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*Iva Nenić**

University of Arts in Belgrade

Faculty of Music

Department of Ethnomusicology

INNER/OUTER BORDERLAND: CONTEMPORARY 'REWORKING' OF GUSLE**

Abstract: The traditional music of Serbian gusle underwent significant changes in the last two decades, the major one being the verve that took place *inwardly* inside local traditional culture of gusle playing. However, there are also instances of *outward* changes, brought by gusle's placement in 'international' musical contexts where this instrument has been recently introduced. In this paper I shall analyze two recent works by Serbian composers Milica Paranosić and Aleksandra Vrebalov where gusle are featured: *Morrigan's Song* by former and *...hold me, neighbor, in this storm...* by latter. Although the ideology, genres and stylistic features of these works differ, they hold in common a specific manner in which the instrument and its distinctive sound is both 'exoticised' and deconstructed. I will argue that both works challenge the familiar notions of 'being-at-home' and 'standing somewhere else' and thus articulate alternate identity spaces, achieving this through the act of symbolic re-inscription of gusle's sound, appearance and function.

Keywords: gusle, contemporary music, identity, multiculturalism in music, gender

Апстракт: Традиционална музика за гусле претрпела је битне промене у последње две деценије, од којих је највећа жар који се разбуктао *изнутра*, у локалној традиционалној култури свирања гусала. Међутим, постоје и примери *спољних*

* Author contact information: iva@fmu.bg.ac.rs

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промена, услед смештања гусала у „међународне“ музичке контексте у које је овај инструмент недавно уврштен. У овом чланку анализираћу два новија дела српских композиторки Милице Параносић и Александре Вребалов у којима су присутне и гусле: „*Morrigan's Song*“ прве и „*...hold me, neighbor, in this storm...*“ друге. Иако се та дела идеолошки, жанровски и стилски разликују, заједнички им је специфичан манир у коме су инструмент и његов особен звук „егзотицизирани“ и деконструисани. Мишљења сам да оба дела преиспитују уврежене појмове „бити код куће“ и „стајати негде другде“, те стога артикулишу просторе алтернативних идентитета, остварујући тиме чин симболичког редефинисања звука, појавности и функције гусала.

Кључне речи: гусле, савремена музика, идентитет, мултикултурализам у музици, род

The multiplication of junctions between acoustic cultures – producing sometimes different and sometimes utterly unexpected crossings and hybridizations of otherwise distant music histories and identities – exempts almost no music community, even those traditionally considered the most resilient and the least prone to changes. The currently favoured visual metaphor of ‘boundary’ largely complies with the nature of global processes which, destroying various hierarchical patterns (and certainly promoting new forms of hegemony), produce quite unique types of the crossing and mixing of various musical idioms. These new ‘frontierdoms’ are battlefields for the meaning and ownership of music, where the intertwining of cultural microcontexts and personal narratives with various cultural models fighting for supremacy in the global society are present to the full extent. This kind of transformation has even occurred in music-making on the gusle, which, with the undisputable invigoration of the neo-patriarchal pattern in the last two decades in the context of the renewal of the nationalistic ideology in the societies of the ex-Yugoslav space, is opening at the same time towards different areas of expression, namely the use of gusle in the context of the current encounter of domicile and immigrant subcultures with the globalized politics of representing acoustic multiculturalism, where the old boundaries are questioned, and at the same time new forms of imaginary and real gathering are produced.

This kind of relocation on the global map of sounds is illustrated by the recent works of contemporary composers of Serbian descent, where the gusle is used in different ways. We are talking about the works of Aleksandra Vrebalov and Milica Paranosić, authors who emigrated and are composing in the United States, and whose opuses include both real transformations of the folklore sample and ‘fictional’ references to the imagined world of the Balkan’s traditional musical heritage. Although we are dealing with two different poetics and creative worldviews of the two composers, the common denominator of the works I shall be speaking about is a specific ideological framing of the ‘folklore’ category which, instead

of the function of a cultural delimiter, is assigned the role of a certain *medium of cultural translation*, materialized in the ideological practice of art (Lat. *mediatus* – the inserted one, the one interceding between the opposites)

Milica Paranosić's work *Morrigan's song* was produced as part of a cycle *Goddess Chronicles* (2011), realized in collaboration with Carmen Kordas, visual artist. This multimedia performance is designed as a sequence of 'stories' about ancient, Slavonic, Celtic, Hindu and Egyptian goddesses, and its continued development will include a female deity from the religious practices of Brazil as well as from the Ewe people of Ghana.¹ The emphasis is put on the author's playful interpretation of the female mythological figure, unhindered by tradition, with a prominent intimate line and avoiding the trap of total submission to the 'universal female principle'. As part of a collaborative project *Skana, Goddesses and More*, the *Goddess Chronicles* cycle follows an ideological and poetical determinant whose frontline, in the words of the authors themselves, is the "same passion for foreign cultures and virtual territories. They celebrate synergistic languages, drawing global and historical influences that span centuries, and cross ethnic and spiritual divides".²

The intertextual nexus, whose wake allows for 'reading' the music itself, is made by the popularized complex of myths and stories about Morrigan, then the poem by Roger Bonair-Agard dedicated to this goddess, as well as the very powerful visual component which unfolds in two layers: through the video work and through the provocative stage position of the artist herself. The video work consists of a syntagmatic sequence of scenes, objects and beings traditionally linked with Morrigan: we see the sea, galloping horses, a crow, then a female body occasionally covered in blood and entrails, which are direct hints to the prerogatives of this Irish mythological figure connected with war, death and discord, but also with fertility.³ Along with the video broadcast, Milica Paranosić performs as a gusle

¹ According to an interview with Milica Paranosić, conducted on 9th October 2011 using Skype software.

² After the description of the music-stage project *Skana, Goddesses and More*, created by Milica Paranosić and Muriel Louveau, composers, Carmen Kordas, visual artist, and Emily Pope Blackman, choreographer and dancer. Available at www.milicaparanosic.com, last accessed on 8th October 2011.

³ It is a figure from the pre-Christian Irish cults practiced in Ireland, whose name most likely signified a class of female supernatural beings connected with water, similar to Naiads or Nereids from Antiquity. During the Middle Ages, in the body of stories, poems and pseudo-historical texts known today as the *Irish Mythological Cycle* (*na Scéalta Miotaseolaíochta*) there appears Morrigan, the dark goddess of war and fertility, the 'ghostly queen' (gael. *Morrígan*) with a triple hypostasis – Badb, Macha and Nemain. The long and complicated history of imagological transformations of this Celtic-Irish deity includes a whole array of various familiar characters from folk beliefs, literature and popular culture, including Morgan le Fay

player. The figure of a 'female gusle player' who dominates the performance undoubtedly infringes the (public) conventions of a culture this instrument originates from. At the same time, an 'ethnic' instrument for listeners in another (American) culture is but one of many 'exotic' artefacts in the 'museum of world music', the deposit of a constant flow of sounds whose origin need not be known, but which have clearly connoted characteristics, such as 'archaic' and 'unadulterated'. To that extent Milica Paranosić on the gusle can freely play with the representation of the archaic priestess of the goddess Morrigan, whose Irish-Celtic nature is 'expressed' by the harsh sound of a traditional Serbian instrument, in the spirit of New Age poetics.

The use of the gusle deliberately toys with several conventions: first, the very sound is altered, and apart from the recognizable timbre, it does not draw directly from the epic tradition of Serbia and the Balkans on the levels of genre, repertoire and style. Then, the privileged position of the epic singer, epitomizing heroic masculinity, now is taken by a female artist who, deftly manipulating a gusle and a laptop, makes the female body very conspicuous and stresses in numerous ways the feminine creative activity hidden/denied in the contemporary discourses of epic traditions dominant in the context of the composer's culture of origin. Milica Paranosić explicitly puts under female control the objects of the staging of social power/control, traditionally subject to male domination, and thus by using Serbian traditional instruments and a computer (as tools treated equally in conceiving the musical process), creates a post-modern acoustic-electronic paean to the Irish goddess on the junction of personal associations and 'loose' inter-cultural concatenation and re-writing the mythological narrations about women. The instrument is also held atypically (the gusle is placed high against a thigh and a shoulder), while the performing style largely deviates from an epic expression where the articulation of the instrumental melody is closely related to the semantics of the text sung; instead, there is the intertwining of an ostinato motive in the gusle part and the short repetitive phrase upon a vowel *e*, which gradually expands into a developed vocal line in the subsequent musical tissue. Formally, the contours of a three-part form can be discerned, where the first part contains the superposition of an electronically realized three-part rhythmic pattern, an ostinato motive in the gusle part in a range of a fifth (which is amplified by a pedal loop) and a slightly modal melodic line rendered by the voice (close to the acoustic sphere of a Phrygian mode). All these factors contribute to the impression of 'folkloreness' which, however, does not share any special links with any of the ethnically profiled musical

from the Arthurian legend, but also Morrigan as the feminist appropriation of the Goddess – female principle, established in the twentieth century within the cult of Wicca.

traditions on the map of world-renowned cultures, apart from the generalized connotations of a floating designator to the fictional 'ethnicity' of a sound, in the spirit of World Music / New Age creations, first and foremost in the sense of predominant modality and repetitiveness, which are distant associations to archaic ritual music genres. The same applies to the manner of singing which, apart from the use of open throat (only recently codified in Serbian neo-traditional music as a paradigm of 'folk singing'), does not reach into the locally specific types of melody, ornaments, timbre and other stylistic-interpretative and genre particulars. In the beginning of the middle formal segment the gusle disappears, and the short sung *forte* motive in the range of a sixth keeps repeating in the background, as a sort of acoustic backdrop for the voice of a male narrator. The verses are from the poem *Song of the Morrigan*, written by a poet from New York, Roger Bonair-Agard, in co-operation with Milica Paranosić for her performance (cf. Appendix 1). The goddess's attributes are emphatically recited ('Prophet of blood, song guardian of the death of nation...'), with a euphemistic address ('Oh kind slaughter, Oh women of wound and sadness and blood...'), with the climactic multiplication and cacophony of sampled male voices which, like some scattered choir, summon the goddess in her merciful and terrifying forms. The ending is dominated by a solemn and meditative atmosphere in which, over the gusle drone, Milica Paranosić almost ceremoniously sings the parts of the poem *Song of the Morrigan*, using a simple melodic formula in an octave-lower register, where for the first time the characteristic Phrygian hyperfinalis, in the shape of the flattened second degree, can be heard.⁴

Unlike Milica Paranosić's approach to the gusle, which does not stress the 'authentic' sound sources of the cultures which the instrument originates from and where the specific, biting sonority is re-semantified and appropriated as an expedient of the musical representation of a powerful (warrior) femininity, Aleksandra Vrebalov's work *...hold me, neighbor, in this storm...* (2008), written for the Kronos Quartet,⁵ has different premises. By taking the more or less recognizable musical symbolism of the 'excerpts' from the acoustic cultures of the Balkans and treating them as a puzzle, as historical-cultural testimonies, the composer surmounts the boundaries in two ways. First, this is a trans-historical and trans-cultural connecting of various faces of a community in the post-conflict Balkans through music, where the secular and the sacral meet, as well as the urban and the rural; also, the specific

⁴ In the analysis I relied upon the two acoustic sources – the mix of the composition, kindly provided by the author, and the recording of the live performance available at the electronic address <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i7MNXMaTG0o>

⁵ The composition *...hold me, neighbor, in this storm...* was released in 2009 on the Kronos Quartet's album *Floodplain*, by the label *Nonesuch*.

contextualization of folklore thematizes the music identities of ethnic and ethno-religious social factors which were until recently irreconcilable. Second (but no less important), the music traces of the ‘distant’ Balkans, whose sound is still presented as somewhat exotic and darkened by the specific local fate, are submitted to the apparatus of a string quartet, thus breaking the boundary between ‘folk/popular’ and ‘high’ cultures. Such a step forward or freely moving between the domains of ‘high’ and ‘popular’, as one of the regular post-modern procedures, is not a surprise in itself. Actually, the Kronos Quartet, to which Aleksandra Vrebalov’s work is dedicated, is known for the bold expansions of a classic string quartet repertoire, including a wide range of music styles, from those with pronounced folklore characteristics (tango, Bollywood music, Azerbaijani Mugham, Roma orchestras) to jazz, electronics and various kinds of experimental music.

By the author’s interpretation, the *raison d’être* of the work ...*hold me, neighbor, in this storm...* is manifested in bringing together the identities which are ideologically and/or historically and culturally distant/conflicting, and in celebrating the diversities:

For me, ...*hold me, neighbor...* is a way to bring together the sounds of the church bells of Serbian orthodox monasteries and the Islamic calls to prayer. It is a way to connect histories and places by unifying one of the most civilized sounds of Western classical music – that of the string quartet – with ethnic Balkan instruments, the *gusle* [a bowed string instrument] and the *tapan* [large double-headed drum]. It is a way to piece together our identities fractured by centuries of intolerance, and to reach out and celebrate the land so rich in its diversities, the land that would be ashen, empty, sallow, if any one of us, all so different, weren’t there.⁶

The musical tissue consists of six segments, and the *gusle* appears at the very beginning. Its highly expressive part, played by the violinist David Harrington, mimics the narrow, non-tempered sound of epic poems, moving in semitone steps within the range of a minor third. After a short solo introduction, the *gusle* part is superimposed by the recorded sound of the Orthodox church bells, the sounds of the *tapan* and the brusque exclamations of the syllable ‘ha!’. Then the main motive core is taken over and elaborated by other (classical) string instruments, and the *gusle* is replaced by a violin. Several times, a short sampled fragment of an *adhan*⁷ is expositied, accompanied by curtly articulated, almost percussive gestures of the quartet, which culminate in an unrestrained rhythmic crescendo. By the interpretation of the author herself, two important points which ‘colour’ the initial segment

⁶ Quotation from the programme booklet of the Kronos Quartet concert on 2 October 2010 in the Hopkins Centre for the Arts at the Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire.

⁷ *Adhan* is the Islamic call to prayer, chanted by a *muezzin*.

of the musical tissue are the elements defined by their reference to the Orthodox and Islamic cultures: 'Gusle and bells suggest the Christian Orthodox side, while the call to prayer and the tapan (two sided drum) suggest Islam.'⁸

Executed verbatim, the concept of multiculturalism based upon emphasizing and nurturing the differences between demarcated identities leads to an interesting oversight: apart from the undeniable affiliation to the domain of Serbian national culture, the gusle can be found in other ethnic cultures of the region, from Croatia to Albania (*lahuta*). Thus, the (benevolent) stress on the multicultural contextualization, in the shape of 'sampling' various musical contents based on their origin, has overshadowed the interculturalism of the gusle as the instrument of the former common epic expression in the Balkans: the latter would be pursuant to the pacifying perspective of permeation, where Aleksandra Vrebalov's work finds its roots. Beside the other mentioned quotations of folklore of ethnic communities, the gusle are emphasized as an instrument of male power, and this intrusion of traditional music-making into the sound of a string quartet is aimed at drawing and confirming the imagined cultural boundaries. This is how Aleksandra Vrebalov formulates it:

Everybody is wrapped up in his own culture and myth, and sees the other as a threat. Being louder, bigger, the more macho is the way to survive.⁹

In the subsequent segments, the indicated masculine-destructive perspective is mitigated by the escape into the comfort of memories: in the third formal segment, after children's voices, we hear the short, sentimentally intoned excerpt of a New Folk song 'Ja posadih jednu ružu belu' ['I Planted a White Rose'] (author Miodrag Krnjevac), interpreted by Aleksandra Vrebalov's grandmother. This motive is taken over by the violin, foreshadowing a virtuoso segment where the Kronos Quartet is immediately 'transformed' into a traditional type of a (Roma) Balkan ensemble, popularized in the twentieth century, with clear references to the Romanian popular song 'Ciocârlia' ['Skylark'], composed in the folk spirit.¹⁰ Nevertheless, their 'music-making', in spite of all the zest, is occasionally punctuated by eerie glissandos, shouts and sounds of distant explosions.¹¹ In the last

⁸ Quotation from the transcript of electronic mails, exchanged between January 2007 and March 2008 by Aleksandra Vrebalov and David Harrington/Kronos Quartet. Available at http://clarice-smithcenter.umd.edu/downloads/Kronos_holdmeneighbor.pdf – last accessed on 13 October 2011.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ This quotation certainly reminds us of *Romanian Rhapsody No. 1 for Orchestra* by George Enescu, but also of Bora Dugić, a shepherd's-flute player, and his performance of the same melody, thus contributing to the diversity of the possible multicultural localization of the music.

¹¹ An unusual counterpart to these procedures is the use of similar acoustic symbols in the context of contemporary singing with the gusle. Such a kind of acoustic enrichment, which

segment, it is as if the repeatedly suggested *fatum* of the Balkans recedes for a moment, and the mutual intolerance transforms into Eros: one hears another segment of muezzin chanting (now considerably longer), intertwined with a passionate, richly ornamented violin melody over variously accented rhythmic figures in the accompaniment, which leads to the final, sizzling culmination and the abrupt interruption of the musical tissue.

Although the gusle has been given the place of a musical patron of one of the (conflicting) Balkan identities, it is important to notice that – similarly to *Morrigan's Song* – the performative dimension materialized in the execution itself, which does not take place in 'just any' cultural venue, facilitates the consequential localization of the instrument, the music and the meanings related to them. The fact that the Kronos Quartet includes the gusle in their auxiliary apparatus through which they 'commune' with Otherness, or represent it, officially introduces this instrument to the collection of other music artefacts in the class of ethnic/exotic, favoured in the world-oriented international music scene (for example, not only are gusle used in the Kronos Quartet's album 'Floodplain', but also the Indian shruti box and electric sitar, nagara and tar drums, as well as the beguèna maridhia, constructed specially for the occasion and conceived to imitate the Ethiopian begena lyre). The gusle is literally transposed to the array of symbolic tools for representing diverse cultural identities, whose visibility and 'audibility' mitigates to some extent the hegemony of Western culture, or even antagonizes it. Moreover, gusle playing is no longer the exclusive property of domicile cultures, defined primarily by its affiliation with the traditional order: largely out of place in the context of the development of contemporary media for transmitting sound and information, their acoustic-semantic world reaches for potential intercultural connections. In the mind-boggling global exchange of sounds, musical instruments become potentially powerful agents of various groupings which can often exceed geographic boundaries of traditionally defined communities. In the process, various histories, contexts and appropriations are activated in numerous ways. Here I refer to the wide definition of interculturalism in music, offered by Mark Slobin: 'relatively loose linkages that span the gaps between the formally defined units we call "societies."' ¹²

contributes to the mosaic form, is often, as Dimitrije Golemović puts it, rendered by 'zvuci crkvenih zvona, udar groma, zvuci ratnih razaranja... ali i svirka na raznim narodnim instrumentima (frula, dvojnice...)' ['sounds of church bells, a clap of thunder, sounds of the destruction of war... but also music-making on various folk instruments (shepherd's flute, dvojnice...)]. Dimitrije Golemović, *Pjevanje uz gusle [Singing with Gusle]*, Srpski genealoški centar, Belgrade, 115.

¹² Mark Slobin, 'Preface', *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West*, London, Wesleyan University Press, 2000 (1993), vii.

With no intention to qualify the positioning of the gusle in the contexts such as previously discussed as a special or new form of culture, I opine that its use out of the original conventions is a valuable testimony to the ever more frequent and more dynamic crossing of local and global narratives on music. Transposed into the virtual space, the sound and the playing technique of gusle are fortified as an acoustic paradigm which the Kronos Quartet's violinist treats as an archetype.¹³ The following words of the Kronos Quartet's artistic director attest to the transformation of the notion of 'ethnic' in the contact with the global, as well as the new meanings which music culture acquires by mediation and articulation through modern technology:

Ms. Vrebalov asked Kronos to learn to play a traditional Serbian folk fiddle called a gusle as part of the piece, and through videos of gusle masters on YouTube, Kronos was able to see and hear directly how the gusle is played. It would have been impossible to find a comparable experience in San Francisco without this [Internet] technology (...)¹⁴

The compositions by Paranosić and Vrebalov are decidedly dissociated from the 'pseudo-folklore' position as one of the paradigms of the (local Serbian) music scene,¹⁵ while on the other hand they produce symbolological music formations in the cultural-political order of (American) multiculturalism. The ideology of multiculturalism is the background of a process where sound traces and material objects originating from former and current musical practices in Serbia and the Balkans, as the elements of 'immigrant subculture' and simultaneously the inventory of world musical heritage, are transformed into one of many 'micromusics' as characteristics of an identity and open up to a new semantic input. The routine symbolism of the instrument, as well as its characteristic acoustic matter, are transmuted by various artistic procedures and contextualized on the verge of 'world' music idioms, which, however, does not bear the same consequences. The differ-

¹³ A possible path for further transformation is suggested by the situations, such as a workshop, where the Kronos Quartet members teach the members of a female quartet how to play the gusle. Asked in an interview for an interpretation of a joke that the girls play better than him, Harrington replied: 'Well... you know... I taught them, I showed them how to do it... What can I say... The fact that they do it better than me only shows you what a teacher I am (laughter). They just continued the tradition of a great gusle master!' 'Bašta od zvukova' ['Garden of Sounds'] (interview with David Harrington by Ira Prodanov Krajišnik), *Politika*, 29 March 2010. <http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Kultura/Bashta-od-zvukova.lt.html>

¹⁴ This passage was taken from a letter by Sidney Chen, sent to the US Federal Communications Commission, where he defends the free flow of information over the Internet.

¹⁵ On the axiological category of *pseudo-folklore* as a musicological ideologeme, cf. Mirjana Veselinović Hofman, 'Srpska muzika i "zamrznuta" istorija' ['Serbian Music and "Frozen" History'], *Novi zvuk*, No. 9, Belgrade, 1997, 13–20.

ences largely stem from a 'new' artistic-ideological context – the cultural setting in Milica Paranosić's performance is the area of the live, bottom-up development of alternative/new identities similar to an open concept, while the work of Aleksandra Vrebalov in collaboration with the Kronos Quartet is a part of the project where it is exactly the idea of the revitalization of 'disjointed' cultures by music that unfolds in the elite space of the hegemonic culture, 'loosened' by the multi-cultural discourse (cf. Appendix 2). What they, on the other hand, have in common is the breaking of a boundary – either the one with 'the close Other' which is materialized in the musical apotheosis of neighbourliness, or the delimiting line which prevents the entrance into the multiplied, imaginary or real zones of musical encounters past by and over the cultural borders, where the gusle unexpectedly, but quite successfully, appear and assert themselves as the instrument of negotiation.

Translated by Goran Kapetanović

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Appendix 1

Song of the Morrigan

By Roger Bonair-Agard

Prophet of blood, song guardian of the death of nation
We love the sound of horn, the cattle prod, the musk
Of battle, your three headed beauty – dreaded wolf,
Bull or lover-child, we smell you other child
Defender of dust, rejecter of what wants
To wan and be owned. Love us into the dirt
Unto death, unto the river that frees us from
The land, the land. Oh keepers of the blood
And the unblooded. Oh kind slaughter,
Oh women of wound and sadness, and blood
And blood and what here smells like your
Funk, your song, your beg toward freedom
From the land's false promises – the slaughter
They convince, the death of our children,
Their souls above us, invisible; their wings,
Sails, billowing wings of crows.

Appendix 2

Morrigan's Song

polazište	origin
etnička/regionalna kultura	ethnic/regional culture
nova lokacija	new location
alter-zona (multikulturalizam u subkulturi)	alter-zone (multiculturalism in subculture)
zvuk	sound
tragovi prethodne zvučnosti se prevode u heteronomni identitet	traces of previous sonority are translated into a heteronomous identity

...hold me, neighbor, in this storm...

polazište	origin
etnička/regionalna kultura	ethnic/regional culture
nova lokacija	new location
alter-zona (multikulturalizam u subkulturi)	'loose' zone of dominant culture (dispersion of difference)
zvuk	sound
tragovi prethodne zvučnosti se prevode a heteronomni identitet	traces of previous sonority are fixed into a closed identity

Morrigan's Song



...hold me, neighbor, in this storm...

