

**Movie Mediterraneanism:
Music in Two Films of Srdjan Karanovic
by Mark Slobin**

This article¹ speaks to Tullia Magrini's passionate interest in issues of gender and identity in Mediterranean music, from an unusual perspective: the work of a regional filmmaker. One familiar, yet largely unexplored, place to look for musical meaning is in the movies. Every film offers its viewers a carefully organized account of a music culture: the soundscape and sensibilities of the community it describes. Soundtracks of films set in locales around the Mediterranean present often precise ethnomusicologies of the many overlapping social and ethnic types of the region. Designed to suit the filmmakers' narrative needs, these descriptions of vernacular musics strongly shape viewers' stereotypes or nostalgias. In situations where ethnic or national identities can be politically powerful, movie music plays a far from innocent role, and sometimes it can also be subversive.

In 1993, I had the opportunity to interview Srdjan Karanovic, a major Yugoslav filmmaker who was working at my university. While viewing some of his films, we talked about his musical choices. Karanovic was born in 1945 and was educated at the film school in Prague, which produced so many fine central and east European directors in the socialist era. He came to attention in the 1970s through his work on a very popular television drama series, "Unpicked Strawberries," that epitomized the experience of a generation of young Yugoslavs. Gradually, his feature films gained an international audience, and he began to gather attention and awards. Karanovic's work succeeded in detailing intensely local political and social issues that foreshadowed the deadly demise of Yugoslavia, while staying

close to European and universal narratives of personal destiny. *A Film with No Name* (1989) satirically foreshadows the ethnic violence that would tear the country apart. *Virginia* (1991) the last film shot in Yugoslavia, takes on gender identity in old village life. So the two movies offer very different possibilities for the musical molding of narrative meaning. The films came out between Slobodan Milosevic's ultimatum speech in Kosovo (1989) and the beginning of the Yugoslav wars (1991), so it was a period heavy with tension and foreboding.

Throughout his career, Karanovic has chosen to collaborate with the composer Zoran Simjanovic, a prolific and very accomplished artist who has worked for a number of well-known directors on very different sorts of projects, first in Yugoslavia, then abroad. Composer-director pairings offer a rare consistency that helps to clarify the logic of musical choice across a set of films. Thus, Karanovic can say "what we learned through all these years is not to use music very often, but when you use it, then to know why you use it," (all quotes are from the interviews) and can speak for both himself and Simjanovic. The two Yugoslavs' knowledge of both local and international music sources and meanings allows them to jointly deploy a large set of resources. In this short article, I will concentrate on just a few salient issues that connect to general principles of ethnomusicological film analysis I have developed in a forthcoming anthology on global film music.

Virginia presents a classic case of how to offer a musical ethnography of a closed community. The film narrates the life of an early twentieth-century "sworn virgin," a girl raised as a boy due to the lack of a male heir, a custom of the "mountainous regions of northern Albania and neighboring Kosovo, Serbia, and Montenegro...the phenomenon appears to be independent of religion and ethnicity: they are Muslim, Catholic, and Orthodox, as well as Albanian and

Serb.” (Moss 2005: 2-3). The girl, known as Stevan, eventually breaks with her overbearing father, reveals her gender, and leaves for America with a male friend, Mijat; the last segment of the soundtrack gives the viewer the sounds of the Mediterranean in the distance.

The music for *Virginia* tacks between two widespread principles of film scoring. One is the familiar system that I call *conventional music*. It relies heavily on unseen performers of a composed score who mostly intervene for two basic goals: to identify specific characters or to suggest emotional grounding for narrative moments. The other principle is *simulated vernacular music*, which can be placed either in the unseen score or can emerge directly from the setting in which the characters live. Karanovic and Simjanovic lean much more heavily towards the latter approach, and dole out music in fairly small segments; as the director says: “well, for a long time I have been thinking of having no music in *Virginia*. Keeping it very ascetic, simple, straight, like certain kinds of sculptures.” More specifically, he stresses that he doesn’t “like music to build up what is happening when it is dramatic. In *Virginia*, when the music plays, it is the music. Nothing else. Music will spoil everything that is dramatic. Music always creates some emotional distance to the whole thing.”

Simulated vernacular music is very useful for this line of thinking, as it does not even seem to be “music.” For example, the first musical cue is a group of children, seen at a distance, chanting a traditional rain-seeking song. Karanovic does “not consider this music; it’s part of the dramatic action. This is an ethnological real song which they used to sing to make rain come, begging for rain, it’s not composed.” But are all these seemingly accurate cues “real” songs? The next musical moment reveals the ambiguity of the method. The peasants bang on metal rhythmically to send messages across a

distance to each other. Karanovic also doesn't consider this to be music, and it doesn't actually reflect local custom: "it was the composer's idea to use it. It's community, to show how they live in different spots lost in that desert, to show they're spread out, they're not together." Here we get to the goal of much of the use of music, not just to describe village life, but also to musically anchor urban landscapes: to center an ethnography, to collect a community. To this end, the music can be technically "correct" or simulated, even if it appears to come from the people themselves as "source music."

It is in the first large set piece of village life that we understand how the simulated vernacular creates a collective. We hear something sounding like a bagpipe for a long time, without seeing anyone play the instrument. What is the music's origin? "It sounds like authentic ethnological music. The real sound was sampled. It shows happiness because it's a son [the sworn virgin] and because it's raining." When I asked Karanovic "whose voice is it?" he conceded: "Well, it's my voice. I'm trying to connect my voice, to make it in a shape of something authentic, that comes from that tradition, that period. That instrument, that tune, they fit that landscape. We did a lot of research. When he used the synthesizer, it's based on authentic instruments."

By contrast, the soundtrack also offers *conventional music*, projected by unseen musicians. This allows Simjanovic to unfold an emotional timeline, from the moment the problematic girl child is born through the late stages of Stevan's development. As Karanovic says, it's a "leitmotif," which helps in "establishing the tune which later develops. That's the beginning of the movie. This is radical, sentimental, and dramatic all at the same time. The music underlines it emotionally. It's very short. It gets longer and longer towards the end. Towards the end the music runs five or six minutes. We decided

to build up the emotion with the music.” Thus, the film’s music deploys its two methods to set up a dialectic: the simulated vernacular, which we sometimes hear coming from the peasants themselves, sometimes from the orchestra, stabilizes a sense of community, shared values, collective moments such as celebrations and public spaces like the market. At other times, the conventional music overlays the locale with an emotional arc that grows more pervasive as the film wears on. It delineates individual destinies. I call this “conventional” music because its appearance relies so heavily on almost ritualized gestures. They comfortably direct the viewer’s response by channeling it through well-worn pathways of sensibility and narrative expectation.

Interestingly, for a film so intent on delineating a woman’s fate, *Virginia* stays away from any one-to-one correlation of gender and music.

Properly speaking, the term Karanovic uses, “leitmotif” should not describe a long narrative and emotional curve, but rather be tied to a specific character or unit, as in the original use in Richard Wagner’s dramaturgy. As Justin London says, “leitmotifs can refer in a manner analogous to proper names in language: through broadly known conventions of usage, a particular musical fragment comes to be associated with a particular place, object, or (most often) character.” (London 2000:89). So we should have a “Stevan” leitmotif, which can then be manipulated to reflect Stevan’s evolving character: put into minor to show sadness, played by different orchestral instruments to shade emotion, etc. By shifting the term to a broader usage, Karanovic signals his interest in operating on a larger plane.

Originally, the director had intended to set the story in a more contemporary period, but had to back off due to the explosiveness of even remotely touching upon echoes of the violent past that could be read as commentary on the volatile present of Yugoslavia’s final days.

By turning the plot's clock back to the early twentieth century, the filmmaker avoided having the movie be censored or scrapped. Yet he clearly wants the viewer to think outside the claustrophobic village setting to a larger frame of reference. In some ways, it is the music that does this job more than other filmic elements of *Virginia*. Conventional music is controlling, forcing the viewer into the filmmaker's point of view by stressing a fixed interpretation of the narrative. Musical tags such as the leitmotif, or other conventions like action-chords ("stingers"), mimetic tracking of the action ("mickey-mousing") or cues that foreshadow threats or signal romance all do this work. This is not what Karanovic has in mind. By bringing the same melodic materials back, increasing their resonance with each entry, Karanovic would seem to be following another of his basic principles: "in most of the films I have made, I like the music when it is always the same. It makes to the audience clear where you stand, what you think of the story. If you change the music, then you make a mishmash." This steadiness cuts against individualizing characters and changing emotions, describing instead an overall emotional arc.

I am not sure this strategy clearly establishes where the filmmaker stands. Instead, the viewer needs to do some work to align the musical development with the on-screen action. In *Virginia*, going beyond the simulated vernacular seems to open up rather than close down meanings, precisely because the score is so generalized. The locally styled music grounds us with very concrete sense of place, while the slowly-evolving "leitmotif" moves us along an emotional trajectory that is both tied to and disconnected from the immediate context. In this way, Karanovic signals the strong tension in Yugoslavia at any point in time and place between a highly restrictive, and often

dangerous, set of social norms and the drive of individuals to define their own destinies.

A Film with No Name offers a greatly expanded set of both resources and strategies, even as it stays close to this message. The movie relates the sad, yet often comic, tale of a Yugoslav Romeo and Juliet of Kosovo—Milojub is Serbian, Nadira is Albanian. Their lives are intertwined with the career of an urban filmmaker who takes on the self-imposed task of being their documenter and champion. The film mercilessly satirizes everyone: the hardheaded ethnics who block the couple (the girl's relatives even emasculate the boy), the clueless filmmaker, whose lovelife and career are a mess, the media, which tries to find ways to exploit the couple's plight, and the heavy-handed state. In virtuoso style, Karanovic moves through various forms of film and video camera work, with fast-paced editing, including mock music videos. At the end, the steadfast couple escapes Yugoslavia with the help of the filmmaker, who asks them to take the footage to be developed abroad. The final scene shows the couple throwing the canisters of footage out of the train window. They roll off, unspooling the film and, in some sense, everything we have seen.

The basic principle of the film's music relies on the labeling of social types, rather than individuals. There are three main categories: Serbs, Albanians, and the intelligentsia, the latter being that east European social layer that includes writers and artists as well as intellectuals. The score labels the Albanians with the rural drum and oboe style. The Serbs are most strongly marked by a classic folkloric moment. A bard, like one of Albert Lord's "singer of tales," improvises an epic poem about the star-crossed lovers, accompanied by the classic *gusle* fiddle,. Karanovic told me that they simply found a real bard and had him spontaneously create the poetry. This is a rather

complex moment of simulated vernacular. Everything about the performance is traditional: performer, instrument, compositional process, and style. Yet the whole moment is skewed by its motivation--to create something for a soundtrack—and its documentation, by a filmcrew rather than an ethnomusicologist. The soundtrack also chips in other stereotyped ethnic references. For example, we hear a bit of background flute when the scene shifts to the Vojvodina, a Yugoslav region with a strong Hungarian minority.

The comic music videos, created by the media to cash in on the couple's plight, include several styles. One features the dominant Yugoslav pop-folk style of the day, "newly composed folk music."² A second plays with a Russian-inflected sound, which the producers hope will cash in on an "eastern" audience, referencing the close ties between Serbia and Russia. The third video is in kung fu movie style: "they are imitating Chinese who are imitating Americans," says Karanovic. This pop cosmopolitanism opens the film up, moving it beyond the intense local concerns of Kosovo blood feuds or Yugoslav politics. As in so many films, musical packaging stretches or bends the narrative in ways that simple dialogue or action cannot accomplish.

The music for the intelligentsia also goes beyond the immediate region, as it expresses the "European" sensibility of the intellectuals and media folk. This comes in various formats. A bit of "detective music" tracks some of the more police-style scenes, while the subplots about the emotional life of the hapless director and his circle is cast in a more generalized "euroromantic" music style, which Karanovic calls "music like in a French movie." The director does not see this as in any way glamorizing the intelligentsia, since, as he says, "my vision of European intellectuals is that they're all losers."

I would speculate that Srdjan Karanovic's resources and strategies might stand for larger questions of how "peripheral" cinemas deal with film music. Partly, Karanovic and his colleagues tended to look from the outside to the mainstream of European and American filmmaking, with their established national cinemas and steady financing. This was particularly true at the time of the two movies reviewed here, at the turbulent end of the socialist era when filmmaking itself became increasingly endangered as a social form. Thus, we see him playing with musical materials for both a domestic and international audience, trying to address the local while speaking to universal human themes: personal autonomy under conditions of social control, ethnic tension, and the ambivalent role of the intelligentsia in creation of "art" and as members of a compromised elite.

This brief excursion to the musical mind of one filmmaking team means only to suggest the richness of material already available on video in the search for regional sensibilities in the cinema world. Mapping cinema onto the emerging discourse can only enliven the field of Mediterranean music studies to which Tullia Magrini devoted her enthusiasm and her formidable intellectual energy.

Works Cited

London, Justin. "Leitmotifs and Musical Reference in the Classical Film Score," in J. Buhler, C. Flinn, and D. Neumeyer, eds., Music and Cinema. Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 2000, 85-98.

Moss, Kevin. "From Sworn Virgins to Transvestite Prostitutes: Performing Gender and Sexuality in Two Films from Yugoslavia," in A.

Stulhofer and T. Sandfort, eds., Sexuality and Gender in Postcommunist Eastern Europe and Russia. NY: Haworth Pr., 2005, 79-94.

Rasmussen, Ljerka Vidic. Newly Composed Folk Music of Yugoslavia. London: Routledge, 2002.

¹ I am grateful to Mirjana Lausevic and Ljerka Vidic Rasmussen for careful readings of early drafts of this article and to Srdjan Karanovic for permission to quote his interviews.

² For a study of this genre, see Rasmussen 2002