

Selena Rakočević's Contributions to Southeastern Europe Dance and Music Studies

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ABSTRACT

Selena Rakočević was a distinguished scholar of ethnomusicology and ethnochoreology, with a focus on traditional music and dance in Southeastern Europe, especially Serbia. Her extensive research has advanced understanding of the cultural practices and traditions of the region. Rakočević has conducted fieldwork in various parts of Southeastern Europe, including Vojvodina and Banat. Her research has included investigations into the mortuary ritual in the village of Svinița, dance movements in Southeastern Banat, and the musical practices of the Banat Bulgarians. In addition to her fieldwork, Rakočević has contributed to the field of ethnomusicology through her writing. This paper discusses Rakočević's literature to reveal her contributions to the region of Southeastern Europe based on her ethnographic, practical, and theoretical knowledge of ethnochoreology and ethnomusicology. Her studies can be categorized under five topics: recent studies in ethnochoreology and ethnomusicology, the ethnochoreological and ethnomusicological approaches of SFRY, fieldwork studies in a theoretical framework, her fieldwork executed especially in the regions of Vojvodina and Banat, and *kolo* dancing as the cultural heritage of Serbia. Rakočević also reviewed books by ethnochoreologists and ethnomusicologists, some of which are included in this article. Her legacy continues to inspire new generations of scholars.

Keywords: Selena Rakočević, Southeastern Europe, ethnochoreology

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Introduction

Selena Rakočević was a well-known scholar in the fields of ethnomusicology and ethnochoreology. Her extensive research explored various aspects of traditional music and dance, with a particular focus on Serbian culture in the former Socialistic Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). Her work has significantly contributed to the understanding about the role of music and dance in the cultural practices of Southeastern Europe.

In 2008, I had the pleasure of meeting Rakočević at the first meeting of the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM) Study Group on Music and Dance in Southeastern Europe held in Struga, North Macedonia. Her work was fascinating to me, especially her approaches to the issues surrounding the dance and music of Southeastern Europe. Since the early 1990s, Rakočević had been an active researcher in this field, and I have witnessed her impressive dance and music abilities, as well as her smooth use of Laban notation at social gatherings of the ICTM Study Group on Music and Dance in Southeastern Europe, the ICTM Study Group on Ethnochoreology, and many other occasions. As the successor to the Janković Sisters and Olivera Vasić, whom I also had the honor of meeting, she was highly skilled in the dance and music of Southeastern Europe, and her theoretical and practical approaches were informed by her ethnographic fieldwork.

In this article, I review Rakočević's literature to discuss her contributions to Southeastern Europe based on her ethnographic, practical, and theoretical knowledge of ethnochoreology and ethnomusicology. Her studies can be categorized under five intertwined titles. These are recent studies in ethnochoreology and ethnomusicology in general, the ethnochoreological and ethnomusicological approaches of the former SFRY and their current reflection, fieldwork studies in a theoretical framework, her fieldwork executed especially in the Vojvodina and Banat regions, and *kolo* dancing as the cultural heritage of Serbia. Rakočević had also reviewed books by ethnochoreologists and ethnomusicologists, some of which I have included in this article.

Recent Studies in Ethnochoreology and Ethnomusicology

According to Selena Rakočević (2020a, 2020b, 2021), ethnochoreology and ethnomusicology have undergone significant changes in recent years due to technological advancements, globalization, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has had a significant impact on these fields, as social and physical distancing have influenced how dance and music are performed, transmitted, broadcasted, and researched. The ontological and epistemological bases of the field need to be discussed, given that the nature of dance and its sources of knowledge have changed under the conditions of being transmitted on screens over the Internet. Communication in virtual space has become the only practical option for establishing professional relations, and digital ethnography has become the primary research method in all humanities, including ethnochoreology and ethnomusicology. The broadcasting of music and dance via the Internet has transformed mediascapes and initiated numerous questions related to the reexamination of the ontological and epistemological foundations of these fields.

In addition to the pandemic's impact, ethnochoreology and ethnomusicology have faced challenges due to globalization and the increasing prevalence of digital media. Scholars have had to adapt to changing circumstances and develop interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspectives to engage with the global flows of sociocultural change. The ongoing need to adapt to changing circumstances, to develop interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspectives, and to engage with the global flows of sociocultural change will continue to be significant challenges for ethnochoreologists and ethnomusicologists. Despite the challenges they face, scholars continue to engage in research, often with the support of international partners and organizations. The abolition of funds for various project financing has been a severe setback of the economic and political transition in Serbia and the region and has resulted in scholars facing increasingly limited resources for their work. The interdisciplinary nature of these fields allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural context in which dance and music exist, with recent studies having shown how ethnochoreology and ethnomusicology can work together to provide a more complete picture of the cultural context of dance and music. However, the tendency of research areas branching out has intensified in recent years under the influence of prevailing postmodern trends toward particularization, interdisciplinary discussions, and the establishment of transdisciplinary perspectives. Moreover, researchers can view these circumstances as confusing and disorienting factors, especially for younger researchers who need to determine and establish individual research paths at the beginning of their academic career regardless of the discipline.

The Ethnochoreological and Ethnomusicological Approaches of SFRY

The academic community of the former SFRY has made significant contributions to the study of ethnomusicology and ethnochoreology. Scholars have dedicated their lives to studying and preserving traditional music and dance, leveraging

the region's rich cultural heritage. Selena Rakočević had published extensively on these studies of ethnochoreology and ethnomusicology, as well as on the notable researchers in this field such as Sisters Janković, Vlado Milošević, Olivera Mladenović, Olivera Vasić and Nice Fracile and their contributions in the former SFRY and other post-socialist countries.

One of the most important historical sources for studying ethnomusicology and ethnochoreology in the former SFRY is the Janković sisters' legacy, whose archive is located in the National Library of Serbia. It contains valuable material related to the work of Danica (1898–1960) and Ljubica Janković (1894–1974), the first researchers in Serbia dedicated to noting, collecting, and studying folk dances. Their work is seen in the book *Narodne igre [Folk Dances]*, whose first edition was published in 1934, and is considered the beginning of ethnochoreological research in Serbia (Rakočević, 2001, 2013d, 2014b, 2015c, 2018a, 2019a, 2020a). Rakočević also organized the fourth symposium of the ICTM Study Group on Music and Dance in Southeastern Europe in Serbia in 2014, which was dedicated to the work of Danica and Ljubica Janković due to 2014 marking multiple anniversaries, such as 80 years since publishing their first book (1934), 50 years since publishing the eighth volume of *Narodne igre* (1964), 120 years since the birth (1894) of Ljubica Janković and 40 years since her death (1974), as well as 40 years since Ljubica, as a dance scholar, had been proclaimed a member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

Vlado Milošević (1901–1990) was a notable ethnomusicologist from the former SFRY. He was a professor from Banja Luka, a member of the Academy of Sciences and Arts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and author of numerous articles on Serbian traditional music and the Balkans. He was also a performer of traditional music and had composed several albums of traditional Bosnia and Herzegovinian, especially Serbian music. His research focused on the cultural and historical context of traditional music, as well as on the musical structures and forms of traditional song and dance (Rakočević, 2004).

Olivera Mladenović (1914–1988) was another significant ethnochoreologist in Serbia who'd primarily graduated from the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade, but was professionally dedicated to researching traditional dances throughout her life. Mladenović continued and developed the methods for researching the traditional dances of the Janković sisters and largely contributed to the development of this discipline in Serbia. Her scientific contribution consists of opening up the historical discourse of dance research through archival work that critically examined conceptual and terminological ethnochoreological approaches and expanded the narrow folklore aspects of research toward observing current dance phenomena and interpreting them within a broader social and cultural context (Rakočević, 2013d, 2014c, 2019a, 2020a).

Olivera Vasić (1947-2015) was another notable ethnomusicologist and ethnochoreologist from the former SFRY. Vasić's approach to folk dance investigation was based on field research in distinct geographical areas of Serbia, to which she applied a mixture of interview and participant observations. She notated several hundred individual dances through Labanotation and systematized them according to functional and contextual criteria. She published numerous papers devoted to various subjects, from ritual dances to different forms of performing folk dances in contemporary Serbian society, and her research has expanded the scope of ethnochoreology in Serbia (Rakočević, 2013d, 2015c, 2018c, 2019a, 2020a).

Nice Fracile (b. 1952) is another notable ethnomusicologist from the former SFRY and a professor at the Academy of Arts at the University Novi Sad. His primary focus of scholarly concern is a comparative study of the traditional music of Serbians and Romanians in Vojvodina based on a diachronic analysis of the recordings and notations made by various authors during the 20th century. Besides Serbian and Romanian traditional music, he has also conducted comparative studies of the vocal musical traditions of other ethnic groups in Vojvodina and Serbia. His research focuses toward a comparative survey of asymmetrical rhythms as a fundamental common morphological element of the musical cultures of the Balkans (Rakočević, 2014d, 2018b, 2019a).

The works of these scholars have contributed to a greater understanding of the cultural, historical, and social context of traditional music and dance in Serbia and Southeastern Europe. Their legacy continues to inspire new generations of scholars in the field of ethnochoreology and ethnomusicology, who are exploring new directions in these fields, from the integration of new technologies to the incorporation of new theoretical frameworks just like Selena Rakočević did.

Fieldwork in Ethnochoreology and Ethnomusicology

Fieldwork conducted in the disciplines of dance and music is essential for gaining a comprehensive understanding of the complex and dynamic nature of dance performances and their relationship with musical components. Selena Rakočević introduced theoretical approaches for this methodology, which is rooted in the interdisciplinarity of ethnochoreology and ethnomusicology (Rakočević, 2015d, 2017b). These disciplines share the theoretical premise that the relationship between the kinetic and musical components of dance is not only unbreakable but also interactive.

Therefore, understanding this relationship is crucial for comprehending the cultural significance of dance and music in different communities.

As she had argued, the importance of researchers' individual experiences has been emphasized in recent decades. Also, comprehensive methods of participant observation remain a central and unifying aspect of fieldwork in ethnochoreology and ethnomusicology. The use of multiple methods of fieldwork, such as observation, participation in the performance process, filming, conducting interviews, and writing field notes, can provide researchers with an in-depth understanding of the cultural and historical significance of dance and music in various communities.

Selena Rakočević's field research on musical and dance practices in the village of Svinica (Svinița) in Romania provides an excellent example of the usefulness of participation in dance performance. She argued for the advantages of participating in the dance performance, as researchers can gain personal kinetic/auditory experience while simultaneously perceiving dance movement and dance music. Combining different methods of field research can also enhance cognitive processes, and considering the borders between ethnochoreological and ethnomusicological fieldwork is essential.

Rakočević's variety of field research methods was her most striking approach and represents an advantage rather than a weakness of the interdisciplinary approach. Researchers can build their post-field ethnochoreological/ethnomusicological narratives upon the information they record during fieldwork, with particular emphasis being placed on the processes of memorization (visual, auditory, and kinetic) when applying the method of participation in the dance performance. One's ability to memorize plays a crucial role in comprehending the cultural significance of dance and music.

Her contributions to field research methodology were based on her approximately 35 years of experience with fieldwork in Southeastern Europe on various aspects of dance and music, especially the one in Banat region which is currently divided into three countries, with eastern Banat lying in western Romania, western Banat in northeastern Serbia, and a small part of northern Banat in southeastern Hungary. As a result, revealing some of her articles about her fieldwork experiences will be important.

Dance and Dance Movements in Contemporary Carnival Event in Southeastern Europe: Case Studies from Romania, Serbia and Macedonia (Rakočević & Mellish, 2020c) is a comparative ethnographic review of presentational evening performances and participatory dance events called *balovi* [balls] within the contemporary manifestations of carnival celebrations. The study analyzes the structural and stylistic aspects of dance and dance movements incorporated in these dance events, with a focus on the sociopolitical implications of their various ironic and parodic connotations. Rakočević's study highlights the importance of fieldwork in gaining a deep understanding of the cultural implications of dance and dance movements in carnival events.

Ethnochoreological Research: Dance Practice of the Village of Svinica (Romania) and Igra za bog da prost': interetnički, genealoški i semantički aspekti namenjivanja plesa pokojniku u selu Svinica [Igrà za Bog da Prost': Interethnic, Genealogical and Semantic Aspects of Dedicating the Dance to the Dead in the Village of Svinița] (Rakočević, 2013b, 2017e) explore the mortuary ritual known as *joc* (also *ora* or *hora*) *de pomana* in Svinița, the southern area of Romanian Banat. The studies involve devoting a dance to the deceased person that takes place within a dance event lasting for several hours. The studies examine the genealogical and semantic aspects of the ritual's kinetic and musical components and highlight the importance of fieldwork in gaining a deep understanding of the cultural and historical context of the mortuary ritual in the village of Svinița.

Dancing in the Danube Gorge: Geography, Dance, and Interethnic Perspectives (Rakočević, 2015b) looks at the dance practices of Romanian and Serbian villagers along the Danube Gorge. The study examines the contemporary dance practice of this region and challenges the notion of geographical place considered in the sense of a distinct culture area. The study also emphasizes the significance of the role of fieldwork in understanding the complex and diverse musical practices of ethnic minorities.

Modaliteti interkulturalnosti: plesanje u svadbenom ritualu Srba u Banatu [Modes of Interculturality: Dancing Within the Wedding Ritual of the Banat Serbs] (Rakočević, 2012) and *Musical Practice of the Banat Bulgarians: A Brief Geopolitical Mapping* (2013a) focus on the Banat Bulgarians (i.e., the Palčeni), a distinct ethnic minority group who settled in the Banat region in the 18th century. The study presents a brief geopolitical mapping of the musical practices of the Palčeni in relation to their country of origin, as well as on the Banat multiethnic and multicultural environment. The study emphasizes the significance of the role of fieldwork in understanding the complex and diverse musical practices of ethnic minorities.

In her paper titled *Past in the Present: Contemporary Manifestations of the Custom Revena* (Rakočević, 2013c), she comments that the custom of *revena*, like many folkloric performances, has changed its form and function in many communities. However, her fieldwork study showed that this custom had remained unchanged in the village of Taraš in Vojvodina. The custom of *revena* allows women to exceed the limits of behavior imposed by patriarchal society and

functions as “a kind of emotional release and a way of balancing asymmetrical gender relations” (Rakočević, 2013c, p. 132). The term *revena*, with its Persian and Turkish origins, also displays the influence of Ottoman rule on language and way of life.

Kolo Dance: A Vital Symbol of Serbian National Identity

Kolo dance, also known as *kolo u tri*, is a traditional Serbian dance that has been popular for decades. Since World War II, it has been a vital symbol of Serbian national identity, representing the country's rich cultural heritage. The dance has been recognized as an important cultural element by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and has been added to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2017. Selena Rakočević played a significant role in this recognition through the administrative works she carried out with UNESCO, as well as through her studies, some of which are mentioned below.

Kolo dance is an essential part of Serbian culture passed down from generation to generation. The dance is performed at various events, such as weddings, festivals, and other celebrations. It is a unifying force that brings people together and strengthens the sense of community due to its chain form. *Kolo* dance is not only a genre of entertainment but also a way of preserving the country's intangible cultural heritage. *Kolo* has undergone many changes over the years but remains an integral part of Serbian culture. While it has been adapted to fit modern times, its fundamental structure and essence remain unchanged. *Kolo* dance is an excellent example of how cultural traditions can evolve while still retaining their core values. (Rakočević & Ranisavljević, 2018d; Rakočević & Ranisavljević, 2019b).

The paper *Kolo in Vojvodina: Visible and Invisible Structures in Traditional Dance Practice* (Rakočević, 2008) describes the different types of *kolos* in Vojvodina, including asymmetrical and symmetrical structures, as well as a *kolo* based on a combination of several dance patterns. While some structures were lost over time, the symmetrical eight-bar structure became dominant in the second half of the 20th century. *Kolo* has also become an important symbol of Serbian and Yugoslav culture and is used today mainly as a nostalgic expression of traditional values.

Despite facing various theoretical and practical challenges, *kolo* dance has continued to be popular in local communities, and its significance has not waned. The particularities of knee movements have been identified, and Rakočević (2019c) has also proposed adequate notations. *kolo* dance has been an important part of Serbian and Yugoslav culture for many years and continues to be a significant part of the country's cultural heritage.

Selena Rakočević's Reviews: An Ethnochoreological Perspective

Rakočević's reviews cover a broad range of topics, including the contributions of various scholars to dance analysis and applied ethnochoreology. In her 2007 review of Jelena Jovanović's edited book *Musical Heritage of Serbs, Šokci and Karaševci in Romania*, Rakočević noted the comprehensive collection of traditional music recorded by Sava Ilić. However, Rakočević pointed out the questionability of the classification based on textual criteria due to a lack of data on the actual function of most songs. Her review highlighted the importance of contextualization and interdisciplinary approaches in ethnochoreological research (Rakočević, 2007). In her review of Andriy Nahachewsky's book, *Ukrainian Dance: A Cross-Cultural Approach*, she highlighted Nahachewsky's comprehensive and original approach in defining dance as a form, context, and meaning of activity. Furthermore, her review recognized the value of Nahachewsky's book as a well-structured and gradual presentation of Ukrainian dance, making it a valuable contribution to the discipline (Rakočević, 2014a). Rakočević's review of *Imaging Dance: Visual Representations of Dancers and Dancing*, edited by Barbara Sparti and Judy Van Zile, emphasized the interdisciplinary approach to the identification, description, and interpretation of diverse content presented in visual artistic works. The book provides readers with a rich and detailed exploration of visual representations of dance, offering new insights and perspectives on dance iconography (Rakočević, 2015a). In her review of the ninth book in Ljubica and Danica Janković's series *Narodne igre*, Rakočević highlighted the importance of field research and interdisciplinary approaches in ethnochoreological investigation. She acknowledged the significance of the book's ethnography and notations of dances from several regions in the western and central parts of the present-day Republic of North Macedonia, as well as two theoretical articles by Ljubica Janković on the epistemological and methodological issues of dance research (Rakočević, 2017c). Rakočević's review of the book *Foundations of Hungarian Ethnochoreology: Selected Papers of György Martin* written by Fügedi, Quigley, Szónyi, and Sándor (2020) recognizes Martin's contributions to dance analysis and applied ethnochoreology. She noted the book to be a valuable resource for scholars interested in the study of traditional folk dance. Her review emphasized the importance of documentation and collection of traditional dances in ethnochoreological research (Rakočević, 2022). The post-socialist countries have been marked by turbulent, uncertain, and confusing realities due to intense EU integration

processes and the prevalence of neo-liberal cultural values. Scholarly literature has discussed the Balkan ethno-pop genre of popular music from the transitional times of East European countries, especially Serbian *turbo-folk*, Bulgarian *chalga*, and Turkish *arabesk*; however, *manele* in Romania was the subject of the first English-language volume. Her review titled *Popular Music Genre in Interdisciplinary Narratives: Manele in Romania* (Rakočević, 2017d) about the book Beissinger, Rădulescu, & Giurchescu (2016) *Manele in Romania: Cultural Expression and Social Meaning in Balkan Popular Music* offers elaborate discussions of all the discursive layers of *manele* that cover a wide range of its musical, kinetic, poetic, and performative features; interpretational and contextual singularities; cultural meanings; and aesthetic values. The book comprises nine chapters, and the accompanying website provides illustrative materials by displaying musical features of *manele*, their geographical dissemination, and visual and performative peculiarities in the private and public sphere to visually reinforce the arguments put forward by the authors. Finally, Rakočević's review (2017a) of Susan Leigh Foster's (2011) *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* emphasizes the importance of studying the sensory experience of dance, as well as the universal principles of dance and its relationship to culture and history. Foster's theory provides insight into the complex relationships among dancers, choreographers, and audiences and offers a multidisciplinary approach to the study of dance. Herewith, Rakočević's reviews provide valuable insights into the discipline of ethnochoreology. They emphasize the importance of documentation, contextualization, and interdisciplinary approaches in the study of dance traditions from different regions and cultures. These reviews serve as valuable resources for scholars interested in the field of ethnochoreology, providing a comprehensive and critical analysis of various publications in the field, and as indicators of her extensive knowledge about the literature of the related discipline.

Conclusion

Selena Rakočević has made significant contributions to ethnochoreology and ethnomusicology. Her research provides a valuable resource for scholars and researchers in the field, and her work will undoubtedly continue to have a significant impact on the disciplines of ethnochoreology and ethnomusicology for years to come. Her contributions to these disciplines are crucial for anyone interested in the history and culture of Serbia and the former SFRY and the role of scholarship in shaping national identity and especially for those interested in the theoretical, methodological, and practical approaches to these disciplines in general. Rakočević's interdisciplinary approach to research has opened up new avenues for exploring traditional music and dance in a changing world, and her work raises important questions about the challenges facing scholars in these disciplines and the need to adapt to changing circumstances. For example, the impact of COVID-19 has transformed the way ethnochoreologists and ethnomusicologists conduct research, teach, and exchange knowledge.

In addition to her contributions to ethnochoreology and ethnomusicology, Selena Rakočević was also an accomplished dancer and musician. Her practical experience in these fields provided a unique perspective that enriched her research. She was also a dedicated teacher and mentor who shared her knowledge and expertise with students and colleagues alike. Her legacy lives on through her many publications and the impact she has had on the field of ethnochoreology and ethnomusicology.

Overall, Selena Rakočević's contributions to ethnochoreology and ethnomusicology have been significant, and her work has paved the way for future research in these fields. Her interdisciplinary approach to research and her critical perspective on the role of dance and music in shaping national identity have been instrumental in advancing the study of traditional music and dance in Southeastern Europe.

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