

# New Europe College Yearbook 2014-2015



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# ‘DOUBLE IDENTITY’ OF CONTEMPORARY GYPSY MUSICIANS IN EASTERN EUROPE OR WHY “THE ROMA [STILL] WISH TO BE HEARD”<sup>1</sup>

In this paper I am dealing with the issue of ‘double identity’ of Gypsy musicians – their concurrent identification as Gypsies and as musicians.<sup>2</sup> I claim that this ‘double identity’ enables them playing music of specific traits, music that is referred to as ‘Gypsy music’ or alternatively as music performed in a Gypsy style. It can be claimed that music not only serves as a means of expressing this ‘double identity’ of Gypsy musicians, but is – in fact – a reflection of this specific duality.

## **The Notion of Identity – Problems and Issues**

While “it is difficult to escape the word identity in contemporary science”,<sup>3</sup> the notion of identity is – at the same time, and perhaps exactly because of its spreading popularity – one of the most controversial terms used in today’s world. The very word identity can be encountered across various disciplines where it is assigned with slightly different meanings. For example the problem of a personal identity as well as self-fashioning has been the subject of investigation by, among others, such luminous academicians as Locke, Hume, Diderot, Kant, Herder, Humboldt, Goethe, Hegel, Bergson, Heidegger, as well as many others.<sup>4</sup> Depending on the school of thought or the field – be it psychology, sociology, philosophy as well as depending on the preferences of particular authors the issue of identity is gaining on new definitions.<sup>5</sup> But also, in many areas of research, identity is still seen as problematic. For example in the realm of phenomenological philosophy identity can be equalled with ego and defined as “the unity pole of the stream of intentionalities”<sup>6</sup> while in anthropology – especially in the recent times – identity is being discussed in terms of its crisis, alienation, etc., and is characterised as

uncertain, fractured, hyphenated or multiple. Michel Maffesoli (b. 1944) maintains that contemporary mass culture has disintegrated the sense of self-identity since today's social existence is conducted through fragmented tribal groupings, organized around the catchwords, brand-names and sound-bites of consumer culture.<sup>7</sup>

Having said that it needs to be stressed that in the light of these observations an attempt to describe the identity of today's Gypsy musicians of eastern Europe (e.g. Romania or Poland) is not an easy one, for their situation is conditioned by the ethnicity, as well as economic, cultural and political circumstances. However, I will try to outline the identity of contemporary Gypsy musicians relying on their own opinions as expressed in guided interviews. This methodological approach was inspired by a Romanian ethnomusicologist Costin Moisil (b.1970) who conducted interviews in order to show whether, and if yes then how, music can be treated not only as an element reflecting personal preferences but also as a manifestation of identity, as well as an important factor contributing to its building.<sup>8</sup> The stimulus came also from the words of another Romanian musicologist/ethnomusicologist – Speranța Rădulescu (b.1949) who said that Gypsies' standpoints need to be taken into consideration when talking about their music.<sup>9</sup> The materials for this paper were predominantly gathered during my stay as an International Fellow at New Europe Collage in Bucharest (2014-2015), but also in my native city of Kraków (Poland) in summer 2014. Furthermore, in this article I am resorting to several chats conducted with Romanian Gypsy musicians as presented by Speranța Rădulescu in her valuable book *Taifasuri despre muzica țigănească/Chats about Gypsy Music* (2004).

There exists different types of identity: collective, e.g. referring to a group and personal, referring to the characteristic of an individual, who constructs his/her own narratives of identity by assuming certain roles to play.<sup>10</sup> In this paper I am talking about the identity of an individual, particular Gypsy musician, however I am also trying to generalize by pinpointing similarities and parallels between musicians' attitudes and behaviours, as revealed in their interviews. In fact I see any person, a given Gypsy musician, as "a product of interactions and relations" of social character.

Thus individuality is dependent on the social context of reference and can be not considered as an absolute attribute, it is dependent on the

circumstances in which individual and collective identity are a matter of perspective of analysis and not two distinct forms by means of which individuals represent themselves as part of their social environment.<sup>11</sup>

Hence for me identity not only is closely associated with “particular circumstances and role frames”<sup>12</sup> but also “rather than being seen as fixed, homogenous, immutable” I treat identity as “fluid and in the state of flux, as performed rather than given, hybrid, and transgressive in norms”.<sup>13</sup> I strongly agree with those researchers who talk about identity as an unceasing process, or “as spatiotemporal continuity”<sup>14</sup> that results in the sense of

coherence to individual experience, places incident, episode and the routine of particular biographies in the flow of historical time; it is an ongoing endeavour that has as main points of reference the parameters of the discourse that manipulate and integrate the various categories that make sense of social reality.<sup>15</sup>

Following that route of thinking it needs to be reminded that identities can emerge from various reasons, among other they can be elective – i.e. chosen, affectual – i.e. stemming from feelings, or can be tribal in character (the sense of belonging being a dominant).<sup>16</sup> Hence it can be stated that “every person has a multitude identity, since everyone who lives in society belongs simultaneously to several groups. Most people have an ethnic affiliation, geographic one, but also a familial affiliation, a professional one, an age one, and so on”.<sup>17</sup> However, for me two most important factors determining the identity of Gypsy musicians, shaping their ego, are: their ethnicity and job. I have adapted this dualistic approach from contemporary anthropologists like Sandra Wallman and sociologists like Kevin Hetherington. Sandra Wallman for example talks about work and locality as two powerful, often overriding factors decisive when it comes to the identity potential. She concludes that “in matter of locality, it is normal for people to identify to some extent with the area in which they live” while “identification with work and the products or rewards of work is not new, but it became more salient in these times”.<sup>18</sup> Similarly Kevin Hetherington argues that mostly two factors determine the expression of identity: everyday life and spatiality. While identity is about communication who you are (or who you think you are) because everyday life is connected with a ‘job’ – performed tasks, and spatiality is

connected with the neighbourhood, principally people you are surrounded by and thus can be associated with ethnicity.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, I propose to tag the identity of contemporary Gypsy musicians as 'double' and as I will try to show their identification is primarily concerned with them feeling that they are Gypsies and that they are musicians rather than simply being Gypsy musicians.

## **Disputes over Gypsy Ethnicity**

Similarly to the word identity, the term ethnicity is considered as "an emotional issue" since it revolves around personal experiences and touches upon the most intimate questions people ask themselves: 'who I am?'.<sup>20</sup> Despite its wide use, the concept of ethnicity "conceived as a designating universal form of groups identity, shaped in [...] different entities" continues to raise fundamental problems, and "its capacity to cluster realities of the same order has been contested".<sup>21</sup> Ethnicity – never being "a singular identity locus"<sup>22</sup> – has often been defined as the character or quality of a given group, but various authors adopted different definitions. For example for a historical and cultural sociologist, Orlando Patterson (b. 1944) ethnicity is "the conscious awareness" – a kind of choice made every day by all people, the decision which manifests itself by a declaration: first admitting to oneself and then proclaiming the same to the rest of the world. This declaration should be further reinforced by commitment and finally overtly expressed.<sup>23</sup>

Yet the understanding of one's own ethnicity bases predominantly on perceiving the "identity as difference and as recognition" (of this difference).<sup>24</sup> Obviously these "differences are established and performed in multiple ways",<sup>25</sup> especially visible during a meeting of different individuals being not only a moment of encounter but also an occasion for an emergence of a relation between people.<sup>26</sup> But despite the fact that differences play an extremely vital role in constructing the sense of identity by helping to define the ethnic belonging, they are more than problematic to explain. The essence of the difference is not to delineate central from marginal but is often linked with creating the feelings of tension, resistance, and empowering everyday choices.<sup>27</sup>

And indeed in case of Gypsies given the diversity of their communities and various strategies of self-identification their own identity has always been constructed on the basis of the clear division: the difference between



Gypsy and non-Gypsy world.<sup>28</sup> “Any investigation of Gypsy ethnicity must begin with a discussion of boundaries. [...] The Gypsy worldview is lodged in the dichotomy between insider and outsider, or Rom [...] and gazhe”.<sup>29</sup> It can be even repeated after Fredrik Barth that “the critical focus of investigation [...] becomes the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff it encloses”.<sup>30</sup> It is valid to underline this fact as it is easy to confuse ethnicity with “cultural behaviour or cultural awareness”, or simply link it with “collective actions”.<sup>31</sup>

Especially Gypsies who become musicians may “manipulate boundaries between themselves and others in order to associate themselves with the socially powerful, disassociate themselves from the powerless, and enhance their market niche and status”.<sup>32</sup> They actively play out their position and negotiate their identity often being “agents in the making of cultural difference as they seek both to blur as well as to clarify the boundaries between themselves and other groups in society”.<sup>33</sup>

### **Gypsies as Musicians**

Some authors would argue that Roms have virtually monopolized certain occupations,<sup>34</sup> and have been mostly associated with some crafts but especially musicianship. This seems the result of the “cultural division of labor based on color and ethnicity [that] facilitated the confounding of occupation, ethnicity, race and class”.<sup>35</sup> As commonly known Gypsies – able to accommodate to situations and economies dominated by other groups<sup>36</sup> – offered their services as fortune tellers, acrobats, jugglers, etc. already in medieval times. Soon they found and willingly occupied an economic niche as itinerant musicians. For example in Romania and Bulgaria, the early mentions of professional Gypsy musicians can be traced back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Thus in eastern as well as south-eastern Europe Gypsies became strongly associated with their excellent musical talents and perceived as wandering (often street) performers. Soon many “Gypsy musicians often travelled to the big cities to seek employment either voluntarily or under orders from the lord of the house. Gradually, increasing numbers of Gypsies – musicians as well as those from other professions – came to settle in these large cities”.<sup>37</sup> Since “the Rom have adapted extremely well to urbanization”,<sup>38</sup> in the city settings of central and south-eastern Europe Gypsy musicians started to perform for remuneration in public, often in beer gardens, restaurants, during dances, etc. soon becoming an indispensable element of an urban landscape.

It was Hungarian Gypsies who quite early on began to organise their own musical groups to perform in cities: these bands were referred to as Zigeunerkapellen. The initial phase in their formation coincided with the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the subsequent stage ended around the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, while the final development of the Zigeunerkapellen was to commence in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The flowering of these orchestras was stimulated by the increasing recognition enjoyed by Gypsy musicians within Habsburg Empire. For example in the fin-de-siècle Budapest everyone listened to Gypsy music as it was “the fashion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century”.<sup>39</sup> From a simple two-instrument line up the Gypsy bands rapidly started to grow: they were composed of three or four instrumentalists, chiefly fiddlers, as well as a musician playing the dulcimer. Zigeunerkapellen did not perform music for their own use but treated music making as a source of income and played in the gardens and cafés of the large towns of the empire. Also an important line of division in the repertoire was drawn across the music played by bands in villages and in the cities. The stylistic features of music performed by Gypsies in the Hungarian countryside did not contain the factors widely identified with so-called ‘Gypsy music’, among other things, the interval of an augmented second. Their performance style did not display the predilection for overt ornamentation, alien to this type of music were polyphonic solutions. The above elements, associated as standard for the Gypsy bands playing at the estates of aristocratic patrons, were to become characteristic for the music performed by Gypsy musicians in urban areas. Not only was a knowledge of musical score often met amongst Gypsy musicians but also the level of their musical education, particularly during the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century grew notably, which resulted consequently in the generating of a sizeable group of professional Gypsy musicians. Musically educated Gypsies, wandering from town to town in search of an opportunity to earn money, brought with them musical innovations from the artistic musical current.

In Hungarian areas music performed by urban Gypsy bands became so popular throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century that when Franz Liszt tried to define Gypsy music he “discovered what he called and believed to be gypsy music, which was however Hungarian urban music propagated by gipsy bands”.<sup>40</sup> While basing himself on what appears one of the most encountered ethnological antinomy between ‘urban-rural’<sup>41</sup> another researcher of Gypsy music Béla Bartók in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century shifted in the direction of opposing urban practices in the performing of Gypsy music to that of folk

music. Around 1920 the category of rusticity dominated his writing and he sketched the rural versus urban dichotomy emphasising an association of a rural character and rusticity with natural beauty, while that of the urban popularity with commercial vulgarity.<sup>42</sup> Despite this scrutinizing tone Bartók also recognised the high position of Gypsy musicians cherished in the cities of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Indeed, for example in the multicultural Polish city of Kraków (belonging in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the territory occupied by the Austro-Hungarian Empire) Gypsies constituted an integral part of urban cultural colourfulness. Gypsy bands were very popular there at the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> century as attested by eye witnesses, among others a man of letters – Stanisław Przybyszewski. The author was reminiscing on his first encounter with a Gypsy band on his arrival in Kraków in 1898:

One time I saw a group of Gypsies – never before have I heard dulcimer in my life – and their music got me so excited that all [around] were astonished by my behaviour and the absolute silence ensued when I'd taken the lead of this small orchestra – the whole world seized to exist to me – there was only dulcimer and I, the conductor.<sup>43</sup>

Needless to add that the line up of the band strictly reminded the one of the famous Zigeunerkapellen.

On Romanian territories the Gypsy musicians were known as *lăutari*. These were professional or semi-professional (i.e. following oral tradition),<sup>44</sup> usually urban (although not necessarily so), Gypsy musicians singing and playing on demand with extraordinary “virtuosity of the executions and with up-to-the minute hits and musical styles”.<sup>45</sup> Sometimes they organized in a small band called *taraf* and their repertoire would be commonly referred to as “muzica lăutărescă” or simply as music of the “*lăutars*”.<sup>46</sup> Gypsy musicians in Romania have provided musical services at least since the late 14<sup>th</sup> century<sup>47</sup> and they became especially celebrated in the age of romanticism. Also in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as later they were present in the streets of Bucharest and “in almost every tram station you could see groups of gypsy musicians, barefooted, with their violin, *dairea* (a kind of tambourine) and *cobza* begging for a penny”, or in suburban taverns “where peasants and inhabitants of the slums meet”.<sup>48</sup> Those street musicians, especially Gypsy ones were visible in the urban spaces of eastern European cities up to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and enjoyed the great popularity, yet the situation was about to change later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Their gradual disappearance was due to a lowering of urban soundscape fidelity (the invention of the automobile) and to the advent of new means of musical reproduction: this equipment succeeds where innumerable legal actions against them, over several centuries, have failed. Street musicians did not disappear completely but lost much of their musical and social relevance until the sixties, when the cultural-political turmoil, primarily involving the younger generation, led to a rebirth of the “folksinger” as a popular stereotype, able to attract many of the new anti-conformist expectations.<sup>49</sup>

However, in Romania, *lăutari* prospered quite well, and during the interwar years they even managed to organize societies like “Junimea Muzicală” [Musical youth] in Bucharest.<sup>50</sup> Still worse times were to come with communist rule after WWII when, by the late 1950s when social and economic discrimination against Romany people began. In eastern Europe the general policy towards the Roma included efforts aimed at assimilating them. For example in Romania Gypsy urban performers were hired in state music ensembles and “all performances reflected officially sanctioned ‘pure’ Romanian folklore”.<sup>51</sup> With the fall of communism in 1989 the political and social climate in eastern Europe changed facilitating new cultural activities to be undertaken by Gypsies. This coincided with the general tendency to bring back music to the streets. Gypsy musicians seized more opportunities and willingly started to play in the urban spaces. For example in Kraków new Gypsy bands were organized boldly appearing in the most representative city squares rather than playing in restaurants or pubs and being (or not) merely tolerated there as it had used to be in the communistic times.

## **Becoming a Gypsy Musician**

The case of Gypsies willingly becoming musicians may illustrate the manner in which pariah peoples accommodate themselves – both spatially and functionally – to economies dominated by groups of higher status, other than their own.<sup>52</sup> Gypsy musicians promote themselves with their job and aspire to be enjoying more prestige than their peers as well as to be more respected.<sup>53</sup> Most importantly Gypsy musicians have learned how to use music as a means of “the social elevator” enabling them to increase their status and economic security. While serving its “primary social function [...] to define the communal self, which includes redefining it

when the community is changing”<sup>54</sup> music (as generally art does), not only helps them to form their ethnicity as Roms, but also facilitates the formation of their identity as working people, those who possess a job (*der Beruf*). Indeed, Costin Moisil even argued that “music can provide components for ....identity, just as dress, hairdo, diet, the economic system and many other such aspects do”.<sup>55</sup> I would add that in case of Gypsy musicians the music gains an additional asset as a constituent of identity performed towards non-Gypsies as well as among Gypsies themselves. In other words, even today in the view of Gypsies *lăutari* are generally well appreciated in the large society<sup>56</sup> and hailed by other Roms as persons who not only earn money, often being the main bread winners of the family, but also are praised for having achieved a certain level of (self)education. Yet, the trade of *lăutar* is customarily hereditary, carried on from generation to generation and passed along the male kinship line in Gypsy families.<sup>57</sup> For example, Aurel Ioniță, a Gypsy violinist and composer who formed in the early 2000s a Bucharest based group called Mahala Rai Banda says that he is a musician just like his father, and he prides in being musically trained at home. Actually, he stresses he feels a *lăutar*, i.e. someone who became musician as an autodidact, while – he adds – *muzicant* is someone who was taught at schools.<sup>58</sup> The spontaneity of musical education among Gypsies was already important, as a matter of fact, for the 19<sup>th</sup> century commentators, who saw Gypsies as naturally born musicians, who would predominantly make a living with their music.<sup>59</sup> But there is more to it: Ioniță not only is proud to call himself *lăutar*, but he stresses it would be unwise, even stupid, if he named himself a musician (*muzicant*).<sup>60</sup> Other Gypsy musicians also willingly talk about this division between *lăutars* versus *muzicants*, saying that “the latter knows (or knows better) musical notation, and does not go to weddings on regular basis”.<sup>61</sup> For all of them it is clear that musicians play by the score, but *lăutari* play by the ear, or – more precisely – by soul. Thus they end up playing well-known tunes just as they hear them, adding something, changing, since they do not read scores. Furthermore, they take delight in being capable to play without music sheets and to learn very quickly any piece of music, only by hearing it.

Although *lăutari* seem solidary when it comes to talking about their musical abilities, yet they are competitive between themselves because finding a job, for example to play at a gig, or perhaps to secure a contract for recording an album, is perceived as a difficult task. The consequent rivalry among musicians can lead to misunderstandings, jealousy or can

even produce bitterness. There is a tendency to treat “music as grounds for competition”<sup>62</sup> and the reason to constantly improve the technique because “after all, a *lăutar*’s survival depends on music-making, which in turn depends on work – “engagements””.<sup>63</sup>

As mentioned appreciating their musical mastery is extremely important for *lăutari*, especially when it comes from professional, i.e. trained in conservatoires, non-Gypsy musicians. Hence they actively seek any forms of boasting by professional musicians: alleviating (in their own eyes) their own position as musicians *lăutari* willingly play then with non-Gypsy musicians during official concerts. Also the stories about non-Gypsy instrumentalists praising Gypsy musicians have been widely spread. Such famous instances of acknowledging *lăutari*’s musicianship by non-Gypsy virtuosos have been known since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For example, the story has it that when in 1847 Franz Liszt (1811-1886) was touring Transylvania and Moldova, he was taken aback and impressed by a Romanian *lăutari* band under the lead of the violinist Barbu. Apparently when in Iași Liszt improvised a song on the piano, and Barbu Lăutaru – having heard the tune for the very first time in his life –was able to repeat it without any modifications on his violin. Supposedly marvelled Liszt was only able to exclaim: “Drink Barbu, my master, drink. For God made you an artist and you are greater than me!”.<sup>64</sup> The story was especially popularized in the interwar period by several Romanian authors.<sup>65</sup> More than one hundred years later a similar story was perpetuated in Kraków in respect to a Gypsy blind violinist Stefan Dymiter called Cororo (1938-2002), who played in the city streets with his band. The well – known anecdote has it that during a visit to Kraków a famous violinist Yehudi Menuhin (1916-1999) was stunned by Cororo’s virtuosity and wanted to play on his violin but apparently could not – due to the tricks done to his violin by the Gypsy. The meeting of two great violinists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – one performing in concert halls, the other one in the streets, one being Jewish, the other Gypsy, apparently resulted in Menuhin’s remark: “Well, Stefan does not know Menuhin, but Menuhin knows Stefan”.<sup>66</sup>

As shown them being a Gypsy musician is, in a sense, connected with a privileged position not only because they are appreciated by their own community but also since they are usually “treated with respect by all also by non Roma”.<sup>67</sup>

## 'Double Identity' of Gypsy Musicians

Gypsy musicians remain active agents in the constructing their own identity, constantly being aware both of their ethnic and musical identification. This 'double identity' helps them to negotiate their own position as they are engaging "in a variety of discourses of cultural difference with others both outside and within their own ethnic group in their presentation of self".<sup>68</sup> In fact construction of their Gypsy identity is connected with their attempts to stress "cultural difference as they seek both to blur as well as to clarify the boundaries between themselves and other groups in society".<sup>69</sup> For example on the one hand Gypsiness is manifested, e.g. in the name of the groups, like Mahala Rai Banda (rai stands for a master, a man proud to be Gypsy), but on the other hand even the members of this particular band never dress in a Gypsy way for their concerts, but simply try to wear nice clothes in respect for the listeners, as any musicians would do. The position of Gypsies as musicians is then never assumed once for all, fixed and immutable, but rather constantly in the state of flux, almost fluid, "performed rather than given, hybrid, and transgressive in norms".<sup>70</sup> The 'double identification' – as Gypsies and as musicians enables them to associate with those more socially powerful and distance from those with less power, as well as "enhance their market niche and status".<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, as revealed among others in interviews, Gypsy musicians "attempt, through diverse types of communication and social posturing, 'to control the impression' that others have of them",<sup>72</sup> including their listeners as well researchers.

Accordingly not only *lăutari* but also people close to them, their friends "explain that professional success in the *lăutărie* involves the same principles as negotiating, repairing and inventing".<sup>73</sup> Hence one of the most treasured trait of their personality is an agility of mind, described sometimes as cleverness.<sup>74</sup> Astutely exercised cultural difference communicated through diverse means and behaviours enables Gypsy musicians to take control of their image and helps them manipulate the impression that others might have of them.<sup>75</sup> Thus achieved marginality is clearly "embedded in power relations, whether symbolic or real"<sup>76</sup> because Romani musicians play with the borders of ethnicity in order to sustain their position as musicians, but they also haze the boundaries between themselves and other Gypsies. For example they allow non-Gypsy members to enter their bands as Gypsy urban musicians define their Gypsiness not only vis-à-vis the outside world, but also try to establish

limits and relations within their own group. Gypsiness is negotiated between Romany themselves as they usually acknowledge members of Zigeunerkapellen as exceptional musicians. Gypsy musicians find themselves in a situation when they need to answer the question who (at least for them) constitutes their own emotional community (to draw on the idea developed by Max Weber): the Romany community or gadze musicians they play with? While contemporary people choose who they want to be linked with and thus create neo-tribes based on the sense of affectual spatiality, I would argue that for Romany the most important role is still played by the emotional community indebted in their extended family and circles of relatives and friends. But in case of Gypsy musicians this becomes more complicated. They often say in public: "We are not Gypsies", because they do not wish to be identified with the stereotypical image of dirty, lazy or begging Gypsies, although they are still extremely proud to say that they are Gypsies referring to their ancestors<sup>77</sup> and talk about their Indian heritage.<sup>78</sup> In Romania, *lăutari* sometimes try to "keep under wraps the fact that they are Roma" and actually deny being Roma (unconvincingly) justifying themselves with their inability to speak Romany. Sometimes, they differentiate between being Roma and Gypsy saying that they are Gypsies (but not Roms).<sup>79</sup> Speranța Rădulescu concludes that "the *lăutari* refuse to be called Roma, definitely preferring the appellative 'Gypsies'".<sup>80</sup>

### **The Question of Gypsy Style: Musical Identity of Gypsy Musicians**

The double identification of Gypsy musicians can be, perhaps to the best degree, explained by their musical choices: the repertoire, and style of execution that are both thought of as emanations of Gypsy (ethnic) character, and at the same time of purely musical virtuosity. I will argue that the 'double identity' is indeed revealed in the music played by Gypsy musicians, i.e. in the way they comprise their repertoire and approach musical components, finally how they interpret musical compositions combining, as if in the light of their 'double identity', elements of Gypsiness and musicianship.

Gypsies easily adapt various cultural codes and "cultivate multiple cultural repertoires"<sup>81</sup> not only in the realm of music but also in reference to clothing or linguistics, etc. Gypsies have always tried to adjust to



local environments, by accepting such 'extrinsic' cultural traits<sup>82</sup> without internalizing them. These qualities would essentially remain "products of the historical vicissitudes [...] external to the core of the group's cultural heritage".<sup>83</sup> As musicians they have predominantly been supplying entertainment to the general public. Hence Gypsy musicians have traditionally resorted to already known tunes, reusing familiar melodies stemming either from popular songs or artistic compositions, basing on well-established musical structures and easily recognizable rhythms. Gypsy musicians have learnt how to adjust swiftly to the needs of dominating societies. Consequently the music they perform by no means can be called avant-garde as "its purpose is no longer that of inventing a code but rather that of checking it".<sup>84</sup> For example in eastern Europe Gypsy bands happily play Johannes Brahms' renowned *Hungarian Dances* that became associated with Gypsy culture already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>85</sup> In Spain – where flamenco is assigned the privileged, almost an iconic position – Gypsy musicians have willingly performed it in the streets, and their culture became even treated as flamenco's "clearest symptoms".<sup>86</sup> So it can be said that Gypsy musicians attune to the needs of their listeners, skilfully choosing their repertoire in line with their status as entertainers but at the same time they craftily play out their ethnic associations by selecting compositions linked by non-Gypsy listeners with the imagined, highly romanticised Gypsy world.

Following this principle, Gypsy urban musicians have mastered the art of seducing their public by playing musical pieces already appreciated by the listeners. They have learned how to engage in the art of flirting with their audience as revealed in the choice of their repertoire. The success of the above mentioned Zigeunerkapellen enjoying huge popularity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century eastern European cities, resulted from, amongst others, phenomenal talent of Gypsy musicians to adapt themselves to the varied tastes of the recipients of this music. In fact it was already a well-known fact within Hungary already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>87</sup> that having monopolised (as performers) the music market, Gypsies easily assimilated popular forms, adapting themselves to the public expectation. Working under pressure as well as being stimulated by the ambience of the moment Gypsies were able to live up to the demands placed before them and to fulfil the requests of their audience. Combining fashionable fragments of works loved by the public with creative fantasy, Gypsies transformed old melodies into something of their own fashion, quite often improvising.<sup>88</sup> Many Gypsies gave these ad hoc created compositions makeshift titles derived from

the surnames of the individual who had hummed its main motif, etc. In fact Gypsy musicians have always drawn from a mixture of sources: not only certain elements come from various geographical locations but they can be traced over the past at least two hundred years. This results in the specific amalgam of elements that is sometimes described as 'Gypsy music' – i.e. multi instrumental or vocal-instrumental music attributed to Gypsy musicians performing mainly in urban spaces of eastern Europe often in festive situations, (e.g. concerts). It differs depending on the region, for example the entire repertoire of the urban Gypsies of Romania is most often referred to as muzica lăutărească or music of the lăutărs. And also *lăutari* "continuously remodel their music, either form the impulse to bring it into line with their own modernized aspect, or (especially in the recent times) out of their professional necessity to satisfy all those who expect them to perform it in one fashion or another".<sup>89</sup> For example Mahala Rai Banda plays a whole array of styles and genres, combining the sound of violins with accordions and a brass section.<sup>90</sup> It can be said that the repertoire this band plays meets the external needs and is, in fact, the immediate answer to them. However, it is the contemporary sponsors – producers who create the demand, thus shaping the modern sound of present-day Gypsy bands. The pressure comes from technology, and it is now not rare that *lăutari* play with loud amplifications, they try to adapt to new market situation by "frantically searching through their inventory of solutions taken from lăutărească music, pan-Balkan mongrel musics, Gypsy movies soundtracks, western pop and world bands....".<sup>91</sup> They are often associated with manele music considered as not advanced, even simplistic.<sup>92</sup> But some Gypsy musicians, like Ioniță would argue that manele – music commonly met across the Balkans (Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Albania) and debated for the last ten years alas with no definite conclusion – should be looked at as purely musical phenomenon rather than being associated with the folklore of criminal suburbia. He says that this type of discourse on manele as performed by Gypsies only feeds the negative stereotype of a Gypsy as a bandit. And again Ioniță is ready to blame producers, not musicians, for promoting such a pejorative image of this music, saying that sustaining certain status quo helps producers and DJs earn more money.<sup>93</sup> But a similar situation can be found in Poland: Gypsy musicians of 21<sup>st</sup> century adopted for example the style called Disco Polo: a sub-genre of Euro Disco, modelled upon Italo Disco, but deeply rooted in Polish folk tradition. Disco Polo is heavily criticized by many opponents (mainly media), who say that it has little to do with

folk music despite claims to the contrary, and represent rather bad taste aiming to please the masses. Performed by Gypsy musicians, with lyrics referring to Gypsy camp life, it is sometimes known as Gypsy Disco Polo and mercilessly mocked at despite its significant popularity.

As the cases of manele and Gypsy Disco Polo prove for Gypsy musicians it is still extremely important to adapt to new styles and fashions, to interact with the listeners, but also to be progressive. Gypsy musicians are always open to news and novelties because as Ioniță says they know that “the fashion comes from Milan”.<sup>94</sup> In other words they understand they have to be innovative and flow with the mode in order to be competitive.

While caring about their musicianship, Gypsy musicians never forget about their Gypsyess. But since Gypsy music – as already mentioned – is drawn from a mixture of sources, tracing these elements is a very complex task because the process of their mixing has occurred over the last more than one hundred and fifty years. Moreover, “Gypsies attach great importance to the style of interpretation”, something they call “Gypsy style”.<sup>95</sup> Yet it is extremely difficult to determine what ‘style’ would mean here: the choice of the repertoire as such, or rather its execution, to be precise the manner in which it is performed.<sup>96</sup> I propose to interpret Gypsy style as both deviation, i.e. “one of the possible interpretations of particular features” and as a choice, where particular musical features and gestures are combined according to the preferred taste of a given Gypsy musician, where the selection of these elements ultimately stands for the name ‘Gypsy style’.<sup>97</sup> For example, Gypsy musicians carefully choose tunes they play only to treat them later as a starting point for further elaboration: they perceive the melody as a combination of small segments which they freely reassemble depending on several factors such as to what degree given motifs can appear catchy to listeners, or whether certain passages are too difficult to play, or take into consideration their compatibility with motifs taken from other sources, etc.

While it is almost impossible to determine what Gypsy style means, there are some characteristic features of music performed in Gypsy style. For example, in case of *muzica lăutărescă* the melodic quality draws from a number of sources but

the formal and rhythmic structure of this music, and consequently of the dances, appears to draw mostly from Romanian folk sources which, again, may have already been heavily influenced by a combination of Gypsy, Turkish, Western European, and Romanian folk elements. Added

to this is the particular style of melodic as well as rhythmic phrasing and expression which seems to have been retained from elements in the music of the nomadic Gypsies.<sup>98</sup>

The harmonic system that provides the substructure for these melodies is a unique adaptation of the Western European harmonic system which accommodates the very special requirements of a melodic system heavily influenced by Turkish melodic types.<sup>99</sup> Not only is then Gypsy music “full of ornaments, with intricate, chiefly minor harmonics”,<sup>100</sup> but also these harmonies are often described as unconventional, yet warm and delicate in character. Ioniță – himself a *lăutar* par excellence – says that a lot of harmonies heard in romantic music of Frederic Chopin can be compared to those encountered in muzica *lăutărească*.<sup>101</sup> To sum up, what generally characterizes music performed by Gypsies – according to Gypsies themselves – is

profuse ornamentation, shocking harmonization, rich in minor chords, free recombination of musical segments of various origins, substantial remodelling of the melodic outline of the executed pieces, insertions of elements from Balkan and Oriental styles, an excessively ‘poignant’ interpretation.<sup>102</sup>

However, what both Gypsies and non-Gypsies would underline about Gypsy style of playing is the emotional character of the performance. For Gypsy musicians music enables them to interact with other people – Gypsy and gadze alike. For example for Ioniță the Gypsy style equals with the attitude to music making, which is not only hidden in the repertoire, but in the way it is performed: music making must be joyful both for the performers and listeners as Gypsy musicians are always playing with their souls.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, Gypsy musicians see themselves as “emotion makers”.<sup>104</sup> Yet, as long as “to an etic culture, it seems reasonable, even normal” to play music full of most intimate emotions to listeners coming from other cultures, “to a traditional emic mentality there may be something shocking about making goods for cultures other than one’s own”.<sup>105</sup> Are then Gypsy musicians “soul-vendors” or is playing in Gypsy style more a strategy adapted by Gypsy musicians to sustain the sense of authenticity in the music they perform?

Authenticity, or in fact the search for authenticity, is one of the central categories to be considered while talking about identities. As everyday life

becomes so “stretched and fragmented” to the degree that it is impossible to define which processes and routines create the identity, it is essential for Gypsy musicians to maintain the sense of their own identity.<sup>106</sup> Bearing in mind that “one of the main issues associated with expressive identities is the idea that the contemporary world does not allow sufficient room for self-expression and development in the context of some form of supposedly authentic communal belonging”,<sup>107</sup> authenticity of Gypsy musicians who possess ‘double identity’ as Gypsies and as musicians becomes of crucial importance. They are authentic to the degree they are allowed – both as musicians limited by being Gypsies (e.g. in their choice of repertoire) and as Gypsies who are musicians (e.g. enjoying better social status, etc).

### **The Future of Gypsy Musicians**

My proposal concerning the ‘double identity’ of Gypsy musicians takes into consideration the “play of difference within identity position which are articulated through a dialogue between their constituent parts” and acknowledges the fact that identities can be defined against others, or in relation to them, as well as “across an uncertain gap between identity and non-identity and in the recognition of that gap”.<sup>108</sup> Gypsy musicians seem to embrace their own ethnicity and the sense of everyday job as musicians playing at the same time with both – they paradoxically “keep themselves distinct while appearing to assimilate”.<sup>109</sup> They even adapt this strategy during interviews conducted with them by researchers: on the one hand they avoid the straightforward answers to the questions concerning their ethnicity and their musicianship, yet they also – already unasked – repeat and perpetuate certain positive clichés about Gypsies and Gypsy musicians.<sup>110</sup> Most importantly though, it seems to me that being a Gypsy musician is still considered today prestigious enough for the next generations of Gypsies to continue this tradition of music making. Aurel Ioniță, for instance, not without real father pride, talked to me about his sons attending musical Academy in Bucharest.<sup>111</sup> Also in Hungary or Poland there are more and more Gypsy musicians who graduate from music conservatoires and successfully pursue professional careers as musicians. Perhaps the ‘double identity’ of Gypsy musicians is a key factor enabling them resilient adaptation to various conditions and changing circumstances. And indeed these young, highly educated musicians of Romany origin not only “wish to be heard”<sup>112</sup> literary, i.e. musically but also want their voice to be heard in the larger context.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> An expression “The Roma wish to be heard” is cited from: Garth Cartwright, ‘Among the Gypsies’, *World Literature Today*, Vol. 80, No. 3 (May - Jun., 2006), p. 53.
- <sup>2</sup> I am predominantly using in my paper the word ‘Gypsy’ rather than ‘Romany’ for at least two reasons. First of all musicians simply identify themselves as Gypsies (not Roms), and secondly while using the denomination ‘Gypsy’ I want to stress the continuity of Gypsy music making tradition, the one that came to fame in Europe in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century exactly under the name ‘Gypsy’.
- <sup>3</sup> Kevin Hetherington, *Expressions of identity. Space, Performance, Politics*, London: Sage, 1998, p. 21.
- <sup>4</sup> See for example Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- <sup>5</sup> Costin Moisil, ‘Problems of identity in the Orthodox Church Music in Transylvania’, *New Europe College Ștefan Odobleja Program Yearbook 2012-2013* (2014), p. 129.
- <sup>6</sup> Mihai-Vlad Niculescu, ‘Emphatic Meeting. From ad intentional to and Exceptional Model of Phenomenological Intersubjectivity”, *New Europe College Yearbook 1998-1999* (2001), p. 249.
- <sup>7</sup> Michel Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes*, London: Sage, 1996.
- <sup>8</sup> Costin Moisil, ‘Problems of identity in the Orthodox Church Music in Transylvania’, op. cit., pp. 125-146.
- <sup>9</sup> Speranța Rădulescu, *Taifasuri despre muzica țigănească/Chats about Gypsy Music* (versiunea engleza Adrian Solomon) Bucuresti: Paideia, 2004, p. 185.
- <sup>10</sup> Ervin Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York: Anchor Books, 1959, pp. 17-71.
- <sup>11</sup> István Horváth, ‘State, Minorities and Identity Aspects Related to Romania’s Hungarian Minority’, *New Europe College Yearbook 2000-2001* (2003), p. 275.
- <sup>12</sup> Sandra Wallman, ‘Identity options’, in: Charles Fried (ed.), *Minorities: Community and Identity*, Berlin: Springer, 1983, p. 75.
- <sup>13</sup> Gary Bridge, Sophie Watson, ‘City Difference’, in: Gary Bridge, Sophie Watson (eds.) *A Companion to the City*, Oxford, UK; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p.256.
- <sup>14</sup> Carline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, New York: Zone Books, 2001, p. 164.
- <sup>15</sup> István Horváth, ‘State, Minorities and Identity Aspects Related to Romania’s Hungarian Minority’, op. cit., p. 276.
- <sup>16</sup> Kevin Hetherington, *Expressions of identity. Space, Performance, Politics*, op. cit., p. 49.

- 17 Costin Moisil, 'Problems of identity in the Orthodox Church Music in Transylvania', op. cit., p.129.
- 18 Sandra Wallman, 'Identity options', op. cit., p. 76.
- 19 Kevin Hetherington, *Expressions of identity. Space, Performance, Politics*, op. cit., p. 62.
- 20 Orlando Patterson, 'The Nature, Causes, and Implications of Ethnic Identification', in: Charles Fried (ed.), *Minorities: Community and Identity*, Berlin: Springer, 1983, p. 26.
- 21 Gheorghe-Alexandru Niculescu, 'The Material Dimension of Ethnicity', *New Europe College Yearbook 1997-1998* (2000), p. 217.
- 22 Sandra Wallman, 'Identity options', op. cit., p. 76
- 23 Orlando Patterson, 'The Nature, Causes, and Implications of Ethnic Identification', op. cit., pp. 27-28.
- 24 Kevin Hetherington, *Expressions of identity. Space, Performance, Politics*, London: Sage, 1998, p. 25.
- 25 Gary Bridge, Sophie Watson, 'City Difference', op. cit., p. 258.
- 26 Mihai-Vlad Niculescu, 'Emphatic Meeting. From ad intentional to and Exceptional Model of Phenomenological Intersubjectivity', *New Europe College Yearbook 1998-1999* (2001), p. 256.
- 27 Kevin Hetherington, *Expressions of identity. Space, Performance, Politics*, op. cit., p. 21.
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- 38 Carol Silverman, 'Negotiating "Gypsiness": Strategy in Context', op. cit., p. 269.
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- 92 Manele is a pseudo-oriental musical style popular in the Balkan countries especially often performed by non Roma artists and enjoyed by many people but also heavily criticised especially for the lyrics.
- 93 An interview with the leader of Mahala Rai Banda – Aurel Ioniță, op. cit.

- <sup>94</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>95</sup> Speranța Rădulescu, *Taifasuri despre muzica țigănească/Chats about Gypsy Music*, op. cit., p. 212.
- <sup>96</sup> Valentina Sandu-Dediu, 'Common Subjects in Musical Rhetoric and Stylistics. Aspects and Proposals', *New Europe College Yearbook 1996-1997* (2000), pp. 381 and 385. Since the 16th century style in music has been conceptualized as "the manner", but a new understanding of the idea of style was suggested by Guido Adler (*Der Stil in der Musik*, 1911) as he treated style as "an assemble of those features that bring together works of a certain historical period".
- <sup>97</sup> Ibidem, pp. 377 and 380.
- <sup>98</sup> Robert Garfias, 'Dance among the Urban Gypsies of Romania', op. cit., p. 86.
- <sup>99</sup> Ibidem, p. 86.
- <sup>100</sup> An interview with a group of Gypsy musician from Cluj (2003). See: Speranța Rădulescu, *Taifasuri despre muzica țigănească/Chats about Gypsy Music*, op. cit., p. 237.
- <sup>101</sup> An interview with the leader of Mahala Rai Banda – Aurel Ionita, op.cit.
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- <sup>106</sup> Kevin Hetherington, *Expressions of identity. Space, Performance, Politics*, op. cit., p. 69.
- <sup>107</sup> Ibidem, p. 70.
- <sup>108</sup> Ibidem, p. 25
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- <sup>111</sup> An interview with the leader of Mahala Rai Banda – Aurel Ioniță, op. cit.
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