Music

The music of the Roma\(^1\) is varied to such an extent that we cannot really talk about a Roma music. Their music is just as heterogeneous as the individual groups of Roma. The wealth of the musical styles and genres is a consequence of various factors: functional criteria play an important role, just like the various regional and cultural influences coming from neighboring peoples, as well as which groups the musicians belong to.

Contrary to the Roma language, whose dialects have a common basis, a common denominator of Roma music cannot really be found. The only thing that could be said is that "The moment a Gypsy performs a non-gypsy tune that tune [...] becomes a Gypsy tune" (Pettan 1992:244)\(^2\). This indeed very broad definition of Roma music comprises not only the music originally played by the Roma, but also interpretations of folk songs and folk-pop songs. This creativity of the musicians who do not simply play an existing tune but "re-compose" it by spontaneously rearranging it, is a characteristic feature of probably all Roma music.

Significance and Functions of Roma Music

In the life of many groups of Roma, music plays an important and living role: on the one hand within the family or group, during celebrations, spontaneous get-togethers or other occasions, on the other as a means of earning money. Contrary to common belief, the Roma do not have music "in their blood" more than other peoples, but music usually plays an essential role in the social life of Roma communities; moreover, the profession of musician has over decades been a possibility to assure existence and a certain acceptance for members of a minority group. The Roma's musical socialization usually takes place within the family; the children acquire a repertoire already at a very early age thanks to listening and imitating. Many famous Roma musicians never learnt to read notes, and they also compose by ear.

---


Music as a profession

Professional musicians usually have a broad, oftentimes multi-ethnic repertoire at their disposal and, apart from their own songs, interpret popular folk songs and pop songs, as well as the specific music of different ethnic groups and "hits" from jazz and pop music.

Roma musicians were – and are – employed for dance and entertainment at marriages and parties; in addition, there is also customs-related music played on the occasion of religious ceremonies, such as the slava, baptism, circumcision festivities and other customary activities for the own or other ethnic groups.

For instance, it was a custom in Burgenland (Eastern Austria) for the Roma to go from house to house and, in exchange for a tip or payment in kind, play the lead for Christmas and New Year Singing. Thus, the Roma can perfectly well be called carriers and preservers of regional and national folk music.

For the Roma, music as a profession is an exclusively male domain; if women make music, it is solely as singers. Female professional musicians were only needed when ceremonies were celebrated by women and men separately, as it was customary for the Muslim population in Turkey and on the Balkans until recently; for women’s celebrations, female musicians were employed, and accompanied themselves on the drums.

Group-internal music

Professional music and music played within the group cannot be completely separated. Dance tunes and music for entertainment, and customs-related music is played mainly for the Gadže; in addition to this primarily instrumental professional music, there is also an exclusively group-internal vocal tradition, presented by lays. These songs are an integral part of the families’ daily life, and include lyrical and narrative songs, dance tunes, lullabies, plaintive songs and songs for special holidays; however, not all of the genres mentioned above are sung by all Roma groups.

The traditional songs of the Lovara and other Vlach Roma living in the Hungarian language area can be taken as an example. Originally sung without instrumental accompaniment, these traditional slow songs (loke gjila, pl. or mesaljake gjila, pl. = table songs) and dance tunes (khelimaske gjila, pl.) of the Austrian

3 → Rombase: http://romani.uni-graz.at/rombase

→ Rombase
Music » Genres » Music of the Vlach Roma; Khelimaski gjili;
Loki Gjili
Kodo phende e Romora ...
Lovara have only been presented to a Gadže public for approximately 15 years.

Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos, who performs with her family ensemble in a modern instrumentation (with guitars, e-bass, drums and percussion), and Ceija Stojka are famous Austrian female interpreters of this vocal traditions. Both singers interpret the traditional Lovara songs as well as neve gjila, "new songs", which reflect influences from pop, jazz and Latin American music.

Since the end of the 1970ies, a modern Vlach style has developed also in Hungary. Traditional melodies and accompaniment techniques (snapping one’s fingers, mouthbass, milk jugs etc.) are blended with singing in harmony, guitars and mandolins. This modern Vlach style was initiated by the Budapest band Kalyi Jag ("Black Fire"); many professional ensembles such as Ando Drom (Road of the Gypsies, CD 1/no. 3 and CD 2/no. 5) followed their lead and acquired international renown.

Genres and Instrumentalization

Hungarian "gypsy music", "gypsy" jazz and Sinti swing in Django Reinhardts wake, as well as the Spanish "gitanos" Flamenco feature among the best known types of Roma music internationally. Additionally, there are several typically Roma instrumental ensembles; most professional musicians play at dances and for entertainment, but also at religious celebrations of the majority population or neighboring ethnic groups.

Among these instrumental ensembles feature:
- Davul-Zurna on the Balkans and in Turkey
- the Kumpaneia on the Greek mainland (common instrumentalization: clarinet, violin, lute, dulcimer, cup and frame drums)
- the Romanian Taraf ("gypsy ensemble" with violin, cymbals, bass, accordion, singing; in earlier times also panpipes and lute)
- the Tambura orchestra in Serbia and Croatia (instrumentalization: plucked long necked lutes of different sizes, and, possibly, a violin)
- the Southern Serbian Pleh Muzika (brass band) and
- the Čalgija (oftentimes with clarinet, saxophone, accordion, long necked lute, cup drums, frame drums, synthesizer, percussion and others) in Macedonia and Kosovo

Hungarian "gypsy music" is a typical example of light music, primarily played for a Gădže audience. It is folkloristic, Hungarian music, shaped by the Roma's way to play, which became famous beyond the bounds of Hungary. Magyar nota (folkloristic Hungarian composed songs), csárdas and hallgató belong to the typical repertoire of "gypsy bands" with violins, cymbal, clarinet and double bass.

Also the Flamenco (Road of the Gypsies, CD 1/ No. 1 and CD 2/ No. 7), originally without accompaniment or accompanied only by clapping or rhythm instruments, became a professionally performed music in the time of the "cafês cantantes" (during 1840 and 1910), when "gitano" musicians and dancers performed for payment. Its main elements traditionally are singing, dance, and accompaniment by guitar. Since the 1960ies, the Flamenco has changed: the "flamenco nuevo" combines Flamenco elements with elements of pop music, Latin American music, Arabian and African music and – in the wake of Paco de Lucía’s interpretation – also elements from jazz, salsa and Bossa Nova.

Nowadays, Flamenco mainly is a sort of music (with dance accompaniment) which finds big audiences on stage or in concert halls. By far not all Flamenco interpreters are Roma, but among the Roma there are many of the most important Flamenco artists, such as La Nina de los Peines, Ramón Montoya and many others.

"Gypsy jazz" is the domain of the Sinti (and Manouches). It ties on to the legendary Django Reinhardt's style, who founded the Sinti swing in the 30ies with his "Quintette du Hot Club de France". His music with the traditional instrumentalization, lead guitar, two rhythm guitars, violin and bass, was formative for a sort of music which has been discovered as "gypsy music" by a broad public since the 1960ies. Sinti swing not only fulfills the function of concert music for a Gădže audience, but has also turned into an integral part of the Sinti's everyday culture. Famous interpreters of Sinti swing are, among others, Schnuckenack Reinhardt (Road of the Gypsies, CD 2/No. 11), Häns'che Weiss, Titi Winterstein (Road of the Gypsies, CD 1/No. 14) and, in Austria, Zipflo Weinreich.

Musical influences and Roma-specific elements

The different kinds of Roma music are mainly interpreted by Roma (or Sinti), but it is also taken over by Non-Roma. In so far, musical influencing was mutual: Roma music had an invigorating effect on Gădže music – and also, and perhaps particularly, on the lately very modern world music -, inspiring and...
broadening the repertoire. At the same time, Roma music features elements from the surrounding musical traditions. For instance, the songs of the Burgenland Roma (Schun, so me phukavav...) include elements from Hungarian folk music; the Flamenco is, apart from modern elements (see above), influenced by Spanish and Moorish music, etc.

This influence concerns structural components like the melodic structure, the underlying scales and rhythmic. Songs of the Slovenian Roma use the major scales, songs of the Serbian Vlach Roma on the contrary use "modal" scales, and songs of the Roma in Macedonia and Southern Serbia oftentimes use the "phrygic" scale. Typical of the Balkans region are additive, asymmetric rhythms and syllabic melodies, but also long, arching lines of melody (in free rhythm, with melodic ornament), which speak of a Turkish influence (Fennesz-Juhasz et al. 2003:323ff)\(^5\). Depending on the cultural sphere of influence, the Roma’s music is always shaped by the music of their neighbors.

At the same time, also some features that are characteristic of Roma music can be found. These include the spontaneous rearrangement of given forms as well as elements of interpretation. In the vocal, Parlando-Rubato-performances and the varying arrangement of the melody, oftentimes connected with certain ornaments, may be cited; concerning voices, typical elements are forceful intonations with slurred notes, "pre-beats", and notes and vibrati sung "too high" or "too low".

Apart from these elements of arrangement, the dealing with music in general can be called Roma-specific. Music is not something established, static, but always improvised. It is a living part of everyday culture, and created anew at the moment of performance with a lot of creativity, open for everything new. "The strong interest for innovation and its easy integration into musical practice may be a reason why the Roma do not have folkloristic fostering of tradition for its own sake. All the time [...] recent influences from popular music, combined with traditional elements, are integrated into the different musical cultures of the Roma. Whether with these new popular styles or with the surviving traditional styles: Roma music will surely continue in its extraordinary diversity." (Fennesz-Juhasz 1999:79)\(^6\)

---
