

Fluid revivals: retouring popular songs to restore a hydrological imaginary in the trans-Danube

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Abstract

This article examines emerging practices of popular music revivals that rely on affective commitments other than nostalgia. It uses two Serbian-based singers' post-war Croatian tours as case studies, analysing musical fluidities in the material and symbolic navigation of post-Yugoslav performance networks and focusing on borderwaters such as the Danube that bridge the region's peoples, centring their interconnected industrial and cultural attachments, yet also physically and politically separating former Yugoslav republics. Reviewing hydrological conceptions of territorial belonging in the late-Yugoslav period and in the 1990s as expressed in their ballads and reception history, it argues that the singers (Đorđe Balašević and Zvonko Bogdan), in attempting to re-establish their inter-public touring practices with the backing of Serbian tambura bands, engage in an economy of love that, as with revival tours elsewhere in Europe, has proved more efficacious than nostalgia for responding to recent political and socioeconomic changes in the European Union.

Introduction

In Novi Sad, Serbia, in 2009, Panonska mornarica ('Pannonian Sea Fleet') formed as the backing band for what was in many ways a new project for Đorđe Balašević. Celebrated as one of Serbia's best-loved singer-songwriters for several decades, Balašević combined his more typical rock-chanson backing (keyboard, drums, etc.) with the plucked tremolos of *tambura* chordophones. He named the group for 'Panonski mornar' ('Pannonian Seaman'), a popular ballad revived for this tour, and originally released by his band Rani Mraz in 1979. It mourns the region's onetime Pannonian Sea, which 'is gone'; while the Danube, his father insists, 'isn't bad', Balašević is left to pine for the sea that 'once was' and that he hopes 'still, somewhere' to meet one day. In the post-Yugoslav context where Serbia is no longer unified with Croatia's and Montenegro's Adriatic Coasts, missing the Pannonia Sea, and questioning how the Danube might replace it, take on new resonances not fully reducible to post-socialist nostalgia. Balašević assembled the Pannonian Sea Fleet for a film project and tours, centring Pannonian tambura performance

not in Yugoslavia or the Danube but in geographically broader, trans-Danubian musical networks, and in a temporally deeper hydrological imaginary. He thereby re-established touring routes that the wars of Yugoslavia's dissolution disrupted in the 1990s.

In Croatia, where I conduct fieldwork on popular tambura bands, the reintroduction of tambura groups from Serbia took the ethnically mixed tours of two such legendary male singers from northern Serbia's Autonomous Province of Vojvodina: Đorđe 'Đole' Balašević (1953–2021), a chanson/pop singer of Serbian descent who distanced himself from Serbian nationalism when the Serbian-led Yugoslav People's Army attacked following Croatia's 1991 declaration of independence; and Zvonimir 'Zvonko' Bogdan (b. 1942), a composer and singer of Bunjevac Croat extraction who long collaborated with tambura musicians, including in Croatia, before taking a hiatus from recording and performing during the wars and transition from state socialism. Tamburas are traditional chordophones that musicians of various ethnic backgrounds, in both Croatia and Serbia, have adopted into trans-Danubian popular music distribution, tours and radio. In Croatia, tamburas also enjoyed a long history as national symbols, a role that burgeoned following Croatia's 1991 declaration of independence from Yugoslavia (Bonifačić 1998; Pettan 1998; Ceribašić 2000; Baker 2010; March 2013; MacMillen 2019). For most Croatian bands, translating this popularity into stable financial income means playing celebrity singers' music at private engagements or restaurants, rather than selling and touring their own albums (MacMillen 2011). Documenting this performance practice sheds valuable light on how working musicians sustain an older repertoire outside of the processes (and metrics) of digital and radio distribution.

Some of Bogdan's and Balašević's tambura accompanists from Vojvodina also occasionally played such private gigs in Croatia in the 2000s. However, Bogdan's 'Pannonia and I' (*Panoniya i ja*) concerts with Radio-Televizija Vojvodine Tambura Orchestra musicians in Zagreb's Lisinski Hall in 2006 and 2007, and Balašević's 2010 tour with some of those same tambura players as Panonska mornarica, occasioned the most prominent appearances of Vojvodinan tambura players in major Croatian arenas. The performances helped to revive these musicians' interrepublic tours in conjunction with specific recording projects, establishing Pannonian performance practice as both a symbolic ideal and a material geography of musical and economic enterprise. While Croatian tambura enthusiasts also recognised local proponents like Zagreb band Ex Pannonia and contributions by female Vojvodinan artists, including Stanka Ninkov Cana's *Pannonian Sea Pearl* (*Biser Panonskog Mora*, 2009), Bogdan's and Balašević's status as male singers from Serbia positioned them within Croatian music scenes as idealisable leaders navigating post-Yugoslav space's geographical, hydrological and temporal vectors.

This article examines musical fluidities in the material and symbolic navigation of post-Yugoslav performance networks and of borderwaters such as the Danube that bridges the region's peoples. Rivers centre interconnected agricultural and touristic industries, yet also physically and politically separate countries in the Pannonian Basin, and I am interested in how musicians navigate these waters' geographic and legal dimensions, reviving repertoire and principles from periods when these rivers *did not* constitute state borders. Reviewing hydrological conceptions of territorial belonging in the late-Yugoslav period and in the 1990s, I analyse Balašević's and Bogdan's attempts to re-establish their interrepublic touring practices with the backing of tambura groups from Novi Sad. Ethnicity has mattered at times to

these projects and those involved in them, but musicians also strive to make it matter less, even as ethnicity has remained inscribed into state structures. Pannonian music, as an object of 'love' and stimulus of the 'soul', has emerged as an affective site for navigating the fluid interplay of material and symbolic concerns facing musicians whose economic needs press them to strengthen older connections in the EU border region's new political geography. While many 1990s bands, and much of the scholarship on them, were focused on the tension between Yugoslav-era and post-socialist/wartime touring networks (and the possibility of reviving the former after settling for the latter), these Pannonian projects mobilised still other geo-temporal vectors. Targeting specific Yugoslav but also prehistoric fluidities that ran across the now nationalised borders, these artists mobilised nostalgia for past sounds, not as an emotional end of reflective or restorative memory work, but as a means of building desire for an economy of musical love that is grounded not least among Croatian-based tambura musicians who both compete with and benefit from Vojvodinan musicians' successes.

Context, concepts and methods

Reintroducing material and acts from earlier periods places these singers among increasingly common and diversely motivated revival projects reanimating music tours across Europe. Reuniting bands and reviving former musical alter egos often thrusts the spotlight back on celebrity musicians, from Hungarian rockers Omega's successful 1994 'nostalgia concert in front of 70,000 people [...] featur[ing] hits from their beat period' after a hiatus during the end of state socialism (Csatári and Jávorszky 2016, p. 278), to attention to David Bowie's rumoured and actual resurrections of Ziggy Stardust (CNN 2002; The Telegraph 2009; Mojo 2023). Acts with more continuous activity and identities have introduced, via new technology, live performance of arrangements formerly possible only in recording studios (Bennett 2022). Retouring an album may mark a jubilee, or simply the crass opportunism, sent up in *This Is Spinal Tap* (Rainer 1984), of capitalising on an earlier tour's 'production value'. For such diverse scenarios as these, fan discussions frequently cite nostalgia as a common motivation and experience of attending (e.g. LetsTalkMusic 2014). Yet artists involved in projects such as U2's 2017 revived *The Joshua Tree* tour note other impacts: 'As opposed to touring the album purely for nostalgic reasons, the 30th anniversary tour would include [...] reflection of the album's [Trump-era] relevance despite being inspired and written as a response to the era of Reagan and Margaret Thatcher' (Morgan 2021, p. 2). Nostalgia is but one affective modality of responding to the present moment via revivals of earlier repertoire.

On nostalgia, and particularly the tension between reflection and restoration (Boym 2001), musicology of post-socialism has had much to say (Buchanan 2010; Szemere 2010; Silverman 2012; Velikonja 2014; Baker 2015). Bogdan and Belašević's repopularisation only somewhat fits this model: reviving socialist-era repertoire and stage personas advances late-capitalist practices of commercial enterprise, even as it intervenes in these practices' commonly touted value systems. Yet, while such interventions sometimes entail a desired restoration of socialist-era socio-economic norms, they often focus more on what could have been (and what could still be) than on what was, revealing much about the complexities of reintroducing past projects in broader neo-liberal, yet not hegemonically capitalistic media and economic networks.

Part of this complexity involves the singers, whose varied reception and impact in Croatia I unpack through fieldwork at performances, interviews with performers and audience members, and analysis of media, including concert reviews and online discussion forums that speak to the singers' popularity, not just on the radio and on tour, but also in the repertoire of working tambura bands. Such bands stressed in comments online and to me that listening to and playing Bogdan's and Balašević's music was caught up in the affective and monetary value of the experience, rather than in remembering the Yugoslav period via these stars. When it comes to listeners, the singers' varied political and cultural associations often left their Croatian fans happier about some aspects of their careers than others. Although Balašević's 'early associations with the Yugoslav regime, particularly through his 1977 song "*Računajte na nas*", and 'mid-1980s statements siding with Serbs against Kosovar Albanians' made him controversial in postwar Croatia, he accrued complex 'symbolic value' there, not for memories of Yugoslavia that he might invoke, but through his more recent 'history of resistance to Milošević' (Serbia's jingoistic president) and 'disapprov[al] of the dominance of [Serbian] newly composed folk music' (Baker 2006, pp. 280, 282). Bogdan has been more broadly embraced in independent Croatia, and notably by Roma and Serbs as well as by other Croats, making him less useful to nationalist causes than some particularly conservative cadres in Croatia might wish. These singers' prospects for reviving tours and specific earlier repertoire and personas, as measured in the discourses and musicking of Croatian tambura enthusiasts and performers, speaks to the broader perception that what is worth reviving in popular music spheres is often not a past time or place, but rather a set of politically potent affective commitments for addressing a present moment, its possibilities and its foreclosures.

For tambura enthusiasts and performers, however, this emerging present, if not fixated on memory, is one rooted in a logic of historical reflection – otherwise, why revive older music? In the post-Yugoslav case, this logic involves competing geographical orientations and overlapping periodisations. The Pannonian Sea in the Miocene Epoch covered land primarily in what today are Hungary, western Romania, eastern Croatia and Serbia's northern (Vojvodinan) and central regions, although when musicians discuss Pannonia they often exclude Central Serbia and its 'Serbs from south of the [Danube and Sava] rivers' (Van de Port 1998, p. 54). This distinction largely aligns with the boundary of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, whose southern extent shifted during centuries of conflict with the Ottoman Empire but left an enduring conception of the 'Pannonian cultural zone' as marked by the Habsburg Empire north of formerly Ottoman Belgrade and Bosnia (Van de Port 1998). Like the 'Hapsburg' Serb tambura musicians and patrons whom Mattijs van de Port documented in Novi Sad in the early 1990s (1999, p. 300), East Croatian musicians saw their own region of Slavonia, along with Vojvodina, as distinct from the south. Following scholarship on the sharing of history and culture in former Ottoman territories, one could even speak of the reconstitution of Pannonia as a Habsburg 'ecumene' (Buchanan 2007). Yet the push to create these tours deliberately invokes not only a preimperial but also a prehistoric fluidity. This naturalises the broader region's interconnectedness while avoiding not only the 'fixed categorisations [of feeling] to which the discussions of affect more generally need to be resistant', which has been reason for Dijana Jelača to describe Roma musicians' versatile 'affective appeal in Yugoslav popular culture' as 'liquid,' but also the limitations of any one period, imperial or otherwise, for

guiding the economies of music, travel, and affect. (It also avoids the limitations of land-based regionalism, taking to waters in a zone where previous Habsburg reign was not predominantly naval, in contrast to the Republic of Venice that formerly ruled Dalmatian Coastal cities.)

Only part of the Pannonian Basin is within the former Yugoslavia, and vice versa, and yet the focus of Bogdan's and Balašević's Pannonian programming was largely on former Yugoslav territories, although their accompanists later toured Hungary and Romania separately. While these projects changed the landscape of tambura touring and influence after a decade and a half of relative isolation, invoking 'Pannonia' by no means privileged a simple return to the Yugoslav period or territory. Instead, it referenced a range of possible pasts and geographies useful for reimagining who they might include (and implicitly exclude) in a broad, renewed network of tambura and popular music appreciation and commerce.

A love of plurality, a soul for water: Bogdan's relations to borders, economies and affect

In Bogdan's absence, his music had remained popular among Croatian tambura musicians and fans, far more so than Balašević's (which, although a personal favourite of many privately, was not a staple of tambura performance). Bogdan's popularity owes to his history of collaborating with tambura musicians, his songs' sophisticated exploration of musical and textual material familiar to Croatian tambura sensibilities, and his repertoire's promotion of Vojvodinan and specifically Bunjevac experiences without overindulging in ethnicity or nostalgia for any specific political period. Bogdan's Vojvodinan themes appealed to antinationalist performers in Croatia, from minority Serb and Roma musicians who noted how his songs filled their need for repertoire acceptable both to them and to audiences (see MacMillen 2019, p. 133), to Croat musicians who told me about Bogdan's music's ability to re-establish pluralistic prewar cultural and tambura music milieus. Bogdan's Bunjevac background was significant. Bogdan, like many Vojvodinan Bunjevci, considers his people an 'ethnic group: they are Catholics and belong to the Croatian peoples' (Bogdan 2013, personal commentary in Subotica, Serbia, 11 June 2013; translated from Croatian¹). I met Bogdan and other Bunjevci through Croat networks based in Croatia, however, and not everyone outside such networks sees this ethnic connection as so clear. Ana Hofman and Aleksandra Marković document 'different claims': that 'Bunjevci are Croats', 'an independent group' or 'Catholic Serbs' (2006, p. 316). This ambiguity made Bogdan's music symbolically versatile in Croatia, even once he stopped performing – in Yugoslavia for sociopolitical reasons² and in Croatia for material ones: trans-Danubian travel was blocked by the war and later by restrictions on Serbian citizens' entry through the river's crossing points.

Surrounding much of Croatia's territory are such border rivers: the Danube (bordering Serbia), the Drava (bordering Hungary), the Sava (bordering Bosnia–Herzegovina) and their tributaries. A border, writes Yael Navaro-Yashin, 'is no border in and of itself': what is important is 'the mark of the material border

¹ All translation mine unless otherwise stated.

² Some claim that Bogdan was reluctant to perform during the 1990s and early 2000s, others that venues stopped booking him.

(or the border as a tangibility) in the subjectivities and imagination' of those whom it inscribes in sovereignty (2012, p. 71). As Croatia's anthem 'Lijepa naša domovino' ('Our beautiful homeland') proclaims, its border rivers' physical presence impacts not only travel but also its subjects' international political sensibilities and aesthetic imagination, in which the rivers are complemented by the 'blue sea'. The Adriatic Sea bounds the country's western half, and the anthem charges it with telling the world how the 'Croat loves [*ljubi*] his people'. Aleksandar Pavković and Christopher Kelen argue that this 19th-century anthem long emphasised water, but did so more prominently following its text's curtailing to a few stanzas in the late-20th century (2016, pp. 66–9). The primary message became 'Croats lov[ing] their homeland *as it is bounded* by the three rivers and the sea [...] love for the country so bounded will not allow them to see the homeland diminished or divided' (Pavković and Kelen 2016, 71; emphasis in original).

Love here bears the characteristics that motivate Slavoj Žižek's cynical conception of 'an extremely violent act': "'love" is not "I love you all," "love" means [...] "I love you more than anything else"' (in Taylor 2005). Verifying the feelings attached to national symbols (songs, flags, etc.) requires ethnographic work and not merely textual analysis (MacMillen 2022), and I am not claiming that this song, or its listeners, love violently. Rather, what interests me is how love may depart from this model, and the role of symbolic and material acts of boundary-fording in the affective and financial economies of revived tambura performance between Croatia and Serbia.

Yugoslavia's dissolution and the 1990s wars disrupted many established networks of public popular music performance across the Yugoslav republics (Rasmussen 2007; Baker 2010). While Serbian rock and pop bands recommenced Croatian tours soon after Serbian president Slobodan Milošević's 2000 fall from power (Muršič 2011), the first prominent, postwar public stagings of popular tambura musicians from Serbia took several years longer. Croatia's 'neotraditional' tambura music – combining traditional tambura performance's melodic tremolos and *estam* (oompah) rhythm sections with regional urban popular song structures and lyrics addressing Croatian independence and *domoljublje* ('homeland-love' or 'patriotism') – distinguished its popularity and national symbolism over patriotic rock's more cosmopolitan strains (Bonifačić 1998). This success owes partly to tambura's close associations with Croatian lands (especially Slavonia) – a longstanding theme in Croatian popular culture emphasised unabashedly in 1990s tambura ballads (Baker 2010, pp. 26, 41–3). By the early 2000s, however, *klapa* (an Adriatic genre characterised by multipart homophonic men's singing, often with mandolin accompaniment) had replaced tambura as Croatia's most popular homegrown music, marked most prominently by Klapa Maslina's 2003 chart-topping hit 'Da te mogu pismom zvati'. Croatia and Serbia began normalising relations that same year with Croatian president Stjepan Mesić's visit to Belgrade, a historic first since Croatian independence in 1991, and Croatian publics were evidently ready for new tambura acts that did not rely on patriotic Croatian sentiments.

If territorial concerns for land pervaded wartime discourses and popular music, visions of waterways fed social imaginaries of reconnection and reconciliation as musicians emphasised shared geographies of the basin centred by the Danube. Bogdan and Balašević deliberately assembled ethnically diverse bands under the banner of a larger musical region spanning the former Pannonian seabed: Slavonia, Vojvodina and parts of Romania and Hungary. In our 2017 interview, Bogdan (personal commentary in Subotica, Serbia, 4 June 2017) described announcing to each audience that, as this is

all the 'Pannonian Plain', his performance includes *pisme*, *pjesme* and *pesme*: 'songs' in the mutually intelligible dialects of Bunjevac ikavian (his native tongue), Croatian ijekavian and Serbian ekavian (official languages of the two former Yugoslav countries where he most frequently performs). He typically appears with Vojvodinan tambura musicians, but also collaborates with likeminded tambura bands in Croatia such as Serbus, which became well known for *Pannonian Postcards* (*Panonske razglednice*), a CD of Slavonian, Vojvodinan, Hungarian, and Romanian repertoire that shortly followed the 2006 album from Bogdan's 'Pannonia and I' tour.

These projects evince commitment to regional breadth and cultural plurality, departing from the singularly focused love addressed by Žižek and by Pavković and Kelen. As Ana Petrov (2018) argues, singers such as Lepa Brena (Yugoslavia's most commercially successful artist) have shown during post-socialism how love can be both political and anti-nationalist, particularly in her popular 2017 song addressing the matter of 'say[ing] the word "sing" as "peva" (Ekavian) or "pjeva" (Ijekavian)'. Brena, in a discourse clearly connected to Bogdan's, uses a word for 'love' that, as I discuss shortly, differs from the term in the anthem analysed by Pavković and Kelen. Her song thus connects 'the message of love among the people in the territory of former Yugoslavia' to the idea that 'it does not matter which dialect you speak; we understand each other since we speak the same language' (*ibid.*).

Bogdan's listing of the languages and names of multiple countries, regions and even sub-regions is also similar to the 'explicit work of linking multiple smaller places into a collective homeland' that Catherine Baker notes played an important role in both nationalist and antinationalist/pro-Yugoslav 1990s songwriting (2015, p. 179). Those projects themselves reflected an extension of a songwriting practice highlighting the *zavičaj*: 'one's home region', which 'is both a material landscape and a web of directly experienced social relations' (Baker 2015, p. 171). In newly independent, war-torn Croatia, however, songwriters addressed home regions under a united national framework of love, and 'the personal associations connected to the *zavičaj* were invited to be applied to the nation' (Baker 2015, p. 175). Unlike Croatia and Yugoslavia, Pannonia is not a current or former country, and has never exactly been proffered as a 'collective homeland'; it affords an alternative space, predating Yugoslavia, in which to centre one's *zavičaj* alongside others, transcending debates over which national community one should recognise or love. This does not mean that the ideal of transcending national concerns has no Yugoslavian origins, but it is not explicitly framed as such. As Mark Forry writes (1990, p. 81), '[c]ommentators on Vojvodina's musical life' under socialism frequently 'remarked on common characteristics of music and dances shared by the different ethnic groups residing on the Pannonian plain', but late-Yugoslav emphases on minority rights and national heritages resulted in tamburas' diminishing usage except among Slavic communities, leading 'to what may be termed a "de-pannonianization" of Vojvodina's cultural life'. In the post-socialist era, this evidently contributed, in turn, to Pannonia's greater symbolic viability over that of Yugoslavia among Croat tambura players, many of whom returned or migrated to Croatia from Vojvodina during the war.

Bogdan's Pannonia in performance and online

Bogdan invoked his own *zavičaj* and its incorporation into something transcending political boundaries at a June 2015 performance that I attended in Zagreb. He and his

tambura accompanists were the featured entertainment on Saturday evening during the three-day International Fireworks Festival on the 'Sava's bank, by Bundeck Lake, where,' as one reporter announced, Bogdan headlined 'a party to remember' (Rajilić 2015; translated from Croatian). Heavily subsidised by the city of Zagreb and festival sponsors, entry cost only 10 kuna (less than €1.50), and the festival and concert drew thousands. I had seen tickets to Bogdan's sold-out performances in Zagreb's Lisinski Concert Hall list for 120 to 250 kuna, and Bogdan's tambura performance was a big draw for this festival, which featured other singers known for working with tambura bands but brought them without tambura accompaniment. After a small, unannounced, presumably local tambura group's short performance, Bogdan's 10 Vojvodinan tambura players took the stage and the crowd pressed forward to hear their opening instrumental medley. The first loud cheers, however, came when Bogdan walked onto the stage just before the medley's end. These calls grew as he called out in Bunjevac 'Good evening, Zagreb' and, gesturing to his 10 musicians, added 'good evening, Vojvodina'. Having alerted us to one vector of interregional connection, stretching along the nearby Sava from central Croatia eastward to Vojvodina, he announced that we would cross 'Pannonia, from the Carpathians to the Balkans. Because of this, there will be *pjesme*, *pisme* and *pesme*'.

The reference to this other (north-south) vector of Pannonian movement garnered even louder cheers, and Bogdan proceeded to name several additional Pannonian locales as he introduced the tambura musicians' names and hometowns. (What Bogdan had meant by 'the Balkans', however, and how his performance represented this southern extent of the Pannonian region, remained unclear.) A few early jokes had drawn chuckles, but the loudest laughs came when he introduced two musicians 'from northern Bačka, from the Bunjevac Republic'. Bogdan was born in Sombor in northern Bačka, a region near Vojvodina's borders with Croatia and Hungary, and the joke alluded to the Bunjevci's prominence there but also to the irony of elevating a *zavičaj* into a republic, precisely when Bogdan was emphasising a transnational Pannonian zone, making moot any question of that hypothetical republic's status.

The audience was diverse in age. Many adults of 30 years or older were there with families. While the children seemed more excited by the young, local tambura group, the adults from generations born in the Yugoslav period sang along from Bogdan's opening number: 'Neko sasvim treći' ('Some completely third person'), a song about love triangles and lost relationships that Bogdan composed to a text by Zlatica Zlatanović and released in the mid-1970s. Although not one of his most popular 1970s pieces, it had audience members participating from all but the youngest generations.

It was his second piece that attendees in their teens and twenties also knew by heart: a medley of songs from the same period for which he had either composed both melody and text or reworked a folk song's lyrics. They sang the words along with Bogdan and concertgoers in their thirties through seventies. Musically, thematically and linguistically, these songs represent various areas and experiences of the *pjesme-pisme-pesme* realm of Pannonia, from streets busy with coaches in cities like Sombor to rural lives spent in small lake houses. If similar musically to the opener, the texts are markedly different: whereas Zlatanović's lyrics describe the inevitability of losing romantic love to a rival, Bogdan's lyrics touch variously on a longing to reconnect (often across great distances) with homes and loved ones left behind, and on hope of protecting one's love and one's soul, either with hard-earned

wisdom or via the help of one's beloved. These songs' texts never name 'Pannonia', but their comparative specificity allowed Bogdan to shape stories that resonated with his concert's geographical frame. These subtle differences in text and reception speak to the hopeful, emotional resonance that keeps Bogdan's songs popular, respected for his aesthetics and wisdom, across decades and generations of listeners (even those who reached adulthood after Bogdan's 1990s career downturn).

One of Bogdan's most popular wisdoms is that a non-political zone for this music, known as Pannonia, exists. Mario Pleše, formerly of the well-known Croatian tambura band Ex Pannonia, continues to invoke Pannonia, despite no longer playing in that ensemble, as he participates in the broader tambura milieu. This includes frequent forum.tambura.com.hr posts where his electronic forum signature quotes a Bogdan lyric: 'a Pannonian soul trembles within me and I love [*volim*] my grandfathers' world' (translated from Bunjevac). Situating generationally the love that attaches to this transnational perspective (for Bogdan and presumably for Pleše as well), the song goes on to request that his beloved 'Open the Window' (*Otvori prozor*, 2001) so that he can see the sun that 'at that very moment' is shining on his 'far away *zavičaj*'; thus might his 'Pannonian soul' find out in which corners of his ancestors' (Austro-Hungarian) world the Danube, Drava and Sava rivers flow, and whose the Adriatic's banks are now. Many ethnicities share tambura music on the Pannonian plain (where it is more ubiquitous than in any one 'Pannonian' country as a whole), and the framing by Bogdan, Balašević, Pleše and others of souls and music as 'Pannonian' idealises, in the face of nationalism, border policing and ethnicity-based EU visa and tax regulations, a fluidity in the vectors of travel and in the musical, cultural, linguistic and geo-political boundaries that musicians navigate from their now more isolated positions.

This fluidity does not involve objectifying love, placing one person (or country) above all others. It mobilises something closer to what anthropologist Deborah Thomas (2019) calls '*Real* love [which] requires deep affective recognition', 'akin to [what] the embodied hapticality Sefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013, p. 98) identify as "the capacity to feel through others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you"' (Thomas 2019, pp. 215, 216–17). Recognising Pannonian souls transpires through the loving and trembling that men such as Bogdan and Pleše invite across expanses of time/generation ('my grandfathers' world'), geography (Pannonia) and gender (to the extent that their repertoire explores heterosexual romantic love as it affects men's and women's souls). One implication is that such a world was more closely within reach in the Yugoslav period, when the Adriatic's banks belonged, geopolitically, to those in both Serbia and Croatia, and when the two republics' boundary did not divide Pannonia so palpably. If not fully capable of consolidating these expanses even then into the Pannonia of Bogdan's ancestors (or of prehistory), Yugoslav-era affective recognition implicitly afforded a set of attachments upon which to build again in navigating the lands and waters of his love.

A loving soul is not merely a spiritual or symbolic locus of belief. As Bogdan's statement that his Pannonian soul 'trembles' [*trepti*] within him suggests, it involves affect, feelings stimulated by music, love and flowing waterways that connect and carry him to the far reaches of his grandfathers' world. Like in many places around the world, people have long considered the soul a source and object of emotional music-making in Vojvodina, where, as Mattijs Van de Port quotes one patron, Romani tambura players are accorded a special ability to move listeners when 'they

show you their heart and soul' in playing (1999, p. 292). Studies of Yugoslav *kafana* (tavern) musicians (Hofman 2015) and tambura/violin musicians in the Croatian and Romani diasporas (where Bogdan found some of his most important collaborators – MacMillen 2020) show that a client frequently expects musicians to draw upon their souls (and to touch listeners' souls). Responding to sceptical patrons who question whether musicians are playing 'for the soul' (*za dušu*) – or might be dishonestly rushing their performance or insincerely faking their affective commitment to it – performers prioritise their love for one another (MacMillen 2020, p. 90) or for themselves and their profession (Hofman 2015, pp. 44–5). They thereby see 'their work not as a one-sided commodification of the audience's emotion, but as an emotional exchange between professional musicians and patrons' (Hofman 2015, p. 45). Bogdan's recorded song does something similar, and his warm, leisurely vibratoed, behind-the-beat delivery of the slow waltz melody communicates a calm assuredness, both in his vocal mastery and in his emotional sincerity in proclaiming his soulful love for Pannonia's distant expanses connected by rivers.

Yet the Danube and its tributaries – which afford hydrologically and geographically the closest, if still somewhat metaphorical, or at best synecdochical, stand-in for the Pannonian Sea – function physically as borders. Especially with increased flooding brought on by climate change (Jakovljević and Govedarica 2019), they divide as much as connect people along their left and right banks. Nation-states mobilise them as 'natural' boundaries that justify mapping territories onto majority ethnic and linguistic groups (and vice versa), imposing a sense of coherent homogeneity on ethnically diverse populations found on both sides of each river. If the Pannonian Seabed maps an alternative territory of belonging, the rivers that remain structure it through routes of travel (riverbound and transiparian) that exclude those without the right documentation. Passing references in popular songs to the Danube as a 'sea' (e.g. Cune Gojković's 'Danube, my sea') are balanced by 'Panonski mornar', which describes the Danube as less satisfying to the soul than the Pannonian Sea. The sea that most excites people throughout the former Yugoslavia is still the Adriatic. While Croatia is bordered by the Danube *and* the Adriatic, for citizens in landlocked Serbia, the Danube now constitutes an official, geographical barrier to cross en route to the actual sea that they visited with greater freedom when they and Croatians shared Yugoslav citizenship. Croatian citizenship (and now European Union citizenship along with it) is extended to Croats in Serbia by virtue of their ethnicity, and to ethnic Serbs and other minorities in Croatia by virtue of their birth in the Republic, complicating the interrepublic fissures oversimplified as 'Balkanisation' in Western media. Bogdan's and Balašević's ethnically mixed backing bands now partake in touristic and professional musical activities on unequal footing, with Croat members enjoying greater rights in Croatia and other EU member states. While Pannonia ideally represents a zone of open economic and musical opportunity, EU visa and tax regulations remap ethnic distinctions onto those of class and citizenship. National belonging structures transnational work, and musicians draw upon splintered national and hydrological imaginaries to respond.

No souls unaffected: impacts of Balašević's concerts on musicians and fans

Balašević's tambura-heavy Pannonian Sea Fleet marked a significant change from his chanson and pop ensemble. Yet the project retained much of his usual approach (not

to mention repertoire). It differed from Bogdan's both in sound, pairing tamburas with Balašević's typical piano accompaniment, and in how it represented Pannonia's breadth of spaces and identities. Whereas Bogdan emphasised combining different linguistic traditions, with their regional and national associations, Balašević's Sea Fleet stressed that what made their and other Vojvodina tambura ensembles remarkable was their integration of different ethnic groups' playing styles.³ This group boasted Serb and Croat players, and when I visited with them in a Radio-Televizija Vojvodine Tambura Orchestra rehearsal space, they mentioned that state ensembles such as the orchestra had an even greater advantage, for they mixed these two ethnic groups' distinct 'styles' with a third approach: that of the orchestra's Roma musicians (they compared this with Germany's top symphony orchestras' mixing of German, Jewish and Russian performers).

The ensemble, and its balladic namesake lamenting Vojvodina's lost sea (which took gold at 1979's coastal Split Festival), are but two of Balašević's many hydrological references. As Vinko Tadić and Goran Đurđević (2017, p. 84) write, in his songs, 'Balašević acts as the native inhabitant of Vojvodina, a province that has always been the epicentre of conflicts between Austria – Hungary and Serbia'; songs such as 'The Night When I Swam Across the Danube' (1985) address rivers important to World War I, which 'brought turmoil into the peaceful Pannonian life and became a part of the culture of remembering. Balašević invokes a nostalgia by singing about Vojvodina's peasants in Austro-Hungarian Army in faraway places such as Galicia, the Vistula [River in Poland] or the Carpathians' (Tadić and Đurđević (2017). Gordana Crnković notes that his early songs, which interweave 'life wisdom' with references to both the sea and Vojvodina's rivers, were a 'staple' of Yugoslav Adriatic Sea tourism (2012, pp. 208–9). In 1990s Croatia, official suppression of Serbian popular music and of memories of multiethnic beach tourism fed a nostalgia that, beyond official circles, popularised among a new Croatian generation Balašević's 1970s hits and post-Yugoslav ballads, which reference loved ones fording the Drina (a border river between Serbia/Yugoslavia and newly independent Bosnia–Herzegovina) or moving beyond the 'malicious', 'false' political world like a wave from the Istrian Adriatic (Crnković 2001, pp. 51–3).

The Istrian Coast came to play an important role in Balašević's return to Croatian venues, with his first post-war performance and his first Panonska mornarica concert taking place, respectively, in Pula's Arena in 2001 and on Opatija's Summer Stage in 2010. These concerts, plus his 2011 Panonska mornarica appearance in Pula, helped to establish his return. According to Balašević, people from Ilok in Eastern Croatia came to his 2001 concert, although they lived 40 kilometres from his hometown of Novi Sad, Serbia, and could have gone 'on bicycles' to hear him there; since that was difficult in the postwar years, they came to Pula, which became 'a pilgrimage' for both Balašević and his fans (in Softić-Mehmedović 2011a, p. 49; translated from Serbian). Opatija, too, was a special place: a 'happy city' where he had premiered 'Prva ljubav' ('First love,' 1987), a song that helped to define his late career; he had now returned to premier his film *Kao rani mraz* (*Like an early frost*) based on 'Vasa Ladački' (1980), Rani mraz's slow piano and

³ Balašević is similarly known for mixing Vojvodina's richly diverse languages and slang (Dražić and Lazić-Konjik 2011, pp. 517–18); he also borrows from beyond the immediate region: 'Latin, French, Greek and German language [...] present themselves as suitable linguistic and stylistic resources for Balašević's emotions' flawless embodiment' (Asimopoulos 2012, p. 91; translated from Serbian).

electric guitar ballad about abandoning love for success, and he hoped ‘that all those who have loved [*voljeli*] the story of Vasa Ladački will come’ to see whether his film matched the story as it ‘played in listeners’ heads’ (in Žic 2010, p. 48; translated from Serbian). Arriving in Opatija literally captaining a boat, the Pannonian seaman, as one reporter put it, ‘finally got both a sea and a boat’ (Žic 2010; translated from Croatian). No longer in need of bicycles, as Balašević’s new tour included stops in Slavonia and central Croatia (in addition to Istria and Dalmatia), fans could count on Balašević’s Sea Fleet to sail, literally and figuratively, to their cities on the Adriatic, Drava and Sava.

By all reports, the ‘emotive shock,’ ‘happy’ experiences, and ‘love’ that Balašević felt (Softić-Mehmedović 2011a, p. 48; translated from Serbian) were matched by concertgoers’ responses: ‘At the verses of the song “Prva ljubav” the audience already caught euphoria [...] thousands of voices sang with Đole and the orchestra’ (Softić-Mehmedović 2011b, p. 48). Balašević thus ‘offered his faithful audience, which this time also arrived from various parts of Croatia and Slovenia, a familiar opus in new arrangements with the excellent Pannonian Sea Fleet [...] which left no one unaffected [*ravnodušnim*]’ (Softić-Mehmedović 2011b; translated from Croatian). *Ravnodušni*, whose linguistic roots mean ‘level’ and ‘soul’, may connote ‘indifference’: neither liking nor disliking something. In Balašević’s (and Bogdan’s) context, however, of importance is the root *duša* (‘soul’), which suggests not a purely cognitive decision about music’s aesthetic or ideological merits but rather a soulful, embodied response. In translating it as ‘unaffected’, I draw out the review’s broader affective possibilities: various audience members might code how they were affected as positive or as negative, but no one was left unaffected. The same reporter noted that ‘[t]en years have passed since the legendary Pannonian seaman, the alchemist of words, the romantic with a Slavic soul, last stood before his adorers [*obožovatelje*] from all parts of Croatia and Slovenia’; that earlier Arena concert ‘had a special emotive charge and great importance’ for performers and audience alike (Softić-Mehmedović 2011a, p. 48). While the author details only positive reactions, her use of ‘*ravnodušnim*’ should be understood affectively: feelings and emotive responses, remarked upon by both the reporter and Balašević for their intensity as much as their quality.

The idea that people feel strongly, one way or another, about Balašević’s music resonates with tambura musicians’ experiences in Croatia. To a forum.tambura.com.hr query (three years before Panonska mornarica’s tour) about whether tambura musicians cover his songs, one frequent poster wrote: ‘Balašević is a figure toward whom a very small number of people is *ravnodušno*, either they love [*vole*] him or they don’t love him. Personally, I adore [*obožavam*] Balašević, and as far as playing goes, I don’t love it when people always force “The Story of Vasa Ladački,” as Đole has other really beautiful songs’ (Svitac 2007; translated from Croatian). Many other replies bear this out: tambura musicians dislike certain songs because of how frequently patrons request them, while other songs they truly enjoy playing; and some clients never request his songs, while others *only* engage with a band when it plays this repertoire. The ‘melodramatic structures of feeling’ that marked the ‘public collective grief and bereavement’ in the former Yugoslavia following Balašević’s death from Covid-19 in 2021, and the heated critique from ‘[r]ight-wing pundits in Croatia’ of various publics’ emotional responses, speak to the continuing dichotomous ‘affective charge’ in reactions to the singer (Pužar 2021, pp. 21, 36, 37). Such reactions included expressions merging the physical

and metaphysical (e.g. ‘My heart ached’, ‘It is my soul that is crying’), and contributed to an ‘economy of impossibility’ where the affective outpouring actually blocked political activism, but in a disguised manner (Pužar 2021, pp. 21, 27). In Balašević’s final years, such structures of material and emotional feeling brought up economic considerations for musicians who made much of their musical income from tipping (MacMillen 2011). Thus many bands rehearsed but cautiously employed Balašević’s music, navigating their own ‘affective block’ (MacMillen 2019) in an economy prioritising material over discursive/aesthetic concerns when playing at restaurants, weddings and other settings where listeners customarily tip.⁴ For all the discussion of reasons for liking or disliking his music, these tambura musicians’ postings, and their comments to me, emphasised materialist, economic factors over musical appreciation.

Balašević evidently perceived a material component to his affective exchange, too. As Belgrade’s *B92* (2010) reported of the 2010 Opatija film premier, which involved ‘Novi Sad officials, ambassadors and the Consul of Serbia’, attendees entered ‘walking along “Pannonian land [*zemlji*]” brought from Vojvodina’, and afterward ‘took home bags of that same land’. *Zemlja* also means ‘soil’, but Balašević’s address suggested its connotation of ‘land’ or ‘country’ (as in Country of Pannonia): ‘There is no greater happiness for a person than for you to gift him a piece of your land’ (in *ibid.*). One Croatian-based forum.tambura.com.hr poster echoed this sentiment but contextualised it in a broader range of emotions: ‘I have been at many concerts (first time at one of Balašević’s) and I couldn’t believe how “loaded” with emotions the entire audience was, even I let a tear fall [...] people were crying and then the presentation of the cast and the departure with several minutes of fireworks and a bag of Pannonian land as a gift ☺ truly a perfect weekend, balasevic [*sic*]’ (Becar 2010). The post describes a range of additional sensations, from sleeping wet while camping to watching stars falling at the premier, but singles out the gift as a tangible source of happiness. Attending also ‘was worth it’ for less tangible pleasures: ‘as balasevic said [...] “the film was made for you, and whoever loves [*voli*] me will like the film, whoever doesn’t surely won’t like it” so I definitely recommend the film for watching’ (Becar 2010). If Balašević had received his long-sung sea and boat, along with the emotive charge (and income from tickets, which ran for more than 200 kuna), his attendees had received sacks of Pannonian land to take home.

His band also received tangible takeaways. Without quoting precise figures, musicians from the Novi Sad band Zorule expressed that accompanying Balašević was good work because he hired them for his permanent ensemble, providing regular, well-paid concerts. This was because, as *primaš* (first tambura player) Zoran Bugarski (personal commentary in Novi Sad, Serbia, 9 June 2013) told me, ‘People in Croatia love [*vole*] Balašević’. They kept the tour going with 24 performances over four years. Bugarski hoped to tour his own Pannonian music programme with Zorule to Prague, Budapest and Vienna, having already played in Romania with local tambura orchestras, but these performances paid relatively little. Musicians must track days spent in foreign countries, however, and following its 2013 European Union accession, days in Croatia also counted against the time that

⁴ I have encountered Panonska mornarica playing Balašević songs on tamburas only at staged concerts; the forum.tambura.com.hr discussion suggests that tipping gigs are the dominant occasions for playing his music.

Serbian citizens could spend in the EU. Balašević's concerts, relatively lucrative and moderately paced in comparison with some musicians' regular weekend gigs abroad, were highly desirable and put musicians in a different class (through financial compensation, but also by not overloading musicians' foreign travel schedules, leaving Zorule free to plan additional Pannonian projects abroad).

Romani musicians I knew in Osijek, Croatia who came from Vojvodina to play with the groups *Dule bend* and *Biće skoro propast sveta* faced a different situation. Both had weekend-long gigs at popular restaurants, and as the latter group were all from Deronje, Serbia, their engagements reached the bi-annual allotment of 90 days well before 26 weeks were out. This had ramifications for their labour and leisure. Members were eager to spend time on the Dalmatian Coast, but typically would do so only for work: otherwise they would forfeit several potential workdays in Croatia, where compensation was higher than in Vojvodina. Since a single evening gig often required visiting during parts of two days, but holding three weekend performances might lengthen the stay by only one day (and village weddings sometimes brought them for much longer work engagements), they generally prioritised spending three or four days in a row, which necessitated finding accommodations. The sole *Dule bend* member from Vojvodina, a violinist, even approached me about letting out a room, as finding affordable accommodation for half a week at a time was difficult (unfortunately, my studio apartment had no spare room).

Documented Croats in Bogdan's and Balašević's ethnically mixed backing ensembles enjoy greater privileges in Croatia. This applies to Bogdan himself, although entry across the Danube through the former UN-occupied zone was initially challenging unless one could prove past residence in Croatia. One famous Croatian tambura performer even claimed to have smuggled in Bogdan and his wife, who were unable to enter with Yugoslavian passports (personal communication). Roma, however, with no nominal home country to grant such privileges, are among a number of groups whose ethnicities and nationalities afford no advantages for residency or labour in Croatia or elsewhere in Europe. Arguably in an even more precarious position were the refugees from Syria and other parts of Western Asia who entered Croatia from Serbia in 2015, prompting Croatia's government to deport most to other EU countries while rebuking its neighbour, blocking entry of both people and cargo from Serbia; although Croatian authorities also expelled Central European settlers whom they perceived to be in violation of Croatian residential sovereignty (so-called 'Liberlanders' claiming contested territory on Croatia's side of the Danube in 2015), the latter's sonic and corporeal presence was welcomed more enthusiastically by Croatian music commentators than that of the refugees, who could not similarly claim shared European biological heritage or Christian faith (MacMillen [forthcoming](#)). Roma, too, have faced discrimination as Serbian intruders in Croatia's music scenes (MacMillen 2019, p. 132), and although those residing in Serbia have typically been granted temporary entry, they have not been able to rely upon Croatian residents to smuggle them in, nor would they be likely to risk accepting such assistance. Thus, although many Romani tambura and violin players accompany Bogdan's tours, they weigh these opportunities for temporary visits and employment against others, in an economy that is temporal as well as financial.

Bogdan's tours benefit musicians as much by promoting tambura listenership in Croatia as by offering work opportunities. During these tours, the term 'Pannonian' was slow to catch on among those who weren't players themselves,

but Bogdan's name had broad appeal, and Vojvodinan musicians took advantage of Bogdan's social capital when positioning themselves. Biće skoro propast sveta played more Slavonian repertoire than music by Vojvodinan artists like Bogdan, but presented themselves as playing 'in the style of Zvonko Bogdan' (MacMillen 2019, p. 133), even though Bogdan is a singer and any playing associated with him also stems from an instrumentalist collaborator (e.g. Romani tambura legend Janika Balazs). *Tamburaši* (tambura players) from Croatia similarly expressed gratitude more for Bogdan's and Balašević's promotion of tambura music than for their Pannonian branding. Mario Pleše posted about Balašević's televised Opatija concert 'cheering [him] up' when he saw that, unprecedentedly, Balašević had a 'TAMBURA ensemble' (2010). Others replied that this was 'just for the purpose of promoting the aforementioned film!!! [...] but in any case a commendable move, that after all there are, in all of that, TAMBURAŠI-good promotion for everyone!!!' (KDL 2010; translated from Croatian). These posts' capital letters attest to the perceived visibility that such promotion offers tambura music.

Feeling nostalgia differently: loving Đole, listening to Zvonko

The concept *ravnodušno* is significant to the discourses and economy of listening surrounding Zvonko Bogdan's performances as well. While preparing their *Pannonian Postcards* album, Croatian band Serbus played a highly regarded 2007 concert with Bogdan in Križevci, Croatia. As with Balašević's performances, comments on this topic centred economic concerns, relating their material and symbolic aspects to physical and discursive dimensions of musical affect. Bogdan's concerts in Zagreb's Lisinski Hall that year and the next provoked numerous questions and comments as posters navigated digital and physical options for purchasing and receiving tickets and for attending; later, they relived and represented emotions and other *dojmovi* (impressions) from their experiences (Forum 2007, 2008). Serbus, however, organised their concert to record a music DVD and only admitted a small audience. Consequently, the forum discussion spotlighted post-concert reporting: someone with no invitation asked Serbus and other 'people who perhaps were in Križevci to extract their impressions a little and share them', and participants discussed how to acquire the DVD (matija_vg 2007a; translated from Croatian). Serbus responded humbly, praising Zvonko Bogdan and providing general details while suggesting that the DVD could better represent the concert. Attendees, however, were exuberant:

The impressions still have not settled completely, but [it was] the best thing that I have heard or experienced in my short playing life [...] an atmosphere so charged with emotions, something beautiful ... for the first time in my life it happened that I cried at music without being drunk or sad [...] it was impossible for me to remain *ravnodušan* when I knew how much effort and anguish was invested in that concert [...] six excellent musicians who play with a heart larger than that Pannonia about which Zvonko sings. [...] Zvonko deserves to be accompanied by people who live and feel that music, and not by some quasi-artists who don't understand and don't feel anything except for colourful little papers. (Saky 2007; translated from Croatian)

The reference to colourful banknotes contrasts a hypothetical commercial exchange with the one claimed for Bogdan, who earned their high-quality, 'sincere' (Saky 2007) playing, not primarily through payment, but through his own musically and

affectively superb performance. Impressions (*dojmovi*) straddle cognitive and affective dimensions of listening (MacMillen 2019, p. 210), and posters quickly related the latter to soulfulness. A Serbus member's sister responded: 'I am inspired [*oduševljena*] and moved ... saky, I cried at the concert, too ... the feelings take you off from those wonderful performances' (ficekica 2007). *Oduševiti* ('to inspire', 'to animate', in the sense of *anima/duša/soul*) appears in responses about other concerts: at Lisinski Hall, 'Zvonko animated me all over again[,] some things only he can perform and interpret like that' (matija_vg 2007b; translated from Croatian). For many attendees, it is their souls that benefit from these exchanges.

Yet much of Bogdan's impression, and the reason that people cannot remain unaffected, comes not from sonic feeling but from knowledge. In addition to knowledge (drawn from personal experience) about the labour and anguish of concert preparations, many commentators posted about Bogdan's stories. *matija_vg* continued: 'I think that it's worth listening to Zvonko every time ... even those stories that repeat [them] forever and they'll be boring :D this time he told some new things [...]!!!' (matija_vg 2007b). A Serbus member commented that their performance's '[o]rder was governed by priorities, tonalities, style, the climate in which the song (Hungarian, Russian, Bunjevac, Sevdah ...) originated and sometimes the time in which it originated, as only uncle Zvonko knows how to tell it' (dado 2007; translated from Croatian). Word got back to Vojvodina of Bogdan's Lisinski Hall performance with '12 [Vojvodinan] tamburaši, instrumentals that heated up the atmosphere [...] then Zvonko emerges and holds the audience's concentration at a maximum for 3 hours, with story and song' (bogics 2007; translated from Serbian). Bogdan's relation of the repertoire's history through a multilingual Pannonian frame is key for the absorbed, soulful listening in which tambura players report engaging. It is part of the reward for time, money and emotions invested in the concerts; in addition, Bogdan's storytelling establishes the repertoire selection as deeply considered and sincerely valued, and Bogdan as the only person who can deliver it so effectively.

Bogdan's reliance on speaking, and more broadly on symbolic performance dimensions, differentiates his concerts from Balašević's. Listeners value the truth and aesthetics that they locate in both singers' lyrics, and Balašević's gifting of Pannonian earth clearly functions symbolically, but the latter also has a more immediately material dimension of exchange than is customary at Bogdan's concerts. I have come across no Croatian reviews (tamburaši's or others') highlighting storytelling at Balašević's Panonska mornarica appearances. Instead, tambura musicians comment on how they and their clients 'love' Balašević.

'Love' is a word not commonly encountered in Bogdan's reception. It is not that people do not love Bogdan, or did not listen to Balašević's onstage patter. The difference largely revolves around the lexicon deemed appropriate in commenting on each. Yet what is appropriate also registers differences in these musicians' relationships to Pannonia, Croatian publics and the waters that connect and divide them. One of these differences has to do with separation between affective informational processing and symbolic thought (thirdness in Peircean semiotics), which entails a more abstracted process of making meaning (a '*relation to a relation*') than that which characterises the indexical relationship of associating a feeling with a circumstance (Tomlinson 2016). In Croatia's tambura scenes, higher-order meaning-making can thus serve strategic purposes by blocking off certain affective experiences (MacMillen 2019). People believe that they know why they appreciate Bogdan (they relate to their relation), as his performances provide symbolic frames directing

appreciation into conscious thought about historical significance. People in Croatia who played his music or attended his concerts stated that their love for Balašević relates to his lyrics and other songwriting dimensions; yet their broadly expounded idea that people either love him or don't suggests only a limited, non-scalable symbolic frame through which to interpret responses to his music, which are otherwise about the affective correspondences of experience (attending a concert) and feeling (love). Thus, in addition to the emotions they feel and the man to whom they listen, tamburaši refer more commonly to the particulars of Bogdan's concerts – the songs, stories, knowledge, and languages – than they do for Balašević's. Even the impossibility of remaining unaffected they explain through knowledge of Bogdan's strategies. In discourses on Balašević, emotions and the man himself dominate, and 'love' (*volim*) conjurs up the lower-level meaning-making of indexically associating feelings with the person, whereas 'listening' is a term that tamburaši employ in contexts of high-level symbolic reflection.⁵

Also important here, however, is Balašević's outsider status in Croatia's tambura scene. He was neither a tamburaš nor previously associated with the music. In Croatia, many fans, and many who hire tamburaši furthermore, are not primarily *tambura music* lovers. Comments by tamburaši across the former Yugoslavia about people's 'love' for Balašević in Croatia speak to the marked *insignificance* of another sort of outsider status: that of nation. The verb used is not 'ljubim' – connoting preferential, romantic, even physical love, which Pavković and Kelen relate to national, territorial sovereignty in Croatia's hymn – but the more flexible 'volim': one can love [*voli*] many people, countries, musics, etc.⁶ In Thomas's conception of loving, her 'affective technologies' involve something like Emmanuel Levinas's (1985) idea that 'mutual recognition yields affirmation in difference through which two parties are not joined, because the other resists the self's claim to knowledge and identification' (Thomas 2019, pp. 217–18). Describing feelings for Balašević as 'love' affirms recognition of difference that need not be denied or elided, while Croatian tamburaši recognise Bogdan – a Bunjevac whom they smuggled back into Croatia's scene at the earliest possible moment – not as different but as self.⁷

Finally, these singers' relationships to Pannonia differ. The Pannonian world that Bogdan invokes – his grandfathers' – goes back a few generations. Balešević's Pannonia is simultaneously prehistoric (the Pannonian Sea) and something that never was: it was never experienced by *Homo sapiens*, never realised or controlled by past regimes, and thus never lost. As Baker argues, since his 2001 Pula concert, Balašević's performances figured in an 'emotional sense [...] as an embodiment of nostalgia', but not of a Yugoslavist revanchism 'with which a political nostalgic would mourn', rather of a 'post-Yugoslav musical transnationalism' (2006, p. 281).

⁵ Discussions of Balešević's gift of Pannonian land suggest that people similarly interpret it indexically (second-order significations association with its Pannonian origin), not primarily through higher-level symbolism or ideology.

⁶ Another verb used, 'obožavati' ('adore'), stems from 'bog' ('god'), suggesting spirituality, as with 'oduševiti' ('to animate'). While one could debate connotations of preferential (monotheistic) love, another difference pertains: with 'obožavati', tamburaši ascribe the action to themselves and their clients (*people* adore Balašević); with 'oduševiti', the *singer* takes action (*Bogdan* animates people). Affective responses to Bogdan are again explainable in terms of his actions, while with Balašević, only the fan's feeling is identifiable.

⁷ Speaking of loving Bogdan might, in the contexts of his Pannonian-framed concerts, push self-recognition into the redundant tautologies of nationalist rhetoric.

The focus on a prepolitical hydrological zone in Balašević's more recent project, built around his late-Yugoslav hit, helped to deterritorialise actions such as gifting soil.

Balašević's tour offered a 'structural nostalgia', presenting 'a time before time – in which the balanced perfection of social relations has not yet suffered the decay'; yet it did so without recourse to 'the official state' that centres Michael Herzfeld's (1997, p. 109) analysis of Greek nostalgia, or to the 'national memory' that Boym locates in 'restorative' nostalgia's conservative post-socialist longings (2001, p. 43). It evaded geopolitical specificity in a manner that parallels Balašević's seemingly ineffable ability to affect people. If not aimed at restoring national purity, this pluralist project, with its overtures at a prehistoric Pannonian time before time, nonetheless had more of a restorative element than other Southeast European musical attempts to 'signify a new, transbordered sense of belonging' (Buchanan 2010, p. 136). Such attempts within Pirin Macedonian CDs juxtapose post-socialist and Ottoman times (when 'Macedonian territory was not divided between three states') and thus 'display[...] many qualities of reflective nostalgia', which 'seeks not to re-establish the past, but reflects emotionally and sometimes playfully on its irretrievability' (Buchanan 2010, pp. 136–7, 129). The latter invites comparison with Bogdan's Pannonia, with references to his grandfathers' world and juxtaposition of new and traditional repertoire – except that Bogdan's seemingly most nostalgic albums, the last CDs released before/during his 2006 tour (*Memory of a Time That Will Surely not Repeat* and *Pannonia and I*), were also those that, post hiatus, revived his practice of recording newly written or recomposed material. Both, for instance, included his hit cover of 'Ko te ima, taj te nema', a song by Bane Krstić whose melody Bogdan heavily rewrote (MacMillen 2019, p. 77). Reworking other musicians' new songs brought them melodically into a common regional *melos* (MacMillen 2019), suggesting the strategic, informed practice of presenting Pannonian music: an aspect of Bogdan's musicianship that tamburaši recognise as a known strength of the singer that garners their deeply appreciative and affected listening.

Conclusion: new political possibilities of fluid borders

Turning to Pannonian expanses and waterways indulges neither reflection upon irretrievable pasts nor retrieval of national communities from those pasts. It instead attempts to restore several past periods' less bordered zones of movement. It also suggests something that might become, responding to the restored conditions of possibility for a nonnational community. While not advancing 'new Yugoslavism', such projects mobilise the 'liminality' between 'known past and an unclear future', between feeling that 'we are no more' and 'we are not yet' (Velikonja 2014, p. 78). Nostalgia here is less a longing for Yugoslavist or socialist structures than 'an undetermined, undefined, amorphous wish to transcend the present' – marked as it is by neo-liberal market attachments and ethnicised citizenship – for 'a society that is better than the current one' (Velikonja 2009, p. 548). 'Love' describes attachments to Balašević's role in this hopeful, historically rooted envisioning of connection across contemporary borders. Bogdan's Pannonia suggests a geography that has survived the past century's political shifts – another hopeful story to which many are eager to listen.

Mobilising 'Pannonian' musicians is an attempt to realise alternative networks of musical commerce and affective labour, conditioned but not defined by state

territories and boundaries. They are interested not only in solidarities fostered across border rivers by virtue of shared ethnicity, class, etc. but also in the liquidities of musical affective exchange (Jelača 2023) along waterways and lands long shared in and beyond the former Yugoslavia. It is not that the possibility of fluid regional movement appears fully reconstituted, or to have been identically complete in all periods before the 1990s conflicts, but rather that re-establishing performance networks brings to mind Yugoslav-era practices that could also *then* have consolidated into a nexus of Pannonian lands, instruments, and peoples. A few tambura musicians in Croatia even spoke of the European Union as a future zone for re-establishing relations with musicians in Serbia, Bosnia, etc., within a projected EU-goslavia, while also affording increased possibilities for touring in non-Yugoslav territories in Austria, Hungary and Romania (personal communication).

Former Yugoslav territories, however, and especially Serbia, whose tambura players are revered by many in Croatia, hold dominance within this geography. Pannonia is often limited further still to parts of Croatia and Serbia formerly under Habsburg rule, and not always in a de-ethnicised fashion: some of Bogdan's Croatian fans love him specifically as a Bunjevac Croat, and might not listen to his call for interethnic appreciation; many of the same listen to Balašević, a Serb, with deep scepticism, recalling how his Yugoslav-era anthems like 'Računajte na nas' evinced a love for Tito's partisans that is difficult to reconcile with independent, post-socialist Croatia. While these two singers have frequently performed in large cities, much of this more limited Pannonian tambura area comprises farmland, and agricultural towns and villages, situated in between cosmopolitan centres such as Zagreb, Novi Sad and Belgrade. Both the former Yugoslav People's Army-occupied war zone and the Croatian-Serbian border (with its ethnicised regulation of travel) are found in this area, presenting several symbolic and physical checks on the flow of music and people – ones that are less immediately visible and audible in the capital cities where more specifically pro-Yugoslav projects such as Lepa Brena's have taken place. The reconstitution of Yugoslav-era popular tambura performance and listening practices to address new political realities is similar to the use of activist choir traditions to stimulate new political potentials and recreate the meanings of the Yugoslav past (Hofman 2021); yet rather than the specifically antifascist politics of new pan-leftist collectives in major urban centres, many of those who love, listen to and labour to play Bogdan's and Balašević's tambura ballads across the Pannonian plains, and particularly in Croatia, do so in ways that embrace certain aspects of capitalism and ethnic/national identity, while also pushing beyond them.

Restorative nostalgia for the time when an album or song responded effectively to the artist's circumstances may inform current performances and reception. Yet for Balašević and Bogdan, as with U2 and other artists retouring older work, a motivation was also the fact that political circumstances themselves restored conditions of need and possibility that had, at an earlier time, made their repertoire's political impact timely. Thus Bogdan has not pushed to revive Serbo-Croatian, as the language (or language group) was known in Yugoslavia, but rather recognises and uses the Pannonian region's various dialects, only two of which have been granted status as official national languages (although he does not recognise Romanes or other non-Slavic languages in this way). Both Yugoslavia and the EU border region have proven limiting as zones for Pannonian mobility, not least because increasing flooding along the Danube both suggests Pannonia's hydrological revival and restricts its navigability – complicating the capacity of rising water,

owing to climate change and other factors, to provoke nostalgia or inspire positive associations in the Pannonian Basin. Invoking pre-Yugoslav and prehistoric geographies, however, claims, in an advanced-capitalist 21st century, new possibilities for circulation that might have been possible but were not realised in socialist Yugoslavia.

As this article has shown, working tambura musicians have been central to these processes, not just in accompanying Bogdan's and Balašević's concerts but also in supplying the repertoire demanded by the singers' fans at bars and private parties. While such circumstances largely remained invisible to digital metrics of popularity, they sustained the publics who eventually paid to attend the singers' live performances. For musicians seeking to reconnect with Danubian Serbia/Vojvodina, it is expedient to promote such songs as Pannonian, as in the style of Zvonko Bogdan. In this regard, however, the idea of Pannonia as a cohesive plain and former sea further centres rivers as regional symbols, sites of leisure and means of travel within an even broader, interconnected, trans-Danubian geography. With Bogdan now in his eighties and Balašević having passed away in 2021, it is questionable whether Pannonia will continue to serve the same symbolic role in popular music discourses, and new research might explore whether music revivals will be able to compete with new original projects in shaping publics' relations with land, territory, and water. In the first two decades of the 21st century, however, Balašević's and Bogdan's tours effectively mobilised multiple associations of Pannonia (its lands and its waters) to connect with collaborators and concertgoers and (re)establish practices of musical listening, labour, travel and love towards a post-Yugoslav inter-regionalism.

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