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Music in Albania

It is unlikely that many readers will know much about Albania, one of only a handful of countries with which Britain has no diplomatic relations. The sporadic reports on Albanian affairs that appear in our media are often remarkable for the degree of their inaccuracy as well as their thinly disguised hostility. And yet the unique nature of the country is immediately apparent to any visitor—it is, after all, a largely self-sufficient society without unemployment, taxes, or inflation (prices were reduced in June 1982). Contrary to popular belief, it is easy to visit Albania, as I did in August 1982, though the only way to do so is by going on a package holiday.[1]

As far as music is concerned, the wealth and variety is astonishing, considering that Albania is a country of just over 2¾ million people inhabiting an area slightly larger (and more mountainous) than Wales. Singing appears to be a national sport even more popular than football—scarcely surprising, perhaps, since a visit to a kindergarten revealed that even young children are able to perform songs and recite poetry with both a remarkable confidence and a surprising lack of self-conciousness.

The three- to five-piece bands that play in bars, restaurants, and hotels (there are no juke-boxes) often include a virtuoso instrumentalist, usually a clarinettist or a violinist: technical dexterity, full-blooded tone quality, intricate ornamentation, and frequent *glissandi* (and sometimes bewildering rhythmic groupings), all contribute to the cheerful, rhapsodic nature of their performance. This sort of band, known as a *sazë*, also includes instruments such as piano accordion, guitar (possibly electric), and drum-kit, and is typical of urban popular music, forms of which developed during the 500-year Turkish occupation. Despite certain oriental features, it sounds just as peculiarly Albanian (rather than all-purpose Balkan) as the strikingly different rural folk music. This itself displays considerable regional differences, particularly the vocal music, which tends towards a hard-edged, nasal homophony in the north and a complex, drone-based, ancient-sounding polyphony in the south, where probably more types of part-singing have developed than in any other region of Europe. Instrumental folk ensembles frequently feature long-necked lutes and shepherds' pipes. Lutes often accompany songs, but instruments such as pipes (*fyell* and *kavall*) and the small double clarinet (*zumare*) can sometimes be heard to best advantage when they are played alone;[2] customarily employing circular breathing, soloists on these instruments improvise 'pieces' based on frequent and varied repetition of simple motifs. A counterpart in urban music (and one of its highlights) is the *kaba*, 'an instrumental improvisation of vast territorial extent . . . as with the Blues in the USA, every performance of the kaba is achingly familiar yet always fresh and different'.[3] Bands that are used to performing for tourists will often play Western tunes as well, complete with Albanian-style expression and ornamentation; they seem to have a peculiar affinity for tangos and soulful popular numbers—*Petite Fleur* and *House of the Rising Sun* are particular favourites.

Albanian folk music, then, is a strong cultural force which is very much alive and well. The folk music

archive of the Institute of People's Culture in Tirana holds about 21,000 folk melodies. 'This may seem a large collection', the assistant director told me, 'but it is small in comparison to what we must have.' There are frequent national and regional contests and festivals, of which the most celebrated is the National Folklore Festival, held in Gjirokastra, a picturesque city in the south renowned for its unique architecture. This festival is held every five years, most recently in October 1978.

Thanks to the pioneering work of the late A. L. Lloyd, Albanian folk music is not completely unknown in Britain. But what of the music produced by Albanian composers? John Jansson's performance of Çesk Zadeja's Toccata at the Albanian Society's memorial meeting for A. L. Lloyd in January was possibly the first British performance of any Albanian composition. But however little known these composers may be to the rest of the world, they seem well publicised and widely appreciated within their own country. Armed with a radio-cassette machine and a daily newspaper, I was able to record a fairly representative sample of orchestral, choral, and operatic music, though solo piano and chamber music proved more difficult to locate.

A general guide-book informed me that 'Albanian composers base themselves on the folklore of the country and avoid "abstract and decadent" trends. Their aesthetic aim is national in form and socialist in substance as the basic principles of socialist realism.'[4] I expected to hear music that was heavily dependent on nationalist composers of the 19th and early 20th centuries and Soviet socialist realist composers of the Stalin era. These expectations were fuelled by the knowledge that the conditions created by the Turkish occupation, the ravages of two world wars, and the inter-war repressive dictatorship of King Zog made it impossible for composers to flourish. In the immediate post-war years, they virtually had to start from scratch. Consequently the first Albanian operetta (*Agimi* (Dawn) by Kristo Kono) appeared as late as 1953, the first opera (*Mrika* by Preng Jakova) in 1958 and the first ballet (*Halili dhe Hajrija* (Halil and Hajrija) by Tish Daia) in 1963.

My first reactions to much of what I heard were mixed. Many pieces were attractively tuneful, spirited, and cheerful, and all were tonal (in the broadest sense). But often I was left feeling rather bewildered by what seemed to be a strange attitude to harmonic progression, or a rate of change of ideas considerably faster than, say, Poulenc's—Sokol Shupo's Rhapsody for piano and orchestra was a particularly inscrutable example. Perhaps the most disorientating thing was that it was often difficult to relate these works to Western models: I heard only one piece (Lorenç Antoni's *Pjesë për malesorjët* (Piece for highlanders)) that could be accused of a particularly strong indebtedness (to Dvořák); the expected whiffs of Bartók and Prokofiev were rare, though a vaguely Russian-sounding orchestral palette was in evidence at times.

The main radio station, Radio Tirana, often presents programmes consisting entirely of rhapsodies, symphonic poems, suites, ballet music, or even overtures. One composer whose music was broadcast frequently and instantly appealed to me was Aleksandër Peçi (b. 1951). The attractive Rhapsody for violin and orchestra (1977) is typical. Subtitled 'Valle e jonë, valle e popullit' (Our dance, dance of the people), it reflects the composer's contact with the folk music of the south, particularly that of Përmet, a town near the Greek border, whose music is noted for its lyrical warmth and lively character. Peçi's Rhapsody contrasts these two types of material—he introduces an authentic lyrical folk-tune at one point—before launching into a brief but astonishing cadenza, related to the particular variety of *kaba* found in Përmet and featuring a stylised 'wailing' figure and retuning of the violin's G string.

This is a good example of a work that openly displays its folk music connections without sounding like a sophisticated arrangement. While it is unmistakably of the 20th century, it is light years away from, say, Bartók or Enescu, being pretty consonant and full of typically Romantic gestures. The clarity and immediate attractiveness reappeared in other works by Peçi for solo instrument and orchestra, particularly the Cello Fantasia (1979). The Variations for horn (1975) is a less memorable piece (I've never heard a horn player use so much vibrato), but the Suite for piano and orchestra entitled 'Kuadro heroizmit' (Pictures of heroism) is more dissonant and highly charged and contains flourishes reminiscent of Prokofiev. *Pjesë për flaut* (Piece for flute; accompanied by an almost Latin-American-sounding folk orchestra) is unashamedly 'light' in character and reflects the fact that Peçi, like most other Albanian composers, is equally at ease writing film music, a stirring revolutionary song, an orchestral piece, or even 'light music'.[5]

Not all composers make such clear references to folk music as Peçi. Several seem to favour highly impassioned minor-key tensions, which are effective in disguising folk sources, or so it would appear. One piece that uses such techniques is Rhapsody no.1 for orchestra (1973) by Feim Ibrahami (b. 1937); a useful little book on Albanian composers, which I managed to pick up, assured me that this work 'directly evokes authentic folk rhapsodies'.[6] Much as I admired the work for its emotional drama and struggle, I couldn't detect a very strong folk connection. Most Western listeners, I imagine, would happily sit through the symphonic poems *Atdheu* (Motherland; 1974) by Shpëtim Kushta (b. 1946) and *Borova* by Thoma Gaqi (b. 1948) without being aware of any folk reference whatsoever. Solemnity and epic-heroics permeate the first of these, while *Borova* (named after a village whose inhabitants were massacred by the Nazis) is suitably imbued with tragedy and a reflection upon the courage of the people who struggled against the invaders.

The orchestration of these symphonic poems is predominantly dark-coloured, a feature common to much Albanian music. Peçi's music is more transparently textured than most, but that of Tish Daia (b. 1926) is the most individual sounding. Daia's Rhapsody for flute and orchestra (1981) is a short but effective essay in highly ornamented, lyrical-pastoral, low-register flute writing, which passes quickly and effortlessly into impassioned orchestral tuttis. The string writing is particularly imaginative, ranging from beefy arpeggio figures (reminiscent of Janáček) in the tuttis to quiet glassy-textured accompaniment in the early stages of the work. Effective string writing is also a feature of an excerpt I heard from a much earlier work, the ballet *Halili dhe Hajrija* (1961-2). The events portrayed in this the first Albanian ballet occurred in the 18th century, when Turkish oppression encountered the resistance of the highland warriors. Musically the piece furnishes further evidence of Daia's ability to cope with rapid contrast without creating the feeling that the composer is presenting too much information—in fact Daia's ideas seem to flow at a more relaxed rate than those of most of his compatriots.

Halili dhe Hajrija was performed 150 times between 1963 and 1973, which is some measure of its popularity. Encouraged by its success, several other

ballets appeared in the 1960s, such as *Delina* by Çesk Zadeja (b. 1927), *Fatozi partizan* (The brave partisan) by Kosma Laro, and *Cuca e maleve* (The girl from the mountains) by Nikolla Zoraqi (b. 1929). Tableau 2 of Act 2 of Zoraqi's ballet (which was one of the most impressive things I heard during my stay) seems to indicate that the composer's forte is the broadly lyrical and the feverishly passionate; the extraordinarily jolly *Uvertura festivalit* (1969) is barely recognisable as a work by the same composer. I also managed to buy a piano reduction of Zoraqi's Third Violin Concerto, which looks fiendishly difficult, but, judging by Ibrahim Mali's dazzling performance of Peçi's Rhapsody, there are violinists able to cope with it.

One of the most prolific composers appears to be Tonin Harapi (b. 1928), whose work seems fairly diatonic in comparison with that of most of his countrymen. His vocal suite *Vullnatarët* (The volunteers; 1965) is dedicated to the youth of the country, whose voluntary work on such projects as the construction of the railways is well known; it is a cheerful and energetic three-movement choral piece, which pays tribute to this topical phenomenon. Harapi seems less attracted to the kind of impassioned utterance common in the works of Ibrahami, Zoraqi, and Kushta, even in dramatic works such as his opera *Zgjimi* (1974). His relatively lightweight Second Rhapsody for piano and orchestra (a work that makes obvious allusions to folk music) seems to bear this out.

I should have liked to hear more of the operatic achievements of Albania's senior composers Preng Jakova (1919-69) and Kristo Kono (b. 1907), both of whom are accredited People's Artists (the others are Tish Daia, Çesk Zadeja, and Avni Mula—several more are Artists of Merit). Kono's opera *Lulja e kujtimit* (Flowers of remembrance; 1958) has a marvellously rousing martial finale, which sounds like the result of a collaboration between Verdi and Eisler.

I was disappointed in the small piano pieces I occasionally came across. The brief Toccata of Çesk Zadeja seems less effective in terms of the piano than does his Symphonic Suite in terms of the orchestra. The toccata-type piece, often involving fast semiquavers in alternate hands, is a popular choice since there is a natural counterpart in the fast virtuoso playing of the *çifteli*, a two-string lute.

The position of Albania in the world of composition is a quite peculiar one. Here is a body of music in which the element of communication is of paramount importance. Quite frankly it was refreshing to hear a large amount of recently composed tonal music, little of which struck me as being trite or ill considered. Composers have flourished for barely 40 years in Albania and yet their music ignores almost all the fashionable tendencies in Western music from Schoenberg and Stravinsky onwards (though Albanian higher musical education includes study of such phenomena). Their reasons for this lie in a popular political stance, which maintains that

> the efforts of the present-day reactionary aesthetes to advertise a 'universal' art serve the interest of the imperialist bourgeoisie which has always striven to denigrate or to eliminate the cultural traditions of smaller nations and the national spirit in art and culture, to facilitate its cultural aggression and the subjugation of nations . . . starting from impressionism and expressionism [and continuing] to the present dodecaphonic, serial, punctualistic music . . . they all try to justify themselves under the cloak of 'innovation', the 'search for the new' at all costs, while breaking down every connection with the best progressive traditions of the peoples and, above all, seeking to divert attention from the essential problems of the content, from the major questions that are concerning mankind today, the working class, the youth, the peoples of the world, who are fighting for their liberation and their social rights.[7]

[1] The only British travel company that arranges visits to Albania is Regent Holidays of 13 Small Street, Bristol.

[2] A record that features solos from different instruments is *Folklore instrumental albanais* (Vendemiaire VDE 114, AD 37). Two other available records that I can recommend are *L'Albanie folklorique* (Disques Cellie 010) and *Folk Music of Albania,* collected and edited by A. L. Lloyd (TOPIC 12T 154).

[3] A. L. Lloyd, sleeve notes to *Folk Music of Albania.*

[4] *An Outline of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania* (n.p.: New Albania, 1976), p.62.

[5] 'Light music', which sometimes features rock-style syncopation or drumming, is perhaps the nearest Albanian equivalent to pop music; it is nevertheless easy to relate to folk music, at times so much so that it is difficult to detect where one stops and the other begins.

[6] Spiro Kalemi, *Arritjet e artit tonë muzikor* [Achievements of our musical art] (Tirana, 1982), p.152.

[7] Simon Gjoni, 'The Modernist Distortions in Contemporary Bourgeois-revisionist Music', *Albania Today* (1977), no.1 pp.48-52.