

LECTURE:
Sounds of the Balkans
Traditional Serbian Folk Music
(Vocal illustrations by Brothers Teofilović)

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LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

I want to thank all of my esteemed hosts from the recently organized Orfelin Circle for inviting me to participate in this opening festivity with a few background remarks on the geographical, historical and socio-cultural context of the beautiful Serbian folk songs you are about to hear. I also wish to extend a cordial greeting and a warm welcome to our young guests of honor, the richly gifted and charismatic brothers Teofilović.

Having heard them on the RTS (Radio Television Serbia), I can assure you of an exquisite and unforgettable artistic experience. And, if their beautiful last name suggests the love of God, you will soon realize their singing proves that God loves them back. The elegance, sensitivity, dignity and integrity of their soulful and heartfelt singing are already earning them an enviable place in the annals of Serbian folk music in which they will some day be remembered with the same critical respect and grateful affection as the brothers Goncourt are remembered in French and world literature or the brothers Grimm among the collectors and interpreters of German and world folk tales and legends.

The music of the Balkan Peninsula, of which Serbian music is an integral, yet clearly distinct, part, shares certain area-wide common features, based on certain common sources and formative experiences, along with certain national and regional diversities, differently shaped by particular local conditions and sometimes unique local influences. That this is really so, can easily be confirmed by listening, for example, to the dazzling Rumanian Rhapsody by Georges Enescu, which, though in many ways distinctively Rumanian, Dacian and Thracian, is also unmistakably and commonly Balkan, containing, as it does, numerous elements of melody,

rhythm, tempo and other features that simultaneously and equally characterize Serbian, Bulgarian and other neighboring traditions.

There is no doubt that the most ancient historic inhabitants of the Peninsula were the Thracians in its eastern, the Illyrians in its western, the Celts in its central and the Greeks in its southern parts. Except as barely recognizable ethnogenetic ingredients of later Balkans peoples and cultures, with their musical traditions, most of these early ethnic communities, including the Greco-Romanized Vlachs and Tsintsars, have been almost completely assimilated, through ethno-biological amalgamation, by their later and current successors. A significant exception to this are the Greeks who, having Hellenized several waves of invaders, still survive, though considerably modified and altered in many respects.

With its Morava-Vardar and Nishava-Maritsa river valleys, the Balkan Peninsula has served, for several millennia, as a major military, commercial and cultural throughway between Europe and Asia, as well as, by way of Greece, Crete and Egypt, Africa. Hence, its ethno-lingual, cultural, denominational and musical complexity and diversity, above and beyond its residual basic unity, are by no means surprising.

To these ancient autochthonous inhabitants, one must add the Romans, whose four centuries of imperial domination, urbanization and Latinization had affected the Thracians, Illyrians and Celts much more than the culturally stronger and lingually more resistant Greeks. – During the Great Migrations, Ostrogoths, Huns, Avars and Slavs settled in the Balkans in large numbers. After the partition of the Roman Empire by Theodosius the Great in 395 A.D., the boundary between the Latin West and the Greek East ran along the Drina southward, through the Straits of Otranto, to Cyrenaica in Lybia. This cultural division in language, thought, world view and ethos became, after the Schism in Ecumenical Christendom, in 1054, much deeper, more serious and pervasive and ultimately tragic. It had a profound impact on the emerging kingdoms and empires of the Bulgarians, Serbs, Croats and other South Slavs, pressed by Hungarian influences from the north and Latin and German from the West. The Fourth Crusade of 1204, with its capture of Constantinople and the establishment there of the so-called Latin Empire, which lasted till 1261, left a traumatic imprint on the hitherto predominantly Byzantinoid Balkan civilizations, and ultimately paved the way for the Ottoman Conquest.

In the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Islamic Ottoman Turks, coming from Asia Minor, conquered Bulgaria, Byzantium, Serbia and other Balkan states and, in the sixteenth, captured Belgrade (1521), crushed Hungary (1526) and besieged Vienna for the first time

(1529). A second and final Turkish failure to seize the Austrian capital (1683) led to the Great Migration of the Serbs from Kosovo and other areas to Pannonia in 1690 and several additional exoduses in the course of the Ottoman-Hapsburg wars of the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries. The rest of this region's stormy history, from the First and Second Serbian insurrections of 1804 and 1815, respectively; the Greek (1821), the Bulgarian (1870s) and other uprisings later on; the emergence of new sovereign Balkan nations after the Congress of Berlin (1878), to the creations and catastrophic disintegrations of three Yugoslavias and their current aftermath are, alas, too well known to elaborate.

With such a long and cataclysmic history on such a strategic crossroad of always conflicting great power interests, it is truly astonishing that the Serbs and their similarly brutalized neighbors can still speak at all, instead of howling like wolves or croaking like crows, and a veritable miracle of God that they can sing and sing beautifully.

Because of its ancient and multiple roots, stormy and always unsettling history and a variety of successive and simultaneous foreign pressures and influences, Serbian music contains many different layers: Old Balkan and Slavic, Turco-Tartar, Arabic and Persian, Indian, Hungarian, Italian and German. This is why it strikes the modern listener as very archaic and spiritual, as well as, sometimes, very young, recent and modern. As a result of all these factors, while listening to a song from Kosovo or any other part of historic Serbian lands, one will not hear a composition preserved on paper, but only through oral tradition based on individual and collective memory. One can, therefore, analyze and, as it were, peel off layer by layer, many facets, echoes and elements from distant epochs of history and remote parts of the world.

The rendition itself, the melodic line and the often intriguing polyphony have been changing over long periods and can no longer be reconstructed to their original condition. They can only be enjoyed as an end result, in all its liveliness, vitality and attractiveness. – This folk music, closely linked with everyday human activities, contains the whole range of universal human emotions, from sadness and sorrow through ecstatic joy and elation to love and tenderness. It also reflects its people's religious reverence, moral standards, history, superstitions, holidays, weddings, funerals and all the other more or less common human reactions and experiences.

In all of its multi-layered intricacy Serbian folk music and its performance have been unfolding in two general directions. The first of these marks the serious and solemn aspects of life, its most important events

and festivities. The most significant in this group are the songs related to everyday work on the land, accompanying the natural rhythms and cycles of changing seasons. Such are the reapers', gardeners', hoers', harvesters' and fruit pickers' songs. A special place among these is occupied by shepherds' tunes whose pastoral themes are often of a lyric and amorous nature.

During the autumn and winter months, when the life of nature outdoors is practically over, we encounter special forms of indoor work in sheltered and enclosed interiors. Such are the so-called mobas, friendly gatherings of whole neighborhoods for alternating mutual aid in corn-husking, feather-collecting and other joint group enterprises, such as women' spinning bees, and the like. Serious work is regularly interlaced with songs. These so called posleničke songs tend to produce a pleasant ambiance, conducive to merry-making and relaxation. On such occasions singing tends to broaden one's field of activity, and to communicate that which everyday interaction often makes hard or impossible to talk about. Among these songs are also poskočice, accompanying the kolo, a circular folk dance and pošalice, joshing or teasing commentaries on past events, important to the community life as sources of knowledge for younger generations.

A special subgroup of these songs are the lullabies, probably the most ancient form of expression in the entire history of music. They are usually of a lyric and magic character, intended to protect infants and children from demonic powers or to produce desirable weather conditions, favorable to outdoor work. Here are the so-called dodola songs, meant to induce or stimulate rain in long stretches of drought, and the koleda songs, meant to bring about a prosperous, healthy and fertile year.

The second major group is made up of songs linked to great and important events of a typical human life cycle. The so-called Lazaričke songs, named after the Sabbath of Lazarus, a springtime observance, are related to the overall cult of a village domaćin or head of household, and his interaction with his kin, neighbors and nature. They celebrate him, his wife or domaćica, young and growing lads and lasses, children, brides, the elders, etc. Songs of nature are about wheat, water, fruit-bearing trees, animals, winds and fields.

The custom called koleda, originally linked to the winter solstice, dates back to the deepest pagan antiquity of Old Slavs. It is still observed in various parts of Serbia, especially around Christmas time, and involves the singing of koledarske songs by masked participants dancing and exchanging gifts.

A separate place is occupied by love songs and those related to such dramatic events as birth, marriage and death, the focal points in all cultures of the so-called rites de passage or rites of passage. The birth songs are sometimes called kravajske (particularly around Leskovac and Slatina). Weddings remain to this day the most joyous events in the life of a family, and its songs are called svatovske, or nuptial songs. A special ritual accompanies the wailing or mourning songs, called tužbalice.

A very important expression of melopoetic creativity is the heroic epic. Its improvisation is still alive and well. At one time, the recitation of epic songs was invariably accompanied by the mournful sounds of the gusle, a one-string instrument regularly made of maple wood. This tradition is extremely ancient, dating certainly since before Homeric pre-history and rightly associated with legendary Greek rhapsodists who served their society as commentators on and interpreters of major historic events. All important turning points in history have found an echo in that melopoetic form.

As for the purely musical traits of this heritage, we perceive in the makeup of the old tradition two broad tonal series or sequences: They usually embrace 4 to 5 tones in intervals of a second, with the volume of a quart or a quint. The tonus finalis is transposed to the tempered tone G L. The most frequent musical form is bipartite. The rhythm appears in two aspects, the so-called “free” rhythm in slow tempos, and the “rhythm of movement” in singing and playing which accompany dancing. The free rhythm relies on the song’s words. In this case the performers’ freedom is great. They adapt the rhythm to themselves and to their style and sensibility. The structure of these songs is based on their strophicity, that is, the stanzas of their lingual and poetic substratum.

The singing practice is usually bivocal, as we shall hear tonight. This bivocality moves in the range of a second to consonances.

Geographically speaking, we have two types of bivocality, separated by the Great, and in part, the Southern Morava rivers in Serbia. – The first type is characteristic of Western Serbia. Here, one voice starts and leads the melody, while the other joins in. At certain definite points in the tune’s unfolding the first voice is lowered by a second below the second voice, thus producing an intersection of voices. The tune ends with a second.

The other type of bivocality stems from Southeastern Serbia. That type is called the bordun. Here the leading voice sings the melody, and the accompanying one lies on the final tone. In singing na bas (“on the bass”), the second voice accompanies the first one in terzas, or triplet rhymes. Such singing is typical of the Morava Region or Pomoravlje.

Among younger musical characteristics we can include the phenomenon of rich melizmatiks, scale systems and diverse rhythms which, since the XIVth century, came to Serbia with the Turkish conquerors and found their most developed expression in the music of Southern Serbia (Vranje, Niš, Kosovo) and Macedonia.

As for the style, very great attention is paid to the performance. It is known precisely who sings when and with whom. Vuk Stefanović Karadžić established the division of our folk songs into muške and ženske, men's and women's songs. The number of the latter greatly exceeds that of the former. One can say without hesitation that women are the main carriers, guardians and transmitters of every cultural tradition. It is of interest to note that polyphonous ensembles in Serbia are not mixed.

The instruments are created by anonymous artists and are not very numerous, although all kinds of them are represented. The most popular among woodwind instruments is the flute or svirala, made of wood, with a brida (mouthpiece) and six openings or holes for the production of tones. The longest form of flute is called a duduk. The dvojnice or double block flute belongs to the same group of wind instruments. They have seven openings (4 on the left and 3 on the right side) and a sharpened whistle. This instrument can be used in producing a dvoglas or double sound.

The bagpipes have a tonguelet or scale needle, openings worked out of a pumpkin, squash or gourd and the so-called meh or bellows, made of inverted sheep skin, which serves as a resonator. There are single-tubed and double-tubed pipes. The so-called zurle, a wind instrument with a double whistle appears most frequently in combination with drums, especially in Kosovo.

The string instruments include the gusle and the tamburas. The percussion instruments (the so-called membranophones) are the big drum, the small drum and the brake drum.

The most popular, these days, are the so-called bleh or brass orchestras, trumpeters from 14 to 16 in a band. Let us mention, in passing, the famous trumpeters of Guča, a small town in Serbia with a renowned yearly festival.

Systematic gathering of Serbian folk tunes and instruments and their scholarly study began in the XIXth century. The most significant collections were examined and analyzed by Kornlije Stanković (1831-1865), the best known, and one of the earliest Serbian composers of his time. It is interesting to point out that a Croatian musicologist, Frano Kuhač (1834-1911) also made a very important contribution to this effort. He collected and wrote down about 300 melodies from Serbia proper and Vojvodina.

Stevan Mokranjac (1855-1914), one of the greatest Serbian composers, collectors and musical pedagogues of all time, whose Rukoveti, especially the Seventh, are again on the American classical concert repertoire, was the key figure of the late XIXth and early XXth centuries. He marked down and arranged this overflowing rich and beautiful folk material and gave us one of the first and finest scholarly analyses of this priceless heritage. – Side by side with the anonymous creator from antiquity, the figure of the recorder and interpreter appears as an equally important link in the chain of cultural transmission, shoulder to shoulder with the performers who bring this treasure to us, the grateful listeners.

This evening is full of splendid and poignant symbolism. It is the first public festivity of the newly formed Serbian-American cultural circle Krug Orfelin which proudly bears the literary name of the great and long neglected XVIIIth-century Serbian rationalist, polymath, scholar, social critic, poet, patriot, translator, lexicographer, historian, master engraver, cartographer, journalist, educator and natural scientist, Zaharija Stefanović (1726-1785) Orfelin. The name Orfelin (Orphelin) consists of the names of Orpheus and Linus, two legendary and martyred heroes and proto-musicians, the former from Thrace, the latter from Phoenicia. Both are remembered by Greek mythology as symbols of musical and artistic creativity, unmerited suffering, tragedy and beauty. The famous lyre of Orpheus is believed to have been elevated to the firmament from which, as the constellation Lyra, it still participates in the heavenly music of the spheres. The name Linus comes from the refrain ai lanu, woe upon us, chanted in antiquity as part of the spring rituals of death and resurrection. Nietzsche, as a classical philologist, wrote on The Birth of Tragedy From the Spirit of Music. It is, therefore, more than appropriate that two serious and proud young gentlemen and earnest musicians, the brothers Teofilovi}, should honor us with their visit and performance under such solemn and momentous auguries and auspices.