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Disciplining Traditional Music: The Leskovački Sabor and Cultural Authority in Socialist Yugoslavia*

Abstract: This paper examines the formation and early development of the *Sabor narodnog stvaralaštva Socijalističke Republike Srbije*, widely known as the *Leskovački sabor*, within the broader cultural and political framework of socialist Yugoslavia. Focusing on the first eight years of the festival's existence (1972–1979), the study analyzes how the manifestation functioned as a representational model for staging, disciplining, and redefining traditional music under socialist cultural policies. Drawing on archival materials, committee reports, and contemporary scholarly reflections, the paper explores the tension between the proclaimed preservation of “authentic” folk expression and the processes of modernization, standardization, and ideological instrumentalization. By interrogating concepts such as authenticity, authority, and cultural ownership, the study reveals how the *Leskovački sabor* simultaneously enabled visibility for working-class performers and contributed to the transformation – and at times fragmentation – of traditional musical expression in Socialist Yugoslavia, while it reveals how authorities reformulated musical performance, which brought it to its reductive, intervened, and disciplined forms of representation. At the same time, the *sabor*, in its traditional sense, served as a model for the younger generation, who learned musical performance from older participants at festivals across Yugoslavia.

Keywords: Leskovački sabor; socialist Yugoslavia; staged folklore; traditional music; cultural policy; authenticity; heritage transformation

Introduction

In its totality, World War II, the fight for liberation, revolution, or new socialist construction over a large span of human existence, brought significant structural changes in societal organization, the economy, and cultural politics, which

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inevitably caused seismic shifts in traditional music, mostly in its representation. Even before the socialist period in Yugoslavia, the development of amateurism was crucial to the formation of many representational models that formed after the World War II.¹ Moreover, it seems that “the concept of amateurism (*amaterizam*) was the most important feature in the creation of the new folk culture in the official discourses” (Hofman 2011, 37), while tradition was reinterpreted in accordance with the needs of established socialist ideologies, especially in its agitprop era between 1945 and 1952. Drawing on Ljubodrag Dimić’s observation that culture functioned as an “instrument of ideological transformation,” folklore festivals in socialist Yugoslavia can be interpreted as staged representations of the broader idea of Yugoslavism and “brotherhood and unity.” Political control of culture established during the agitprop period (1945–1952) did not disappear with the gradual liberalization of Yugoslav cultural policy but was instead institutionalized through bodies such as the Savez amatera Srbije and its affiliated committees, which continued to regulate folklore production in the 1960s and 1970s. As shown in program structures and selection procedures of major festivals, including the Leskovački sabor, these institutions exercised influence over repertoire, performer selection, and staging conventions. In this context, folklore festivals functioned as performative displays of Yugoslav unity, in which local traditions were selectively curated and standardized to align with broader narratives of multicultural socialism (cf. Dimić 1988).

The former and ever-present partisan movement and the growing socialist ideology that penetrated every segment of social life inexorably influenced changes in traditional music, its appearance, character, and essence, as will be further discussed. Although these changes could be interpreted as evolutionary and contemporaneous, they did not necessarily yield the best results, which were often obscured under the general label of “developmental” changes, as they were frequently described in the period’s broader narratives. The source of these changes is first seen in population migration, from one republic to another or, more likely, from rural to urban settings. Supported by a prolific political

¹ Different forms of folklore practices constituted an important segment of the so-called cultural and educational activities of interwar mass organizations such as the Yugoslav Sokol Association, later the Sokol Association of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, as well as the organization *Seljačka sloga* (see more in: March, 2013: 93–110; Vesić, 2021; Jakovljević, 2012). The methods and approaches employed in working with folklore ensembles and performers within these frameworks later served as a key reference point for postwar initiatives in the field of amateur cultural production. This influence was particularly evident in the formation and structuring of events dedicated to presenting folk creativity, the so-called folklore festivals or reviews (*smotre*) (cf. March, 2013: 93–110). For additional and cross reference on public showcases on traditional music in Croatia, see Ceribašić: 20023.

system, the partisan movement managed to bring together people of different nationalities, social backgrounds, and levels of education or life experience under one umbrella, as these groups moved from place to place during the war. In these circumstances, as in historically established oral traditions, people created music, songs, and instrumental pieces that were entirely based on previously established “old” or ancient traditions, just as has happened or was happening in many socialist societies of the time.² Simultaneously, they expressed new ideas through texts that glorified revolutionary spirit, while in instrumental music, the structure and stylistic features of traditional expression were juxtaposed with melodies from the National Liberation War and the Socialist Revolution. The effects of such transposition were radical, as the repertoire shift became streamlined in most public performances, including gatherings of ensembles showcasing folk creativity – *smotre narodnog stvaralaštva*, which flourished in socialist Yugoslavia. The secondary effect of these migrations, which amalgamated rural and urban settlers into a single public space, was that such performances, whether traditional or newly composed, created new forms of representation that tended to exceed levels of national identification. Moreover, it brought each musical practice closer to being perceived and absorbed as Yugoslav (supranational), rather than national or even local, despite having been formed as such.

From the 1950s until the dissolution of the federal republic, authentic or traditional Yugoslav folklore or more accurately the traditions of the constitutive republics, such as ritual singing with its dissonant vocal type or old instrumental styles, as i.e. *gusle* epic singing, could still be researched in the field, but the newly composed forms of cultural expression slowly reached the point of equalization. This, to some extent, was paradoxically brought about by the manifestations organized in most urban and rural places across the country. Instead of working to preserve the more traditional forms alongside new styles of performance and representation (i.e., styles of interpretation, hybrid forms, etc.), it was believed that merging them would benefit both; in fact, it only undermined the cultural preservation of older musical traditions. What was done was simply not the result of the organic evolution of musical styles, as was the case with the singing of “older” and “newer” traditions, which coexisted for decades. However, both new and old styles of traditional musical practice underwent rapid change in the mid-twentieth century, propelled by new cultural politics that

² See more about this subject and compare: Rice, Timothy. (1994) *May It Fill Your Soul: Experiencing Bulgarian Music*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Buchanan, Donna A. (2006) *Performing Democracy: Bulgarian Music and Musicians in Transition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Silverman, Carol. (2012) *Romani Routes: Cultural Politics and Balkan Music in Diaspora*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Seeman, Sonia Tamar. (2010) *Sounding Roman: Representation and Performing Identity in Western Turkey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

brought a new vision of folklore to socialist Yugoslavia. This issue became more pronounced as more folklore manifestations formed after the Second World War and intensified in the 1970s, which is the primary historical focus of this research, when musical folklore became increasingly drawn into new modes of representation through stage performances, media coverage, and various forms of aesthetic and organizational “enhancements.” In this sense, the representation of musical folklore became highly mediated by multiple actors—from professionals involved in shaping stage performance profiles to institutional and media frameworks that structured its presentation. As observed in studies of cultural-artistic societies (KUDs), such processes often involved the application of professional aesthetic criteria and staging conventions that aligned traditional practices with the expectations of organized performance and audience reception, thereby recontextualizing them within a performative and, at times, spectacular framework.³ Having this in mind, such newly created performative context changed the way how traditional music appeared in public, with alterations of its forms, styles of performance, and duration of songs, tunes or dances. By exposing specific traditional musical performances to numerous alterations or interventions, we could argue that such musical folklore was “disciplined”, as musical representation became heavily articulated by political and cultural agents and authorities, which generated a completely different context. Under the designation “disciplined” we should understand this term in relation to how the practices were reframing, reshaping or re-articulating traditional folk music under the influence of cultural agents and authorities, which will be discussed further. In addition to this, it is important to note that such cultural politics at village gatherings and local festivals were significantly shaped by the growing influence of the media. Furthermore, the influence of these performances on the development of younger performers is relevant, as they not only observed these events but also acquired their musicianship through osmosis. Additionally, the essence of “disciplining” differs from what should be perceived as standardization, selection or professionalization, because those concepts do not include changes or interventions to the traditional material that extends beyond the scope of music, while it also disguises the ideological or political motivations that are relevant for this discussion. However, for the purpose of this particular discussion, we will be focusing on the role that folklore manifestations had in such context, by more closely examining the initial eight years of one of the most prominent manifestation in Serbia – the *Sabor narodnog stvaralaštva Socijalističke Republike Srbije* (Festival [or Gathering] of Folk Creativity of the Socialist Republic of Serbia), which was colloquially referred to as the *Leskovački sabor*

³ On questions of professionalization, stage aesthetics, mediation by experts and transformation of tradition into performance/spectacle see more in: Jovanović 2016: 134–140.

in the years of its establishment. We will use the term “leskovački sabor,” or simply “Sabor”, in the remainder of the text. It is worth noting that the majority of materials used for this research encompass not only archival texts and rare monographs dedicated to the first ten years of the Sabor (Savez amatera Srbije 1982) and its detailed programs, which are less known to the wider public, but also a very valuable sound collection from the Phonoarchive of the Institute of Musicology SASA in Belgrade, which was compiled by Radmila Petrović.

Aside from analyzing the practices that cultural authorities and agents enacted by shaping the Sabor’s repertoire, selecting performers, and using specific “guidelines” for performing styles, we will give a brief insight into the event’s broader socio-cultural effects. In this respect, the problem of the commercialization of Yugoslav (and Serbian) culture since the late 1960s – understood as detrimental both to the appropriation of socialist values by the younger generations and the preservation of Yugoslav traditional folk music – will be considered as one of the factors in the establishment of events such as Sabor. Given the highly critical views of cultural authorities and policy makers on the impact of commercialization on the musical taste, particularly among Yugoslav youth, and their envisioning of folk music (see Hofman 2013; cf. Vesić 2023), the ambitious scope of the Sabor’s main and side programs, as well as its approach to the selection of performers, could be interpreted as a counter to the perceived evils of this process, including the contamination and degradation of both the aesthetic dispositions, and the spiritual horizons of young people and other groups.



Image 1: The Opening Ceremony, *Sabor narodnog stvaralaštva Socijalističke Republike Srbije*, Leskovac, 1982. Savez amatera Srbije Archive.

The Sociopolitical Background of the Sabor

During the 1970s, the local communities within socialist Yugoslavia reflected many contrasts – from economic and cultural to political ones – while the instability of society began to manifest itself in everyday life. At the same time, this was also a period of extensive state decentralization, marked by the establishment of self-managing interest communities (SIZs) in the cultural sector at multiple levels—from the highest to the local—which undoubtedly facilitated cultural development at the local level, already enabling easier control and management of the cultural content presented to the audience, especially the youth, which was very significant and frequent during this period. These processes also created more favorable conditions for cultural consumption and participation, including those of younger generations. On one side, the political structures maintained their continuous interest in the development of cultivated folklore, while on the other, the same authorities allowed a significant rise in popular culture that amalgamated characteristics of Yugoslav urban culture with the mainstream established throughout Western societies. Additionally, the articulation of cultural politics tended to bring to the fore the dualism between rural and urban, while musical expression was caught in the middle of a battle between state socialism and capitalism, consumerism, general social tensions, to the binaries of censorship and freedom or questions of quality cultural production on one side and “kič”/“šund” practices on the other. As the Sabor was effectively established in 1971 in Leskovac, its creation coincided with these fluctuating trends and seismic shifts in Yugoslavia, where the growing prominence of popular music often relegated traditional folk music to the status of a perceived “national enemy”. It is in the same year that the Yugoslav authorities introduced a series of legislative measures to combat “bad taste” and poor-quality practices in cultural production, which was colloquially termed the law against bad taste (šund).⁴ Arguing this particular development, Ana Hofman specifies that such political pressure was an “attempt to announce the end of ‘unsettled cultural politics’ and growing nationalism in all domains of society by introducing more restrictive rules” (2013, 295).

Parallel to bureaucratic measures, various expert circles sought to draw public attention to the harmful effects of commercial trends on the shaping of musical preferences, primarily among younger generations—particularly in relation to perceptions of what is or is not musically valuable, or, in the case of

⁴ The “tax on shund”) was a distinctive cultural-policy instrument used in the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), especially from the early 1970s onward. Although commonly remembered as a tax on popular folk music, it actually applied much more broadly to books, magazines, comics, gramophone records, and other cultural products that state-appointed commissions judged to be of low artistic value (“šund”) or “kitsch.” (Cf. Hofman 2013, Bačanić 2021).

musical folklore, what does or does not constitute an authentic expression of the people (Volk), deeply rooted in traditional creative and performance practices. Concern over the types of content to which this segment of the population was significantly exposed can be interpreted from several perspectives: as an expression of unease regarding the potential disruption of the natural transmission of traditional practices from older to younger performers, and thus their gradual disappearance; as well as the beginning of a more lasting alienation from the cultural heritage of this region and the loss of a part of one's own authentic cultural identity.

Despite being located on the periphery of Serbia, Leskovac was perceived as a city that had become a major regional economic, cultural, and industrial hub in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), especially in southern Serbia. Before discussing the Sabor further, it is important to outline the context in which this manifestation was conceived – from the characteristics of the locality and the wider network of similar festivals in Serbia to the specific institutional histories that preceded its creation. Within this complex scope, it is necessary to include the geopolitical and cultural background of Leskovac, as well as the earlier formation of specialized associations, such as the local folklore society, which played a significant role in the broader context, as well as other institutions and authorities involved in the creation of such an idiosyncratic cultural manifestation.

Even before the 1940s, Leskovac was southern Serbia's industrial and economic powerhouse, focused primarily on textile and tobacco production. Because of its economic potential and industrial profile, it has been widely known as the "Serbian Manchester", as early media and scholars defined it, mostly due to the city's rapid development of textile industry at the beginning of the twentieth century (Cvijić 1902). However, Leskovac was situated at the crossroads of important commercial routes connecting Serbia with Macedonia and Greece, thereby linking major markets in the Balkans. The urban development of Leskovac began well before World War II, but it became an important hub of development after the War, propelling the region's economy. Because of its important cultural and geographical position and its economic profile, Leskovac was naturally one of the most developed areas in terms of folklore practices, music and dance performances, and local productions. The folk costume production coincided with a strong textile production history, organized labor, materials, and knowledge of patterns and regional styles. Going further, the city was one of the first to adopt the physiognomy of what would later, in socialist Yugoslavia, be designated under the term KUD (cultural-artistic societies) for the representation of folk music. This dates back to artistic group Abrašević⁵ in 1919, which

⁵ KUD Abrašević was founded by the Royal Provincial Administration (Kraljevska banska uprava) under the direction of the Ministry of Interior of the Kingdom of Yugo-

in turn helped institutionalize various folk ensembles, amateur theaters, and the preservation of folk costumes and music.⁶ Since its inception, Abrašević has not only been an emblematic example of Yugoslav cultural life but has also been closely linked to revolutionary ideas and the liberation movement during and after the Second World War (Popović 1963). The interconnection of the workers' profile, artistic and folklore conservation character, and the defiant or resistance-minded spirit grew from the measures that Abrašević faced in December 1940, when the Cvetković-Maček government imposed a ban (Decree II, no. 217) that halted the activities of this and similar societies across the country (Popović 1963, 70). Consequentially, Abrašević became a backbone of the revolutionary movement before and during the Second World War, and the connection of folklore and insurgency was established for now on. As a historical precursor, Abrašević's idiosyncratic significance extended to the establishment of the Leskovački Sabor, which will be examined further.

The ever-growing, rhizomatic network of what became known as KUDs required a place where their performative potential could fully unfold. Since the repertoire was built on the most popular dances, sporadic songs, and instrumental tunes, the audience size and consequential popularity also grew exponentially, following general social trends and the emotional desires of the working people. It was at this point that staged folklore reached the communities, mostly drawing on experiences from other Eastern Bloc societies, such as the USSR, Bulgaria, and Hungary.

The connections between these representational forms and politics were growing in power, and the messages conveyed on stage became more apparent as the socialist system enveloped them. Commenting on these connections, Miroslava Lukić-Krstanović asserts that [...] in the time of socialist holidays and rituals, conventional festivals of light music were an integral part of official politics and establishment. Their purpose: the glorification of the Communist party and leader cults of ex-Yugoslavia and other countries of the Eastern Bloc (2008, 131). On the other hand, the reviews, saviors, and other festivals that arose from the socialist era were de facto bringing together sometimes untouchable groups – elites, urban or middle class, and rural or traditional communities.⁷

slavia. The society was registered as the "united worker's artistic group 'Abrašević' in Leskovac (Popović, 1963:71).

⁶ It is important to distinguish the Abrašević society in Leskovac from the homonymous society formed in Belgrade in 1905.

⁷ This kind of disposition and analytical model was used in Jelena Arnautović's study of intercultural dialogues and their significance for the creation of festivals, which found that the festivals in Serbia moderated the dialogue that existed within modern Serbia's intercultural structures (cf. Arnautović, 2017).

The Birth of Sabor

The first Leskovački sabor was officially organized in 1972 by the Serbian Amateur Association in Leskovac. According to personal recollections, a poet, Tomislav N. Cvetković, met in October 1971 with renowned Serbian ethnomusicologist Dragoslav Dević at the Bojan Stupica Theater in Belgrade to discuss the possibility of organizing a manifestation which would encompass the folk creativity of the Socialist Republic of Serbia (Cvetković 1982, 4). The idea came from their earlier meeting in Guča, where the famous Dragačevo Trumpet Sabor (*Dragačevski sabor trubača u Guči*) had been held since 1961, and was a festival also initiated by Dević.⁸ The main premise was to expand this manifestation into smaller preliminary contests in every region where the trumpet was traditionally played, as happened in the following years. However, the two also discussed conducting a review of the entire practice of musical folklore in Serbia, which would extend far beyond the trumpet to showcase the “richness, authenticity, and diversity of folk music” in the Republic (Cvetković 1982, 4). The fact that Socialist Yugoslavia already had a widespread and highly effective network of musical traditions festivals, which were spread throughout the country in many different formats, from local and regional to republican and national levels, simply required one all-encompassing and comprehensive sabor, which would absorb many musical or folklore practices in a singular representation form. During the 1960s, aside from the mentioned Dragačevo Trumpet Sabor, the Socialist Republic of Serbia already had a whole variety of folklore manifestations, such as Homolje Motives (*Homoljski motivi*),⁹ the Sokobanja Review (*Smotra u Sokobanji*), or similar manifestations and festivals in Boljevac, Za-

⁸ On the formation of Dragačevski sabor of Guča, see more in: Lajić-Mihajlović, Danka – Zakić, Mirjana. (2019). “Dragačevo trumpet festival in Guča: A place of networking music cultures”. *Zbornik Matice srpske za društvene nauke*. Issue 139: 223-236, and Lukić Krstanović, Miroslava. (2008). “The festival order: Music stages of power and pleasure”. *Issues in Ethnology and Anthropology*, (3), 129–143.

⁹ Similar to the Leskovački sabor, the first Homolje Motives happened in 1968, when members of the Organizing Committee, together with representatives of the Cultural and Educational Society (Kulturno-prosvetna zajednica Srbije), such as Miodrag Simentić (see more on the opening ceremony of Leskovački sabor in the later text), Dragoslav Dević, Mile Janković, and Miloš Jeftić, suggested that this manifestation should be formed and supported by the authorities in Belgrade. Although different in its main purpose, where Leskovački sabor was seen as the umbrella form of folklore representation of the Republic of Serbia, and Homolje Motives were of strong regional character, it shared an almost identical political background to its formation, including the main authorities with influenced these two festivals. On the beginnings of Homolje Motives, see more in: Lajić Mihajlović, Danka – Andjelković Grašar, Jelena. 2017. *Pola veka*

ječar, Vršac, or villages in the Leskovac region, such as Vlasotince, Grdelica, Lebane, Medvedja, Bojnik, and many other villages and towns across the Republic had already taken the lead in their own respects. Therefore, just like the general plan of the Socialist Yugoslavia, folklore also conformed to centrally planned governance (Lazić 2011, 126), which was manifested in the domain of music folklore as well.

After the initial meeting between Dević and Cvetković in 1971, the landmark project was launched and streamlined by two major entities: the umbrella organization of the Serbian Amateur Association (*Savez amatera Srbije*)¹⁰ and its affiliate, the Committee for Folk Art (*Odbor za narodnu umetnost*), which was formed almost simultaneously with the Sabor itself. As early as 1948, Serbian authorities established the Association of Cultural and Educational Societies (*Savez kulturno-prosvetnih zajednica*), which led to the formation of numerous

Homoljskih motiva (1968-2017): Miris jorgovana u dolini zlatonosnog Peka. Opština Kučevo – Centar za kulturu Veljko Dugošević Kučevo: 23–24.

¹⁰ It is indicative to draw comparisons of the earlier and current definitions of the cultural amateurism in its legal terms. Analyzing cultural amateurism in her study, Cultural-Artistic Amateurism, M. Vukanović examines multifaceted aspects of this phenomenon, including its policy profile and recent legislation stemming from the Socialist era. She adds that, within more recent Serbian legislation, cultural or artistic amateurism is explicitly defined in the Republic's laws and regulations in culture (*Zakon o kulturi*) in *Službeni glasnik RS* No. 72/2009, whereas related provisions are also found in the National Youth Strategy (*Nacionalna strategija za mlade*, *Službeni glasnik* No. 101/07), adopted as part of the implementation framework of the Law on Youth (*Zakon o mladima*, *Službeni glasnik* No. 50/2011). Given the fact that legislative definitions typically did not vary from those of Socialist Serbia and its laws, Vukanović then quotes the definition given in the Law on Culture, where amateurism is regulated by Article 72, which states:

"Amateur cultural and artistic creativity includes the activities of individuals or groups of individuals who engage in the creation or performance of works in the fields of culture and art without material compensation [...] The individuals and groups referred to in Paragraph 1 of this Article may associate into amateur cultural and artistic societies and their unions in accordance with the regulations governing the association of citizens [...] Associations referred to in Paragraph 2 of this Article shall have the status of subjects in culture. A local self-government unit shall provide the spatial conditions for the operation of amateur cultural and artistic societies, as well as unions and amateur groups that implement amateur cultural programs, and shall provide the funding necessary for programs of local and regional significance. Cultural and artistic societies may associate into unions at the level of multiple municipalities, cities, provinces, or the Republic to establish a system of competitions for amateur programs, as well as for education and the development of amateurism, in accordance with the provisions of the law (cf: *Službeni glasnik* 72/2009, Vukanović 2011, 11–12; Vukanović 2013).

KUDs, while the Serbian Amateur Association and its committees were established in 1972 (cf. Vukanović 2013, 142). It is worth noting that the formation of such a republican-level cultural, or rather political, body as was the Association comes relatively late, given that the political system has already reached a stage of slow political decentralization, gradual democratization on one side, and the rise of nationalism on the other. However, the Committee for Folk Art followed socialist policies and sought to give folklore even greater importance among the working class and to proliferate a modernized expression, which was believed to be a bridge between ancient practices and tendencies towards modernity in rural communities in Serbia. Since the Committee's work commenced, experts from diverse fields were included in its decision-making, among them ethnologists, ethnomusicologists, ethnochoreologists, and folklorists. A significant "supplement" to this conglomerate of experts came from many different areas of public life, including journalists, poets, media producers, cultural professionals, and simply local members of the Communist Party and politicians. The appointed Chairman of the Committee was the ethnomusicologist and university professor Dragoslav Dević, who then created the Program Committee, yet another body that would decide on the fate of this manifestation¹¹. From the sources and archive materials of the Sabor, including program materials, sound recordings and other printed publications, it seems that the Program Committee had a significant role to reshape traditional music by intervention. More precisely, the Program Committee appears to have operated along two principal lines: first, to assemble the most skilled performers from across the Republic, and second, to align their performances with the broader cultural objectives of socialist Yugoslavia. In this context, the emphasis on "authenticity" and modernization did not simply reflect neutral preservation efforts, but corresponded to socialist cultural policy, which sought to standardize and recontextualize folk practices as representative forms of collective identity. By selecting performers, regulating repertoire, and adapting performance formats for staged presentation, the Committee effectively transformed local, context-bound musical practices into curated displays suitable for mass audiences, media dissemination, and ide-

¹¹ The Program Committee comprised of renowned Serbian scholars, professionals, and local politicians, such as Dragoslav Dević (ethnomusicologist and President of the Program Committee), Milica Ilijin (ethnochoreologist), Radmila Petrović (ethnomusicologist), Olivera Mladenović (ethnochoreologist and ethnologist), Desa Djordjević (ethnochoreologist), Dragoslav Antonijević (ethnologist), Jasna Bjeladinović (ethnologist, folk costume expert), Slobodan Zecević (ethnologist), Dobrivoje Putnik (ethnochoreologist), Miodrag Simentić (Secretary General of the Serbian Amateur Association), Tomislav Cvetković (poet and President of Organizational Committee), Božidar Pantić, Borivoje Ilić, Rastko Krčmarek, Dragutin Djordjević, and Dobrivoje Rančić (see Dević 1982, 4).



Image 2: The Dance, *Sabor narodnog stvaralaštva Socijalističke Republike Srbije*, Leskovac, 1982. Archive of the Institute of Musicology SASA, Belgrade, Serbia.

ological framing. Such processes reflect the broader socialist agenda of integrating diverse local traditions into a unified cultural framework aligned with the principles of Yugoslavism, “brotherhood and unity,” and the cultural elevation of the working class.

Disciplining Musical Folklore

In this part of the research, we will return to the dynamics outlined in the Introduction—particularly the role of festivalization, expert mediation, and state-sponsored cultural frameworks—in order to examine how “invasive” interventions operated on the ground. By tracing the standardization of performance, the regulation of repertoires, and the recontextualization of local practices within events such as the Leskovački Sabor, it anticipates how musical folklore was not only curated but actively disciplined, revealing both the reach and the fragility of socialist cultural governance.

Like many similar festivals throughout the country, the Leskovački Sabor was held each year at the end of June until 1979, after which it was relocated to Aleksandrovac, Vranje, Topola, and Gornji Milanovac (cf. Jovanović 2010) by the decision of the Serbian Amateur Association. As already stated, the focus is only on Sabor’s formative years while it was organized in Leskovac, emphasizing its inaugural edition in 1972.

In its first edition, the Sabor, as a manifestation or festival, was scheduled and later held on June 21-24, 1972, at the local stadium “Dubočica” in Leskovac, with a capacity of over 5,000 spectators. Although the Serbian Amateur Association managed to obtain funding from the Republic Cultural Association, many other entities contributed to the financing of this project, including the Tourist Association of Leskovac, the textile industrial complex and Textile Machinery Fair, and the Association of Cultural and Commercial Organizations of Leskovac. The Sabor was honored by the presence of Dragoslav Marković, who was serving as the President of the Parliament of the Socialist Republic of Serbia, while the opening speech was delivered by Miodrag Simentić, who was the serving Secretary General of the Serbian Amateur Association (Cvetković 1982, 4). Although the main event – the opening ceremony – was held at Dubočica Stadium, there were numerous sites where the Sabor was also held, including two nearby places of Vlasotince and Grdelica. Apart from the Sabor, two more events were held around the same time – preselection for Guča, and the Evening of Gusle Performance in the Core Regions of Serbia (Veče guslara uže Srbije). This practically enriched the repertoire itself, as it was already represented by these two types of traditional musical instruments or ensembles. When considering the example of gusle players—their popularity and their ability to convey clear messages to audiences – it appears that such performances served as effective vehicles for political commentary, helping to construct broader narratives and promote concepts such as brotherhood, unity, and other themes drawn from the socialist ideological framework. Lending support to these notions, in her study on the gusle as living performing art forms, Danka Lajić Mihajlović argues that “as a symbol of traditional culture that was supposed to be bypassed on the path towards ‘a new culture of a new society of the new multinational state’, according to the government of the socialist Yugoslavia to which Serbia belonged after World War II (and additionally as a symbol of the particular ethnic Serbian culture), the gusle experienced strong marginalisation as an ‘unwanted heritage’ on the one hand. On the other hand, as a means of expression that was close to the people, singing with the gusle was used to promote the new politics and its ideology by means of a new repertoire – about the heroes from the immediate (partisan, communist) past, including the contemporary events at that time. As expected, the newer generations of guslars slightly transformed the inherited artistic expression under the influence of the media and commercial culture in the changed circumstances of life, in urbanized villages and industrialized cities” (2019, 95).

The Sabor gathered many local artists and craftsmen, offering visitors much more than music – from handcrafted folk costumes, pottery, embroidery, and local gastronomy. This, in fact, fulfilled the traditional form of the Sabor – a gathering event where people hosted guests from nearby places to celebrate the village saint patrons’ day, as traditionally prescribed. Commenting on this, Jelena

Jovanović contrasts traditional and modern events such as *sabor*, claiming that “although conceived as a continuation of tradition, the life of such an association revolves, to a great extent, around a relatively firm set of conventions. For example, concerts represent important events in a small community. It might be said that they provide a substitute for *sabor*, a word of Slavonic origin meaning gathering or meeting” (Jovanović 2010, 164). Furthermore, it seems like the *Sabor* by its structure indeed followed most sacred stages of ritual process – having *procession* throughout the city, just like ritual processions were conducted, then *ceremonial opening*, which could be identified as the relic of the introduction to the hosts homestead or household in the past rituals, and the third stage, where *musicians performed*, competed or reviewed their music qualities, which was coinciding with pure music performance in given rituals of the past. Therefore, something has brought continuity to this manifestation and its design. The *sabor* exists as a particular form that draws its own new authenticity that emerged from the past glory of the old tradition. Alternatively, the *Sabor*’s stage brought performers an opportunity to distance themselves from everyday life, or, as Ana Hofman puts it, “to relocate their activity from the periphery to the center of social events and to gain power in an officially recognized way” (2011, 103). *Sabor* was opened with the song “Oj, Moravo” performed by the ensemble of almost two hundred trumpet players from the South Morava region. Even though trumpet or so-called *bleh* ensembles were an essential part of regional musical history, Leskovac was also well known for its complex and far-reaching musical traditions of *gusle*, *gajde*, and, more widely, a distinctive vocal tradition that included ancient ritual songs such as *lazarice* and *koledari*. Now, everything was there, the *gusle* players in the People’s Theater of Leskovac, the trumpets on the opening stage, the processions throughout the city, the folk costume showcase in Strojkovac Museum of Textile Industry, and people gathered at the stadium or at the seminar for the traditional dances teachers, the pottery and folklore artifacts, but it was deliberately regulated in forms of staged or *disciplined folklore*. The repertoire at the first edition of *Sabor* was well organized into symmetrical blocks of dances from different villages of the Leskovac region, followed by sporadic vocal performances of old traditional or staged ritual songs, and finally, very rare solo instrumental pieces on *duduk*, *gajde*, *drombulje*, *dvojnice* and *svirala*, and more stage or media appealing renderings of music ensembles (*bleh*/trumpet or tambura orchestras, three *svirala*’s or violins), whether they existed in such configuration in traditional life or not. The spectators were there, along with the radio and TV, while ethnomusicologists gathered their reel tape recorders to capture every glimpse of this musical phantasmagoria.¹² The performances

¹² The recordings of Leskovački *sabor* were made by local radio stations Radio Leskovac, but also Radio-Television Belgrade. For the local newspaper *Naša reč* and

were scenic and almost entirely polished, in a sense of rehearsed and adjusted by performance style or vocal volume, without any resemblance to the true rawness and elemental texture it had until almost twenty years ago, where musical performance was mostly spontaneous. The focus sharply interchanged and shifted from the Leskovac region, with distinctive rituals of the surrounding villages such as Brza, to folklore of Vlachs in Northeastern Serbia, to music of the Serbs and minorities (Slovaks and Romanians) from the very northern parts of the Republic – Vojvodina, each bringing some dances, some songs, and some tunes to the floor, while the audience sonically traveled from Levant to Central Europe in just minutes. A layer of ritual practice (*koledari* or *kraljice* from Brza), some new traditional songs and customs (*komišanje* from V. Središte), a *bleh* orchestra from Čačak, a rendition of a WWII-inspired epic song played with *gusle* (“The Execution of Schoolchildren in Kragujevac” depicting Kragujevac massacre in 1941), a step into musical heritage worlds of Serbs from all parts of the Republic, Slovaks, Romanians, Romani, Vlachs, brought so many diverse forms of culture on one stage and under one event, which could most likely never be seen together in Leskovac if the Sabor was not formed. This was the imagery the Party wanted for the working people. Moreover, it was the framework through which younger generations – both in the role of performers and members of audience – were meant to internalize socialist cultural models prompting them to gather, participate, and accept novelty, being offered space where a quest for “authenticity” does not necessarily mean to search for an old traditional practice, but to proliferate novel forms of expression – what the working class performs in the present. During the evening, around forty-eight stage troupes performed their local repertoire, with hundreds of individual and group performers. Although ethnomusicol-

other printed media, journalists and photographers compiled a large collection of photographs, which were consulted for this paper. The entire sound recording archive of the Sabor, made by Radmila Petrović and Ana Matović, was archived and preserved in the phonoarchive of the Institute of Musicology SASA. It contains 8 reel-to-reel tapes (sig. TR271-TR291) that cover all 8 years of the Sabor in Leskovac and were reviewed in detail and analyzed for this research. With regard to the immediate impact that the Sabor had on younger generations of performers, as well as on the musical horizons of younger audiences, further research is needed—particularly through the analysis of press reports, especially the weekly *Naša reč*, and by developing insights into the experiences of participants and attendees of the Sabor. Regardless of Leskovac’s specific position as a peripheral industrial center within the heterogeneous cultural landscape of Yugoslavia, it is unlikely that the Sabor produced effects substantially different from those of similar cultural manifestations in republican capitals. This primarily refers to its deeper and more lasting influence on the habits and preferences of younger generations, which—according to existing research—were throughout the 1970s unmistakably shaped by the strong influence of commercial cultural values.

ogists, ethnochoreologists, ethnologists, and other folklore professionals initially served on the Program Committee, they also had a role in observing, recording, and moderating or intervening in many aspects of the event. As Dragoslav Dević described in the commentary on the tenth anniversary celebration of the Sabor, it has been decided that the most important Republic manifestation of its kind should not be about contesting but that performers should “equally perform as the best chosen representatives for the unique [unified; author’s addition] review of folk creativity” in Serbia (Dević 1982, 2), which aligns completely with the conceptual, theoretical, or doctrinal influences in the Socialist Yugoslavia, going even to the ideas of the equality and self-governance (*samoupravljanje*).¹³ In the same commentary, Dević asserts that such positioning of the Program Committee stems from the fact that “since the groups and individual performers, which are participating in the program of the Sabor, are being chosen during the year on local and regional reviews, they are in fact the best representatives of their local areas, which also, by their rule, have competitive character, are in fact the best representatives of their local area, and as such and without comparison and competitiveness among each other, should [are entitled; author’s addition] represent their folk creativity” (Dević 1982, 2).

Distorted Progress

One could argue that the stakes for Sabor performers were high. Even though most of the performers were of older age, the selection of working people would mean that they needed to put off their work in order to attend numerous and frequent rehearsals, while they also had to polish their skills – this was typically the case with “seasonal” instrumental players who made music when they did not have any sessional work. In addition, the chosen performers represented their local areas, which was considered both an honor and a huge responsibility. Therefore, in this sense, music-making was considered a specialized activity or labor that, although based on individual engagement within tradition, also

¹³ The concept of self-governance, self-management or “*samoupravljanje*” has been established in former Yugoslavia to regulate state ownership by delegating authority to the working people. This meant that working people themselves decide on the conditions, organization, and results of their labor, as Edvard Kardelj defined it in his paper “Socialist Self-Management in Yugoslavia” (*International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 1976) and *Directions of the Development of the Political System of Socialist Self-Management* (1977). The Constitution from 1974 also defines self-government by reflecting on how “workers’ self-management is the right and duty of working people to manage directly the affairs of social reproduction in organizations of associated labor.” (Yugoslav constitutional principle – 1974 Constitution).



Image 3: The Audience and Professionals (including members of the Program Committee), *Sabor narodnog stvaralaštva Socijalističke Republike Srbije*, Leskovac, 1982. Savez amatera Srbije Archive.

required coordination with other performers, members of the Committee, and other parties involved in this intrinsic process. However, for a local worker who is also a music laborer and their colleagues, good representation might bring visibility among local politicians, while remarkable artistry and outstanding rendition would bring the entire village group high ranking, which would then lead to possible radio or TV appearances, as this was highly sought after among the general public in socialist Yugoslavia. Success would lead to eventual placement in the program of renowned national festivals, such as the International Folklore Review in Zagreb (*Međunarodna smotra folkora u Zagrebu*) and Balkan Folklore Festival in Ohrid, which was the highest achievement in this field, and for the entire country. If it were successful there, it could lead to numerous participation and travel to the world's largest folklore festivals, which were usually unreachable for these workers. In addition, local industries and commercial enterprises showcased their potential at the Sabor and presented gifts to local representatives, which were sometimes symbolic and mostly consisted of local products. Because of such high interest, each potential performer had to pass numerous local competitions to qualify for the Sabor. However, the members of the Sabor Committee had their own ways of articulating their interests, and most of them did their best to assist and advise as effectively as possible.

As a well-established Serbian ethnomusicologist, Radmila Petrović took part in the Committee early on. Indeed, Petrović was perhaps one of the handful of professionals who offered honest criticism of Sabor's representational politics and performance standards. In her observations following the tenth anniversary of the Sabor, she clearly stressed that it is not entirely acceptable to represent vocal practice at the Sabor in ways as represented, stating that "such folk song, being channeled on the stage, does not possess an old and authentic function. It changed its cultural function by detaching from its ambient and its authentic cultural context [...] from traditional contexts of labor, celebrations, customs, and other occasions, the song now became a stage performance [estrada; author's addition], and represents only amusement, which in turn reveals the novel life necessity of people" (1982, 32). Indeed, the folk song, or at least the most preserved form of it, suffered great changes in Sabor performances, which impacted primarily at the semantic levels, when songs became trimmed to fit the timings of the staged performances. Even though stylistic or sonic features could still be observed, the performance comprised only two or three verses, which not only disrupted and impaired original cultural expression but also disciplined authentic performers to adopt desired manners of musical representation.

However, the intervention just kept on going, it seems. The members of the Committee attended local manifestations to recruit performers, but also to define and tame performance by choosing songs, tunes, and dances originating in their local area. As emphasized in their writings on the Sabor, the members took many steps in order to regulate this manifestation. The second stage involved visits to the field, that is to the villages themselves, where the members of the Committee practically worked, or rather, intervened on the spot with the performers. They then delegated which performers would take the lead and what they would perform, selected instrumentalists and vocalists, and arranged the duration of their musical performance to fit the program and to discipline their musical folklore for the stage. In her recollection of the Sabor, ethnochoreologist Desa Djordjević argued that members intervened with how local musicians and dancers would, in fact, act on the stage. This was not necessarily negative by itself, as folklore professionals really had the best intentions in delivering the most representative performance to the audience, but the ethical aspects of it still bring us to question whether such performative articulation or intervention would not disfranchise the very carriers of endangered traditions that we ought to protect, despite clear consumerist impulses. However, from the narratives and the structure of this Sabor, its program, performance styles, and media representation, it could be concluded that the ideological pressure, whether solid, fragmented, or full of inconsistencies, in Socialist Yugoslavia caused certain damage to the intangible heritage that professionals aspired to protect and preserve. Supporting this notion, Djordjević observes the very thing

in her depictions of staged ritual performances, or choosing the performers for the Sabor, stressing that “frequently it was hard to convince people to remove some elements from their program, which was foreign to their local tradition, which were often forced by previous program creators [Committee; author’s emphasis], good-willed but unprofessional individuals” (1982, 33). Although she generally believed that the Sabor represented a major contribution to cultural development, Olivera Vasić in her reflections argues that many mistakes have been made during the process of Sabors formation. She then comments on each of the representational categories – from staged simulations of certain rituals to dances, customs, songs, and tunes. Moving further, Vasić, in her capacity of ethnologist and ethnochoreologist and in sovereign argument asserts that the “grim imagery” has been made during the years of the Sabor, where we “assign” the tasks to the local music or dance performers in order to satisfy our needs for spectacles,¹⁴ by turning performance into “pantomime”, and expect them to show proficiency in expressions so foreign to them, as specified in her statement (1982, 37). This not only indicate how traditional music deteriorated, but that the harm was caused by the ones who “took an oath” to the preservation protect what was authentic.

Conclusion

If the earlier chapters have traced how musical folklore was intervened upon—through selection, stylization, and its reorganization within festival frameworks—what remains less explicitly addressed is the question of who could enact, legitimize, and sustain these transformations. The processes examined so far point beyond technique and policy toward a more fundamental issue: the production and distribution of authority within the field of musical folklore. Introducing authority here allows for a shift in perspective, from describing interventions to interrogating the conditions that made them possible and meaningful. It opens a space to consider how expertise, institutional power, and cultural legitimacy were negotiated between performers, mediators, and state structures—an issue that, while only implicit in the preceding analysis, proves essential for understanding both the reach and the limits of these interventions, and for guiding future research in this field.

¹⁴ The book *The Spectacles of the 20th Century: Music and Power* (2010) by Miroslava Lukić Krstanović explores how twentieth-century musical and political spectacles functioned as powerful social mechanisms that shaped ideology, collective identity, and systems of authority, revealing how public performances—from state ceremonies to popular music events—both reflected and actively produced structures of power within modern society.

Although the notions of agency have been largely discussed in this text, it is clear that previous arguments raise questions about authority in folk music preservation efforts and representation, but they also bring to the surface the consequences that followed. In this sense, the importance of the authorities in creating Leskovački sabor has only been anticipated by the facts presented in the previous discussion, while further research is needed. To open this aspect, it is worth reflecting on some key points regarding agency and authority in the creation of festivals in socialist Yugoslavia, as it will lead to a better understanding of the motives for their formation, the ideas of their purpose, and the effects they had on the course of traditional music and folklore maintenance and survival throughout the 20th century. Numerous studies have examined this aspect in terms of the representation of Serbian traditional music, or, more generally, folklore¹⁵. Although unlikely to offer any significant answers to this colossal topic at this point, it is worth remembering the fact that in 1979 the authorities, primarily the Serbian Amateur Association, moved Sabor from Leskovac to Aleksandrovac, Vranje then to Topola, and finally, on or about 2015, to Gornji Milanovac, where it remains active today, although the Sabor lost its grandeur and national importance at large. The strategy behind the relocation stems from the idea that the locality's folklore representation, or its staged or commercial potential, had perhaps been exhausted, meaning also that the region's folklore groups were participating more than once. Therefore, to overcome redundancies, it has been decided that the next edition of the Sabor would be held in Aleksandrovac, a small town in the Rasina District of central Serbia.

As for Leskovac and its surroundings, the efforts to enrich, stimulate, and preserve traditional musical folklore were supposedly said to have helped the locality strengthen its capacities enough to self-maintain, if not advancement. However, it rather brought advantages, benefits, engagement, labor, and support to cultural or political workers and the many auxiliary professionals involved in this process, while generating new administrative levels of authority, influence, or power.

¹⁵ Although many recently published studies on Balkan music address questions of authority and power, several works have become particularly influential within contemporary ethnomusicological scholarship. Among the most frequently cited are: Ana Hofman, *Socialism Now: Singing Activism after Yugoslavia* (2025), Ana Hofman, "Maintaining the Distance, Othering the Subaltern: Rethinking Ethnomusicologists' Engagement in Advocacy and Social Justice" (2010), Carol Silverman, *Romani Routes: Cultural Politics and Balkan Music in Diaspora* (2011), Sonia Tamar Seeman, *Sounding Roman: Representation and Performing Identity in Western Turkey* (2019), *Balkan Popular Culture and the Ottoman Ecumene: Music, Image, and Regional Political Discourse*, Donna Buchannan (ed.) (2007), Jane Sugarman, "Albanian-Language Etnopop and the Emergence of a 'Balkan' Regional Music Sphere" (2024), Dave Wilson, "Not Different Enough: Avoiding Representation as 'Balkan' and the Constrained Appeal of Macedonian Ethno Music" (2020), among others.

Finally, in his analysis of folk costumes in Serbia and similar political agendas that resurfaced beneath, Miloš Rašić very clearly outlined the nature of such involvement, stating that it is paradoxical that certain folklore professionals, while observing in the field and directly or indirectly participating in these traditions, simultaneously claimed in their narratives that the tradition had become “decustomized” or “removed from customary practice,” as he stated, which in fact contradicts the pattern of “disciplinary self-production and perpetuation of an expert paradigm” (cf. Rašić 2025, 1088 after Hafstein 2018). Even if the authorities of different folklore specialists during Sabor in Leskovac years aimed to indicate the major issues on ethics, traditional music cultivation, or preservationism, as well as the questions of authenticity and authority itself, by crossing different narratives in this study, it is highly likely that further investigation on the levels of interference and ownership should be conducted. By closely examining archival materials and documentation that have survived to this day, this research invites examination and complements current research in this field. It was the notion of involvement that outlined this research. A mechanism of social integration was examined that amplifies the voices of those who would otherwise be silenced, while the investigation affirms that political engagement through music can expand the agency of socially disenfranchised communities in weathering Socialist Yugoslavia’s cultural articulation and the gradual erosion of authentic expression.

Declaration

I confirm that the submitted manuscript is the result of the author(s)’ original and independent scholarly work, based on my own intellectual effort, analysis, and interpretation. During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) used the AI tool OpenAI for translation from Serbian into English and/or the AI tool for editorial assistance to improve grammar and readability. The author carefully reviewed and revised all content generated by these tools and accepts full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript.

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*Disciplinovanje tradicionalne muzike:
 Leskovački sabor i kulturna politika u socijalističkoj Jugoslaviji*

U ovom radu se istražuju formiranje i rani razvoj Sabora narodnog stvaralaštva Socijalističke Republike Srbije, poznatog kao Leskovački sabor, u okviru šireg kulturnog i političkog okvira socijalističke Jugoslavije. Fokusirajući se na prvih osam godina postojanja festivala (1972–1979), u studiji se analizira kako je manifestacija funkcionisala kao reprezentativni model za postavljanje, disciplinovanje i redefinisane tradicionalne muzike pod socijalističkim kulturnim politikama. Koristeći arhivsku građu, izveštaje odbora i savremene naučne refleksije, uočava se napetost između proklamovanog očuvanja „autentičnog“ narodnog izraza i procesa modernizacije, standardizacije i ideološke instrumen-

talizacije. Ispitujući koncepte kao što su autentičnost, autoritet i kulturno vlasništvo, u studiji se otkriva kako je Leskovački sabor istovremeno omogućio vidljivost izvođača radničke klase i doprineo transformaciji – a ponekad i fragmentaciji – tradicionalnog muzičkog izraza u socijalističkoj Jugoslaviji, dok otkriva kako su vlasti preformulisale muzičko izvođenje, što je dovelo do reduktivnih, obrađenih i disciplinovanih oblika reprezentacije. Istovremeno, sabor je, u svom tradicionalnom smislu, služio kao model mlađoj generaciji, koja je učila muzičko izvođenje od starijih učesnika na festivalima širom Jugoslavije.

Ključne reči: Leskovački sabor, socijalistička Jugoslavija, scenski folklor, tradicionalna muzika, kulturna politika, autentičnost, transformacija nasleđa

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