http://dx.doi.org/10.25038/am.v0i13.185

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Socialism or Art: Yugoslav Mass Song and Its Institutionalizations[1]

Abstract: The genre of the mass song is one of the fundamental phenomena in aesthetics and practice of socialist realism. Mass songs are supposed not only to be accessible to the lay audience, but also to be composed in a way that invites the participation of amateurs. Importantly, the institutions which have been disseminating the mass song under state socialism, such as various institutions of education, culture and art, have also served as mechanisms for the normalization of its ideological content. This article summarizes important aspects of the concept of the mass song in general and offers a multifaceted exemplification, before proceeding to discuss the history of mass songs in socialist Yugoslavia (including, by and large, what is usually referred to as partisan songs), with emphasis on the institutional framework through which they were practiced and disseminated, and on specificities that the genre had accrued within the Yugoslav framework. This historical framework of practicing mass songs in Yugoslavia provides a platform for opening the question of intrinsic incompatibility between the project of a classless society and the institution of art. In regards to this, article discusses contemporary practice of Yugoslav mass songs as practiced by self-organized choirs and their new political potential.

Keywords: mass song, socialist realism, partisan art, canonization, amateurism

> […] every participant in revolutionary activity knows from his own experience that a good mass song is a powerful weapon in the class struggle.[2]

One should not be surprised if, as the restoration of capitalism[3] takes its full swing, the most thorough and poignant criticism of socialist Yugoslavia's legacy comes from the Left. The criticism from the Left was present already as the socialist project was taking its shape, e.g. in activities of the Praxis group of philosophers or in the student

[1] The paper was written as a part of the project *Serbian Musical Identities within Local and Global Frameworks: Traditions, Changes, Challenges* (no. 177004 /2011–2017/) funded by the Ministry of Education and Science of Republic of Serbia.

[2] Aaron Copland, "Workers Sing!," *New Masses* 9 (1934): 28–29, cited in Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 655.

[3] Cf. Darko Vesić et al., ed., *Bilans stanja – doprinos analizi restauracije kapitalizma u Srbiji* (Beograd: Centar za politike emancipacije, 2015).

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protests of 1968, and it was directed towards the failure of socialist Yugoslavia to achieve the ideals of classless society. In this essay I take the genre of mass (and partisan) song and I analyze its institutionalizations within Yugoslav societies, arguing that resurrecting worlds of traditional, bourgeois and nationalistic art inevitably led to aesthetic practices which are incompatible with the project of a classless society. Showing how processes of canonization led to misunderstanding of what mass song is and to stifling its radically participative character, I also endeavor to follow the lead of critics such as Rastko Močnik, who have recently revisited the aesthetics of visual partisan art, and offer different ways of appreciating mass partisan songs of the Yugoslav revolution.[4]

While in a broad sense one could think of a *mass song* as any song gaining mass popularity and performed by crowds or (their) choirs, the denomination of mass song is historically inextricably linked to the idea of proletarian revolution. Mass songs, as *массовая песня* in Russian, *Massenlieder* in German, or *masovna pesma* in Serbo-Croatian, were to be distinguished from 'national songs', which also attained mass character in the 19th century, as the agendas of national projects were marred by the narrow interests of ruling bourgeoisie and incompatible with the internationalism of the proletariat. Naming proletarian songs 'mass songs' was a form of leftist critique of European nationalistic projects, stating that they were not speaking in the name of the 'masses' and were neglecting the interest of the many for the sake of the few. Mass song as a concept is thus also linked to the question: who has the right to speak for and in the name of the masses? Therefore, it is also a question of who (if anyone) has the right to compose a mass song, in what moment a 'song' can be named a 'mass song', and is it only a question of stylistic features that makes a song a 'mass song' or is an act of public recognition (by the 'masses') of the song needed.[5]

The musical style of mass songs can be explained by a need not only that mass songs be accessible to the lay audience, but also to be composed in a way that is inviting to the participation of amateurs and versatile in terms of different, albeit simple arrangements. The qualities that one seeks in a mass song can be a striking melody or rhythmical line that is easily memorized, but also grounded in simple Major-Minor tonal harmonies and simple meter, especially in the opening of the song. Modulations are mostly avoided, as well as a range which outreaches an octave, although leaps in vocal line are often appreciated. If asking for multipart singing, mass song usually refrains to two voices, and additional accompaniment is written for keyboard, guitar or accordion. It is, however, of great importance for a mass song to remain distinctly recognizable and performable even if sung in one voice without any accompaniment, which would provide opportunity for amateur performances in various conditions.

As the issue of legitimization of a mass song becomes developed, it is important to stress that mass songs experience what can be termed a 'crucible moment', when their legitimacy, discursive explanation, but often final character as well, are

[4] Cf. Rastko Močnik, "The Partisan Symbolic Politics," *Slavica Tergestina* 17 (2016): 18–39.

[5] Cf. А. Н. Сохор, "Массовая песня," in *Музыкальная энциклопедия*, Vol. 3, edited by Ю. В. Келдыш (Moscow: Советская энциклопедия and Советский композитор, 1976), 476–77; Marija Kuntarić, "Masovna pjesma," in *Muzička enciklopedija*, ed. Krešimir Kovačević (Zagreb: Jugoslavenski leksikografski zavod, 1974), 543.

obtained in revolutionary events or broader times of unrest. A mass song which has been accepted and, perhaps, even modified by revolutionary upheaval is thus legitimized throughout as the voice of the proletarian masses, to the level that its original authorship remains irrelevant or even forgotten. As the message of the mass song is formed in the crucible of unrest, remaining faithful to the song as it is forged in this moment also represents an act of remaining faithful to this historical event.[6]

In order to understand the institutional framework typical of mass song, one can briefly refer to the relatively short-lived institution of the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (*Российская ассоциация пролетарских музыкантов*). Founded in 1923 by the musicians who were also members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, it was directly opposed to the Association of Contemporary Music (*Ассоциация современной музыки*), another alternative musicians' society representing the traditional establishment of art music and including composers regarded as traditional modernists.[7] The Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians was dedicated to revolutionary utilitarian music with overtly political texts, that is, by and large to composing and disseminating mass songs. In terms of development of the genre, the supposed triumph of the association, accomplished through the centralization of musicians' guilds authorities in 1929 (as the First Five Year Plan was imposed) under its purview, was in the longer run detrimental to the 'revolutionary utilitarian music', as the association was now supposed to work inside the concept of 'music as art', and not in radical opposition to it.

Understanding the mass song phenomena is inextricably linked to one specific kind of material artifacts: songbooks. Mass songs are usually short compositions, whereas their printing requires one or two pages of small format booklet, and individual printing is usually discouraged. Songbooks intended for wide dissemination of mass songs are usually printed in small pocket formats and contain simple arrangements of the songs intended for amateur performances. As such, they also reiterate the fundamental amateur nature of this genre. Importantly, 'mass songbooks' not only serve the purpose of dissemination, they also define the often heterogeneous genre of mass song, providing the outline of the sanctioned canon of songs in lieu of other mechanism of canonization of musical works present in art music. As such, they can also enter and become material agents in other institutions of education, culture and art, which act as mechanisms for the normalization of proletarian ideological content.

Based on the presented discussion, in lieu of a simple definition, one can summarize important aspects of mass song as:

- Leftist, proletarian, opposed to national and bourgeois culture;
- Musically fitting for amateur and *ad hoc* performances;
- Legitimized by revolutionary events, licenced to speak for the people;
- Produced and performed outside traditional music art institutions;
- Disseminated and canonized through recognizable songbooks.

[6] This can be interpreted very much in the sense recently put forward by Alain Badiou; Cf. Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, transl. by Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2005).

[7] See Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, 777.

As is the case with mass songs in general, Yugoslav mass songs can be classified into three categories based on the way they were produced:

1. New-composed songs

   This category can further be divided into songs composed by professional composers who asserted their authorship, and songs of anonymous authorship for which one can trace the historical moment when they were produced and to a great extent exclude the possibility of using pre-existing songs.

2. Songs based on popular/folk songs

   A vast number of mass songs were produced internally by adapting popular folk songs that were widely known within the proletariat and peasantry. This includes now internationally popular songs of the left such as *Bella ciao* and *¡Ay Carmela!*. More so than in the case of two other categories, revolutionary crucible and legitimization through historical upheaval is germane for the appearance of mass songs based on folk material.

3. Translated and/or adapted songs

   The idea of mass songs is inextricably connected to the need to create an international repertory of the revolutionary proletariat, meaning that translation and adaptation figured as an important practice in the genre. Translations could be mostly literal, where the topic of the song remains unchanged, or performed as free adaptations, with the same or novel and fully rewritten poetic subject.

The history of mass songs in socialist Yugoslavia is first and foremost the history of partisan songs.[8] For most Yugoslav mass songs, the experience of the National Liberation War (*NOB, Narodnooslobodilačka borba*) as both a Communist-led partisan struggle and resistance to the Axis occupation, and as a proletarian revolution, was the outmost crucible through which mass songs were appropriated, produced and legitimized. The second categorization of Yugoslav mass songs thus must take this into account and assume historical character, dividing songs into three historical periods: the pre-Second World War period, the period of the National Liberation War, and the aftermath of the war and the (early) existence of socialist Yugoslavia (for representative examples of songs categorized in these two criteria see Table 1).

[8] Cf. Krešimir Kovačević, ed., "Partizanska pjesma," in *Leksikon jugoslavenske muzike*, Vol. 2 (Zagreb: Jugoslavenski leksikografski zavod "Miroslav Krleža", 1984), 149–50. For recent literature on Yugoslav mass songs cf. Vesna Mikić, "Mass Song as a Key Product of Yugoslav Music Propaganda," in *Music and Propaganda in the Short Twentieth Century*, ed. by Massimiliano Sala (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 159–65; Rade Pantić, "'The Hero's Voice Let Us Follow, May Tito Lead Us': An Interpretation of the Phenomenon of Songs about Tito Based on the Theory of Ideological Interpellation," *New Sound* 45 (2015): 103–18.

	Composed	Based on folk songs	Adapted
Before 1941	*Crveni makovi* (N. Hercigonja) *Mitrovčanka* (M. Vukdragović)		*Budi se istok i zapad*
Partisan	*Naša pjesma* (N. Hercigonja) *Pjesma o pesti* (O. Danon)	*Marjane* *Mlada partizanka*	*Po šumama i gorama* (*Partizan sam tim se dičim*) Komandant Sava
After 1945	*Od Triglava do Balkana* (M. Živković, 1947) *Zadrugarska* (M. Logar, 1949)		*Aj Karmela* (D. Rundek)

Table 1. Examples of Yugoslav mass songs in three categorizations[9]

In the period up to the Second World War, production of mass songs can be described as a subcultural phenomenon. Composers of leftist orientation often worked under the rose, as the Communist Party was outlawed, or they worked in unenviable positions. Nikola Hercigonja serves as an example of the latter, leading a rural youth choir in the village Mlada Mlaka near Zagreb, as he failed to find a position in Zagreb after graduating the Music Academy, and penning the song *Crveni makovi* based on peasant-poet Mihovil Pavlek Miškina's verses in 1936.[10] Thanks to the influence of the Soviet Communist Party, internationally acclaimed Soviet songs, such as *Смело, товарищи, в ногу* (written and composed by Leonid Radin [Леонид Петрович Радин] in 1896, a song that gained popularity during the 1917 October Revolution and the ensuing civil war) were also initially adapted in this period (translated as *Budi se istok i zapad*).

The National Liberation War saw a surge of partisan songs being composed, adapted and translated throughout Yugoslav territory. Composers such as Nikola Hercigonja and Oskar Danon were directly involved in military uprising and were engaged in composing songs, organizing music and cultural practices, as well as recording folk song adaptations within partisan military units.[11] Nikola Hercigonja later discussed ways in which partisan units adapted folk songs and gave them new meanings

[9] Examples are selected in order to illustrate the categorizations and to support the discussion in the text, hence the table should not be read as comprehensive nor as a selection of most popular Yugoslav mass song titles.

[10] Nikola Hercigonja, *Crveni makovi. Pesme za decu* (Knjaževac, Nota, 1976), 4. Cf. Srđan Atanasovski, "Nikola Hercigonja i proizvođenje jugoslovenske nacionalne teritorije," in *Nikola Hercigonja (1911–2000), Čovek, Delo, Vreme*, ed. Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman and Melita Milin (Beograd: Muzikološko društvo Srbije, 2011), 133–51.

[11] See Zegirja Ballata, ed., *Muzika i muzičari u NOB*, (Beograd: Savez organizacija kompozitora Jugoslavije, 1982).

and texts, but also how composers worked together with partisans in order to achieve melody and style which could be widely accepted by the populace.[12] Movement of military units also proved beneficial for the dissemination of mass songs, especially for the popularization of songs of Dalmatian origin throughout central Yugoslavia.

Importantly, already during the Yugoslav National Liberation War, the production of mass (or partisan) songbooks occurred. Already on 7 November 1941 in Užice, in the liberated territories, a special issue of the journal *Borba,* titled *Antifašističke pesme,* was printed with verses of 33 songs, mostly adapted from Soviet models. In the following year a more comprehensive songbook *Pesme borbe* was issued, followed by the final and perhaps most important songbook, *Naše pjesme*, printed in 1944 in liberated territories in Lika. Termed as a "partisan collection of poems", "fighting songs" and "songs of the new desires", this songbook brought together songs of all categories: ones based on folk models as well as new composed ones with signed authors, including also pre-war workers' songs. The same songbook had three more issues, firstly in the following year as the war was still being waged, and then again in 1945 and 1946 in the immediate post-war period, thus serving as a bridge connecting the crucible of the National Liberation War with the post-war period (see Illustration 1).

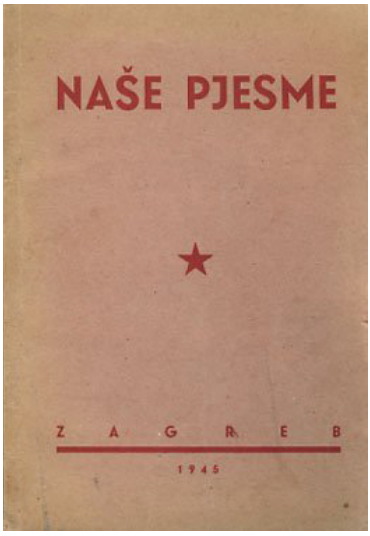

Illustration 1: *Naše pjesme*, title page of 1945 edition

The immediate post-war period is especially interesting in the history of the Yugoslav mass song. Written materials from the first large labor actions organized in the late 1940s testify that mass songs were widely practiced as amateur music activity. In the case of the federal labor action on the construction of the Šamac–Sarajevo railroad in 1947, the exhaustive documentation which remains testifies that music,

[12] See Nikola Hercigonja, "O partizanskim narodnim pesmama," in *Napisi o muzici* (Beograd: Umetnička akademija, 1972), 274–305.

particularly mass songs, occupied an important place in participants' everyday work. Cultural and educational work at the labor camps consisted of lectures, activities, reading groups, performances, film screenings, popular lectures and special courses. One of the courses offered was on managing and leading choirs, which aimed to train young people to organize small amateur choirs. In addition to this program, choruses with an average of twenty to thirty members were formed in all brigades (units into which laborers were divided were designated), while some brigades featured more than one choir, as the total number of choirs active in 139 brigades amounted to 155. While a small number of these choirs could sing in four voices, most of the choirs, especially the ones compromising youth with no previous music education, sang in one voice.[13]

Another mechanism which made it possible for the mass song to cut into the daily life of the population of the new socialist Yugoslavia were numerous choral societies, whose repertoire consisted primarily of revolutionary and labor songs. Namely, immediately after the war, the establishment of new choirs inspired by the liberation grew exponentially. This is confirmed by information gathered by the Committee for Culture and Arts of the Yugoslav government during 1947. On two occasions, first on 14 December 1946 and 4 April 1947, the Committee sent a letter to all relevant offices in the republics to provide 'statistical information on the choirs' in their territories. Comprehensive reports requested by the Committee were to contain information regarding the name and the place and year of establishment, the composition of the choir, the number of members, the frequency of performances, as well as information about the choirmaster and the repertoire. Although the reports that were sent by individual offices were very uneven, and the repertoire rarely spelled out, statistics alone suggest a real explosion of choral activities during 1945 and 1946 (see Chart 1). Moreover, one can tell that the situation was very volatile and that, in the words of the report of one Slovenian official, it changed from month to month. Most of these choirs can be referred to as 'micro-choirs', operating with a modest number of members, often within larger cultural societies, or in the context of labour unions. Information on the repertoire of choirs is often incomplete, but still sufficient to create a general picture of what of choral material was performed immediately after the war. The repertoires often cite "national partisan songs", "battle songs", "youth songs", "our songs", as well as "folk songs" and "Russian songs", occasionally works of canonized composers such as Stanislav Binički, Jakov Gotovac, Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac and Ivan Zajc, but also mass songs composed by partisan composers Oskar Danon, Silvije Bombardelli, Natko Devčić and Nikola Hercigonja.

[13] Arhiv Jugoslavije, fond 114/II (Savez socijalističke omladine Jugoslavije), fasc. 129.

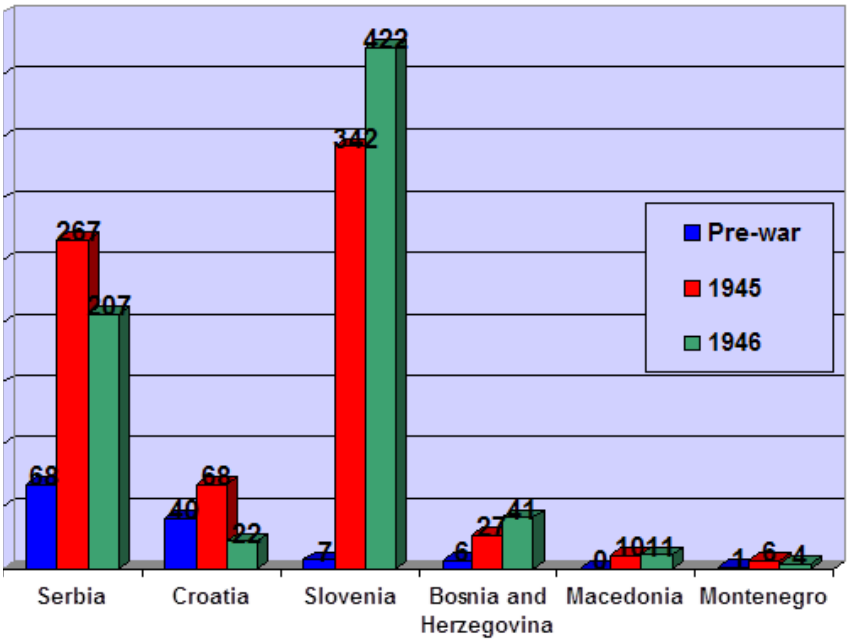

Chart 1. Number of choirs in Yugoslavia by the year of establishment, as of 1946.

The immediate post-war period inspired by the revolutionary fervor was, however, to be a short-lived phenomenon in the history of Yugoslav mass song. One might argue that the genre of mass song is one of the fundamental phenomena in aesthetics of socialist realism, as the style officially sanctioned primarily by the Soviet Union from the mid-1930s, but as well by the socialist Yugoslavia until the late 1940s (as afterwards the ensuing Tito–Stalin split of 1948 and distancing from Soviet Union resulted in different cultural politics). Indeed, mass songs seem to have fulfilled all the precepts of socialist realism, such as accessibility to the masses and a clear professing of socialist ideology. However, one must still take into account that socialist realism, as formulated in Soviet Union in the 1930s, was primarily an art of *representation*, not an art of participation. Envisaged as a means of redeeming the traditional, bourgeois art, socialist realism gave a new mission to the institutions of art which could seemingly render it compatible to the project of socialist society: creating adequate ('realistic') representations of the new society governed by a dictatorship of the proletariat. In other words, it was not participation and amateurism as such which was the primary goal of socialist realism, and its practice was compatible with, and often even seeking, artistic prowess in music performance skills.

As the consolidation of institutions of the arts took place in late 1940s in socialist Yugoslavia, one cannot escape noticing the changes in the production of mass

songs. Almost all mass songs produced after 1945 fall into the category of 'original' compositions of professional authors, as the practice of adaptation and translation has all but ceased. Although seemingly of similar style as the mass songs produced during the partisan struggle, these mass songs are strikingly different when one approaches them from the point of amateur music-making. In this regard, one can take *Zadrugarska* by Mihovil Logar and *Od Triglava do Balkana* by Milenko Živković, published in 1947 and 1949 respectively, as representative of the genre in this period, and composed by authors who were not themselves part of the National Liberation War. These artworks cannot function as songs performed in one voice without accompaniment, as they feature both modulations and wide vocal ranges (if not distributed to multipart singing), as well as the interplay between vocal and instrumental lines which would make *a capella* performance incomplete. Interestingly, at the same time these composers shunned superficial, but effective and – from the point of view of participants – enjoyable vocal virtuosity which can be accessible to amateurs (such as, e.g., octave leaps in *Po šumama i gorama*). The manner in which the songs were published also testifies to changes – as they were printed in separate editions as a music score on one or two sheets of large format paper and excluded from songbooks – and so does the alternative to the process of canonization through crucible, that is, awards which were at the time given by various organizations on annual basis for composing original mass songs and which rarely affected popularity and acceptance of the songs in question.

During the 1950s one can also note the dissipation of music amateurism in everyday life, as making music through institutions such as micro-choirs gave way to listening pre-recorded music in private and semi-public settings. For example, as the labor actions were resuscitated in mid-1950s (this time as openly ideological projects, in opposition to the actual economic interests of the state), practices of everyday music-making were almost completely abolished and music was played using records, with popular music taking a lead in consumption – not least as the creation of *Yugoslav popular music* proved to be another state-sponsored project[14] – while the popularity of performers was furthered by their visits to labour action camps and live performances.

As everyday performances of mass songs became abandoned, professional music ensembles produced recordings in arrangements for four-part choir and symphonic orchestra, providing a benchmark of mass song interpretation that was intimidating and an utterly unachievable goal for amateur performances. Following the rise of modernism in the 1950s,[15] mass songs ceased to be produced as independent compositions and the genre of cantata took over as the prime exponent of socialist realism.[16] Although cantatas could incorporate sections written as mass songs, the

[14] Ana Petrov, *Jugoslovenska muzika bez Jugoslavije. Koncerti kao mesta sećanja* (Beograd: FMK, 2016), 1–40.

[15] Cf. Ješa Denegri, *Pedesete: teme srpske umetnosti (1950–1960)* (Novi Sad: Svetovi, 1993).

[16] Cf. Milena Medić, "Vokalno-instrumentalna muzika," in *Istorija srpske muzike: srpska muzika i evropsko muzičko nasleđe*, ed. Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman (Beograd: Zavod za udžbenike, 2007), 562–65.

intricate structure and dominantly through-composed style of these compositions were unequivocally asking for accomplished ensembles led by professional conductors. Moreover, unlike mass songs which were relatively few and performed repeatedly, cantatas were often composed for specific commemorative or festive occasions and their performances were often one-off, unique and unrepeatable events.

While institutions of art music appropriated and canonized mass song through professional performances and the highbrow genre of cantata, the institutions of folk (traditional) music employed a different agenda. Constructing the notion of 'partisan folk songs' enabled ethnomusicologist and music folklorist to appropriate the prestige of partisan art without deconstructing the paradigm of the folk song. In order to understand the problematic aspects of this appropriation, one need to note that 'folk song' as such is no less a product of nationalistic European projects than its counterpart, that is, the bourgeois institutionalized art music.[17] As it soon became clear that partisan songs were to become the purview of folklore studies, this appropriation proved strikingly detrimental. Namely, as the main criteria for a song to be described as a 'partisan folk song' was the supposed originality or the novel variety of the folk creation, many of the most popular and widely performed songs which did not conform to this criteria – the ones which were adapted, translated or composed by professional musicians – were excluded from the canon. Unlike in the realm of art music, canonization through paradigm of folk music did not eschew songbooks as instruments of canonization, albeit of a substantially different nature. Paradigmatic of this is the collection of partisan folk songs *Zbornik partizanskih narodnih napeva* published in 1962 as a prestigious hardcover edition by the Belgrade publishing house Nolit, to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the partisan uprising.[18] The edition is designed in every respect as an edition of folk songs, intended primarily for academic research rather for performing. While one cannot find within it some of the most popular Yugoslav partisan songs, the edition still contains more than 350 songs and their variations in a form that is of little value for an aspiring choirmaster trying to assemble a micro-choir.[19]

The historical development of mass song in socialist Yugoslavia shows that socialist realism was socialist only in name, building a representational artistic framework with a clear division between performers and audience, professional musicians and listeners, whether or not those are considered as informed or 'uneducated'. It also shows that the rise of state institutions of art and the new wave of professionalization in the field proved detrimental to participatory art, which was at best regarded as of secondary value. In other words, it demonstrates intrinsic incompatibility between the

[17] Cf. Srđan Atanasovski, *Mapiranje Stare Srbije* (Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek, 2017).

[18] Nikola Hercigonja and Đorđe Karaklajić, ed., *Zbornik partizanskih narodnih napeva* (Beograd: Nolit, 1962).

[19] As these two lines of canonization transformed mass song into a petrified outdated genre, adaptations of international mass songs *Bella ciao* and *!Ay Carmela!* by Yugoslav popular music performers Pankrti and Darko Rundek in the 1980s seems as a last stage of further distancing of mass singing from everyday life and reinforcing the division between performers and audience, those who sing and those who listen.

project of a classless society and the institution of art, as it is grounded in bourgeois national European societies, as institutions of art showed their deep incompatibility with the project of building classless participatory society. To paraphrase a famous slogan of Rosa Luxemburg – 'socialism or barbarism' – it was either socialism or art.

In regards to this, it is important to discuss the contemporary practice of Yugoslav mass songs as performed by self-organized, openly leftist choirs built from below in the cities such as Pula, Ljubljana, Vienna and Belgrade.[20] Appropriating the seemingly defunct amateur practice of Yugoslav mass songs, they operate outside of the world of art, as activist collectives. These choirs renew some of the basic characteristics of mass song practice, discarding requirements of any musical education as prerequisite of joining the collectives, shunning the vocal mannerism, reducing the arrangements to a minimum and returning to the one-voice vocal line as the main building block of the mass song, but also rethinking the lyrics, translating and adapting the songs and consciously endeavoring to build an international leftist songs repertoire. Radical amateurism in these most recent institutions of Yugoslav mass songs is not seen as unavoidable burden to cope with, but as a crucial resource in fashioning music-making as a participatory activist practice.

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[20] Cf. Ana Hofman, *Novi život partizanskih pesama* (Beograd: Biblioteka XX vek, 2016). In this paragraph I mostly refer to two choirs, *29. Novembar* from Vienna and *Naša pjesma* from Belgrade, in whose activities I have been personally involved.

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Article received: May 6, 2017
Article accepted: May 14, 2017
Original scholarly paper