Part Three

Music
Introduction
The Space for/of Romani Music

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The historical spaces of interaction between Roma and non-Roma are characterized by a strong sonic-musical component which has significantly structured their intercultural communication and can serve as a key to understanding the dynamics of these relations. This third part explores music as a factor in the construction and adaptation of Romani self-representation in non-Romani spaces and treats music as a medium facilitating exchange and mutuality. While presenting very distinct case studies of Romani musicians from different regions – Hungarian territories, Romanian lands and communist Poland – Part Three describes and analyses the role of the musical element in the interaction between Roma and non-Roma in each case, drawing special attention to its various dimensions by addressing the question of its meanings. All three chapters presume that music can and should be treated as one of the main axes of the relations between Roma and non-Roma. Part Three focuses on the collective biographies of Romani musicians from Central Europe, but also documents and accentuates the role of the individual in the musical presence of the Roma from the region. The key argument is that historically the Roma shaped the soundscapes of Central and Eastern Europe, especially the sonicity of its cities. The emphasis of Part Three is thus on those Romani performers who presented their music in public spaces, for example directly in the streets of capital cities of the region such as Budapest, Bucharest or Vienna, or in other important cultural hubs, be it Kraków or Iasi. We explore how in this way the everyday impact of Romani musicians extended beyond the
better-known inclusion of Romani music and “Gypsy” motifs in concert hall performances, while acknowledging that this dimension of the history calls for more detailed studies that rise above the level of legends, myths and fictional narratives.

Romani Musicians in the Collective and Individual Perspectives

The first chapter of Part Three, entitled “Romani Virtuosi: A Multifaceted Portrait” presents the most popular and still remembered (e.g. featured in films) Romani musicians, those whose achievements permeate the collective imagination of artists and scholars. These are predominantly musicians from Hungarian territories immortalized in books and other artistic productions (operas, operettas, paintings, etc.). The chapter highlights their contribution and roles in cultural exchange while focusing on the diversity of their life paths and the complexity of their careers. It discusses in detail the cases of the renowned violinists Panna Cinka, János Bihari, Jožko Pit’o and Jancsi Rigó. Each case is approached individually and serves as a basis for discussing the Romani input in European musical culture. While stressing the uniqueness of each life story, the chapter demonstrates how all the musicians discussed contributed to the development of musical culture, actively shaping the musical life of Central Europe during the nineteenth century. The selected Romani musicians are thus analysed as emblematic figures in the process of emancipation of women musicians, and as representatives of the idea of the “self-made man” as well as individuals who managed to infiltrate the wider popular imagination. As the chapter makes clear, the contribution of the Roma to the Central European musical scene was widely acknowledged and the work of individual Romani musicians recognized in the nineteenth century, as is attested by the dictionary of “great Gypsy musicians” compiled by the Austrian music writer and journalist Miklós Markó (1865–1933) and published in 1896. Markó’s work included short biographical entries for over 100 musicians. These were mostly living at the time of publication and enjoyed considerable popularity, but the dictionary also included the names of the legendary Romani musicians who had significantly contributed to the tradition of Hungarian Gypsy music which had become internationally renowned by the mid-nineteenth century, not least through the efforts of the composer Franz Liszt (1811–86). In Chapter 7 the best known of Markó’s subjects are re-examined with a critical eye. Their lives and achievements are situated within the context of the political and cultural situation of the region, and Markó’s account is supplemented by references to historical documents, literary texts and iconography.

In a similar vein, Chapter 8, on the Romani lăutari from the Romanian territories, looks at a well-known group of musicians in historical perspective. It draws a larger picture of their situation, initially – till the
middle of the nineteenth century – as slaves. Stressing the significance of the move from rural to urban milieux, the chapter focuses on Romani musicians from Bucharest as celebrated virtuosi admired by monarchs and fellow musicians alike, who performed in other European capitals as well. Although less widely advertised than their Hungarian peers, Romani musicians from Romania were also present, for example representing their country at the Parisian Exposition Universelle. Accordingly, the chapter outlines the successes of Romani musicians from Wallachia or Moldavia, but also explores the importance of the Romani lăutari for the Romanian economy. The significance of the Romani musicians in the formation of the Romanian national culture is also highlighted. Like Chapter 7’s study of Romani musicians from Hungary, this chapter also moves from the account of Romani musicians in Romania as a more or less homogenous group to consider some outstanding individuals who influenced the development of Romanian culture. The chapter ends with a brief account of the difficult circumstances of Romani musicians in Romania under communism, while that issue is elaborated upon in more detail in the following chapter, which focuses on the Polish situation.

The third chapter of the Part, “The Story of Corroro, a Musical Genius from Kraków”, uses a Polish case to discusses Romani street performers and the complexity of their situation as conditioned by the political situation – starkly affected by the communist regime and then by its fall. Against that collective backdrop, the focus is on the persona of the violinist Stefan Dymiter (1938–2002). Known as Corroro, Dymiter was a legendary Romani musician performing in the streets of Kraków in the second half of the twentieth century as the leader of his own street band. Unwelcome in the public space as far as the authorities were concerned, merely tolerated by others, he was admired by many passers-by and gained the respect of his peers, both Romani musicians and international music stars. The limitations of Dymiter’s career revealed in the chapter seem to stand in stark contrast to his exceptional musical abilities. However, his unique performance style, his musical memory and interpretations make him a fine example of the so-called musical genius. A further significant dimension of Corroro’s career discussed in the chapter is his disability, for he was not only blind but also had a visible physical handicap affecting his whole posture. The chapter argues that Corroro’s iconic status should be considered as the ultimate effect of several factors. While their overlapping helped to generate the legend, it also allows us to take an intersectional approach to understanding the situation of Corroro, and of Romani buskers in general, under communism. The chapter draws on oral sources such as extensive interviews with members of Corroro’s band, his collaborators and friends, and also with his fans, as well as on new documentary evidence. Close attention is also given to his music itself (recordings, videos, film excerpts), which is analysed from a musicological point of view.
The Gypsy Musical Stereotype in the Scholarship

While shedding new light on the position and role of Romani musicians, Part Three highlights the experiences of Romani people in a particular region. The specifics of the situation in Central and south-eastern Europe are either signalled or discussed at length in order to contextualize the particularities of regional performance cultures. Not only have the Roma been present in that part of Europe since the Middle Ages, contributing to the economy and culture of the region, but they also actively co-created its legacy. At the same time, they have been subjected to various political upheavals affecting the region, among which were the communist regimes of the second half of the twentieth century. While shifting political frameworks – socialism and its aftermath – were very important for this region, Part Three also considers issues of the identity and self-identity of Romani musicians in the light of such other material changes as patterns of urbanization, settlement and slavery.

All three chapters of Part Three focus on the iconic status of the Romani musicians and present them as full-fledged contributors to European musical culture. The position of Romani musicians was confirmed in the late eighteenth century by Heinrich Grellmann, whose study Die Zigeuner (1787) treated music as one of the highlights of Romani culture in general.1 With time, the musical stereotype applied to the Roma acquired a specific – sentimental, even maudlin – dimension and the Roma en masse came to be depicted as romantic wanderers who loved nature and spent their lives in nothing but music-making.2 Eventually – as several authors who have analysed these narratives as well as iconographic representations of the Roma underline – the putative musicality of the Roma ossified “as something that functions on the level of a collective genetic trait”.3 The discourse on the intrinsic association of the Roma with music was consolidated throughout the nineteenth century, and musicality came to be treated as one of “the most prominent aspects of Gypsy fetish” – glorified by some, perceived as irritating by others.5

It needs to be stressed that the stereotype of Romani musicality should be treated as highly ambiguous, for it comprises both ethnic and

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5 See Bartosz, “Gazetowy wizerunek Roma”, 98.
sonic elements and, like most stereotypes, is grounded in the sphere of half-truths, misperceptions, falsifications and insinuations. At the same time, though, as demonstrated in Part Three, that stereotype has worked as an avenue allowing for frequent and often positive representation of Romani culture. The stereotype, being one of the central cultural mechanisms in the reception of the other and/or the self, reflected the ambivalence of European intellectuals – like the above-mentioned Grellmann, but also George Borrow and many, many others – who have stressed the contribution of Romani musicians to local music-making and indirectly admitted their impact on European sonic spheres.

The musical stereotype of the Roma often features the hyper-emotionality and willingness to please the audience (at any price) that are part of a wider generic image of the Roma. They were seen as expressing their extreme emotions (such as love or hate), free of social or cultural constraints, usually with the help of music and dance. Endorsing the image of the Roma as children of nature, the musical stereotype usually presented Romani musicians as self-taught, impulsive and existing outside the mainstream of musical events. All three chapters in this third part revisit that stereotype, demonstrating the degree of incoherence in the myth, or pointing out its inaccuracies, while at the same time demonstrating the value of understanding musical performance in terms of such categories as identity, disability, gender or politics and culture. One of the themes permeating Part Three is that of “difference” as observed on various levels and applied to musical examples.

The musical stereotype is challenged here on various levels as it applies to musicians, audiences and musical style, showing that stereotyping – when used to judge individuals – can result in incorrect conclusions (like the assumption that Romani musicians gained their position easily, or effortlessly learned to play musical instruments). Part Three nevertheless emphasizes the role of music in the self-identification of the Roma and its function in negotiating relations with non-Roma. While all three chapters seem to support the idea that stereotypes have formed and still, at least partially, impact contemporary culture (regulating the system of inclusion and exclusion of ethnic minorities), their goal is to expose how the musical stereotype of the Romani musicians has affected not only artistic production and musical compositions, but also academic research and the general reception of the Roma.

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The close link between the Roma and music has been commonly recognized in popular sayings, but also confirmed by scholars who have adopted a multitude of perspectives while studying it. These include, among others, the historical approach based on extensive studies of archival sources, references to premodern texts, etc. At the same time, ethnomusicological research has developed extensively, with a number of scholars preferring to apply sociologically oriented and ethnographic methods to documenting the musical cultures of various Romani groups. Additionally, a separate group of musicologists has shown considerable interest in artistic compositions (predominantly from the Western European musical canon) influenced by Romani music or in another ways alluding to “Gypsy” motifs. These compositions predominantly comprise stage works – ballets, operas and operettas featuring “Gypsy” heroes – but also songs whose lyrics allude to the idealized “Gypsy” lifestyle and purely instrumental works incorporating, for example imitations of the instrumental sound typical of Romani music-making, or attempts to mimic their performative manner. Accordingly the term “Gypsy music” is used in the scholarly literature to mean both music produced by the Roma themselves (hence also referred to as Romani music or music by the Roma) but also music produced by non-Roma who have referenced Romani culture in the titles of their compositions, the musical language or instruments used, or introduced Romani-related elements, characters, etc. into the plots of operas, operettas or ballets. Romani musicians, as argued in this third part of the volume, display a sometimes emotional but at the same time “common-sense” approach to the issue of labelling their own repertoire: some openly dislike being asked to “play something Gypsy” while others are either not troubled by it or prefer to avoid arguing about it. Part Three traces the changing uses of the term “Gypsy music”, alluding to the slow process by which it has come to be used “respectably/respectfully” without ever losing its ambivalent connotation.

Romani Musical Presence in the Zones of Contact

The visibility and the aural presence of Roma musicians and their music in public spaces is one of the most commonly recognized features of European sonic landscapes. Even if not explicitly articulated, it is reflected in most recent publications, whether they focus on more or less institutionalized forms of musical life such as concerts and stage performances, or connect the notion of public spaces with various music-making practices exercised in public areas – cafes, restaurants, pubs or even in the streets and squares. Such (predominantly) urban public spaces constitute “contact zones” between representatives of different cultures and enable Romani musicians to display their musical skills. However, as shown in the chapters of Part Three, the aural presence of Romani musicians in the public space of Central and
south-eastern Europe is not related solely to entertainment, nor should it be understood merely as a way of securing income for the Roma. This part demonstrates that Romani music-making in public spaces provides a unique opportunity to cultivate intercultural exchange and is a significant facilitator of that process, which can be difficult at times. The musical practices cherished by the Roma have impacted the dynamics of neighbourly relations between local communities and minorities, and affected various aspects of the sociocultural life of the region and even of individual nations. Music, being at once an artistic and social phenomenon, serves several important functions when performed in public. Accordingly, in the public places that accommodate Romani music, both performers and listeners representing various cultures (which might otherwise never interact) are exposed to other cultures and are called upon to renegotiate their relations by refreshing their own understanding of them, deconstructing and creating them anew. As clearly illustrated in all three chapters of this third part, musical practices provided by the Roma were instrumental in the process of shaping the position of the Romani minority – constantly (re-)established through the course of intercultural communications. However, as signalled, for example, in the chapter on lăutari from Romania, there are also dangers connected with music-making in public, in the direct exposure of Romani musicians to non-Romani audiences. Some contact zones might be devoid of clear structure and/or rules and their chaotic, unpredictable nature can lead to acute displays of social inequalities, thus turning them into arenas of conflict.

The Identity of Romani Musicians

Since medieval times, Romani musicians have been perceived in European culture as providers of musical entertainment, initially as wandering performers, then as settled providers of music in the towns and cities of Eastern and south-eastern Europe. While various authors claim that “the Rom have adapted extremely well to urbanization” and succeeded in establishing close relationships with the dominant, non-Romani societies, the process of adapting has not been free of difficulties. The Romani minority has had to navigate the complexities of living in a society that is not always welcoming, and the cultural practices that they have developed to survive in this environment have been instrumental in shaping their identity. Music has been a crucial aspect of this process, providing a means of expression and a way of maintaining their cultural heritage.

it is also widely known that as a minority within European cities the Roma were often feared – perceived as mysterious and different, labelled as “Other” and consequently marginalized in ghettos. Nevertheless, Romani musicians were usually welcomed in public spaces and thus allowed to enter and co-create the zones of contact mentioned above. As intermediaries operating simultaneously in Romani and non-Romani spaces, Romani musicians could support interactions between these groups and encourage the flow of mutual knowledge and the exchange of information. Chapter 8, on Romani musicians from the Romanian territories, offers more insight into that issue, while tracing the process by which Romani musicians and other Roma came to settle in large cities. The migration of Romani musicians to the cities is explicitly discussed in the chapter on Romani virtuosi from the Hungarian regions. These musicians seized their chance as small entrepreneurs and began organizing musical groups, referred to as “Gypsy bands”, in the late eighteenth century. Boasting exceptional talents (and accordingly perceived as intuitive musicians gifted with innate musicality), Romani musicians often acquired a solid musical education and eventually were able to generate a very sizeable group of professionals open to innovation and aware of current musical trends. In the nineteenth century they came to be known for proposing new kinds of musical entertainment, taking on the role of cultural intermediaries between different audiences and intermingling repertoires of various origins. That feature remained unchanged and even in the late twentieth century in Romania “the entire repertoire of urban Gypsies … most often referred to as muzica lăutar or music of the lăutar”, was in fact the music of “the professional or Gypsy musician”. By the mid-nineteenth century, in Romania and in Hungarian areas the repertoire performed by Romani musicians became so popular that the composer Franz Liszt, seeking to grasp the phenomenon of Romani musicians, “discovered what he called and believed to be gipsy music, which was however Hungarian urban music propagated by gipsy bands”.

That hybrid character of the repertoire offered by Romani musicians resurfaces across the whole of Part Three, because it affects the question of their identity. It is often interpreted as one of the key elements in constructing “cultural difference”, for Romani musicians are believed “to blur as well as to clarify the boundaries between themselves and other groups in society”. Practising this cultural difference as communicated

14 Garfias, “Dance among the Urban Gypsies of Romania”, 87.
through a diverse repertoire and behaviours and an agility of mind, which Irish Travellers call “cleverness”, seemed crucial as it provided Romani musicians with the means of taking control, even manipulating their own image (as the case of Jansci Rigo perfectly illustrates). The sophisticated problematics of the identity of Romani musicians is considered – to different degrees – in all three chapters of Part Three, in terms of a quality that is never fixed and immutable, but constantly redefined and “performed rather than given”. The authors support the thesis of its hybrid and transgressive character, stressing that Romani musicians have always actively sought to negotiate their position while trying to “enhance their market niche and status”. What becomes clear when reading these chapters on Romani musicians is that their position – whether marginalized or rediscovered and celebrated – has always been “embedded in power relations, whether symbolic or real”. In this context, Romani musicians have always been perceived as privileged within their own group, for musicianship has traditionally served as a “social elevator” enabling a better life, assuring economic security and sometimes even prestige. Hence they constantly needed to play with the borders of their ethnicity, sustaining their position vis-à-vis their own group but also as musicians in wider, non-Roma society. This delicate situation is acknowledged in all three chapters, with Romani musicians from Hungary, Romania and Poland presented as subjects of a specific “positionality” (in the sense of the “plural cultural, political, and ideological subject positions occupied by individuals in society”).

Concluding Remarks: Research Considerations

This third part of the volume provides unique case studies shedding light on Corroro as an obscure “Gypsy musical genius”, revisiting the role of Romani musicians from Hungary and assessing the situation of Romani


20 Bridge and Watson, “City Differences”, 257.


musicians in the Romanian lands. It presents their public appearances and music-making on several levels: practical (focusing on actual performances), pragmatic (delving into economical aspects), but also cultural (considering the imaginative dimensions of the figure of the Romani musician). The idea of the acclaimed “Gypsy musicality” is thus discussed as a construct in need of elaboration: reconfirmed, remastered or reinterpreted (either magnified or diminished).23 Part Three relies on a deep ethnographical approach, looking on the one hand at over 200 years of Romani contribution to the musical life of Europe, but on the other also adopting a transnational perspective, albeit with a focus on particular countries of Central Europe.24 While relying on historical accounts, it also takes into account the contemporary situation of Romani musicians. Taking in a broad geographical space and a long chronological span allows us to demonstrate a multitude of topics and themes which emerge from investigations into the visibility and aural presence of Romani musicians and so-called “Gypsy music” in European culture, irrespective of political regimes or cultural fads. The input and the impact of Romani musicians on the European musical landscapes discussed here show that the notion of “Gypsy musicality” is not only a romantic ideal, a mythologized thesis permeating literary works and artistic production, or a scholarly thesis, but – in the form of well-established traditions of practical musicianship – a well-documented and important part of the European heritage.

23 See Anna G. Piotrowska, Gypsy Music in European Culture: From the Late Eighteenth to the Early Twentieth Centuries (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2013).