

Samson, Jim. 2013. *Music in the Balkans*. Leiden, Boston: Brill. xvi + 729 pp. Hb.: €157.00 / \$218.00. ISBN: 9789004250376

A comparative music history of the Balkans, especially as seen in relation to political and cultural history, is a much-needed project. If such a history would ever be written, I thought, this would be a colossal editorial project based on the competence of specialists, grounded in a tight and equal collaboration between Western European and American scholars and their colleagues in South East Europe. Jim Samson, Emeritus Professor of Music, Royal Holloway at the University of London has undertaken this monumental effort alone, presenting a volume which embeds music history into the wider circles of cultural history.

The volume is a highly imaginative, often personally coloured account of music-making in the Balkans and its often contradictory meanings and appropriations – departing from Ivo Andrić’s evocation of epic *gusle* playing in *The Bridge on the Drina* to the contemporary DJ culture in Kosovo. The volume, which in its essence has an inclusive and encyclopaedic character, shows how difficult it is to cover all aspects of musical life in the Balkans with the same expertise: popular music, classical music and ethnomusicology have distinctively different weights in the volume. This nevertheless should not impede a scholar from embarking on such a project. A careful reading of *Music in the Balkans* reveals that at the core of the publication project stood the idea to rehabilitate (in particular) the role of classical music in the Balkans from the early folklorists and modernists in early 20th century to the present day. Around this well-informed and exciting music history, which offers as well new insights into the institutionalisation and nationalisation of musical practice since the 19th century, the chapters on popular music and ethnomusicological issues are built. These chapters are discussed from the perspective of a scholar who is primarily trained in historical musicology: resulting in a synergetic approach, based on extensive literature work enriched by first-hand experiences of colleagues. Nevertheless, the momentum of fieldwork and performance is underrepresented in this book. This is particularly regrettable as the performance, and the subsequent processes of negotiation and construction of musical meaning are essential for many of the arguments the author discusses in his book. In this sense, the volume discusses the impacts and effects of codified ‘musical products’ and not the processes which charge music-making with particular meanings. Nevertheless, Samson (who has travelled in the Balkans since the 1960s) takes us on a journey beyond disciplinary boundaries, transcending different historical periods and different musical traditions. The chapters on popular music follow the path paved by Buchanan (2007) reusing several tropes established in the field of Balkan music studies: the link between music and politics, the Ottoman period as a shared cultural heritage, and the hybridisation of musical practice in the previous two decades. He nevertheless modifies and enriches these arguments in highly innovative ways. Referring to the musical heritage of Ottoman times, he makes a point in depicting the musical adaption process as a reciprocal endeavour: there was not only the transplantation of ‘Anatolian traditions to the Balkan soil’ but vernacular traditions in the Balkans played as well a key role in the formation of Ottoman musical traditions. Nevertheless, it becomes clear that

this book is focusing primarily on the musical past of the Balkans, e.g. the processes of folklorisation and ideologisation during communism or the current changes in musical practices through heritage politics, although mentioned, are not discussed at length. The already existing volumes of Rice (1994), Buchanan (2006), and Hofman (2010) may have been a reason for this conscious exclusion.

The way musical history is constructed in this volume also shows that the author has felt the need to position oneself in relation to the recent debates in musicology concerning terms such as ‘authenticity’, ‘collective identity’ or the ‘identity-generating meaning of place’. Generally, he takes up here a defensive stance: the relevance of place for the construction of musical meaning is indicative here. He argues for a continuing relevance of space-bound musical practice even if ‘place’ in postmodern times can become an attribute of music. A similar defensive position he takes in relation to the term ‘collective identities’, which he considers a valid research tool.

Throughout the book, several passages show the author’s interest in enriching the musicological perspective through excursions into the realm of philosophy and literature: Confucius, Orhan Pamuk and Alain Badiou all make their appearance in the book. At times, this gives strong interdisciplinary impulses: introducing Badiou’s ‘human agency’ into the context of Balkan music history pointing to the importance of cultural action within an occurring practice is such a positive example. At times, these cross-references are less convincing, however, and leave the reader puzzled, at times disturbed as they lead away from the main argument of the book. The final chapter dedicated to a more general reflection of ‘progress and degeneration’ is a striking example in this sense. Furthermore, political statements such as the author’s concerns about the accession of Turkey to the European Union are barely in the right place in a book dedicated to cultural practice.

However, the highly innovative potential of this volume, searching for commonalities and not for differences in Balkan music history, cannot be valued enough. The extensive and complete list of references (mainly in Western European languages) on 31 pages is worth alone buying this book. The book will surely have a lasting and positive impact for all following studies on Balkan music for two reasons: firstly, the attempt to look beyond the East-West dichotomy as translated into music, and secondly, the visionary call for a denationalisation of music history.

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