

THE ROLE OF THE NATIONAL AND SHORTWAVE RADIO BELGRADE IN THE SPREAD OF SERBIAN FOLKLORE AND SCHLAGER MUSIC IN THE 1930s

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In 1929, the regular broadcast of Radio Belgrade began in the broader area of the Yugoslav capital. The royal government immediately noticed the new media's potential. The regime invested in state-of-the-art broadcasting technology, which soon made it possible for a radio signal to reach even the most distant corner of the country. Almost expectedly, the ruling elites edited and censored the program from its very beginning.

Regular broadcasts included news, sports events, and talk shows, but – as in other countries – mostly music. Although virtually all the genres were present in the musical program, editorial board members underlined the significance of Serbian folklore and schlager. The former genre was associated with the majority of the population living in the rural areas of Serbia. The latter drew explicit references to the growing urban population, most notably Belgrade, which had developed Jazz nightlife and begun a process of proto-westernization.

These tendencies went even further into the mid-1930s when a shortwave program dedicated to the Yugoslav diaspora commenced. According to some evidence, which will be presented in this paper, these broadcasts became popular to an unprecedented degree. The first and second generations of Yugoslav expatriates sent letters and telegrams from all the continents, suggesting the type of music they wanted to hear.

The article explores how the popular music selection of the national and shortwave Radio Belgrade managed to capture the collective attention of the Serbs and other Yugoslavs worldwide in the era long before the Internet.

141

Keywords: Radio Belgrade, folklore music, schlager music, the 1930s

Introduction and challenges

The present article aims to explore a new primary focus for musicologists and historians, and those engaged in media history. This aspect is an investigation of the status of musical genres conventionally not considered classical music within the programming scheme of the interwar national Radio Belgrade and Shortwave Radio. Therefore, in this research, we will approach it from the perspective of the history of media and communication, addressing certain issues such as endemic genre categorization and defining the status of individual compositions.

One of the major methodological challenges associated with this work was the objective lack of primary sources. This was primarily conditioned by the fact that a significant portion of the interwar archives of Radio Belgrade were destroyed during

the Nazi bombing of the Yugoslav capital in April 1941. Additionally, it is worth noting that, except for a small amount of provided data, the current administration of this media institution has shown a lack of understanding of the research of available material, thus not allowing us to conduct research on-site. Therefore, a significant part of this research relies on secondary sources, such as amateur recordings, testimonies, and recollections.

Among the scarce primary sources, it is worth mentioning the following:

1. Periodicals, including daily newspapers and the magazine of Radio Belgrade itself.
2. A few sound recordings, mainly not created in studio conditions (which are contained in the Radio Belgrade archive).

Periodicals are a valuable historical source through which we can confirm the radio's programming concept and the problems that arose from it. Concerning the recordings from the interwar period, two significant problems should be noted:

- a) No professional sound recording equipment existed in Belgrade before World War II.
- b) Even the existing recordings are often lost due to war operations and neglect.

It is worth mentioning that, thanks to its collaboration with the *Edison Bell Penkala* company (which had its representative production office in the present-day capital of Croatia), Radio Zagreb (founded in 1926) had the facilities for sound recording and, as a result, a lot of musical and dramatic material – not only Croatian but also Serbian – was preserved. Some musicians also went on world tours among the diaspora, and their performances were recorded, for example, in North America. Therefore, most of the musical numbers broadcast on Radio Belgrade were performed live in the studio and did not leave any sound recordings.

Besides, I want to thank Mr. Dragoslav Simić, the author, radio journalist, and historian, and Mr. Dragomir Pokrajac, a radio enthusiast from Serbia employed in the USA, who provided us with a significant amount of archival material and sound recordings in their possession (Pokrajac 2023). We conducted an interview and exchanged emails with both as part of the preparation for this work. In addition, I would like to thank Mr. Đorđe A. Brkić from the music archive of Radio Belgrade (Brkić 2023). He was the one who drew our attention to specific schlager compositions that have survived turbulent times and the historical bombing of the building, so we can say with relative certainty that they were broadcast during the 1930s.

Historical context

On December 1, 1918, in Belgrade, the Serbian Prince Regent Alexander I Karađorđević (1888–1934) proclaimed the common state for all South Slavs. Initially named the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, this state was officially renamed Yugoslavia in 1929, a name that is celebrated in the halls of modern history. The same year Yugoslavia got its name, a significant chapter in its and Serbia's media history was written on the fifth floor of today's building of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts in Knez Mihajlova Street in Belgrade: The regular broadcast of Radio Belgrade began. Whether Radio Belgrade was also the first electronic media in Yugoslavia is a matter of debate. In March 1924, the station started experimental, one-hour programming daily through a transmitter in the Belgrade suburb of Rakovica. However, according to journalist and chronologist Dragoslav Simić, this experimental program lasted only half a day, and the radio was broadcast sporadically from Belgrade in the following years. In May 1926, Radio Zagreb began regular programming, and various sources testify that they were the first electronic media in Southeast Europe.

The emergence of Radio Belgrade from the experimental phase in March 1929 coincided with the establishment of the so-called "January dictatorship" when King Alexander I Karađorđević carried out a *coup d'état*, abolishing the constitution and parliament due to the rising inter-ethnic tensions between Serbs and Croats. The new king's policy was, in fact, very similar to specific solutions from the communist period that would be adopted decades later: It entailed the maximum suppression of national freedoms, an insistence on the equality of the three then-constituent peoples (Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes), and – media control (Ćorović and St. Protić 2020, 487–489). The state wanted to have control over Radio Belgrade, as evidenced by the fact that its long-term director was a high-ranking officer of the Yugoslav Royal Army, Colonel and later General Danilo Kalafatović (1875–1946) (Bjelajac 2004, 179).

143

Musical context. Genre considerations

The cultural life of the kingdom inherited significant heterogeneity from previous eras. For a couple of decades, Slovenia, Croatia, the province of Vojvodina (in present-day Serbia), and Bosnia and Herzegovina were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until 1918. As provinces of Vienna – albeit distant – they were still considered part of the Habsburg cultural sphere. Italy had a strong influence in the coastal regions of Croatia (Istria and Dalmatia). However, the rest of the country – Serbia (with Kosovo and the Vardar Valley – present-day North Macedonia), Montenegro, and to a significant extent Bosnia – was still marked by a strong post-Ottoman cultural model, as the Turkish Empire had controlled the region for almost half a millennium. All these differences were reflected in musical life. While classical music had played a significant role in Croatia and Slovenia for centuries, it was only beginning in Serbia (Ćorović and Protić, 482–483).

On the other hand, perhaps due to the Turks (who did not allow the development of high culture among the enslaved “*rayah*”), Serbia had a very pronounced folkloric heritage, which was highly heterogeneous across various regions. However, by the end of the 19th century, a new genre emerged through the inevitable Westernisation of the barely independent state, later called *starogradska muzika* (lit., *old town music*). It was folk music adapted to modern ensembles suitable for performing in small salons and cafes and contained tonal harmonic (cf. Vesić 2015, 23). It’s worth noting that *starogradska* often had not been written or hadn’t notated arrangements but rather was passed on orally or simply by listening. This is also the most significant difference between *starogradska* and stylized folk music, which professional composers and ethnomusicologists arranged. Until after World War I, *starogradska* would constitute the basis of the Serbian urban musical tradition.

Editing and programming. Archival materials

The music editor of Radio Belgrade from 1929 to 1937 was Petar Krstić (1877 – 1957), a composer of an older generation. According to musicologist Ivana Vesić, although Krstić tried to organize the program, he was under constant pressure from General Kalafatović (Vesić 2015, 21). As a result, the program included shows with *Starogradska muzika*, such as “*Serbian Evening*” or “*Skadarlija Evening*” (named after a bohemian quarter in Belgrade), which featured live performances of tavern groups that played folk and urban music without any predefined concept – to please the audience.

Because of his resistance to Kalafatović, in 1937, Krstić was replaced by a group of young composers, mainly those educated at the Prague Conservatory – somewhat surprisingly, primarily of left-wing convictions. The position of chief music editor went to Mihajlo Vukdragović (1900 – 1967), and his deputy became Vojislav Vučković (1910 – 1942). The pressure expressed by the professional community at that time bore fruit, and Vukdragović and Vučković were given somewhat more leeway. For example, Vučković organized shows with avant-garde and atonal music and lectures on the subject. The pressure from the public prevented the cancellation of the shows mentioned above. Still, the chaotic airing of *starogradska* and folk music partly gave way to professional arrangements of folk material by composers such as Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac (1856 – 1914), Kornelije Stanković (1831 – 1865), Josif Marinković (1851 – 1931), and others (Vesić 2015, 24).

As mentioned earlier, primary academic sources regarding this topic are quite rare. Therefore, we had to rely on secondary ones, including some amateur recordings. We can examine the several recordings of folk and *Starogradska* music that have survived. In that respect, a decisive event was the appearance of brother and sister Sima Begović and Lela Đorđević.¹ While Begović – the son of Tešimir Begović (1871 – 1936), a tenor of

¹ Biographical details for both are unknown, except that Begović died in 1944, while Đorđević survived the war and had children. Her son, Dragoljub Dika Đorđević (born in the early 1940s), was involved in folk music in later decades.

the Belgrade Opera and manager of the National Theatre – occasionally performed on the radio from the start of regular programming, his sister joined him around 1935. After that, they performed as a duo for many years – both were vocalists and guitar players. The band was expanded in August of the same year with two violins. In December 1937, Begović received permission from Vukdragović to form a professional folk orchestra of Radio Belgrade. What is certain is that, besides Begović, one of the orchestra leaders was also the first violinist, Vlastimir Pavlović Carevac² (1895–1965) – a lawyer by profession. Still, as a tavern musician, he was considered a virtuoso and a star. One of the song recordings of Begović and Đorđević that can be found on Dragoslav Simić's website is *Čije je moje devojče* (*Whose is my girl*).³

Some additional considerations related to this genre must be made. In the mid-war period, Belgrade was not immune to global trends. Already in the 1920s, the first Charleston record releases reached private collections. The popular belief, also present in some contemporary movies, is that by the 1930s, jazz clubs became a standard part of the rich nightscape of the Yugoslav capital. However, we will explain why this premise is somewhat overrated. It is certain that jazz, in the sense of a genre idea, arrived in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes already in the early 1920s, approximately half a decade after the first phonographic record of a jazz ensemble in the US. It is assumed that one of the first jazz bands in the territory of the fledgling country was the *Bingo Boys* from Zagreb, founded in 1923 (Vučetić 2012, 59). As noted by the author of the preface to Jakovljević's book, Radomir Ječincac, no audio recordings of Serbian Jazz ensembles from the interwar period have survived. In general, especially during the 1930s, jazz was identified with dance music (Jakovljević 2003, 60). The first declared jazz ensemble in Belgrade (and Serbia) was the *Jolly Boys*, most likely founded in 1929 (Jakovljević 2003, 60). According to some sources, this ensemble consisted of three saxophones, two trumpets, a trombone, and a rhythm section with a banjo. However, photographs of the ensemble testify that there were also a tuba, two violins, a double bass, guitar, ukulele, and possibly other instruments – which may indicate that the band was not solely focused on jazz music but rather adapted to various occasions (Jakovljević 2003, 59–61). Such evidence shows that pioneering bands, although probably primarily dedicated to jazz music, were considerably more “versatile,” performing not only jazz but also schlager compositions and even folk or Starogradska music. This genre heterogeneity is not unfamiliar to present-day event bands, which, for example, perform at weddings and other gatherings, covering a wide range of musical genres over several hours.

According to Marija Golubović (with this topic has been discussed multiple times), the term “Jazz” in the interwar period was globally more inclusive, encompassing all genres coming “overseas,” including original African influences and Latin dances like tango (Golubović 2024).

2 After World War II, Carevac played a significant role in reviving the work of the folk orchestra. He hired musicians who would become major stars for decades, such as Božidar “Boki” Milošević (1931–2018), the renowned clarinet player.

3 See the bibliography for more details.

Therefore, if jazz was challenging to define in the interwar Yugoslav cultural context, what about schlager? The answer to this question is not entirely straightforward. Still, it could very roughly be that it is a genre palette that encompasses everything that is not primarily jazz or folk music but may contain elements of them. The post-war Yugoslav Music Lexicon from 1972 defines schlager as “a popular, mostly vocal composition with simple instrumental accompaniment in the field of entertainment music” (Šlager 1972, 576). It clearly emphasizes that works of this genre can draw inspiration from “folklore, operetta, and Jazz.” (ibid.)

Additionally, it is noted that “most Schlagers become fashionable and are then forgotten. Only a small number of Schlagers remain in musical practice as “old hits,” i.e., as musical documents of an outdated fashion, a disappeared spirit of the times, reflected in popular character music.” (Šlager 1972, 576)

As already implied, no live recordings of schlager or popular music unrelated to Serbian or Yugoslav folklore have been preserved. In that sense, we can only speak of a strong and well-founded assumption about what was broadcast and what could have been broadcast. Based on record production and testimonies in the press, it is clear that so-called “dancing” music featured in the programming concept of Radio Belgrade (*Politika*, 09.10.1934). There is no surviving trace of jazz music being performed on Radio Belgrade.

However, there are certain indications that the schlager song *Adio Mare*, performed by a famous interwar singer, Milan Timotić (1908–1988), could have been broadcast on Radio Belgrade in the 1930s, although the recording is from the 1920s. Specifically, thanks to Mr. Brkić from the music archive of Radio Belgrade (Brkić 2023), it can be established that this song was preserved after World War II in the phonographic archive. Therefore, there is an excellent possibility that it was broadcast during the 1930s.⁴ On a side note, Milan Timotić was one of the biggest singing stars of interwar Belgrade. An operatic tenor, he used to record for the *Odeon* label in the 1920s.⁵

Shortwave radio

A significant milestone occurred in 1936, as Radio Belgrade launched a new service: a shortwave radio station. In the standard history of electronic media, which includes radio, television, and the Internet, the significance of shortwave radio stations is often overlooked. However, this medium played a significant role until the end of the Cold War. Due to the specific physical characteristics of shortwaves, these stations had a powerful reach and could be heard in remote parts of the planet, thus representing a kind of Internet of their time.

4 The song is available on YouTube. See bibliography for details.

5 He is best known for his episodic role in an unfinished musical from the early 1940s, *Priča jednog dana* (*The Story of a Day*). From that movie, his performance of the song *Svi vi što maštate o sreći* (*All of You Who Dream of Happiness*) was used in the famous 1982 comedy *Maratonci trče počasni krug* (*The Marathon Family*).

The shortwave radio station in Belgrade was launched from a separate studio in the current building of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Knez Miloš Street, which at that time served as the headquarters of the Ministry of Forestry (Simić).

The program was broadcast daily, including news and collage programs in different languages and a rich music program. Interestingly, the shows were announced or signed off in three languages: Serbian, French, and German. Twice a month, because of the Dutch network of transmitters, in the night hours, two one-hour “transoceanic shows” were broadcast and aimed respectively at the diaspora in North and South America. The first was broadcast on March 14, 1937 (Simić). Though no more precise information is available, according to the news archive, it is known that the broadcasting of shows to Australia and New Zealand started later (*Politika* 23.01.1941, 20).

To some extent, the musical concept of Shortwave Radio was somewhat similar to the national Radio Belgrade, with an additional emphasis on folk and *Starogradska* music – probably to preserve national feelings among members of the Serbian and Yugoslav diaspora.

In this sense, the Sima Begović orchestra played a significant role and was often featured on the airwaves of this station.

For instance, the recording of the song *Sinoć mi dojde ludo mlado* (*Last night, a crazy young one came to me*) was taken with the equipment of the NBC radio network. NBC transmitters were used to amplify incoming shortwave signals in North America.⁶

147

Further development. Reactions

During the 1930s, Yugoslav radio, like in the rest of the world, was fully expanding, especially in urban areas.

Besides the Belgrade and Zagreb centers, there was also one in Ljubljana (cf. Simić). Just before the start of WW2 in Yugoslavia (1941), a station was also founded in Skopje (Antić, 7). According to Dragoslav Simić, even at the beginning of that decade, there were joint broadcasts – a precursor to regional and national programs in the contemporary era. Yugoslav radio was also part of the International Broadcasting Union (a precursor to the European Broadcasting Union) (Simić 2023).

Radio Belgrade launched its magazine and was open to listener suggestions. The biggest radio stars were often interviewed, and reactions from listeners were published.

Moreover, some letters have been preserved in the private archive of Lela Đorđević's family. In this sense, mentioning certain Serbian diaspora reactions is fascinating.

To illustrate, here is a letter, originally in Serbian, sent by a certain Božidar Igić, residing in Akron, Ohio, USA. He states, among other things:

⁶ The recording is available at Simić's website. See bibliography for details.

Your broadcasting is of great interest to me as I also sing and play on the radio station "Srpske Melodije" ("Serbian Tunes")⁷ and every week at the owner's luxury café and director of "Serbian Tunes," Mr. Sima Stanković in Cleveland, Ohio. (..)

As much as I express my warm congratulations to the program managers, so I do too to my, as you call them, popular colleagues, both men and women – and they truly deserve that name and award. For the songs they sang, "Anđo, moja Anđo" ("Anđo, my Anđo") and "Anđo na brodu" ("Anđo on the boat"), if I'm not mistaken, I would like to ask you to send me the lyrics or sheet music. (..) ^{8 9}

(Simić)

From what has been stated, it is evident that within less than a decade of regular programming, Radio Belgrade and Shortwave Radio have gained significant popularity both in the country and among the diaspora. Listeners actively responded to the editing of this medium and sent their suggestions.

Reflection on the post-war period. Conclusion

Today, when the Kingdom of Yugoslavia is a relic of history – almost a whole century old – the pre-war Radio Belgrade has also experienced a similar fate, and the general public knows very little about it, particularly about the popular music it broadcasted. Yugoslavia disappeared in the turmoil of war in 1941 and was re-established as a socialist federation in 1945.

The pre-war building of Radio Belgrade was directly hit in the Nazi bombing, leading to the destruction of a significant part of the phonographic archive (which posed certain difficulties in compiling this paper). German troops immediately occupied the Shortwave Radio building for propaganda purposes. Although the latter operated as the controversial *Sender Belgrade* during the war years and even broadcasted a rich musical program (including the wide-spreading of the infamous song *Lili Marlene*), its real-life continued only after liberation.

By its nature of an overview, the present article has only touched the tip of the iceberg and, we hope, opened the doors to a somewhat forgotten chapter in the history of Serbian and Yugoslav media.

7 The history of the Serbian diaspora in overseas countries (USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) is well documented. Nowadays, Serbian communities in these countries are well-connected, and in some cities, like Chicago and Toronto, there are Serbian schools, newspapers, folklore societies, and even Serbian radio and television stations. However, the fact that Serbian immigrants had a radio program in the USA as early as the 1930s is new information to us.

8 Translation adapted by the author of this article.

9 Simić's website contains numerous letters from Đorđević's archive, both from the country and from around the world.

In the past two decades, significant progress has been made in researching this topic, including articles in media history and musicological texts (some of which are listed in the bibliography or cited). However, much remains hidden under the apparent veil of history. The overall increased interest in Serbian musical and media history before the First World War, as well as during the socialist era, makes the interwar period somewhat overshadowed and, in some cases, even a taboo subject (perhaps precisely due to the rigid attitude that prevailed for decades).

Nevertheless, as professional researchers, we are responsible for not allowing amateurs and enthusiasts to take precedence in this field.

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