

Manele in Romania: Cultural Expression and Social Meaning in Balkan Popular Music. Eds. Margaret Beissinger, Speranța Rădulescu, and Anca Giurchescu. Vol. 21, Europe: Ethnomusicologies and Modernities, eds. Philip V. Bohlman and Martin Stokes. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. xxiii, 311 pp. Figures. Index. Maps. Musical Transcriptions. Photos. Song Lyrics. References. Website. \$100.00, hardback; \$95.00, eBook.

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Music, mafia, media, masculinity, and postsocialist (im)morality. As the eleven contributions to this edited collection elucidate, the syncretic Romanian popular culture phenomenon *manele* conjoins these five topics in eclectic performances of music and social dance rich with regional, political, economic, ethnic, and social significance. *Manele* (sing. *manea*), usually referred to in the plural, is a contemporary, urban, ethnopop genre blending aspects of Romanian traditional and popular song and dance with stylistic components and influences originating in Western popular culture or the ethnopop trends of other Balkan states. Performed largely by Romani musicians (*lăutari*, *maneliști*), often in live venues at highly amplified volume, the genre first emerged during late communism beyond state-sanctioned channels, gaining widespread popularity under the moniker “*musică orientală*” (oriental music) after the 1989 Romanian Revolution as a symbol of democracy, freedom, changing markets, youth culture, and the escalating social power of the new political and economic elite. These *nouveaux riches* include politicians, businessmen, and mafiosos who became the patrons of *manele* performances and the acclaimed subjects of their song lyrics in the 1990s and early 2000s. Embraced by the working classes, the genre’s association with Romani culture, the criminal underworld, and political corruption, together with the gendered, sexualized quality of its song lyrics (especially during the 1990s) and Middle Eastern-influenced sound and suggestive dance style, caused intellectuals and white collar professionals to vilify it as foreign, tasteless, immoral, and plebian. In short, the authors show how *manele* has engendered for disparate audiences the greatest aspirations and most disturbing excesses of post-1989 Romanian life.

Manele in Romania is the first book-length and English-language compendium to address this complex phenomenon, and it does so from varied disciplinary vantage points in an international framework. The collection's three co-editors hail from different fields: Margaret Beissinger, the only American contributor, specializes in Romanian folklore, while Speranța Rădulescu is a Romanian ethnomusicologist, and the late Anca Giurchescu (1930–2015), to whom the volume is dedicated, an internationally celebrated Romanian ethnochoreologist who worked in Denmark after emigrating there in 1979. Beissinger and Rădulescu dominate the volume, together authoring or co-authoring seven of its chapters. The remaining contributors, all Romanian, include sociologist and cultural anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu, musicologist Costin Moisil, anthropologist and journalist Adrian Schiop, and anthropologist and ethnomusicologist Victor A. Stoichiță, who directs the Center for Ethnomusicology Research at the CNRS, Paris. Every chapter is ethnographically grounded, comprehensively documented, and enhanced by many firsthand anecdotes, illustrations, and observations. Readers will also appreciate the numerous musical transcriptions and excerpted song lyrics, which appear both in their original Romanian and English translation. A companion website, created by sociologist Florian Iordan and Rădulescu, features chapter summaries, color photos, and ca. 100 audio and video illustrations of *maneliști* in action; these are listed by chapter in the volume's front matter and integrated into the authors' discussions.

As explained by Beissinger (p. xxix), the volume is structured in three sections whose contents move generally from descriptive and contextualizing discussions to interpretation and social analysis along a broadly chronological trajectory. The first four chapters introduce *manele* in straightforward musical and choreographic terms. The initial chapter, by Giurchescu and Rădulescu, surveys typical *manele* performance contexts (life-cycle celebrations, restaurants, clubs, concerts, competitions), rhythmic and melodic structures, lyrical content, gender considerations, and choreographic models, drawing useful comparisons between *manele* and other regional and Romanian dance styles. Moisil's contribution (chapter 2) provides a supplementary historical overview of the genre's roots in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, exploring *manele*'s relationships to influential Ottoman Turkish repertoires and music/dance practices conceived locally as "oriental." These include scale types, rhythmic patterns, melodic ornamentation techniques, modal improvisation practices, and choreographic gestures or movements. Chapter 3 (Rădulescu) considers creative process, locating the composition of *manele*

songs in practices of borrowing, troping, variation, quotation, and improvisation. These techniques both speak to the genre as a manifestation of oral culture, and contribute to its Balkan and Romani sensibilities, as *manele* musicians incorporate tunes from neighboring repertoires and accommodate them to the audience at hand. In the subsequent chapter, Beissinger extends this discussion by outlining how *manele* compares with other Balkan ethnopop genres (Yugoslav newly-composed folk music, post-Yugoslav Serbian *turbo-folk*, Bulgarian *chalta* and *popfolk*, among others) in music, lyric topics, performance forces, and associated dance styles.

Building on this initial foundation, the book's second section (chapters 5–8), takes up issues of *manele* performance and reception in an increasingly interpretive manner, while the concluding section (chapter 9 and the epilogue) repositions the genre's significance on the eve of its decline. In "Actors and Performances" (5), for instance, Rădulescu supplies a typology of indigenous occupational and consumer categories associated with *manele* production from the standpoint of an informed insider. But it is the remaining chapters that stand out as the most compelling and sophisticated reads in the book. Stoichiță's "The 'Boyar in the Helicopter'" (6) takes the discussion into fresh analytical territory, insightfully considering *manele*'s potential for irony and parody, how specific performance protocols (tipping practices, improvised praise song lyrics, protection rackets) and sonic properties actively enhance its association with emotional and social power, and tying its carnivalesque and liminal qualities to the revolutionary upheavals that prompted its popularization. The ensuing, groundbreaking exposé by Schiop, "Manele and the Underworld" (7), courageously documents the genre's ties to the hypermasculine realm of Romanian mobsters: gangsters as clients and patrons, how *manele* bands and performances became instruments of mafioso notoriety, how the praise songs mobsters commissioned contributed to their status, and how *maneliști* navigated these aggressive circumstances.

Beissinger's "Village Manele" (8) is likewise an ethnographic *tour de force*; rooted in her deep knowledge of Romani musicianship gleaned over decades of firsthand work, she traces *manele*'s history through the artistry of a single family of rural *lăutari*, revealing how they altered their repertory, performance practice, and instrument technology to accommodate shifting demands in the village wedding market. In the book's concluding essay (9), Mihăilescu shifts the analytical focus from *manele* and *maneliști* to "manelism," a discursive construction and even habitus

situated amidst the interplay of postsocialist desire, power, balkanism (after Maria Todorova), and what the author calls “turbo-authenticity” (a concept that I understand as the grassroots pursuit of who to be and how to belong in a manner true to one’s sense of self, one’s aspirations, and one’s internal moral compass in the post-totalitarian Balkans). Rădulescu’s epilogue reflects on *manele*’s ongoing decline, hypothesizing that, beyond logistical factors such as the current economic crisis or imprisonment of the crime bosses who were its main patrons, the genre is losing popularity because it has essentially accomplished its “mission” (p. 267), both as social commentary on a particular historical moment and as an emblem of global citizenship.

Despite the volume’s many obvious strengths, significant redundancy of information from chapter to chapter exists that, while reinforcing major points, also interrupts the narrative flow. (One example: nearly every chapter attempts to define and regionally or historically emplace *manele*.) However, this same redundancy allows each chapter to stand on its own, thereby facilitating the anthology’s utility in the classroom. Overall *Manele in Romania* provides multiple perspectives on postsocialist Romanian society enriched by an interdisciplinary counterpoint of local scholarly voices. It sheds new light on the social import of Romani musicianship, the inextricable intertwining of music and gender politics, and the implication of music in criminality, shadow economies, and social marginality. English-language studies of Romanian music are scarce indeed, making this collection a particularly welcome and valuable contribution.