

*Pri Muzike? No mozhno li byt' blizhe...
Why, can one be closer, than through music?...
B. Pasternak, Balkan Blues*

BALKAN BLUES

Boris H. is a Bulgarian poet and by all accounts a serious person. I met him abroad a few years ago at an important conference about Eastern Europe. Boris laid his modest possessions out in front of the audience of foreigners (and his own writer kin): pipes, flutes, whistles... Boris would first recite some of his verse, and then, almost with relief, he would begin to explain his primitive wind instruments: this flute sounds like this, this pipe is played like this. And he gave us a demonstration of each one.

I wondered why Boris H. dragged his modest possessions around the world with him, why the sound of an ocarina meant more to him than his own verse. Why was this writer not prepared, like all the rest of us, to talk about democratisation in his country, about the freedom of the media, and the similar interesting post-totalitarian things.

On one post-conference evening, Boris H. tried to teach me an old Bulgarian folk song. The song was about a woman waiting for her husband to come back from an inn. Each line was interrupted by little cries (uuu! i i i i i!), sighs (uh!), spoken sighs (uh, woe, ah me!). "Everyone else's husband has come home," went the song, only her "blockhead" had not, uh, ih, there he is, uuuu, i i i i i, staggering, he misses the house, falls flat in the chicken coop, uh, ah me, ishishish, ishishishoo...

"What do I want with this? I can't stand folklore..." I protested.

"Take it... You never know..." said Boris simply.

We met once again, at a similar conference. Boris H. was laying his pipes out again. He reminded me of the meek old ladies who can still be found in East European markets, laying out all they have to sell: a few wizened apples, a spring parsley, a head of garlic...

I can't stand folklore, but oddly enough I have not forgotten the song. Sometimes I pull my covers over me and let out little

cries in the dark (uuuu! i i i i!), I soothe my vague anxiety with little sighs (uh! woe! ahme!), I turn it into modest rhythms, I wait for the husband I don't have. I chase invisible chickens (ishishish shooo...). It might have been a little Indian song I picked up, I think... But there we are, all I've got is this Bulgarian one.

Sometimes I lie under my covers trembling, whimpering my Balkan Blues in the dark, driving away my Balkan fever, the fever of the Balkans, using musical notes to drive away my nervousness, my nervousness of musical notes, using rhythm to drive away my fear, my fear of rhythm...

RERE

On our way back to Zagreb from the coast, my friend and I chose the longer route. It was the summer of 1991, drivers tended to avoid the shorter route which went through Knin. It was late when we left Split, but we hoped we would find a restaurant somewhere along the way where we could have dinner. Somewhere beyond Sinj, on a road that was inexplicably empty, we spotted a village inn where there were lights and we stopped. The air was sharp, there were bare fields around us, a deserted road ahead, and a bright moon in the sky.

I stepped into the inn first and stopped, as though pole-axed, in the doorway. There were about twenty men sitting in the thick smoke of the room. In complete silence. Twenty pairs of eyes were fixed on mine. Then one of them, the one sitting nearest to the door, feeling perhaps that he had the logical right to go first, slowly raised his beer bottle and took a swig. It lasted a long time, the sound of the beer pouring down his throat. The man set the bottle down just as slowly, without lowering his gaze. Then, as though the contact of bottle with table had struck a gong, he tightened the veins on his neck, sank his gaze still more deeply into mine and – began to sing. It was a strong, throaty voice which came from who knows where, and it was like a wolf howl. The howl was taken up by others as well, staring me straight in the eyes, just like their leader. Their looks expressed nothing, it was a dark, unblinking stare.

My friend and I continued our drive. A little further on, out of the darkness, a large, white, illuminated boat loomed up, beached beside the road. It was called MIRKO. In that deserted, unearthly landscape, on the empty road, in the sky with

its bright, sharp moon, the men's wolf howl, the boat standing by the road, in that nocturnal journey through my homeland, I sensed madness (real madness was yet to come), that silence when everything stiffens in anticipation of the first shot.

It was not until we reached Zagreb that I realised that what I had heard in the inn behind Sinj was the famous *rere*, the men's wordless intoning, the most primitive form of folklore which has survived in the Dalmatian hinterland, in Lika and Krajina. One form of intoning with words is called the *ganga*, and this kind of singing is called *ganganje*. It is performed to this day, usually by men, Serbs and Croats, in Hercegovina. The men sing in a group, their arms round each other's shoulders, the veins on their neck swollen, their faces red, their legs placed wide apart – emitting strong, guttural sounds in a range of two or three notes. One such *ganga* goes:

*Ganga of mine,
I would not take you, my ganga,
Had I not been
Born in you*

As far as the boat was concerned, I did not feel any better when I discovered that the white apparition was not a product of my nocturnal hallucination. Some local really had dragged an old boat up to the road and converted it into a house. That was his name: Mirko.

In my personal experience of events the episode described above marks the beginning of the war. The montage of disparate scenes ranging from the deeply primitive (the men's wolf howling) to the highly sophisticated (the boat in the deserted fields) simply could not support its component parts. And the image soon cracked open, the madness boiled over, shattering into – sound and rhythm!

RHYTHMS

In a little note published in the *Zagreb Evening News* on 21 December 1993, I read that an exhibition of Croatian national costume had been put on in a wine bar in Munich. On that occasion, said the note, the organiser announced that in its own way the exhibition was a "presentation of what had been suppressed in former Yugoslavia," something with a specifically Croatian flavour. The piece did not catch my attention because of

the new-style regime speak, nor because of its obvious untruth, nor because of the information that the costumes for the exhibition had been lent by the (formerly Yugoslav and now Croatian!) *Ivan Goran Kovacic* folklore group. The innocent little text pressed a button in my memory and the whole fifty-year history of Yugoslav daily life opened up in front of me like a – musical reading book!

If anything in former Yugoslavia can really be described as copiously STRESSED (rather than repressed), then it was folklore. For some fifty years, the Yugoslav peoples had pranced and capered, twirled and tripped in their brightly-coloured national costumes in various formations (garlands of the songs and dances of the nations and nationalities of Yugoslavia), indeed it seems to me now that they did little else. And the only difference was that up to now they had pranced together and now each one was prancing on its own. The newly proclaimed democratic regimes had fought for the right to their own nationally and territorially delimited notes and rhythms; the “repressive” Yugoslav federal regime had emphasised the community of popular notes and rhythms.

I remember how teachers in primary school bored us with a *pot-pourri* of popular songs. We all had to move from north to south: from Slovenia (“My little pony, on paths steep and stony...” to Macedonia (“Biljana weeeaaaves with cloth...”). The dances of the nations and nationalities of Yugoslavia were an integral part of our so-called physical education. Hard-hearted teachers drove us into school folklore groups and choirs. Ethnic identities were forged by stamping, skipping, whirling, choral singing, pipes, lutes, harmonicas and drums. And we all knew everything: the sound of the *bajs* from Zagorje, the tunes of ballads from Medjimurje, the songs of Dalmatian groups, the words of Slavonian jigs and of Bosnian *sevdalinke*, the beat of Albanian drums, the sound of the Serbian trumpet and the rhythm of the Slovene polka...

It was as though the whole fifty-year history of Yugoslav everyday life had passed in folklore displays, in the inter-republican history exchange of folklore groups all over the world. All the socialist countries used folklore as an innocent, parallel, ideological strategy which was hard to resist: the strategy was directed at everyone and everything, the literate and the illiterate.

(The deaf are after all an insignificant statistic! Nonetheless, during the national homogenisation of the Serbian people, which was carried out in large part with the help of organised national spectacles, so-called meetings, the political manipulators did not forget the deaf. There was one placard proclaiming: "Even the deaf hear the voice of the nation!"). So, for some fifty years under the federal cupola of Yugoslavia, that "repressive" community of nations, the VARIETY of national identities was drummed into its soil through folklore. Probably in order that it should not occur to those same nations to seek anything other than folklore, their own state or geographical identity for instance. The new states, which promptly proclaimed democracy on the ruins of the old, make use of the same strategic device. First they assured their peoples that their national identity was repressed under the Yugo-communist regime (the "musical" phrase of the new age!), and then in return gave them (again!) the FREEDOM OF FOLKLORE, always an effective opiate. Because the citizens of the new states might have recalled that they were not merely merry nationally autochthonous folklore groups but – citizens, political subjects. They might have recalled that thousands of corpses, refugees and cripples were the price they had paid for the right finally to dance "on their own land" (the "musical" phrase of the moment!), and the most depressing thing about it is that for the time being all they may do is – dance!

The area where music really did forge brotherhood and unity (the phrase of former times!) was the broad and democratic stage of pop-music. While folklore drummed VARIETY into us, pop-music forged UNITY. That is why the whole country rang with cheerful sound, like a musical box!

Today, when ex-Yugoslavs meet – crushed by the amnesiac steam-rollers of war and thoroughly rinsed in national brain-washing machines – the most frequent common ground, that still warm terrain of common references, is the history of popular music! They no longer remember party congresses, or years of change, or the replacement of political terminology every ten years, or the years of "self-management," or the names of political leaders, they hardly remember their common geography and history: they have all become Yugo-zombies! But what they do most frequently and most gladly recall are the years of festivals of pop-music, the names of singers and songs.

In other words, they remember the HISTORY OF TRIVIALITY poured into lines, rhythm and sound; they remember their common "idiots of music." And it is just this culture of the everyday – and not a state or political system! – that is the source of Yugo-nostalgia, if such a thing exists today. Nostalgia belongs to the sphere of competence of the heart. Just like pop-music.

FOLKSIES

What are "Folksies"? They are the new-style, "newly-composed" folk songs, an endemic musical virus. "Folksies" are the glue of the nations of the former Yugo-space, a common aliment, a mark of mutual recognition, a shared reason for simultaneous sympathy and hatred. "Folksies" are the bared "soul of the nation," the heart, the weak spot, a genetic code, collective remembrance reduced to sound. Today, when the former Yugo-nations are frenziedly cleansing their cultural space of everything construed as alien and putting their little national cultural homes in order; when, for fear of anyone snatching from them what they have acquired, they are founding special commissions for the preservation of the "national essence," the "national spirit," they are designing that "essence" in frenzy because they don't really know what it should be – at this time the "folksies" are, it seems, ours, our common trash, ineradicable as desert dust. "Folksies" are our common hereditary cultural disease, an ironic cultural grimace, and maybe they are in fact that essence.

Let us now replace the term "folksy" with the more refined: "newly-composed folk music." Let us use the abbreviation NM, gender: feminine. (In the Slovene and Croatian and Serbian and Macedonian and Bosnian languages, the word "music" is feminine.)

So, NM was born in Yugoslavia, she grew up with Yugoslavia, humbly to start with; she came into homes with the first radios, the first fridge, the first television. For years, NM and the so-called "ordinary man" (a verbal mask for the so-called "people") rehearsed their rhythm of love. NM spoke His language, she sang of His everyday reality, together they established their values. NM suited Him, and He suited her. She sang of His pains: erotic-gastronomic ones ("You left me to cry,

you didn't try my apple pie..." wails one line of a folksy); erotic-accommodation ones ("When at last mother goes, I can live here with my Rose..."); erotic-cultural ones ("On the sheet two red drops appear, proof that you were the first, my dear..."). NM didn't show off, she didn't speak some high-falutin' language, she didn't humiliate him, her "ordinary man," nor did she mock him. She kept her hand faithfully on his pulse and adapted her musical rhythm to the beating of His heart. NM faithfully accompanied His death and burial, His departure to the army, His assignments with His beloved and His breaking-up with His beloved, His marriage and the birth of His children, the death of His parents. NM didn't get involved in politics (why cut off the branch she sat on). In her own way she supported the values of the system in which she flourished. Indeed, the loyalty known as patriotism was always His theme. She sang of His region, His village and mountains, individually and locally, and then of His Yugoslavia, globally. NM was thematically wide-ranging, but she made sure that the basic words were the same, comprehensible and dear to Him: mother, dear, home, love, fate, life friends. NM "bared the soul," NM was His freedom, He felt most at ease in her company.

The singers, male and female, of newly-composed folk Music were His idols: the Yugo-dream, a fairy-tale of glory and wealth came true. From the sleeves of gramophone records and cassettes, from TV-items, from posters, from the front pages of newspapers and magazines, all around, His gods smiled at Him. The female singers, Yugo-Barbie-Dolls, with their tight skirts, cleavages, and high-heeled shoes, were exactly what they actually were: their own preconception of an enticing woman and the fulfillment of His preconception of a "real" woman. The male singers – with open collars, gold chains round their necks and thick gold signet rings on their fingers – they too lived in perfect, authentic harmony with their "ordinary men." They realised their own idea of a successful man (in every sense!). The gods and goddesses of Yugo-mass culture were His golden reflection. They sprang up in remote village inns, in provincial workers' cafés, at cheap truck-drivers' coffee shops beside trunk roads, they sprang up from the very depths – and were transformed overnight into "stars." From being café "whores" – into whose bras the intoxicated male crowd thrust their monthly wages – the female

singers became the unattainable queens of Yugo-mass culture. It was the "Folksy" singers (and not the communists!) who were the powerful, the golden two-fingers to the regime, to any regime, including the Yugoslav one. Why didn't they leave if they were so rich? Because of the market. It was only in their "homeland" that they could sustain Him with their songs, and it was only He, the people, who could sustain them.

NM, that faithful companion of the so-called "ordinary man," quickly adapted to the political changes and was transformed into a political propaganda, war industry. Like a powerful transformer, NM turned the political ideas of the national leaders into sung synopses accessible to the "ordinary man." The mutual permeation of the political and the popular has reached its legitimate height today: the mass cultural stage has become the loudest, and therefore also the most potent means of sending political (war) messages, and political life exactly resembles a stage.

Among those responsible for the war in former Yugoslavia, one of the most important places belongs to – the media. One thinks of course of newspapers, television and radio. The newly-composed folk music is not to be found on the list of war criminals. The accusation would sound flippant.

Today, when all sorts of things have been destroyed – lives, libraries, schools, priceless cultural monuments – among the ruins, like plastic flowers in a cemetery, the indestructible NM blooms. She, who contributed to the destruction, is now weeping over the ruins; she who drove sons to war with war cries, now weeps over their graves; in songs sung in refugee camps (at home and abroad), she who produced hatred, now blames "unhappy fate" for everything. Yes, NM is indestructible!

OUR FATE IS SONG

Suada Becirovic, alias Suada from Bosnia, who has been living in Western Europe for six years now, has made a hit with her first album. The songs "A girl from Bosnia," "I'm coming home, mother dear," and "What's got into you" are on all the charts, announces Bosnia Press.

"Our fate is song," said Suada in an interview for that paper.

THE SINGER AND THE PRESIDENT

In his novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* Milan Kundera writes: "When Karel Gott, the Czech pop singer, went abroad in 1972, Husak got scared. He sat right down and wrote him a personal letter (it was August 1972 and Gott was in Frankfurt). The following is a verbatim quote from it. I have invented nothing. 'Dear Karel, We are not angry with you. Please come back. We will do everything you ask. We will help you if you help us... Think it over.' Without batting an eyelid, Husak let doctors, scholars, astronomers, athletes, directors, cameramen, workers, engineers, architects, historians, journalists, writers and painters emigrate, but he could not stand the thought of Karel Gott leaving the country. Because Karel Gott represents music minus memory, the music in which the bones of Beethoven and Ellington, the dust of Palestrina and Schönberg, lie buried. The president of forgetting and the idiot of music deserve one another. They are working for the same cause. 'We will help you if you help us.' You can't have one without the other."

The episode Kundera is describing is typical and belongs to the common memory of citizens of the former East European socialist countries. Each of us had his own "idiots of music," we even shared some of them, like Karel Gott, in the early years of socialist pop.

The episode which follows occurred 21 years later, in the small, independent and democratic country of Croatia. A popular pop-singer, who had confirmed herself as a passionate patriot during the political changes and days of war, announced that she would kneel in public before the President and beg him not to give the Serbs her native Konavle. (The Serbs really had plundered that area, burned it and aimed their guns at Dubrovnik from the Konavle hills). It was just at that time that the President was snapping furiously at intellectuals, "enemies of the people." The Croatian media were burning "five Croatian witches" at the media stake (these were women writers and journalists who, according to the local media, had joined the "world conspiracy against Croatia" with their writings; who had, therefore, "raped" Croatia!).

In the case of the singer, the President immediately hurried to write her a nice, warm, open letter. She should not worry, he would not allow it, he would not let it happen, and so on and

so forth. The President acted correctly. He replied to the one who deserved it: THE WOMAN WHO KNEELS AND BEGS. "We will help you if you help us..."

I add a detail to this episode. At that time, the Croatian (and world) media were brimming with articles about the rape of Bosnian and Croatian women, victims of Serbian gratification. And at the same moment, Croatian music stalls were selling a cassette featuring a cheap "folksy" with the title: PUNISH ME, I AM A WOMAN. The aforementioned singer was not the singer of that song. That would have been too much.

MUSICAL DIVORCE

Neda U. was one of the first stars of the Yugo-pop scene. Her cheap, half-folksy hits echoed "throughout our lovely" (now former) "homeland." Neda U. came from Sarajevo, and her song-writer, N., came from Zagreb. In the course of the war, Neda U. became – a Serb.

After its regular report from the war zones, the Croatian television screen showed a young singer dressed and made-up like Neda U. "We've recorded all Neda's hits. So that we can restore all our great composer N.'s wonderful compositions to Croatian popular music. So that his music will belong to the corpus of Croatian pop," said the singer, emphasising the word "corpus"!

"But you sing just like Neda!" said the TV reporter.

"That's the way to make N.'s music Croatian again," said the Croatian singer, herself for a moment confused by the complex logic. "I'll work on developing my own identity later," she added.

THE HURDY-GURDY AND THE DRUM

Ivan Bunin wrote a poem – *With a monkey* (*S obez'yanoi*). The poem is about a hurdy-gurdy player and his monkey, and the little scene takes place in a hot Odessa square in summer. In Bunin's poem, for some unknown reason the hurdy-gurdy player is a Croat. All we know about him (because Bunin is more impressed by the monkey) is that he is "thin and bent, drunk with thirst." The Croat asks for water and gives it to the monkey (incidentally Bunin rhymes the word "horvat"/Croat with the word "zad"/rear, meaning the monkey's rear, of course!). While

the monkey drinks, "raising his eyebrows," the Croat "chews dry white bread" and slowly walks to the shade of a plane tree. Bunin ends his poem, written in 1906-1907, with the line "Zagreb, you are far away!"

In 1918, another Russian poet, V. Hodashevich, wrote a poem with an almost identical title *Monkey* (*Obez'yana*), completing it in 1919. (My attention was drawn to Hodashevich and Bunin's poems and the similarity of their subjects by Igor Pomorantsev, a Russian poet and essayist.) The little scene described in Hodashevich's poem takes place further north, in the town of Tomilino, on the outskirts of Moscow. The same intolerable heat as in Bunin's poem. The narrator of the poem goes onto a porch and there, on the steps, leaning against the fence, dozes "a wandering Serb, thin and dark." The narrator notices a heavy silver cross hanging on his bare chest where beads of sweat are coursing. Beside the tramp is a monkey, in the same little red skirt. Like the Croat in Bunin's poem, the Serb too asks for water, and does not drink it himself, but gives it to the monkey. Hodashevich is more moved than Bunin by the figure of the monkey. In a gesture of thanks, his monkey holds out his hand, black "blistered, still cold with moisture," and he, Hodashevich, who had shaken hands with beautiful women, with poets and state leaders, would never forget that hand, for none had ever touched him in so "brotherly" a manner. The Serb in Hodashevich's poem walks away, beating on a drum. On his shoulder the monkey sways like "an Indian maharajah on an elephant." And Hodashevich ends his poem with the simple line: "It was on that day that war was declared."

Why Bunin had to make his poor hurdy-gurdy player a Croat and why Hodashevich needed to camouflage his obvious plagiarism as a Serb drummer – I do not know and at the moment I do not care. At the end of this century, I read the poems by two Russian poets from the beginning in my own way. My countrymen, "thin and dark" with their only possessions, "drunk with thirst" serve their master, a monkey; they serve the aggressive and ironic human replica, a grimace of cunning and deceit, an animal in human clothes, which "raises its rear comically" (Bunin); they both serve a master who rides on them, swaying like "an Indian maharajah on an elephant" (Hodashevich).

MUSICAL FOAM

"Do you have any bedtime stories that aren't about the former Yugoslavia?" asked the little boy in bed. His mother was sitting beside his bed, reading to him from a newspaper. This cartoon was published in the weekly *New Yorker* on 22 November 1993. We've travelled our road, and now, from being victims, we've become the heroes of bedtime stories, entertainers of the indifferent world, hurdy-gurdy players, drummers, dark-skinned swindlers, selling our misfortune like street attractions, our misfortune is sold around the world by the managers of pornography like moral and emotional vibrators. We only supply the goods. The only thing we have all failed to notice is that the batteries are running out...

In a mere three years we've become the new gladiators, we have sprung up again at the end of the twentieth century to advance technology, it is enough to turn on the television or to buy a newspaper. From the screen "thin, dark" people pour, performing their misfortune, and, look, they won't stop, there's not a bead of sweat on their brow, how do they have the energy? We beat our drums to the point of exhaustion, we turn the handle of the hurdy-gurdy of our suffering without rest. At first people stop, and then they walk away, bored. What can one do, the effect is lost with repetition: the music is always the same, and the monkey goes on gulping water without ceasing...

We massage the weary world's heart, rouse it with increased doses of adrenaline, but we can't get it going. Our pictures are on the front pages of newspapers, we enter the TV screens, they sell us on video-cassettes like a life-show: the rapes are real, the tears are salt, the massacres are fresh. What do we not do to acquaint the world with our skill at dying. Like the heroes of a novel by Günter Grass, our voices break the panes of our own and other people's windows. The heart of the world, a tired sack, rattles dully like a beached whale. And the more real and more perfect our death, the more persistently the world perceives it as a provincial spectacle. The greater our unhappiness, the more persistently the world experiences it as a little village event. The more of us die, the more tedious we become. Now we feature in jokes, we have become "material," but we've made it to the top: to the *New Yorker*! The height of our rise is equal to the depth of the *New Yorker's* current fall. We have ended up as street

entertainers at the end of the twentieth century, but the twentieth century too is ending as our stage. The artistic defeat is two-sided: ours and that of the audience.

But they, the audience, by the very logic of things, will remain, and we shall disappear. For they are deaf, while our hearing is perfect. What is it that has occurred and where is the artistic, if not the human, justice? Perhaps we really have moved (like cartoon characters!) into another dimension, into a fourth world? Perhaps we are no longer alive, as it seems consistently to us, perhaps we are ghosts, spectres who appear at crossroads in Geneva, Paris, London, New York and perform our "national substance," twanging on the last remaining string, letting out the primitive lament decanted into a *gusle*, pipe or *tambura*... Perhaps we all belong to the brotherhood of strong rhythms, yes, sound and rhythm, that is all we know... We spring up like serpent's teeth in all the corners of the world. "Thin and dark" we tread our phantom ring dance, our feet stamp out the energy for the continuation of the species, but there is no continuation; we keep sending out our sound signals, but no ear recognises our message. Behind us, up there, nothing but foam remains. Musical foam.

BALKAN BLUES, REFRAIN

Boris H., the Bulgarian poet, taught me an old Bulgarian folk song. I can't stand folklore, but the song has stuck in my memory like a musical burr and won't leave me alone...

Sometimes I pull my covers over me and let out little cries in the dark (Uuuu! I i i i i!); I pour my loneliness into short sighs (Uh! eh!); I howl my Balkan Blues in the dark (Uh! woe! Ah me!); driving away my Balkan fever, the fever of the Balkans, with musical notes I drive away my anxiety, the anxiety of musical notes, with rhythm I drive away my fear, my fear of rhythm... At times I suddenly seem to feel a monkey's paw cold with moisture on my shoulder. And then "terror engulfs me like a wave..."

December 1993



Sarajevo, pendant le siège.

Photo, Frédéric Tonol