

Vernacular Ensembles in the Academy: TTU Balkan Ensemble

Vernacular music ensembles hosted in academic settings, i.e., “conservatories of music,” afford numerous opportunities unique to vernacular musics that prove to be of great value in the academic music setting. Vernacular idioms each have their own appeal and present specific and general challenges to students that they are not likely to encounter in classical or jazz ensembles. In the case of Balkan music, this appeal is often a case of its unusual meters, rhythms, and modes. Students are often challenged by the improvisation required. The fact that harmony is not prioritized, that its rhythms are usually dance-oriented, that it requires memorization in addition to improvisation, results in an unfamiliar musical territory. Their initial impression that the music is “simple” evaporates and with it comes the realization that there are other kinds of complexities—in contrast to the structural, developmental, orchestrational, or harmonic complexity of the Euro-American concert tradition—that are usually not obvious on first hearing.

These complexities usually have to be pointed out to be perceived, and taught aurally to be achieved. They are best taught by actual practitioners of vernacular idioms or those player-educators who have had direct personal experience with an idiom’s tradition bearers. Aural vernacular pedagogies, while different from those of classical music and jazz, serve to remind music students of the importance of aural transmission in those musics, as well as providing an alternative framework for experiencing music and its acquisition. Having more than one view of how human societies conceive of music and its function, as well as the special problems posed by its characteristics, instrumentarium, and repertoire, gives students a broader set of tools

with which to approach their own musical lives, and serves to make them more well-rounded people as well as musicians.

Appeal

On first hearing Balkan music many students perceive it as slightly exotic but not completely otherworldly. It sounds challenging but achievable. Students are attracted to a music that feels unique and challengingly different, the acquisition of which might even set them apart from their peers.¹ They recognize that Balkan music requires “chops” that they don’t have, chops they might wish to acquire.

Another part of the appeal is the leveling aspect of students approaching an unfamiliar music together without a “supposition of skill” (as one of my students put it). A student who connects with Balkan music might excel in that context when participation in a larger ensemble has not worked for her or him. A student who is not afraid to try improvising might gain the respect of more technically capable musicians in the ensemble who are not ready to do so. Another student might have creative arranging ideas that would not be welcome (or possible) in other ensembles. While perhaps not appealing to every music student, Balkan ensemble does provide a unique opportunity for transformational experiences for those students for whom it is a good fit and every student who has participated has said so.

Challenges:

Asymmetrical meters can pose a challenge for students; some take to it rather naturally (often these are composition students), while others may take a bit longer to internalize them.²

However, while the challenge of these meters might seem very difficult when viewed on the page, they quickly become understandable when learned and applied aurally.

The scales, or *Makams* used in Balkan music may seem strange at first but students take to them once they hear and then play them.³ The realization that these scales are not used as a framework for harmony seems to be an epiphanic step in the process that contributes to the recognition of “other complexities.”

As I have implied above, for many students learning to improvise is a daunting prospect. The fact that the improvisation in Balkan music is not based on chord structures like those used in jazz, blues, or rock, that employs various makams, and often asymmetrical meters, means that it can be a substantial but enlightening challenge even for students with experience improvising in high school or college jazz ensembles.

For other students memorization provides a significant challenge and with that struggle comes the realization that, given the memorized performance practice required by musics from all over the world and all periods, Euro-American concert music’s reliance on notation is anomalous. The requirement of a “literature” stored in the mind rather than on the page is something that most students have not experienced before, unless they come from a family or community within a living vernacular tradition. Memorization is also a link to early European music as well as to the preliterate traditions of epic oral poetry in which meter and rhyme, as well as narrative, served to organize a vast oral literature in the “mind’s eye” of the bard (*file*, *aşiq*) who was at once a performer, a scholar and a repository of his culture’s repertoire.

Finally, the requirement that each student make a personal contribution to the music—whether it be through improvisation, arranging, or composition—entails a different level of

responsibility than that expected in other ensembles. They are conscious that they are helping to shape a tradition, at their university if nowhere else, of an ensemble that will continue after they have moved on and through which their successors will come to know their previous efforts. This is a model of the idea of continuity in vernacular music traditions.

Procedures:

Interfacing with the asymmetrical meters of Balkan music can actually be accomplished very quickly and efficiently. The procedure I use is to simply beat the quarter note/dotted quarter note pulse of a 5/8 *baidushka* on my leg or chest and—with NO explanation—invite the students to do likewise. Once they are all solidly on board I pick up an instrument and play the tune. Afterwards I invite *them* to explain what was going on. Someone almost always “gets” it and can explain to the others, thus providing a usual example of peer-based teaching. I then explain that the uneven quarter note/dotted quarter note combination is the building block of all the other asymmetrical meters.

From there we go to 7/8 by adding another quarter note and repeating the process, still with omitting introductory explanation but with discovery after the fact. Then we move on to 9/8, 11/8, 13/8, 15/8, 17/8. Next come examples of an asymmetrical 8/8, 10/8, 12/8, 14/8, followed by the inevitable questions, “Why is 8/8 not just 4/8, 10/8 just 5/4, 12/8 just 6/8, 14/8 just 7/4?” The answers to such questions only enhance the growing respect the students are acquiring for this “simple” monophonic music.

Not all Balkan music is in unusual “non-Western” scales. Much of it in fact employs Ionian, Dorian, or Aeolian modes (or their eastern equivalents). But some of the *makams* are

quite different. These can be introduced simply by playing them for students, allowing them to analyze the sequence of steps, and then performing a melody in that makam. I always start with *makam hijaz*, which has the scale degrees: I, b2, M3, P4, P5, m6, m7, or its variant *hijaz kar* (1, b2, M3, P4, P5, m6, M7). I choose these because they are the makams with which students are most likely to be familiar from movie soundtracks or television, and because the lower tetrachord of each corresponds to the upper tetrachord of the harmonic minor scale, with which they are almost certainly familiar. This recognition that the lower tetrachord is based on the tonic and not the fifth can be disorienting but enlightening.

The next step is to have them read through some tunes in those makams and begin to get a feel for how this monophonic music is structured. Once they can play a tune through I introduce a vamp or solo form for the piece over which we will improvise solos. I make them memorize the vamp and then listen to me play a solo. I invite them to give it a try. Usually at least one student will agree. The advice I give at this point is that they stay perfectly within the rhythmic structure of the vamp, matching it note for note, except with different pitches. This will usually get them over the obstacle of playing something that is not written down. In this first step they usually are thinking of what intervals their improvised notes make with the notes of the vamp, imposing a harmonic structure where there has been none. This is fine because it helps them learn that they can improvise without crashing and burning, and, since we westerners tend to hear harmonically, it can actually be a window into the melodic structure that is not obvious through sight-reading the melody from a chart.

Further explorations include advising students to stray from the rhythmic structure of the vamp, trying to actually subvert it and knock their fellow players off it—a study in

concentration for those playing the vamp, to be sure, but an ear-stretching exercise for the improviser. I usually require that players conform to just the notes of the makam at this point but there is room for divergence later on in the process when they are more experienced improvisers.

The next procedure comes when a piece has been arranged and the soloists have volunteered (or are chosen). If there is more than one volunteer I usually put them in the order that will allow for a dynamic build, such as cello followed by trumpet, rather than the other way around. That reduces the chance that a soloist will feel apprehension at having to follow a colleague who has just made a big noise. It also affords an opportunity for a little friendly competition—especially if there are three soloists rather than just two—that helps them focus on their own solos and those of their colleagues.

Finally, I should say that the fact that improvisation in Balkan music is (usually) not in a chordal context is a daunting yet liberating prospect for many students. Since almost all of the improvisation they are likely to have heard has been over chord changes their absence can be disorienting (even if they have not tried improvising over chord changes themselves, they are certainly acculturated to hearing that process). Having only to think about the notes in a makam and a vamp over which to play those notes is certainly a simpler structure for learning to improvise but it is not necessarily easier. The advice I give is to find notes in the makam that sound good on their instrument against the vamp. It is as simple and as difficult as that.

Another aspect is that of conductor-less performance. While it might be a more familiar and perhaps comfortable setting for many of my student musicians I do not conduct my ensemble in the manner of an orchestra or symphonic band. That would be inappropriate for

most of the music that we perform and it is not part of most of the traditions from which we draw our material and inspiration. I think it is a healthy stretch for young musicians to approach Balkan music with a more egalitarian spirit such as they would experience in a small chamber ensemble, jazz combo, or rock band.

Importantly, the cueing of tempi is assigned to different players for each piece, thus the leadership role is passed around depending on the requirements of each piece and individuals' capabilities therein. This accomplishes several things:

1. Putting the responsibility on one musician means that she or he focuses to a degree that is not the same when all are simply playing in the ensemble.
2. The rest of the ensemble, seeing their colleague in the "hot seat," often focuses on that player more than they would a conductor.
3. The continually shifting focus—much like the Native American concept of the "talking stick," in which the stick is passed around an assembly, its holder being given the undivided attention of the rest of the assembly members because each knows that they will be given the same consideration when they hold the stick—tends to reinforce the *esprit de corps* of the ensemble.
4. Putting an individual player in charge of starting tempi means that not only are they responsible for choosing and initiating an appropriate tempo when they start a piece, they also have the power to make an informed performance choice that—however subtle—will influence the way the piece is performed.

5. The preceding likewise means that each individual in the hot seat is subject to the feedback of their fellow ensemble members, which peer pressure can be much more potent than that of the ensembles' director.
6. #s 4 and 5 above mean that ensemble members are responsible to and for each other, that they are in fact a community. All vernacular musics are centered in communities and building community within a university-based ensemble is an excellent way of teaching vernacular music, modeling the ethics by which it is produced.
7. The absence of a conductor means that the director, even if s/he performs with the ensemble as I do, is much less likely to be the center of the audiences' attention, thereby more widely distributing the credit for the evening's performance.

Benefits:

Learning about a different musical system is a great exercise in diversity at many levels. Realizing there are other musics with priorities that contrast those of classical and jazz is a mind- and ear-opening experience. Putting oneself in the musical "shoes" of Balkan musicians, and then approaching their music, while adopting their priorities, can be a humbling but energizing experience. The question often comes up, "How can this be an art music with no harmony?" The answer not only increases respect for the music in question, it also invites one to more properly appreciate the achievements of the Euro-American concert tradition.

Many students have related to me that participating in Balkan ensemble has helped their concepts of time and rhythm, improving their “chops.” Others cite learning to improvise as a particularly valuable skill acquired through the ensemble. Still others mention that it has inspired their composing and/or arranging activities. A few have said that they intend to start their own Balkan ensembles when they begin their teaching careers. In a recent informal poll of ten current members of the ensemble each one has communicated that being in the ensemble has changed their musicianship for the better and that it has been a positive experience in their lives.

Conclusion:

For students who do not have much experience outside of orchestra, symphonic band, or marching band, Balkan ensemble provides a unique set of experiences through which they can acquire useful tools for their performing and teaching careers. These tools include a set of procedures that, while they may not be in and of themselves unique, together constitute a tool set that can be used as a template for vernacular ensembles in upper level music education. And finally I think that there is great value in being part of an ensemble that approaches music as a set of living processes—rather than a static cultural achievement to be reenacted within very narrowly prescribed conditions—and that is what vernacular music is all about.

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¹ It is also something that can set them apart from the school’s faculty. In our institution all six of our musicology faculty have experience with Balkan music but we are unusual in that respect.

² Asymmetrical meters usually have an odd numeral larger than “3” for their top number with the subdivision of notes within the bar in unequal groups, resulting in a pattern where the note value of the subdivision is equal but the length of the pulses is not. For instance, 5/8 meter can be expressed as a pulse of a quarter note followed by a dotted quarter, or two eighth notes followed by three. It is also possible to asymmetrically divide a meter whose top number is an even numeral, like 8/8, in which case an uneven subdivision would be quarter-dotted quarter-quarter or two eighths-three eighths-two eighths.

³ There is a fair amount of overlap between Turkish *makam* and Arabic *maqam*, and many similarities in Greek *dromoi*. The Persian *dastgah* system may precede both the Turkish and Arabic systems and there is a relationship with Byzantine music. The theoretical basis of makam is the division of each whole tone into nine commas, resulting in a microtonal scale of either 17, 21, 27, or even 79 unequal divisions of the octave, depending on regional differences. The musics that are related through these systems are almost completely non-harmonic being based on a drone or ostinato (there is an exception for some types of Greek music that use equally tempered fretted instruments in which triadic harmony is used). Exploring the microtonality in makam is done in some university ensemble contexts but it is not something that is easily prioritized for students who are just being introduced to it, and is impossible on many of the instruments used in the university setting, such as piano, guitar, accordion, bouzouki, mandolin, banjo, harmonium, and it is difficult on brass and winds, less so for strings.