*Music in the Balkans*

Jim Samson

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Reviewed by *Roland Clark*

Eastern Connecticut State University

Jim Samson’s *Music in the Balkans* is breathtaking. Its scope, theoretical sophistication, interdisciplinary breadth, and synthesis of a vast range of literatures, histories, and musical styles is unparalleled within recent scholarly literature on the Balkans. Samson relies heavily on secondary sources, but this includes a multitude of studies by local experts in at least ten different languages. The book’s greatest achievement is to tell the story of the Balkans without allowing competing nationalisms to dominate the presentation. Samson emphasizes connections and flows between local regions at the expense of broader ethnic identities. He draws in particular on Homi Bhabha as he locates “the point of transit and the liminal space, products of cultural displacement” (p. 275) to identify previously unnoticed links between musical cultures as they create “interactive zones,” or “ecumenes,” in which “systemic fields of interactive musical idioms share a single space” (p. 80). The result is a rich and subtle analysis of compositions and composers that demonstrates that Balkan musicians drew not only on Western classical music or local peasant traditions, but synthesized a variety of eclectic sources when they wrote and performed.

The book opens with an excellent discussion of the musical traditions of Sephardic Jews in Sarajevo and throughout the diaspora. In doing so, Samson emphasizes the importance of place, arguing that “here music might enchant rather than haunt the landscape, giving it symbolic density and significance” (pp. 28-29). Allowing the Jewish expulsion from Spain in 1492 to drive his story, Samson argues that Jews made themselves at home in the Balkans by grafting local musical idioms onto older Hispanic traditions. His sources on Jewish music prior to the eighteenth century are very slim, but when he gets to the modern period he is able to show how Jewish liturgies turned into popular music as Jews became an established feature of the Balkan musical landscape. Music helps perform identities, and Samson is attentive to how borders are erected and crossed in the process of music-making in the Balkans.

Finally, he sees musical events “as simultaneously reactive and proactive” (p. 34) and places mini-histories in counterpoint to grand historical narratives in a way that complicates both very instructively. When he discusses Sufism in the Ottoman Balkans, Samson argues that it evolved alongside Orthodox chant, which gradually embraced new polyphonic styles during the nineteenth century. He highlights the importance of Sufi groups such as the Bektaşi, who attracted famous musicians and cultivated popular regional styles, and shows how much Islamic music differed from one place to another once the Ottoman empire began to lose its hold on the region. Live performances of the *Mihrabije* service in mosques in Tetovo and Gostivar, for example, stand in stark contrast to the marked decline of “musical” performances in mosques elsewhere in Macedonia. Samson juxtaposes this story with that of Turkish coffee houses, which gave musicians new venues once Phanariot courtly patronage dried up and consolidated the presence of Roma performers within Turkish music history.

Samson’s usual area of expertise lies in classical music, especially Chopin and Liszt, and he dedicates a great deal of space to classical composers in *Music in the Balkans*. He emphasizes how nineteenth composers from the Balkans deliberately sought to create “national styles,” though he judges some to have been more successful, and more innovative, than others. He frequently compares individual composers both with their Balkan contemporaries and with the musical giants of Western Europe, giving brief biographical sketches before plunging into analyses of their major works. Insisting that composers lived and worked within institutional networks, Samson also pays attention to the role of states and private sponsors in cultivating art music in the Balkans. In many countries choirs played a key role in linking popular music with art music, for example, and communist Composers’ Unions commissioned new works just as they censored others. Large numbers of talented people from the Balkans have left the region in the years since the Second World War, and Samson shows how the diaspora has created its own musical genres through Balkan fusion or émigré folk ensembles. Although it may seem strange to juxtapose turbo-folk with classical music, Samson’s approach reminds us that musicians are musicians regardless of genre and that all are responding to similar social, political and economic transformations.

Despite its erudition, many people will find this book frustrating. Musicologists and ethno-musicologists alike will be unsatisfied with Samson’s attempt to blur the lines of their disciplines because of how many disciplinary norms and debates he has had to sideline in order to build a single story. Historians who are struck by Samson’s impressive ability to construct a narrative that de-centers the nation-state will be disappointed that his focus on esoteric musical traditions prevents them assigning chapters of the book for their undergraduate courses. Anthropologists will be annoyed by Samson’s focus on musical works and performers rather than performances, audiences, and musical commodities. Students who have taken the trouble to track the book down in their library stacks will be crushed when they find that neither the index nor the contents page are very helpful for finding which of the book’s 729 pages they should plagiarize. While the index includes references to “Roma,” it does not have “Jew,” or “Romanian,” meaning that someone looking specifically for a history of Romanian music has to find it on her own, scattered throughout chapters 6, 8, 15, 17, 19, and 21.

The book’s organization is as maddening as the complex phenomena it describes. Samson shifts between regions and time periods every few pages and the connections he draws between his diverse topics are thematic rather than geographical or chronological. Chapter headings are of little use. The chapter entitled “Infrastructures,” for example, covers Dalmatia and Transylvania during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia, the Ionian Islands and the Romanian principalities in the nineteenth century. What links these diverse topics is a discussion of the way that littorals, empires, and commercial networks nourish unique cultural movements on their peripheries. Such an array of examples might be useful if the question of peripheries was the main focus of the book, but when Samson’s stated purpose is “to bring some of this knowledge – available for the most part in minor languages only – to wider notice,” (p. 3) the book’s organization obscure more than it illuminates. Methodologically, Samson’s insistence that we de-center national narratives is necessary and praise-worthy; practically, it makes this monumental tome difficult to use.

*Music in the Balkans* is encyclopedic in its scope, but its value as a reference work is limited by poor indexing and organization. It is theoretically sophisticated, but the smorgasbord of theorists Samson draws on means that the book lacks without a unifying message. It blurs interdisciplinary boundaries very fruitfully, but in a way that limits its usefulness for classroom teaching. Ultimately, these problems are not Samson’s fault. The histories and musical cultures he is describing defy any simplistic organization, and only a multi-faceted and lengthy volume such as this one could possibly hope to do justice to music in the Balkans.