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Published by: Editura MARTOR (MARTOR Publishing House), Muzeul Țăranului Român (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant)

URL: http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-22-2017/

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*Martor* is indexed by EBSCO and CEEOL.
M anele in Romania provides the first comprehensive analysis of one of the most controversial, but also one of the most dynamic popular music genres to emerge on the Romanian music scene during the past thirty years, a genre whose roots extend, however, as far as the 19th century, as several of the contributors to the volume claim.

But what is all the fuss about manele? Manele (singular: mane) are controversial for various reasons. Firstly, because of their association with Roma people, secondly because of their sound, which is perceived as “Oriental”, and thirdly because of their lyrics, which deal with sex, love, power, and informal economy. Everyone in Romania has heard of the music genre, yet the reactions of people from various social strata, various age and professional categories, are always different. These reactions range from outright disgust to enthusiastic admiration, and often include a kind of self-imposed ignorance. Romanians hear, listen to, and complain about manele; still, any attempt at defining them has remained vague, at least before the publication of the book under review. George Pruteanu, one of the most famous Romanian public intellectuals and politicians of the 1990s and 2000s, used to qualify manele as being “what mildew is to bread: something that alters.”

In making such a comparison, Pruteanu was expressing the view held by most Romanian intellectuals, as well as middle and upper class socio-professionals. Under various names, and in different forms, manele had been part of the music underground/ periphery since the 1970s, gaining more and more popularity throughout the 1980s and especially in the 1990s, when they became acknowledged by their name. Lately, in Romania’s public sphere, manele have become the negative expression of a social and cultural context marked by the political rupture of 1989 and the passage from an officially closed society, within which state approved fakelore was salient, and access to Western popular music genres was restricted, to one dominated by rapid Westernization and intense capitalism.

As it embarks on the ambitious task of tackling manele, the book under review surpasses in depth and width of analysis the Romanian public sphere magazine articles, editorials, or highbrow essays which have addressed this topic. The volume brings together ethnomusicology, anthropology, cultural studies to provide a detailed and nuanced account of manele as a music genre, and as a social and cultural phenomenon. Furthermore, the book’s interdisciplinary approach covers various facets of manele, their performers, their audiences, their lyrics and the way in which they represent the transition of Romanian society and culture from the communist period to one marked by capitalism, neoliberalism, Europeanization, and globalization.

The content of the volume is divided into nine chapters which form three thematic clusters. The first cluster explores manele in musical, historical, and geographical
terms. The first chapter, written by ethnochoreologist Anca Giurchescu and ethnomusicologist Speranța Rădulescu, provides a historical and contemporary overview of the maneă phenomenon in Romania. The authors begin by claiming Ottoman aristocratic roots for the genre, then they discuss its Romani appropriation in the second half of the nineteenth century and its contemporary influences coming from Romani, Balkan, and Euro-American popular music genres. The chapter also focuses on the diversity of manele in their instantiations, such as songs, dances, and performances. Closely linked to life-cycle events, such as weddings or baptisms, as well as to private and public events that are part of nightlife entertainment, manele target a variety of audiences, including both the nouveaux riches of post-1989 capitalism and the lower classes, for whom the world depicted in manele (re)presents the standard of living they wish to achieve.

The second chapter, written by musicologist Costin Moisil, focuses on the history of manele, from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. He relies on a variety of primary historical sources and secondary literature to challenge Andrei Oișteanu’s theory according to which manele were a legacy of the Phanariot era. Thus, Moisil states that maneă was a generic term, which had been in use since the mid-nineteenth century, referring to any so-called “oriental” music, either previous or contemporary. The usage of the term becomes more important, as the nineteenth century is marked by an ever-increasing influence of Western styles of music, which can be correlated with the creation of the Romanian nation-state based on Western European models. By the early twentieth century, the loss of familiarity with Turkish music meant that maneă would become an umbrella term for any new musical (sub)genre which bore any “Oriental”/“Turkish” sounding influence.

In Chapter 3, Speranța Rădulescu discusses how the music of manele is structured, focusing on the ways in which the genre is created and disseminated. Rădulescu underlines that contemporary maneliști (performers of manele) descend from lăutari (traditional, usually Romani, musicians). This descendence informs the ability of manele to absorb new influences from different music genres and to appropriate them. Thus, innovation can be achieved through absorbing new influences, recuperating tradition, and remodeling. According to Rădulescu, manele lost their pre-1989 stylistic homogeneity, becoming increasingly diverse after the fall of the communist regime. Their audience also became more heterogenous. Hence, rural manele took on regional influences, while urban manele incorporated Western (both European and American popular music influences). This led to the creation of so-called eclectic manele, in which multiple influences ended up homogenizing the songs, by cancelling out each other’s effects.

In the fourth chapter, ethnomusicologist Margaret Beissinger puts forth a comparative approach to manele by placing the genre in the context of other Balkan ethno-pop genres, such as Serbian turbo-folk, Bulgarian chalga, or Greek laika. All these genres feature a multitude of similarities in regard to their contemporary origins, to influences from Middle-Eastern popular music, to common-themed lyrics, or to spatial and temporal contexts of performance. Similarly, these genres trigger nesting orientalisms within their own countries. However, they are also set apart by significant differences, in addition to linguistic ones: they are deliberately national in their stylistic construction, and they have been heavily influenced by their own historical, social, and cultural background. For instance, one important difference that Beissinger underlines is the fact that while performers of turbo-folk or chalga in Serbia and Bulgaria respectively are female members of the ethnic majority population,
performers of manele in Romania are predominantly male Roma. For Beissinger, the explanation for the male bias of modern day manele lies in their descendence from an urban genre, performed at the turn of the twentieth century by male Roma, as well as in the nature of the power relations between patrons and performers within the communities where the author has carried out her research.

The second cluster of chapters, from 5 to 8, focuses on the interactions between the participants in the performance of manele: performers, audiences, patrons of manele (including wise guys, or mObșters), mass-media etc. The first chapter in this second cluster, by Speranța Rădulescu, focuses on the actors of the maneа performance, whether in terms of creation, consumption, or assessment. It argues that manele owe their success not only to their creators, or to their performers, but also to their audiences, whether fans or adversaries. According to the author, “the real maneа fans are students, young peasants, apprentices, workers, functionaries, greater or lesser businesspeople, and loafers.”

Rădulescu also discusses the fans’ ethnic background and shows that Romanians and Roma react differently to manele, particularly when it comes to dancing: while for the former dance is only an appendix, for the latter it is at the very heart of the maneа performance. The adversaries of manele include intellectuals, elderly people, traditional lăutari, and inhabitants of rural areas. The latter reject the maneа phenomenon and prefer to it what they deem to be rural music. In addition, urban-educated, middle-class young people may disregard manele altogether and lean towards Western popular music genres.

The sixth chapter of the volume, written by anthropologist Victor Stoichiță, focuses on the live performances of manele, whether these occur at weddings, baptisms, or at public events in night clubs. Relying on direct and indirect observation and on qualitative interviews with performers and consumers of manele, as well as on text and musical analysis, Stoichiță construes instantiations of power and the idiom of parody, as manifested within performances of manele. He argues that manele concede the experience of alternative agencies: members of the audience may take on temporary new identities (such as those of nouveaux riches, mObșters, characters mentioned frequently in lyrics of manele) by “dedicating songs” (dând dedicăți) and paying tips to the performers, whose songs and lyrics address the themes of financial potency and social respect. Meanwhile, however, as Stoichiță argues, audiences may not take manele lyrics and performances seriously. Thus, their reaction is to parody manele, a cultural practice which Stoichiță finds present among casual listeners, as well as among performance audiences.

In his chapter, “Manele and the Underworld”, writer Adrian Schiop pursues further analysis of the interrelation between performers of manele and their audiences. His main line of inquiry lies with the underworld, the post-1989 nouveaux riches, who have benefited (illegally) from the economic turmoil of contemporary Romania. It is to them that the performers of manele sing praises at private or public events. Taking a cue from Stoichiță’s chapter, Schiop underlines the fact that manele performers, similarly to lăutari, never express their own feelings, or message, in their songs. Consequently, they act more like mediums, through which audiences convey their own desires. This, in turn, explains why live performances are the main income source for the performers of manele. However, for certain male performers, they have also become dangerous encounters with some of the more notorious figures of the crime world. It is during such live performances, described by the author as a form of semi-spiritual, that songs are sung on commission, and money is circulated between musicians and mObșters. While performers of manele are despised by gangsters, primarily because they can be bought, they are also coveted by
the underworld, as an appropriate means to gain notoriety.

The last chapter of the book’s second cluster, written by Beissinger, focuses on the village manele, or, as the author puts it, on “an urban genre in rural Romania.” Relying on text and music analysis, as well as on participant observation, Beissinger details the narrowing gap between urban and rural culture, through the lens of manele. She points out that village musicians have continued traditional forms of culture, while concurrently acting as agents of cultural modernity, also because of their intense competition with urban ensembles.

The third cluster of the book consists of a chapter by anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu, on turbo-authenticity, and an epilogue by Rădulescu. It goes beyond the analysis of maneles as mere musical performance, and it advances maneles as a wider social and political phenomenon, with deeper implications, an issue at which the first two clusters of chapters only hinted. Thus, Mihăilescu addresses the phenomenon of manelism, which is directly related to what the author calls “the primitive accumulation of desire.” By this, the author means a process triggered by the collapse of communism, which has led, through intensive Westernization, to the formation of the post-1989 “Romanian dream.” This dream, the phantasm of the absolute winner facing society, is a recurring theme in lyrics of maneles. Speranța Rădulescu’s epilogue seconds Mihăilescu’s reflections and contends that the changes in Romanian society have had an impact on the world of maneles itself. The editors leave the story of maneles with an open ending, as one cannot ascertain their future trajectory.

Overall the book combines descriptive and analytical approaches and, while specialized (ethno)musicological jargon is often used, the style employed is accessible. Together with the wealth of detailed and general information on maneles, as well as on the historical and geo-political context of Romania and Southeast Europe, this makes the book useful for both general audiences and specialized scholars. Of great importance is the website accompanying the volume, which includes maps, field research photos and, most importantly, audio and video recordings of maneles performances. Another great strength of the book (also symptomatic for the lack of secondary literature about the topic) lies in the different approaches undertaken by its authors, even if this leads, at times, to the overlapping of certain pieces of information.

This, however, is only a minor point of criticism for a book which opens new fertile ground for inquiries into the world of what Donna Buchanan has called “transnational ethnopop.” In the current context of maneles becoming appropriated by urban, college-educated, middle-class audiences, Manele in Romania offers the reader a reminder of the fact that “mildew” (to come back to Pruteanu’s term) has been and might as well be the source for aesthetic re-evaluations. The revisionism put forth by this book goes well beyond the aesthetic realm, and a Romanian translation of Manele in Romania would only contribute to a more thorough debate about the racial prejudices and the identity crises Romania has accumulated throughout its (post-communist) history.

For students of post-1989 Southeast Europe and Romania, this volume might well serve as an alternative history textbook, its often specialized terminology notwithstanding. For scholars of the region, as well as for those dealing with broader issues, such as the interrelation between music genres and society, Westernization, Orientalism, national identity de construction, the book under review is bound to become an indispensable, or, at least, a highly valuable reference.
