

Parody Rhetoric, Intertextuality and the Groovy Aesthetics in Bulgarian Jazz

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There is a popular credo among jazz musicians which reads: “Never twice the same!” I’d like to take this credo as a starting point of my reflections on jazz aesthetics for several reasons. First, it apparently implies much of the dynamic nature of what we imagine while thinking of jazz as a “chameleon”, especially nowadays when quite a diverse music could be heard under the umbrella of jazz. Second, while the credo “Never twice the same!” clearly signifies a cult towards the freedom of improvisation or at least a perpetual mobility of musical thinking, it also signifies – not less clearly – particular relation to the concepts of “sameness” and repetition, that is, to the crucial role of the musical standard in jazz, based on highly conventionalized musical structures. In this sense, no doubt, standard (the “sameness”) and improvisation are only seemingly contradictory. As hinted in the above mentioned credo, these categories obviously complement each other.

However, I believe that the credo “Never twice the same!” has much to do also with the concept of the inverted world of parody which brings another, perhaps even more general perspective in our attempts to understand the essence of jazz. To make my point clear, I would quote Linda Hutcheon, who broadens the usual, rather narrow, one-sided understanding of the 20th century parody. According to her, “the god of parody, if

there were one, would have to be Janus, with his two heads facing in two directions at once...Increasingly though, I find myself invoking Hermes, the mediating messenger god, with his winged sandals and paradoxically plural functions..." (Hutcheon 1985, 2000: xvii).

Hutcheon portrays the mythical image of Janus who embodies the double and potentially mocking perspective. On the other hand, the reference to the mythical figure of Hermes draws attention to the *inter-textual* aspects of parody and the re-signifying of familiar, highly conventionalized structures. This is another, *no less essential perspective on parody*, which today seems to be rather neglected in attempts to identify its various manifestations. In this sense, Hutcheon reminds us that the prefix *para* in Greek has two meanings: *counter*, *against*, but also intimately "*beside*" without necessarily implying contrast. It is this *second*, rather neglected meaning of the prefix that *broadens* the practical scope of parody in a way most helpful to discussions of modern art forms. Parody, then, concludes Hutcheon, in its ironic "trans-contextualization" and inversion, is *repetition with difference* (Ibid.: 32).

How does this statement, which clearly develops also the influential Bakhtin's concept of the "double-voiced word", inform the non-verbal realm of musical parody, including in the world of jazz? Is it, indeed, a creative approach which might bring meaningful signs of particular stylistic and value affections of today's people, tempted not so much by the didactics of one-sided artistic messages, but rather by the metaphorical potential of the playful, roundabout, slippery, and multi-layered *hidden*, "*second meaning*"?...

Applied in more general terms to the concept of jazz, such questions suggest, I believe, another perspective in understanding that "Never twice the same!" which implies aspects of parody rhetoric, taken rather as *repetition with difference*, that is, in the sense of both "beside" and intimacy, on one hand, and contrast or ridiculing imitation, on the other. This perspective often takes the form of borrowing, re-working and transforming not only particular previous works, but also well established conventional musical structures and stylistic patterns, without bringing necessarily any allusion of references to concrete, specific background pieces.

Reflecting on the repetition issue, Richard Middleton (1998), for instance, provides an exhaustive discussion. He points out that repetition is a particular source of pleasure, especially in relation to the world of rhythm. Thus, if the concept of swinging, taken as a crucial aspect of

classical jazz, clearly hints at a passionate orientation towards the “broken rhythms,” then one can understand another no less notorious credo among jazz musicians which says: “The world does not beat in 4/4!” Such a playful attitude to music making, which also exemplifies particular taste for the parody, seems to signify the opposite side of what we consider to be musically “square”. Rather such an attitude stands perhaps at the core of that powerful drive for innovative rhythmic patterns – not just for the sake of elaborating any metric and rhythmic novelties in music but in the name of exploring new expressive means that diversify *the pleasure and the joy of music*, that is, those musical perspectives which stand at the core of what I would call *the groovy aesthetics*.

To some extent, I developed this understanding concerning the jazz aesthetics during my interviews with numerous Bulgarian jazz musicians. For instance, Milcho Leviev, the eminent Bulgarian-born composer, arranger, piano player and jazz innovator with special taste for rhythmic novelties, who still in the 1960s opened the door for what was called at that time folk-jazz, reflected on the pleasure of music in the following terms:

Mozart said something that most people consider ridiculous but I think he was right. They asked him: “Maestro, what is the point of music?” And he answered: “To give pleasure to the ear.” Whose ear, though? Well, one has to be able to judge for himself what his ear can and can’t put up with; my ear takes pleasure in certain sounds, while yours most likely prefer others. Thus, I have to create something that your ear enjoys, as well as mine. This is what the “pleasure of the ear” means, this is what an artist needs to do (Levy, 2007: 52–53).

In jazz and popular music in general “the joy of music” is a condition often described by the slang word “groove” (to enjoy, experience pleasure). Also understood in the sense a particular steady pulse, this condition energizes all levels of music-making, from the backbeat to intonation, from harmonic lines to the kinetics of performance. This kind of pulsation is connected with an element of psychological and even “physical” involvement, which can be observed not only in dance music genres. As Richard Middleton (2006: 145) points out, it is telling that the current connotations of “groove,” “groovy,” and “grooving” suggest something both pleasant and exciting. Incidentally, the etymology of the word “groove” is related to the connection of man to the earth, understood in terms of the latter’s fertility as well as its productive sense. Regarding the

sphere of music, it is as if such connotations bring to life the understanding that music relies on the relation to the time and is rooted in corporeal movement. But the affinity for disruptions of metronomic regularity – in jazz as well as a number of different developments mostly in the field of popular genres in various historical periods – does not suggest some previous stage in the evolution of music bearing the marks of a genetically-based atavism. Rather it suggests a natural connection between the “musical” and the constantly flowing energies via complicated paths of culturally, socially and psychologically determined interactions. In other words, representations of the body, the psychologically grounded forms of desire and the socio-musical action are in constant contact.

It appears, then, that the interest to “groovy” aspect of music making, which can also be conceptualized as an aesthetic category, stimulated Leviev’s curiosity in metro-rhythmic innovations.

For Milcho Leviev, swinging turned to be compatible with diverse aspects of folk music, especially with its historically later stages, which evolved in the context of the transition from rural to urban life and which gave rise of a particular cult of improvisation and virtuosity in vernacular instrumental music. Experimenting in this direction, Leviev, even in the absence of a favorable creative climate of any rich national jazz traditions, began a new chapter in jazz innovation, inspired by non-traditional forms of synthesis, in this case between jazz and Bulgarian folk music.

His early composition *Blues in 9*, created immediately after Leviev assumed leadership of the Bulgarian Radio Big Band in 1962, revealed his intention to play with non-traditional creative approaches. Based on references to highly conventionalized folk dance rhythm structures, it is a particular example which illustrates parody rhetoric, that is, repetition with difference.

It is not a coincidence that Leviev begins these experiments with an emphasis on none other than 9/8, which is one of the most typical Balkan meters. Having a particularly vigorous “groovy” potential, this meter defines key varieties of widely-popular folk dances. In other words, Leviev approaches such meters not just as a “laboratory experiment,” but rather to awaken specific social associations based on the semantics of extremely popular metrical models. Unlike Dave Brubeck, who previously had experimented with asymmetric meters (say, the emblematic piece *Take Five*, based on a combination of two-beat and three-beat sections that eventually sounds still “Western”), Leviev introduces

meters which are not conventional in the Western metric understanding (including in the sphere of jazz), with the intention of exploring metric unevenness, typical for many Bulgarian folk styles.

As if fully in the spirit of the village tradition, the very beginning of *Blues in 9* alludes to elements widely established in the folk song tradition (in this case, the ascending leap to the seventh, known as *provikvane* or “whooping” in Bulgarian). However, the expectation of some kind of development in this direction turns out to be misleading. A second introduction follows, which is associated with a quite different situation – a distant and seemingly slightly pathetic hint of opening chords that recall the Romantic conception of concert piano playing, which, however, encounters the vigorous swinging sounds of the big band brass section. No doubt, the symbiosis in this danceable piece, in which we can hear a little something of the twist that was so popular at the beginning of the 1960s, invokes humour, combining a range of surprisingly diverse stylistic techniques. Even the main musical motifs are based on ostensibly incompatible modal orientations, connected with modal aspects of Bulgarian folk tunes (in the “question” motif) and with elements of pentatonic blues (in the “answer” motif). The original vision in this particular “poly-stylistics” was concerned with working out a musical joke, which reflected in the very way the theme is “twisted around,” in the manner of approaching the sound, in the ingenious layering of tonal and timbre colours, in the quite blues-like keyboard solo episodes, as well as in the moves within the metro-rhythmic play, which makes good use of the ever so slightly clumsy 9/8 – not so much as an expression of somewhat rough local antithesis, but rather as an expressive break-through into a new musical space with unexpected musical potential.

The joy of the ear has different and more dramatic emotional dimensions in another emblematic piece (created in the mid-1960s), in which Leviev continues his innovative attempts at unusual forms of symbiosis between “odd” meters and blues intonation. As the name of the piece itself indicates, *Blues in 10* experiments with “counting in ten” which flows according to the movement of the leading motif. Such an organic attitude to musical time undoubtedly breaks up prevailing metrical ideas connected with western as well as non-western music. Inspired by the logic of free and natural music making, the invention here does not keep within the bounds of established models, but rather creates an original rhythmic matrix. The “ten-beat bar” can also be interpreted as a combination of two variants of 5+5. The allusion to asymmetry here is, in fact,

only superficial, since in this case the five-beat measure contains an odd number of metrical *beats*, but cannot be identified with any asymmetrical meters known in the Balkan folk vocabulary, where the asymmetry arises from the combination of *two*-beat and *three*-beat sections.

Subjected to multiple repetitions, as well as to intriguing changes within the general musical development, the key motif seems to be somehow personalized. It takes on the role of a mysterious, haunting, but endlessly attractive figure, performing the leading dramaturgical part. The use of repetition as a prevailing approach to creating emotional tension and as a source of particular pleasure recalls to a certain extent the musical dramaturgy in Ravel's famed *Bolero*. On the other hand, *Blues in 10* is one of the first documented compositions within Bulgarian jazz that tangibly depends on free improvisation, and thus to a large degree also depends on equal partnership in the collective music-making, with an emphasis on the inventiveness and individual style of each of the musicians.

Leviev's merit as a composer-inventor, as well as a leader who has succeeded in engaging and stimulating the individual improvisational potential of the musicians he works with, is reflected not only in the new level of professional and artistic awareness of jazz as a distinct type of music making. His innovative approach undoubtedly pushed the potential of jazz fusion, which would further inspire and deepen unknown aspects of the otherwise traditional interest in "root" musics. And the modernized sound of local folk styles would meet new forms of interactions that blend tunes and rhythms with different communal origins.

As to Leviev's unabated interest in the "study" of metro-rhythmics as a multiple creative factor in the groovy aesthetics, this is evident even if one looks only at his album *Man From Plovdiv*. The album includes pieces for solo piano such as *Polymetric Study #3* or the notorious *Sadovsko Horo* in 33/16, famous also under the name of *Bulgarian Bulge* (recorded by the Don Ellis orchestra) which has acquired the fame of emblematic sign of Bulgarian contribution not only to the world of what we call nowadays ethno-jazz, but also to the field of (neo)folk music worldwide. This example reminds, however, that even if "musical texts" might be specific reflection of the history and the changes in thinking and feeling of the very person, their messages can nevertheless not be reduced solely to the personal artistic biography. Questions of aesthetic values are intimately connected to intellectual explorations of a given individual, but they are also tied to historically-determined modifications and shifts in terms of

the prestige of various codes that are articulated in the contexts of a given socio-musical consciousness.

As far as the dominating characteristics of Bulgarian socio-musical consciousness are concerned, the idea grasped by Leviev in the 1960s seems to have been ahead of its time. Attempts to mix folk and jazz have for a long time remained rather sporadic. Nearly thirty years later, ethnically-derived music, understood already as a concept uniting the variety found in the sphere of locally shared communal musical traditions, has come into its own in a far more palpable manner in Bulgarian jazz, as well as in the wider realm of popular music in Bulgaria. Recognized aesthetically in a new way – from the point of view of an urban mentality distanced from its rural roots, as well as from the point of view of those who immediately carry on and rejuvenate the folk tradition – the ethnically derived musical language has gained prestige and attractiveness of the “old new thing,” involved in unpredictable moves of diverse forms that outline the emergence of a flexible synthesis. Musicians with a taste for experimental playing set into motion a new wave in the sphere of improvisation and that tendency which I would call the realm of *non-fixed* music, if I can use such an euphemism for the concept of jazz. Seen through the perspective of parody rhetoric and the groovy aesthetics, such synthesis reveals curious interplays between musical worlds which, within the recent Bulgarian context, occupy considerable part of the present musical practice and have forged new aspects of the chameleon nature of jazz.

References

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