

Navigating the change: a creative work on a novel  
gusle repertoire

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### **Abstract**

Centuries old gusle practice in Serbia preserved valuable sonic and cultural heritage, centred mainly on the performance of the epic poetry, but also including contemporary topics and changes to an extent. Lullabies have not been a part of the common gusle repertoire, but in this artistic research, composed and authored *gusle lullabies* are presented as a contribution to the building of contemporary gusle youth culture, which is in a delicate position in-between the practices of the older generations and the potential involvement of the young people on a wider basis. The idea to include the infants and to bring the soothing effects by the means of the sound of gusle is a novelty which the artistic project aspires to introduce, by re-reading the ideas of the folk heritage and exploring the borders and possibilities of the artistic freedom in that context. The supporting personal stories are given in order to contrast or supplement the usual representation of the practice of gusle playing. The *gusle lullabies* study offers a re-examination of dominant narratives and argues for the new possibilities in creative, educational, and research work related to this practice in Serbia, the Balkans, aspiring also to reach the audiences worldwide.

**Key words:** contemporary gusle music, gusle lullabies, children's culture, female gusle player, tradition and change.

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## Introduction

The *Gusle lullabies* project is motivated by a wish to contribute to contemporary children's culture from a personal side, as well as having in mind the possibilities of transformation of the modern gusle playing practice. Lullabies are not a common part of the traditional gusle repertoire, as their placement in the gusle practice does not yet exist and is not typical in the canonized traditional repertoire centred around the dominant genre of heroic epic poetry. *Gusle lullabies* present a lyrical topic and an artistic approach to a part of folk heritage and contemporary practice of lullabies. Therefore, gusle lullabies are designed in order to invite infants, children, mothers, parents, caregivers, along with others, to explore their relation to the gusle practice and musical culture from a novel angle, yet being familiar enough since the lullabies are a common part of the childhood memories for many. Furthermore, the project has been crafted as a search for new, dynamic ideas within the very cultural practice, and as an initiative for the similar approaches to rise, by mixing the artistic agency and the inherited cultural patterns.

As a Serbian female gusle player, I hold a specific position as the musical culture is still predominantly reserved for men. Nevertheless, with over twenty years' experience in this practice ranging from traditional singing to the accompaniment of the gusle towards a more contemporary approach, I have acquired new artistic skills and the experience in pedagogical and community engagement work in and outside Serbia. Aside of being deeply immersed in the gusle practice since an early age, my BA and MA educational background given by Sibelius Academy – Global Music department in Helsinki, Finland also helped reach new positionalities regarding my own culture and the possible paths of the artistic development. I wanted to include my position of intersectionality in crafting a new direction for gusle music, as well as to claim the agency in that process, by going from and returning to the Serbian music tradition, and voicing my past and present experience in that process.

The structure of this thesis is as follows: a literature review provides an important overview in understanding the history, contemporary setting and the main issues pertaining to the gusle tradition in relation to the research questions. Historical overview is divided into two parts: the left side represents objective critical thinking, stemming from the research, of Serbian, Balkan, European, but also global origin. The right side suggest inclusion of subjective thoughts and reflections to related topics coming from my own experiences, further supported by a personal diary documenting the process of building the project as well as the previous

personal experiences and thoughts, but also specifically focused on the period from April of 2023 to November of 2023, when the thesis was being written. Then, relying on the theoretical insights of Huib Schippers (2006) on music's preservation and sustainability, I share and examine four gusle lullabies, *Visoko li lete labudovi* [*As high swans are in flight*], *Popara* [*Milk toast*], *Milo moje* [*My Dearest*], and *Ratna uspavanka* [*Action lullaby*]. This thesis addresses the issue of using gusle in a way which is not in line with a reproduction of the heroic epic poetry, but in-between the artistic novelty and the keeping the relation with the folk culture, as the lullabies are authored, invented or re-sounded as a part of a heritage, yet not being a standard part of a gusle repertoire, and with a full artistic freedom. It seeks to answer the following questions:

*How can new forms of expression arising from engaging with diverse musical and personal experiences become part of contemporary gusle practice, which is currently primarily oriented towards preservation of the tradition?*

*Can gusle lullabies contribute to a diversification of practical and tacit gusle knowledge and lead towards more inclusiveness and exchange?*

## **Theoretical and methodological framework**

The thesis relies on Huib Schippers' (2006) vision of re-examining the static perspectives of tradition. Schippers (2006) argues that seeing contexts as static can lead to possible misconceptions of music from a wider perspective. Therefore, in understanding contemporary music as well as contemporary contexts, he puts forth a theory for a dynamic approach, whereby it is essential to view tradition as being in constant flux. This thesis makes use of this theory, and is in tune with my experience for over twenty years on how singing to the accompaniment of the gusle has been primarily seen through the perspective of the canonized reproduction of the tradition, both from the carriers of the tradition and official institutional context in Serbia. Therefore, Schippers' arguing for a dynamic approach can offer a vital element in supporting the gusle tradition to reclaim its dynamic inclinations, as it once had, as seen through the literature review, being a mainstream platform for communication by resonating current contexts in response to a range of artistic aspirations and functions. Another theoretical aspect I use is related to approaches to gender in ethnomusicology (Nenić, 2019) and in other field of social sciences (Brković, 2020). Finally,

using cultural folkloristic approach to the lullabies (Young 2008, Sikimić 2013, Pešikan Ljuštanović 2013) gave me framework for balancing between the folkloric elements and new elements of my own composed lullabies.

In this thesis I reflect on my own history using narrative inquiry (Barrett & Stauffer, 2009) as the main research method. I chose this particular method which involves my memories, experiences, feelings, thoughts and relationship with the tradition to get close to the origins of my expression and creative process as well as to better understand the dynamics of the gusle practice I have been influenced by throughout the years. Narrative inquiry has been described as an inquiry *that makes evident to readers the lived experiences of individuals and groups by foregrounding their narratives and their understandings* (Barrett & Stauffer, 2009, p. 20), with the main purpose *to inform and perhaps transform music making and teaching* (ibid). I have also used an extensive literature review, applying the critical re-examining, and the close reading at certain points, and resulting in a synthetic overview of the different topics relevant for the thesis. As a part of autoethnography, I have included a personal diary documenting the process and at some points, re-visiting the personal memories in that context. Work of this artistic research is seen as with no ethical concerns.

## **Cultural, historical and contemporary aspects of the gusle practice**

### **Historical overview of the gusle practice**

Singing to the accompaniment of the gusle is centuries long musical practice rooted in the Balkan region (Golemović, 2008) dominantly carried by Serbs as a part of a long-standing tradition (Laić, 2014), but also including other Balkan people such as Montenegrins, Bosnians, Croatians, and Albanians (UNESCO, 2018). Fundamental expression consists of singing of epic poetry along with the one stringed, bowed, non-tempered instrument – the gusle. This largely aural practice is considered as a poetic and musical improvisation within traditional framework (Laić, 2014) that relies on musical and poetic formulae and codes of creation / crafting the lyrics and tunes, where storytelling is of a greatest importance (Golemović, 2008). The practice of singing to the accompaniment of the gusle had a significant role in everyday life (Šire, 1964), and throughout the yearly and life events and festivities such as births, weddings, religious celebrations, including also all sorts of cultural, and social gatherings. The standard gusle repertoire is based on a decasyllabic epic poetry

that, among other topics, includes themes related to historical and local figures and events, everyday relationships, chivalry, strength, and dignity, as well as stories based or inspired by real or mythical origin. The practice draws from the patriarchal ethos and lifestyle, with gusle players serving the role of intergenerational mediators and keepers of the collective memory (Laić, 2018). Carriers of this musical tradition were predominantly men, and this instrument was played by the members of Serbian dynasties, people from middle class, as well as by those on sociocultural margins such as blind gusle players, although it is today predominantly related to village and city musical scenes and hence tied to different social and economic classes. The gusle practice helped preserve the memory of the Serbian medieval kingdom and its culture, articulate folk wisdom commonly connected to religious motifs, but also to reflected and praised the resistance to the Ottoman rule that lasted almost five hundred years in Serbia, starting from 1459, the year of the fall of the city of Smederevo, to the Serbian uprisings and winning of freedom in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while the process lasted in some other areas of the Balkans until 1912.



Watercolour reproduction by Gabel, surrounding of the city of Jagodina, Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade, as cited in Tomić (2016, p. 78)

In the context of the awakening of national identity and a desire to preserve the language and folklore, the important collections of epic songs were created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, a great reformer of Serbian language and grammar. He had collected epic poetry from the gusle players and other informants across Serbia, Montenegro as well as

Bosnia and Herzegovina (Karadžić, 1985), writing down also other folk forms and genres. Due to the published collections of folk songs, the 19<sup>th</sup> century also saw the change of epic poetry transmission mode, from aurality towards learning through books, that as a consequence made gusle players less of creators of their own poetry, but interpreters of already existing songs (Laić, 2018). Today, Karadžić's collection of epic songs is one of the most representative repertoires of the gusle players (Laić, 2014), and the epic poetry is part of the study of literature program in primary and high schools in Serbia. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after the liberation from the Ottoman empire, a rebirth of national identity was in a process, followed by the formation of a new country, The Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Yugoslav King Aleksandar I Karađorđević was himself a president of the gusle jury in the fourth gusle competition in 1931. year, held in the capital city, Belgrade, which showed the importance of the evolving gusle practice in a new political and ideological context. The beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century was also marked by the arrival of a new recording technology and ways of transferring the practice through the first gramophone records by notable gusle players such as Vladimir Zimonjić, Petar Perunović Perun, Jevrem Ušćumlić, and Ilija Vuković (Laić & Đorđević, 2016, p.206). Media had brought tradition on the place of being *exemplified* and *reshaped* as influencing changes such as the length of the poetry, exclusion of nonverbal communication, placement of this practice in urban areas and professionalization of the practice (Laić & Đorđević, 2016, p.222).

## **Beyond the Balkans**

Although the gusle is considered the national instrument of Serbia and the region, its influence can also be seen worldwide beyond geopolitical boundaries. Notable thinkers and researchers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century devoted much attention to the legacy of Serbian gusle poets and poetry. Jakob Grim who describes Serbian poetry as *surpassing everything known to its kind in its scope and moderation* (Čurović 2014, p.114) or Goethe who had learned Serbian in order to feel the poetry in a more profound and natural way, are among these. Additionally, scholars such as Milman Parry from Harvard and his colleague Albert Lord who travelled to the Balkans in order to research aural tradition of singing with gusle in order to comparatively use the insights for the understanding of the Homeric epics, also left valuable data on the gusle culture. Many epic songs sung with the gusle have a universal character and topics that transcend the local cultural milieu, although the local values and memories are deeply engraved in them. Such is the song *Jetrvica Adamsko koleno* [*Sister-in-law, Adam's*



*bloodline*] where a woman named Koviljka embraces and adopts a child of her relative Vinka upon Vinka's death, and even treats her child more carefully than her own. Following *singing to the accompaniment of the gusle* enrolment to UNESCO's intangible heritage list of the world in 2018, Laić (2018) has also pointed out to contemporary potentials of gusle culture transcending national and regional boundaries: *The archetypal humanistic values that gusle refer to are the basis for cultural diplomacy; the comparably large number of examples of the epic heritage of mankind presented in UNESCO's ICH list indicates the potential for comparatively established representations of this kind of heritage at international concerts and festivals.* (Laić, 2018 p. 97). Collaboration between a well-known and respected gusle player Boško Vujačić and notable operatic singer Jadranka Jovanović in the aria *Andjelija* from the opera *Knez od Zete [Prince of Zeta]* by Petar Konjović (Belgrade, Sava Centre Hall, 2006) can suggest one of the first intercultural placements related to the gusle. Works introducing gusle to cultural settings outside the Balkans, thus outside the more common cultural frames can be observed in the works of two Serbian composers living in The States. First work is *Morgan's song* by Milica Paranosić, composed as a part of the musical *Goddess Chronicles* in 2011, while the other composition including gusle is titled *...hold me, neighbour, in this storm* by Aleksandra Vrebalov, written in 2008 for the Kronos quartet (Nenić, 2011). Additionally, there are works for the gusle and orchestra, *Symphony 1804* by Ivan Jevtić (Serbia 2005), and *Sacrificum* (Germany, 2023) by Hristina Šušak. One can find a similar tendency in the work of actress and director Ivana Žigon, who conducted a theatrical production *Njegoš Nebom osijan [Njegoš shine upon the sky]* in 2013, and *Stojte galije carske [Hold your ground imperial galleys]* in 2015, combining gusle with ballet, hip hop, other genres of music and artistic expressions. Žigon's events proved to be of a high interest for the large numbers of contemporary audiences and were perceived as a positive re-evaluation of the practice (Peković, 2020).

To conclude from a more global and comparative point of view, in relation to the gusle not only being significant to Serbia and the Balkans, the gusle is part of one string family instruments, as narration of stories with instrumental accompaniment of the one string exists in other cultures and parts of the world. One of the most similar instruments can be Ethiopian masenqo or Arabic rababa, both supporting archaic music expressions and having similar ergonomical features to gusle – e.g., the very body is made of wood, skin and horsehair, with predominantly one playing position. Furthermore, both traditions are commonly seen as male-oriented and solo-dominated musical cultures where ways of performing suggest codes

of interaction between audiences and the players structurally similar to the gusle. Although differences can be seen, such as more rhythmical melodies or repertoire, musicians who play masengo or rababa are part of contemporary global music scene, in which gusle also started to take part in.

## **Gusle repertoire**

Nowadays, gusle repertoire is still tied to decasyllabic epic poetry, in its earliest outreach depicting the so called *non-historic epic poetry cycle*. A special group of songs consists of medieval heroic songs, and songs depicting Serbian nobility such as the songs about Saint Sava, known also as Enlightener, a member of the Serbian Nemanjić ruling dynasty born in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Serbian prince, and later an Archbishop, Saint Sava is considered the patron of Serbian people and education, as he was the founder of the Serbian Orthodox church, as well as the founder of Serbian medieval literature. In addition to this, the largest part of the gusle repertoire is related to cycles of songs depicting events before, during and after the battle of Kosovo. Kosovo and Metohija is the place where the historic Kosovo battle occurred in 1389. year, which is the core event in this cycle, as the battle marks the beginning of Ottoman invasion and, later, conquering of Serbian medieval kingdom and lands, with a great impact on its culture, sacred places, and governance. In addition to *Kosovo cycle*, *cycle of liberation of Serbia and Montenegro* from the Ottoman empire after five hundred years, is also quite extensive. On the other hand, equally significant can be *Marko Kraljević cycle*. Marko Kraljević is remembered and depicted as the Serbian prince who mocked and fought the Ottoman Turks, although historically he was both a Serbian lord and a Turkish vassal. He is an exemplary historical figure who was through the centuries turned into a strong mythical and heroic character who in the songs often saved the common people and the people in need, fought and brawled, and in general portrayed faith towards goodness and greatness. To illustrate this, the cycle about Marko Kraljević includes songs where he fights against any form of injustice in favour of those oppressed, poor or in danger. Moreover, Marko Kraljević is depicted as a courageous, agile, strong, fearless, and intelligent, as in the epic poetry song *Uroš and Mrnjavčevići* and the line, *as Marko is not afraid of anyone except the one true God*. Some other gusle songs are about everyday life, faith, local and historical figures, national heroes during the first and the second Serbian uprising, World Wars, Yugoslav nation, and recent wars that marked the fall of socialist Yugoslavia.

All the segments of repertoire mentioned in the previous paragraph reflect on the most dominant representation of the practice still evident today. However, other forms such as lyrical and personal songs are also present along with those of the comic content. Additionally, there is reciting of epic poetry without the gusle or the songs that are played collectively, in which one gusle player leads with the gusle and the voice while other gusle players sing repeated lines, but the latter is a more recent phenomenon. Moreover, there are songs connected to other ethnicities and their poetic characters and inspirations. In terms of the structure of the verse, the songs might also be of eight but twelve, fifteen or mixed syllables, nevertheless, in a rhymed style, which is again found to a smaller extent in the contemporary practice. Aside of epic poetry from the past, today a common approach is also that the individuals order a song from contemporary epic poetry writers, later asking known gusle players to sing along with the gusle. Example of one such song, with a great number of copies sold is *Smrt Branke Đukić* [*The death of Branka Đukić*], in this case both written and sung by Božidar Đuranović. To summarize, the songs are receiving their meaning in relation to an actual historic context and ongoing social processes, and are fundamental to the communicational function of the practice, which according to Laić (2014) is its most dominant aspect.

### **Musical characteristics**

Simplicity as a part of the aesthetics greatly shapes musical elements of the gusle genre. According to Becking and Wunsch, most common range of songs is the interval of a diminished fourth such as c1+, d1, es1-, e-, f1 (Becking and Wunsch as cited in Laić, p. 266) predominantly performed in unison with the voice (Golemović, 2008). Aside of one playing position, common practice has been also singing the whole step below the open string, which makes the overall ambitus of a fifth. There is no use of scores or notes to this practice aside of ethnomusicological transcription done for the research purposes. According to Laić (2014), the traditional epic poetry structure consists of an instrumental portion being played before the singing enters, vocal-instrumental part in which small instrumental transitions take place in-between each verse of the song, and instrumental short ending. Musical dynamics is usually executed in a small range, the rhythm and tempo are not steady, while the ornaments are rich and determined by the individual technique (Laić, 2014).

## **Gusle Union and gusle schools**

Nowadays, gusle players are mostly self-organized in small non-profit gusle associations mostly based on ethnicity (Laić, 2018). Gusle Union for Serbs gather over seventy gusle associations in Serbia, Montenegro and Republic of Srpska, all having the same statute and propositions. Gusle events and competitions are the most significant events in the Gusle Union calendar. Seminars, informal meetings, and other activities related to the gusle, such as publishing of *The gusle magazine* are also frequent. Yet, informal gusle schools, that many gusle associations have, are valuable for the keeping of tradition to another generation, as in all three mentioned countries there are just two public music institutions where gusle can be learned formally: one in the Serbian capital city of Belgrade, and the other in Kraljevo, a city in south central Serbia. The method of transmission in both, according to Laić (2012) is similar with the folk pedagogy where gusle players learn one from another through observing, listening, imitating, and playing on a daily basis (Laić, 2012). Both programs belonging to *Stevan Mokranjac* music school being introduced in the former case in mid 90s of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and in the latter in 2004. year. The program lasts four years either on the primary or the high school level, and it is highly dependent on the individual knowledge and skills of the teacher, as curriculum is still under development. Facing formal, pedagogical, and educational obstacles such as absence of educational gusle books, audio or video tutorials, official web channels or even YouTube or other platforms related on how to learn this musical practice and discern its history, is a relevant topic for the further change and improvement of it (Peković, 2021). Additionally, in terms of music theory, students attending only Western music theory and ear training, which to a great degree differs from non-Western local musical language in which gusle is rooted (Laić, 2012). Institutional support and cultural planning of preserving and promoting the culture calls for more actions (Laić 2014. p. 109). Pointed to the challenges of being *a female, a child gusle player*, and the one who *pushes tradition's boundaries*, in my bachelor thesis (Peković, 2021) I argued for bringing a dynamic approach back, and stressed the urgency of re-examining and developing new artistic and pedagogical approaches to the gusle practice to create a platform for a greater creativity and inclusiveness (Peković, 2021).

## **Female gusle players**

*Today's image of the epic culture along with the gusle, is still very much focused towards a male dominance. As a consequence, appearance of young women, especially the ones who do*

*not fit the image due to their age and their gender, hails as something interesting but also somewhat threatening. To that note, the mechanisms of non-inclusiveness, traditional selectiveness, and setting someone in position of uniqueness and representing an ideal type are still very much at play* (Nenić, Radio Televizija Srbije, 2017, 17:45).

Dominant male perspective on musical practices in Serbia is not only related to the gusle but is part of the representational discourses related to a larger, patriarchal model of many instrumental traditions in Serbia such as aerophone frula (Nenić, 2019). In the first extensive research on the topic of female gusle players, approached from the ethnomusicological and feminist perspective, Iva Nenić (2019) further explains how the female gusle history has been left in shadows and put on a borderline of the official historical narratives through various forms of implicit 'rules'. Entering the culture of public gusle playing was easier if hiding femininity (or claiming a *non-typical* femininity), as it was the case of blind women, the women with more *masculine* traits as well as those who played the gusle bypassing the midlife. Yet, blind female gusle players being present in continuation at least over 300 years (Nenić, 2019, p. 64) were a part of the public sphere, and after the 19<sup>th</sup> century, forgotten as their image didn't fit newly forged narratives of nation building (Nenić, 2019, p.70). Additionally, negative undertone to femininity of the blind women gusle players came with the Western European culture arrival in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where the higher classes wanted to distance themselves from what was perceived as the low-class remnant from the past, and instead forge a modern Serbian identity, closer to the bourgeois culture of Europe (Nenić, 2019, p.71). Acknowledgement and acceptance by the dominant culture is mostly seen if through the perspective of a woman becoming the symbol of the national identity (Nenić, 2019, p.193), demonstrating strong identification with the epic cycle, and the homeland, further connected with ethnoreligious apparatuses (Nenić, 2019, p.200). In addition to Nenić's research, biographies and information on 71 female gusle players throughout the history, mentioned in the book by music pedagogue and publicist Dejan Tomić *Apotheosis to Serbian gusle* (2021) show that female gusle players participated in great number of local, regional, national occasions, many forms of gatherings, and that their presence was followed by remarkable impressions such as was the case with Olga Kovačević at her performance in Novi Sad (Serbia) in 1886.

*...And then she quickly bowed and went aside but others went with: Again, Again!... The excitement was so strong that it was impossible to move on. The old people were whispering, and the young ones were squeezing their right hands, all were breathing simultaneously in*

*coexistence of impressions. Democracy of Serbian gusle shine upon us, glory to her!* (Kosovac as cited in Tomić, 2021, p.265).

According to the literature, a common thread for all female gusle players is for each to be perceived as *the first* and *the only one* (Nenić, 2019, p.203), as i.e., in the case of young Olga Kovačević from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Dragica Radović as the first woman guslar with a cassette recorded for Croatian Yugoton in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and myself in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Being cherished as a first and only one is a discursive gesture that divides and isolates a female player from embodying female lineage of the practice and holding her agency (Nenić, 2019, p.80). The 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century have been marked by media curiosity, as well as the novel folk and world music approaches to the practice, offering more freedom for the personal, and artistic expression of women instrumentalists, and to gusle female players as well.

Jela Kosorić (Јела Косорић), Stanija Bazovina (Станија Базовина), Marica Milić Četković (Марица Милић Четковић), Mara Čeklić (Мара Чеклић), Sofija Janković (Софија Јанковић), Ljubica Ardalić (Љубица Ардалић), Cvijeta Šuta-Bojović (Цвијета Шута-Бојовић), Krstinja Vujadina Četković (Крстиња Вујадина Четковић), Stoja Puletić (Стоја Пулетић), Milosava Popović (Милосава Поповић), Jela Bukvić (Јела Буквић), Kate Murat Paulinko (Кејт Мурат-Паулинко), Đula Đurković (Ђула Ђурковић), Milosava Popadić Pavićević (Милосава Попадић Павићевић), Stoja Džaković (Стоја Џаковић), Gospava (Морачка) Tomović (Госпава (Морачка) Томовић), Jagoda Lačković (Јагода Лачковић), Ikonija Četković (Иконија Четковић), Miluša Kosovac (Милуша Косовац), Ilinka Rakočević (Илинка Ракочевић), Ljubica Čakarević (Љубица Чакаревић), Milosava Dragojević (Милосава Драгојевић), Milosava Arsenijević (Милосава Арсенијевић), Ruža Kostić (Ружа Костић), Milosava Perunović (Милосава Перуновић), Stoja Marković (Стоја Марковић), Miluša Mileva Lorušina (Милуша Милева Лопушина), Živana Bučalina (Живана Бучалина), Anda Vožović (Анђа Божовић), Velika Čuković (Велика Чуковић), Gvozdenija Dukljanin (Гвозденија Дукљанин), Anda Danilović (Анђа Даниловић), Ruža Gardašević (Ружа Гардашевић), Jovanka S. Šiljak (Јованка С. Шилјак), Vukosava Čubrović (Вукосава Чубровић), Hristina-Kića Knežević (Христина-Кића Кнежевић), Branka Mijušković (Бранка Мијушковић), Natalija-Maja Jovanović (Наталија-Маја Јовановић), Dobrinka Ristić (Добринка Ристић), Jovanka Đorđević (Јованка Ђорђевић), Marija Čulibrk (Марија Чулибрк), Gorda Jovanović (Горда Јовановић), Dragica Drašković (Драгица Драшковић), Kata Odkolić (Ката Одколић), Miluša Jovanović (Милуша Јовановић), Novka Milana Đukić (Новка Милана Ђукић), Darinka Radunović (Даринка Радуновић), Kata Milivojević Ajdučica (Ката Миливојевић Ајдучица), Darinka Dobrosavljević (Даринка Добросављевић), Atia Musakadić (Атија Мусакадић), Velika Rizinović (Велика Ризиновић), Leposava Zarić (Лепосава Зарић), Milena Lena Živadinović (Милена Лена Живадиновић), Stevanija Dragaš (Стеванија Драгаш), Marjana Maslovarić (Марјана Масловарић), Olga Kovačević (Олга Ковачевић), Jelisaveta Marković - slepa Iesa (Јелисавета Марковић - слепа Јеца), Slepa Živana (Слепа Живана), Slepa Stjepanija (Слепа Степанија), Slepa iz Grgurevca (Слепа из Гргуревца), Matija Slipica (Матија Слипица), Stanislavka Cvetković (Станиславка Цветковић), Seva Tošić (Сева Тошић), Jorda Petković (Јорда Петковић), Tala Milka Stefanović (Тала Милка Стефановић), Rada žena Mikailova (Рада жена Микаилова), Đeva Jovanović (Ђева Јовановић), Jaglika Muškobađa (Јаглика Мушкобађа), Rajka Josipović (Рајка Јосиповић), Tijana Škrnić (Тијана Шкрнић), Vidosava Vasić (Видосава Васић), , baba Juca (баба Јуца), Rajna Zareva (Рајна Зарева), slepica Ružica (слепица Ружица), slepica iz Jarca (слепица из Јарка), slepa Pava (слепа Пава), slepa Jela iz Vrdnika (слепа Јела из Врдника), Ruža Jolić (Ружа Јолић), Ruža Bačak (Ружа Баћак), Vojana Skočajić (Војана Скочајић), Gvozdenija Dubljanin (Гвозденија Дубљанин), Milenija Dužanić (Миленија Дужанић), Milica Bubnjević (Милица Бубњевић), baba Sovija (баба Совија), Dara Marinković (Дара Маринковић), Dragica Radović (Драгица Радовић), М.К. (М.К.) Jelena Joković (Јелена Јоковић), S.Ž (С.Ж), Milla Mijailović (Мила Мијаиловић), Kosana Marić (Косана Марић), Višnja Stašević (Вишња Сташевић), Jelena Živković (Јелена Живковић), Ljubica Cvjetković (Љубица Цвјетковић), Ivana Đorđević (Ивана Ђорђевић), Vojana Peković (Војана Пековић), Jelena Miljanić (Јелена Миљанић), Violeta Krajišnik (Виолета Крајишник), Marija Petrićević (Марија Петрићевић)...

## Voicing personal experience

This subjective part of the thesis shows my own thinking on the topics connected to the gusle practice or on my own expression. With the voices of the gusle players themselves being often silent throughout history, and having in mind my personal journey and position in the

practice for more than twenty years, my mentor Iva Nenić suggested to have a diary as part of supporting the work on the thesis. The diary was written from April until November 2023. I chose to portray some of my thoughts combined and blended in the chapters below with the hope that those insights can offer another layer of information to those interested on *how does the gusle practice look like in Serbia today, what is the desirable representation on femininity in the gusle practice today, and what defines my artistry and role in that context.*

### **How does gusle practice look like in Serbia today?**

Unlike some other music traditions of the world that have raised the popularity of traditional expression and sometime promoted it to the field of the mainstream culture, such as griots and djembe players in West Africa, the contemporary gusle playing does not belong to the mainstream culture in Serbia. The practice is not particularly tied to modern multimedia, nor does it take part in multicultural collaborations often, although some changes in these directions can be observed in the last 15 years. People see the gusle practice as an important aspect of Serbian cultural heritage, and one of the fundamental “sonic cards” of their ancestral identity. On the other hand, there is still a large audience attracted to this music in Serbia today. The audience occupies the social spaces ranging from local scenes to the most prestigious cultural hall in the capital city of Belgrade, Kolarac, where the gusle events are visited in great numbers. There can also be observed an interest in portraying the gusle through the dynamic approach or outside the conventional framework. An example of such an approach happened in 2012, when a competition *I have got talent*, a nationally streamed show in Serbia, included my brother Nikola and myself winning the competition. Our participation and winning the show was followed by public re-examining of the perception of the gusle, including its expressional range, gender dynamics and audience outreach.

Carriers of the gusle practice, the gusle players, are the most important actors in passing this form of expression, covering music, language, poetry, as well as drama, theatre, and journalism. As gusle players in Serbia can take part in thirty-six non-profit organizations, their work is seen through various forms of officially organized community events across the country. Most of the contemporary gusle players admire epic poetry, the canonical form of singing along with the gusle. However, there are some aspects which require strategic thinking and further changes such as the establishment of official joint spaces or representative buildings, the issues of youth and female inclusivity, budget management,

connecting to various ethnic gusle associations in the Balkans, and a better collaboration with other institutions and media.

Given my twenty-one years of experience, it seems that the friction between the rapid and constant changes connected to values, ideologies, technology, and geopolitical positioning, in comparison to centuries' old storytelling culture, makes both the carriers of the tradition, and a new audience hesitant or confused. Regarding the latter, I see young people as a key factor in portraying their views and serving a role as cultural and intergenerational mediators. In Serbia, currently, there is a need to highlight and support the informal gusle teachings by the non-profit gusle associations, and to put forth more effort in the urgent support in establishing methodology of existing public gusle programs. As far as the latter, a further question can be, *why do children in Serbia have the right to find piano and saxophone, Mozart and Bartók, in all music schools, but not the gusle? And where would they find the gusle if not in Serbia to begin with?* There are countries offering excellent examples of preservation, promotional and educational actions in regard to traditional music. In Finland, much work has been done with jouhikko and kantale, as those instruments have been introduced in a range of educational programs, from public preschools up until the doctorate level. Youth culture connected to the gusle needs more opportunities and directions for self-actualization through the prism of professional and academic expertise and work in relation to the gusle. I suggest that offering young people to meet and create their future can be a surprising asset to the cultural development both in Serbia and abroad. Additionally, the bridge between the scholarship and practice often lacks a stronger bond. Furthermore, the lack of gusle players' perspective in the academic world brings up the next question of *what if critical thinking and contribution should come from the first-hand carriers of the practice in the first place, and what can we do to make that happen?*

### **Desirable representation on femininity in the gusle practice today**

*Oh, poor him, perhaps he does not have a son, so his daughter has to sing,* concluded a woman while watching me perform with my father, from the audience not knowing that my mother was sitting right next to her (The gusle evening event, Kraljevo, Serbia, December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2007).

According to my experiences, the expectation from gusle players on the engagement of female guslars is still observed through the patriarchal worldview. According to this,



femininity should be harmless, sweet, joyful, fragile, strong, pure but wise, modest but unwavering in preserving the self through the identity of the collective in a deep historical-national context. Furthermore, femininity should be associated with protecting and nurturing traits but also women should be knowledgeable, patient, sonically and verbally skilful, yet not playful to the great extent, and orientated towards history and lore perceived as belonging to the male domain. The representation of femininity in the public sphere of performance of traditional music must be very content, almost perfect in order to be acknowledged, and positioned with respect in the practice, which is not always the necessity for male gusle players. The depiction of female characters in the Serbian epic poetry, on the other hand, puts them in the role of wise mothers, loyal sisters and beautiful young wives and lovers, but there are also women who challenge that narrative. Contemporary media shows great curiosity in representing female gusle players, especially differing to the conventional expectations. A growing part of the audience is showing a support for the woman establishing her interpretation and performance on gusle. Unlike at home, where her presence might be looked at from the expectations of being loyal to the codes of traditional femininity and not necessarily reflecting the complex nature of her individual identity, situating the performance abroad offers a different perspective. Yet, the codes of transmitting the message especially tied with lyrics, might be totally different in the settings outside Serbia. Lastly, in navigating what is meant to be a desirable representation, the greatest support is coming mostly from a place of female artist's own vision, care, and artistic choices.

### **Self-reflection**

Gusle opened an unbelievable world from my early age, and exploring its depth and scope has been a process through which I continue to grow. By being a female gusle player, I interact with many different communities and people, and the very connection and exchange with them give rise to memories which I find inspiring and moving. Serbian national culture gave me the strength, guidance, and a sense of belonging which is also important for obtaining autonomy and individual expression. Yet, I was not aware of the history of women's involvement with gusle, as such was not available in gusle circles and in the official discourses, until recently. Initially, as my musicianship has always been plentiful, I did not feel alone, as I was guided and protected by my father Radovan, a gusle player, involved in the Serbian Gusle Union for many decades, as well as my brother, and later on many collaborators. However, I was missing something along the way, needing to see similar

women for the past or the contemporary role models. Seeing my culture, country, art, and artistic position from another angle upon my arrival to Helsinki in 2018, and observing female position in the gusle culture from a distance for the first time, I became able to ask myself questions. The answers on the position of women as gusle players in historical and contemporary contexts I found in works about female gusle players by Nenić (2019), and Tomić (2021), and to an extent, also Laić (2014). The scholarly perspective offering knowledge about traditional styles and women's role in traditional Serbian culture helped me find a spot to improve, situate myself or perhaps depart from.

*I'm so surprised the female gusle player exists! My family told me my hair will fall off if I touch the gusle*, said one middle aged woman to me on my visit to Niagara, Canada, after the gusle workshop as a part of my master studies' fieldtrip (June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023.)

I undoubtedly had moments of experiencing gender bias and gender-based stereotyping. A flashback of my own experience occurred on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023, where a young female gusle player J.M who was supposed to take part in the youth gusle competition in Montenegro was supposed to be banned on the base of her "wrong" gender by an official of the competition. I experienced the same repeatedly through many years being a child, but witnessing it from the side this time, it hurt even more.

In those moments when the institutional or social structures *above* you are larger than the given position you have, I always have in mind the words of my father *in the context and environment you are at, you can only succeed if you talk through your actions, and works*. However, from the perspective of a female artist and a promoter of positive change, the answer should also be to change those very structures that still reproduce outdated gender constraints and prevent women from taking part in this cultural and artistic practice on a larger scale.

### **What defines my artistry?**

To me, an artist is: *transmitter of being human, seeker of identity, sharpener of inner and outer worlds, a shelter for the truth, a texture of frequencies, the reflection of a captured present, future* (Peković, diary, 4.10.2020, 2.4.2023, and 19.8.2023).

Diary, 13.4.2023.

What do I strive for, what do I love:

- Simplicity but also the integrity of nature
- Security, inner peace, beauty of expression
- Love and connection

What components I see as important for my artistry:

- Approach (to the practice, myself, people)
- Intuition, inspiration
- Knowledge
- Style
- Action
- Communication



*The raw impulse* master concert, Helsinki Music House, 9.10.2023.

Picture by Mehrnoosh Zolfaghari.

My expression often goes further from a present gusle cultural and performative framework, ranging from my sound being based within the tradition, inspired from it, or perhaps, not

much connected to the dominant gusle practice but rather a third liminal space *arising from transcultural dialogues* (Thomson, 2021, p.33). I find the tensions between archaic and contemporary aspect of music making as a source of inspiration. One such example is my master concert *The raw impulse* (9.10.2023) during which I combined the gusle with the electronics made by Timo Kaukolampi, a Helsinki-based experimental music artist and self-taught composer, producer, and meta-band leader. I see a dynamic approach to the gusle practice as fundamental to continuation, keeping the beat with who I am, and with the time I live in. I admire the stage, costume, the very process of creating a performative moment in which I express my own language both solo, with my group *Art Family*, other artists, or different projects such as theatres, orchestras, music festivals. I look upon people being in similar yet different musical backgrounds worldwide. One notable collaboration was with João Luís, a percussionist from Portugal, with whom I made a duo dedicated to exploring the dialogues between the gusle and percussions. I also collaborated with Adriano Adewale, a Brazilian percussionist with whom I explored the synergy of one-string Afro-Brazilian instrument berimbau with the one string gusle at his doctoral concert *Hidden sounds* (Helsinki, Music House in Helsinki, 6.6.2022). Yet, I often revisit the world of the epic poetry, as being the base of my extended paths, where I like to present something familiar in a new way, being close to the concept of defamiliarization known in theory of literature, as an important artistic device. One such project was *Ep o Kosovu [Epic about Kosovo]*, my solo gusle CD published in 2022. by the Serbian national record publishing house and label PGP-RTS. In the epic song *Smrt majke Jugovića [The death of Jugović's mother]* with my playing at 6:05-6:22min (Spotify) I anticipate an upcoming whine of a horse, representing sorrow of the horse returning home without his owner, a Serbian knight whose mother is waiting for his return from the battlefield in vain. This sound is not particular for the traditional expression, yet it seems close and relatable. Additionally, I found it interesting working on [new] models and pedagogy of transferring the gusle practice to children, youth, and senior citizens, of Serbian, but also international background. My pedagogy endeavours were applied in twenty-seven gusle workshops held in Germany, Finland, United States and Canada from September 2022 to November 2023, under the mentorship of a Finnish composer and music educator Soili Perkiö.

What is the context of Global Music department at Sibelius Academy (Helsinki, Finland)?

As there is no higher education for the gusle instrument in Serbia, and my attempt to study at the ethnomusicological department of the faculty of music in Belgrade resulted in a

challenging time for navigating my artistry, I found the Global Music department at Sibelius Academy as a strong educational framework for my artistic needs and aspirations. Through experiencing, for the first time, usage of my instrument in music institution courses, such as classes of global orchestra, transcultural ensembles, music pedagogy, rhythms of the world, Arabic ensemble, instrument building, film composition, electroacoustics, management courses, and others, I was able to tap into progressive understanding of capabilities of my instrument, and ways I can maximize the expressiveness and the social relevance of my music. Being surrounded by a wide range of artists instilled in me a better understanding of the complexity of world cultures and artistic communities. Furthermore, finding myself in a different social, cultural, and political context from home has given me a valuable period of exploring new dimensions of my identity and artistic and personal agency. Having that setting, I was able to detect my own processes of conscious decision-making much faster and understand certain dynamics more clearly. Moreover, being a woman with an “ethnic instrument” in that environment is seen as not uncommon or necessarily tied with the expectation of traditional aesthetics of playing that I often face at home. More informal and balanced student-professor level provided a relatable environment for artistic exploration and growth. Global Music department and life in Finland led me to fundamental in-depth work on myself and endowed me with the strength for reaching out to an international context along with preserving my gusle audience, collaborations and acknowledgement of the gusle players.

What I bring with me prior to entering the Sibelius Academy in 2018:

- A spark, curiosity and hope to continue my music path,
- My strong sides, creativity, experience on and off the stage within the gusle practice,
- Great people’s network,
- Basic English skills,
- Bojana who is also vulnerable.

After graduating at Sibelius Academy in 2023 I have:

- Better artistic, pedagogical, social, and performative experiences,
- Greater knowledge on the gusle history, female gusle history, the gusle in contemporary terms, other cultures,
- Desire for constant learning and improvement,

- Ease in seeing my visions and listening to the world,
- A larger network of people, and experience of living abroad,
- Desire to influence gusle carriers, the way I wished I was,
- Enjoying both local and the global,
- More stable well-being,
- Embracing my vulnerable sides,
- Bojana who loves cultures and loves what she did not previously consider.

## Historical and cross-cultural overview of lullabies

Lullabies are an ancient aural form that appears cross-culturally, forming a rich and an intangible heritage of world cultures. Their social function is to put children to sleep, more specifically related to the notion of falling asleep. As a part of folk culture in Serbia, lullabies have a repetitive form, narrow tonal ranges, and belong to a special genre of lyric songs passed usually from mother to daughter. Their form is in-between speech, rhythmic speech, and singing. Popović (2020) notes similarities between learning of mother tongue and listening to the first melodies as a form of language that stays in a long-term memory permanently. According to this author, putting the baby to sleep is *the closest contact between mother and child, the most intimate moment in which she, humming with emphasized emotions, can express her tenderness and warmth, her care and protective relationship* (Popović, 2020, p. 124). Aside from the soothing effect, and lulling a child to sleep, all tender processes of an infant's adaptation and change can be observed from a point of a constant initiation, or transitioning (Pešikan Lj, 2013). Historically, one of the oldest functions of lullabies was apotropaic – singing served to protect the infants from evil spirits through the use of words related to blessings and magic (Pešikan Lj, 2013), as the very power and fear of dreams and their content goes far back in history, later forming a practice of 'reading a dream' or reinterpretation of it by relying on the knowledge of the elders (Brković, 2020). Along with lullabies stemming from personal memories and experiences, lullabies can also be a part of a wider collective or family-based heritage, with many examples of generations who have sung and listened to them. Pešikan examines a temporal dimension of lullabies, whose lyrics often portray the past and present actions as well as anticipate the future (Pešikan Ljuštanović, 2013). The following Serbian lullaby clearly illustrates that stance: *Duško mi se u gori rodio, u gorici će se legu vuci, Vučica mu i babica bila, B'jela vila*

*ml'jekom zadojila* [*My Duško was born in the mountain, in the mountain where the wolves are bred, the wolf was his midwife, while the white fairy nursed him with milk*] – the past is seen here through building the present moment with the magical helpers (a beast, a fairy). A metaphor of shaping the future can be observed in the example of a blessing that will affect a future marriage: *Da mi dete bude tanko i visoko, da mu dete bude belo i crveno*, [*for my child to be thin and tall, for my child to be fair and rosy*] (Pešikan Ljuštanović, 2013. p.322).<sup>1</sup> Sikimić points out that texts and rhythms of Slavic lullabies can structurally be so versatile that the songs can also be placed in other folk song genres such as love, family, funny, dance and other (Sikimić, 2011). Moreover, according to Pešikan Lj. (2011) the method and the context of interpretation defines such lullabies.

Folk lullabies are an important form of children's folklore and bedtime rituals known before the impact of contemporary sound-recording technology, in which children's prayers were also known to South Slavic people (Sikimić, 2013). In addition to Vuk Stefanović Karadžić's immense work on gathering the epic poetry, as discussed in the chapter on gusle history, he was also the first one who collected lullabies in Serbia. Karadžić published the first twelve lullabies in the book *Serbian folk songs* in 1841 (Vujanović, 2016. p.11). Among many lullabies mentioned, including those in his later publications, there are very interesting lullabies with the epic decasyllabic verse structure portraying moment between mother and son (Vujanović, 2016). The information on whether these lyrics were ever sung with the gusle accompaniment are not sufficient. After Karadžić, numerous folklorists, ethnologists and ethnomusicologists in the Balkans such as Ludvig Kuba, Franjo Kuhač, Miodrag Vasiljević (Popović, 2020), Pavle Rovinski, , Dimitrije Golemović and others have conducted research on folk lullabies.

New, modern lullabies in Serbia started to circulate during the 20<sup>th</sup> century after the world wars. The socialism in former Yugoslavia brought a new wave of children's culture through engaging various writers, composers and directors in order to create content specifically for children. Such work was disseminated through books, TV and radio shows for children such as TV show *Na slovo na slovo* [*Letter by letter*], *Laku noć deco* [*Good night children*], children's choirs such as *Kolibri* and many others. According to the latest research on the topic of children's contemporary culture (2020) in which 302 Serbian preschool teachers participated in relation to the use of lullabies in the curriculum, one of the most known

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<sup>1</sup> The attributes of being tall, white, and rosy are typical descriptions of young women and brides in Serbian folk poetry.

contemporary lullabies are *Jednog zelenog dana* [On one green day], *Majka Jovu u ruži rodila* [Mother gave birth to Jova in the rose], *Laku noć deco* [Good night, children], *Zemlja snova* [A land of dreams], and others (Kostić & Purić, 2020). This research confirms that along with contemporary lullabies used in the educational processes, some folk lullabies have been used too, as well as the songs similar to lullabies, but belonging to other genres of children songs, such as *Leptiriću šareniću* [My colourful butterfly], *Mali konjanik* [Little horseman], *Mali div* [Little Giant], *Nova radost* [New Joy] (Kostić & Purić, 2020). Nevertheless, in the curriculum that they have implemented, educators also used some newly composed songs that they created themselves (Kostić & Purić, 2020). The study on the use of lullabies in preschool education shows that more than 70% of lullabies played to children were those of vocal-instrumental structure, above 25% *a cappella*, and a little above 4% belonging to a pure instrumental performance. Nevertheless, change to contemporary digital medium such as CDs and later, YouTube, is something that profoundly marks the contemporary transmission of lullabies (Kostić and Purić, 2020). A final outcome of the study in Serbia about preschool teachers points out need for future endeavours in strengthening early education practitioners and children, by a better connection between practical and research studies, a need for systematic support by cultural policies and in choosing a curriculum in relation to lullabies implementation (Kostić and Purić, 2020). Lastly, there is a need for a more diverse variety of lullabies in working with preschool children in order to attain a more stimulating environment, as number of well-known lullabies to contemporary scholars is only eleven, of which three were the most used (Kostić and Purić, 2020).

In terms of the global research on this topic, it seems that there is a wide range of interest in lullabies. African *imilolozelo* lullabies, a part of Zulu children's aural tradition, promote a unique method and environment to children's upbringing, as a form of *imfundiso*, which is an informal home-based cultural education. The significance of *imfundiso* is seen to be introduced to children much earlier than *imfundo*, Western-centred knowledge and practice (Danisile, 2013, p.13). In their interpretation, lullabies are a source of direct and indirect communication (p.18), knowledge on socialization, physical development (p.15) but also have a holistic dimension (p.21). Performative aspects of Zulu's *imilolozelo* lullabies gradually transition towards more complex forms of performances following infants' growth, through play songs, that further invite cross-generational participation and offer a continuum through a dynamic approach of the tradition:



*Sometimes, noise-making objects are tied around a child's ankles so that they will make a sound when she/he is walking. The noise that is made by these things makes the child continue walking until at times it will seem as if she/he is attempting a traditional dance on the same spot and eventually, she/he will end up performing a traditional dance (Madzidzela as cited in Danisile, 2013, p.21).*

Aside from children's tendencies to mirror what they see, Danisile wrote on the continuum of the aural transmission of *imilolozelo* from child to child (Fraser in Cynthia, 2013, p.15). On the other side, according to study of Portuguese lullabies that involved eighty-four women and a total of seventy songs (Vicente et al. 2020, p.328), 54,8% of mothers still use lullabies when putting babies to sleep. Among 71.8% of the mothers had someone in their childhood that sung lullabies to them, nevertheless, 87.9% of lullabies transmission is present through maternal lineage (2020, p.338). This study, based on identifying maternal unconscious fantasies in lullabies used in contemporary settings resulted in five common categories. These are *Introduction of the Idealized Good Object* (51.20%), such as appearance of shiny stars in lullabies in diminishing fear of darkness, *Introduction of the Bad Object* (23.20%) such as fearful characters as reference to Bogeyman who eats small children (p. 337), *Holy child* (12.00%) as reference to the *Holy family*, *Emergence of sexuality* (8.00%) with scenes alluding on sexuality, and *Introduction to the Third Party* (5.60%) such as the introduction of mothers work or infants relatives (2020, p. 338). Nevertheless, 82.9% of contemporary Portuguese lullabies examined in that research were profane while 17.1% were religious in nature, which is the main difference in later comparison to traditional Portuguese lullabies in which religious motifs were marked in 55.43% (Vicente et al. 2020) which suggests that significant drop of religious motifs reflects lullaby's adaptation to more flexible views on modern Western family structures (Vicente et al. 2020). Lastly, this research shows interesting observation through acknowledging that longing and melancholic traditional *fado* music did not influence today's lullabies in a scale marked by previous researchers in the past (Vicente et al. 2020). Much research has been done on the effects music therapy has on physical and emotional regulation, among which lullabies were examined. Research published by New York Academy of Science undertaken by NICU (Neonatal intensive care unit) shows that parent selected lullabies, known as songs of kin, function net positively in supporting health treatment, and healing processes of their children. Furthermore, the effect is even greater when lullabies are sung live by their parents. Nevertheless, the very voice, and even repeated lullaby by parents serves as continuation of familiar sonic spectrum deriving

from the infant-womb period that further serves as calming effect (Loewy, 2014). This study shows that the exposure to lullabies increases the percentage of deep sleep, oxygen level and better supports the breathing patterns, increases level of calorie intake, decreases heart rates of the infants, as well as parental stress (Loewy, 2014). Effects of lullabies on the psychological and neurological function can be assessed also throughout pregnancy (Loewy, 2014). Research done in Sweden in 2017 shows that live usage of lullabies drastically reduces infant's procedural pain (Ullsten et al. 2017). Evolving lullaby practice of Australian children was examined through modern day technologies, screen media and audio-visual interpretation, YouTube, mobile apps, television, musical toys, and books that continue to change the way this practice is shaped and transmitted. Although the study shows that parents still sing to their children and that there is an advantage in that, as *the parent reads the infant's signals and adapts the musical performance until it stimulates the desired response* (Brooks, 2016), lullabies through new media are seen as reaching a greater audience and building a larger repertoire. Some of the features of lullabies stemming from new media is the length, in some cases lasting up to several hours (p.87), often departing from traditional lullabies with inclusion of progressive approach in aesthetics, arrangements, instruments used, that can to some degree represent other children music genres. Furthermore, there is an inclusion of different performances such as by male singers and players or others, generic rather than personal lyrics (Brooks, 2016). According to this study conducted in Australia, a significant difference in using these fixed lullabies is a change in their function, where lullabies are used as a routine before bed or sleep, *identified as settling, rather than lulling to sleep* (Brooks, p.94). Nevertheless, according to Brooks (2016), although parents expand their lullaby repertoire through the new media, the role of the digitized content is seen as replacing traditional lullabies in Australian households. Moreover, consumption, marketing and profit side of those media can affect parents being less involved in crucial bonding time prior to sleep (Brooks, 2016). Yet, according to Young (2008), exposure of infants, and today's children to digitalized sounds starts even before the birth, and as such represents an inevitable sonic norm and reality to young generations, that consequently should result in *radically reconfiguring musical childhoods* (Young, 2008, p.34). Furthermore, Young (2008) reflects on Gottlieb's (2004) findings that in recent decades children are encouraged to sleep alone, where new ways of practicing lullabies can support that narrative. Nevertheless, as Young (2008) researched UK infants and toddlers' music, specifically targeting the mothers of diverse backgrounds, the results show that popular media, and toys greatly exclude cultural, and ethnic variety, while centring on the melodies of Euro-American origin or

similarity. On the other hand, through India's perspective, in terms of new media transmission and introduction of contemporary sound cultures, many lullabies are taken from Bollywood movies (Pathak & Mishra, 2017). However, the transmission of lullabies from parents or grandparents to children is not threatened by media consumption as much as by rapid economic challenges that lead to children spending much more time with caregivers (Singh & Hoge as cited in Pathak & Mishra, 2017). And lastly, among other views the global scholarship takes on lullabies, seeing them as a vehicle for community engagement and/or art repertoire is a frequent conclusion in cross-cultural and comparative terms. Jacobi Medical Center (NYC) and Carnegie Hall's Musical Connections team project, resulted in pilot implementation of *innovative model developed to support vulnerable groups through community-based music creation* in United Kingdom in 2017 (Ascenso, 2021, p.1-2). Lullaby music making in collaboration with Royal Philharmonic Orchestra that included refugee mothers and, on the other side, fathers from a central London prison, showed great results in improving the wellbeing of vulnerable groups, such as the increased feelings of autonomy, and personal growth, accomplishment, sense of purpose, direction of life, positive emotions, sense of connectedness, increased empathy (p.7), richer perspective, and positive coping mechanisms (Ascenso, 2021, p.9). *Amazing, it's very touching! When I got back to the cell, I was feeling I have done something right for the right reason... [...] I could just always remember the smile of my little man... Richard.* (Ascenso, 2021, p.5). A space specifically crafted for self-expression of participants followed by mentorship of professionals, fostered dialogue and diversity, social nurturing, and agency, with a final output in a form of a CD *allowing for the experience to outlive the project duration* (Ascenso, 2021, p.11). In addition to that, Scroggins (2021) examines lullabies as art songs in classical performances of piano over centuries that proves their greater expansion and change, which shows a different path of lullabies, not only being connected to motherhood and soothing effects but also amplifying opposite textures (Scroggins, 2021, p.110).

## **Gusle lullabies, an interpretation of an ongoing project**

### **Inspiration for gusle lullabies**

There are three major reasons how and why the gusle lullaby project has started. The essential spark came from my nephew Bogdan, born in September 2021, as my brother

Nikola's and his wife Katarina's first child. As I became an aunt for the first time, it reminded me of my aunt, Tatjana, with whom I grew up and bonded very closely. Additionally, it brought a lot of childhood memories. I was born and raised in the city of Kraljevo, Serbia, in 1997, which is also the year my family took a short breath of fresh air after the last war starting with the fall of Yugoslavia in 1991, the year my brother Nikola was born. Two years after my birth, another war was on the horizon, the bombing of Serbia in 1999 by NATO, this time related to Kosovo and Metohija ethnic conflict. Moments of gathering with the loved ones were the most valuable moments, and the small positive moments were always cherished in my family, where everyone supported each other. My aunt Tatjana had a big role in bringing me up, opening the world of jazz and classical music for me and being my piano teacher. I remember in the time after the recent wars and conflicts in Serbia how she would come from the work with big *Takovo* (Serbian sweets factory) sweets, something hardly affordable at that time, yet seen as the beginning of a better life. Nikola and I used to call her 'our Santa Claus'. During my childhood, every member of my family highly influenced the way I would see the life in the future. With my brother Nikola, it was all about adventures: the neighbourhood car built out of a hand trolley, sledging down the hill with big bags filled with hay in a mid-summer rainy day, and many others. I remember one day while in Montenegro, where we often visited, being half Montenegrin and half Serbian, Nikola guided a group of us children through nature, being the oldest in the group. He took a role of a wise old grandpa with a curved back, while holding a small grey stone in his hand. Mysteriously gathering us around him, he said: *my dear children*, [he made a pause until we nodded], *look carefully at this stone...* [another great pause], *as many cracks on this stone, as many years this stone has! Now count and tell me how old this stone might be?!* We were stunned by the number of cracks, and I believed his story for a long time after. A great musician today, my brother offered to me one of the crucial support systems I have had over the years of extending my own musical expression, from forming a duo and later a band together, traveling the world and growing from mutual experiences. This time I wanted to make a journey and a tribute to Bogdan for his second birthday, that will cherish him through new inspirations, moments, and memories, just as I had with my aunt, brother and parents.

A few months after Bogdan was born, I was involved in the lullaby project lead by my teacher Puro Paju at the Sibelius Academy, which required students to bring lullabies from their own countries, just as I had with the Serbian folk song *Nanina uspavanka* [*Nanina*

*lullaby*]. We then performed all the lullabies together on our particular instruments, making movements, using water flying bubbles, and accompanying Moomin children's goodnight story *Muumipeiko nukahtaa*, told by Elina Simes. Creating an immersion of all the senses for our audience, infants, parents, and toddlers, as well as being in various settings such as a library, or at a concert at the Helsinki Music Centre (May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022), brought new insights. Another work from 2021 to 2023 has been with Ad astra, a non-governmental organization in Helsinki whose mission is to support minority cultures and promote equity especially among children, through creative methods of art and storytelling. Ad astra project is where I had accompanied and performed stories such as King Barhat and baba Yega with the gusle too. Prior to these experiences I had mostly performed for senior audience. The audience of infants I faced for the first time with the gusle. From these experiences I realized how important it is to introduce cultural content from an early age, as well as how the artists' ability to influence the young audiences as open minded and curious is of importance. I was reminded of books and stories that my mom would read to me before bedtime such as the traditional *basne* [stories where animals are major actors], brothers Grimm's or Andersen's fairy tales, a lullaby she used to sing me, *Moja mama divno priča svake noći* [*My mother wonderfully tells the stories every night*], and other childhood experiences in different media, such as a popular children's CD by Dragan Laković and Minja Subota, Yugoslav / Serbian TV children's program *Muzički tobogan* [*musical slide*], as well as the cartoons such as *Pčelica Maja* [*Maya the Bee*] or others. The activities related to my formal education in Finland, and the evoking of my own personal memories in that context, led me to my own project related to the gusle and children.

Lastly, the third reason for making this project came from reflecting on my own path of being a child gusle player. I lacked the audience of my generation, since the followers of the gusle in Serbia are mostly seniors and men. When those rare moments of having a generationally close audience comprised of children and young people, I had usually seen them giggling, laughing, putting hands on their ears and mouth. Along with the instrument, and the very sound or expression, the repertoire I would sing [traditional epic poetry] was either foreign or barely familiar to them. Gusle were mostly associated with something from the past, which I also highlighted by wearing the folk costume while performing. I knew there was a constraint in the gusle presentation, as my stage interaction with children had been drastically different when playing the piano or singing pop songs. The fact that, according to my experiences, children in Serbia have rarely heard about the gusle or seen the instrument in a live

performance, which is even more pertaining to children of Serbian origin living abroad, had always stayed with me. It has to be said that there were not many ways to hear or get immersed into the gusle practice specifically envisioned for young people. Additionally, at the beginning of my playing the gusle, even if one would join the gusle-related activities, there was a lack of a social space meant for children in the gusle circles, with rare instances of a few individuals stepping in and making an effort to include young people on different, more contemporary basis. To illustrate this, a lack of age-related categories in the gusle competitions in the Gusle Union, meant that children and youth, including me, were competing amongst the best and most well-known adult male gusle players, where the age gap in some instances was over fifty years between the youngest and the oldest competitors. To pass the audition and to get the opportunity to perform live in front of an audience, simultaneously getting valid and equal opportunity to grow as a gusle player connected to the whole context of the practice, was almost impossible for children who wanted to play the instrument. The first ever youth-oriented gusle competition of three countries, being part of the Gusle Union, happened on May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2011, in my hometown Kraljevo, in which I also took part in. It was initiated and organized by gusle association *Žiča* founded by my father Radovan Peković. Since then, the youth festivals have been organized regularly in different cities across three Balkan countries. The current status of young players or the atmosphere is better compared to the time of my growing up, yet the desired structure and the establishing of a more inclusive and contemporary system is still in progress. Reflecting on Bogdan, my experiences in Helsinki related to children, and memories when I was a child, I had asked myself *what is something I would like Bogdan to have, what are the things I wish I had in my childhood related to the gusle, and what are the things that I can do?*

### **The initial outline of the gusle lullaby project**

The very decision to record the gusle lullabies occurred at the beginning of summer of 2022. year. I called my cousin Relja Jakovljević, a son of my aunt Tatjana, to ask him about collaborating on the project. Relja, only 17 at the time, already had a lot of experience with electronic music, digital beats, and songs based in the Western culture musical idioms. At that moment he had just enrolled BA studies of composition at Faculty of music in Belgrade. Given that I admire the way he hears music, as well as our successful collaborations in the past, we decided to work on the lullabies together, and that he should take the role of a producer. The recording of the first three gusle lullabies had occurred in three stages at *As*

*Studioton* in Belgrade, where Relja works. My initial idea within the first recording period, from 11<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> of August 2022, was to create a few lullabies as a present for Bogdan's first birthday coming next month. Given that I was going back to Helsinki soon, I did not manage to make lullabies at the time. However, we had created a great material, comprised of around eight recorded gusle lullaby ideas, more or less still structurally open towards searching for the right sound solutions, and accompaniment. The following year, 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> of August 2023, I went back to the studio, and re-recorded two lullabies from the previous year, *Milo moje*, and *Popara*, [*Milk toast*] which I liked after the first ideas and impressions settled. A month later, September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023, I had recorded the third lullaby inspired by the literature material that I had read for my thesis in August 2022.

The process of recording was half-prepared, and half-improvised in all three recording periods. I opted not to use Western notation in creating lullabies, as my usual approach to the gusle culture and storytelling relies on the aurality. On the other hand, Relja worked in Ableton live music program to which I am familiar working with as well. In all those, Relja gave tremendous artistic input by utilizing his recording, composition and production skills, and helping me move through new musical areas. His ideas introduced various sound colours, effects and rhythms that further inspired the entire process. The majority of those aspects won't be elaborated in this paper, due to also my decision to show lullabies where I am the only one singing and playing, yet this explorative approach influenced sound base for all lullabies presented here. Lastly, we had the fourth additional planned recording on September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023, that had occurred at Relja's house in the city of Kraljevo, in which Bogdan was recorded talking with his parents Nikola, and Katarina, as well as with his uncle Relja. Postproduction happened both in live communication and remotely, starting from the first recordings in August 2022 until October 2023.

The overall aim was to create a spacious sound adapted for bedtime, preferably a softer layer of sounds, lyrics based on the sleep-related motives, and touch of personal addressing or wishing to Bogdan, as well as on the reflections on the world of childhood. The process felt as crafting especially in finding the line between the preconceived thoughts on how the Balkan traditional or western lullabies should sound with what the role of the gusle will be. It was important to me that I have agency in the ideas and sounds I do. I did not want to be creatively influenced or blocked by any existing cultural frameworks. I wanted sounds to have a lot of explorative, light, emotional and fun moments, to channel these to the other people. Many things occurred as an inspiration that came in that moment. Perhaps if I were to

do the lullabies again, they would be different. It is important to underline that the lullaby project did not occur because I am a woman and by some ‘natural’ dispositions related to gender, which would fall into the trap of essentialism. My inspiration came from my connection to the project itself and how I relate to lullabies, my family stories, Bogdan, and young children. It occurred from a different spot of a genuine curiosity, not yet explored by me earlier. Lack of references regarding gusle lullabies offered space to move as an artist, but also engendered a sense of responsibility and doubt. A question of, to what scale and in which way electronics will support the lullabies was also coming up. The range we chose during the process was wide, from lullabies sounding as any Western or digitally supported lullabies with some elements of the gusle (used more as the cello rather than in a traditional way), pentatonic harmonies, those that greatly differ from traditional lyrics, to those that did not seem to differ much from the original gusle repertoire and style. Some persistent thoughts include what the audience, and other parents might think, as well as the conventional gusle audience. Yet, the most important thing was my personal focus on my nephew Bogdan and on what he might enjoy as expression created by me and my cousin Relja, as a joyful contribution to the toddler’s life. Nevertheless, all three ‘possible’ audiences seemed to be holding different views and perspectives on the lullabies presented in the upcoming chapter.

In the chapter bellow, three lullabies dedicated to Bogdan are described and interpreted. First two are *Visoko li lete labudovi* [*As high swans are in flight*], and *Popara* [*Milk toast*], are comprised of singing with the gusle accompaniment, while the third *Milo moje* [*My Dearest*] also has the electronic sounds included, and also feature a guest Miloš Nikolić, a kaval player from Serbia. The songs were made to soothe Bogdan, but I also had in mind a wider young audience, as well as a complex history of the gusle, and my own contribution to ongoing change of this musical culture. Furthermore, in the chapter bellow, *Ratna uspavanka* [*Action lullaby*] can be found which does not belong to group of lullabies dedicated to Bogdan. However, *Action lullaby* represents my first attempt of working with the format of lullaby that occurred two years prior, so it seemed apt to include it as a document of the earliest phase of the creative process.

### ***Visoko li lete labudovi* [*As high swans are in flight*]**

This lullaby has been recorded as the last one in the group of four, on September 19<sup>th</sup>, yet here presented as the first due to its historical aspect. The idea about this lullaby came while drafting my thesis in August of 2023, and coming across a paper suggested by my mentor Iva



Nenić, *Songs Intended for a Child and Children's Songs in the Publications of Vuk Stefanović Karadžić* by Tatjana Vujnović (2016). I was immediately drawn to this song, as it is written in decasyllabic meter, unusual for lullabies, but common to versification of epic songs that are a central part of gusle players' repertoire. I found the song mysterious and intriguing: yet, there was none of the records of whether the song has been interpreted by other gusle players of the past. I wanted to research, and illuminate the possibility of epic lullabies, as there were a few similar decasyllabic songs mentioned in the same text. Whether this piece of poetry had the function of lullabies is under question, and it wasn't possible to conclude about its place in the gusle musical practice, as well as of its past relation to the child-related folklore. After musing on this topic, I wanted to portray aspects such as heritage in a novel way, and to explore a possible connection between lullabies, epic poetry and the gusle players. The song was originally printed under the title "*Dejan's mother*" from the writings of Vuk Vrčević (Mladenović 1973: CCLXXI) in the first book of Serbian folk songs from the unpublished manuscripts of Vuk Stef. Karadžića (1973), edited by Živomir Mladenović and Vladan Nedić (Vujnović, 2016, p. 15).

In terms of the lyrics, I have changed the name used in the song, from originally Dejan to Bogdan. Additionally, I have changed the title of the song from *Dejan's mother* to be as the first line of the song *Visoko li lete labudovi* [*As high swans are in flight*], as it is typical for folk songs to be named after the first verse. I made the changes in order to invite others to adjust the song and personalize it by referring to their own child. The first time when I sing, the lyrics are based on a sung traditional epic poetry with the gusle accompaniment. I specifically wanted the children to hear that sonic spectrum of the gusle. I thought, *one day when they hear older gusle players, they will already be familiar to ornaments, ranges of the voice, and melodic paths that gusle players usually create, based on their familiarity with this lullaby*. However, I have implemented new ornaments, voice motifs and dynamics throughout the song, introducing nuances and soft sound<sup>2</sup> layers in the performance, using pizzicato technique, and singing the song for the second time with that kind of accompaniment. In contrast to the first time when I sing the lyrics, the second time using pizzicato technique had fostered expressiveness and affect, highlighting the emotion in singing. Yet, the imprint of the traditional epic culture is very much present through the decasyllabic versification, and different poetic devices and characteristic motives, evoking the pictures from other traditional epic poems I have sung along the years, about heroes and history. Although departing from

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<sup>2</sup> Also a male name.

traditional style, in this lullaby I feel great closeness to the core of the traditional gusle practice and a contemporary continuation of traditional expressiveness.

*Visoko li lete labudovi*

*As high swans are in flight*

*Visoko li lete labudovi,*

*As high swans are in flight,*

*Jošt su viši dvori Bogdanovi,*

*Taller yet are Bogdan's Towers,*

*I u njima Bogdanova majka,*

*In 'em Bogdan's mother weaves,*

*Svom Bogdanu šije košuljicu,*

*Weaving shirt for Bogdan dear.*

*Zlatnom žicom, a srebrnom iglom.*

*Using thread of golden strands,*

*Using needle made of silver.*

### ***Popara [Milk toast]***

In the *Popara* lullaby, I have created music and lyrics, deriving from the summer of 2022, and the first recording that I had made with Relja. I re-recorded *Popara* a year later, August 2023, changing tiny details, such as a few words in the lyrics and making the tempo slower. *Popara* lullaby is written in octosyllabic line which structurally belongs to newer forms of the gusle repertoire (Laić, 2014). Lyrics directly recall my favourite dish when I was a child. *Popara* is one of the most favourite baby foods, and it is traditionally made by dipping the (old) bread in hot milk. That dish also represents memories of my life and childhood – I remembered how my parents and grandparents made *popara* for me. In making the music, I relied on the sensory memories related to the smell and the foam of boiling milk, as well as crust of bread that differed in colour from the middle softer bread part. The memories of my feelings and early friendships were also a source. Additionally, at the time of my kindergarten, I felt proud while going alone to the nearest store around the corner, with my parents and grandparents' permission, signalling that I was *mature enough* to buy the bread and milk by myself. It is also a food that represents two of most used and appreciated ingredients during post-war period, and I value them from this distance from a different angle. I enjoyed writing the lyrics as they had made me cheerful and positively emotional. The bread in the song is falling asleep *tucked in milk*. As the song goes on, and the bread starts to dream during sleep [*Crossing the world, the whole worldwide*], the bread discovers the great world in which I portrayed my own life, experiences before and while in Finland. The plot explores the idea of growth and following dreams in life, using a dish and a sensory memory as a personal and cultural standpoint for such an exploration. Just like how following those dreams and those beats alive within you, can lead you to meet those things in real life

(that happened to me), and expand your world with new dimensions and realizations including friendships [*From Serbia onto Finland, from Aruba, to India, friends abound, blissful joy surrounds*].

*Popara*

*U mleku je hleb zaspao,*

*Pokrio se jorgan belim,*

*Zahrkao pa sanjao,*

*Kako plovi svetom celim.*

*Od Srbije pa do Finske,*

*Od Arube do Indije,*

*Prijatelje našao je,*

*Oh milina ta toplina.*

*Svakome je radost dao,*

*On postade na kub bolji,*

*Duži, širi, hranljiviji,*

*Mleku, bebku,*

*Sad u pravu dremku.*

*A Milk Toast*

*Tucked in milk, the bread was lulled to sleep,*

*Und'r white covers,*

*Dreams sail wide,*

*Crossing the world, the whole worldwide.*

*From Serbia onto Finland,*

*From Aruba, to India,*

*Friends abound,*

*Blissful joy surrounds.*

*Gifting joy to all around,*

*It expanded triple unbound,*

*Longer, wider, more nutritious,*

*Milk, my babe,*

*Off to dreams you fade.*

I had a few consultations regarded playing, with my father Radovan, an experienced gusle player, as I wanted to invent a form of singing lullaby lyrics in a more repetitive way. At the end, I reverted to my first idea, which was to sing the lyrics as I would almost sing any other octosyllabic gusle song. The biggest changes in comparison to singing octosyllabic gusle song was my perception of the audience, and the approach to the function of lullabies I wanted to obtain by the performance. I was hesitant to take this song for the thesis purposes, as it felt too personal. However, as in other times when I overcame those moments with the support, as my thesis' mentor had encouraged me to follow and embrace my artistry by telling me how the song made a big impression on her. With only that but perhaps enjoying the trust I felt throughout the process, I decided to share *Popara* as it reflects aspects I love.<sup>3</sup>

To tap into the creative processes, in the last recording of this song, as there was one earlier in the summer of 2022, I sung the lullaby three times in total of 10 min 35 seconds, with all

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<sup>3</sup> I was even more pleased when I found, much later, that one of Bogdan's favorite meals has become popara too.

the breaks and rests in between. I later made a postproduction with Relja extracting the best takes from all three. The lullaby is recorded slightly above C.

*1 - 2 - 3 (referring to verses) - notes*

1. *Fine, 1, good bridge, 2, second gusle part quite fine, 3, not bad*
2. *Not bad, 1 (super), x no voice, gusle bridge fine, 2 (2. very well), 2bridge fine, 3, the ending gusle, you have to wait for it but it is there, maybe not the best from all*
3. *-, 1, solid bridge the second time but a bit loud, 2, „Oh milina“ very well, great bridge!!*

These are my notes sent to Relja from Helsinki, on October 18<sup>th</sup>

*Final*

*Bridge from the first, 2, bridge from the first, 2. time from the second („Oh milina ta toplina“ from the 3. and continue to 3. gusle bridge, 2, 3. gusle bridge that goes after the first line, and then, the very end 3 (no flageolet).*

### ***Milo moje [My dearest]***

*Milo moje* lullaby derives from the first recorded ideas, being made during the summer of 2022. The lullaby was originally in a different tonality (a few steps lower) and had a slightly darker tone. A year later, Relja and I decided to raise the pitch to A minor, re-record the voice in a softer way with complete lyrics, while Relja also added digital layers and effects. I composed the main melody and wrote most lyrics, reflecting on my impressions of Katarina and Nikola as the parents. I also used the word *grumen* (*noble ore*), a nickname my father Radovan chose for Bogdan (*grumen dedov, grampa's noble ore*). A small part was written by my mother Snežana, such as in the third verse *neka dragi Bog te čuva [may God be upon you]*.<sup>4</sup>

I invited a well-known kaval player from Serbia, Miloš Nikolić, to be a part of the lullaby project, as a collaboration between the gusle and kaval has not been done before. This collaboration was very significant to me as Miloš's work and artistry were a great inspiration throughout the years of being a traditional folk music performer. Collaboration with him felt just right for this particular song. Prior to Miloš's joining on August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023, we had

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<sup>4</sup> Aside of her wish for Bogdan to be lead and protected by God, first three letters of Bogdan's name, Bog, means God in Serbian, and his name patron indeed is Him. Furthermore, full name translates to *gifted by God*, so the lyrics greatly reflected on Bogdan.

already recorded and produced the majority of the song, voice and electronics. Gusle were recorded after the kaval, on the same day. Before Miloš joined, Relja and I had already planned the structure, and had written some parts for the kaval, yet there was a lot of space for Miloš to improvise, especially in the beginning of the song where we intended the kaval part to be in *rubato*. Miloš also added some ideas to other parts that we combined all together. We struggled to blend and add the gusle to this very song because of the tuning of the gusle. Trying to solve that, I used the gusle from my late singing teacher, Snežana Spasić<sup>5</sup>, as her gusle had a more stable sound and tuning than mine. We carefully picked and processed those gusle sounds that built the desired spectrum. Recording that which occurred on August 16<sup>th</sup> was observed by my mother Snežana, aunt Tatjana as well as my mentor Iva Nenić. Their presence and support provided an atmosphere in which I felt that the size of this project was much larger than me dedicating this to my nephew Bogdan.



Photo: Marko Živković ©

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<sup>5</sup> Snežana Spasić was a well-known traditional performer mostly covering heritage of South Serbia where she was born. She was my singing teacher for a brief period, yet her contribution was big in my artistry. A few years ago I ran a gusle workshop invited by her, in her music studio *Naissa* in Niš in which I was her student for her voice course but also, she was participating as a student in mine, wanting to learn the gusle. We ordered her gusle from my gusle maker, and I remember how excited and fulfilled she was prior and after she got them. Her gusle are not that typical as she wanted them to have ornaments of Pirot's *ćilim* (a traditional woven rug) from her hometown, on the neck, as well as a fairy behind the gusle instead of usual religious motives. After her death, her husband, a writer Goran Stanković gave me her gusle knowing I will take a good care of them. I have never played on them, and I did had not planned on it, however, they happened to sound the best for this very moment. Through using Snežana's instrument I later realised while recording in the studio, how much her care and love for me are still present, and I cherished that symbolic connection.

*Milo moje*

*Spavaj milo moje,  
Spavaj radosti,  
Mama tvoje lice ljubi  
Mama s tobom snove sni.*

*Spavaj milo moje,  
Spavaj radosti,  
Tata tvoje ruke greje,  
Tatin grumen, to si ti.*

*Spavaj milo moje,  
Spavaj radosti,  
Neka dragi Bog te čuva,  
I nad tobom uvek bdi.*

*My Dearest*

*Sleep my dearest,  
Go, my joyful rest  
Mother kisses your two cheeks,  
Whilst our dreams embrace*

*Sleep my dearest,  
Sleep my joy,  
Your Daddy will keep you warm,  
You are daddy's noble ore.*

*Sleep my dearest,  
Sleep my joy,  
May dear God keep you,  
And always watch over you.*

### ***Ratna uspavanka [The action lullaby]***

*The action lullaby* came as an addition to all lullabies above, made two years prior to the 'official' start of my lullaby project, in August of 2020. It is also created in collaboration with Relja Jakovljević and recorded in our home studio in Kraljevo. It made sense to add this lullaby after reading a literature on lullabies, as it can be related to the research on the smaller portion of lullabies that in various world cultures might have different functions than a soothing one. I wrote the lyrics and composed the main melody for this lullaby, while the rest was made with Relja. It is originally a part of a Serbian film, yet not released. The film is a second edition of the film *The impure blood*, directed by Stojan Stojičić, it recalled The First World War in Serbia to some degree, and the director wanted to include a music that will go along the portraying of mothers protecting their children during the war time. This lullaby was inspired by epic drama, and the plot of the first movie based on novel written by Bora Stanković, a famous Serbian writer. Beside recalling the atmosphere of the epic poetry, I especially enjoy the inclusion of digitally processed sounds, and the solo gusle portion that captures the gusle sound and ideational world in its full capacity, even if just instrumentally applied. Through this lullaby, I found empowering the feeling that it is possible to portray collective thoughts or great historical events with ease and a degree of artistic freedom. A historical narrative in this case made my embodiment closer to the traditional gusle heritage

regardless of sound aesthetics, although it maybe cannot be immediately heard as such by the audience.

*Ratna uspavanka*

*Nuna nuna, nuna nana,  
Nuna nuna, nuna mama.*

*Nunam, čuvam,  
Najnani, šušušu*

*Nuna nuna, nuna mama.*

*Action lullaby*

*Nuna nuna, nuna nana,  
Nuna nuna, nuna mum. (lulling a baby)*

*Nunam, čuvam,  
Najnani, šušušu  
(whispering comforting words)*

*Nuna nuna, nuna mum.*

### **Photo shoot with Bogdan**

I arranged Bogdan's first photo shoot on July 25<sup>th</sup>, 2023, in my hometown Kraljevo with a long-term collaborator Marko Živković. I bought a very nice white outfit in Helsinki, and we used Relja's children's gusle, originally made as a present for his second birthday. The very connection of both clothes and the instrument felt very appealing and symbolically tied to my artistic project. Along with Marko, we also had my mother Snežana, myself, and Nataša, the wife of a photographer, joined the photographing session. All three of us engaged Bogdan when, and where needed, with children's music, our movements and talk. Bogdan was patient and behaving as a true model. Under the lights and with all the attention on him, he was collaborating to such a degree that there was clear that he enjoyed posing for the camera. Being a curious and fast toddler, it was striking to see him in action, as if he knew what to do. Seeing him holding the gusle, and realizing that the project is including his own presence in this way, made me truly happy and encouraged me to believe that the personal aspect and the future 'life' of the music I've created go along. That day was one of my best memories throughout this project.



Photo: Marko Živković ©

## Discussion

In cultural terms the very sound of the gusle has been sonically and ideologically almost inseparable from the epic poetry world, its mores and aesthetics. On the other hand, a powerful expression, drama, sorrow, and longing were coming through the sounds of lullabies very often. Therefore, I was trying to find a sweet spot of having epic elements adjusted to my ideas and using their material, sonic aspects in building the novel lullabies. I lacked a real lullaby bedtime with Bogdan, as I was predominantly abroad but I embodied the new field with certain techniques and practicing time that created a similar atmosphere. I would calm myself first while imagining singing to baby Bogi<sup>6</sup>, and then the sound itself would synchronize with the desired outcome. I have even at some points used a blanket that I put in front of me to look like a wrapped baby when practicing, to create and embrace the right feeling inside me. The process of creating those sounds, melodies and arrangements made me grow and understand myself better as an artist, but also allowed me to gain a new, fresh perspective on my own music tradition and my place in it. Those sounds slowed and calmed my perception of the time flow and raised my sensory awareness, serving as a basis for a personal and artistic exploration.

Another important issue was related to technical obstacles, such as establishing a culturally non-characteristic ‘soothing sound’ on the gusle, as the frequencies of the gusle tones are

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<sup>6</sup> Bogdan’s nickname.



naturally unpredictable, sharp and non-tempered. When one changes the bow direction on the gusle, the pitch may alter with the bow change. *Wolf* tone is quite common, and tuning peg is not always sustainable. All these technical aspects followed me along the past years with collaborative processes, and there were many attempts to bypass the restrictions, such as using a cello bow, *wolf* eliminator, and peg powder – yet none was permanently working. The future attempts to build technically altered gusle to suit the collaborative work with other tempered instruments is something that might help see this Serbian instrument into the creative collaborative projects more. Applying theory of Huib Schippers' (2006) for a dynamic change, a transfer of knowledge from other string instrument makers can be useful as contemporary gusle makers are not that familiar with these phenomena, e.g. how different wood, skin or string will affect the sound, size of the instrument, bridge<sup>7</sup>, bow, type of threads, rosin. Whether some additional instrument or specifically made tools for the gusle will serve as a solution for the issues related to tuning, perhaps urgency of establishing fine tuning, is yet to be seen. However, it was equally interesting to produce solutions based on the current technical reality that contemporary gusle players work from. I saw a great potential in exploring that very spot in regard to 'unusual' and desired sound of lullabies, and the more time I spent with the project, the keener I was to design my new instrument in collaboration with a few building instrument manufacturers.

## Conclusion

This project holds a great significance in the process of exploration of my artistic identity and development, as well as regarding my contribution to the ongoing modernisation of gusle music culture. One of the turning points was to present my own lyrics and share insights related to the artistic process, and this kind of reflection, intertwined with my examining of the official narratives and research perspectives, created a platform that brings together the objective, research-based approaches and the direct self-observation of the artist being in-between the tradition and innovation. I grew with the project, being led by my inner world, and the one around me: I found many hidden aspects of experience and sound memories, which were unexplored in my work. Many new sound colours and timbres were brought further by various gusle involved – my own instrument, a small children gusle that Bogdan

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<sup>7</sup> As building of a such an instrument takes time, it did not happen during my lullaby project, but the project's unfolding helped recognize the urgency of the need to have an improved instrument.

used, gusle I inherited from late Snežana Spasić, with an anticipation of my future gusle to be created in order to reflect the new nuances, ideas and possibilities of both instrument and my own work. The encounter with electronic music and the cooperation with my cousin Relja added a fresh difference to the whole project, introducing a vital ideational and sonic spectrum important for both my personal aesthetics and to building of a dynamic, contemporary approach to the gusle practice. I see a potential of mixing different media with gusle sound, and in adding live electronics to the performance, with a vision to include this approach in Serbian music culture, as well as in the international music scenes. The gusle lullabies seem to be a piece of puzzle contributing to ongoing change and hopefully fostering a relation between a contemporary children's culture and the gusle, as well as a possibility to enjoy the gusle sounds, resonances, its quality and range from different poetic and social perspectives of new generations.

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