

Oliverta Lila – Shqip

Ardian Ahmedaja: The rare recordings that I found at the Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv

A CD featuring rare Albanian recordings has been brought to Tirana. It was produced by the Albanian researcher Ardian Ahmedaja (who works at the Institute of Music in Vienna) using materials sourced from the Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv. The recordings include those made in 1903 in Mirdita and Shkodër by Paul Treger, as well as recordings from 1957 and the 1990s.

Researchers from various countries around the world inaugurated the second international symposium of the Study Group for Multipart Music (known in Albania as polyphony) yesterday in Tirana. Organised by the Ulysses Foundation in collaboration with the Institute for the Study of Folk Music and Ethnomusicology at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna, as well as the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Youth, and Sports of Albania, this symposium aims to promote Albanian culture and establish connections for further collaboration. As part of this initiative, a CD featuring rare Albanian recordings has also been brought to Tirana. It was produced by the Albanian researcher Ardian Ahmedaja (who works at the Institute of Music in Vienna) using materials sourced from the Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv. These recordings include material recorded in 1903 in Mirdita and Shkodër by Paul Treger, as well as recordings from 1957 and the 1990s.

Ahmedaja notes that there is a wealth of additional material that would require entire volumes to publish. According to him, Albanian institutions should pay greater attention to preserving and promoting this musical heritage. In this regard, he also takes a critical position towards the few existing initiatives that aim to promote traditional music, such as festivals, as he believes they are harming the tradition-bearers and the transmission of this music across generations.

The second symposium of the Study Group for Multipart Music is being held in Albania. How might this event impact Albanian musical tradition?

The symposium focuses on three main themes: creativity in multipart music, the connection between local and religious music, and the recognition this music receives in public performances, such as festivals. Throughout the conference, as well as in the book that will be published afterwards, Albania will hold a special place as the host country of this event. More importantly, it will secure its place on the map of this organisation. Ethnomusicological studies in Albania still receive no support from universities, as there is no ethnomusicology curriculum in place. This event could provide fresh impetus, both for policymakers and relevant institutions, to establish an ethnomusicology programme at the University of Arts.

More than 20 researchers from various countries around the world will discuss multipart music, or as we know it, polyphony. How well do they understand the Albanian phenomenon in this field?

Multipart music practices in Albania are known to a relatively small circle of researchers abroad, as they have not had the opportunity to conduct field expeditions and study this music firsthand. There has only been one professional expedition, organised in 1957 by German researchers in collaboration with Albanian specialists. However, after political relations broke down, foreign specialists could only attend the Gjirokastër Festival and were always under surveillance. Those who are familiar with this music hold it in high regard, not only for its musical value but also because it is sung everywhere—on stage, at home, and among friends. The participants are pleased that during the events, they will also have the chance to listen to Albanian singers.

You have also produced a CD featuring early Albanian recordings. From what year do they date, and where were they recorded?

These recordings come from the Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv, which was established in 1900, the second of its kind after the Vienna archive (1899). At the time, recordings were made on wax cylinders, where the vibrations of the voice caused a needle to engrave grooves into the wax. The same needle could then be used to play the recording back as music. The Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv holds an extraordinarily large collection from around the world. During World War II, this collection was taken to Russia, and until 1991, it was considered lost. Fortunately, it was returned intact. A digitisation project was then launched to preserve these recordings. In 2002, I was invited to listen to some of the recordings made in 1903 by Paul Treger and to conduct a study on them, a project that lasted two years. This work continued in 2008 when I applied for a European Union project to produce two CDs featuring recordings from these archives. In addition to the 1903 recordings, the collection includes those from the 1957 expedition and others made by German researchers in the 1990s. As part of this event, and in collaboration with the Ulysses Foundation, we decided to bring this CD to Albania, also marking the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Independence.

Is there a history of these recordings?

Paul Treger served as secretary of the Society for Ancient History and Archaeology in Berlin for 30 years. As the son of a wealthy factory owner, he had the means to travel and was particularly interested in the Balkans. From 1899 to 1903, he visited Albania every year, focusing primarily on archaeology but also studying the physical characteristics of Albanians (such as head size and shape). In 1903, he brought recording equipment and made recordings in Mirdita and Shkodër,

believing that the Catholic communities there had remained untouched by the Ottoman invasion and were therefore "true Albanians"—a theory that does not hold up today. He was assisted in his work by priests, who made an excellent selection of songs. However, I have not yet found any specific information he may have provided regarding this visit to Albania.

You have also found recordings from 1957. Are there other materials in the Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv that remain unstudied?

Beyond the recordings, there are also musical instruments collected both in 1903 and in 1957, purchased during visits to Albania. Paul Treger made detailed sketches of everyday objects, including musical instruments, cradles, tools, and weapons. Additionally, there is a remarkable collection of photographs from the 1957 expedition. If published, these materials could form an entire series of their own. In this archive, there are 28 recordings by Treger and 30 hours of recordings from the German expedition of 1957. However, I am also aware that relevant materials exist in the archives of Hungary, Denmark, Vienna, England, and among the Albanian diaspora in the United States. We often talk about the music, but the people who create it are just as important—and yet, they are not provided with the necessary support.

Do you think this music is at risk of disappearing?

Music will survive because people cannot live without it. But will it be the same in 100 years? That is impossible to say, as many factors influence its evolution. Institutions need to focus on the people who create the music. Festivals are a good initiative, but their structure needs to change. Currently, they still seem restricted in ways reminiscent of the communist era. Take, for example, the Gjirokaštër Folkloric Festival. Many groups prepare up to six hours of programme but are only allowed to perform for half an hour. How can a lute player that sings epic songs just seven minutes of time on stage, while such a song can last up to one hour and a half? It's like comparing it to a cinema movie – the film lasts 90 minutes, but only three minutes of it were shown as a trailer. This is exactly what we do with traditional music: we present only a "trailer" to the audience rather than the full picture. The way these events are organised must change. Some of the singers I have met now ask: "Do you want the short version of the song?" The misguided practice of shortening performances for the stage has influenced even their daily singing habits, which affects the long-term quality and preservation of this music. Our hope is to do everything possible to ensure that singers and instrumentalists do not allow others to dictate their performances by telling them to step on stage but only giving them two minutes.

The symposium

The representative of the *Ulysses* Foundation in Tirana, Emi Aliçka, explains that the idea for this symposium stemmed from the need to enhance the international recognition of Albanian culture. *"ICTM is a highly reputable organisation in research and studies, and this was the perfect opportunity to bring it to Albania and establish a platform for building relationships between institutions. It is also an opportunity for Albanian institutions to participate in these international research groups. We hope that, in this way, scientific research in Albania will be reactivated, ensuring continuity so that we can preserve our culture properly, respect its bearers in the right way, and provide them with the necessary space to develop this cultural heritage,"* says Aliçka.

[legends of the photographs:]

Paul Traeger 1867-1933
(Discovering Albania 2012, 9)

The participants of the expedition in Cakran, Southern Albania
(from left to right: Wilfried Fiedler, Erich Stockmann, Ramadan Sokoli, Albert Paparisto (?).
Discovering Albania 2012, 18)

Translated from Albanian into English by Sokol Çunga