



Exoticism, Hybridity and the Postethnic Perspective

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While studying the blues tradition in its home country, I found myself tempted to trace out some hypothetical parallels between what might be considered as the “black music” in various socio-cultural contexts. Music, of course, as Philip Tagg cleverly argued, has no colour, and the very term “black music” appears to be highly problematic (see Tagg, 1989). Even though, the term is still very much in use among journalists, scholars and listeners. Generally, the term relates to cultural traditions of African American people and to the roots of some major twentieth century developments in music, including jazz. But it is also generally interpreted as a sad metaphor for music made by people, who are considered to be “inferior” due to the arrogant understanding concerning the “white superiority.”

My intention to draw the attention to another notion of “blackness” relates to the context of Bulgarian ethno-jazz – a trend which emerged as a particular fusion between local folk music and global jazz idioms still in the 1960s under the name of folk-jazz due to the music activities of Milcho Leviev – a key figure in the innovation of Bulgarian jazz. Stimulated by the 1980s novelties in Bulgarian wedding orchestras, the new phase of ethno-jazz activities turned to be widely contributed by local others, that is, by Roma musicians – the proverbial Balkan “black people” whose performing skills draw on the tradition of *chalgija*, a vernacular instrumental music developed in the context of urban folk music all over the Balkans.

Yet, why to refer to music of local Roma people as the “black music” of the Balkans? And what, on the other hand, Balkan “black music” and African American roots of jazz might have in common? Hypothetically, such a comparison suggests nothing more than some historical similarities in terms of unfavourable social fates of two otherwise geographically distant and musically completely different, completely distinct ethnic cultures. One common line between them reminds, however, that both of them are *expected to perform* the Exotic Other in the modern western world, and above all, are often

“cursed as people and honored as musicians” (Silverman, 2007: 36).

Interestingly enough, nowadays we clearly witness an accelerated pace of migration and crossing of musical languages, which seems to blur not only the boundaries between ‘folk’, ‘pop’, and ‘art’ as historically constructed domains, but also between notions concerning the issue of ethnicity and its relation to music and identity. And the Exotic Other, ideally imagined as the “charming primitive”, seems to refuse imposed images and plays around multiple identities, as if to break down any stereotypes and to claim about inhabiting *simultaneously* different human and musical worlds. Such an assumption becomes quite evident while observing much of the music that today occupies particular trans-border zones and develops new forms of eclecticism observed under the label of world music, or, say, in locally developed genres like, for example, ethno-jazz or pop-folk observed within Bulgaria.

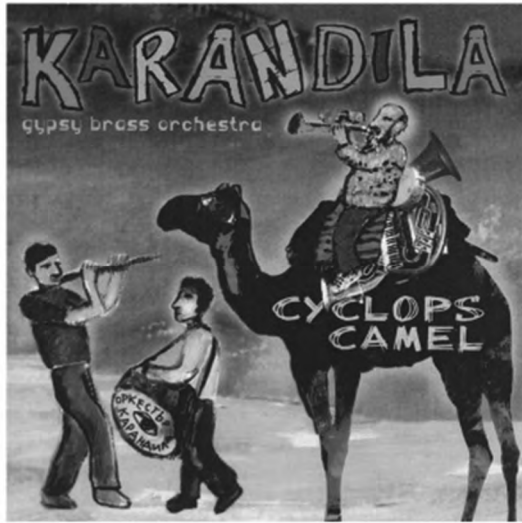


Fig. 1. *Cyclops Camel*. Front side of the album cover (2005, Messechina Music)

The notion of such a flexibility is clearly observed in the performing events of *Karandila* – the Gypsy brass orchestra from Bulgaria (led by trumpeter Angel Tichaliev), who at the end of the twentieth century actively toured all over Europe and gained popularity in local, national and international terms. As noted in the booklet of their album, entitled “Cyclops Camel”, released in 2005, their music strikes with “an unusual stylistic diapason which ranges from swing and bebop to operetta and circus tunes, yet all of them spiced by traditional Balkan folk idioms...”.

Even only the very design of this album suggests a notion of particular clash between seemingly incompatible cultural polarities. Images in the spirit

of naivety hint, in a joking manner, of particular exoticism – as if domestic, but yet “not quite from here”. The allusion of Balkan affiliation of the musicians, bearing the traditional drum (named *daul*) and other instruments, attributed to the specific arsenal of the Balkan chalgija, is located in a space which apparently contrasts the typical geographical landscape of the Balkans (Fig. 1).

Looking at the flip side, one can notice a sign that shows two counter pointers: the one points to Sliven – the home town of *Karandila* musicians. The other points to New Orleans – the emblematic spot considered as the birth place of jazz. As to the figures on the pointers, they hint that the presumable geographical landscape is somewhere *in-between* these too distant from each other destinations: the one located in South-Eastern Europe, in the Balkans; the other – in the southern part of North America. In other words, the depictions on both sides of the cover seem to create a notion of an imaginable “third place” – a desert, located quite far away East from the Balkans (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Cyclop Camel. Flip side of the album cover (2005, Messechina Music)

Apparently, both the title of the album and the images on the CD cover play around *intentionally* on exotic symbols of three spots located in three different continents.

Why is this so? Is this parallel between the town of Sliven, considered as the informal capital of Roma people from Bulgaria, and New Orleans – “the birthplace of jazz”, only a commercial trick? What might be the relation between the “black music” of the Balkans and the African-American roots of

jazz? Even in the sphere of the imagined comparison, such a parallel suggests, first of all, a certain doze of self-irony which somehow questions all theories devoted to the issue of Otherness. On the other hand, the intention here suggests those unpredictable windings in the process of hybridity, which indicates particular transnational and trans-ethnic traffic of musical ideas, associated to a great extent with multiple identifications in the context of diasporic cultures, which usually play a significant role in the intercultural communication.

Musically, these polarities are embedded in much of the music included in the whole album, by mixing idioms based on Bulgarian folk, classical American jazz, Oriental dance patterns, and, certainly, on the specific oriental melismatic manner of playing. Intended to fit what is nowadays considered as *world music*, this album seems to be quite symptomatic in terms of the process of hybridity – a concept, which is very much in use, when discussing issues of Diaspora, cultural difference and change, and the complex interplay between ethnicity, cultural politics and social identities in contemporary culture.

Why Hybridity? What is the difference between this concept and related terms such as, say, fusion, synthesis, and interaction?

Simon Frith notes, for example, that the concept of hybridity criticizes the old understanding of authenticity and brings a more sensitive reading of the relationship between musicians and producers. The term refers not only to the process of music creation or to the migration of given musics in the context of the international market for the exchange of sounds and images. It also points to a broader research perspective that can interpret world music not only in the sense of a market label on a deliberately packaged product containing "ethno music for sale" but also in the sense of particular "...space in which new (hybrid) signs are played in cultural identities ..." (Silverman, *ibid*). Regarding music, the term hybrid synthesizes a number of arguments related to issues of the relationship between the process of cultural globalization and its reflection on the forms of self-identifications.

The term appears as a convenient and challenging concept that describes *moments of communication across incommensurable polarities*. It has come to mean all sorts of things to do with mixing and combination in the moment of cultural exchange and signifies a key part of cultural modelling that proliferate in contemporary culture. Besides, it cut across traditional boundaries of nations and groups, giving rise to transnational spaces for a range. I'm not going to discuss on this matter but would only point out that the concept of hybridity presents an *alternative* model which can address the ambivalence towards fixity and mobility in contemporary culture.

My personal concern in relation to the productive effects of the term hybridity is motivated rather by the assumption that it might oppose the romantic nationalistic myth, still very much alive among Bulgarians, which take

for granted the notion of any cultural purity. Much of the music featured in “Cyclops Camel” clearly informs on how unpredictable the forms of cultural exchange might be and how a variety of musical vocabularies might interplay and cut across any boundaries. Without romanticizing on this matter I would suggest that – through its crossovers – the hybrid music of minorities, and especially the one of Roma Diaspora in Bulgaria, performs a particular impact on the dominant society and, potentially, on diversifying the notion of national identity. I would suggest that this impact may *pre-formulate* the traditional Bulgarian *ethnic* nationalism, which, as argued by Donna Buchanan, is rooted in the nineteenth-century Bulgarian state (Buchanan, 2006: 37). Insisting on traditional understanding of nationalism is symptomatic in terms of a mentality and sentiments, deeply seeded in the national consciousness, that might explain some of the frustrations, experienced nowadays by the dominant Bulgarian society while meeting demands of the socio-political doctrine of democracy, including in terms of understanding and conceptualizing cultural pluralism and cross-ethnic musical developments within the Balkan region.

Hot polemics concerning this process dated to the wedding bands boom in the 1980s when some folk musicians felt somehow encouraged to draw freely on the tangled regional skein of local Balkan roots, but also from a wide spectrum of globalized sounds projected onto the field of contemporary popular music. At approximately the same time, astounded Westerners were struck by the whirlwind tempi, complex metric and rhythmic patterns, passionate tunes and unusual (for the Western ear!) timbres and modal structures heard beyond the Balkans as early as the eighties – say, for example, in the playing of Bulgarian master clarinetist of Turkish-Rom origins, innovator of local wedding music Ivo Papasov and his orchestra Trakia. The West had begun to talk about the legendary performers of Bulgarian wedding music, described as a new phenomenon that in the 1980s transformed the East-European musical terrain with its mighty blend, woven from Balkan folk, spiced with jazz, rock, Gypsy, Turkish, and Indian music (see Silverman, 2005). Clearly, the Western world had noticed alternative impulses in the *new* ethnomusic from Bulgaria, touched as if by the wild blast and somehow irrational waft coming from those zones which, in the words of Richard Middleton, were formally abused but subconsciously desired in post-Renaissance Europe (see Middleton, 2000: 61). Connected mainly to the traditions of rural folk and urban vernacular music, such zones remind in a particular way of the Other in Europe, as well as of that “Dionysian” sensitivity presently observed in the ubiquitous mosaic of non-standard phenomena teeming along unknown paths in the variegated context of the global postmodern situation. At the end of the twentieth century, it appears that the West, shedding layered taboos and simplifying cultural interpretations, is looking for new stimuli in the notions of “roots” and “authenticity.” Weariness with the mimicry

of rational and somehow sterile strategies in the creation of musical artifacts or boredom with the slick brilliance of the refined expression of pop culture has activated a taste for *difference*, for those not quite known but inspiring cultural spaces connected with the symbolic and enigmatic nature of regional traditions that ignite the imagination, although not always at a conscious level. The global craze for regional cultures created new prospects for the already innovative sounds of Bulgarian wedding music. Fitting, in a sense, the famous postmodern motto “Think globally, act locally!,” it is these sounds that feed, to a great degree, the contours of the new wave in Bulgarian jazz, as well as colouring other non-traditional genre trends in the field of Bulgarian popular music that emerged in the beginning of the 1990s.

It is worth noting, however, that the flourishing of local ethnomusic, based on multi-ethnic fusions was perceived at that time as a peculiar novelty in the soundspace, not only by Westerners but also by Bulgarians. The paradoxes in the dynamic between concepts of “self” and “other” had pushed identification processes in such a way that, at the end of the 1980s, the sound profile of popular music within Bulgaria – at least the one that dominated the public media space and influenced an essential part of the Bulgarian musical mainstream – was related more to the vocabulary of a pro-Western oriented, *modernizing* sound lexicon than to the traditional *vernacular* language of the local self. Despite ideological restrictions of the then totalitarian regime, the result of centralized cultural politics that ran for nearly half a century, the leading trends in the development of pop, rock and jazz in Bulgaria during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s revealed an insatiable striving toward the acquisition of just such modernizing intonational orientations. In a sense, the view toward dynamically changing global fads prompted tendencies that reformulated local concepts of “everyday music,” especially those which had a bearing on the attitudes and preferences of the generations formed in the context of urbanized Bulgaria during the second half of the twentieth century. In this way the local self, understood as a polyphonic set that ranged over musical traditions of different local ethnic communities, was for a long time pushed out to the periphery of the public space, mostly because of its Balkan flavor and of complicated sociopsychological connotations dominated by negative signs and the allusion of “backwardness” (see Levy, 2004).

On the other hand, the specific profile of folk music disseminated by the state controlled media, connected mainly to the institutionally encouraged “museum-like” or beautified and magnificently staged “concert” representations of Bulgarian folklore in the years after the Second World War, had distanced folk music from the expectations of a living and naturally functioning, naturally developing *vernacular folk* music with roots in local traditions.

The Bulgarian musicologist Gencho Gajtandjiev reflects on the character of the second, concert trend, marked by glossy stylistics in the spirit of the western Music Hall and a somehow distanced artistic vision that is intended

for the “big stage:” “Is there any truly ‘folk’ idea in the stage costumes, stylized more and more richly by famous artists and designers, in the songs arranged by professional composers, and in the glittering expensive panels in the folk style that cover the walls of the houses of culture?” (Gajtandjiev, 1990: 126). The author alludes to the predominantly ostentatious profile associated with the common practices of the state folk ensembles and sees the reasons for their alienation from “the music of everyday life” as a reflection of the widely represented view, sustained among some influential folklorists and academically oriented musical spheres, “...of the incompatibility between musical folklore and current pop and rock music” (Gajtandjiev, 1990, 120). On the other hand, the author does not fail to note the suspensory role of the long-cultivated romantic concept of preserving the “purity” of Bulgarian folklore. Contrary to this concept, he argues that folklore is a living organism and that musical traditions may be protected only by means of their constant renewal: “Do we realize that the folkloric legacy, like an organic whole, like a vital system... is part of a way of life,...which remains irreversibly in the history, the museums, the memories, the genetic code of a community?” (ibid).

Directing attention toward *folk as a process*, such a point of view brings a particular perspective. Although already distant from the semantics of the ritual-ceremonial tradition, the folk idiomatic, felt now more as a convention for a given artistic expressiveness, finds its place in the contemporary world. The most natural environment in this regard is the non-formalized sphere of life, long neglected in the public space of the Bulgarian situation. This is especially true for those of its niches in which the link between the intimate and communal experience is difficult to subject to external sanctions or forms of centralized control. Such a niche in the Bulgarian case turns out to be the peculiar cultural territory of the village wedding, a space in which, during the 1970s and 1980s, the sentiment toward folk tradition lived in the context of changed current conditions. Split between “past” and “present,” between “traditional” and “modern,” between “rural” and “urban,” the cultural space of the village wedding outlines a new stage in the inescapable process of modernization, as well as in the revitalized contours of that eclectic feeling for semirural-semiurban living that to a certain degree has accompanied Bulgarian culture at least during the whole twentieth century.

In this sense, the wedding orchestras’ boom during the 1980s is not accidental. The existing vacuum in the sphere of locally-oriented vernacular music as well as the new sociocultural situation stimulated liberating impulses in the function of folk music, defined at that time usually as “wrong” and “distorted.” It is also not accidental that wedding playing, that *other* folk music, is realized as a kind of underground—that is, as a tendency that has turned from the orthodox, from the “right” path, and from hidebound notions of the preservation of the folkloric heritage. Formed under the strong impact of

the romantic idea concerning the existence of “pure” folklore, the Bulgarian, eager-to-become-modern and Westernized, correlates wedding-music more with the concept of some kind of local “home-grown” exotic, understood in conjunction with the valued marks of cultural backwardness and ignorant primitivism. Even during the 1990s, when the dominant notions in the wide vernacular sphere and the already partially deregulated media space were largely influenced by the intonations and innovative artistic approach developed in wedding music, the majority continued to perceive the characteristic accents of this updated Balkan expressivity, rich as it was in specific and generous intonations of “Eastern” sensuality, as a “foreignism” in the vocabulary of Bulgarian music.

In a sense such an attitude is a reflection of public polemics, still undertaken “from above” in the mid-1980s, on the countenance of wedding music, which at that time was experiencing a powerful new development. The proponents of these public polemics criticized the “anarchism” that had swept through the folk instrumental tradition, that is, an artistic freedom sublimating a set of spontaneously arising innovations including a line of ostentatious, uncontainable virtuosity and improvisational approaches that crossed ethno-dialects from different regions and also fused intonations with a far from local origin. In the critical words of Gajtandjiev, “arguments of a different nature are adduced in defense of a quite extreme, generalizing and completely non-pluralistic view, which might be summarized thus: these ensembles and the music that they spread... *distort and debase folklore*, because of which they occupy an undeserved place in the sphere of contemporary musical culture. And this is why, in order to exist in the future, they must ‘cleanse’ their music and place their production inside ‘prescribed boundaries’.” (Gajtandjiev, 1990: 128).

The call for the “cleansing” of “foreign” elements from wedding music by means of the exercise of a central control manifested itself in various ways. The intention to sanitize this type of music, to do away with the “warped” in relation to notions of the “right” folk music, projected itself finally into the sanctioned politics of specialized juries for the selection of groups for participation in the State-initiated national review of instrumental folk music ensembles that took place in Stambolovo in the mid 1980s. The idea of obliterating the “foreignisms” that characterized the capricious nature of this musical practice and which had assumed exceptional dimensions in the field of non-formalized music-making (especially in the territory of the village wedding), was declared more than once in different public forums. In the words of the chair of the jury, the aim was “to preserve authentic folk tunes in a manner attractive to young people,” but “the other goal of the festival was to eliminate foreign elements from our neighbors in the music” (Rice, 1994: 255).

The comments of the American ethnomusicologist Timothy Rice, a long standing expert on Bulgarian folk music, are curious in this regard. Rice noted the *dual* behavior of the musicians during the reviews in Stambolovo (see Rice, 1994, p. 253). Describing his observations during the festival in 1988, the author directs our attention to a peculiar trick in the behavior of the orchestras, which practiced a double standard in presentation: one “right,” *when in front of the jury*; the other free, *when in front of the people*. The latter style is dedicated to the unpredictable movements of virtuoso improvisation that involve the given conventions only as a prop and a moment in the building of music that flows, exactly like a club jam session, according to the caprices of the situational logic. The “right” way of playing is pro-forma, something that can secure a “passport” for the musicians to the Stambolovo festival stage, where the audience of many thousands, without a doubt, has flocked to hear the second, “incorrect” playing, which had acquired the aura of a kind of defiance and was a trade-mark of wedding music.

In his description, Rice also points out fundamental stylistic differences between the two types of playing, which are construed as a manifestation of a certain aesthetic profile. The author connects one tendency, encouraged by the jury, with stylistics marked by moderate volume, moderate tempi, tight rhythmic and melodic unisons, all subordinated to the idea of a “sweet” (that is, prettified or saccharine) sound. The melodies and improvisational moments, although they might include elements of contemporary wedding music (for example, chromaticisms and arpeggios) are restricted to four- and eight-bar phrases. This mode of playing reveals a type of self-control and self-discipline, cultivated to a large degree according to delineated notions of folk music, influenced by the aesthetic of Western-oriented models, and by standards connected to what might be called “radio-stylistics,” which form a substantial part of folkloric music intended for media broadcast.

The other tendency, the antithesis to radio-stylistics and to controlled playing, reveals an approach, described most often by the expert members of the juries as “irritatingly aggressive” (and yet especially liked by the audience!). The sound here is “non-sweet” (that is, natural, non-saccharine), notable for sharper and louder acoustic characteristics, and for taking the path of unfettered improvisational music-making. This approach exploits the sound and technical potential of the instruments to the utmost limit, breaking the conventional four- and eight-bar structures and changing the harmonies in an unpredictable way. Usually, each performance on the stage in Stambolovo lasted around twenty minutes. Leading off most often with a song melody in a danceable tempo followed by a series of instrumental dance tunes typical of a given region, the musicians would then move into improvisations, breaking the model of the customary “radio” arrangements and finding their way by this means to the real stylistics of wedding music. In his description Rice also emphasizes that “some groups, particularly those that played for

Gypsy and Turkish weddings, dispensed with the sweet aesthetic all together and played with free passion from the beginning of their performance to the end” (Rice, 1994: 253).

According to Rice, the two approaches might also be construed as a manifestation of different aesthetic views of the tradition: one connected more to the “Bulgarian” point of view; the other to the “Rom” attitude in music-making. The attempt at control in relation to this style in wedding music making is revealed even in acts that, at first glance, have as their goal the popularization of musicians like Ivo Papasov. For example, the album of wedding playing by Papasov and his orchestra released by Balkanton (the state controlled record company) at the end of the 1980s is nothing more than a flirtation with the popular artist’s name. There is not even a trace in the album of the “aggressive” tendency that originally developed as a result of Papasov’s innovative playing. On the contrary. Produced in the spirit of “correct” folk music, the recordings here have had the stylistics characteristic of “real” wedding music making surgically removed. The improvised moments are reduced to a minimum, the general sound more closely resembles that of the moderate, encouraged “from above,” controlled radio-stylistics.

No doubt, following the innovative liberating activities in the late 1980s wedding orchestras, Karandila’s instrumental music is among those contemporary examples which represent, revive and further develop the cultural legacy of the oriental past. Their artistic dialogism and adaptive mentalities, associated with the Roma Diaspora, are open (inevitably) to all possible surroundings, especially to those local folk musics which are part of the host culture. This is why Roma music in Bulgaria, Russia, Hungary or, say, Spain, deeply differentiate from each other. Since 1998 when *Karandila* made their first major crossover through the film entitled “Gypsy Summer: Tales of Surviving” and the CD release under the same name, the notion of exchange and transmission through *ethnically mixed* local practices seems to be flourishing home and abroad. Even so, obsessive fears about keeping the notion of “pure” national identity is still there. One can still hear aggressive calls and accusations that such developments *gypsify* Bulgarian folk music and damage the “authenticity” and the “purity” of Bulgarian national culture. Other voices insist on preserving the “authenticity”, that is, the exotic image of Roma music, as if leaving aside the understanding that the category of authenticity is also a matter of changes. On the other hand, alternative viewpoints come from those open-hearted, sensitive learners, who appreciate their others and share the assumption that such developments point to particular aspects of democratization in the musical life in Bulgaria and the increasing understanding of “national” as multifaceted and changing category.

Such an alternative calls for recognition of multiculturalism and pluralism. But is that good enough to feel the subtle processes of cultural identifications? Can we refer to the musicians of *Karandila* as representatives of any

frozen idea concerning *gypsy-ness* while they apparently appropriate and inhabit different cultural worlds? On the other hand, how to look at those non-Gypsy musicians who nowadays perfectly use all these idioms once attributed to Gypsy music?

Dwelling on such issues, the American historian David Hollinger developed a *postethnic perspective* to argue that identity is not a stable category. Hollinger's reasoning is not intended to impose, with yet another fashionable "post", a notion of the profound terminology in the field of contemporary cultural theories. The author is motivated by the intention to take a next step in the critique of essentialist views on ethno-cultural identities in modern civil society. He posits a post-ethnic perspective that favours voluntary affiliations over fixed identities. According to him, "...a postethnic perspective recognizes that *most individuals live in many circles simultaneously...* (Hollinger, 2000: 106). "A postethnic perspective also tries to remain alert to features that are common to one or more other ethnic identities inclined to see each other as opposed" (Ibid: 107).

Even though Hollinger refers to the North American society, his theoretical model suggests perspectives that might be applicable to other modern societies. I am far from the idea to apply mechanically this model to other societies, yet much of its points relate to actual, and I would emphasize, *hot* problems concerning the understanding of modern democracy within the present Bulgaria.

Considering music as a dynamic category, which denies any static or frozen condition, the post-ethnic perspective seems to be self-obvious. Self-obvious is also the people's ability to embrace and enjoy a variety of artistic values. Years ago the ethnomusicologist John Blacking posed a rhetorical question. *How musical is the man?*, he asked. The question brings humanitarian notion which draws attention to the relative nature of cultural values – a notion that, according to Blacking himself, is systematically disregarded by Eurocentric views, implied in the western concepts concerning music and musicality. Following the pathos of this question, today we could ask: *how many musical worlds, after all, can co-exist in the mind of a man?*

Rather in this sense, the co-existence of different stylistic lines in the music of *Karandila* suggests not merely the profile of particular artistic fusion. It also suggests a particular internal freedom in the process of cultural self-identification – a freedom which refuses stereotypes locked in the prism of any essentialism.

Listening to one of the most emblematic pieces included in "Cyclops Camel" named *Peasant Dance*, one can hear that any single component in this hybrid form, no matter whether it brings an allusion of the steady pulse based on oriental dance patterns, of Bulgarian folk intonations, of particular virtuosity associated with the improvisational approach attributed to Bulgarian (Balkan) wedding orchestras, or, of classical jazz idioms that remind the

global impact of the swing big bands, none of these components work in any pure way; all of them interact under a particular cultural logic that conceptualizes music, according to the words of James Clifton, as “temporal, contested, and emergent” (see Clifford, 1986). For the mastery of a “foreign” vocabulary and turning it into a part of one’s own expressive arsenal is a process that recalls the eternal interplay between self and the other, taken not so much as oppositional categories, but rather as complementary aspects of personal identity. “The other in myself” or “myself in the other” – no matter how we choose to name this interplay, it from time immemorial indicates that music, as pointed out by Richard Middleton, is *not* a possession that one can lock away in one’s own safe (Middleton, 2000: 60).

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