

# MA Ethnomusicology

## Female Musicians in Šuto Orizari, Macedonia

Author: Gundula Gruen

### Table of Contents:

1. Introduction
2. Šutka, the Place and its People
3. Music and Musicians, and the Lack of Female Musicians in Šutka
4. Parallels to 19th-Century Female Musicians
5. Case Study 1: Esma Redžepova
6. Case Study 2: Bajsa Arivofska
7. Current Influences and Future Outlook
8. Conclusion

Total word count: 5217

## INTRODUCTION

This essay is the result of my Odyssey to find and research female Romani musicians in Šuto Orizari, Macedonia. After having spent many months exploring the music through learning and playing with local musicians, males without exception, my curiosity was roused as to where the females are hiding. In Hungarian Romani music history, back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there was Panna Czinka, the first famous *Primas*<sup>1</sup> of the first ever formal Hungarian Romani music ensemble; she was the only ever female *Primas*. Afterwards, men took over, decorated by the occasional female singer (Sarosi 1996, p.27).

The central questions of this essay are: “why are there so few female musicians in Šuto Orizari?” and “how did the existing ones make it?” After introducing the place, the essay discusses the role of traditional Romani women in their society, the importance of music, and the obstacles for women to perform; some interesting parallels to the position of females in the 19<sup>th</sup> century will also be examined. This is followed by case studies of two exceptional female performers connected to the area: Esmá Redžepova (1943-2016), the first world-famous Romani singer, and Bajsa Arifovska, possibly the only female professional Romani instrumentalist in Macedonia. The last section picks up a new thought regarding religious restrictions to performing music, and an outlook to the future situation of female Romani musicians.

As sources of information I read relevant literature around Balkan music, Romani culture, gender issues in Ethnomusicology and other writings on female musicians. I also conducted interviews with a variety of people connected to Šuto Orizari, including Branislav Petrovski, a Roma activist who has been organising cultural projects and supporting young people for more than 30 years; Eleonora Mustafovska, one of the very few professional female Romani singers and the only female student of Esmá Redžepova; and Bajsa Arifovska, multi-instrumentalist and composer. In the house of Elvis Asan, a semi-professional Roma musician, I met and interviewed him and some members of his family: his wife Rehijan and his cousin Naser Jašarević. Additionally, I talked to a number of Roma and non-Roma on an informal basis, and I used my own observations from various visits to Šuto Orizari and Macedonia between July 2015 and April 2017. Most interviews were conducted in Macedonian, and I would like to thank Mihajlo Stojanov for his help in translating, and his

---

<sup>1</sup> Solo violinist and leader of a *Verbunkos* Ensemble, the first formal 5-piece line-up of Hungarian Romungro Romani music in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Sarosi 1996, p.27).

general knowledge of Romani culture which derives from growing up in a Roma neighbourhood.<sup>2</sup>

## ŠUTKA, THE PLACE AND ITS PEOPLE

Šuto Orizari, known as “Šutka” by the locals, is a suburb of Skopje, Macedonia. With 18,000 inhabitants of which approximately 80% are Roma, it is the largest Romani settlement in Europe. Though it is part of Skopje’s administration, Šutka has its own Roma mayor and is in many other ways largely independent, making it one of the few places where Romani traditions can be practised and lived freely (Evans 2007, p. 144).

Šutka was established in 1993, after the Romani neighbourhoods in the centre of Skopje were destroyed by an earthquake and subsequent floods. Aiming for a Roma-clear city centre when reconstructing, Skopje’s municipality offered housing grants to all Romani who would settle in Šuto Orizari, which was rural wasteland at that time. Many Roma from Skopje took advantage of that opportunity and were soon joined by Roma from other Balkan regions in their new settlement (Silverman, 1996, p.64).

In Romani society, the family is the most important social unit, based on a patriarchal structure (Oppong 2014, p.67). However, within the family it is mostly the women who make decisions in domestic as well as financial matters (Silverman 2012, p.30). Kertesz states: ‘in most Gypsy societies, women are the dominant providers for their families’ everyday needs’ (2017, p.5). For Xhemajli, they are the most important members of a family (ERRC 2000).<sup>3</sup> Their fulfilment in life is to marry, bear and raise children and educate them into respectable Roma people (Oppong 2014, pp.69-71). Women who do not have children may be regarded as ill-fated and in some communities, they are even believed as being possessed.<sup>4</sup>

Although outwardly Romani men are considered to be more empowered than women, most Roma women see themselves inwardly as the superior members of their society. The responsibility of running the household and keeping up the high moral standards of traditional

---

<sup>2</sup> The essay contains several Macedonian terms. I have chosen to use Macedonian Latin letters such as ‘š’ (pronounced ‘sh’), ‘č’ (‘ch’) and ‘ć’ (‘tsh’) to preserve the Macedonian atmosphere as much as possible.

<sup>3</sup> Interview in *Romani women in Romani and Majority Societies*, the European Romani Rights Centre’s Journal: <http://www.errc.org/article/romani-women-in-romani-and-majority-societies/626> - last accessed on the 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2017.

<sup>4</sup> This tendency I picked up from informal conversations and my own observations of Romani people.

Romani lore is usually conducted by the wife, giving her a more important role than her husband (Fonseca 2012, p.47). In my own visits to Romani homes I witnessed mature females ruling their families including husband and sons, demanding respect and keeping a strict eye on morals. Many Romani women also look down on Western European and American women, condemning their immoral behaviour and dispersed identity. This paradox is described by Kertesz (2017, p.5) and occasionally I experienced it myself too. <sup>5</sup>

Due to poverty, many Romani women have to contribute to the family income, going out to work in addition to the obligatory wifely duties of running the household. As Silverman explains:

Women's wage labor includes doing cleaning in private homes, offices, hospitals, schools, and on the street. Typical female unskilled and semi-skilled occupations include ironing and cooking in state institutions and doing middleman marketing. Many Shutka women (and indeed all East European Rom women) are actively involved in trading (1996, p.66).

In Romani culture nowadays schooling is deemed important for both sexes; however, a critical eye is kept on girls reaching puberty for keeping an immaculate reputation, so a successful marriage can be achieved. <sup>6</sup> Activities outside the family are strictly monitored, and unchaperoned interaction with boys or non-Romani is generally prohibited (Kertesz 2017, p.5). Above all, the virginity of girls is protected, as noted by Silverman: 'Brides must (...) endure virginity tests', and even some educated women agree with that practice (2012, p.32, 34). If a bride fails the test, she may be sent back to her family, bringing disgrace to herself and to her whole family (Oppong 2014, p.68).

## **MUSIC, MUSICIANS, AND THE LACK OF FEMALE MUSICIANS IN ŠUTKA**

---

<sup>5</sup> There are parallels to Jewish Hasidic women who likewise act as the keepers of high morals, 'staying separate and even hiding from male public view' in order not to tempt them (Rosenfelder 2003, p.250).

<sup>6</sup> I have not heard of forcefully conducted marriages in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; however, I have experienced arranged marriages, with a "modern" approach which allows the young people to go out with each other, and to refuse a prospective spouse.

Weddings play a central importance in Romani society. When walking through Šutka on weekends between May and October, it would be unusual not to encounter a wedding party, each with its own brass band. Sometimes the bands seem to compete with each other in volume, charisma and daring improvisations. Next to brass bands, there are also *Čalgja* ensembles (performing Turkish-originated music) and *Turbo Folk* (the highly amplified modern style of wedding music). Interesting for this article is the complete absence of women in those bands, except for the occasional female singer in *Turbo Folk* ensembles.<sup>7</sup> According to Bajsa, there were female performers at weddings in the past. They performed behind closed doors for the women's rituals, playing *daira* (frame drum) and singing (Interview, Skopje, 20<sup>th</sup> March 2017). The musicians were mostly relatives and wives of male musicians (Silverman 1996, p.71).<sup>8</sup> Those ensembles have gradually disappeared over the last 20 years, when amplified music took over (Silverman 2012, web supplement).

Working as a musician for weddings is one of the prominent sources of earnings for the Romani population (Kertesz 2017, p.2). As discussed above, in present-day Macedonia, Romani women are required to contribute to the household income, so why not as musicians? I would like to approach this question by analysing the reasons for the generally low number of female Romani performers. Branislav Petrovski told me:

Normally there should be more (girls) doing music, but we are poor, poor in money and poor in cultural activities. There aren't enough cultural events, so there is little motivation to develop the musical talent of the girls. Male music talents can pop out, for women it is more problematic. Because they cannot get culturally known, as there are no events and no promotion (Interview, Topansko Pole, 20<sup>th</sup> March 2017).

Naser Jašarević agrees: 'The biggest problem is the money. Because Romani people are socially and financially in danger (...), we have no capital, and simply cannot afford it' (Interview, Šuto Orizari, 17<sup>th</sup> February 17). Similar to Branislav's earlier remark, Naser also raised a gender issue: 'In general, Romani families give more opportunity to their male children to prosper in comparison with female children'. Elvis Asan addressed the core issue behind this imbalance: 'For my daughter it is very nice to learn an instrument, but only at home, as it is not respectable. The women who are considered to be from good houses, and

---

<sup>7</sup> I made this observation on several visits to Šutka in July, August and September 2014 and 2015; it corresponds with the knowledge and experience of all my interviewees.

<sup>8</sup> A similar practice had been conducted in various Islamic traditions for many centuries (Doubleday 1999, pp.116-117).

have a good reputation, they are not doing music, and that is the general opinion' (Interview, Šuto Orizari, 17<sup>th</sup> February 17). Silverman quotes Esma Redžepova: 'According to our traditions it was shameful to sing in public' (2012, p.202). Silverman also raises the issue of lost modesty associated with singing in public as the main reason for the small number of professional female Romani vocalists (ibid., p.203).<sup>9</sup> In her experience, Romani people consider a pure reputation far more important than the economic necessity of extra income from women performing (ibid., p.218).

Since performing in public is considered immoral, it would prevent any prospect of a good marriage. Naser stated: 'This issue is a bit uncomfortable; it's a bit tricky for a woman to play instruments. If she is already doing that she can't marry, or she will not be able to marry well'. The implementation and the impact of this mentality on a daughter's education and the extent to which she is allowed to make music vary from family to family. Naser explained, 'if a girl who sings or plays an instrument gets into a relationship, the boyfriend will ask her to stop performing or he will leave her'. Eleonora said: 'For Romani people it would not be that shameful, if the daughter sings in a concert. But if the place is a *Kafana* or nightclub, then it is the opposite. This is like prostitution.' The general consensus seems to be that making music is ok for girls before puberty in private within her own family circle. Performing on a stage, removed from close contact to the public could still be acceptable to some families. However, when it comes to marriage, those activities will most likely be prohibited by either the future husband or mother-in-law. This would apply to any public-display activity: 'My sister was doing athletics, and she was very good at it, but when she got married, she had to stop it; the mother-in-law forbade it and made her stay at home to do the house work' said Elvis.

Bajsa put forward another interesting thought: to her knowledge there are no female instrumentalists and very few singers to be found in any style of traditional Macedonian music. One could conclude that the lack of female performers not only applies to Roma people but to the whole Macedonian folk music scene. Bajsa believes that keeping aside

---

<sup>9</sup> The notion of public singing not being respectable is not limited to Romani culture only. Rosenfelder describes issues connected to immorality in Hasidic Jewish culture. Interesting is the fact that whilst in Romani culture the immorality is connected to the display of the body for Hasidic culture it is the high timbre of the female voice which is considered to be arousing for men and therefore prohibited (2003, pp.254-255).

financial and moral issues that apply to Romani women, making traditional music is just not in the mind set of women based in Macedonia.<sup>10</sup>

## PARALLELS WITH 19TH-CENTURY FEMALE MUSICIANS

When stepping into a traditional Romani home one can easily feel like having travelled 150 years back in time; the furniture, the decor, the served coffee and the manners of the inhabitants remind you of times long gone.<sup>11</sup> Roma activists like Branislav and Xhemajli are criticising the old-fashioned attitudes. ‘Their lifestyle is comparable to what it was five hundred years ago’ (ERRC 2000).<sup>12</sup> ‘If one were to compare the situation of Romani women from times long ago and today, it would be obvious that nothing has changed’ (Ilić, ERRC 2000).

There are clear parallels of Romani women nowadays to women living in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Western Europe regarding their position in society and the attitude toward female performers. According to Oliveros, women ‘historically have been taught to despise activity outside of the domestic realm as unfeminine, and have been valued for the obedience and support they offer to men’ (as cited in Maus 2012, p.320-21). Solie describes marriage and bearing children as the highest purpose of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century woman’s life (1993, p. 131). The patriarchal values she points out also echo the ones of Roma society. However, whilst Romani women feel inwardly superior to their husbands and govern large parts of their family life, 19<sup>th</sup>-century women were educated into submissiveness on all levels. The attitude towards females performing in public and the effects on their reputation and marriage is very similar in both societies. Reich describes the public attitude in the 19<sup>th</sup> century towards performing women who were considered a disgrace due to displaying their talents and their bodies (1993, p.132). His research also shows evidence that, similar to those in Romani society, most women who do perform will retire or draw back their career upon marriage (ibid., p.126). The view on music making in private circles, however, differs. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century every upper-class daughter was musically educated. This displayed sophistication and a high social status; it increased her

---

<sup>10</sup> Bajsa acknowledges a fairly high number of female instrumentalists and singers in Bulgarian folk music, an observation which I also experienced on several visits to Bulgaria.

<sup>11</sup> This impression is interrupted by the mobile phones on the table and the flat screen TV on the wall.

<sup>12</sup> ERRC (2000) *Romani women in Romani and Majority Societies*, Article in the European Romani Rights Centre’s Journal: <http://www.errc.org/article/romani-women-in-romani-and-majority-societies/626> - last accessed on the 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2017.

chances to attract a suitable husband. According to Eleonora, not so in Romani culture: 'Romani people throw away their money. If they are rich, they might buy instruments, but learning and playing music is not a sign of social status for us'.

There is one special scenario in which women were able to become performers without losing their reputation: being born into a musician's family. In this setting, instruments and tutors are within the family, so learning does not cause a financial burden; moreover, the female performers are chaperoned by family members at all times, so their reputation stays pure. Reich found out that almost all female performers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century came from traditional musician's families (1996, p.126). The same applies to the female singers currently known in Šutka's musician's circuit: Džefrina and Atina are both daughters of well-known wedding musicians; they perform regularly with their family ensembles, I was told by Branislav. For girls who want to perform without losing their good reputation, Silverman suggests 'to marry a musician. This mitigates the professional's immodesty because one's husband (or brother or father) serves as a protector of a wife's honour' (2012, p.202).

The following section will look at two exceptional female performers who despite all restrictions managed to break through. I will explore how they achieved that, to what extent they were brought up according to Roma traditions, and the attitude of other Roma towards them.

### **CASE STUDY 1: ESMA REDŽEPOVA**

'Esma Redžepova is perhaps the most famous singer in the world' (Silverman 2012, p.201). She was born in 1943 in Skopje, in the Romani quarters close to the Old Bazar, before large parts of the city centre were destroyed in the 1963 earthquake. Esma was the second-youngest of six children, with a Catholic Roma father from Albania and a Muslim Roma mother from Skopje. (Cartwright 2005, p.100). Her family lived a traditional life, but her mother did support the education of all her children, and unlike the typical upbringing of Roma girls, she did encourage Esma's musical gifts.

'I have been a rebel since I was very young' (Esma Redžepova cited in Cartwright 2005, p.104). Aged 14, she took part in a Radio competition without her parents' knowledge,

and she won. Stevo Teodosievski, a non-Romani musician from Kočani,<sup>13</sup> heard the performance; he was the first to recognize her true potential, helping her develop her musical skills and acting as her manager. Later, they got married. Residents of Šutka who knew her in person pointed out Esma's extreme intelligence, her hard work and her determination. Branislav remarked: 'She had a strong mission, vision and purpose. Her goal was to be famous. This separates her from other Roma women and makes her stand out from the Romani community; others don't believe in themselves and they do not realise their potential'. Eleonora expressed her own admiration for Esma's courage, pointing out that 'nobody can get famous over-night. It's not just her voice capability, she has worked really hard on herself'.

For Esma, it was her defiant and wilful character in combination with her outstanding voice and musicality, which enabled her to rise above the previously discussed traditional attitude of Romani women. 'I was dedicated to being an artist and singer, not a wife' (Esma Redžepova cited in Cartwright 2005, p.101). Ambitious not just to become a singer, but to be a famous one, Esma and Stevo developed a clever and powerful marketing strategy. They promoted her 'as exotic, nubile, emotional and musical on the one hand, yet rooted in families on the other' (Silverman 2012, p.201), using a nostalgic Romani image which would be popular worldwide. Partnering up with humanitarian organisations they performed charitable events and fundraising concerts, which, according to Branislav, made Esma's name famous around the globe and gained her a positive reputation.<sup>14</sup> Stevo's strategy proved extremely successful. Esma did not just break through as the first female Romani singer:

Esma was the first Balkan Romani musicians to achieve commercial success in the non-Romani world: she was the first openly identified Romani singer to perform in the Romani and Macedonian languages for non-Roma. She was the first Romani artist to record in Yugoslavia. She was the first Macedonian woman (Romani or non-Romani) to perform on television. (Silverman 2012, p.205).

Esma became the equivalent of a cultural ambassador for Macedonia and represented her country as well as Romani people and their rights around the world.<sup>15</sup> She received numerous

---

<sup>13</sup> Macedonian town which is known for its excellent brass ensembles. Stevo was working as accordionist and bandleader.

<sup>14</sup> Stevo and Esma made it their aim to be there first in every crisis, raising money and awareness for the people in need. This applied to victims of the Balkan wars, of earthquakes as well as Romani issues.

<sup>15</sup> Eleonora told me 'She was amongst the few, if not the only one who really helped'.

awards, amongst them the *Roma Woman of the Millennium*, the *2002 Mother Theresa Award*, and two nominations for the *Peace Nobel Prize*. The highlight of her career was probably her visit to Chandigarh, India, in 1976, taking part at the *First World Romani Festival of Romani Song and Music*, where she was crowned *Queen of the Gypsies* by Indira Gandhi.

So how did Esma win back the appreciation of Romani people, after breaking most of the norms of conduct for a decent Romani woman? Esma did comply with certain rules. For instance, she never performed in bars or discos, which would have degraded her to prostitute level; her concerts took place in halls and art venues, removed from close contact with strangers. Also, she and Stevo did get married and by performing with her husband, her reputation was protected. According to her student Eleonora, Esma always dressed decently in traditional Romani *Šavare* (pump-trousers suit) or long dresses, never exposing skin in public inappropriately. ‘There was nothing disgraceful or shameful in what Esma was doing. She was highly appreciated. (...) She represented traditional Romani songs and music’.<sup>16</sup>

Ultimately, her interacting with non-Romani people was the biggest cause of rejection. ‘We were the first mixed marriage! That was a big deal! (...) 10-15 thousand people came to our marriage to see if it were true’ (cited in Silverman 2012, p.205). In 1960, Stevo and Esma founded a school for young, musically-gifted Romani boys from disadvantaged homes, whom they raised and tutored (ibid., p.211). Even though she never had children of her own, she served through the school as a mother to 47 “adopted” children.<sup>17</sup> ‘By achieving success among non-Roma first, she legitimated her role as a professional among Roma’ (ibid., p.218). Branislav’s pride reflects the feelings of many Roma towards Esma as a public face of their people:

Esma is a very good woman, a very good housewife, she has a great voice and she uses her intelligence, courage and her instinct. (...) With her charm and her voice, she makes everything and everyone positive; pain, sorrow, worries and negative energies disappear when she sings and dances. She is unique and I’m proud that she is a person from my community.

---

<sup>16</sup> Despite Eleonora’s statement, and information derived from various interviews and other literature, Esma’s dress code of decent coverage according to Romani tradition only applies to her later years, as the video sample for the 1970s shows.

<sup>17</sup> The kids were not legally adopted; living with Esma and Stevo, they were fostered and educated, and trained to be musicians in their school. Eleonora told me she was the only female student amongst them.

Eleonora shares this pride, and so do many Romani people in Macedonia and anywhere else – at least on the surface. However, there are hidden frustrations as well as controversial views of how much difference Esma really made to the Romani community. Esma herself felt she had achieved a high level of change: ‘I opened the way for Roma in the first place, to admit (...) and not to be ashamed they are Roma’ (cited in Silverman 2012, p.207). Branislav though heard some criticising voices amongst his people suggesting that her humanitarian deeds served Macedonia only and that she did little to improve life or culture of her own Romani community. Even the pride towards her as *the Queen* is tainted by doubts about her genuine charitable motives and by hidden feelings of disrespect regarding her life-style. ‘There are women like Esma who do music, but she did not get married for a long time’. Naser remarked that if she would have lived in Šutka, she would not have gotten married at all.

Did she through her example manage to initiate a change amongst Roma women? In Branislav’s experience, Romani women do not really identify with Esma as one of their own. The notion that any woman with talent could develop her skills has not infiltrated common Roma mentality.

## **CASE STUDY 2: BAJSA ARIFOVSKA**

‘A completely different story is Bajsa, a music professor. She is the only known female Romani musician’ said Branislav. Born in 1978 in Kočani, Macedonia, she lived with her Romani parents and her brother in a non-Romani neighbourhood. This has possibly left some impressions which influenced her later life, even though her family itself abided traditional Romani lore. Her parents had nothing to do with music, though some relatives on her father’s side worked as instrument makers and performers. Surrounded by *zurna* (Macedonian reed instrument) and *tapan* (double-sided drum) she started learning traditional Macedonian Romani music from her uncles. When she was eight, her family moved away to *Makedonska Kamenica*, a small town in the East with a low Romani population. There she got involved with Macedonian folk music and learned traditional Macedonian instruments like *tambura* (plucked string instrument) and *gajda* (back pipe). In *Štip*, where she relocated to next, she studied classical music at the Music College, in particular piano and violin. ‘I was always interested to observe other students, how they play flute, clarinet, saxophone. I didn’t have enough money to buy instruments and learn for myself. Often I took the instruments from my

friends and tried to play, in this way I could learn more instruments'. She completed her formal music studies in the main subjects Theory and Music Education at the Music Academy in Skopje.

I studied with Professor Dragan Dautovski, who became my Guru, a second father, a big friend, my teacher and everything. I studied with him many styles of music, and a number of instruments like *kaval* (Macedonian flute), back pipes, drums. But I learned from him more than playing. I learned from him a way of living with music.

Later, Bajsa taught traditional instruments at the musical high school *Ilija Nikolovski*. She formed, arranged the music and led the orchestra at the *Romani Centre for Culture and Education*, which closed down a few years ago due to lack of funds. Nowadays, she works as a freelance musician and performs in the *Dragan Dautovski* Ensemble, the group of her previous professor. Recently, Bajsa became the leader of the Macedonian State Folk Orchestra.

'There is no instrument she cannot play,' Eleonora had mentioned, which I thought to be an exaggeration until I experienced her playing all instruments mentioned above with high proficiency myself. Also, her repertoire and knowledge of Macedonian Romani music, Macedonian folk music and Turkish-influenced *Čalgja* music is astonishing. 'I'm the first Romani girl composer, the first girl in Macedonia who plays traditional music on the clarinet, the violin, the drums and many other instruments'. She is also the first female orchestra leader in Macedonia. This "ground-breaker" spirit is a shared attribute of Esmā and Bajsa. However, whilst Esmā had the initial strategy to become famous, Bajsa's attitude differs: 'I don't think about this "I'm the first girl" thing. I am a musician, and I always did what my heart told me, which was playing music'. So how did Bajsa manage to break through convention, and become what she is? Branislav said 'she is quite something else', referring to her unconventional character. Bajsa told me:

The relatives of my dad kept telling me off "Playing instruments is a male thing - you cannot play weddings or go to music school. As a woman you must not do this in the cycle of men, this is shameful, and you will not find a husband". I don't care about this. I answered back "the music school is not only for weddings, it is for something bigger, it is for art." I did in fact start to play weddings when I was 14 years old, but Macedonian weddings, not Roma weddings.

Her mother, who had by then divorced her husband,<sup>18</sup> supported her in going her own way. Bajsa herself never got married. ‘Boys are afraid of successful woman’. When I met her, I was really taken in by her warm and sociable personality, open and unpretentious with a natural confidence. ‘In my childhood, I never played with Barbie, and I never owned any make-up. I always liked to do the man’s things, for example to repair something’. Any trials of her relatives to educate her into a well-behaved Romani girl, failed. Bajsa never allowed others to constrain her. In her life, Romani traditions only play an active role as far as the music goes.

Is Bajsa respected by Romani people? Interestingly enough yes, everyone I talked to holds her in high regard. It seems that her honest personality and her excellent musical performance has gained her appreciation amongst Roma despite performing unchaperoned with male musicians.<sup>19</sup> However, Bajsa does not really live a traditional Romani life, so whilst she is respected and accepted as a female professional Romani musician, she is an outsider to the community.

## **CURRENT INFLUENCES AND FUTURE OUTLOOK**

It was Branislav who initiated the following train of thought: ‘I’m really deeply sorry, Gundula, watching this situation in the last 5 to 10 years, I think that Romani population lost their identity very quickly by accepting religion. I’m talking about the identity regarding freedom and music’. Branislav thinks that amongst the low-educated Roma, which in his opinion is still the majority, people too easily accept rules of religion and suffocate their own traditions. In order to collect more evidence, I asked my other interviewees. Eleonora, a Muslim herself, also feels disturbed by the religious rules which recently seem to have more influence on everyday life. ‘Making music is considered a sin. Also, girls are told to cover themselves up from the age of 14’. Sugarman made a similar observation: ‘Historically this ideology about the shame of professional female singing and dancing existed among all ethnicities in the Balkans, but today it is stronger among Muslims’ (cited in Silverman 2012, web supplement). My own time in Šutka has been too short to witness changes in religious

---

<sup>18</sup> Divorces were extremely rare at that time around 30 years ago; nowadays they are still reproached in Roma society, especially when initiated by the wife.

<sup>19</sup> I would like to add an observation which may influence that attitude: neither her manners nor her dress code contain any flirtatious or specifically feminine elements. This applies to both, stage performance and every-day life.

practice. I did notice though Islamic customs such as dress codes for women and abstinence from alcohol, which, for me, was previously unheard amongst Balkan Romani. The effect of modern Islamic movements on music making seems not to be isolated to Muslim Romani in Šutka. Landau discovered similar tendencies amongst young Moroccan Muslims in London (2010, pp.123,-124).<sup>20</sup>

Is a change of the situation for female Romani musicians likely to happen in the future? Bajsa reported that during her teaching work at the Romani Cultural Centre, she did notice an increasing number of girls learning instruments. Both Branislav and Bajsa mentioned two female classical violinists who had studied at the Music Academy. However, they have disappeared from the community, probably they have moved to a different country. 'I wish parents would leave their old-fashioned traditions behind, and let their children do what makes them happy'. This is Eleonora's wish, and she is positive change will occur eventually. 'We Romani people are the most talented population in music. I know a lot of girls who would like to sing, but their parents don't allow it'. Branislav, in his role as an unofficial cultural attaché, took a pro-active position: 'this interview helped me to realise there is no talent support for females. I shall dwell on possibilities to first detect the musical talents of girls and then support them, so we can altogether develop a richer and more positive society'. Xhemajli described the change in society in a more general way: 'we find ourselves now in a period of radical change. There are many Roma now who attend school and university. There are also many Romani women who, despite their traditional upbringing, have built their own lives for themselves' (ERRC 2000). Despite those positive visions, my impression after conversations with various Roma in Šutka is that change is slow. Most families are strongly attached to their traditional lives, they do not feel trapped and therefore see no reason for change. Whilst Romani musicians seem to pick up modern musical styles from anywhere in the world in no time, it appears to be the opposite when allowing for any change to their traditional customs. In this, the Roma activists' desires differ from the wider Roma population. Still, walking through Šutka and spending time with people, there is a lot of music, happiness and laughter there, more than I can sense amongst North-West Europeans, where the chances for men and women are equal.

---

<sup>20</sup> Driven by their own motivation, the young Muslim changed both, their music making and their music listening habits, away from secular music to purely *Qur'an* reciting.

## CONCLUSION

My odyssey for finding female musicians did not reveal any mysterious places where they may be hiding, but it exposed reasons for their small number. Puzzling is the point which Bajsa raised regarding an overall lack of female musicians who perform traditional music in Macedonia. Her observation that women seem not to be interested and inspired to play music in general underlines different aspects in addition to the issues of patriarchy, of respectability and of religious rules, it exposes it as choice of the women themselves. Considering, that those three main reasons were raised by males and by established female performers only, but not by any of the average Romani girls, emphasises this argument. It also could explain the low number of rebellious girls who fight to break through traditions to become performers.

My research revealed that the aspect of reputation is certainly the main motive why parents seldom encourage their daughters to perform music. Similar issues had applied to female performers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which implies that Romani customs have not changed much since then. Whilst traditional lore and patriarchy is still respected by most Romani all over the world, Šutka Romani women's attitudes may additionally be influenced by being Muslim. Financial issues certainly have some impact too, however, as Esmā and Bajsa have proven, those obstacles can be overcome with determination and hard work, if the will and passion is there.<sup>21</sup> Then again, whilst being respected and admired as performers, neither of them was or is really embedded into traditional society in their adult life.

One cannot know to what extent the Romani girls' lack of rebellion and desire for change may be caused by those hidden feelings of superiority towards their men, and towards the "immoral" life-style of Western-European and American women, or possibly derives from some passive rebellion or deeply hidden envy. Nowadays, musical performance is being discouraged even further by current religious movements.

A more supportive environment for female performers and a transformation of Romani society towards equality for women will not happen quickly, as long as women themselves protect their current life-style. According to Branislav, super-women like Bajsa and Esmā only appear once in a century.

---

<sup>21</sup> The supportive attitude of both of their mothers towards their education and music making may have played a role too in their achievements.

## REFERENCES:

### Bibliography:

- CARTWRIGHT, Garth (2005) *Princes Amongst Men: Journey's with Gypsy Musicians* (London, Serpent's Tail).
- DANIELSON, Virginia (1997) *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century* (The University of Chicago Press).
- DOUBLEDAY, Veronika (1999) 'The Frame Drum in the Middle East: Musical Instruments and Power' in *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (University of Illinois Press).
- EVANS, Thammy (2007) *Macedonia* (Bradt Travel Guides LTD, UK).
- FONSECA, Isabella (2006) *Bury Me Standing* (London, Vintage).
- HELLIER, Ruth (2013) *Woman Singers in Global Contexts* (University of Illinois Press)
- IVANCHICH DUNIN, Elsie (2006) 'Romani Dance Event in Skopje, Macedonia: Research Strategies, Cultural Identities, and Technologies' in Theresa Buckland *Dancing From Past to Present: Nation, Culture, Identities*, chapter 8 pp. 175-199 (University of Wisconsin Press).
- KERTESZ-WILKINSON, Iren (1997) *The Fair is Ahead of me* (Budapest, Institute for Musicology of the Hungarian Academy for Sciences).
- KERTESZ-WILKINSON, Iren (2017) 'Gypsy Music' in *Grove Music Online* (Oxford University Press) <http://0-www.oxfordmusiconline.com.wam.city.ac.uk/subscriber/article/grove/music/41427>
- LANDAU, Carolyn Sandra (2010) *Moroccans, Music and Identity In Britain: Exploring The Relationship Between Ethnomusicology Sound Achieves And Cultural Heritage Communities In The Diaspora*, PhD Thesis (Music Department, City University, London).
- MAUS, Fred Everett (2012) 'Music, Gender and Sexuality' in Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, Richard Middleton *The Cultural Study of Music* (New York, Routledge) pp. 317-329.
- OPPONG, Steward Harrison (2014) 'The position of women in a traditional Romani community' in *Ahfad Journal*, Vol. 31, Issue 2.
- REICH, Nancy (1993) 'Woman as Musicians: A Question of Class' in Ruth A. Solie *Musicology and Difference* (University of California Press) pp. 125-146.
- ROSENFELDER, Ruth (2003) *Hidden Voices: Women's Music in London's Lubavitch and Satmar Hasidic Communities*, PhD Thesis (Music Department, City University, London).
- SAROSI, Balint and Luiza Tari (1996) 'Die Ära des Verbunkos' in Anita Awosusi *Die Music der Sinti und Roma*, Band 1: Die Ungarische „Zigeunermusik“ (Dokumentations- und Kulturzentrum Deutscher Sinti und Roma) pp. 25 – 79.
- SEEMAN, Sonja Tamar (2012) 'Macedonian Čalgija: A Musical Refashioning of National Identity' in *Ethnomusicology Forum*, Vol 21, No. 3 (Routledge) pp. 295 – 326.

- SILVERMAN, Carol (1996) Music and Power: ‘Gender and Performance among Roma (Gypsies) of Skopje, Macedonia’ in *The World of Music*, Vol. 38, No. 1 *Music of the Roma* (Verlag für Wissenschaft und Bildung) pp. 63-76.
- SILVERMAN, Carol (2012) ‘Education, Agency, and Power among Macedonian Muslim Romani Woman in New York City’ in *Signs*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (The University of Chicago Press) pp. 30-36.
- SILVERMAN, Carol (2012), *Romani Routes* (Oxford University Press)
- SZEMEN, Ioana (2009) ‘“Gypsy Music” and Deejays: Orientalism, Balkanism and Romani Musicians’ in *TDR*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (The MIT Press).

#### **Websites:**

- IZVOR MUSIC, *Biography on Bajsa Arifovska*: <http://www.izvormusic.com/bios/bajsa.html> - last accessed on the 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2017.
- ERRC (2000) *Romani women in Romani and Majority Societies*, Article in the European Romani Rights Centre’s Journal: <http://www.errc.org/article/romani-women-in-romani-and-majority-societies/626> - last accessed on the 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2017.
- IMPORT - EXPORT (2016) *Interview with Esma Redžepova* by Robert Ringey – last accessed on the 9<sup>th</sup> May 2017.
- SILVERMAN, Carol (2012) *Romani Routes* Web Supplement: <http://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/9780195300949/> – last accessed on the 9<sup>th</sup> May 2017.
- WORLD MUSIC CENTRAL.org (2007) *Interview with Macedonian Singer Esma Redžepova, the “Queen of the Gypsies”*, interviewed by Ivana D’Alessandro – last accessed on the 9<sup>th</sup> May 2017.

#### **List of Interviews:**

- Bajsa Arifovska, the only female professional Romani musician. Interview in Skopje, Macedonia on the 20<sup>th</sup> March 2017.
- Branislav Petrovski: Roma activist, Founder of *Romano Ilo* (Romani Heart), a cultural organisation supporting young people in art. Interview in Topansko Pole, Skopje, Macedonia on the 13<sup>th</sup> February 2017.
- Eleonora Mustafovska, singer and the only female student of Esma Redžepova. Interview in Kratovo, Macedonia on the 16<sup>th</sup> February 2017.
- Elvis Asan, semi-professional musician, his wife Rehijan Asan and his cousin Naser Jašarević. Interview in Šuto Orizari, Skopje, Macedonia on the 17<sup>th</sup> February 2017.

## SUPPORTING MATERIALS:

### Some of the people involved:



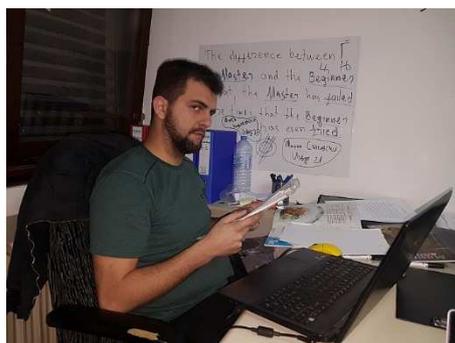
Music making & Interview with Bajsa



Interview with Branislav



Esmā and Eleonora



Mihajlo Stojanov

## Map of Šuto Orizari “Šutka“:



### Links to Music Video samples (last accessed on the 14<sup>th</sup> May 2017)

#### **Bajsa Arifovska:**

Yeni Yol – Čalgja piece, performed by Bajsa on clarinet: <https://youtu.be/n1TDuDAw-sQ>

Igrale Igrale, Devojinja - Macedonian folk song, performed by Bajsa on *tambura* and the *Izvoren Orchestar*: <https://youtu.be/0YE22oRUflk>

Nad Pirin - traditional Macedonian folk dance, arranged for symphony & traditional orchestra by Bajsa: [https://youtu.be/ugQzdRLD\\_DA](https://youtu.be/ugQzdRLD_DA)

Rovela Odemo – traditional Romani Song, arranged, led and performed by Bajsa on piano and *Duško Georgievski* on vocals: [https://youtu.be/Pw\\_4f2nc\\_rw](https://youtu.be/Pw_4f2nc_rw)

Tri Godini Stano Kako Me Zafana – Čalgja song, with Bajsa on violin and Zoran Dzorlev: <https://youtu.be/MD8Tx1iXsyQ>

My Way b – Composition by Bajsa, from the Choreodrama “Boken Dream”:  
<https://youtu.be/dGu5lcM9xrg>

Harmeologic - Collaboration project featuring Bajsa on a number of instruments:  
[https://youtu.be/\\_NZmjqB0eGw](https://youtu.be/_NZmjqB0eGw)

**Esma Redžepova:**

Čaje Šukarije – Romani song performed by Esma: <https://youtu.be/x4-MORq8LTs>

Đelem, Đelem – Romani song, performed by Esma: [https://youtu.be/UiIcfH0\\_Z3g](https://youtu.be/UiIcfH0_Z3g)

Romano Horo - Romani song, performed by Esma in the early 1970s:

<https://youtu.be/fP9FYpp6p6s>

Gore Vo Rajot - Macedonian folk song, performed by Esma: <https://youtu.be/jxSrLyGnlSs>

Devla - Romani song, performed by Esma & Stevo and some of their students:

<https://youtu.be/MeQ62ql7H6c>

Amanet Od Mene – Macedonian folk song, performed by Esma and her student Eleonora

Mustafovska: <https://youtu.be/MeQ62ql7H6c>