
НА ПЕРЕКРЕСТКАХ КУЛЬТУР



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The Romany Musical Versatility: the Case of *Gypsy Disco-Polo*¹

Цыганская музыкальная универсальность: на примере цыганского диско-поло²

As commonly known, European Roma (Gypsies) have specialized in certain occupations but predominantly were associated with their excellent musicianship skills. It is also true today – as attested, among others, by the never dwindling popularity of such bands as The Gypsy Kings. Gypsy musicians are very much appreciated and their music is still enjoyed. It is the result of the Gypsy versatility and their ability to adapt to musical innovations. Despite the extreme richness of forms, manners of performance, etc. characterising the so-called Gypsy music, or more precisely the music by the Roma, their musical products are still easily identifiable by non-Romany circles who associate them with the colourful world of the highly idealized and romanticised Gypsy life. The paper shows – without neglecting the

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historical perspective – that the question of the essence of the genuine ‘Gypsyess’ in music can be, at least partially, answered by taking a closer look at new genres associated with Gypsies and by analysing contemporary practices exercised by the Romany musicians. Consequently, the article is focused on the contemporary trends in the so-called Gypsy music, especially those which merged in the 2000s with popular genres such as Gypsy disco-polo – popular till today and enjoyed by large audiences in Poland. The article claims that such new genres as Gypsy disco-polo should be considered as fine examples of Romany musical versatility proving the vitality of their tradition as cultivated today. Romany musicians adapt to the new situation in such a way as to address the requirements of contemporary listeners who expect that the so-called Gypsy music should be on a par with up-to-date productions known from the mass media, while still adhering to the romanticised vision of the ‘Gypsyess’.

Keywords: Roma (Gypsies), Gypsy music, lăutari, Zigeunerkapellen, disco-polo, World Music.

In the past – as commonly known – European Roma specialized in certain occupations (e.g. blacksmithing), but became predominantly associated with their excellent musicianship skills. Also today – as attested, among others, by the never dwindling popularity of such bands as The Gypsy Kings – Romany musicians are still treasured and their music is constantly much appreciated. The dynamically developing music of the Roma has always briskly reacted to musical innovations and – while adapting them – constantly changed its countenance. Despite its extreme richness in form and manner of performance, the music by the Roma – often simply, yet not very precisely called ‘Gypsy music’ – remains easily identifiable and is still associated by the non-Romany circles with the colourful world of romanticised Gypsy life. The very reception of this music by the gadje (i.e. non-Roma) who are predominantly focused on its specific values seems to work as an important factor while defining – not only stylistically but also ideologically – the phenomenon of ‘Gypsy music’ and its internal cohesion. Taking into consideration the historical perspective of how Romany musicians have always adopted their music-making to particular conditions imposed by the gadje, the question of the essence of genuine ‘Gypsyess’ in music can be – at least partially – answered by analysing new genres associated with the romanticised Gypsy world and by looking at contemporary practices exercised by the Romany musicians who attempt to reach the mainstream audience. In my presentation, I would like to discuss an example of the contemporary ‘Gypsy music’ which has merged with popular genres, while still incorporating elements of ‘Gypsy’ scales and alluding

to the stereotypes of the Roma, and, above all, being often associated with the Roma themselves as performers. Hence my emphasis in this paper will be on the genre well known in Poland and called *Gypsy disco-polo*.

I claim that such new genres as *Gypsy disco-polo* should be considered as fine examples of Roma musical versatility proving the vitality of their tradition as cultivated today. Romany musicians adapt to the new situation, in which contemporary listeners expect the so-called Gypsy music to be on the par with up-to-date productions known from the mass media, but they also long for the old-style, intimate songs conveying the romanticised vision of the ‘Gypsyess’. On the one hand, there is the pressure dictated by the modern technology, while, on the other, – the wish to convey the undefined past. So contemporary music by the Roma – nowadays often labelled within the larger phenomenon of World Music – needs to meet these expectations without losing the trait of its authenticity.

Gypsy music as the “most prominent aspect of Gypsy fetish”

In central and southeastern Europe, Romany professional musicians have traditionally – since the late medieval times – played and danced for remuneration, providing thus musical service to non-Roma communities [4, p. 32]. It seems that in these parts of Europe (as well as in Spain) the Roma became most strongly, almost intrinsically associated with their acclaimed and much celebrated musical talents. Music, alongside some other components, became one of the most significant elements of Gypsy identification in Europe [9, p. 130]. The stereotype of Gypsies as excellent mu-

sicians, affecting their perception among the non-Roma, has been maintained – and perhaps even exaggerated – by the Roma themselves. Also, contemporary Roma musicians *willingly repeat and perpetuate positive clichés concerning their musicianship* [12, p. 98]. Hence, a significant number of authors writing about the Roma toady underline the idea that music is something that Roma people ‘inherit’ from their ancestors, that music runs in their blood. Accordingly Anikó Imre observed that “the Gypsy’s inherent musicality has long been established in popular representations [. . .] as something that functions on the level of a collective genetic trait” [7, p. 326]. And Florentina C. Andreescu and Sean P. Quinn identified music “amongst the most prominent aspects of Gypsy fetish” [2, p. 281]. Lozanka Peycheva and Ventsislav Dimov went even further claiming that “regardless to the territories they inhabit, the names they are called, the stereotypes applied to them by the host ethnic communities, the Gypsies have always been associated with music and the music gift” [11, p. 190]. In other words, most authors writing about the Roma have been fond of the idea that eastern European Gypsies are as if ‘born for music’ [8, p. 77].

Historically speaking, in eastern as well as south-eastern parts of Europe many “Gypsy musicians often travelled to the big cities to seek employment either voluntarily or under orders from the lord of the house. Gradually, increasing numbers of Gypsies – musicians as well as those from other professions – came to settle in these large cities” [6, p. 87]. Hungarian Romany musicians quite early on started to organise their own musical groups performing predominantly in towns: the bands referred to as Zigeunerkapellen became so popular that they quickly proliferated and spread around appearing in the territories of southern Poland, e.g. in Kraków. Also Romany musicians from Romania – *lăutari* – became very famous. In the 19th century wealthy boyars kept bands of Gypsy musicians [1, p. 92], they were also to be heard in the streets of Bucharest. Moldavian Gypsy violinist *Barbu Lăutaru was admired by Franz Liszt, who met him personally in 1847* [10, p. 49-51]. At the same time, Bulgarian Gypsy professional musicians, known as kemendjii, cherished great popularity becoming very popular in the Balkan towns [11, p. 190].

The popularity of the Roma professional musicians, especially in the 19th century, was the result of various factors: on the one hand, circumscribed by the specific demand for the catchy, danceable music performed during public events, while, on the other hand, conditioned by the romanticized fame of Gypsy musicians accordingly described by no one else but the famous composer – Liszt in his book *Des Bohémiens et de leur musique en Hongrie* (1859). Admired and sought after, the Roma musicians have always relied on these pillars sustaining their reputation: the one connected with their celebrated image and the other with specific musical features, which the non-Roma audience would traditionally consider as ‘Gypsy’. Hence the Roma musicians cultivated the vision of their ‘Gypsiness’, which can be roughly equalled with ‘otherness’, exoticism, or strangeness, yet from within, i.e. present, and somehow accepted or simply tolerated in Europe, since the Middle Ages. The issue of creating and presenting their own image as the Roma is closely linked with the strategies implemented by Romany musicians who manage to remain “agents in the construction of their own identity”, while defining their own ethnicity both within their own community and towards the non-Roma audience. As Margaret H. Beissinger says Roma musicians must “play with the boundaries of ethnicity and class because in doing so they are enabled to elevate themselves, thereby gaining prestige and economic security” [4, p. 26]. In this paper, I am not interested in the tactics adapted by the Roma musicians to negotiate for their own position, or identity. Rather, I will set here to prove that music which today can be tagged as ‘Gypsy’ has never lost its authentic character being the combination of Romany tradition with new solutions, easily available nowadays.

Gypsy music as “something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue . . .”

Music performed nowadays by the Roma can be roughly described as following the rule of “something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue”. The ‘old’ is the well-established tradition of relying on the Roma ethnicity as an important factor in creating their own musical identity, while the ‘new’ is connected with the pressure coming from the technology. The ‘borrowed’ refers to the Romany practice of adapting external musical language, or its elements and

interweaving them into their own productions. Finally, while talking about something 'blue' one can think both of the preference for the 'sad', e.g. minor tonalities in Romany music, and the development of the so-called Gypsy jazz.

It can be claimed that contemporary Romany musicians entertain the idea of representing their culture. Thus their musical performances work as moments when their ethnic differentiation is underlined. Romany "musicians like to speak about themselves as 'emotion makers'" [14, p. 215]. By exposing certain qualities immediately linked with the Roma – such as over-emotionality, colorful costumes, characteristic instruments used, the lyrics including Romany words – the Roma performers present themselves as bearers and wardens of this tradition. While in the real life, i.e. outside musical scene, these Romany markers tend to be less exposed by the Roma themselves, on stage they gain additional advantage as a cluster of unique features characteristic only for Romany performances. This 'stage ethnicity' is – in my opinion – an immediate answer to the public's longing after the old times with traditional Romany caravans, Gypsy fortune-tellers and fiddlers. Contemporary Roma musicians cultivate this type of nostalgia in order to evoke positive attitudes toward their own musical propositions. The references to the romanticized vision of the Romany culture have become significant markers of their ethnic differentiation.

At the same time, with regard to the musical repertoire performed by the Roma musicians, they heavily rely on the contemporary fashions and modes, easily adapting the style of their performance to the tastes of the listeners. Accordingly, the Roma musicians easily mix various stylistics drawing on the accessible sources. Hence the music performed by the Roma in Bulgaria differs from the one played in Poland, etc. As the Roma interact with gadje culture, they often appropriate its certain aspects, but "redefine them and incorporate them into their own culture" [13, p. 266]. This process of mixing various – external and internal – elements, has been taking place for so long, that sometimes it is even impossible to determine which stylistics features of music performed by the Roma have been borrowed, and, if so, – when and from whom. In general, it can be said that what is considered as 'Gypsy' in music by

the Roma "is a unique adaptation of the Western European harmonic system which accommodates the very special requirements of a melodic system heavily influenced by Turkish melodic types. The formal and rhythmic structure of this music, and consequently of the dances, appears to draw mostly from Romanian folk sources which, again, may have already been heavily influenced by a combination of Gypsy, Turkish, Western European, and Romanian folk elements. Added to this is the particular style of melodic as well as rhythmic phrasing and expression which seems to have been retained from elements in the music of the nomadic Gypsies" [6, p. 86].

Also characteristic for the very broadly understood 'Gypsy' style, even without specifying the region it comes from, are "intricate, chiefly minor harmonics" as well as the specific manner of performance with "profuse ornamentation, shocking harmonization, [...], free recombination of musical segments of various origins, substantial remodeling of the melodic outline of the executed pieces, insertions of elements from Balkan and Oriental styles, an excessively 'poignant' interpretation" [12, p. 237, 241]. As commonly known, Roma musicians often play by the ear, although contemporary Romany musicians also know how to read the scores. Above all, as they say, they always play from their soul. So, even when performing some well-known tunes, they usually add some notes, or slightly change the melodic line, ending up with unconventional harmonies. Most importantly, Romany musicians modernize these tunes, adapting to new styles and fashions, wanting to appear progressive and innovative. In Romania "the *lăutari* musicians continuously remodel their music, either from the impulse to bring it into line with their own modernized aspect, or (especially in the recent times) out of their professional necessity to satisfy all those who expect them to perform it in one fashion or another" [12, p. 214].

Indeed, most Romany musicians are open to new trends, catching up with the latest modes. Hence their music has gone through a number of stylistic changes in the recent years. One of the most acclaimed fashions among Hungarian Romany musicians was, for example, playing in the 'Romanian style', but also in 'Spanish style'. Also Latin music, e.g. Brazilian 'bossa nova' exercised its influence. Furthermore, insertion of some Rus-

sian elements (e.g. in Russian/Gypsy romances) as well as referring to the Indian roots of Romany music gained popularity, too.

Most significantly the music performed by the Roma was influenced by the electronics. Indeed, nowadays it is the modern technology that determines the new exploits of most Romany musicians. The search for new solutions (turning to *pan-Balkan music*, to *film soundtracks* featuring Roma heroes, etc.) is predominantly impacted by the sound of *western pop bands*. Not only most Roma musicians play with loud amplification nowadays, but also new 'Gypsy' styles have emerged such as 'Roma pop' or 'Roma rap' (hip-hop). It can be argued that not only "escaping international influences – lyrical, ideological, stylistic or technological – is impossible" [5, p. 357], but in fact – in case of the Roma musicians – incorporating such external influences determines traditional Romany way of interacting with other musical cultures.

Case study: Gypsy disco-polo

One of the best examples how – in the current situation – Gypsy music is the subject of the above mentioned tendencies may be the case of the so-called Gypsy disco-polo, the genre popular in contemporary Poland. It is developing in parallel to *manele* in Romania or *chalgă* Bulgaria, with the predominantly electronic arrangements and the stress put on Romany markers.

Gypsy disco-polo has emerged within the so-called disco-polo – a sub-genre of Euro disco, modelled upon Italo disco, but deeply rooted in Polish folk tradition, especially with regard to instruments and simple (superficial and naïve) lyrics. Disco polo first occurred in the mid-1980s, with the peak of its popularity in the 1990s. Then the genre lost its initial impetus, but after 2004 it staged a gradual comeback. Typical instruments include accordion, guitars and electric instruments, especially keyboards, often with automatic percussion. In the 1990s, most groups playing disco-polo stemmed from amateur circles and were formed as boy-bands reflecting the western popularity of neo-doo wop vocal bands. Roma as well as non-Roma musicians seized the opportunity of adopting musical and stylistic features of mainstream disco, while referring to the imagined, romanticized 'Gypsy world' creating thus a peculiar variant of disco polo commonly

called Gypsy disco-polo. It makes use of typical elements of disco-polo e.g. unsophisticated lyrics, bordering with the banality, the overuse of melodic patterns derived from western popular music of the 1960s and the 1970s, heavy dependence on electronic instruments with ready-made rhythmic formulas. However, in order to be called Gypsy disco-polo, songs need to include several 'markers' indicating their 'Gypsiness' – appearing both in musical and textual layers. In other words, the newness of electronic sounds catching up with the latest dance tendencies is balanced with sentimental lyrics and the presence of traditional instruments.

Willingly introduced are instruments associated with the Roma, among others, guitar, violin, or accordion. The faster tempo in the last section of the songs reminds of the *czardas*-like formal layout. References to tunes traditionally linked with the Roma are heard. Most symptomatically, the lyrics talk about the migrant Gypsy life, about the Gypsy love, about beautiful Gypsy people – sitting at the fire, dancing and singing. Even the titles of Gypsy disco-polo albums are volume speaking – for example *Cygańskie wesele* (Gypsy wedding) or *Cygańska biesiada* (Gypsy feast).

While inserting typical pop elements, e.g. rhythmical beats, etc., the Roma performers still adhere to the old way of music making hazing the borders between the traditional and the modern. Although the authenticity of Gypsy music is often connected with being able to perform in the 'old style', the modern expectations imposed on the musicians result in the new quality of music they compose, being the mixture of the old and the new. These factors co-exist in Gypsy disco polo as constantly negotiated by such means as the reissuing and remixing, recycling of old tunes, styles, forms. For example, old tunes are presented in new arrangements, old lyrics gain new melodies, the tempo of traditional songs is made faster, or the opposite – up-tempo dance melodies are turned to slow ones, rhythmical changes occur, etc. But while "Gypsies attach great importance to the style of interpretation" [12, p. 212], it seems that one of the most characteristic features of Gypsy disco-polo remains the manner of deliverance, stressing the euphonic qualities connected with musical performance.

Gypsy music or "...in folklore everything is up-to-date ..."

The development of 'Gypsy' music is challenged by external anticipations and global forces. Contemporary expectations are still connected with certain 'ethnic' image as well as the demand for danceable tunes supported by advanced technology. Above all, music by the contemporary Roma is believed to sustain its claims to authenticity: this is often executed by means of conjuring up the charms of nostalgia that lovingly recreates and reminisces, but also revives old forms and styles. Referring to the traditional qualities is often equalled with authenticity, and opposed with the tendency to immerse into a new context. But when Romany musicians combine the sounds of the violin and the dulcimer with the keyboards, they do so exactly because – as Gia Baghashvili once observed – "in folklore everything is up-to-date, the new as well as the old. [...] consequently everything is 'modern' " [3, p. 53]. It seems to me that the Romany ability to reinvent their traditional music as supported by the new technology, etc. is the ultimate mark of their authenticity. Incorporation of new ele-

ments serves as a means of re-freshening and re-inventing the concept of Gypsy music within the larger trend of the so-called World Music, which can be defined as a new reincarnation of musical folklore. To sum up: Gypsy music is not a fading-out phenomenon. Not only is it suffice to take a look at the number of CDs with records labelled as 'Gypsy music' sold at music shops. There are also several festivals organised nowadays with Gypsy music (for example, since 1997 Międzynarodowy Festiwal Piosenki i Kultury Romów [The International Festival of Roma Culture and Song] has been held in Poland), more and more Internet sites on the issue of music by the Roma appear. Romany musicians – their status and music – have also been the subject of intensive scholarly research (among others late Katalin Kovalcsik, or *Irén Kertész Wilkinson*, Ursula Hemetek, Lozanka Peycheva, Lynn Hooker, Carol Silverman, Svanibor Pettan, Peter Manuel, and many more). All these efforts attest that the so-called Gypsy music – understood as music performed, composed and promoted by the Roma – is thriving and fascinating, as ever.

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Аннотация. Как известно, европейские цыгане всегда тяготели к определенным видам деятельности, из которых ближе всего им была музыка. Свидетельством природной музыкальности цыган в наши дни может служить, например, неизменная популярность таких творческих коллективов, как «Gypsy Kings». Несмотря на восприимчивость цыган новым веяниям, постоянно обогащающим жанрово-стилистическую палитру их музыки, она всё ещё легко узнаваема и по-прежнему завораживает своим особым мелодико-ритмическим рисунком, своей романтической экспрессией и ни на что не похожей манерой исполнения. В данной статье поднят вопрос о сущности подлинного «цыганства» в музыке, на который, как считает автор, можно, по крайней мере частично, ответить при более детальном исследовании произведений, созданных носителями культуры рома, в 2000-х гг. Анна Пиотровска рассматривает современные жанры цыганской музыки, самым популярным из которых в Польше является цыганское диско-поло, в исторической перспективе и приходит к выводу об исключительной универсальности и многогранности цыганских музыкантов, обладающих способностью с лёгкостью подстраиваться под любую культурную ситуацию, позволяющей им и сегодня удовлетворять вкусы широкой слушательской аудитории, одновременно поддерживая жизнеспособность собственных многовековых музыкальных традиций.

Ключевые слова: Рома (цыгане), цыганская музыка, лэутары, Zigeuner Kapellen, диско-поло, World Music.

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