The Status of Traditional Music in Eastern Europe

The investigation of traditional music in Eastern Europe is currently a means toward the better understanding, not only of music, but also of the general social and cultural situation there at a time of great political change. Similar cultural processes, and the uniform status of traditional music in Eastern Europe, suggest that first, we can conceive of that part of the Old World as a coherent geopolitical and cultural zone in spite of the fact that it comprises many different ethnic groups, and second, that the contemporary nation states of the region have been exposed to various historical and cultural currents.

Several factors have contributed to making East European culture generally unified, especially the traditional arts and traditional music. One is the predominantly Slavic origin of East European ethnic groups. Although the major East European geographic zones—the Carpathian Mountains, the Pannonian Plain, and the Balkan Peninsula—had long cultural traditions of their own, they were open to interaction with other cultural zones. This was the arena for the division of the Roman and Byzantine, and later of the Islamic religious spheres. Furthermore, most of Eastern Europe was for long periods under foreign rule: Austro-Hungarian in the northwest and Ottoman Turkish in the southeast. This meant, inevitably, that elements of the ruling cultures were incorporated, including music. Lastly, all the East European countries (except Greece) were exposed over the last fifty years to a forceful communist rule and ideology. Communism strictly directed and controlled the interpretation of all social, scientific, and cultural activities.

Today we are witnessing some intensive processes both of national sociopolitical consolidation and of the turbulent destruction of East European societies. There, cultural factors such as traditional music are used both as powerful tools for national recognition and as destructive forces in nationalistic manipulation.

This paper aims to focus critically upon the status of traditional music in Eastern Europe (excluding the countries that belonged to the former USSR) both from a historical perspective and in the contemporary period. It will try to present globally recognized forms and values of traditional music and the dominant theoretical approaches of the scholars and institutions that control the status of traditional music in this part of the
world. Both approaches are treated as part of the discipline of ethnomusicology (known by various names at other times), which in Eastern Europe means, primarily, investigation of traditional or folkloric music. Eastern Europe has offered some very important theoretical and methodological directions and approaches in ethnomusicology; these can be recognized as having a specifically East European orientation.

The primary interests of East European scholars working in the field of traditional or folkloric music lie in native musical forms, which were in the main orally transmitted and secular in character. It is important to emphasize that the sources related to forms of traditional church music are commonly treated and presented as art music (except for the hymnals forms) and not as folk music. However, those who perform that music recognize their liturgical or paraliturgical musical forms as part of their folk tradition.

Some sporadic descriptions of and references to traditional music in Eastern Europe were compiled relatively early on, chiefly by foreign travelers, diplomats, or merchants. These observations offered information on musical context, instruments, and stylistic features, or they provided their own aesthetic experience of the singing, instrumental playing, or dancing of indigenous peoples.

The collecting and writing down of traditional songs were neglected until the nineteenth century. But the roots of some of these collections can be found in earlier periods. Peter Hektorović, a sixteenth century Croatian poet, was one of the first melographers of secular songs on Eastern Europe. He noted down two Croatian lyric songs (called bugārītice) that he heard from Dalmatian fishermen in 1557 and published them in the collection Ribanje and ribarsko prigovaranje (1568).¹

The real interest in traditional music and other aspects of traditional culture in Eastern Europe developed in the period of romanticism among the educated elite. In the context of movements for national self-recognition, especially pan-Slavism, members of the elite felt that traditional music was a part of their precious cultural heritage. They also found that traditional music was a powerful means for provoking and strengthening national feelings. Newly-discovered forms of traditional music, and the values associated with them, had become the basis for cultural pride. In this climate, traditional music confronted Western musical achievements. Musicians, composers, folklorists, and musical amateurs became interested in collecting and noting down traditional music, primarily popular and urban folksongs. They wanted to popularize them mainly in a polished or arranged manner and to use their musical-thematic material as the basis for unexplored and “exotic” sounds in newer compositions. Rural folk music, especially from Balkanic areas, was generally unattractive or too difficult for proper understanding and notation by early ethnomusicologists and collectors.

Until recently, scholars in Eastern Europe focused predominantly upon the cultures within their own nation-states. They had little interest in the musical traditions and contemporary folk music of other nations. However, some melographers and folklorists became interested, in the nineteenth century, in the musical traditions of different Slavic peoples as the result of a shared pan-Slavic movement, as in the case of work by the Polish ethnographer Oskar Kolberg (1814–90), the Croatian music critic Franjo Ksaver Kuhač (1834–1911), and the Czech musicologist and painter Ludvík Kuba (1863–1956). Besides these, several figures are worth mentioning for their interest in East European traditional music: the Greek folklorist A.N. Sigalas, the Serbian composer Kornelije Stanković, the Hungarians István Bartályus, Béla Vikár, and others. Their basic merits can be seen in extensive published collections of folksongs and folklore. Some also offered preliminary but important theories on certain aspects of folk music style or the socio-cultural contexts in which they found folksongs in the second half of the nineteenth century. The melographers’ interests, however, were not fully synchronized with the actual situation in the field of folk music. This was the early phase in the conservation of traditional music, but also the beginning of dynamic changes in the style and status of folk music that reflected newer processes in social and cultural life.

At the turn of the twentieth century, East European interest in folk music had intensified as demands for cultural self-recognition spread everywhere. Some common trends related to the treatment of cultural heritage, including folk music, and influenced other nations outside Europe. Thus, for instance, a marked similarity exists in the treatment of folk music between the Serbian melographer and composer Stevan Mokranjac (1856–1914) and the Armenian folklorist and composer Vartabed Komitas (1869–1935) even though they never established contact. Their common interests related to collecting numerous folksongs, establishing an authoritative ordering of religious chants in the Serbian and Armenian Orthodox liturgies, composing predominantly vocal music based on traditional native music patterns, and composing original masses in multi-part harmonic progression (drawing for this on traditional monodic chants). Moreover, there is an obvious similarity in their method of exploring folklore in their compositions. We cannot explain the similarities between Mokranjac’s and Komitas’s treatment of musical tradition as the result of accident, but rather as stemming from a centuries-long similarity in the socio-political and
cultural history of their separate countries. These men had also common ideas on cultural identity and the role of music in expressing that identity.

A deeper understanding of, and presentation of, traditional music was limited until the present century with the appearance of the phonograph. The direct writing down on traditional music forms was restricting, not only for transcription but also for the process of analysis.

Radical changes in the treatment of folk music in East European countries arrived with the extensive scholarly activity of Zoltán Kodály (1888–1967) and Béla Bartók (1881–1945), who had begun systematic investigation of Hungarian folklore in 1905. These two prominent scholars, composers, educators, and artists developed methods and theories out of their new projects and on the basis of data related to their broad interests. Their primary aim was to “collect and study Hungarian peasant music” that was previously unknown, to observe folksongs as a living tradition, and to review the features of old, new, and mixed styles. Bartók also sought common patterns in the folk music of different nations: Slovaks, Hungarians, Croats, Serbs, Bulgarians, Turks, and Arabs and searched for the relationship between folk and art music. Their major interest in folk music emerged primarily from their activity as composers. Bartók understood that traditional and especially rural music offered new ideas for composition in terms of melody, rhythm, and formal structure. He began to apply rudimentary elements of Hungarian and Romanian folklore in his compositions at an early stage in his scholarly interest in traditional music, but his first such compositions were poorly received by the audiences in Budapest. This signifies that the application of authentic structural patterns which had emerged from Bartók’s knowledge and experience of traditional music was still far removed from the norms and aesthetic experiences of the Hungarian cultural elite at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Kodály and Bartók evolved a new approach to folk music that began from the already established viewpoint of the Berlin school of comparative musicology. They also developed and coordinated new methods of collecting, analyzing, classifying and comparing folk music materials, thereby improving the recently founded discipline. Their common work on the scholarly and artistic promotion of folk music was received as extremely important for Hungarians but also for all ethnomusicologists in eastern Europe and indeed throughout the world, since some of their methods and approaches are still followed. Yet each of them had his own orientation and approach. While Bartók was interested in international comparative studies, searching to find common musical nuclei among traditions of several East European countries and to explain “ancestral cultural links between peoples who are today separated far from one another,” Kodály’s impetus was to establish the basis for an investigation of Hungarian cultural history.

Bartók’s internationalism (i.e., his interest in the musical traditions of countries surrounding his own) cannot be treated as a phenomenon *per se*. It can be explained, rather, as his real understanding of the complexity of East European socio-cultural processes as they are expressed through folk music. Bartók did not follow a hard nationalistic line, supporting theories about the absolute cultural autonomy of his own nation (as was common for that part of the world at the time). He “formed the hypothesis that a kinship or reciprocal influence existed between the folk music of linguistically differentiated peoples living within the borders of old Hungary” (Suchoff 1972: 557–571). Bartók’s theoretical interest in the wide geographical dispersion of common musical patterns and elements was not, for him, relevant to the understanding of Hungarian traditional music exclusively, but rather for the insight he could achieve into general cultural processes. This is why he undertook fieldwork in Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Turkey, and worked hard to learn about traditional Bulgarian music and Milman Parry’s collection of Serbo-Croatian folksongs. But theoretically and methodologically his comprehension of musical processes revolved around structural principles without comprehensive reference to the social setting. Nevertheless, although he avoided any discussion of social context, Bartók was accused “of a lack of patriotism” by the political authorities in 1920 because he had published an article on Romanian folk music.

Almost from the outset of their ethnomusicological activity, Bartók and Kodály collected folksongs in the field using the Edison phonograph. Bartók in particular was primarily responsible for developing fieldwork methods that included sound recordings. He then used these recordings for the transcription and analysis of sound data and was able to attain perfection in noting every small detail and fluctuation that his ear detected. Bartók’s “exactness” in his highly descriptive transcriptions, which were published in numerous collections of East European traditional music, was often criticized for the reason that it was difficult to read.

My own conclusion is that Bartók, unlike most of his contemporaries and later ethnomusicologists, understood the morphological peculiarities of traditional music. It is my opinion that Bartók did not record such details in transcription just because of his excellent ear but also because he understood what each microtone, vibration, fluctuation, or rhythmical “flexibility” meant for the people in the culture and their musical style. His close connection with the field, where for decades he conducted his
investigations annually, signals for us his deep understanding of the music. Bartók criticized the low transcription standards of some East European melographers and ethnomusicologists which he found a major obstacle in making structural analyses of East European traditional music. As a composer of western music and as one of the pioneers of ethnomusicology, he paid exclusive attention to analyzing the style of traditional music. The investigation of stylistic features and the status of traditional and folk music as it is understood in social terms was not yet familiar to Bartók and Kodály or most other European ethnomusicologists of their generation.

Over several decades of collaborative work, Bartók and Kodály established extensive folk music archives that, together with material collected later, became the main source for investigating Hungarian and other musical traditions. Giving priority in their research to the old rural traditions, they left behind an enormous opus, with published collections of folk songs from Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, Turkey, and Yugoslavia as well as studies on different theoretical and methodological aspects of this work. Their scholarly treatment of traditional music became a model in some East European countries, inspiring them to institute large archives of folk music or organize “systematic” investigation of native musical traditions (e.g., in the Baltic states and to some extent in Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia). Over time, some of their theories and methods were criticized and replaced with new theories. Bartók’s handling of the tradition in his compositions, too, was regarded as in some respects decadent in the early postwar communist period since it did not conform to the model of socialist realism in Eastern Europe.

In Romania the most notable treatment of traditional music was achieved by Constantin Brăiloiu (1893–1958), one of the most prominent ethnomusicologists of his generation. Acting in parallel with Bartók and Kodály and admiring their aims and accomplishments, Brăiloiu staked out original musicological and sociological approaches to music folklore. He treated oral tradition as a directed system that has to be defined primarily through analysis. With that goal in mind Brăiloiu developed fieldwork methods, applying the twin approaches of musicology and sociology, using recorded documents and transcriptions. To provide a systematic elaboration of the development of traditional music, Brăiloiu insisted on founding archives as strong, centralized institutions. Thus, he founded the Institutul de Foclor și Ethnografie in Bucharest (1928) and the International Folk Music Archives in Geneva (1944).

In addition to the usual scholarly means of presenting music traditions, Brăiloiu found recordings to be the most appropriate means of documentation and preservation. From 1930 to 1958 he edited and published, in Bucharest, Geneva, and Paris, 96 records of traditional music from Romania and different parts of the world. Finally, it is important to emphasize that Brăiloiu was one of the most active East European scholars in creating a new direction for ethnomusicology. He criticized previous theoretical treatments of European folk art and of non-European “primitive” music (for example, Rezeptionstheorie and what he termed “incoherent” theories of musical systems) and offered in his studies, some new directions for the field of musical folklore through sociological research. As one of the first European scholars to adopt the term ethnomusicology in 1954, Brăiloiu evinced interest in further radical change in the direction of the discipline.

Bartók, Kodály and Brăiloiu promoted the traditional music of Eastern Europe internationally through their collections and their original approaches to ethnomusicology and composition. They also contributed greatly to the recognition of the value of traditional music in the societies to which that music belonged. These three scholars are still acknowledged as the most prominent and productive ethnomusicologists in Eastern Europe.

The political changes in Eastern Europe after World War II brought immense changes in the status of the arts in general, and this affected the traditional arts especially. This period was largely reckoned to be very favorable for the official recognition of the folk arts, including traditional music. Folklore and ethnomusicology institutes, archives, or departments of folk music were established at universities. Musical folklore was systematically taught in the music high schools of Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania. Traditional music was recorded, classified, and discussed in the context of research projects and then presented at scholarly conferences and in many publications. The principal effort was aimed at finding appropriate systems of cataloging and classifying material in the field of traditional music and instruments. Musical terminology and the methods and principles of transcription were also the subject of intensive discussions that were organized either locally, or internationally within institutions in Eastern Europe. Some organizations in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Yugoslavia also collaborated with experts from Central Europe (Austria and Germany) in an effort to maintain previously established theoretical and methodological links within the discipline.

The socialist ideology that had been already developed and institutionalized in the USSR became the dominant model for the theoretical interpretation of traditional and folk music in most countries of Eastern
Europe. Gorky’s definition of folklore as “the creativity of working class people” was adopted in most East Europe areas. Criticism of the previous decadent social classes by communist ideologues and privileging the working class or peasant class and their culture led to rigorous elimination of some forms and styles of traditional culture and to a preference for the cultural heritage of the working class. Following such ideology, traditional rural music together with new working-class and revolutionary folksongs—which were regarded as collective cultural creations—officially became the most favored subject for scholarly projects.

In some countries, cultural reality and actual scholarly interests were mutually incompatible. For example, the official orientation of folklorists and ethnomusicologists in the former Yugoslavia during the postwar period was directed toward investigating remnants of the rural traditional culture since the peasants were the most numerous category of the working class (ca. 75% of the total population until 1946). Immediately after 1946, a high percentage of the rural population was forcibly pushed into an urban environment in order to abandon their “primitive” conditions of life (i.e., their culture) and to accept new urban conditions from which they could become involved in the modernization and industrialization of their country. There they were unable to continue performing their traditional rural music since the function and social context of these forms were inappropriate to the new urban society in which the newcomers found themselves. Further, although ethnomusicologists were very active in recording and archiving the “precious remains” of traditional rural music, rural songs or dances could be heard on radio programs, or on the stage only in stylized and elaborate forms, until the 1970s.

The official presentation of traditional music on the stage was confined, in Eastern Europe, to amateur groups of singers, players, and dancers. Their activities were, of course, organized and supervised by the government. The late 1960s brought to Eastern Europe the “festivalization” of traditional music, a phenomenon that also involved the presentation of newer folk music styles: for example, Greek rebetika songs and Yugoslav “newly composed folk music.” Very popular from the 1970s, this trend in Yugoslavia was poorly received by the experts because it broke the principle rule of folk creativity, namely collective creation. The composers and poets of these new “folksongs” were known, but their music was officially anathema since it did not follow the rules of traditional folk creativity. For this reason they had to avoid the controls of official cultural policy and followed instead the taste of consumers of their music and market influences, implementing this direction at many festivals and in the mass media.

In the last two decades, traditional music was also a source of inspiration for pop and rock music groups in Eastern Europe. The music of these groups was enormously popular and promoted traditional culture among the younger generation. Even so, these trends did not get appropriate recognition from the scholars and from the leaders of cultural policy. Meanwhile, the Hungarians and Bulgarians developed an interest in the revival of their ancestral music. Some younger scholars attempted to define anew the essence of their nation’s traditional music as it had been found in the field and to present it on stage in an authentic but “elite” mode of interpretation.

From the early 1950s the majority of ethnomusicological projects undertaken in East European institutions had an anthological or monographic character and related mainly to research into local and regional musical traditions. Very often the borders of the scholars’ interests had to be restricted along contemporary administrative lines that did not correspond to the real dispersal of some traditional forms of music and their attendant phenomena. In most cases, therefore, research was limited to one’s own regional and narrow national interests. Such studies contradicted the general socialist proclamation on social and cultural internationalism. Monographic studies of this kind, however, very often neglected existing cultural links and the relevant socio-cultural processes. In short, to avoid proclaiming meaningless socialist dogma, scholars were often constrained to ignore some connections that actually existed between and among cultures. The pressure of ideology thus had an unavoidably distorting influence on research.

Some attempts at comparative investigation into traditional music in Eastern Europe emerged and aimed at discovering the basis morphological principles in folk music of different ethnicities; these were usually realized within Slavic peoples (e.g., the works of Rubtsov, Czekanowska, Goshovski, Zemtsovsky) or within Finno-Ugric groups (Vikár, Szöke). However, existing cultural connections, as they had been expressed through traditional forms of music within heterogeneous ethnicities (for example within Balkan nations) were greatly neglected since they did not correspond to the official interpretation of cultural history.

Studies of musical traditions outside national boundaries or outside Slavic cultures were not accepted or supported in East European countries. Polish scholars and institutions alone carried out projects of this kind (e.g., in Central Asia). Research into minority musical traditions was undertaken mainly in cases when music of one’s own nation was performed outside
one's country by an expatriate minority. Recent exceptions to such an
exclusive view have led, in some centers, to a certain internationalization
of research interest, especially among scholars of the younger generation.

East European scholars also began to take a greater interest in more
recent theories of traditional music as they were introduced from Western
sources. Some theories, especially those derived from linguistics or anthro-
pology, stood little chance of official recognition in this part of the world.
In fact, only a small number of experts had communication with the Western
world, that is, were informed about other trends and theoretical concepts in
ethnomusicology. No “serious” scholars were willing to deal with popular
culture. It was unusual to quote or apply the theories or relevant findings of
contemporary Western scholars, with the exception of Poland. Senior
scholars were ready, even in the late 1980s, to term contemporary Western
approaches as “decadent” or “bourgeois ethnomusicology” in order to
protect their own doctrine.

Such accusations deterred East European scholars from studying
musical traditions and their transformations objectively. We were obliged
to remain deaf for decades to many socio-cultural phenomena as they were
reflected through music. In many cases we were not supposed to find the real
roots of traditional sounds or to discover the entire spectrum of cultural
influences. We had to favor certain traditions, to neglect or totally deny
others, and to overlook the roots of smoldering nationalism. Often we were
not supposed to trace the transformation of music (i.e., of society) for fear
that we might discover some “displeasing” sounds — that is, displeasing
aspects of society. That is why ethnomusicologists from Eastern Europe
were supervised and investigated by the secret police if we did something
that contravened official doctrines and trends.

In offering this critical review of the status of traditional music in
Eastern Europe in a period of major social and cultural change, I do not think
that, after the collapse of the communist system, the coming period will
bring radical metamorphosis in the treatment of tradition in music in that
part of the world. Some traditions may be recognized again or become over-
revived, like Serbian epics during the latest nationalist hysteria. Unfortu-
nately the new nationalist politics, when extended into the most cruel
confrontations in the former Yugoslavia, lead to human and cultural
extermination. Traditional music once more becomes a powerful tool for
the manipulation of the masses and a weapon in ethnic strife. It is now a
moral question whether we should permit our traditions, our knowledge,
and our discipline to serve extremist political systems rather than scholar-
ship.

Traditional music by its very innocence tempts tyrants to use and
distort it for political purposes. There is much work that young scholars can
accomplish today in revealing and unmasking such abuse and in searching
to find new values in East European traditions. Through such attention, both
our discipline and traditional music itself will benefit.

Notes
1. *Bugarslka* is a kind of Croatian narrative song from the period between the fifteenth and
eighteenth centuries.
2. *Rebëtika* are Greek urban songs from the beginning of this century that were rediscovered and
popularized in the 1970s by the younger generation.