

MUSICAL FOLKLORE AND ITS FUSION WITH POPULAR MUSIC STREAMS IN SLOVAKIA

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Lucie Uhlíková in her introduction and invitation to this colloquium writes about the phenomenon of folk music and its transformation in contemporary musical genres, that is the issues, which have been especially relevant in the past ten years, in Slovakia as well. In my paper I would like to stress the fact that Slovak folk music and modern popular music look like two independent and specific fields, but they have various forms of contact zones which originated much earlier. In other words, their mutual fusions can be seen not as a new quality, but as a quality in continuous progress. It has been noticed in Slovakia since the beginning of the 20th century, but at the same time it crosses the borders of Slovakia as well as the middle European region. I would like to stress that this paper will be tied to musical folklore in Slovakia, that is, it will touch neither Celtic nor any other music.

Numerous musical manuals have covered the beginnings of popular music. They agree that the development started at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, when new music was born on the American continent as a result of migration waves from all over the world. This unique cultural-syncretic process resulted in music with multinational features, such as jazz, and modern popular music. At the beginning of the 20th century, and increasingly after WWII, this music reaches Europe. There it is established as a product of highly developed industrial society, and its existence depends on urban type of entertainment.

The development of modern popular music in Slovakia had a specific turn. Slovak folk music and culture was quite alive in the country,

touching in a certain way the urban environment as well. There was also a strong interest in social dances which were at the beginning of their popularity considered modern, such is the Polka and Waltz which originated in the 19th century. Since the interwar years, these dances have become a core of dance repertoire in Saturday night dances and wedding banquets. Then there was the Csárdás. It is evident that it was created with the idea of the Hungarian folk dance, as a counterpart to the Czech Polka, and Austrian Waltz. They were equally favored by the Slovaks and Austrians.

Social dances were performed predominantly by Gypsy ensembles, which can be considered the first interface between folk music and the newly born modern popular music. Gypsy ensembles managed to absorb and unify many types of music due to their typical performing qualities. They covered originally composed songs, popular songs, or better to say, folk songs which accompanied the above mentioned popular social dances, as well as Slovak, Hungarian, and other traditional folk songs. They were influenced by many other genres, including the operetta. Folk music remained a steady part of the repertoire of Gypsy ensembles, in spite of changes in musical taste which reached cities like Bratislava and Košice in the 1920s. People favored the new, attractive, modern popular music dances with exotic roots coming often from Latin and South Americas (such as the Shimmy, Two-step, Tango, Charleston, Bossa nova, Cha-cha, Rumba, and the Samba). Gypsy ensembles put these dances immediately on their repertoire.

The Slovak Tango, which originated in the 1930s, can be considered another type of the mutual fusion of local tradition and modern streams in dance music. The process of its accommodation was longer, and not straight at the beginning. This was because the Tango presented exotic, modern elements not only in music (the new rhythm and form), but also in dance movements, which were at the beginnings refused by rural people who considered them decadent manifestation of the naughty urban youth. It was only the new wave of Slovak composers which

helped the Tango accomodate and became part of folk music repertoire. The songs had pleasing and catchy tunes, rich harmonies, and lyric and sentimental texts. Nowadays they present an important part of the transparent or latent repertoire of the older and middle generations.

The commercially transmitted production was recorded by singers like Janko Blaho and Štefan Hoza who applied the performing style they learnt in opera (creating the tone, phrasing), as well as in Slovak folk songs. From the beginnings till the early 1960s, the Slovak Tango has remained an important, often vital part of the whole music repertoire.

It was noted that each important composer of popular music of that period wrote hit Tangos. The Tango allowed to many successful composers the best use their melodic inventions.

After few years of the hegemony of the Tango in Slovakia, new repertoire is coming, this time even more stressing the connection between folk dances, and modern popular dance music, represented mainly by the Fox and the Fox Trot. As a result, the Csárdás-fox and the Fox-polka originated. It is evident that these were newly composed dance songs. Their lyrics reflected the typical Slovak environment with words which were connected with folk songs: diminutives of first names, expressions like mountain challet, little mountain, little dove, gal, and swain. The origin of the Csárdás-fox and the Fox-polka was directly dependent on performing activities of Gypsy ensembles of the mid-1930s. On the one hand, the ensembles arranged some fast folk songs into a partly modernized form (it was the *primas*, the lead fiddler, who usually added a modern middle part), and on the other hand, they performed the songs of American and British origin, mostly the Fox Trots, in the style of the Csárdás (using mainly its phrases and harmony). This explains why among the first composers of such music were lead fiddlers such as Jožko Pihík, and the fiddler and respected composer alike, Gejza Dusík'. Considering vocals and performing qualities, dance songs of this type are linked predominantly with the name of František Krištof Veselý.

Apart from dance repertoire, there were other common features of folk and modern music in Slovakia in the first half of the 20th century: among them new musical instruments. They became the standard part of the line-up of Gypsy ensembles. 'A combined ensemble' was a new term for Gypsy orchestras which were universal: they had traditional instruments like the fiddle and cymbalom, and used modern instruments as well, such as saxophones and drums.

The new instruments became quickly adopted. They soon inspired the establishment of dance bands with brand new instrument line-up. In the 1950s, the ensembles of popular music and entertainment originated. They were nicknamed 'jazz bands' (using the Slovak spelling of the term, *džezy*, they had nothing common with real jazz bands). Their line-up included one or two saxophones, the trumpet, trombone, accordion, and the drum set. They were so popular, that they had a huge follow-up not only in the town, but also in villages, where they performed regularly at Saturday night dances and wedding banquets and became a strong competition to the local string and cymbalom bands. They have penetrated into all parts of Slovakia and have been popular ever after. An important input of the popularity came in the 1960s when these bands added to their line-ups various electrical instruments: the accompanying electric guitar, then bass guitar, and lastly the synthesizer. Sound system, acoustic pick-ups, and microphones became an integral part of technical equipment of the band. They amplified not only the new instruments, but the voice as well.

In spite that ensembles of this type were marked modern and represented a certain counterpoint to the above mentioned string bands and cymbalom bands, the coming of the new electrical instruments did not mean that folk dance tunes were less represented in the repertoire of new ensembles. Dance sets of folk melodies have had a steady structure until today: they consist of the best loved folk, popular and newly composed polkas and waltzes which are known all over Slovakia, then there is the Tango, and the set is usually closed with the Csárdás.

It is interesting to note how these dances, which were originally perceived as progressive and modern, have transformed into the form of the pure folk dance repertoire. It is also important to learn that the period of the biggest popularity of the ensembles of popular music and entertainment came after 1989. It was particularly because of the folk dance repertoire which was then published in enormous numbers on audio-cassettes and CDs.

Although the mass, persistent and sometimes almost aggressive background noise of these recordings has now almost vanished from shopping centers, boutique shops, and municipal transport buses, you cannot speak in any way about the rapid vanishing of this music as such. The Senzus ensemble, as well as its East Slovakia regional pendant Drišťak, still have their regular shows on the Slovak TV, the Profil musical band is to release its 20th CD, not to speak about live performances and music for wedding banquets and Saturday night dances. The only limitations they suffer is that the folk music sets alternate with the modern music sets: they consist of old hits, popular songs, and contemporary hits of popular music (mostly within the main stream of pop music). There is no wonder that the competition and commercial success of the ensembles of popular music and entertainment has always had a great influence on string bands and cymbalom bands and their repertoire. Paradoxically, a similar press has had touched also the folk ensembles which perform mainly at folk festivals and venues, exhibitions and contests, where they represent through their typical performance and repertoire a model style of folk music of a specific region. On the other hand, the same ensembles play at weddings and dances, when they meet their competitors, the ensembles of popular music and entertainment.

To get attention, they use the same amplifying system, and microphones for the fiddle, cymbalom, double bass and vocals. They offer a similar dance repertoire as well: the best known polkas, waltzes, tangos, and csardases known all over Slovakia, which is in no way a

specific local and regional repertoire. This is natural if we consider the effort of musicians to be commercially successful and able to survive the competition. From the point of view of the strict ethnomusicology, to follow the view of one of the best fiddler players of the region of Hriňová, Ján Hronček, may look absurd. On the fiddle, he plays only csardases and local traditional folk songs at weddings and dances. Then he switches to the saxophone to play waltzes, polkas, and tangos.⁷ Folk dance ensembles have one feature similar to that of the ensembles of popular music and entertainment: cymbalom bands play regularly dance sets which include the best known hits of modern dance music, arranged for folk instruments. It is almost compulsory to include melodies from the TV series *Repete* in the repertoire; cymbalom bands go even further and perform also pop hits, Elvis Presley's R&R, and American country music.

Recently, various fusions of folk music and modern popular music have originated in Europe and the rest of the world. They are called world music, or, ethnomusic. In spite that there is time delay in Slovakia as compared to foreign countries, starting with the neighboring Czech lands and Poland, these trends has reached Slovakia as well. It is evident in an increasing number of studio recordings and stage projects which are based on the combination of traditional local musical instruments – bagpipes, whistles, and long wooden shepherd's pipes - and guitars, synthesizers, and so on. The pioneering musicians of this stream [in Slovakia] were those of the Ghýmes band, who are well known abroad as well and whose music is predominantly based on Hungarian folk music. Similar musical ensembles started to enter official exhibitions and contests of folk ensembles, where they have been a subject of ongoing discussions of how to perceive them there.

It is interesting that these trends has also reached professional folk music and dance ensembles in Slovakia. It was for example 'This is Lúčnica' project, where this favorite folk and dance ensemble performed with the top band of Slovak popular music, Elán. Similarly, when the

SEUK ensemble celebrated the Milenium, they included into their program compositions which combined traditional folk music, and contemporary folk music (performed by the violinist S. Smetana and singer-songwriter Zuzana Homolová in the composition called "The Ballad"), modern popular music (the whistle and pipe player R. Andris, leader R. Puškár, and guitarist Andrej Šeban and drummer O. Rózs in the composition called "An Improvisation"), and finally the Ghýmes with their "Christmas Song". The latest noteworthy project is the [Slovak] band Jej družina [Her Entourage] and its two CDs. They are a fusion of two different worlds. The first brings the elements of Slovak traditional music and its instruments (the long wooden shepherd's pipe, whistle, bagpipe, fiddle, and contra fiddle), the repertoire, and the performance of the lead singer. The other is represented by the dominant melodic expression of rock music, including electrical instruments (the rhythm and bass guitars, drums and percussions), and a hard-driving rhythm.

Musical production of young Romani musicians and bands, which is mostly called rompop in the Slovak lands, has also the interface between traditional and modern popular music. Not always there are original compositions, though there are exceptions. New songs are quite often based on radio, TV and other media hits. They may be inspired by a melodic motive, rhythm structure, or the course of harmony, which then are proceeded/processed by the young Romani musicians with creative ability and musical means they know well. It is the same with lyrics, which are taken from old Romani songs (called *phurikane gil'a*), and from Slovak songs; quite often one can meet highly corrupted Czech and English lyrics as well. Even though this may seem a huge mixture, such music has a strong follow-up and background. In the past ten years, a great number of such bands were established in Romani communities in Slovakia. It is perhaps too early to understand their social and cultural size.

Another type of the interface between traditional Slovak music and modern popular music found in Slovakia are new (or newly shaped)



The band Jej družina.

musical festivals and other activities. It is interesting to follow their reflections in press and other media. It has almost been a standard for respected traditional music festivals (such as Jánošík's Days in Terchová, Koliesko in Kokava nad Rimavicou, or Hontianska paráda in Hrušov) that contemporary, modern bands appear on stage as well (such as Jej družina and Ghýmes). It works also the other way round, that is, there are traditional folk music bands on the list of contemporary, modern festivals (such as the Pohoda Festival in Trenčín). There have been also new types of festival established (such as the Summer World Music Festival in Zvolen).

Musical editors and journalists of daily press and other type of media have welcomed the new (or re-shaped) festivals, following the growing interest of their audiences. All new issues, including the fusions of traditional folk music and modern popular music, have been attracting a huge attention. Some people love them, other hate and criticize them. In general, both listeners, visitors to the crowded festivals, and reviewers of such festivals evaluate such music highly.

In many cases, especially when the audience reacts more than positive, the young people are in fact likely to discover and admire something, which for a long time has been part of musical tradition in Slovakia. Take for an example the popularity of the folk ensemble of J. Bartoš – Šuko from Čierny Balog, which has been the star of festivals and concerts of world music from Bratislava to Prague (where they use to perform with the flute player Jiří Stivín). The same J. Bartoš – Šuko and his ensemble has been for several dozen years a permanent name on the list of all Slovak traditional music festivals.

This concerns Romani musicians as well. Reviewer Andrej Bán wrote about their performance at the musical festival Pohoda in Trenčín: “I know that nowadays it is kind of a fashion to discover music which has not been introduced by any DJ and any radio, the music which is part of entertainment in [Romani] communities in weddings and dances. The shock from the living, authentic music was so high that the audience did not want to let the performers go off the stage: the men in white shirts and black vests, the women in color headscarves, and the children in cheap, chain-store dresses”.

Who knows what shock would hit the audience of the Pohoda in Trenčín, if its stages hosted eight hundred Romani musicians, singers and narrators, as it really happened more than twenty years ago, in the program hosted by V. J. Gruska at the traditional folk festival in Východná. We don't have to go into extremes: the living music by Romani and non-Romani musicians has recently been performed at the annual traditional folk music Koliesko Festival in Kokava nad Rimavicou.

It is a pity that the young generation has kept perceiving the traditional folk music festivals the fossilized prejudice of socialism. Though there are many innovations, there is a rigid program planning surviving in some of traditional music festivals. The difference is perhaps in the fact, that in spite that the music, musicians and ensembles may be the same, the young audience is prevailing at the new, non-

traditional folk music festivals. They are of the same age, they feel well together, they have the same aims, and they can accept things new to them extremely well.

In any case, this is positive, because they enlarge the popularity of traditional music ensembles. As the ethnomusicologist myself, the only reservations I have about this, is that they create an illusion that everything is new, falling down right from heavens. The Balkan brass bands had been here long before Goran Bregovič and his music to the cult movie *Underground* by Emir Kusturica, though Bregovič has finally popularized them on his victory campaign through Europe. It is the same with J. Bartoš- Šuko, whose music is older than world music. Also the Romani musicians from East Slovakia communities had been involved in music long before the Pohoda Festival in Trenčín.

In conclusion, I would like to repeat the idea from the introduction of this paper. History shows that great musicians of any genre of folk, popular and other music have always been inspired by variety of sources, depending on how accessible they were. Today, when the world is governed by the media and almost unlimited exchange of information, the intensity of the inspiration is much stronger than in the past, the forms of various fusions are more rich, and there is more space for their presentation. Not always the quantity is on the same level as quality, nevertheless, it is evident that there has originated a new, dynamic process in the development of music with roots so strong that we must reflect it.

Notes:

1. The most known Slovak tangos are: "Ešte raz ku tebe prídem" (1935, Pálka – Hoza), "So slzami v očiach" (1935, Pálka), "Rodný môj kraj" (1938, Dusík), "Poprosme hviezdy" (1942, Dusík – Kaušitz), "Tak nekonečne krásna" (1944, Dusík – Braxatoris), "Nečakaj ma už nikdy" (1946, Cón – Kaušitz), "Biele margaréty" (1946, Čády), "Dve oči neverné" (1946, Dusík – Braxatoris), and "Skôr než odídeš" (1946, Frank – Bača).
2. See Wasserberger: 1988: 36.

3. See Garaj: 1993: 138.
4. See Garaj: 1995: 145.
5. For more information of the band, performers, and CDs, look at www.jejdruzina.sk
6. See Belišová: 1992: 142.
7. See Bán, A. "Hyperpohoda." In *Domino fórum* 30 (2003): 12 - 13.

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