, *Narodna muzika Crnorečja (u svetlosti etnogenetskih procesa)*, Beograd, JP ŠRIF Bor, KOC Boljevac, FMU Beograd, 1990, 43, 87; M. Vukičević-Zakić, *Instrumentalno i vokalno-instrumentalno nasleđe Zaplanja u svetlu tradicionalnog muzičkog mišljenja* (MA thesis, defended at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade in 1993; manuscript), 117, 119; D. O. Golemović, „Narodna muzika oblasti Timok i Zaglavak“, *GEM u Beogradu* (Beograd), 1998, knj. 62, 265–290, 21; Z. Marjanović-Krstić, „Vokalna muzička tradicija sela Brza“, *Leskovački zbornik* (Leskovac), 1998, br. XXXVIII, 61; **D. Jasenica**: Lj. Miljković, *Donja Jasenica*, Smederevska Palanka, Centar za kulturu „Smederevska Palanka“, 1986, 244, 329; **Mačva**: Lj. Miljković, *Mačva (rukopisni zbornik)*, Šabac, Glas Podrinja, 1985, 158, 337; **Sandžak**: M. A. Vasiljević, *Narodne melodije Crne Gore*, SAN, Muzikološki institut, Posebna izdanja, knj. 12, Beograd, Naučna knjiga, 1965, 144; **Kosmet**: M. Milojević, *Narodne pesme i igre Kosova i Metohije*, Beograd, Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva – Karić fondacija, 2004, 205–207, 211.

¹⁵ Note that real examples of gusle songs, which were only by coincidence interpreted without instrumental accompaniment, have not been included in narrative songs.

research, but also through the shared opinions of almost all the authors who have so far given at least some consideration to the matter.¹⁶

The affinity between gusle songs and the narrative songs of this type is not only manifest on the level of melopoetic shaping of the variably strophic macro-form. A great degree of similarity can be seen to exist in other elements of their melopoetic structure, shaped primarily on the basis of their close connection with intonation and speech rhythm, these being:

- the firm structure of epic decasyllabic verse;
- the marked syllabicity of melodies, which are based on the *parlando rubato* interpretation;
- frequently pronounced recitateness, which usually implies that the caesura between verses is not emphasized by longer metrorhythmic¹⁷ values right before or after it appears in the sung text (i.e. absence of the so-called agogic accents);
- combining several related intonation patterns that can generally be linked to the typical (ascending)-descending intonation of the declarative sentence in our language;¹⁸
- a considerable role of variation, improvisation and individual style in defining melodies.

The distinctively narrative nature of texts, the sporadic stereotypical first line ‘Fala Bogu, fala jedinome’ [Thank the Lord, thank the one] (particularly in the Leskovac area and Zaplanje), the occasional marking of the melostrophe’s beginning by the sung exclamation *ej* or *aj* (mostly in Vojvodina),¹⁹ performing songs usually at the dining table during family celebrations (*slava* – family patron saint feast, wedding, baking and offering *kravaj* [a ring-shaped bun] to an unchristened newborn, *strižba* – trimming a child’s hair by his godfather, christening) and at social gatherings – are also elements that point to the genetic connection between narrative songs and the gusle tradition. On the other hand, there are also major differences between the two in terms of intonation: the chromaticism, and close, oscillating intervals of gusle melodies are frames that are conditioned primarily by the specific music capacities of the instrument, while

¹⁶ By way of illustration, commenting on an unusual narrative song *in bass* from Crnorečje, D. Dević said: ‘The ballad of hero Viden... in terms of genesis is related to epic songs... Their melodies are completely identical, from the metro-rhythmic basis to the gusle-style tune, the latter being typical of the Montenegrin-Herzegovinian style of singing epic songs to the accompaniment of gusle. The origin of the aforementioned Serbian ballad, which is linked to epic songs, points to the mainstream which the population of two villages of Crnorečje, Krivi Vir and Jablanica, came from. The adoption of epic tunes for ballad singing clearly testifies to the former wide diffusion and universal acceptance of the once thriving epic tradition that has remained etched in the music memory of our people to the present times.’ D. Dević, *Narodna muzika Crnorečja*, 35. See also: N. Fracile, op. cit., 52–55; M. Marković, op. cit., 35; M. Vukičević-Zakić, op. cit., 116–120.

¹⁷ More about this term in: S. Džudžev, op. cit., 338.

¹⁸ Cf. Đ. Krstić, *Rečenička melodija u srpskohrvatskom jeziku*, Tršić – „Vukov sabor“, Beograd, Rad, 1983.

¹⁹ This exclamatory adjunct, clearly functioning as an unstable refrain, is termed *anacrusis* by some authors. Cf.: N. Fracile, op. cit., 53–54; S. Litvinović, op. cit., 211. It seems that this terminological explanation is not suitable after all as *anacrusis* in literary theory originally refers to ‘...one or more unaccented syllables at the beginning of a line up to the first thesis in the ancient verse, that is, up to the first realized ictus in the accentual-syllabic versification.’ – *Rečnik književnih termina*, Beograd, Nolit, 1992, 25.

narrative songs almost always involve a broader intervallic scope (often spanning an octave) and tonal relations similar to those in the tempered system.

The geographical diffusion of these cognate categories also supports the assumption that narrative songs of the first type developed from gusle songs. In other words, on the territory of central and western Serbia, where gusle singing is still nurtured, narrative songs are a true rarity if it is to be judged from the material so far published.²⁰ At the same time, most of them have been found precisely where gusle epic poetry is in decline or almost completely extinct but once used to be a significant segment of traditional culture.²¹ The famous influence of Irig's gusle school, the so-called 'blind academy', in Vojvodina in the 19th century, or, on the other hand, the presence of the Dinaric migratory stream in eastern Serbia, particularly in the north-west region, have been pointed out by certain ethnomusicologists as unavoidable facts to be considered when analyzing the genesis of narrative songs.²²

By all indications, the gradual fading of the gusle tradition in said regions ran parallel to the shaping of a new vocal form, one that inherited many traits of gusle songs but at the same time took its own course of development. In addition to said changes on the level of intonation, narrative songs thus grew into a vocal form designed primarily (but not only!) for epic-lyric, i.e., balladic texts with historical, mythological or everyday themes,²³ with women becoming equal or even dominant performers (as in eastern Serbia).

While the so-called *astalske songs* [dining-table songs], stylistically familiar and relatively homogenous, were cultivated over almost all of Vojvodina's territory, in other parts of Serbia, eastern in particular, further development of narrative songs gave rise to many regional

²⁰ In Sandžak, Mačva and D. Jasenica, territories where only a handful of narrative songs have been recorded, gusle tradition was until recently relatively well preserved. On the other hand, the anthologies containing material from central and western Serbia, which also attest to a very influential gusle tradition of the time, do not feature a single narrative song.

²¹ Some authors have documented the decline of the gusle epic, which was once widely diffused in eastern Serbia, e.g. Crnorečje, Svrljig and Zaplanje. – Cf.: D. Dević, *Narodna muzika Crnorečja...*, 33, 35; Ibid, „Narodna muzika“, *Kulturna istorija Svrljiga II*, Svrljig – Narodni univerzitet, Niš – Prosveta, 1992, 442–443; M. Vukičević-Zakić, op. cit., 31–32, 55.

²² 'Irig's blind academy... has also indirectly preserved its unique creative values for posterity. Not as an institution, i.e. in view of the success it had in promoting the gusle and gusle playing since, according to Vuk Karadžić's testimony, there were no gusle players in Srem (apart from the blind ones) in 1823, but because it encouraged people, on a large-scale, to sing heroic songs in their homes without instrumental accompaniment, thus paving the way for the development of the so-called "astalske" (dining-table) songs. It was in these circumstances, where no major family festivity went by without every connoisseur of epic poetry taking turns in singing songs around the table (hence the term "astalske pesme"), that the heroic epos of Fruška gora was formed. This part of the tradition has remained so deeply etched in the consciousness of the people of Fruška gora that we have yet to encounter a narrator who is familiar with the epic lore, but does not know a single "astalska" pesma.' – Lj. Miljković, „Muzička tradicija Fruške gore“, 84–86. See also footnote 16.

²³ The predominantly balladic content of these songs was also pointed out by D. Golemović commenting on the variable length of the melostrophe which in Serbia is typical of 'songs with a more developed narration, mostly ballads'. – D. O. Golemović, „Narodna muzika oblasti Timok i Zaglavak“, 269.

specificities. Specifically, some examples betray a strong influence of the songs *na bas* [in bass],²⁴ while in others melostrophes are linked by a full chain²⁵ (most likely an influence of ritual singing from these parts), or a simpler technique of text treatment is used.²⁶ In the scarce notations, the melody is more elaborate and so defined as to suggest influences of the urban tradition.²⁷ In others, however, the verse type,²⁸ theme and/or function²⁹ of the melody is different. Still, the recognizable melopoetic form – variable length of the melostrophe, dependent on narration – remains their ‘common denominator’, by virtue of which they were given a place of their own in a recently proposed macro-formal typology of Serbian vocal forms.³⁰ The examples of narrative songs in which the important distinguishing feature is lost are, however, much scarcer. These are the cases of the *litanic*, *quasistrophic* and *true strophic* macro-form.³¹ Their lesser diffusion and almost invariably strophic texts (usually in rhymed couplets) lead to the assumption that they should be viewed as representatives of a subsequent stage of development, as being even further removed from their original epic vocal-instrumental models.³²

In the context of examining Serbian narrative songs of the first type, particularly those from eastern Serbia, due consideration must also be given to the epic recitatives from the central part of western Bulgaria found in the area between Sofia, Stanke Dimitrov, Kyustendil and the Serbian border. They are one of the dominant genres on the mapped territory and are known as *Kralimarkove* or *Markove pesme* [Krali/Marko’s songs]. Their texts are usually in epic decasyllabic verse, or less commonly in asymmetrical octosyllabic, which is considered a more recent phenomenon in the genre.³³ A telling piece of information is that this manner of singing is known among the folk as *male singing* and that it used to be accompanied by the one-stringed

²⁴ Cf.: D. Dević, *Narodna muzika Crnorečja*, 43; D. O. Golemović, „Narodna muzika oblasti Timok i Zaglavak“, 21.

²⁵ Cf. M. Vukičević-Zakić, op. cit., 117.

²⁶ Cf. K. P. Manojlović, op. cit., 279.

²⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, 220.

²⁸ Some examples are based on the symmetrical or asymmetrical octosyllabic verse, rather than the decasyllabic. – cf.: V. Đorđević, op. cit., 176; M. Milojević, op. cit., 211; K. P. Manojlović, op. cit., 132, 177, 220, 239.

²⁹ Besides the prevailing ballads, other texts with different content can also be found. The change in the function is illustrated by several examples termed ‘*žetvarske pesme*’ (harvest songs), ‘*čilimarske pesme*’ (carpet-weaving songs) or lullabies (see examples in the appendix). – cf.: K. P. Manojlović, op. cit., 132; V. Đorđević, op. cit., 88; M. Marković, op. cit., 38.

³⁰ Cf. S. Radinović, *Zakonomernosti melopoetskog oblikovanja*, 278–287.

³¹ Cf. *ibid.*

³² See, for example, transcripts in A. Matović’s paper „Pevanje balada u sokobanjskom kraju”, *Razvitak* (Zaječar), 1992, god. XXXII, br. 3–4 (188-189), 113–116.

³³ E. Stoin, „Narodnata muzika v Sredna Zapadna Bŭlgaria“, *Izvestia na Instituta za muzika* (Sofia), 1970, Tom XV, 122-144, 177-178.

gusle!³⁴ Even though nowadays this instrument can no longer be found anywhere in Bulgaria, the extant sources unquestionably testify to its former presence.³⁵

In terms of the occasions on which they were performed, their solo interpretation and many other elements of their music structure, *Markove pesme* bear a close resemblance to our narrative songs of the first type, although they also bear hallmarks of an autochthonous vocal style that should perhaps be linked to Vasiljević's aforementioned *Šop variety*. The variable length of their melostrophes, conditional to the content of the poetic text, is likewise one of their distinguishing features, along with marked syllabicity, recitativeness, predominant *parlando rubato* interpretation and the prominent role of individual style, variation and improvisation. According to Elena Stoin's view, expressed in keeping with the familiar evolutionism of the Bulgarian school, all this suggests that *Markove pesme* originated from 'the chanted recitation of an epic narrative' that eventually grew into 'a melodized declamation' coordinated with the intonation of the spoken utterance, which is why the objective of the formal shaping of these songs is not a music phrase that is subordinate to a clearly defined structure.³⁶ By revealing their spoken origin, they are in fact built on specific intonational and formal stereotypes with individual style, variation and improvisation playing a considerable part.³⁷ As with certain Serbian songs, there are likewise examples among *Markove pesme* with a fixed melostrophe. Such stabilization of form in Bulgaria is characteristic of female interpretations and is explained by the influence of a predominantly female singing repertoire.³⁸

In view of all these facts, it seems quite possible that the epic recitative songs from the central part of western Bulgaria developed in a specific way from the forgotten gusle epic, marking - like Serbian (predominantly epic-lyric) narrative songs - the areas of its former diffusion on the territories of the central Balkans and Pannonia. Similar assumptions have already been made about the genesis of Macedonian epic songs, generally known as *kralske*

³⁴ In addition to the gusle accompaniment, E. Stoin mentions that these songs were also sung to the gadulka or bagpipe.

³⁵ Ibid.; cf. S. Džudžev, op. cit., 100–101.

³⁶ E. Stoin, op. cit., 123–125.

³⁷ By this we mean the commencing of a song with a sung exclamation (which can have rich ornamentation and grow to the size of an independent melodic section), sequential descending motion within pentachordal series, a specific arrangement of intonational ictuses, the stereotypical shaping of the last sung verse of each melostrophe etc. Ibid., 127–135, 142.

³⁸ Ibid., 135. Similar observations have been made about certain examples of Macedonian epic poetry. – cf. Ć. M. Ćorčiev, „Mužičkite osobenosti na epskite narodni pesni od Titovveleško“, *Makedonski folklor* (Skopje), 1988, god. XXI, br. 42, 125–137.

pesme,³⁹ which were performed on the same occasions and seldom featured instrumental accompaniment.⁴⁰ These forms are also characterized by a marked presence of improvisation, a predominant descending melodic motion and a variable melostrophe, the structure of which is becoming increasingly stable in the interpretations of younger performers.⁴¹

Variable strophic macro-form, solo interpretation by both sexes, the same generic classification of their texts and the same function they perform in the context of folk life also distinguish Serbian narrative songs of the second type (example 2), which can be assumed to correspond to Vasiljević's transitional *Morava-Vardar* variety. However, unlike the forms previously analyzed, the examples of this type have so far only been recorded in the southernmost part of Serbia, on the territory of Kosmet, Jablanica and Bujanovac.⁴² Their specificities do not point to a genetic connection with gusle songs, which comes as no surprise since, according to field research data gathered so far, they have never been sung to instrumental accompaniment. Assuming their melody did originate from the spoken intonation of epic narration, it must have reached a higher level of development, independence and stabilization in these songs.

The basic characteristics of the narrative songs of the second type are as follows:

- besides the epic decasyllabic verse, both types of the octosyllabic are here used more frequently; heterorhythmics are often present in the form of verses that are lengthened (less frequently shortened) by usually one or two syllables;⁴³
- the occasional presence of disyllabic refrains lele, more, džanum, which are mostly unstable when inserted between hemistiches;
- in certain examples the beginning of a melostrophe is signaled by a refrain usually consisting of a (melismatically) sung exclamation (ej, aj, haj), a short word (more) or the combination of the two (haj, more); in others, it can be the 'previously stated' first hemistich/part of the first line of each melostrophe (as in example 2);

³⁹ Ibid., op. cit., 127–128. Milojević applied this term for a Serbian narrative song of the first type he recorded in Kosmet (Lipljan). Cf. M. Milojević, op. cit., 205.

⁴⁰ As in Bulgaria, these songs could be accompanied by the kaval, bagpipe or even 'gusle' (by which what is really meant is the fiddle). However, the 'gusle' practice, which was performed until the interwar period only by blind gusle players in Macedonian towns, is completely extinct. Cf. M. S. Vlahović, „O slepim guslarima u Južnoj Srbiji“, *GEM u Beogradu* (Beograd), 1931, knj. VI, 100–106. The fiddle and the gadulka in Macedonian and Bulgarian epic tradition respectively were presumably used as substitutes for the former accompaniment on the real, one-stringed gusle.

⁴¹ Ć. M. Ćorriev, op. cit., 130-132; T. Bicevski, „Melodikata vo baladnot tip pesni“, *Makedonski folklor* (Skopje), 1984, god. XVII, br. 33, 113.

⁴² **Kosmet**: M. Milojević, op. cit., 75, 158; M. A. Vasiljević, *Narodne melodije koje se pevaju na Kosmetu*, 79, 188; **Jablanica**: V. Đorđević, op. cit., 46; **Bujanovac**: D. O. Golemović, *Narodne pesme i igre u okolini Bujanovca*, Etnografski institut SANU, posebna izdanja, knj. 21, Beograd, 1980, 39, 41, 58, 85, 91, 127, 130, 132, 135. The diffusion of examples of both types in Kosmet reaffirms the well-known fact that this region is a place where Dinaric and Central Balkan cultural spheres converge.

⁴³ Such 'oscillation' around the basic metric scheme is the fundamental characteristic of the poetic texts from the entire area herein specified.

- they usually contain hemiolitic meter (the most common bar being 7/8), whether in its pure form or in the stage of deconstruction;⁴⁴
- in terms of agogics, certain interpretations are very loose and involve frequent changes in meter;
- tonal relations are very close to being tempered; generally, melodies cover a broader span, usually of a sixth or an eighth, and often contain an augmented second (A-flat¹ - B¹);
- the melody's predominant feature is gradual descending motion, punctuated by occasional ascending skips.

Even though the few songs of the second type so far collected do not provide a solid basis for further deductions, we should nonetheless point out, at least as guidelines for future research, their similarities to certain recitative epic songs from the central part of western Bulgaria, which are considered to be of more recent origin,⁴⁵ as well as similarities to those from Macedonia.⁴⁶

Only a handful of published examples, recorded in various parts of Serbia, remain outside the existing classification.⁴⁷ Their common feature is simpler melodic structure and affinity with songs of the litanic macro-form, from which they possibly originated (example 3).⁴⁸ Another fact to bear in mind is that several examples of the analyzed types have also been registered, but the endings of their (variable) melostrophes do not correspond to the endings of the narrative units within the text of the song. These sporadic cases should nevertheless be regarded only as exceptions that do not contradict the proposed typology.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ The examples with hemiolitic meter in the deconstruction stage are those 'which experienced, to a greater or lesser extent, metric transformation into another type of hemiolitic meter different from the original one, and/or a drift toward a distributive rhythmic system, that is, toward *rubato* interpretation.' – S. Radinović, „Hemiolna metrika u srpskom muzičkom nasleđu – ‚autentičan‘ fenomen ili rezultat akulturacije?“ (in print), 5.

⁴⁵ Discussing the epic recitative songs of the central part of western Bulgaria, E. Stoin also mentions their younger stratum, based on the asymmetrical octosyllabic. The analyzed examples are said to “feature hemiolitic meter, a mellower and more ornate melody, which distinguishes them from the older, strictly recitative forms in the decasyllabic.” E. Stoin, op. cit., 129, 139–144.

⁴⁶ They are similar in terms of refrains, heterorhythmic verses, the occasional presence of hemiolitic relations in the metrorhythmic basis, the predominant descending melodic motion, tone series that sometimes contain an augmented second, ornamentation, the presence of female performers. Ѓ. M. Ѓorġiev, op. cit., 125-137.

⁴⁷ Cf.: Lj. Miljković, *Banja*, 246; K. P. Manojlović, op. cit., 1; V. Đorđević, op. cit., 525; M. A. Vasiljević, *Narodne melodije iz Sandžaka*, SAN, special editions, vol. CCV, Muzikološki institut, vol. 5, Beograd, Naučna knjiga, 1953, 59.

⁴⁸ Cf. S. Radinović, *Zakonomernosti melopoetskog oblikovanja*, 219–226, 281.

⁴⁹ The view held by D. Golemović that the endings of melostrophes in the narrative songs of southeastern Serbia rarely correspond with the dramatic-narrative units of a text, which is true of gusle songs, has not been confirmed in our analyses of the existing examples. Cf. D. O. Golemović, „Narodno pevanje između improvizacije i postojanosti“, *Etnomuzikološki ogledi*, Biblioteka XX vek, knj. 95, Beograd, 1997, 63–64.

* * *

Finally, it remains for us to address the as yet unsolved issue of terminology, which, however, proves to be much more complex as the examined songs link it to the field of thematic conceptualization as well. According to information gathered so far, the folk names for narrative songs are few and far between and vary across the country. As already mentioned, they are known as *popevačke pesme* [ditties] in the area of Negotinska Krajina. In Zaplanje, they are termed *junačke pesme* [heroic songs] or *pesme uza sovrnu* [songs sung at the dining table], which clearly indicates the occasions on which they were performed; the cognate term *astalske pesme* is common in most of Vojvodina. The most frequent popular terms are, therefore, those betraying the function of these songs, which is only to be expected.

In a number of our ethnomusicological studies, the authors address the issue at hand differently – they either eschew any particular terminology or accept the folk terms or, on the other hand, apply some of the following terms: *female songs*, *narrative songs* or *ballads*. The latter term is the most widely used, implying that functional or musical criteria are disregarded in favor of literary theory. This selection, however, proves to be the worst answer, and for a number of reasons. Firstly, although the songs in question usually are ballads, texts with different themes can also be found among them, such as epic, comic (as in example 2), or texts with motifs of *strižba* or wedding. Secondly, these are not the only ballads in Serbian vocal heritage, as balladic texts are also typical, albeit to a lesser extent, in vocal forms with completely different musical-structural features.⁵⁰ Finally, the term *ballad* says nothing about the musical characteristics of a song. In that regard it should be mentioned that practice has shown that optimum results in ethnomusicology are often achieved if the research is thematically and problematically based on genre as a *functional* or *musical*, but not *poetic*, category. Specifically, defining the genre of the object of research based on the content of its text is hardly ever justified given that the sample thus obtained is, as a rule, overly musically heterogeneous.⁵¹

A further question arises: which term, then, best denotes the songs examined in this paper? Can we regard them as a functionally uniform category and, in keeping with that, ‘officially’ term them *astalske pesme* or *pesme uz trpezu*? Or should we adopt Svetlana Zaharieva’s typology and classify them under the musical genre of *recitative songs*?⁵² The first

⁵⁰ The introduction of the term *ballad voice*, which appears in recent works of several Serbian ethnomusicologists, seems all the more inappropriate.

⁵¹ The same is true of the poetic genre of love songs, which due to its distinct musical and functional heterogeneity is seldom and only for good reason treated as a separate subject of ethnomusicological studies.

⁵² Proceeding from the concept of S. Skrepkov, who draws a distinction between *recitative*, *dancing* and *singing* genres, Zaharieva interprets the relationship between the functional and the musical in the folk song as a complex syncretic system and gives a detailed explanation of the specificities of each of the existing genres in Bulgarian

option does not appear to be fully satisfactory as the group of songs in question are not functionally homogeneous. The second option, which we believe is the only suitable one, should only be modified by minor terminological corrections, as recitativeness cannot be declared the common and most important feature of all Serbian examples encountered so far. What is essentially identified as a primordial creative impulse that underpins these songs and is correspondingly musically-structurally embodied – first and foremost in the variably strophic macro-form and the specifically melodic(-rhythmic) motion – is the primeval need for melodized narration. This is precisely why such vocal forms should henceforth be only studied separately as a category of *narrative songs*.

vocal heritage. In her study she explains that music genre is ‘a maximally generalized typification of everyday life content, “translated” into music language’, i.e., that the listed genres are ‘typologically different modes of the existence and functioning of the music principle in a different, artistically specified everyday life context’. S. Zaharieva, *Formoobrazuvaneto v bŭlgarskata narodna pesen*, Sofiŭ, Bŭlgarska akademija na naukite – Institut za muzikoznanie, 1979, 72–73. See also a brief critical overview of the many interpretations of the complex term genre in ethnomusicology, literary theory and musicology, which was recently provided by M. Zakić in her study

Example 1

(♩ = 158) Банатско Ново Село

1 Се - ја бра - та на ве - че - ру зва - ла;
2 -Хај - де, бра - те, са мном ве - че - ра - ти!
3 -Не мо - гу ти, се - јо, ве - че - ра - ти,
4 ја сам си - ноћ у ме - ха - ни био,
5 и с Тур - ци - ма кав - гу за - ме - тну - о,
6 у - би - о сам је - дин - ца у мај - ке,
7 а цар не - ће ни сре - бра ни бла - га,
8 већ он 'о - ће у за - ме - ну гла - ву,
9 и - ли мо - ју, и - ли ко - га мо - га,

Sister invites her brother for dinner
(astalska pesma)

Sung text arranged in melostrophes: *

I
Sister invites her brother for dinner:
“Come and dine with me, brother!”
“I cannot eat tonight
For I went to the inn last night
And picked a fight with some Turkish folk.
I killed a mother’s only son
And now the sultan seeks not gold or silver,
It’s my head he wants, he said.
Either mine or my close ones’,
Either mine or my close ones’.”

II
“Come and dine with me, brother,
Your sister has four sons,
She’ll offer one to the sultan,
And so save your life,
And so save your life.”

III
At the crack of dawn
Mother wakes her son Radovan:
“Should I pick Radovan?
Radovan was my first joy.”
Mother wakes her son Milovan:
“Should I pick Milovan?
Milovan was my second joy.”
Mother wakes her son Jovan:

“Should I pick Jovan?
Jovan is the educated one.”

IV
Ay, mother wakes her son Simeun:
“Wake up, Sima, the sun is up,
Your uncle is calling you to his wedding,
He wants you to be his best man.”
Sima gets up, his mother overwhelmed by grief,
And mounts a sturdy horse.
Sima rides down green hills,
His mother looking after him,
Looking after him and weeping.

V
Thence come three young Turks,
The first says: “What a handsome fellow.”
The second says: “What a fine fellow.”
The third keeps quiet, says nothing
He swings his sword and beheads him.
The head is dead but the tongue speaks:
“Put me in the horse’s feed-bag,
Let him take me to my dear mother,
So she can watch me, so she can weep,
So she doesn’t send my brothers to weddings,
Off to weddings, to my uncle’s betrayal,
Off to weddings, to my uncle’s betrayal.”

N. Fracile, *Vokalni muzički folklor Srba i Rumuna u Vojvodini (komparativna proučavanja)*, Matica srpska, Odeljenje za scenske umetnosti i muziku, vol. 2, Novi Sad, 1987, example 95.

Example 2

Косовска Митровица

♩ = 160

6 На - ни, на - ни. На - на на - ни Са - ву лу - до де - те

и о - ва - ко ње - му про - го - ва - ра:
На - ни, на - ни, Са - во, лу - до де - те,
на - ни, Са - во, мај - ке да по - рас - теш,
9 да по - рас - теш, ца - ру да ца - ру - јеш,

и на ма - чу цар-ство да до - би - - јеш.

* An attempt at reconstruction based on the song’s inaccurate original transcript.

Mother lulled Sava, her silly child, to sleep
(lullaby)

Sung text arranged in melostrophes:

I

Mother lulled
Mother lulled Sava, her silly child, to sleep
And thus she spoke to him:
“Lullaby, Sava, my silly child,
Lullaby, Sava, may you grow up,
Grow up strong and be king one day,
And take over the kingdom by sword!”

II

This was overheard,
This was overheard by Turkish janizaries,
Who went straight to the sultan,
Who went straight to the sultan:
“Have you heard oh sultan, our mighty lord,
Mother lulled Sava, her silly child, to sleep,
And thus she spoke to him:

III

– Lullaby, Sava, my silly child,
Lullaby, Sava, may you grow up,
Grow up strong and be king one day,
And take over the kingdom by sword!”

IV

The sultan sent out
The sultan sent out his loyal janizaries
To bring him Sava, the silly child
The silly child, to his divan.
The sultan looked at Sava, the silly child,
And thus he spoke to him:

V

“Thank the Lord
Thank the Lord, thank the one,
For how can this tiny child possibly
Take over my kingdom
My kingdom and my riches?”

VI

It would be a sin,
It would be a sin to hang this child,
It would be a sin to slay this child,
Put him instead in a dark dungeon,
Where he would be in water up to his knees.”

VII

So he sat in his dungeon,
Sava, the silly child, sat in his dungeon,
Imprisoned in a dark dungeon!

In a dungeon riddled with lizards and snakes!
He sat there as days and years went by.

VIII

His mother missed him all the while,
His old mother yearned to see him
To see her Sava, her silly child,
So she came to see the sultan
And ask him for the key to the dungeon:

IX

“Give them to me, oh sultan,
Give me the key to the dungeon,
For I want to open the dungeon door
I want to see my little Sava’s bones,
To see them and to kiss them!”

X

The sultan took pity,
The sultan took pity of the woman
And gave the mother the key to the dungeon.

Water has dried up in the dungeon,
Grass has grown knee-high,
On the grass stands a gilded dining-table,
On the table fine bread,
Beside the bread a gilded carafe,
In the carafe fine wine,
Beside the table a silver chair,
And on the chair sits Sava, the silly child,
Drinking wine, glancing at his mother.

XI

The sultan heard of this,
The sultan lying on his divan heard of this,
So he rushed to the dark dungeon,
So he stormed into the dark dungeon,
He pulled out Sava, the silly child,
Then he pulled out his damascus blade
To slay Sava, the silly child.

XII

Sava leapt to his feet
Sava leapt to his feet like a fierce animal,
He wrenched the sword from the sultan’s hands
And cut off the sultan’s head,
And climbed to the chambers,
Up there, to king’s chambers
And took over the kingdom.

M. A. Vasiljević, *Narodne melodije s Kosova i Metohije*, Beograd – Beogradska knjiga; Knjaževac – Nota, 2003, example 188.

Example 3

Бијело Поље

♩ = 92

Раз - бо - ље се, ја - а - до,
дил - бер мом - че мла - а - до,
шћа - ше у - мри - је - е - ти.
Пи - та - ла га ма - ај - ка:
„Шта је те - би, Јо - о - во?“
„Ме - не бо - ли гла - а - ва

3

хо - ћу у - мри - је - ти!“

Poor Jovo has fallen ill
(a song accompanied by kolo dancing)

Poetic text:

Poor Jovo, young fellow,
Has fallen ill,
He lies in his mother's lap,
He lies in his sister's arms.
His mother asks:
“What's wrong, Jovo, my son?”
And Jovo replies:
“I have a headache
I won't ever recover from,
I want to die.
Bury me, mother,
Beside Mara's house;
Bury me, mother,
In a leaden coffin
And on this coffin, mother,
Make four windows.

The first, mother,
Whence the sun shines,
So the bright sun
May keep my face warm.
The second, mother
Whence the wind blows,
So the wind
May keep my young face cool;
The third window, mother
Whence the dew drops,
So the honeyed dew
May keep my face moist;
And the fourth, mother,
Where Mara passes by
So that Mara, mother,
May look at me every so often!”

M. A. Vasiljević, *Narodne melodije iz Sandžaka*, SAN, special editions, vol. CCV, Muzikološki institut, vol. 5, Beograd, Naučna knjiga, 1953, example 59.

Translated by Dušan Zabrdac

Summary

Narrative (story-telling) songs, whose main trait is a melostrophe variable by its length and formal structure, have thus far been passed over in major Serbian ethnomusicology reviews – in all probability due to their uncommonness and inconsistent music-formal and melodic-rhythmical structure. Following a short account of the history of the previous research of Serbian narrative songs, this study deals with the issue of their origin and offers a typology proposal, based on the author's analytical-comparative appraising of all the examples published. A discussion of the terminology and genres concludes this analysis, shedding light on the reasons why the ethnomusicological research of Serbian folk ballads, relying on the genre as a poetic and not a functional or music category, cannot be a prerequisite for valid scientific results.