On the New Life of the Partisan Songs in ex-Yugoslavia

REVIEW OF

HOFMAN, ANA, 2015: Glasba, politika, afekt: novo življenje partizanskih pesmi v Sloveniji. Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, ZRC SAZU.
For decades, songs by the Yugoslav Partisans and masses have been something of an ostracised topic in musicology and ethnomusicology. Even before the break-up of socialist Yugoslavia, a tide of laudatory essays praising the role of these songs in the liberation and rebuilding of the country was largely ignored by scholars, as neither their historical impact nor aesthetic value were deemed worthy of thorough scholarly treatment. And once new national borders were eventually imposed on the Yugoslav space, and new parochial agendas were introduced in the humanities of the new countries, a renewal of the scholarly interest in the Partisan songs seemed almost impossible. However, Ana Hofman’s book *Novi život partizanskih pesama* (The New Life of the Partisan Songs), which was just published by the renowned Belgrade publishing house Biblioteka XX vek, proves not only that the Partisan songs are a viable research topic but also that it is possible to swim against the mainstream and actually pursue the topic. The book itself comes from Hofman’s ethnographic research in the practices of post-Yugoslav self-organised choirs from Skopje, Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Pula, Vienna and elsewhere. The book published in Serbian is largely based on Hofman’s Slovenian book *Glasba, politika, afekt: Novo življenje partizanskih pesmi v Sloveniji* (Music, Politics, Affect: The New Life of the Partisan Songs in Slovenia), which appeared in 2015 with the publishing house of the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts and focuses on the Ljubljana-based self-organised choir Kombinat. However, through the prism of this case study Hofman manages not only to speak about the importance of reviving the repertoire of the Partisan songs in the ex-Yugoslav space but also to address wider questions of the politics of empathy in the conditions of neoliberal capitalism.
Hofman divides her book in six chapters and a conclusion. In the first chapter, she introduces the Partisan songs in the ethnomusico-
logical discourse on heritage, unravelling the long history of main-
stream deprecatory comments on the Partisan songs and showing
how the concept of heritage is by itself unavoidably exclusivist. Hof-
man pays particular attention to the specific position of the Partisan
songs in Slovenia compared to the rest of Yugoslavia; specifically,
she focuses on the contested processes of post-Yugoslav ‘nationali-
sation’ of Slovenian Partisan songs, through which the ruling elites
have endeavoured to divest these songs of their explicit anti-fascist
legacy and to interpret them as a kind of ‘national songs’. Hofman
uses her second chapter to introduce the reader to her case study, in
which she positions the above-mentioned Ljubljana-based choir in
the wider landscape of ex-Yugoslav self-organised choirs. Founded
in 2008, Ženski pevski zbor Kombinat was conceived as a women’s
choir, yet it also comprises a group of male instrumentalists who
accompany the performances. Dedicating her attention to the inner
dynamics of the choir, Hofman succinctly delineates the vicissitudes
of a self-organising community. Openly presented as an amateur
and egalitarian community, the choir struggles with its own success
in order to maintain these principles: as their activities gain more
prominence in Slovenia, Kombinat’s inclusiveness is challenged by
the sheer number of membership applicants, and the management of
the choir is increasingly prone to taking into account the applicants’
vocal qualities. Hofman is particularly sensible in describing the im-
plicit structures of power within the choir as well as the members’
different agendas and interests, which range from female solidar-
ity and political engagement to enjoyment in perfecting the musical
performance itself.
In the third chapter, Hofman addresses the very theoretical lens through which she interprets the music practices she writes about, namely the so-called affect theory. Hofman’s use of affect theory is inclusive, and while the main tenants of the theory she uses are of Deleuzian lineage, she also engages throughout her book with the linkage of affect and emotion in order to reframe the autonomy of the affect by insisting on the material messiness of the sound. While this chapter partly aims to fill in specific gaps in the post-Yugoslav ethnomusicological studies, which rarely discuss affect theory, Hofman is never too far from the object of her study, using affect theory to underpin the historical narratives on the Yugoslav Partisan songs as well as to interpret the experience of singing in Kombinat.

Hofman uses the last three chapters of *Novi život partizanskih pesama* to offer three different yet complementing views on Kombinat, conceptualising their practices as partaking in anti-sentimentalism, resistance and protest. Engaging with the discussion on the ideology of Yugoslonostalgia, which is centred on the accusation of defeatism, Hofman analyses the position of Kombinat as one of open anti-sentimentalism, as the choir refuses the label ‘nostalgia’ and discusses the revival of the Partisan repertoire as a contribution to anti-fascism. However, Hofman is critical of Kombinat’s membership referring to their repertoire solely in terms of songs of resistance; she poses the question whether a practice which reduces rather than accrues meaning can truly be politically engaged. In other words, is it possible to divest the Partisan songs of the deeply embedded layers of historical meaning that has come to be rather undesirable as it is connected to the experience of socialist Yugoslavia, and still employ them as a potent vehicle of social change? This question is reiterated and left open to interpretation in the last chapter, in which Hofman tells the
story of Kombinat’s local involvement with mass anti-austerity protests in 2012.

Hofman’s account of the revival of the Partisan songs in general and the activities of Kombinat in particular has immensely benefitted from her relentless commitment to rigorous ethnographic research due to which she is able to contextualise the social micro-practices she is observing. One of the most engaging aspects of this study is that it often offers more questions than answers. In a time when we are constantly reminded of the importance of social resistance, Hofman writes about a music collective which openly embraces the position of resistance and uses the repertoire which is inconsistent with the prevailing neoliberal ideology, to say the least. However, in her search of radically different material practices, practices which are truly irreducible to the neoliberal agenda, Hofman cannot refer to the activities of Kombinat as a whole: under the veneer of their rhetoric of resistance, their activities are often more distant to radical amateurism or anti-consumerism than one might guess as an outsider. But Hofman’s investigation does not stop there: it is in the micro-practices of self-organised collectivity and in the common engagement with the affect of sound that she finds the truly unique realm of empathy and solidarity. In this way, Ana Hofman makes the promise of radical social change seem more distant and at the same time closer than one might have thought before reading her book—which is an invaluable scholarly and cultural achievement in itself.
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