MUSIC AND DANCE IN SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

MYTH
RITUAL
POST-1989
AUDIOVISUAL
ETHNOGRAPHIES

Fifth Symposium of the ICTM Study Group
on Music and Dance in Southeastern Europe 2016
South-West University "Neofit Rilski", Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria

Music and Dance in Southeastern Europe: Myth, Ritual, Post-1989, Audiovisual Ethnographies

Blagoevgrad • 2016
University Publishing House "Neofit Rilski"

This book is based on the Fifth Symposium of the ICTM Study Group on Music and Dance in Southeastern Europe which was held at South-West University "Neofit Rilski" on 2-8 May 2016 in Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria

International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM)
Study Group on Music and Dance in Southeastern Europe

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Graphic design:
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First published 2016
Publisher:
University Publishing House "Neofit Rilski", Blagoevgrad

The publication of the book is funded by South-West University "Neofit Rilski"

ISBN 978-954-00-0123-4

CONTENTS

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BULGARIAN FOLK DANCE CLUB REPERTOIRE TEN YEARS LATER: WHAT GENRE? WHERE SHALL WE PÚT IT?

This paper suggests that the club dance repertoire may be defined as a new genre for the homeland folk dance scene that neither duplicates the formal ensembles from the near past, nor resembles folk dance club activities of Central and Western Europe and the USA. It is something "third" – a uniquely Bulgarian club form with multifaceted origins and features; these stem from the impact of the Soviet Union ensemble training system in the near past and the current Bulgarian political, economic and cultural situation, without state censorship. But what genre is this? Where shall we put it? This analysis is based on first-hand observation of rehearsals, repertoire and performance participation in both Bulgaria and the US. It also includes questionnaires and formal and informal interviews with folk dance enthusiasts and specialists. YouTube dance tutorials, festivals and social media postings are also examined. The theoretical review follows the broader understanding of genre as a social action.

Keywords: Bulgaria; clubs; repertoire; genre; theory.

By choosing to discuss "genre" I was aware that I was planting a troublesome seed in my garden, at least because of the genre ambiguity and the need to elaborate. But I welcomed the challenge. I looked forward to finding unexplored relationships between genre theories and semiotic perspectives, and to apply these to the study of Bulgarian club folk dance. This kind of qualitative investigation, to recall Hanstein, resembles the process of making choreography, when the choreographer has a general idea about what she/he is attempting to achieve but does not really know how the research will develop on its own [Hanstein 1999:34]. With regard to genre, I found fruitful insights in the works of Michail Bakhtin [1986], Tzvetan Todorov [1990], John Swales [1990:33–67], and others that helped me start my paper with a general understanding of genre as a social action [Miller 1984]. I found this point of view further developed in the co-work of Anis S. Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff, entitled "Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy" [2010].

On another page, while reading recent publications on transculturallity, I was provoked by the concept of mediatization. Andreas Hepp describes mediatization "more generally as a frame for researching the relationship between media and cultural change" [Hepp 2009:140]. I believe I can apply this relationship when researching the role of the Internet and social media in disseminating Bulgarian standardized folk music and dance repertoire around the globe. The process is on an impressive scale and I would argue that this has an impact on Bulgarian culture as a whole.

I am indebted to the many folk dancers who responded to my 2008 and 2013 surveys. I am also very thankful to a number of Bulgarian choreographers who helped me stay attuned to the dynamics in the movement. Another big helper, of course, was "uncle" Google, who was constantly bringing "moving images" across the Atlantic.

Understanding genre

In which sense should we understand genre in this paper? Let me first review the following introductory note of Bawarshi and Reiff:

> Despite the wealth of genre scholarship over the last thirty years, the term genre itself remains fraught with confusion, competing with popular theories of genre as text type and as an artificial system of classification. Part of the confusion has to do with whether genres merely sort and classify the experiences, events, and actions they represent (and are therefore conceived of as labels or containers for meaning), or whether genres reflect, help shape, and even generate what they represent in culturally defined ways (and therefore play a critical role in meaning-making) [Bawarshi; Reiff 2010:3–4].

I found this way of looking at genre to be very productive. Also helpful was the way in which Bawarshi and Reiff discussed the etymology of the word genre, which is borrowed from French:

> On the one hand, *genre* can be traced, through its related word *gender,* to the Latin word *genus,* which refers to "kind" or "a class of things." On the other hand, *genre,* again through its related word *gender,* can be traced to the Latin cognate *gener,* meaning to generate [...] At various times and in various areas of study, genre has been defined and used mainly as a classificatory tool, a way of sorting and organizing kinds of texts and other cultural objects. But more recently and, again, across various areas of study, genre has come to be defined less as a means of organizing kinds of texts and more as a powerful, ideologically active, and historically changing shaper of texts, meanings, and social actions [Bawarshi; Reiff 2010:3–4].

And a final quote:

> Such a dynamic view of genre calls for studying and teaching genres beyond only their formal features. Instead, it calls for recognizing how formal features, rather than being arbitrary, are connected to social purposes and to ways of being and knowing in relationship to these purposes. It calls for understanding how and why a genre's formal features come to exist the way they do, and how and why they make possible certain social actions/relations and not others [Bawarshi and Reiff 2010:3–4].

So, my first premises for this paper will be that Bulgarian folk dance club genre reflects processes in Bulgarian society (occupies a passive role, so to say). There are specific features that distinguish this genre from both "classical" folklore, with its traditional dance patterns, and the folk dance ensemble tradition – which will be addressed in the text below. The second premise may be defined in a contemporary jargon: in essence, it is not proper to say that folk dance leaders and attendees create a new genre; we can also say that the genre creates them. And, as it is the case with the disseminated "synthetic" dances (not my term) inside and outside Bulgaria, we surely observe processes of dissemination and adaptation of a particular cultural knowledge.

Previous researches

When I started a group for recreational folk dancing in my Beli Brezi neighborhood in 2004, it was among the very few similar initiatives in Sofia and Plovdiv. My group of about 15 people danced at an apartment complexes' meeting

room, half a mile away from home. I vividly remember myself carrying two large bags to our venue: a CD-player along with the CDs in one hand, and a teapot, an immersion heater, teabags and teacups – in the other. I was highly motivated to teach popular dances and village patterns to my middle-aged students. I believed that the moment for this kind of recreational club activities in Bulgaria had finally arrived. The suggested donation was two leva per class. The earning was minimal because some people could not afford to pay even this symbolic amount. I enjoyed making tea in the breaks, wishing to create evenings in which everybody would dance and would have good time. With no exaggeration, to me this was a healing activity for our struggling society. I called these folk dance evenings "gatherings" (*sreshti*) – in the same way I now call our Saturday folk dance workshops with the Bulgarian Seattle's community. It never occurred to me to call them rehearsals (*repetitsii*) or *trenirovki* (sports-like training hours) – in the way that many people call them today and actually reveal what they think they are doing when going folk dancing.

Because of my lengthy tours to the States in 2005 and later, I could not sustain my leadership of the group and asked someone with choreographic training to take over. Two years later, in 2007, *Horo se vie izviva* – the first festival-competition for recreational club dancing was held in Sofia. This was followed by another in 2008. My former group was among the several hundred participants, now three times bigger, all dressed in uniforms – pants, skirts and t-shirts with the group's logo – like almost all of the rest of these clubs.

This club folk dancing has branched out fruitfully since 2007-2008. But even then in 2008 the movement begin to demonstrate strong relationships to the Bulgarian folk dance ensemble – the topic I have investigated for a long time by looking at early 20th century, the period 1944-1989, and the period after 1989 [Ivanova-Nyberg 2011]. I cannot here avoid paraphrasing Anca Giurchescu's reminder that instead of complaining about the disappearance of some forms, dances scholars should pay attention to the many phenomena that are now emerging [Giurchescu 1999]. This way of thinking was an important encouragement for me, and in 2008 I took it as a green light to look more closely at the dance clubs' activities. Under the spin of my club's fieldwork, I delivered a paper on Bulgarian folk dance club competition for our first ICTM group meeting in 2008 in Struga. I was convinced that the Bulgarian club movement, although inspired by the club movement of other European countries (some of which were inspired by American International folk dancing) was taking a direction that clearly differs from the known European and American models.

In 2013 for the Western States Folklore Society Annual Meeting "Folklore in a Digital Age" (April 19-20, University of California, San Diego) I delivered a paper entitled "A door wide open: Bulgarian dance lessons on YouTube". This topic was provoked not only by the lessons themselves and the role of the media through which "everything is within reach" [Welsh 1999:198] but by the fact that to some Bulgarian communities in the States these lessons are a primary repertoire source.

Again in 2013 I encountered online Slavka Karakusheva's research entitled "To be or not to be Bulgarian?" [Karakusheva 2013]. This made me reexamine my 2008 survey. A quote from it: "Folks finally understood that we are Bulgarians" provoked me to transform this statement into a question and to conduct another series of online surveys with members of several now well-established groups. This investigation brought new insights with regard to the motives. We probably will all agree (along with Burke, Schutz and others), that recognition of the motives is crucial for understanding the nature of the action itself.

Analytical review on the activities from the past decade

While analyzing the folk dance ensemble as a cultural phenomenon in 2008 I was inspired by the Malinowskian concept of "contact diffusion," i.e., transition from a higher to a lower level, as it reflects the decline of a particular culture [Malinowski 2004]. When this occurs, the group under regression begins to adopt the pattern of the more efficient cultural form that emerges. In turn, certain achievements of the higher cultural level are adopted by the lower. Here the "higher" may be applied to the ensemble's highest achievements from the "golden age" of Bulgarian choreography (mainly the 1970s and 1980s), and "lower" could be referred to the open-to-everyone, "democratic" recreational folk dance club. The first requires years of training a dancer to become part of a performance, the second – comfortable shoes and enthusiasm. After losing governmental support the non-professional folk dance ensembles nationwide adopted the "club" mode of existence and management, that is, collecting a monthly fee from their members. This means descending from quality to quantity, although there are several exceptions. Simultaneously, recreational folk dance clubs (the new, active form) adopted the ensemble mode, although associating themselves with sports and fitness. Up to 2008 the leaders of both ensembles and recreational clubs were professional choreographers, not necessarily researchers. Most dancers from recreational clubs developed an appetite to perform and compete [Ivanova-Nyberg 2011:384-395].

Data from the 2013-2016 recognized some changes since my 2008 research with regard to both qualifications of the clubs' leaders and the trends in repertoire development. Let me here present the points of view of Emil Genov, Georgi Garov and Stefan Vitanov – choreographers, intimately familiar with the recent processes in the folk dance club development. The first is in his early 60s, the second is in his early 40s and the third in his early 30s. All three share the opinion that recreational club dancing continued its development in the most dynamic ways.[1] The clubs now are so many that people are not asking themselves "Are you dancing somewhere?" but "Where are you dancing?" On one hand, this is a very good thing: people are dancing Bulgarian dances, they are listening to Bulgarian music, they are more engaged in Bulgarian folklore.

One the other hand, some new trends appeared that are not welcomed; some enthusiasts who danced for a couple of years decided that they had learned enough so that they could start their own businesses, because, as Emil Genov pointed out, this folk dance club movement is a commercial enterprise. So, one may observe on the Internet many compilations between different dance styles and ethnographic regions. For people who danced for many years and studied Bulgarian choreography at the highest level, this is a very irritating issue. Stefan Vitanov clearly advises these newborn club leaders to be careful with their public activities: "It doesn't look funny anymore and I don't feel like laughing […] Nothing is going to change but I am saying it because it bothers me".[2]

Trends in repertoire

All of my three interviewees shared the opinion that the instructors need to feed the dancers' interest, therefore they try to introduce new material all the time. As a result, some nice dance pieces appear but also *golemi gluposti* (nonsenses). To all three choreographers creation is a normal development but it is not alright to present a newly created choreography without clarifying its nature. These new *izmislitsi* (creations) go viral on the internet because of the thirst for new material.

The club repertoire distributed via YouTube is called "synthetic dances" by some specialists – "X is one of *these* dances." Yulian Yordanov, who leads a Bulgarian group in Sunnyvale, California told me: "But sometimes I have to teach some of these creations because my dancers want to learn them" [Ivanova-Nyberg 2016].

The unified repertoire goes along with the unified music. Garov: "But dance leaders must understand that they need to invest some time in research and some money in recording so that every club will have its own music" [Ivanova-Nyberg 2014].

There are many folk dance competitions: "If you would like to observe a competition this weekend, we can open the internet and will find one right away" [Ivanova-Nyberg 2013b]. These competitions have positive and negative poles. It keeps some groups stimulated, but on the other hand, "what kind of competition could be a competition for traditional dances?"

> I was a jury-member for one competition, and I am not going to repeat it, even I have to go thirsty and hungry. I initiated a gathering like this in my area but it is for outdoor dancing and having fun to live music […] We shall bring people together in the dance and the joy, not to separate them […] [Ivanova-Nyberg 2014].

There are two main trends in the repertoire: one toward attempts to resurrect some old village patterns, another – to find a "catchy" tune and develop a new choreography [Ivanova-Nyberg 2014]. According to Emil Genov, if a newly introduced pattern has the needed quality, it will stay and one day it will become folklore. People will dance it without knowing who introduced it. Folklore is not frozen, but constantly developing [Ivanova-Nyberg 2013a]. Among the choreographers there are different opinions about what folklore is and is not. Several choreographers even attempted to create an organization which will, so to say, "approve" the legitimacy of newly introduced patterns. Genov strongly disagrees with this idea because such a censorship belongs to the communist/socialist era and we now live in a *pazarna ikonomika* (free-market economy).

Some choreographers try to use dance descriptions presented by Bulgarian researchers and choreographers several decades ago, "but the result from reading and interpreting such written documents is just horrible […] [Ivanova-Nyberg 2014].

Final remarks

"Where there is style there is genre," Bakhtin pointed out [1986:66]. And, "Any style is inseparably related to the utterance and to typical form of utterance, that is, speech genres" [1986:63].

In Bulgaria it is accepted by the folk choreography guild nationwide to define the staged dance arrangements as a "folk stage arts genre".[3] The relationships between the dance and the text have been terminologically established for decades: choreographers talk about dance text, teach dance alphabet, etc. The ensemble and club genres today have their own specific types of utterance, or folk dance styles. Within the folk dance club gere there are divisions. Some leaders put the focus more heavily on the fitness side, select great music and create these so called "synthetic dances"; others, along with the fitness, pay higher attention to the traditional past. We can distinguish different degrees of reflection of the past; here the understanding of vival and reflective dance proposed by Andriy Nahachewsky is fully applicable [Nahachewsky 2012:24–30].

Clubs that developed into performing groups, to many choreographers "spoil" the image and the reputation of the Bulgarian ensembles abroad because they were not originally created for performance but for recreational dance.

But clubs do perform. So, what kind of genre it is? Is it a kind of neo-folklore, post-folklore [Neklyudov 1995] or neo-fitness? "I do not know" – was the answer of choreographer Yordanov – "It is kind of a mixture, kind of a hybrid" [Ivanova-Nyberg 2016].

We cannot discuss the complicated nature of hybridity here. With respect to postfolklore I would suggest, along with Inna Golovakha-Hicks [2006], that we probably do not need the concept of postfolklore, since the dynamics lay in the very heart of folklore.

Prognostics?

Wittgenstein reminds us that "When we think of the world's future, we always mean the destination it will reach if it keeps going in the direction we can see it going in now; it does not occur to us that its path is not a straight line but a curve, constantly changing direction." (Wittgenstein 1984:3). I cannot agree more.

Endnotes

1. The reasons for this increase are the object of a separate investigation.
2. Facebook-post, 21 April 2016.
3. See the choreographers' discussion on this matter in Ivanova-Nyberg 2011:269–290.

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