



## BOOK REVIEWS

Edited by Philip Vandermeer

367

### MUSICAL GEOGRAPHIES

**Albanian Urban Lyric Song in the 1930s.** By Eno Koço. (Europea: Ethnomusicologies and Modernities, no. 2.) Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004. [xxviii, 400 p. ISBN 0-8108-4889-2. \$73. (hbk.); ISBN 0-8108-4890-2 \$45. (pbk.).] Music examples, index, bibliography, 2 compact discs.

“The urban song must not remain only in the mouths of singers dressed in folk costumes and *fez*, but it needs to put on the modern dress of our time” (p. 59). Such is soprano Marie Kraja’s explanation for the efforts of a generation of Albanian singers from the educated middle class, trained in western Europe in operatic technique, who returned home in the 1930s and transformed the older Albanian urban song repertoire into art song, to be performed to the accompaniment of piano or chamber orchestra. By recasting urban song as a cultivated art form that could share a concert stage with operatic arias, these performers helped to assure a prominent place for it in Albanian musical life up to the present day. It is the Albanian “lyric” song of the 1930s and the singers, instrumentalists, composer-arrangers, and lyricists who developed it that are the primary subject of Eno Koço’s excellent and well-researched study. As the first monograph in English to examine an urban song repertoire from southeastern Europe, and the first to detail musical life in the region in the early twentieth century, it will be revelatory for international readers.

Aside from his skills as an ethnomusicologist, Koço is a highly accomplished classical musician who, as longtime conductor of the Albanian Radio and Television Symphony Orchestra, arranged and recorded many examples of the songs he examines here. He is also the son of two of the singers who helped to develop Albanian lyric song: Kristaq Koço, a baritone who studied in Milan; and Tefta Tashko-Koço, a soprano who studied at the Paris Conservatoire. The lives and careers of Koço’s parents, born respectively in Romania and Egypt, together with artists such as Austrian-trained Kraja and tenor Kristaq Antoniu, who studied in Romania and Italy, illustrate both the far-flung character of the Albanian middle class in the early twentieth century and their strong sense of affinity for European high culture. Koço’s study does much to counter

stereotypes of Albanian cultural isolation by illuminating a fascinating period of musical “Europeanization” in the decades before World War II.

Throughout his study, Koço distinguishes between what he terms “Albanian urban song” (AUS) or “traditional urban song,” and “Albanian urban lyric song” (AULS). AUS refers to the repertoire of urban songs created and performed up to the present by Albanian musicians within a framework of local performance practices; and AULS to the concert repertoire composed of reworkings of AUS as well as newly composed songs. Koço focuses on four towns that served as centers of urban musical life: Shkodër in the north, Elbasan and Berat in Central Albania, and Korçë in the south. Songs from these towns are known today not only in Albania, but also in Albanian communities in the former Yugoslavia as well as throughout the large Albanian diaspora. While many present-day listeners are acquainted with recordings of “lyric” performers, perhaps many more are familiar with the larger repertoire of urban songs performed in a more local style by several generations of professional “folk” singers.

Following a short introduction and a historical overview in chapter 1, Koço provides, in chapters 2 and 3, substantial information on the historical and social context of Albanian urban song. First he surveys possible sources for the musical style of this repertoire, with particular attention to the Byzantine legacy and the many genres that were introduced to the region in the Ottoman period. He then focuses on the performances and styles of small ensembles of singer-instrumentalists, known in the north as *aheng* and in the south as *saze*, whose members were the principal creators and performers of “traditional” urban song.

Intermingled with these descriptions, Koço traces the gradual transformation of local, orally transmitted *aheng* and *saze* repertoires into a pan-Albanian corpus of notated arrangements and new compositions. A contrast emerges between composers such as Isuf Myzyri from Elbasan, who was not trained in Western music and who created his songs as a member of his own *aheng*, and Palokë Kurti from Shkodër, trained in piano and trumpet, who composed for brass band before turning his attention to stylized urban songs. In conjunction with biographies of major artists and an overview of their performance approaches, Koço vividly evokes the social setting for presentations of lyric song in the 1930s, giving attention to concert venues and programs, patrons, audiences, and reviewers.

Later chapters of the book present an analysis of the lyric song repertoire, beginning in chapter 4 with its textual, rhythmic, and formal structure. Of particular interest to (ethno)musicologists is Koço’s extensive analysis of the modal character of urban songs in chapter 5. In his view, the urban repertoire is composed both of melodies that may be related to the Ottoman modes or *makams*, and ones based on modes of a local character, which he postulates under the label of Southwestern Balkan Modes (SWBM). Believing that the latter developed in pre-Ottoman times and were later accommodated to Ottoman-era practices, he relates a number of them to Byzantine *echoi*. He further divides the SWBM into diatonic modes (with scales composed with whole- and half-steps) and non-diatonic ones (with scales that include augmented seconds), both of which are more prevalent in the north of the country; and pentatonic and pentatonic-derived ones, which dominate in the south. Koço hypothesizes that the strong pentatonic and polyphonic basis of southern music prevented the *makam* system from making major inroads there. In northern and central Albania, however, some form of the *makam* system, albeit adapted

to local tastes and practices, became the basis of *aheng* performances that included Turkish as well as Albanian compositions. With the gradual introduction of Western art music and associated instruments in the nineteenth century, the Ottoman based intonation of the *ahengs* was adjusted to the tempered Western scale, the framework within which Koço presents his analysis. Koço offers valuable documentation of *makam*-based practices, including two early twentieth-century accounts from Shkodër of local mode designations together with lists of songs assigned to each. Nevertheless, he wisely decides to use standard Turkish *makam* names in his analyses so as to facilitate comparison with related repertoires.

The final chapter presents an analysis of twenty-eight urban songs as recorded by both “traditional” and lyric singers. Textual and musical features of the songs and the performance approaches taken by each artist are discussed in conjunction with appendices of texts, translations, and carefully executed musical transcriptions. In order to account for the historical layering of musical systems, Koço analyzes many songs from multiple perspectives, pointing out their relationship to SWBM as well as Byzantine *echoi* and Turkish *makams*. All examples discussed are excerpted on the book’s accompanying compact discs, which reproduce these early recordings with admirable clarity. As Koço points out, the first recordings of lyric song were made in the 1930s and 1940s, whereas few recordings of “traditional” urban song were made before the 1950s. The great majority of professional performers up to the present, whether trained in bel canto technique or not, have thus been influenced, to varying degrees, by the early art-song performers. For non-Albanian listeners who might have puzzled over the unusual mixture of local and operatic features evident in recordings of this repertoire, Koço’s book does much to clarify how that mixture came to be.

This otherwise excellent book’s most serious drawback is its organization. Crucial information on individuals or analytical topics is often scattered over several chapters and major analytical points are often reiterated. These problems lead not only to unnecessary repetition but also to omissions and inconsistencies. It would be helpful, for example, to learn more about the role of the *bejtexhi* poets and the Ottoman basis of their verse. Likewise, the important but sensitive question of the ethnic makeup of *ahengs* and *saze*, and particularly the participation in them of Romani musicians, is touched upon but not fully addressed.

The volume also suffers a bit from its attempt to cover in adequate detail both “traditional” and “lyric” song. Art singers, who often included novel melodic progressions or chromatic alterations in their performances, are ultimately less reliable sources of modal practice than are singers whose performances are based in local styles. As Koço himself acknowledges, detailed research now needs to be undertaken on individual regional repertoires before his approach to modes can be considered definitive. Amateur singers in particular might preserve aspects of intonation and ornamentation no longer found even in “traditional” professional performances. A further step would be comparative analysis of the urban repertoires of the various southeast European countries, together with the popular urban songs of Turkey that circulated so widely throughout the region. Such research could illuminate how the *makam* system was adapted to various local contexts and clarify its relationship to “Balkan” modes that might be found in several contiguous countries. Eventually it might be possible to suggest whether such “Balkan” modes are in fact holdovers from pre-Ottoman times or locally inflected

melody types that developed and circulated during the Ottoman and immediate post-Ottoman period, whether within or outside of a *makam* system. All these are topics to which Koço stands to make invaluable contributions in the future.

Despite these reservations, the present study is a groundbreaking contribution to the literature on European vernacular musics. It belongs in every university library supporting programs in ethnomusicology, folklore, and European or East European Studies, as well as any library that serves the large Albanian communities living in English-speaking areas.

Jane C. Sugarman

*State University of New York, Stony Brook*