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**Genres: Europe**

**Aheng Music**

The *aheng* in Albania indicates both an instrumental ensemble and a specific kind of music, *aheng* music, which is characterized by a Middle Eastern influence in the song’s linear melodic flow, curved melodic movements and mosaic-like decorations. The most significant mark of Ottoman cultural influence upon northern Albania was reflected, probably more than in any other field, in urban music. At the beginning of the twentieth century in northern and central areas of Albania both local and Ottoman traditional urban music was performed.

Although the *aheng* practice followed more or less the same rules and performed the same function throughout north and central Albania, local customs and regulations were quite distinct. The *aheng* ensembles of the towns of Shkodër, Durrës, Elbasan, Tiranë and Berat all followed Middle Eastern intonations and practices, albeit adapted into local versions, but this was the only point of contact and interchange of the traditional urban music between these towns. This enabled the *aheng* ensembles to meet the demands of ordinary people all over the North and Central Albanian world, at weddings and other festivities, and gave them an advantage over rural music, which could not arouse interest beyond its immediate area. The growth of the *aheng* ensembles in the mid-nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth century in a country where three quarters of the population lived in rural areas made it possible for urban music to reach a much wider audience and for the *aheng* practice to be introduced into the villages. As they were obliged to participate in some of the rural musical rituals, for example at weddings, *aheng* players also included in their repertories the oral traditional music which had been strongly preserved in the rural and mountainous areas as part of the musical identity of the region. The gradual spread of Islam through Albania during the course of five centuries brought its own influence to the arts, and the introduction of the *makam* system in particular was influential in the development of urban music (see entry on Albanian Popular Song). This system was modified by the cultural climate of the south-west Balkans (where Albania is situated), in that it absorbed and adapted indigenous musical styles.

However, not all Ottoman modes (*makam-*s) were used with the same emphasis in North Albania; some of them were more adaptable to the Albanian ethos and some less. Musical motifs from various towns and regions of north and central Albania, such as Shkodër, Elbasan, Tiranë and Berat, soon became models for the entire Albanian musical world. In Berat, for instance, the instrumental and vocal pot-pourris in the *aheng* style, used as introductions to wedding parties, were mainly improvised by the local *aheng* players, but some elements were also borrowed from other *aheng* areas. In all parts of northern and central Albania where urban and popular music was cultivated, instrumental urban music was also practiced widely. The instrumental ensembles in urban areas had their distinctive features, which varied from north to south Albania.

Until the end of the nineteenth century the *aheng* ensemble of north Albania consisted roughly of a *saze* (a long-necked lute, with up to ten strings), a fiddle, a percussive instrument like a *dajre* or *def* and a singer.Other instruments were added on different occasions, such as the *çapare* or *zil* (a kind of Turkish finger cymbals), *tarabukë* (a goblet-shaped hand-drum made of clay, wood or metal and animal skin) and wooden spoons, all these instruments of Middle Eastern derivation. The *Bejtexhi-s* (*bards* or anecdotists, who in *aheng* parties improvise a range of humorous conventional verses) and even dancers were also part of the *aheng* ensembles. As time passed, the clarinet was included in *aheng* groups and, in addition, the violin and *def.* At the beginning of the twentieth century the instrumental ensembles of Elbasan in central Albania consisted of the following: violin, *çyrr*, *llauta*, clarinet, *dajre* and one or two other instruments.

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### Albanian Popular Song (Kënga popullore shqiptare)

*Albanian popular song* is the most prominent of Albanian musical genres. In Albania the term *popullore* (popular), which is closer to the Italian *popolare* or the Russian *narodnaya*, is used in a broad sense to embrace the music that, with the growth of the towns from the eighteenth century onwards, began to develop distinctive characteristics which tended to be accepted by most Albanians. *Kënga popullore* (popular song) is employed as a general and common term, and not one that implies a cultural context that is more American or modern. *Kënga popullore* is also, after all, part of the folk–song of Albania. The repertories covered by *popullore* song embrace not only urban and rural songs, but also gypsy song and sometimes elaborated folk music. If the oral folk music traditions are, more or less, restricted to their immediate geographical areas, the *popullore* song or music has a wider range.

This repertory is rooted in the popular music of the towns, whose growth has been marked by more and more Turkish influence which penetrated the texture of the Albanian indigenous tunes. The rural areas preserved their traditional local modalities for a longer time, although in the last period of Ottoman rule, from the second half of the nineteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth, even there (in the villages around important towns) the Middle Eastern mode was able both to penetrate and become absorbed by the local ancestral songs.

To Palokë Kurti (1860-1920) (from Shkodër, in northwestern Albania, goes the indisputable credit of creating a new type of song which gained enormous popularity. Kurti’s songs were adopted naturally, organically and happily into the repertoires of the new generations of professional urban singers. The urban songs of *jare* style from Shkodër present the closest parallels to the foremost *makam* types that were formerly introduced into Albania. (*Makam,* from the [Arabic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic_language) word Maqam, is a modal system of [melody types](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melody_type) used in [Turkish classical music](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkish_classical_music).Shkodër, where the *aheng* ensembles and the *makam* system flourished in the nineteenth century, included in their repertories Turkish and local music introduced by the professional or semi-professional musicians. The Albanian ‘*makam*-s’ only approximate to Turkish (Ottoman) *makam-*s and the Albanian songs of *makam* inclination are not in any Turkish *makam*).

The *jare* is a type of urban song very characteristic of the town of Shkodër and is distinguished from other urban songs by its unique elaborated form.

In the central Albanian towns of Elbasan and Berat, as the main centres also of the Middle Eastern urban culture, urban song developed by other means. Because it is situated just north of the river Shkumbin, the population of Elbasan belongs to the northern Geg ethnic and linguistic group. Isuf Myzyri of Elbasan played a leading role in central Albania. He developed his career as a traditional violinist and urban composer in the period between the two World Wars. Some of his melodies were influenced by a Middle Eastern kind of sentimentality, however, his inspiration and intuition, softness and pensiveness, make his songs sound on the one hand very personal and on the other, affectionate.

Another important centre is Korçë in southeastern Albania, where urban songs have a character all of their own and their origin is still somewhat mysterious. In Korçë it is assumed that some of these elegant songs – as they are commonly viewed - probably came from Ali Pasha’s Palace in Janina but, whatever their exact origin, they faithfully reflect some of the most modal typical characteristics of the Korçë district. Thus, the popular songs of the Korçë area represent the heart of that modal idiom defined as the south-western Balkan mode.

The melodic pentatonic nucleus of these songs produced the foundation, not only for the multipart singing, but also for the monodic singing of the South Albania. Although a monodic song emerged as a univocal genus, it contained in itself elements of individual parts of multipart singing, however, in a horizontal or linear form. From a monodic tune, in its linear version, other parts could be extracted in order to shape a multipart rendering of two, three or four voices. The reverse could also happen; a multipart song could be adapted to a linear monodic rendering, incorporating in the song’s corpus ‘contrapuntal’ features and being presented as a single line melodic contour with an anhemitonic pentatonic spectrum.

The monodic singing of South Albania has clearly absorbed the most contemporary features of popular singing; songs sung by Eli Fara from Korçë, accompanied by the Saze group, are a good example of the popularisation of traditional monodic song that puts it closer to the taste of the modern urban milieu. This new genre of [popular music](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Popular_music) is marketed by live, amplified shows, recordings and broadcasting

Love songs, the predominant category of urban popular songs, are widespread throughout Albania. The spoken dialect or ‘musical dialect’ plays an enormous role in defining the different musical temperaments in the south, central and northern regions. Thus, love songs represent regional musical idioms, which are highly distinctive and are also guarded with a fanatical devotion by the local people. The love songs did not derive directly from sociological and historical contexts, that is they did not project the political situation as did the historic and patriotic songs. However, they became the centre around which the urban singers and composer-arrangers orbited, and became a part of cultural life, and the focus of nationalistic feeling, ironically by allowing the people to ‘forget’ the political situation in the pleasure of listening to Albanian urban song as it began its transformation into a pan-Albanian popular song.

Usually the composer-singer also wrote the verses (Kurti, Myzyri, Muço and others,) like minstrels or *canta-autori*. Thus, the song was born from one single inspiration, so that the text was appropriate to the melody. This is the way that the folk singers (bards) or *Bejtexhi* create, and they played an essential role, particularly in the development of urban popular songs. The best models of these types of songs are characterised by a genuine local inspiration and sentiment. The Middle Eastern impact is apparent in the exotic features in the interpretation. Almost the whole of Albanian life, particularly in the towns, was strongly influenced by the Turkish mode of thought and activity, and songs were no exception.

Among the interpreters of the urban popular songs in the period after the Second World War, the singers Luçie Miloti, Zihni Berati and Ibrahim Tukiqi, who developed their careers between the late 1940s and 1970s, take a special place. They represent another trend, in which the distinction between the two different interpretations (amateur and art singing) is narrowed; Miloti, an amateur singer, tended towards an art singing interpretation, while Berati and Tukiqi, art singers, tended towards a more natural and unaffected interpretation. Among the lyric singers, who not only showed an enormous love for the urban songs, but also dedicated a great deal of effort to recreating them, was the tenor Gaqo Çako (b.1937.) He selected a bunch of the urban songs, which best suited his voice and, in a close collaboration with Gjon Simoni, shaped them into more elaborate formal structures, romance or ballad type, preserving the original vocal line. There are a considerable number of recordings made by Çako, which represent urban songs of different regions of Albania; among those, the Korçare urban songs occupy a prominent place.

**Kaba**

The semi-professional groups of southern Albania known as *saze* have consolidated some formal instrumental structures, among which *kaba* occupies a special place. *Kaba*, which in Turkish means ‘thick,’ ‘coarse,’ ‘crude,’ also ‘dense,’ is a genre of instrumental music originally performed at funerals. Its practice is found both among the Roma/Gypsies and the indigenous people from South Albania and it is likely to have been borrowed from Ottoman traditions. There is substantial evidence that by the fourteenth century Roma musicians gradually became settled in South Albania and Epirus and shaped some of the region’s music. They introduced several instruments of the Eastern tradition and played their own tunes based on the Middle Eastern popular modes for family celebrations of the Muslims and Christians of the region. In the twentieth century *kaba* started not only to be practiced funerals but appeared also at dances and weddings as well as concert performances and was treated as a stylized genre. *Kaba* has become one of the most popularized instrumental genres of Southern Albania and beyond. Laver Bariu is one of its most prominent performers.

*Kaba* structure is in 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. The *saze* ensembles that regularly perform Albanian *kaba* are found throughout South Albania and extend to north of Greece, Epirus. A different type of *kaba*, called *mirologi* or *miroloyia* (funeral dirges), is practiced in northern Greek Epirus, but tends to be as a kind of monophonic melodic line with a *koumpania* accompaniment, rather than a multipart rendition. The *koumpania* music of Greek Epirus, part of which is *mirologi*, is based mainly on anhemitonic pentatonic modes. The singing, either by a solo singer or a group, is very ornamented and melismatic.

Evolving from a traditional urban and rural music *saze* music has established itself as a new form of popular music and is distributed across many forms of mass communication.

‘Korçare Distinctive Song’(*Kënga karakteristike korçare*).

Seeds of this type of song from the Korçë area came from outside Albania and when planted in Albanian soil produced a song form well known all over the Albanian world: this unique type is sung at both southern and northern Albanian wedding tables, parties, tours and evening rests. Although the *KDS* were born or adapted in Korçë and were much loved by their own people, with the growth of towns and communications, they reached urban dinner tables and gained popularity because they were conceived in a simple and spontaneous way. At the beginning of the twentieth century in particular, when the Albanian struggle for national awakening and independence reached its peak, the newly composed *Korçare* choral songs of patriotic character revealed certain new features particularly in their constitution and spirit. The former entertainment character was replaced with a sort of mobilising or nationalistic fervour. The repertories covered by the *Korçare distinctive songs* (KDS), which could be classed in the more general category of *popular* songs, comprise two main styles; one used in choral songs of a light-hearted nature which will be called the ‘light’ style, and the other which may be classified as ‘late Romantic’. The Korçare distinctive songs of late Romantic style are, more or less, the same as their counterparts in other Balkan countries, and farther afield. The late Romantic KDS (or the Korçare *serenatas*) represent a less precise field and as a genre display fewer original regional characteristics.

### ‘Light Music’ Song as the Most Popular Music Genre

In the post-WWII period, the best of the newly composed songs of the ‘light music’ (muzikë e lehtë) type came to be considered a popular music genre. Mechanical recordings preserved national and regional collections, and the ‘light music’ song became a means of promoting nationalistic ideologies. The influence of ‘light music’ songwriters and amateur singers expanded the genre to include original music that largely retains the form of traditional compositions. The most eminent voice of contemporary ‘light music’ is that of [Vaçe Zela](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Va%C3%A7e_Zela" \o "Vaçe Zela), who developed her career in Tirana. Up until the beginning of the 1990s, the ‘light music’ song that wedded traditional forms and styles with lyrics praising system and the state was extensively developed. After the 1990s, the ‘light music’ song has become one of the most sustainable forms of production and consumption. Albania has participated in the [Eurovision Song Contest](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eurovision_Song_Contest) several times. The Albanian broadcaster, [*Radio Televizioni Shqiptar* (*RTSH*)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radio_Televizioni_Shqiptar), has been the organiser of the Albanian Eurovision entry since the country’s debut in the contest in [2004](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eurovision_Song_Contest_2004).

**Conclusion**

Albanian popular song has continuously been overlooked by musicologists in favour of rural folk-music. Some commentators have implied that Albanian urban music was not as genuinely Albanian as the music of its mountains and countryside. But it is no less part of the country’s musical history, particularly in the twentieth century, and is equally as ‘pure’ an expression of Albanian spirit and culture; it has also been a necessary part of Albanian daily life. Albanian popular song had the privilege of surviving and evolving without being written down, as literature or art music had to be; urban song that later became popular nationwide song was born to live, die out or survive in its own way, during the course of Albanian history.

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