

# ***DANCE, SENSES, URBAN CONTEXTS***

**Dance and the Senses · Dancing and Dance Cultures in Urban Contexts**



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**Editor**

**Kendra Stepputat**

**Copy-editors**

**Liz Mellish**

**Andriy Nahachewsky**

**Kurt Schatz**

**Doris Schweinzer**

**ICTM Study Group on Ethnochoreology  
Institute of Ethnomusicology, University of Music and Performing Arts Graz  
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Internet: [www.shaker.de](http://www.shaker.de) · eMail: [info@shaker.de](mailto:info@shaker.de)

URBAN CONTEXT FOR RURAL MUSIC AND DANCE PATTERNS:  
A CROATIAN CASE STUDY

After the Second World War folk dance ensembles in the cities were established and developed a new way of public presentation of national traditions. The Croatian folk dance scene was divided between city ensembles performing stylized choreographies and peasant groups performing their native traditions. Since the breakdown of Yugoslavia the urban folk dance scene and its repertoire have been changed to a national repertoire but the style of presentation has mostly remained unchanged. Since the 1990s, inspired by nostalgia, folklore associations were founded in Zagreb by migrants from villages and refugees. In searching for their roots they started to present folk traditions from their old homeland.

*Keywords:* Croatia; urban context; rural music/dance

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Exploring the concept of "urban" compared with rural traditional music and dance culture, we have come to interesting conclusions following the unbreakable bond of rural inspiration presented and modeled in urban environments. The inspiration in this case definitely came from rural culture – peasant songs, dances and costumes. In the time between the two world wars while the urban population in Croatia was small (the rural population was more than 70% [Puljiz 2006:8]), the city and intellectual elite were the ones to "conduct and model" the rural folk scene. Naila Ceribašić analyzed the processes that followed the development of the public folk scene with respect to the questions of legitimacy (of bearers or connoisseurs) of folklore music practice, and proposed three basic models: the modernistic model in the second half of 1920s, the traditionalistic model in the second half of the 1930s, and the socialist realism model during the 1950s [Ceribašić 2003:406]. The history of the term folk music and dance is closely related to the history of its representation at various festivals and other public appearances. Owing to the modes of public presentation of folk heritage established at the beginning of the 20th century, the Croatian public managed to acquire a positive attitude towards the local tradition of dancing and archaic singing. As a result of those public performances, some forms have managed to extend their life span while others were abandoned or neglected. Altogether this was related to the "Peasant Harmony" (*Seljačka sloga*) movement and to the intellectual's idea of "enlightening" the village. Together with the encouragement of better hygienic and health conditions and the enlightenment of the rural population, Peasant Harmony also encouraged presentation of local music and dance traditions. Cultural events and festivals that were educational and entertaining were at the center of attention; the pyramidal structure of the events and folklore festivals generally ended in cities, and the most important events of all in the capital.

Since the 1930s, the production of folk festivals – which is at the same time the most important field of the application of ethnomusicological, ethnochoreological and related (folkloristic and ethnological) knowledge – played the major role in the canonization of

traditional music, i.e. in configuring particular genres and styles as legitimate traditions, and in configuring particular performers as legitimate bearers of tradition, distinguishing them from those that are not. At the same time the experts gained the status of the connoisseurs of tradition.

During the 1930s there was also another, parallel, but not so dominant urban idea of organizing an amateur group of students and people from the theatre and ballet circle in Zagreb – *Matica hrvatskih kazališnih dobrovoljaca* (Matrix of Croatian Theater Volunteers). Starting from 1923 they collected "folk art" from all over Croatia and included this in some performances through which they intended to make folk dramas and plays that celebrate traditional peasant life more popular and visible [Senečić 1972]. They started to prepare choreographies from the moment that they received an invitation for an international dance competition in Berlin 1936. After six months of intensive training and preparation involving three choreographies of folk dances from different parts of Croatia they went to Berlin during the 11<sup>th</sup> Olympic Games. The ballerina, Nevenka Perko, performed solo ballet dances inspired by folk dances, and in between her solos, the group of volunteers performed choreographies of folk dances from Slavonia, Posavina and Istria [Sklad 1936]. We can read from the newspaper reviews that the German audiences accepted them with ovations. As far as we know, that was the first performance of stylized and spectacular Croatian folk dance choreographies at a festival abroad. This was referred to during the 24th Symposium of our Study Group in Cluj in 2006 [Zebec 2012], as part of the panel "Diverse fields to text" where we discussed different revival case studies applying the terminology proposed by Andriy Nahachewsky [2012:131–135]. It is important to notice that in the middle of the 1930s students and young urban classes found this form of recreational folk dance presentation an ideal way to spend leisure time but also to present national identity abroad.<sup>1</sup>

After the Second World War the situation changed significantly; the city population rapidly increased due to the government policy that promoted industrialization. The result was an exodus of rural populations to the towns, the relocation of a large number of people who formed a new labor force from the countryside to the city. They brought with them their customs and practices that they found difficult to give up. During the 1950s the activity of the "Association of Cultural and Educational Societies of Croatia" projected a "real" socialist realism model suppressing any kind of boundaries inside the Yugoslavian collective – national, ideological, class, gender or age parameters. In that period the Croatian peasantry lost the position of legitimate bearers of folk and nation; the dance tended to be stylized, raised to a higher artistic level. "Original" folklore (*izvorni folklor*) associated with the peasant culture was regularly presented as a simple local dance with its associated music [Ceribašić 2003:408].

After the Second World War folk dance ensembles were established in the cities, mostly in Eastern and South Eastern Europe, and became a new way of public presentation of national traditions. In a federal political state such as former Yugoslavia, stylized songs and dances performed by city folk dance ensembles were the political tool for showing brotherhood and

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<sup>1</sup> At that time this kind of ideology was dominant all over the Europe. Since the early 1930s Moiseyev came up with the idea of establishing the Theatre of Folk Art, and since 1936 he established the Igor Moiseyev Ballet [2002–2014].

the unity of different South Slavic nations and nationalities. The presentations were under the influence of stylized performances by the Moiseyev Ballet thanks to their participation in international festivals and professional tours [Sremac 2010:327–329]. This situation was similar to that in other East European countries under communist or socialist regimes. Professional folk dance ensembles were established in certain republic capitals (Kolo in Serbia, Lado in Croatia, Tanec in Macedonia, Shota in Kosovo) while in others there were semi-professional city ensembles, as well as numerous student ensembles.

The Croatian folk dance scene was divided between city ensembles performing stylized choreographies from the "Yugoslav program", and, to the opposite extreme peasant groups performing their own, local traditions.

The shift from rich tradition towards artistic interpretation requires creative authors, as well as systematic rehearsals that will enable first-rate performances. Modification of forms taken from the past does not arise of necessity as is considered by those who pursue the ideal of "authenticity"; they are, instead, the results of the idiosyncrasies and inventiveness of distinguished individuals: choreographers, ethnochoreologists and folklorists, musical arrangers and ethnomusicologists, conductors and composers who have been inspired by traditional music. In the realm of stylized traditional music, professionalism replaces spontaneity which is one of the key values in the realm of traditional creativity.

Even in this urban tradition of folk dance ensembles, Lado, the Croatian professional ensemble was recognized not so much for their stylized choreographies, than for their stronger idea to stay as close as possible to traditional forms of dances, songs and costumes. That style and sound marked the time when the artistic directors of Lado were Zvonimir Ljevaković and Ivan Ivančan, and the Orchestra Leader was Božo Potočnik. They were known as the founders of the "Zagreb School of Folklore" on the stage. The main characteristic of the Zagreb School of Folklore was to make authorial choreographies, organized according to certain stage rules – geometry, symmetry, perspective, dynamics and other rules that Ivančan elaborated on [Ivančan 1971], but without the use of strong stylization and spectacle. The Zagreb School has also been well-known for simultaneous dance and singing and the use of original or reconstructed costumes based on the original ones.

The city population that is most active in the folk movement is the students; student folk dance ensembles are numerous and have a high quality. To this day in Zagreb, there are a number of these ensembles, which bring together every year a large number of young people representing traditional music and dance programs of various qualities. The all-Yugoslav program also had preferences in the selection of the programs. It is often the case that urban society prefers "exotic" versions of folklore choreography; they prefer to opt to perform the choreography from Macedonia, Kosovo, Eastern (Vlach dances) or Southern Serbia (dances from Vranje), or Roma repertoire rather than Slovenian. During the socialist period, rural associations (performing groups) were also active but not in all regions equally. Those in the coastal area with its local dances were content to perform the all-Yugoslav program designed for the tourist population that is omnipresent from year to year in these areas. If we talk about the relationship between the rural and urban, we could say that this was the time when the state cultural politics again developed tastes obviously designed according to the tastes of the urban audience.

After the breakdown of the former Yugoslavia the style of presentation did not immediately change in the city ensembles even when the program changed to a national – in Croatia to a Croatian – one. Some of the leaders and choreographers in the urban folk dance ensembles have been trying to follow up recommendations regarding ways to present folklore on the stage without much stylization. Partly this is a result of our ethnomusicological and ethnochoreological influence through our work in juries at folk festivals during the last twenty years, and partly their wish and the necessity to build up the new, only Croatian national program. The intention was to choose folklore or ethnographic material from a narrower region than in the previously (Yugoslav-socialist) developed paradigm. Oriented to only Croatian national culture, the intention was also, to put less known and less recognized rural traditions onto the urban folk scene. We can think again about searching for exotic, new or less publicly known traditions. The situation is mostly the same among city ensembles all over Croatia, in Dubrovnik, Osijek, Rijeka, Split and other cities.

In the context of the war in the 1990s, in connection with the breakdown of Yugoslavia and the post-war and refugee situation, many Croatian people from occupied territories in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina migrated to the city of Zagreb. Our capital city in the meantime came to include one fourth of the Croatian population. Even though it was known that Yugoslavia during the 1980s had a softer socialist regime, the new post-war, transitional and more liberal, national context with free possibilities to express one's suppressed religious or national identity publicly, led people to establish many amateur cultural associations that had existed in the villages in the time between the two World Wars, but were forbidden or neglected during the socialist period in particular regions. As ethnographers we were also surprised with the amount of new established cultural associations in Kordun, Lika, Karlovac, Zadar or Šibenik County, or other regions. That was the reason why we found it necessary to ask ourselves again what is so important in public expression of one's local identity through folk music, dance and costumes.

Since the mid-1990s, after the Homeland War ended in Croatia, in the atmosphere of national revival the number of organized folklore groups, cultural-artistic associations (*kulturno-umjetnička društva*) so-called KUDs, have significantly increased, especially in regions directly affected by the war. For example, in the region of Ravni Kotari in Zadar County there was not a single organized village KUD before the war, while today there are about seventy of them. Their agenda is to preserve and/or revive old repertoire and performing styles typical for their immediate community. Besides dancing, singing and playing music, they dedicate themselves to preservation and/or reconstruction of traditional costumes that they wear at public performances, as well as traditional customs (e.g. weddings, Christmas, harvest, etc.) that they represent on stage, and sometimes also maintain or return to their original settings. Through activities of the KUDs people socialize, use their free time meaningfully and keep social connections within their community. Safeguarding of their own identity is usually highlighted as a main purpose of the KUD's existence. Regular meetings (rehearsals) where they practice repertoire are usually associated with eating and drinking as forms of social exchange. The programs that are rehearsed are performed at numerous local, regional or state folk festivals, the origins of which in Croatia reach back into the 1920s and 1930s. Performing involves visiting new places, and also frequently hosting groups from

elsewhere, that additionally inspires the KUD's members to participate in regular activities [Ceribašić, Čaleta 2010:337].

On the other hand some homeland associations were established in the city of Zagreb. *Zavičajno folklorno društvo* (Native Folklore Society) is the newly established term for the village folklore groups that have been founded in Zagreb. The members of these societies are in many cases displaced persons that found a new home on the outskirts of Zagreb. Folklore was a perfect way to foster their traditions. One of the first was *Zavičajno društvo Lička Plješivica* (Native Society Lička Plješivica) for people displaced during Second World War from the Bihać region (Western Bosnia). The group was founded in 1994 and is still performing dances and songs from their "old" homeland. After that, numerous *Zavičajna društva* were founded most of them by the Bosnian refugees (Bosna Srebrena, Žepče, Usora, Derventa, Plehan, etc.).

Svetlana Boym [2001:XIII] says "nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but is also a romance with one's own fantasy". According to Boym, a long distance relationship yearns for nostalgic love and its double exposure of two images – of home and abroad, of past and present, of dream and everyday life. Through the activities of their native associations immigrants in Zagreb feel connected among themselves but also, with their old homeland.

The so called *izvorni folklor* (original folklore) is the main concept of their activity. According to the concept of originality ("authenticity"), folklore is an immediate expression and integral part of local culture. For cultural-artistic societies which adhere to that concept, the basis of their activities is in the maintenance of exclusively local and/or regional repertoire. These folklore groups safeguard "original" music and dance forms taken over from the past without modifications. The knowledge that previously belonged to the community is transferred through skillful rehearsing and is presented within the regulatory mechanism of public practice. It is the same concept that is maintained by hundreds of newly established village folklore groups that is supposed to be an expression, and integral part, of contemporary local culture. At the same time, Lado, the professional national ensemble is trying to follow the basic principles of the same concept while presenting its new choreographies. They are the model for the others as well as for the urban folk ensembles. The new generations of urban (student) dancers are seeking inspiration for their new choreographies and singing examples from the "exotic" and unconventional examples of Croatian archaic music and dance traditions. *Ojkanje* and the *nijemo kolo* (mute/silent circle dance) are the best examples of these characteristics.

Our example perfectly illustrates the contemporary situation explained above. The story begins with the Zagreb Club of Livno Students. Many Croats from Livno, a town in Bosnia and Herzegovina, have migrated to Zagreb during the long period from the time of the socialist regime until today. They were also broadly known as *Gastarbeiter* (low migrant working class) in Germany and Austria at that time. Of course, a stronger wave of their migration as refugees to Zagreb was during, and after the war in the 1990s. The younger generation of migrants was born in the eastern suburbs of Zagreb, in Dugo Selo and Sesvete. They have now become students, and in 2013 organized their own student club. Such a club had never existed before. Obviously they want to show their old homeland identity through traditional songs, folk dances and costumes in a simple way as they learned from their

ancestors [Zagrebački klub livanjskih studenata ZKLS 2013]. In this example we can see young girls singing and dancing *kolo* without any special preparation or authorial idea of how to make a choreography for the stage. They are not such perfect singers, even the first song they sang was not clearly performed in intonation. They asked for help from one of the folk dance leaders just to form them into a group but without greater ambition regarding the quality or continuing existence of their performing group.

Another example is the Folk Dance Ensemble of the Academic Cultural Artistic Association "Ivan Goran Kovačić" in Zagreb. With the intention to broaden their long existing program with at least one new choreography every year, they decided to present Croatian traditions that were rarely seen before in the Zagreb folk dance scene. Looking for something "exotic" nowadays their leader chose the choreography of dances and songs of the Croatian population from Livno and its surroundings in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He did this because of the *nijemo kolo* (silent/mute circle dance), and especially because of *ojkanje* singing that was inscribed on the UNESCO Urgent Safeguarding List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The students' interest and ability to learn this dance and the special, archaic style of singing, and to rehearse frequently were remarkable. At the premiere performance of the new choreography their success was impressive [FA Ivan Goran Kovacic 2016].

The presentation of singing is following the same tastes and concepts as the dance. Inscription of the *ojkanje* on the UNESCO Urgent Safeguarding List has increased the demand for workshops in this particular singing style and technique. Young singers outside of the Dinaric culture, again mostly students from urban areas, have become interested in this different style of singing.

In the past, *ojkanje* was learned as a part of the oral (local) tradition. The younger generations were, through listening and imitating the elders, adopting, performing and improving the tradition and then transmitting it to new generations. Living conditions have never changed faster or have never been more far-reaching than now and, although the dynamics of cultural, social and political processes are historically positive as never before, the ability of people to handle all these changes is limited both institutionally and individually. Today's carriers of tradition are mostly older people who are carrying their specific styles of singing to their graves. The globalized and standardized way of life in rural regions prevents the younger generations from learning this type of singing actively, as an integral part of their lives. The use of media (audio and video examples) and organized folklore groups are today becoming the methods and places in which the contemporary generations have the possibility to acquire knowledge of this style of singing [Čaleta 2012:182].

We have shown how rural music or singing and dances can change in an urban context according to different times, and political, ideological or social circumstances. Some of these dances that were accepted and adopted for the stage became internationally recognized through the festivals. In relation to their presentational layer through the stage, the style has changed in comparison to the local, peasant performances. The implicit phenomenon of improvisation on the spot does not happen in the same way on the stage or in the recreational groups of dancers around Europe that like to perform "international dances". On the other hand, students in towns and cities are still looking for exotic, archaic and special ways of expression in dance and music, and sometimes they are even more capable of learning or



reproducing older layers of tradition than the "real" bearers of their traditions that have changed through the time. This kind of interaction between urban and even international, versus local, has sometimes proved to be very positive and productive, and sometimes these reflections can be less productive, but through them we can always read about the social relations, or relations of power. In homeland associations in the city of Zagreb, nostalgia is what moves their members who are migrants to express not merely their local longing. Their performances are results of a new understanding of time and space that makes the division into "local" and "universal" possible [Boym 2007:XVI]. Accepting these thoughts by Svetlana Boym, we can confirm that nostalgia is not always retrospective – it can be prospective as well. The nostalgic idea of archaic singing is different in a student folk dance ensemble than in the native society. For certain, we will follow up how the fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, will have a direct impact on the realities of the future for different populations in the cities.

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