**THE SAZE INSTRUMENTAL ENSEMBLES**

**OF SOUTH EAST ALBANIA**

**The Urban Semi-Professional Ensembles**

In all parts of south Albania, where the urban song was cultivated, instrumental urban music was also practised. The instrumental ensembles in urban areas, known as Saze, had their distinctive features. Initially they were limited in number and functioned mainly for special ceremonies such as weddings; the members of these groups, the *ahengxhi* or *sazexhi*, did not enjoy any particular social status and the people who played the instruments or sang in these groups were, generally, looked upon with a sort of contempt. Despite this attitude, these professional or semi-professional popular musicians have played an enormous role in the preservation of popular musical events such as weddings and parties, dances and even live concerts. They were the real carriers of the tradition of urban instrumental and vocal music. It is important to stress that the term Saze has a double significance: it refers as a general term to a type of musical instrument, but it is also used as a collective name i.e. for a group of instrumentalists. Although this double use of the term Saze has the same significance as in Turkey, in Albania the notion Saze (Turk. sing. *saz*, pl. *sazlar*) connotes the south-eastern traditional ensembles.

The Saze semi-professional ensembles are spread throughout the South and South East of Albania, particularly in the Korçë area, and extend to Epirus, northern Greece. Some of the most renowned Saze groups were made up of family members since musical talent seemed to be a genetic requisite in these families. Thanks to their ability for ‘freeing’ music from local, ethnic or national ideas, the wandering Saze musicians adapted parts of the national heritage to their taste and styles and stored them in their own idiomatic repertoire. The ‘wandering’ way of life which the Saze-s represented, facilitated them in enriching their repertoire with characteristics of the various ethnic groups. Being invited to weddings and religious festivities of a relatively vast geographical area of south Albania and north Epirus, the Saze-s were labelled with their names ‘and travelled from one place to another, from Leskovik to Përmet, from Korçë to Konica, from Berat to Labëri, Myzeqe, and beyond. Each Sazeadapted its own stylistic features, such as being ‘sweet’, ‘hard’, or as if ‘weeping’ or ‘bursting’.

**Traditional Musical Instruments**

There is a relationship between traditional musical instruments (mostly used in rural areas) and the human voice. The unpolished techniques of the traditional musician in the production of both the vocal line and the instrumental accompaniment embody, to a certain degree, some of the regional tonal qualities from the early strata of Korçare folk music, particularly those of rural areas. Combined, both vocal and instrumental elements create a blended sonority, which is specific to the Saze ensemble. Dialect, i.e. the intonation of the spoken language is also a distinctive feature; the Korça dialect, for example, is clearly distinguished by its pitch contours and soothing intonation.

The traditional musical instruments used by the peasants or townsmen of South East Albania were either made by native people or imported from the surrounding Balkan areas, from further east or from Western Europe; these instruments played an important role in defining the characteristic regional features of instrumental and vocal sounds. When specifically urban songs were introduced into Korçë, new imported instruments also became familiar; a more fashionable voice production (i.e. tone of voice) emerged. As a result of this gradual change or replacement of instruments, the relationships between many characteristic sizes of interval started to dissolve and the equal temperament system began to be introduced, which co-existed with the old system. The borrowed instruments began to become acclimatised to the new environment and the local people; traditional musicians adapted their ear to the autochthonous inflection patterns which were familiar to them.

Many of the instruments used in Albania are also found in other Balkan countries and several of them have a common origin within the Levant, Turkey in particular. On Albanian soil, these instruments have acquired distinctive melodic performing styles and some structural modifications have also been made, both associated with the demands of local patterns of music. Not all the instruments which will be considered below have the same importance in urban ensembles. Some of them, such as the *fyell*,[[1]](#footnote-1) *bakllama[[2]](#footnote-2)* and one or two others, were little used compared to instruments such as the clarinet, violin, *llauta*, *dajre* and later on, the accordion. In the second half of the 20th century other instruments, such as the flute, accordion and double bass became an even more important part of the urban song’s ensembles.

The multipart styles of these ensembles, in the way each instrument functions, correspond to the multipart singing styles of south Albanian music. As far as the Sazegroup is concerned, it consists of one or two clarinets, a violin, a *llauta*, an accordion and a *dajre* or *def*. The two main instruments in the Saze ensemble, the clarinet and violin, are used mainly for the melodic and contrapunctal lines with an emphasis in its lyrical side. Other players provide a droned accompaniment with instruments such as the *llauta* or the *dajre*, while the second clarinet sometimes imitates the tune as well.

Traditional instruments which were initially used in the Saze groups were gradually modified, supplemented, or replaced by some Western ones, i.e. tuned in the equal temperament system. This new tuning system slightly compromised the pure intervals of the former modal colouring and texture.

The clarinet, often called *gërrnet* or *klarino*, was introduced into Albania ‘around the middle of the 19th century … In the Saze groups of south Albania, the function of this instrument is even more important that of the violin, particularly when it leads the tune’ (Sokoli & Miso 1991, 139–140). The Boehm system (in B flat) is the most common clarinet used in South East Albania, but its approach differs distinctly in these areas according to their regional vocal styles, harmony and sentiment.

The *llauta*, like a short lute, is one of the most important of the Saze ensembles’ instruments, along with the clarinet and violin. It is played with a quill plectrum. The neck has 11 ring-shaped frets and four double courses of metal strings which are tuned in fifths downwards (like the viola), A, D, G, C. There are two ways of manoeuvring the left hand on the *llauta*: when it is used as a solo instrument the fingers are placed in a stretched position, whereas when it plays the role of the accompaniment, the narrow position of the chord is used. In a Saze group the *llauta* may have a simplified melodic function, a heterophonic role with violin and clarinet, but its main importance is to provide rhythmic and chordal accompaniment. The intervallic relationship in the placing of the frets of the *llauta* is achieved according to the principles of the equal temperament system.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The European violin which used to be called *qemane* is one of most prominent melodic instruments in the *Aheng* (northern) and Saze (southern) ensembles. The violin was sometimes held upright, on the player’s knee, but more often, in the normal way. It has four metal or gut strings and ‘up to the 1940s the Albanian *ahengxhi* tuned the thinner string of the violin a fourth above the second string, whereas the other strings were tuned in fifths, i.e. D, A, D, G’ (Sokoli & Miso 1991, 224); the same as the tuning of the Turkish *keman*.

The *dajre* or *def* (frame drum), is one of the principal membranophone percussion instruments to be found in the southern Saze ensemble. There are different sizes of *dajre* but there are two main types used in Albania; a frame drum with and without metal discs. It is held and used in most peculiar ways; ‘in this respect there are observed regional differences in the technique of its usage’ (Sokoli & Miso 1991, 71).

**Roles of the Saze Members**

The multipart styles of the southern instrumental ensembles, in the way each instrument functions, correspond to the part-song styles of south-eastern and south-western Albanian traditional music. The multipart roles of the other members of the Saze have different contrapuntal functions and consequently different descriptive titles; the violin, for example, ‘cuts’ or ‘replies’ (Alb. *i a pret*, *i a kthen*) to the main melody of the clarinet―the ‘taker’ (Alb. *i a merr*), whereas the *llauta* ‘fills up’ (Alb. *i a mbush*) or ‘holds’ (Alb. *ia mban*) the tune, and the *def* sustains the rhythmic pulsation of the music. According to Çabej, it is the musical expression which is transmitted through the folk tunes that still show the former geographical division of the southern tribes into two territories, Tosk and Lab.

Both groups of tunes have in common their form, which is the alternation of the first singer (the soloist) with the chorus. For the first singer’s tune, in the Tosk song we say: *i a hedh* (throws), in the Lab song *i a merr* (takes); for the second singer who starts after the first, in the Tosk song we say: *i a pret* (cuts), in the Lab *i a kthen* (returns). For the chorus in the Tosk song we say that *bën iso* (makes drone), in the Lab song, *i a mbush* (fills up). In other respects, both folk tunes are very different from each other (Çabej 1975, 130).

The clarinettist, who almost always plays the leading role, builds up his interpretation on the principle of continuous improvisation whilst other members of the Saze follow his mood. The group is supposed to support each emotional outburst of its inspiring leader and to articulate with him the tune, particularly the climaxes and the ends of phrases. It should be pointed out that the Saze members sing as well as play.

**The Kaba**

The Saze groups of South East Albania and of Korçë, in particular, are of an entirely different nature from the north Albanian *Aheng* ensembles. They display the most typical features of the polyphonic rendition which originated in southern vocal multipart music and have consolidated some formal instrumental structures, such as *kaba* or, as Vasil Tole calls it, the ‘instrumental concerto’ (Tole 1998, 76). The *kaba* traditional genre occupies a special place in Saze music. Particularly well-known are the southern styles of ‘kaba me gërnetë’ (weeping with clarinet) which is one of the most interesting types of urban instrumental music of Albania. The *kaba* influence in employing characteristic expressive devices such as *portamentos*, *glissandos*, embellishments, types of phrasing, improvisation and structure, has also pervaded the instrumental accompaniment of the southern urban songs.

A different version of *kaba* is also found in northern Greek Epirus (*mirologi*), but tends to be a kind of monophonic melodic line with a *Koumpaneia* accompaniment, rather than a multipart rendition. *Kaba*, in its origins is a *mourning* tune,[[4]](#footnote-4) as if the clarinet or violin escorting the funeral was actually crying. In the 20th century, treated as a stylised genre, it appears as a concert performance. This practice is found both among the Romani and the indigenous people of south Albania, and it is likely to have been borrowed from Byzantine and Ottoman traditions.

*Kaba* consists of two sections, the first slow, melancholic and in a free-moving style, the second, in a fixed tempo (tempo *giusto*), usually *Moderato*. The clarinettist or the solo violin players compose their own *kaba* but do not write it down. The leading instrumentalists use common expressive devices of regional patterns such as improvisation, descending slides, pentatonic developments and the minor seventh as a preferred frame interval of this genre.

**Performances**

As stated above, the Saze ensemble also includes singing in their performances; some of the Saze musicians sing together as well as play. The solo singers, who are not members of the group, are very much in demand to join the Saze and perform with them. Vasil Tole states that ‘the experience of the past several decades proves that for the men’s songs accompanied by the Saze the most common *tonics* are on F, G, A flatand B flat*,* while for the women’s voices on B flat*,* C*,* and D’.[[5]](#footnote-5) The Tosk three-part singing areas of the Korçë region, its surrounding villages and also the neighbouring regions of Kolonjë, Devoll, Pogradec, Skrapar, the Përmet region and others, all have their own characteristics, but the most distinctive one is that most of the singing is accompanied by the Saze instrumental ensemble.

The most common metre used in the Sazemusic of South East Albania is 7/8, thus providing the main soloist(s), accompanied by the Saze instrumental group, with conditions in which to exhibit its great dynamism and spectacular instrumental gesture as choreographic practice. In Dropull (a Greek-speaking area) the penetration of the Saze instrumental groups, which are by now also incorporated into the multipart unaccompanied singing, has changed the more traditional practices of singing to a certain extent. The main change is the practice of being accompanied by instruments; the doubling of human voices and their functions (*marrës*, *kthyes* and *iso*) with instruments acting in the same role have almost become the norm.

‘Alismonó ke hérome’ (I Forget but Enjoy), is a song from the Greek Epirus (Ktismata). The melody of this song is similar to numerous Lab songs in that they both share near identical rhythmic phrases, formal structures and a pentatonic gamut. There is another version of this song from Greek Epirus which is of a monodic nature and accompanied by an instrumental *Koumpaneia* (Alb. Saze)group; it contains in itself elements of individual parts of multipart singing but in a linear form. The latter singing and playing version (*Koumpaneia*/Saze) is obviously much closer to the Tosk multipart singing of the Përmet or Leskovik tradition. The song ‘Alismonó ke hérome’ provides a good example of the point of merger between the Epirus ison-based multipart unaccompanied singing and monodic singing.

The shared musical and ethnographical traditions of the Southwest Balkans are the attributes and assets of the ethnic populations of this region. The *fustanella* (a pleated kilt or dress), claimed by both Albanians and Greeks as their traditional national costume, is associated with their practices and the shared influence of some of their common history; it is regarded by both with pride and as a mark of identity. Yet it is not just the *fustanella*; there are other components of similar roles and functions, though in some cases bearing different names, such as the instrumental *kaba* or *mirologia*, Saze or *Koumpaneia*, *chamiko* (*çamiko*) or *tzamiko*, *llauta* or *laouto*, the Pyrrhic dance, tetratonic and pentatonic tunes, tonic and subtonic tonalities, common trochaic and iambic verses and, above all, the *iso*(n), secular and ecclesiastical. All of the above represent the continuity of these earlier traditions.

1. The *fyell* (Turkish *kaval*) is one of the most diversely shaped and named wind instruments; it is found all over Albanian territories including the Diaspora (in Italy). It is an open end-blown flute of cane, bone, wood or metal, and is generally found among shepherds and goatherds. Some types of *fyell* which provide all sorts of folk music played in a group or solo, create a pastoral atmosphere and fascinating colour in urban instrumental ensembles. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The *bakllama* is a long-necked lute with three or more strings. Its size can vary but its body is always pear-shaped and gut frets tied on the neck are preferred. It is played with a plectrum made of cherry-bark or a turkey’s feather, by plucking the strings with a variety of strokes and particularly of one or two drones. This instrument is used in the south of Albania and, although it has never been a part of the Saze ensemble, its use for particularly colourful details plays a characteristic role in urban music. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‘The replacement of natural or ‘untempered’ tuning instruments (such as *llauta*) with the ‘tempered’ ones, throughout the group, has changed the originality of folk and urban music and some of their most typical characteristics’. (R. Sokoli, P. Miso, *Veglat muzikore të popullit shqiptar*, 235). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ‘Kaba’ in Turkish means ‘thick’, ‘coarse’, ‘crude’, also ‘dense’. It is often used to describe notes on the Turkish gamut to indicate a slight weighting or lowering of pitches in crucial intervals. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Personal communication. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)