

Social Canons Inherited from the Past: Women Players of Folk Music Instruments in Croatia

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Abstract: As documented in mainstream ethnographic texts and fieldwork records, and evidenced at folklore festivals, women in Croatia do not play folk music instruments. If someone mentions some exception, it is usually explained as the very latest practice, as an example of transformation of tradition into the contemporary. However, this paper describes a number of exceptions from the past, covering a range of historical periods, social contexts of music-making, music fields and genres, and types of instruments played by women. The reasons for women players being either confirmed or kept silent by a particular discourse is analyzed, as well as broader social canons which supported (and/or restricted) their presence in public practice. They have appeared as a family member, a Croatian Woman, a custodian (savior and reviver) of local tradition, a member of “the fairer sex”, a shameless woman, a mannish woman a substitute for an absent man player, and as a player of handy and substitute instruments..

Keywords: instrumental folk music, Croatia, women players of musical instruments

The basic stimulus for this research was the widely disseminated conviction that women do not play folk music instruments, and particularly that they did not play them in the past. It turned out that both components of this thesis are faulty and that the in/visibility of the women players depends on (ethno)musicological and social canons. Their invisibility in ethnomusicology has been an outcome of the ethnomusicological limitation to *folk* music (i.e. peasant, old, local and nationally specific music), its products and its most prominent representatives.¹ Therefore, we learn about them to a much lesser degree from the centre of the scholarly discourse (i.e., ethnomusicological and ethnoorganological works) than from various fragments, primarily poorly documented photographs and notices in the popular press and other written sources. One possible example which illustrates this point is the contrast between the central, most influential, nationally-oriented discourse on folk culture during the 1930s, on the one hand, and the liberal bourgeois discourses, marginalized at that time when folk culture was in question, on the other. *Seljačka sloga*

¹ More about concepts on folk music in Croatian ethnomusicology see in Ceribašić 1998.

[Peasant Harmony], the organization which completely controlled the definition, production and reproduction of folk culture in public during the 1930s, stood to one side. The notion of *folk* which the experts of *Seljačka sloga* constructed has fundamentally influenced the orientation of the scholarly disciplines which deal with folk culture, almost up until the present day. In the conception and practice of *Seljačka sloga*, women appeared in the roles of singers and dancers, but not as players of musical instruments. I have read in detail all the available material connected with its activities (its magazine, various publications, programs for the numerous festivals which it organized, newspaper articles, the legacy of its professional associates, and the like), and found only one piece of information on women players.² On the other hand, I studied only superficially alternative discourses on folk music of that period. Despite that, for example, in only one annual edition of Radio Zagreb magazine I found photographs of as many as four women players, two of whom were Croatian: an unnamed player of the accordion, and Anica Dobrić, a player of the *sopila* [shawm] ([S.n.] 1940; *Figure 1*).

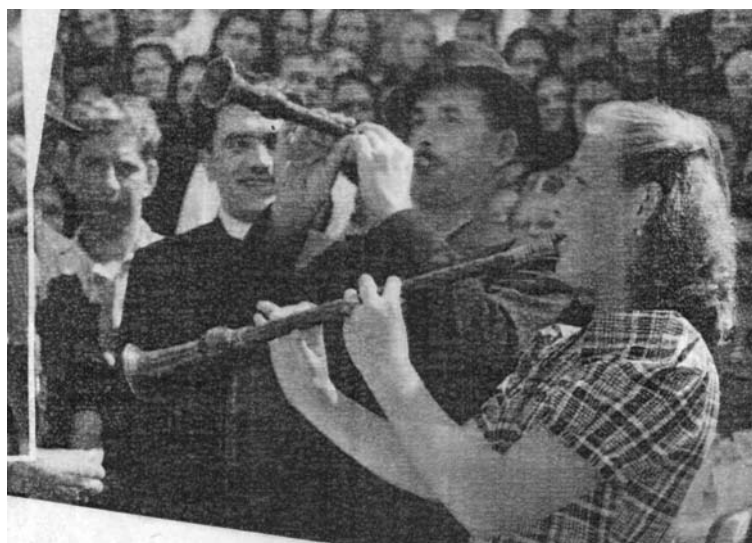


Figure 1

² In 1926, at the very outset of the organization's activities, a branch from Đelekovac near Koprivnica reported on an entertainment gathering at which "a peasant string ensemble consisting of five persons played very beautifully. This group is very interesting since the players are made up of the father as leader of the group, along with the mother and two grown-up daughters" (Stanković 1926: 157). The informants with whom ethnochoreologist Ivan Ivančan spoke in the 1990s remembered the same ensemble. They were the Marcijan family from Kutnjak. The father and two daughters played the violin, the mother the bass, and someone called Šimek played the *bugarija* [the baritone *tambura*] (Ivančan 1999a: 142).

Anica Dobrić was photographed in Novi Vinodolski together with another *sopila* player, Ivan Dobrić, on August 15, 1940 during a performance which was organized and broadcast by a Zagreb radio station. This photograph and the player's name in the weekly program (no. 9, unpag.), is the only trace to date of this woman player. Although the associates of the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research, a central Croatian ethnomusicological institution, conducted comprehensive field research in that very place in 1964, and then several times during the 1980s, not one of the numerous informants mentioned either A. Dobrić, or any other woman player of the *sopila*. Obviously, she has been hidden from view by the canon of Croatian ethnography, ethnomusicology and public practice of folk music, according to which women never ever play(ed) the *sopila*, and it would be "a great disgrace if a woman even tried to play one" (Jelenović, quoted in Zebec 1998: 67).³

A kinship relationship with a man player – a father, brother or husband – very often made it possible in the past, and still makes it possible for women to enter into the field of instrumental music in a more permanent, serious, and professional way. Along with allowing the (semi)professionalization of women as players, the importance of this social foothold lay in its relative independence from regional differences, socio-political contexts and time periods, types of instruments and instrumental ensembles, and from the music genres connected with particular instruments. It is interesting to note that the earliest named woman player in Croatia I have read about was not only a daughter of a musician, but was connected with Hungarian music. She was called Mara, and together with her father, Jozo Luić Ciganin [nicknamed Gypsy], she played so-called *Rakoci music* until he died in 1830. Her father played an oboe-type *svirala*, while Mara played a large drum (Brlić 1885 [1838]: 41–42). Many of today's women players are also from players' families, which confirms the family canon as a long-lasting one. Beside, this mode of women's musicianship is neither a specificity of traditional music, nor of Croatia. For example, Lujza Tari mentions it frequently in her article on Hungarian past and present women players of folk music instruments (Tari 1999).

The next important foothold were mutually conditioned national-integrating and modernizing processes constituting bourgeois society, which were gaining momentum in Croatia from the 1870s (Gross & Szabo 1992: 13–19). Both ideas enabled women to make music in public as members of the amateur

³ More about ethnomusicological canons with regard to women players see in Ceribašić 2001.

singing societies and *tambura* societies as well as in other organized amateur instrumental ensembles.⁴ During the 20th century, *tambura* ensembles [made up of long-necked lutes of various sizes] served as a means of reconciliation at various levels and in various contexts between traditionalism and modernism, as well as between the multiple differences within the national and/or state community: ethnic, regional, class, age and gender differences. Each of the political projects included the *tambura*, which facilitated it becoming the most widely disseminated traditional music instrument and one of the main symbols of Croatian traditional culture. It is possible to find postcards from the beginning of the 20th century depicting imagery of gender-mixed “Croatian *tambura*-players” (Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research, IEF Postcard No. 155) or that of the “little Croatian girl”, identified as such obviously because of her stylized folk costume and the *tambura* she is holding (1911–1912, IEF Postcard No. 151; *Figure 2*). However, in addition to national imagination, women *tambura* players at that time really did play in mixed or even all-women *tambura* ensembles, mostly in urban settings.⁵

A contemporary counterpart of such a nation-building canon could be recognized in the promotion of women player as custodians, saviours and reviv-

⁴ The perspective available here is the external reception of the broader social community, since available sources give no data on the personal motivation and direct support given to a particular woman player who participated in music amateurism. In this sense, the women players contributed to the ideas of national integration and/or modernization of Croatian society, although their personal motivation and the most direct support for their musicianship could have been completely different. In other words, amateur instrumental ensembles could bring (and probably brought) together relatives by birth or marriage, but their organizational foundation was still in music amateurism, and not in the family.

⁵ For example, mixed *tambura* ensembles were active in 1910 in Petrovina (photograph of the Tambura and Singing Society in the Jastrebarsko City Museum, IEF Photograph No. 43626) and in 1911 in Zagreb (postcard of the *Zvezda* Tambura and Singing Society, IEF Postcard No. 154). Around the year 1900, there was an all-women *tambura* ensemble in Zagreb (photograph in Ranitović 1974: 237), while the Women’s Tambura Choir of the Home-Helps’ Co-Operative performed in 1939 at the concert given by Zagreb *tambura* ensembles (Croatian Music Institute, Program No. 1939/41).

The growth in the number of *tambura* ensembles among Croatian migrants in the USA prompted their increasing distinctiveness during the 1930s, so that children’s *tambura* choirs and orchestras appeared in which young girls participated only somewhat more rarely than boys, and during the 1930s and 1940s there were several exclusively women *tambura* ensembles in Illinois and Pennsylvania: *Katarina Zrinska*, *Rožmarin*, *Vesele djevojke*, *Chicago’s All-Girl Tamburica Orchestra*, *Slovenski djevojački tamburaški zbor “Lira”*, and *Hrvatske kćeri* who were active for the longest time (Kolar 1975: 21, 56–57).

Mirjana Škunca provided valuable data about the Split amateur women and men players in the second half of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century (1991: 338–343). Judging from the sources which were available to her, in Split between 1882 and 1918 *tamburas* were played predominantly by women. Because of the incomplete data (mostly only the initials of the personal names), no conclusions can be drawn on the proportion of men and women among those who played the mandolin. For the time being, it is not possible to explain the considerable preponderance of women *tambura* players in Split over the men players. It is possible that the sources upon which Škunca based her list of Split amateur musicians emphasized the women as a curiosity, with no mention of the standard (so that only the women names have survived until today). Still, it is also possible that the women of Split really did play the *tambura* more than men did, which could possibly be confirmed and explained only by new research into the same sources.



Figure 2

ers of local traditions. Due partly to the destruction of local communities during the war, partly to the somewhat more liberal discourse of public practice, and partly to the old convictions about women as the guardians of tradition, it became possible for a number of older, skilful women players to play at festivals (including the most respected ones) for the first time in their lives. Their appearance in public was supported also by the fact that usually none of the men from their villages is able to play the traditional musical instruments in question any more. So, for example, a recently released CD, which presents a selection of Croatian traditional music, includes the playing of Manda Gašparić, a player of the solo *tambura* and one of the leading members of the folklore group from her village (Ceribašić & Čaleta 2000: II/2). Her successful and well-received public appearance made it possible for a few other women players from her region to follow in her footsteps.

Another group of contemporary female guardians of instrumental music traditions is made up of young women who were taught to play various traditional musical instruments at formally organized seminars and schools. Thus, for example, in the region of Istria and the Bay of Quarnero little girls, girls and young women today play the *sopila* [shawm], *šurle* [clarinet-type instrument] and *mih* [double clarinet with windbag], musical instruments which are typical to that region. In the region of eastern Croatia, the *gajde* [bagpipes], an instrument which was almost completely superseded by the *tambura* ensembles at the beginning of the 20th century, has undergone a revival during the last decade and re-entered representative music practice, thanks to the stimu-

lus from experts, folklore schools, folklore festivals, music teachers and instrument builders. One of today's best-known young players of the bagpipes is a young woman, Anita Tomoković, who already performed twice at the central Croatian folklore festival in Zagreb, appeared on several Croatian Television broadcasts, has drawn journalists' attention, etc.

However, today's young women like A. Tomoković do not usually appear only as custodians of local traditions, but also as members of "the fairer sex". As an illustration of this social foothold can be mentioned a selection of the most beautiful Croatian females in folk costume, which has been held for some years on a regular annual basis in Slavonski Brod. Last year, the organizers chose an all-women *tambura* ensemble from a nearby village to provide the musical accompaniment because, according to the main organizer, the members of the ensemble were young and beautiful and performed in lovely gold-embroidered costumes, so they were the most appropriate choice for such an event (Zvonimir Toldi, personal communication, 2000).

Historically, women's attractiveness and drawing power were linked largely with the so-called *Damenkapelle*, travelling women instrumental entertainment ensembles which were hired in the first decades of the 20th century by various types of catering and hospitality establishments: from prestigious hotels in the Croatian tourist resorts to provincial taverns (c.f. Škunca 1991: 232; Ruck [in print]; advertisement in *Narodni glasnik*, December 1930). The foreign *Damenkapelles* and the relatively good reputation they enjoyed that probably initiated, or at least helped, the formation of domestic women entertainment instrumental ensembles. Such ensembles did not always operate nor were they regarded only as ensembles made up of (attractive) ladies who made music, some of them being regarded as ensembles of ostensible musicians who in fact lived from their appearance or even literally engaged in prostitution.⁶

⁶ For example, at the end of the 1930s in Našice a certain *Damenkapelle* (consisting of a violinist, two *bugarija*-players and a bass-player) caused concern to the wives of respectable Našice craftsmen, since, because of the women players, "they often stayed on longer than normally [in the tavern owned] by Florian, so that the craftsmen's wives jealously guarded their lawful spouses from straying, God forbid, from their nuptial nests into unfaithfulness with the *tambura*-players" (Majer 2000: 77). An even more outstanding example is that of certain Zagreb taverns, which the police department proclaimed in 1937 as having "hired women musicians and singers only to serve as so-called *animir-dame* [B-girls], and they engage in the most vulgar prostitution and exploit the guests in the most blatant fashion", that is, "conduct an immoral life and engage in prostitution", and on numerous occasions "they have robbed our citizens and foreigners in the bars where they play". Therefore, the police issued an order which, among other, prohibited "women members of the orchestras and the women singers to sit at the tables with guests or to enter ... the separate premises (the private booths) where the female staff, and particularly the various women singers and *tambura*-players then conduct immorality" (Police Report to the Royal Banate Admin. in Zagreb on July 28, 1937; kept in the Croatian State Archive, SBUO Folio II 905/6873/1938, ZP 3011).

Such a position of women players was in keeping with folk concepts as mediated by early ethnographic writings. According to Kuhač, the founder of Croatian ethnomusicology, “the people think that it is not fitting for girls and women to play reed-pipes” (1877/41: 12), while Ivanišević supplemented him by the comment that they “are ashamed to do that in front of people, in front of men” (Ivanišević 1987 [1906]: 507). Because of this frequent idea of shame, Ankica Petrović assumes “that musical instruments are in some way associated with sexuality or that the instruments may actually be seen as sex symbols” (Petrović 1990: 73).⁷ Concordantly, this ignominy in ethnographic descriptions of folk music relates largely to “shameless” women players of aerophones, while women players of chordophones – particularly *gusle*-players – are usually described as mannish women. During his research into folk epics at the beginning of the 1930s, Matija Murko met or at least heard of women who sang to their own accompaniment on the *gusle* [a single- or double-stringed fiddle] in Sandžak, Montenegro and Bosnia, and he met a blind woman *gusle*-player in Croatia (at Drniš in the Dalmatian hinterland). Of these women, one “lived with the highwaymen [*hajduks*], smoked a pipe and did men’s work” (Murko 1951: 190, 202); another “behaved like a man” (ibid.: 190); a third carried out “a lot of men’s work” (ibid.: 202); a fourth sang without the *gusle* but “like a man” (ibid.: 195); while he described in more detail the fifth woman, Darinka Radunović (b. 1913) from Kraljska Bara in Montenegro (Figure 3). Murko wrote:

She had completed four grades of elementary school. As she had nothing to do during the summer holidays, she started to sing from her 13th year, first for the members of her household, later in response to requests from guests (her mother owned an inn, note N.C.). She did not listen to the songs but learnt them from books ... She holds the *gusle* in her left hand, and fiddles and sings very energetically like a man, sometimes unclearly in a hoarse voice ... People say of her that ‘she deports herself like a man’. She says to her mother: ‘I shall get married’ [‘I shall take a wife’] (ibid.: 194).⁸

Ankica Petrović connects such *gusle*-players with *virginas*, female persons who took over male gender roles, either because of “pronounced hormone disorders which cannot be hidden from the public” or because of “a lack of male children in the family”, which was “compensated by assigning one of

⁷ Curt Sachs put forward a similar thesis as early as in 1940: “The player’s sex and the form of his or her instrument, or at least its interpretation, depend on one another. As the magic task of more or less all primitive instruments is life, procreation, fertility, it is evident that the life-giving roles of either sex are seen or reproduced in their shape or playing motion. A man’s instrument assumes the form of a man’s organ, a woman’s of a woman’s organ. In the latter case the addition of a fertilizing object is not far off” (1940: 51).

⁸ The phrase she used, “ja ću se oženiti”, is the active male form for “I shall get married”.



Figure 3

the daughters a male gender role, including the rights, duties, social communication and artistic expression characteristic of male” (Petrović 1990: 74).⁹ In his article about women in the Serbian vocal tradition Dimitrije Golemović describes the woman *gusle*-player as one who has, through a combination of circumstances, become “head of the household”, and has adapted her behaviour “which is marked by a whole series of typically male acts (she smokes, drinks, and the like)”, including singing to the *gusle*, which would “in ordinary circumstances be regarded as a type of sacrilege” (Golemović 1998: 54).¹⁰ There is less information about women *gusle*-players in the territory of Croatia. An informant born in 1894 in Vinišće near Trogir spoke to Ivančan of three sisters (Jako, Dore and Ivka Pažanin) who, in their young years, played and sang to the *gusle* on the terrace of their house, and two of them dressed like men (Ivančan 1999b: 14; c.f. also Pažanin 1986: 169).

In contemporary practice, as far as I know, beside just one mannish *gusle*-player (who appeared at a couple of festivals in Split region in summer 2002), there are other women players of chordophones who are described as being mannish, as is the case with the player of the mandolin in *Cinkuši*, one of the most popular neo-traditional ensembles today in Croatia. But, apart from her “masculine” appearance, she is at the same time the wife of the band leader,

⁹ We could add that the *virginas* (particularly their “pronounced hormone disorders”) could conceal a place for homosexuality in the context of marked heterosexuality and/or as yet unrecognized homosexuality.

¹⁰ Golemović does not give any historical framework nor does he mention the source; somewhat earlier in the text he only refers to his “twenty-years-long field experience”.

also a kind of a reviver of local tradition, while the entire band builds its image on a jocular reversal of the serious approach to tradition.

It brings us to the last social foothold which during the 20th century simultaneously provided opportunities and restricted women players in Croatia. It sprang from the (self)negation of serious women's musicianship. The woman player was often a one-off jocular substitute for an absent man player or one who was reluctant to play, who did not feel like playing, or had to be talked into performing (c.f., for example, Kuhač 1877/38: 8). The un-seriousness of her position could also be read off in her playing children's, handy or substitute instruments (c.f., for example, Širola 1931: 140; Ivančan 1999a: 144; Ivančan 1989: 208–209). Either former or latter, this was in both cases a temporary state, only a short-lived excursion outside the established order, which made it clear how things really stood. A performance at Rijeka Carnival in year 2000 illustrates this point – the carnival-like reversal of reality was supported by a band put together only for the particular occasion, with a male singer and percussionist, and two women whose assignment was to pretend to be playing the accordion and the guitar.

The most prominent musical instrument of the second aspect of substitution was in the first half of the 20th century the mouth-organ, a small, portable, cheap and relatively loud instrument which served mainly as a substitute instrument for dance accompaniment in the context of smaller, unrepresentative dance events (e.g. bees). That is perhaps the reason why today's informants mention relatively often that mount-organs were played by women in the past. Nowadays, women play them relatively often as well.

During the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries, women players' positions as members of a family and as participants in national-integrating and modernizing processes made it possible for their musicianship to prevail over their gender. These were also the positions which women players shared with men players: for both, their immediate families or their imagined national family could be a source of support in their activities and in favourable reception of these activities. The remaining women's positions were based precisely on certain stereotypes of women (from the woman player as a member of the so-called fairer sex, to the woman player as a shameless woman, and the reverse of the stereotype in the woman player as a manish woman) or on the (self)negation of serious musicianship (the woman player as a substitute for an absent man player, and the woman player of handy and substitute instruments). There is no doubt that "changes in social structure and gender ideology are also reflected in changes for women performers" (Koskoff 1995: 125), so that over recent years in Croatia a relatively large

number of women players have taken part in diverse public occasions. At the same time, the old patterns continue to persist as regards their activities and the reception of such activities. In other words, women players today – although they may emphasize the fluidity, changeability and performativity of gender identities in their comprehension of their own music and gender pathways – also have to negotiate with persistent, both supporting and restricting canons inherited from the past.

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