

Uneven Terrains of Struggle: Towards the Transformative Notion of Female Music Leadership¹

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Abstract: *Ethnomusicology and the related disciplines have devoted much effort to affirm female musicians, most often through the lenses of feminism, gender studies and identity politics. The topic of female leadership within various socio-musical arenas, especially in the “micromusic” contexts, or in diverse subcultural, non-hegemonic cultural scenes and landscapes, remains relatively underresearched. Observed in terms of equality, power to act and promoting wider social interests, female music leadership is often overlooked, but its relative marginalization in the cultural lacunae outside of major power arena doesn't mean that the struggles and the achievements are less real. Rather differently to the prevailing neoliberal concept of high individual achievement, the notion of transformational female leadership within music could lead to answers to a few fundamental questions. Firstly, what does the female assuming of the leading position and power within the immediate surroundings and wider actually produce, being always-already situated within the gendered expectations and constraints? What are the historical and present forms of female musical leadership, in a range from inter-group communication and decision-making to cultural leadership and musical activism? What kind of support is required for the female music leadership? The multisited ethnography performed with women of various personal, cultural, ethnic and generational backgrounds in Serbia, as well as the comparison with wider set of worldwide examples, would serve as a ground to seek those answers.*

Keywords: *female leadership, Serbia, world music, rock music, women, cultural leadership.*

While shaped by changing historical circumstances worldwide, female music-making is still shadowed by the overarching patriarchal presumption that culturally desirable femininity is a precondition that must be acknowledged, affirmed or reflected in the social dimensions of music practices. From different and changing gender-based divisions of music in traditional, pre-industrial and late agrarian societies (Doubleday 2008; Koskoff 1989; Nenić 2013), to contemporary global music stars often being presented as perfect

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simulacra of idealized womanhood,² the hegemonic concepts of femininity serve not only as an identity position, but more often as a requirement, a fact that must be socially reproduced in a correct manner, although, as Judith Butler (2006) puts it, the very performatives in the form of various material acts retroactively constitute what we perceive as a palpability and reality of gender. Thus, various sonic-based acts of simple non-conforming by female musicians or their intentional disruption of social expectations are retroactively framed as disturbing transgressions of the naturalized patriarchal worldview. Gender-related expectations are also ingrained in occupational gender segregation in music industries, and within creative and technical aspects of music producing, the latter being more frequently claimed by men (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2015). Although the participation of female musicians in local and international music scenes and industries has raised substantially during the 20th century up to the 2020s, and the possibilities for female musicians have diversified together with the greater inclusion of feminist viewpoints in the presentational discourses regarding women in music and to an extent, regarding the material conditions of female music labor, the backlash against progressive ideas on womanhood and gender is still an ongoing issue. It can be the resurfacing of various gender-related stereotypes when female artists step too close to the position of power, or it can take the form of toxic fandom or “cancel culture”³, as new phenomena brought by the global media and contemporary digital cultures of consumption. Simultaneously, within the constraints of local communities, national and regional cultures, female musicians still face numerous obstacles while trying to maintain professional careers and visibility and balance between private and public aspects of life that could be historically shaped and context-specific.

In the contemporary humanities, the interest in female leadership in arts and culture has steadily grown during the recent years. The usual approach is informed by feminism and strives to separate the very idea of leadership from its usual associations with masculinity, autocracy and power, while it “yet [has] to describe the complex leadership exhibited by the women leaders in the arts” (Brodsky and Olin 2018: xxv), by not falling into the trap of gender essentialism or citing various “leadership styles”, which is often the practical focus of corporate leadership studies. The concept of female musical leadership has not been thoroughly explored in the global context, and needs to be addressed

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- 2 This often includes able-bodiedness, cis- and heteronormativity as the standards to be repeated and embodied.
 - 3 For example, important female artists of the nineties are now sometimes questioned because of their reluctance to declare themselves as feminists, avoiding to be named as “female artists” or not being enough sensitive to the issues of intersectionality, race representation etc., according to contemporary standards. While today gender mainstreaming, the archival practices on the internet and the rise of broad discussions in the online social media allow for such retroactive interpretations, sometimes they miss the context and unnecessarily paint the musicians as not being emancipated or aware enough. Many artists like Björk or Tori Amos who were the champions of the non-conforming female artistry and musicianship at the time could sometimes not express themselves fully as feminists because of the atmosphere in the industry where the word “feminism” was seen as loaded, and actually avoided to be referred as “female artists” because that could put them in the niche of “exception”, or being thought to repeat certain representational codes tied to the socially dominant view on femininity.

both by paying attention to the locally based, idiographic studies, minutely documenting particular instances of music making (Rice 2010: 108 et passim) and also to “interlocal theory about musical processes in related communities” (ivi: 120 et passim), that in the latter case could, following Rice’s model, help discern a complex global interconnection of music practices where women participate, ideas on womanhood, fourth wave feminism and various forms of anti-gender backlash and retraditionalization working against hard won rights of women. This chapter is an attempt to incite both – while being focused on multiple case studies of female musicians in Serbia, it also interweaves the discussion of that particular local situation with regional and global instances of female musicianship, starting from the presumption that there are shared structural preconditions for women’s expression and agency through structured sound, as well as the shared experiences of inequality common in the present moment.

Although the praise of the achievements of many female musicians became increasingly common in the official discourses on music as well as on female music stardom on a global scale, these victories are not a guarantee that the freedom of expression and the value of female musical labor are to stay unchallenged, or a history of female musicianship brought forward, despite the great joint efforts by culturally oriented feminism, as well as ethnomusicological scholarship directed towards promoting female musical creativity and work. A recent online hatred directed towards major pop star Madonna aptly illustrates that: the visual appearance and the behavior of a singer who uses digital filters for her photos and videos on social networks, openly speaks on sexuality of older women and, in general, presents herself by refusing to conform to social standards of modesty and “fading” from the public eye expected from aging people have been heavily condemned on online forums and in internet communities. The Queen of Pop has successfully sailed the rough seas of the demanding global popular culture by introducing new music trends, served as a role model for other female musicians, spoken openly about sensitive or problematic issues related to different oppressed communities, publicly presented non-conforming female sexuality and freely morphed gender expression and agency,⁴ thus embodying a striking example of female musical leadership. Yet, by reaching a certain age and choosing not to silently retire, her public presence seems to be a red beacon, provoking misogyny, ageism, vile comments and the retroactive dismissal of her manifold achievements and battles fought in the global music industry known as often being hostile towards women. In a world where constantly morphing misogyny, increasingly alienated enjoyment of music and the resistant patriarchal *status quo* cast a long shadow over seemingly transient, yet powerful affective experience such as the act of music making and experiencing music, what can prominent female musicians, music

4 While many scholars and critics indeed see Madonna’s position as liberating and gender-non conforming, there are also opposing interpretations, framing her public acts as reproducing the common tropes of female eroticism and the stereotypical vision of seductive femininity. However, as Sara Martín (2022: 36) points out, the public persona of the singer is complex, as “many see [...] her as a major feminist icon and others as a power-hungry, controlling, manipulative diva, though perhaps these two images are complementary or even the same one”. Public personas like Madonna often have to negotiate between the socially desirable and transgressive visions of femininity, which might be a strategy to success, while simultaneously undermining the very traits that are being depicted.

workers and educators offer – both with respect to their own stance and in relation to the communities they represent, and how can they maintain their position, despite all the obstacles that keep showing up? In case of less visible, but still highly influential female music makers who belong to smaller local or subcultural communities, what kind of situations are there to be solved and what contributions are being made, in the specific articulation of leadership in micromusic settings outside the domain of dominant music cultural networks and industries? The answers to these questions may vary, but if a wider platform for female musical leadership is to be pursued, it must include the varied positionalities of women in music, with many shared aspects as well as the differences that might call for context-related actions in promotion and support directed towards the betterment of female music making, labor and sound-based activism. Similar to the tropes of transgression and / or rebellion, Burns and Lafrance (2002) posit the intriguing theoretical metaphor of “disruptive divas”, which include the intentional artistic questioning of dominant systems from a countercultural position, the assuming of music’s affective powers by female musicians in order to create the feeling of uneasiness for the listeners by letting the suppressed traumas and experiences of the artists emerge, the rearrangement of the norms and codes of music practices in order to directly “disrupt musical and narrative norms”, and the claiming of technical skills and wider control over the processes of music’s creation (ivi: 2, 3). Although Burns and Lafrance refer to the notable female musicians of the nineties belonging to the wide realm of indie / alternative orientation, like Tori Amos or PJ Harvey, their ideas could be applied to other historical and contemporary figures as well, as an approach to leadership taking into account the gendered specificities of fandom and presentational tactics influencing the mainstream culture, with the attention devoted to sonic and poetic strategies of disruption.

Female Leadership in Serbian Contemporary Semi- and Independent Music Scenes: Historical, Ideological and Cultural Standpoints

The possibilities offered to female music performers within contemporary music scenes and communities in Serbia depend on local beliefs regarding female social roles, but also increasingly on global ideas of womanhood, female intersectional identities and female expression and agency claimed through music. The source for the latter is the wide range of female musical and social involvement happening globally. Leadership tactics, in this sense, pertain to responses of female artists to the #me too movement, addressing gender inequality via music, taking an active role in preservation and change of local music and heritage, pushing towards responsible cultural and, more recently, environmental management through music and practicing models of feminist separatism as a tactical position in relation to art and music, to just name a few.

Historically, the local cultural mores in Serbia and in the Balkans regarding gender and music stressed that it was not common for women to assume the public role of a professional musician. Women were less common as folk music players in villages and the choice of professional career of singers or instrumentalists in urban vernacular music has been linked to lower social status and “questionable morality”: however, both positions can be contested as the effect of the patriarchal representational tropes in popular

culture and in music scholarship. Take the example of the epic songs with *gusle*⁵ accompaniment, typically represented as a national music culture related to masculinity, national history and the heroic acts of past. Although there were many female *gusle* players in Serbia and in other parts of the Balkans, the official version of local music history put them aside almost to the point of invisibility, despite communities being aware of such women or some scholars portraying their work through short case studies in 20th century. Their position has been usually approached through tropes of exceptionality and firstness, thus effectively rendering the possibility to learn of female-related history of *gusle* playing highly unlikely, both in everyday and official scholarly discourses. However, notable early folk music collectors like Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (1878–1864) observed that there were many women who were able to play the instrument, blind female *guslarke* were common and earned money on the street and by travelling until the late 19th century, and later on, during the 20th century female *gusle* players such as Milena Živadinović or Stevanija Dragaš, to just name a few instances, were also role models and teachers in their respective local communities (Antonijević 1960; Barjaktarović 1954). Another Serbian female *gusle* player of the 20th century, Darinka Dobrosavljević, according to press accounts, continued to play and sing even as an octogenarian: in addition to the traditional repertoire consisting of epic songs that she learnt from her father, she also composed her own songs like ‘Lađa od pirinča’ (‘A ship made of rice’) and ‘Lađa od đonova’ (‘A ship made of shoe soles’), thus showing her agency and capacity to insert her authorship in the traditional corpus otherwise bound to the topics of bravery, heroism, male nobility and the battles for freedom, which was considered at the time, as it still would be nowadays, a very bold gesture. This kind of silence surrounding female music acts that seemingly transgress the “norm” was transferred across subsequent music genres, ensuring that talented women are written out of the history, devalued, or put in the position of an exception at best (Nenić 2015). I remember one particular instance of stumbling upon one unnamed Yugoslav all-female pop / rock band formed long before the 1990s that wasn’t documented by the local rock historians: the archival black-and-white photo of female band members with guitars in knee-long skirts smiling at the camera silently screamed the “fact” that even nowadays all-female music groups cannot easily learn about their female forebears and are still commonly depicted as “the first and only”.

During the 2000s, changes took place in the field of Serbian popular music. The rise of the pop folk⁶ in the early nineties after the breakup of Yugoslavia reached its peak, by becoming the dominant vernacular musical culture spread through Serbian and regional

5 *Gusle* (Serb. гусле, pluralia tantum) are a one-string folk bowed lute, typical for Serbia and the wider Balkan region. The history of *gusle* playing points to a transregional culture with many historical and local articulations of their music practice, but since the 19th century’s formation of the nation-states in the modern sense, those traditions continued to unfold separately, as largely being framed by the exclusivist discourses of national culture and heritage.

6 Pop folk, sometimes called “turbo folk” by the critics and the members of educated elites, and “narodnjaci” (the folkies) by the listeners, is the largest mainstream popular music culture in Serbia that brought together the aesthetics and production of contemporary global pop music industry and the way of singing nowadays vaguely associated with the previous ruling music culture of *novokomponovana* (newly composed) folk music, the latter being a modernized form of folk songs and ballads created during Yugoslav period. Much like *novokomponovana* music, it has continued

TV stations, powerful music industry like Grand Production record label, and later on, the digital media and music sharing services. The post-Yugoslav neoliberal music market created a great disproportion between the massive pop folk industry and independent music scenes. The depiction of female musicians within these two highly asymmetric sociomusical strata – mainstream pop folk vs alternative culture – shared conventional gender tropes, but also exemplified profound differences. The typical construct of pop-folk female music star employs the imagery of sexiness, youth and conventionally understood female beauty, with song topics mostly about heteronormative love, and visual presentation often hinting at the luxurious lifestyle and seductiveness of the singer, although the performers sometimes undermine the conventional reading of their otherwise stereotypical “delivery” of gender by certain material and discursive gestures (Nenić 2009). On the other hand, in the Serbian independent music scene, the possibilities for female performers may seem more varied and in a dialectical opposition to the pop folk’s figure of *diva*, but certain restrictions and constraints tied to local cultural norms and expectations regarding gendered behavior are still in place.

In the case of late millennial and older female musicians, the influences can be both local and international. This web of interlaced local conditions and global trends shapes the possibilities and agency of music performers in a gendered way, by confronting or mixing changing local ideologies with the dominant models of gendered behavior circulating within the global musical “superculture”, to borrow Slobin’s term (1993), thus giving rise to a specific articulation of female agency through music. Asked to single out female role models, the interlocutors cited both foreign music stars and fellow Serbian female musicians, but also the teachers, activists and famous women musicians of earlier generations who belonged to a similar background or a local community, in a wide range from Florence Welch, lead singer of the band Florence and the Machine, to late Margita Stefanović of EKV, a keyboardist, artist and a symbol of progressive Yugoslav rock scene endowed with nostalgia, to regional prominent alternative pop singers like Croatian Ida Prester of the band Lollobrigida who often speaks about pressures faced by female artists and motherhood and supports LGBTQ+ people. The ex-Yugoslav pop and rock female musicians are often cited as the earliest exemplary instances of successful female participation in alternative music culture. Margita Stefanović, a keyboardist and supporting vocalist of new wave band EKV, or folk accordion player Radojka Živković who was the first highly popular performer and author on that instrument within the field of modernized folk music during Yugoslav socialism are often mentioned in that context – both performers were seen as exceptionally gifted, but were mostly surrounded by fellow male musicians, and described as not-so-typical women who rose to fame by being “different” and were treated as such, which, again, exemplifies the discursive gesture of masking the exclusion with the veil of exceptionality.

My research of contemporary independent scenes in Serbia has been carried out in several sociomusical settings and during the last two years specifically through the research project titled *Female leadership in music: a cross-genre research of women’s roles, agency*

to blend various local folk music styles, locally incorporated influences of Ottoman culture and newly imported melodies from the Middle East.

and collaborative music-making practices in Serbia. I have been observing the activities of female musicians belonging to musical scenes of neotraditional music, world music, rock, pop and jazz, with various in-between genres falling to these loose categories, being outside the music mainstream and with smaller and dedicated audiences who treat music as a social “mark of distinction”, but also increasingly as a social arena for seeking viable alternatives, and sometimes, for articulating dissatisfaction and anger. Our team’s research informants were predominantly of Serbian, but also of Romani, Slovak, Croatian, Hungarian, Vlach, Bunjevci and interethnic background, and belonged to different age cohorts. In defining leadership in operational terms and choosing the informants, we have combined the criteria of visibility and impact as seen by the communities and our external observations on how certain female musicians, as well as the women related to the music industry and cultural institutions, claim the agency and push for visibility.

Younger performers who use the platforms of YouTube and Tik Tok to learn about music trends, female musicianship and socio-politically engaged genres and songs are often not fully aware of the local history of female musicianship, but easily reach global instances of music-mediated critique of various issues, like racism, misogyny or the exploitation by contemporary capitalism, among others. The intersectionality of racial and gendered oppression is a topic investigated by the all-girl Romani activist band Pretty Loud who address multiple issues related to the experiences of Romani women.⁷ The band’s members have pointed out that the song ‘Energy’⁸ by Zambian female rapper Sampa the Great, is something “[they] listen all the time” (Pretty Loud, interview, Niš, 26 April 2021), which, coupled with their interest for online feminism and intersectionality of ethnicity and gender, gives an explanatory background to their experiences of oppression, a call to end the practice of child marriage and promote women’s rights discussed in their own songs. When I carefully introduced the word “feminism” during our group interview session, one of the more outspoken band members almost jumped with joy and quickly explained to me why feminism matters and how she and other band members discovered it:

I’ve seen it on social networks. I saw the comments telling that the feminists are sick women who hate men. No, that is not a point of feminism. The point of feminism is the equality (Pretty Loud, interview, Niš, 26 April 2021).

The same young informant continued to explain the feminist position by highlighting the fight against the oppression of women and racism:

I was always saying that the feminism is [related to] man and woman, there shouldn’t be that the man is above or that the woman is above, but equality. I feel sorry when daughters are treated differently than sons when it comes to to having a partner, going

7 Pretty Loud is a Belgrade / Niš based performance collective gathering Roma girls and young women, whose songs speak against early arranged marriages in Romani communities in Serbia, deal with issues such as racism against Roma people, but also include everyday topics of interest for young women. Their formation and subsequent work has been supported by the GRUBB foundation, facilitating educational and artistic projects aimed at Roma children and youth in Serbia. For a detailed case study of Pretty Loud, see Carol Silverman’s chapter in this volume.

8 The lyrics stress “feminine energy”, “female energy” and “female libation”.

out, going to school [...] There are our texts where we rap 'I am a woman and I will have a voice. Why shouldn't I have a voice?' (Pretty Loud, interview, Niš, 26 April 2021).

Young Roma people, as well as some elders within the Serbian Romani community strongly relate to the experience of oppression depicted in the songs, but also to the criticism and the messages of empowerment. Sometimes the audience refers to a certain band member as an imaginary female character of one of their songs, 'Samanta', a girl being forced to marry young, by calling them by her name and seeing the performer as an embodiment of that position (the lyrics go "And that's how Samanta got married / But everybody knew that's not what she wanted / She will never be happy / But her father will carry her burden"). The members of Pretty Loud have been praised as activists and promoters of women's rights by the wider community, which led them to receive many formal recognitions, such as the prize titled "Bring the noise" granted to the band on the 8 March 2021 by the feminist association BeFeM (Belgrade) for the fight for the voice of Romani women.

Although local world music and folk music revivalism differ from indie / alternative music in many ways, both are largely outside the dominant music industry in Serbia and the region, and offer a different experience and sense of belonging in comparison to highly stylized pop folk forms, thus being, as David Hesmondhalgh and Leslie M. Meier put it, "strongly linked to ideas of aesthetic, institutional and political alternatives" (Hesmondhalgh and Meier 2015: 2). Those two domains also share a historical position of women not being readily granted importance and power to act. This often meant that female participation was preferred in a collective form or as a supporting position. During Yugoslav socialism, the preferred way of presenting folklore included female *a cappella* traditional folk music groups, but comparatively less instrumentalists, while in pop and rock music, apart from the position of lead singers, women were often backing vocalists in the bands, less represented as players and sometimes not being fully credited for their overall role in music's production that could include composing, arranging and other tasks. If they tried to make a living based on music and hence become more visible in the mainstream media, they often faced criticism and did not receive enough support, which is often a case even today. A prominent pop singer, composer and producer Aleksandra Kovač described that situation and how that effort led to the feeling of exclusion, but also of perseverance:

The underground scene sees me as a part of the mainstream and the mainstream scene sees me as a part of the underground. I don't belong to either fully, I belong to both [...]. My music will fall under my microcosm, my scene, my publishing company, my production company. I will gather in the craziest possible way the audience that will understand that I am now a small islet floating in the vast ocean and trying to survive (Aleksandra Kovač, interview, 20 February 2022).

The Articulation of Female Musical Agency and Leadership in Serbian Music Scenes: Echoes of the Past, Multiple Presents

As a concept, leadership has been appropriated by the neoliberal discourse of exceptionality, the authority equated with masculine traits and high individual achievements. In contrast to that, I start with an idea of leadership as either individual or shared action taking and assuming responsibility for different communities and affinity groups in need. Moreover, it is not only a pure act of gaining power, but also a tactical rearranging of the given set of meanings, values and qualities attached to a certain identity position in order to stretch or overstep the boundaries, to evoke Judith Butler's ideas on disidentification. In addition to celebrating the individual accomplishments of notable female figures like major music stars who succeeded in not-so-friendly cultural and media environments, there are many things done by women in music and for the communities that perhaps deserve equal attention, and also rethinking of what basically constitutes leadership in today's world crippled by inequalities, rapid changes and uncertain future. Can it be related to informal and non-hierarchical "autonomist leadership" of leaderless movements (Western 2014: 680) where there is a loose but wide group "without movement" (e.g. female music artists and cultural workers) with similar aims, but without a common agenda that can perform "individualised collective leadership" together (ivi: 693), or is it more easily related to the concept of transformational leadership (Klenke 2011), where the outstanding figures incite the change within their immediate communities? One can easily differentiate between several possible models of leadership in music: intragroup and intergroup leadership within the immediate context (a band, cultural institution, network of fellow musicians), community leadership (presenting and safeguarding the music for a particular social group), cultural leadership (promoting a cultural identity through music) and transformational leadership (understood differently from the corporate slang of "leading and inspiring", as sonic activism, changes of music scenes and the wider society through music). Also, as regards the shaping of the agency, there are individual and collective, as well as hierarchical and horizontal, modes of leadership to be observed. Leadership can also be a failed or a budding possibility – the first is often the case with the women who were not able to obtain a necessary support network and the latter is a frequent situation with young female musicians. Olga Kovačević, an educated woman and a daughter of a Serbian Orthodox priest from Vojvodina⁹ (northern Serbia) who lived in the 19th century and was a self-taught *gusle* player, is an example of the arc between two possibilities – namely, of growing into a leadership position and sadly losing it, due to the lack of support for "overstepping" a traditional female role and being ahead of time. Olga gained popularity as a young girl within the national movement of United Serbian Youth. It was not common for an upper class woman to publicly play *gusle*, however Olga gave several notable public performances since she was 14 years old, where she was greeted with ovations due to her skillful singing and playing, but also as an epitome of national ideals of femininity, in the context of the 19th century Serbian national revival. In her diary entries (*Beleške*) published after her death, she eloquently

9 While seeking to establish the national culture in line with prevailing national romanticism discourse of the 19th century, United Serbian Youth also supported female emancipation.

expressed her views on culture and women that could be seen as openly feminist and ahead of her time. She also wrote about her unfulfilled wish to create a school of *gusle* playing for women (Kovačević 1912), which was an idea that radically challenged the 19th century's ideal of womanhood, primarily connected with the modesty, respectability and the private sphere of home. Without the formal support and quickly forgotten after the sharp rise to a relative fame within the national movement, she could not fulfill her vision, which stands out today as the first noted attempt to create an informal music education hub for women in Serbia that would transgress traditional gender boundaries. In her own words, it was hard to motivate other women to learn *gusle* playing (ivi: 24), as most of them saw the piano playing as the “modern” European music practice, standing at a more desirable intersection of class and gender.

In the most immediate context, the leader can be one person who is also externally perceived as such, or, in some cases, the true leader would be a person who performs the most important tasks, but “stays behind” the public view. Then, leadership could be also shared and fluid, with several musicians dividing the responsibilities and decisions – sometimes, this is the case with all-female bands whose members often recognize multiple subtle, yet real difficulties brought upon female artists by the society and strive for equality within the group by dividing the tasks and occasionally “rotating” the leadership roles in a horizontal manner. Speaking of sharing creative and managerial labor in her all-female melodic death metal band Nemesis, the drummer Selena Simić stated:

There are different hierarchies for different things. Regarding my band, I like to see that one of them has warmed up for something particular. Be it a shooting, a video, a song, I like to let it go of control and to trust that they will do everything well. When we were filming the music video for “The War is On”, our bass player was totally into finding a location and coming up with something. I also had a myriad of ideas, but I didn't want to force it, because I think that, when somebody is into something, you should let her go on and fulfill her own idea because afterwards she would appreciate both the thing we did and the band itself. [...] There are different types of hierarchies, but I know that the band expects from me to manage things. I always negotiate with the guy in whose studio we rehearse. When we travel, I am the one to talk to organizers (Selena Simić, interview, 8 October 2021).

Belgrade-based Nemesis is often presented with a reference to the gender of its members – an all-female band, *sveženski*¹⁰ *bend*, the girls [that] can play fast and furious music (“praše death metal”).¹¹ The band quickly went from playing covers to creating their own

10 *Sveženski* (adj.) is a calque of “all-female”, a loan translation, standing in-between an archaic tone and a playful meaning in modern Serbian. The use of this adjective in many newspaper articles mentioning the band, thus, subtly indicates the underlying mechanism of representation, that takes a note regarding the gender of the performers, but also leaves space for interpretation of the gendered positions as unusual or even funny.

11 Highlighting the band's ability to play in an energetic and powerful way, common for the death metal, is a commonplace in the announcements of their gigs, as well as in the press. This particular quote was taken from a Facebook event description, for a concert in 2015 in Belgrade club Kuglaš. <https://www.facebook.com/events/kugla%C5%A1/kuga-nemesis-petak-16012015-kuglas-beograd/1610603379167403/> (accessed 18 September 2022).

albums with authored music, and songs like 'Uprising' or 'The War is On' offer a critique of contemporary capitalist exploitation, with feminist overtones ("I am the owner of my life / You can't push me down / It's not over / the battle has just begun!"), delivered through the persuasive death growl of singer Sanja Drča.

Figure 1: The members of the band Nemesis. Photo credits: Danijela Zmajević.



In addition to being active in Serbian metal music community, band members like Selena Simić and Tijana Milivojević also take part in passing the skills and the experiences of playing to young women, like in Rock camp for girls – an annual event organized by Femix¹² since 2017, dedicated to building the community of young rock female musicians and helping the girls learn and combat prejudices while in a safe environment. Simić is also active in the Serbian feminist movement, where, among other things, she leads the drumming section for the 8th March protest walk. Being a long-time participant of the drumming section, I have been able to observe through the years how Simić has been carefully balancing between her leading position and the requirements of participatory music making, as a master drummer who passed the skills to sometimes completely untrained women in the informal feminist setting, offered rhythmic patterns for the protest and yet let the others decide over them, patiently waited until everyone learnt the rhythms sufficiently enough, and positioned herself as an equal member of a situational collective, while practicing a non-directive leading. Her work, thus, embodies a

12 Femix is a program supported by OPA, Organization for the Promotion of Activism, that actively supports the creative work in arts and culture by women in Serbia, especially focusing on young women and girls: <https://femix.info/> (accessed 11 September 2022).

situational approach to leadership that could be seen as gender-informed and fluid by being able to assume the leadership position and to step back when necessary, but also by combining the roles of an outstanding musician, a member of a band and an activist for women's rights, thus reaching across various social groups.

Figure 2: Anka Puđerka and Marka Vozaf (left to right) from the group Meškarke, during a field-work session. Photo credits: Branislav Stevanić.



All-female music collectives and shared and multileveled leadership can be encountered in other sociomusical contexts as well. The group Meškarke from the village of Aradac in Vojvodina is formed by women of the Slovak ethnic minority who maintain female playing on small diatonic single row accordions (*meške*), thus safeguarding their cultural identity through an exclusively female and Slovak tradition that started in the early 20th century. Their repertoire consists of dance tunes like the waltz, step dance and *csardasz*, as well as Slovak and some Serbian songs.

Their instruments were passed on from mother to a daughter and the group's present setting consists of four active players in their late sixties, as well as one octogenarian member. The group successfully performs in Serbia and abroad, as the music allowed its members not only to promote Slovak heritage, but also to travel and see the world outside their village and encounter different cultures and lifestyles, sometimes very far from their own:

[My husband] sometimes murmured and nagged, but he was able to go everywhere when his company would take them. I would let him go. Then he also would let me. Now he doesn't care anymore. [...] I have been everywhere and saw many things that cannot be described. I saw and experienced a lot. [...] Once we slept for a night in a

student's dorm abroad. There were different people there, making noise, partying. We didn't sleep the whole night (Anka Pudar, interview, 30 October 2021).

The bending of expected gender roles was allowed because the music was seen by the local community as a hobby and also an attractive and polite representation of their cultural identity. However, it was not fully met without resistance: the members recalled how some of them had to literally escape the work in the field to join the group for a journey, argue and negotiate with their husbands, or how they had to organize everything at home in order to be able to travel. On the other hand, the music allowed Meškarke to raise their social status within the village and the community of Slovaks in Vojvodina in general as cultural ambassadors for their ethnic minority group, as well as to conquer a space for the activities not related to female roles in rural patriarchal settings and recruit new members along the way.

As we see, the cultural expectation regarding the female musicians practicing local traditional music often underlines (female) virtue, modesty, and a role in safeguarding the national heritage. This is also typical for the revival of *frula* that started during the 2000s, with many girls and young women entering the community of *frulaši*. *Frula* is a Serbian folk instrument,¹³ an end-blown shepherd aerophone made of wood, with a traditional repertoire tied to village songs and dances that has been modernized throughout the 20th century. Nowadays *frula* playing is equally part of the Serbian music heritage preservation efforts, of folk amateurism and of professional world music settings.

From a gendered position, there is something specific in this otherwise common trope of successfully blending the modern and the traditional. Male *frula* players of the mid- and older generation either continue the reproduction of traditional musical models and repertoires treated as the local cultural capital and the “imaginary museum of sound”, to paraphrase the famous metaphor by Lydia Goehr (1992), or some of them like virtuoso Bora Dugić, decide to play in an improved and technically superior manner, choosing more popular or melodically richer traditional tunes and adding examples of regional music, as well as their own authored works. Female *frula* instrumentalists often have to prove themselves on both levels – by entering the neotraditional music scene where there is still an underlying presumption that the instrument is reserved for men and by demonstrating an equal level of mastery in contemporary approach to performing on *frula*.

Young prominent *frula* player / multiinstrumentalist¹⁴ Neda Nikolić's performances and repertoire choices illustrate the typical position for a female performer outside conventionally assigned gender roles: she plays the instrument associated with men in the general discourse on national folk culture. Neda commands a vast repertoire that could be tuned either towards neotraditional music events related to local and national heritage sustainability by playing village airs and dances without the accompaniment and by learning local musical dialects, or in other instances, towards presenting herself as a skilled multi-instrumentalist on a large stage of a concert venue associated with “serious” classical music, in front of an orchestra, doing crossovers and jumping between Serbian

13 While the majority are ethnically Serbian, there are also Vlach and Bosniak *frula* players.

14 For an overview of Nikolić's approach to *kaval* playing, see Mirjana Zakić's chapter in this volume.

folk music, jazz, contemporary classical and world music. In other words, she constantly has to move between social spaces, by participating in folk music events officially staging the national culture, as well as by doing the gigs in the clubs and negotiating a position in terms of representation, authority and labor value. This expectation to subtly tie the knot of the dichotomy between the old and the modern was summed up in a recent interview for the Serbian populist magazine *Telegraf*, whose title proudly stated “She is the pride of Serbia in the world, because she plays both *kolo* [a traditional Serbian dance] and jazz on *frula*”.¹⁵

During the first year of pandemic, I was able to observe Neda’s struggle to maintain her multileveled positioning through scheduling performances in the very limited context of COVID19-related prevention measures: she performed a concert in Belgrade’s Ethnographic Museum during a period of very strict regulations on public gatherings, earned money through club gigs with pop music bands, and held her jubiliary concert titled “Čarobna frula” (The Magic Flute) at Belgrade’s Kolarac concert hall, where she presented her different musical “personalities” and varied repertoire with various guest musicians. In addition to performing, Neda also taught young children either through private lessons or through the workshops: many young girls who saw her performances on television and on the internet now point out to Neda when asked about the role models in *frula* playing.

Figure 3: Neda Nikolić playing *frula* in Belgrade’s Ethnographic Museum. Photo credits: Iva Nenić.



15 <https://www.telegraf.rs/pop-i-kultura/muzika/3178546-ponos-je-srbije-u-svetu-jer-svira-i-kolo-i-dzez-na-fruli-ovo-je-neda-nasa-najbolja-frulasica> (accessed 17 September 2022).

If the intersectionality is a common identity precondition, then this situation – namely, of a female performer being under pressure to fulfill different social expectations and to cross different borders (between musical genres and between gendered areas of expression as defined by the society) in increasingly precarious conditions, could be understood as a constant demand to juggle between one's own agency, social biases and invisible borders. Thus Neda can turn over the expected position of a “partial insider” due to her gender by inventing herself as a versatile performer being able to move between scenes, instruments and genres and being invited to different musical arenas, but also putting more effort into sustaining that position and successfully avoiding the “either-or” logic. Of course, it is questionable whether this is a victory, or actually a burden faced by female music artists, especially at the early stages of their careers and in sociomusical formations with an ambiguous approach towards the professionalization of female music labor.

Growing into a transformative leadership position can be observed in the case of all-female neotraditional / world music band Rodjenice, gathering young women from the Serbian cities of Belgrade, Novi Sad and Subotica. This *a cappella* group, now a trio, was formed in 2009, with the intention of performing Serbian and regional traditional folk songs outside the common representative mode of folk music heritage that stresses the authenticity and locality as a means of safeguarding national culture. Rodjenice's repertoire consists of two-part village folk songs and, while they keep the non-tempered tonality and “rough” vocal expression characteristic of Serbian and regional rural music culture of the past, their framing of the songs differs from other all-female traditional and revivalist groups. The band is active on digital music platforms and they translate the song lyrics and present themselves to the foreign, English-speaking audience, while also taking part in international world music festivals and in general re-framing traditional music by aspiring towards an artistic concept that endows their music with a specific visual imagery and allusions to the Yugoslav past. One of the main metaphors used by the members of the group is “raw”, which is simultaneously evoking the discourse of authenticity typical for the Serbian revivalist traditional music scene and a word play regarding the band's name and identity (their album recorded during the pandemic and released in 2021 is named *Rawdjenice*). As one of the singers said in a recent interview, “We don't want Yugoslavness as a political or social arrangement, or necessarily the cultural experience it entails. What we want from Yugoslavness is something supranational, that we can sing [to the various audiences in that context]” (Rodjenice, interview, 6 October 2021). The “raw” metaphor, thus, functions on several levels. The members of the trio have recorded their singing with a Zoom H4n recorder, wanting to “offer a specific musical experience as well as the experience of the space, in a form of a music narrative relying on sonic and production imperfection”.¹⁶ The “raw” concept serves as a descriptive statement for inserting the “exotic”, loud and crisp sonic qualities of Serbian traditional folk music into the wider medium of popular culture, deliberately playing with fascination and estrangement, to use Freudian terms, of the audience. Lastly, it is an allusive political gesture asking for a bottom-up approach to the turbulent past and present cautious

16 <https://rodjenice.bandcamp.com/album/rawdjenice?fbclid=IwARoKsCT4kwUACM5qDi8Po3rrSAXDV6KrPyjWbKfjprs7tXB8vyMl5ZMQ1bs> (accessed 5 September 2022).

alliances between the post-Yugoslav nations as a “raw” ideology without politics; in the very words of the band members, “the choice of the songs [has] activated [...] the politics in the culture, but in a non-deliberate way” (Rodjenice, interview 6 October 2021). This stands in contrast to the usual framing of traditional folk music as national and non-political at the same time and, as an intervention by a new generation of performers, it addresses different and wider younger audiences, while letting the older listeners relate to their experience of Yugoslavia, especially with the partisan songs sung in the style of village two-part singing *na bas* (on bass), like *ojkača*¹⁷ ‘Mladen’ – a song describing how a fellow partisan fighter in WWII brings the news of the heroic death of a young brave man fighting the German fascists to his old mother.¹⁸

Figure 4: Rodjenice posing with statues in the Museum of Yugoslavia’s park. Photo credits: Jovan Radaković.



Rodjenice have also addressed the gender-based division within the folk music repertoire, by making an album entitled *Male voices* (2020), where they have deliberately sung the pieces today conventionally seen as meant for male performers – this decision stems both from their claiming agency as female artists (and refusing the role of mere “carriers of tradition”), but also points out the gap between the rigidly gender-codified domains of folk music making and the complex and changing history of gender positioning within

17 *Ojkača* or *ojkalica* is a type of song performed with the use of *ojkanje/groktanje* (shaking), an archaic singing technique where the leading voice decorates the melody on the syllable “oj” (oy) with the tones produced by the use of tremolo / vibrato, common for the Dinaric areas of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. It is performed by Croats and Serbs, the latter also bringing and preserving this type of singing to Serbia through the communities established with the resettlement of Dinaric Serbs to Vojvodina after the WWII.

18 <https://rodjenice.bandcamp.com/track/mladen> (accessed 11 August 2022).

folk music. As an act of disruption, it paves the path for a different interpretation of tradition and models a fresh approach to reshaping the relation between the past and present of national / regional culture from women's point of view.

Similar to the previous case study, the recent rise of popularity of Serbian finalist in the 2022 Eurovision song contest, Ana Đurić Konstrakta illustrates how taking hold of leadership can start from a seemingly underdog position and end up in a powerful act of being listened to outside the fandom circles and resonating on wider social issues. Lead singer of the indie pop band Zemlja groova (Groove land) and solo artist since recently, Konstrakta has been a long-time member of Belgrade's independent pop music scene. Her clever and ambiguous lyrics together with the rich visual imagery far from the figure of seductive music diva, mix irony, fun and carefully crafted social critique. The Eurovision entry 'In corpore sano' epitomizes this approach by simultaneously targeting the global obsession with female beauty (the now famous opening line "What is the secret of Meghan Markle's healthy hair"), addressing the hypocrisy of over-caring for the body but less for psychological wellbeing, and the precarious position of today's artists outside of mainstream music industry ("God grant us health since there's no medical insurance for me"), to name a few. On the stage, the artist is seen in a buttoned up suit, singing playfully in a narrow range and in recitative mode, surrounded by the choir echoing and amplifying her statements of a post-post-modern priestess condemning the *status quo*. Her performative act was cherished by the artists in Serbia and in the region, whose precarious position has rarely been publicly addressed in such way, but also by ordinary people who understood the lyrics as denouncing the falsehood of today's self-care practices preached within capitalist societies and even as a critique of the approach to Covid-19 pandemic that has often neglected the effects of restrictions and fear on psychological health. This way of claiming agency actually shows how being a part of small sub-culture of Serbia and to an extent, of the changing post-Yugoslav context, could be strategically used to reach the wider audiences together with posing an alternative model of female identification as an artist, as well as practicing transformational leadership for artists, female musicians and the wider community by pointing to social problems often left unspoken.

Roads to Take: Female Musical Leaderships for the Future

If leadership is to be understood apart from the mere obtaining of a power and authority position, taking it as a set of qualities and acts that should not be quantified but dialectically approached, it can lead to several directions in research, but also in the process of improving women's position in music. Society's gendered expectations and pressures often lead women to take multiple positions of promoting female agency in music, being role models, practicing horizontal and egalitarian inter-group relations, representing different communities, and using music as a tool for the social transformation. Close to Klenke's concept of female leadership as the contextualized and gendered breaking of various barriers and "glass ceilings", but also of a "labyrinth", a complicated journey towards a paradigm of "new organizational structures or different contexts" (Klenke 2011: 9), female affective and immaterial labor and carving of a leader's position in musical practices could be seen as a living experience that should be recognized and supported

through representation and networking of the women in music scenes and the relevant stakeholders, as being transformative, non-directive and multimodal. From the perspective of engaged scholarship, this also requires a discussion of the trap of exceptionality and tokenism (being labeled either as an “only” or a “representative” woman) within the communities, together with combating various stereotypes in many ways still attached to women’s musicianship. Working across the genres and in-between generations, communities and cultures is a task that female musicians often take already being in a position of “partial belonging” due to their gender and this kind of cross-boundary approach can also be seen as a form of leadership as it builds bridges and takes a lot of work and courage from a privileged position. From young musicians, like Neda Nikolić, who work in different music scenes and in international contexts, to traditional and neotraditional female groups in Serbia addressing interethnic and regional issues related to the past and to contemporary identity politics, to rock artists like the band Nemesis singing in English for an international audience, but also empowering both budding female musicians and independent cultural production, this is a feature that characterizes female musicianship in Serbia, but also elsewhere, as other chapters in this book exemplify. The experience of inequality, but also the understanding of womanhood and identity in general as multiple, changing and not determined by entrenched social norms, has led many female musicians to address important social issues like social injustice, early marriage, precarious labor conditions, double burden of work performed by women, but also, in some cases, to strategically evoke feminist approaches and epistemology. Female musical leaders embody a multiplicity of ways of being or becoming women, and in that process use sonic, visual and discursive means to carve a place for themselves and the others in the world by “doing things with music”. This calls for a greater attention to their endeavors by the joint efforts of academia, music communities, industries and activism, in order to remove various invisible, but solid “glass ceilings” and “concrete walls” on their way.

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