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The Gypsy caravan. From real Roma to imaginary Gypsies in western music and film (review)

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esting is, for example, the discussion of the ways in which the annual arrival of clothes and other luxury goods brought by a Western European NGO influences the mutual relations and power structure between the Romanian villagers and the hamlet Roma, offering the Roma a certain feeling of superiority by the trade and barter of clothes to the villagers.

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Reviewed by Nina Stoffers

In the past, various attempts have been made to address the difficult field of (so-called) Gypsy music, putting forth different strategies of scientific analysis. With his book “The Gypsy caravan: From real Roma to imaginary Gypsies in Western music and film” David Malvinni proposes a combination of strategies to approach this subject matter. Unlike other musicological studies, he is not trying to give an exact definition of what Gypsy music (and/or Roma music) might be. Rather, the author is interested in what lies underneath such definitions by finding a kind of subtext for the phenomenon he introduces as “Gypsiness”. By this, he refers to a set of ideas, both real and imagined, the mixture of which is precisely the difficulty. Its common tropes are the road, journey, caravan, fire and the outdoors, sensuality, and nature.

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The starting point for the study is the author's general statement that Gypsy music is stuck between reality and the imaginary. Despite the numerous ethnomusicological and musicological publications on the subject, Malvinni accuses those disciplines of never having fully recognized the Gypsies' influence on and their interrelation with the artistic tradition in Western music. Besides that, and even more important, he attests them as a basic problem, as they have not been able to deal with the elusive nature of Gypsiness.

Beyond this academic one, another aspect of the general marginalization of Gypsy music has to do with the notion of nationalism. As easily shown, there are no national advocates to defend Gypsy music *as* Gypsy. The discourse about Gypsy music, however, is always already within the national dimension of different states. Either Gypsy music is connected with a certain country such as Hungary, Russia, or Spain, or it is detached from the national context and seen as a musical amalgam with the uniting factor 'Roma' connecting them all together. By deconstructing nationalism, Malvinni asks if we do not detect an interest and advocacy behind every discourse on music and touches therewith a philosophical context he will attend frequently throughout the study.

Within this philosophical context the question of Gypsy music might turn into the question of the meaning of music itself and the ultimate purpose of music-making. Hence, Malvinni's thesis is that "Gypsy music [...] is not simply a musical style, nor another exoticism [...], but a consciousness of the communicative essence of music" (p. ix). This is certainly not a new perception in the field of musicology in general, but it is a new perspective within the context of Gypsy music. By developing a—in his words "mock"—equation, the author tries to get a hold on Gypsy music as a performative and communicative phenomenon: "I+V=E". In this equation, Improvisation (on-the-spot creation) plus Virtuosity (technique and the idea of innate musicality, whether or not this actually exists) results in Emotion or expression on the listener. While the equation itself is as simplistic as it appears, Malvinni's investigation goes into a very detailed and precise analysis of its individual parts. As a result, it can be said that even though the characterization of Gypsy music as emotional and performative is not original, Malvinni's approach is new in that it combines threads that had been detached before—after (re-)spinning those threads in a very differentiated and consequential way. Thus, Gypsiness appears natural as an outlet of emotion, passion and even seduction, delivering a popular motif where Gypsies represent the "noble savages" and their music functions as a bridge to the innocent and lost world of the primitive.

The main body of Malvinni's book proceeds in a historical manner with examples from literature, music and film in order to derive pattern and paradigm shifts for Gypsiness. Omitting an in-depth literary analysis for each of his references, Malvinni (briefly) touches on, among others, the sixteenth-

century play by G. Vicente, *Farsa das Ciganas*, as well as on J. W. Goethe's *Götz von Berlichingen* and V. Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris*, finally to reach D. H. Lawrence's twentieth-century short story *The Virgin and the Gypsy*. As a contribution to the understanding of Gypsiness in music, the literary examples bear witness to how "Gypsy" and "music" became almost automatic reciprocal connotations in popular culture. Even though Gypsies were the obvious target of racist stereotyping in literature, the cited works also served as a positive reference point when Europeans tried to understand the mystique and power of itinerant Roma musicians. Today this ambivalent image of Gypsy culture is subtly and expertly exploited by marketers and promoters of Gypsiness (pp. 39–40).

Malvinni then moves on to a very interesting chapter (Chapter 3) in which he outlines the history of improvisation in Western music. His goal is to comprehend what kind of substance Gypsy music was understood to be—for composers and audiences alike. He refers back to the difficulties of defining Gypsy music when he states that if the essence of Gypsy music cannot be determined, precisely and exactly, it is because of the "un" at the heart of the unpredictability of improvisation (p. 48). This is the operative point, and with the outline of the history of improvisation he proposes a new perspective on the subject. The other interesting point discussed in this chapter is that improvisation in Western art music has merged paradoxically into the very concept of a composed musical structure. It is the nineteenth century's familiar tale of the triumph of composer and work over performer and event (p. 49). Furthermore, improvisation is no longer found in written Western art music. However, it is kept alive—even though not noticed as such—in the encore presentations of today's concert halls.

Before looking at some music examples in detail, Malvinni proposes Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome concept as a better explanatory model than the tree model that dominates Western perception. This theory of "nomadology" attempts to explain the historical and geographical breaks of Gypsiness in music, and vice versa these disruptions and eruptions show how Gypsiness in music is rhizoid—reconstituting and re-imagining itself with each new cultural contact (p. 67). Even though it seems far-fetched, this transfer does allow new explanation patterns for events that can hardly be brought together and thought about without it.

The following five analyses of musical material by Brahms, Liszt, Rachmaninov, Janáček and Bartók make different contributions to the understanding of Gypsiness in music. Beginning with Brahms, Malvinni sees Gypsiness as a necessary element in Brahms' style and shows with the *Hungarian Dance no. 5* that Gypsy music fits perfectly into the paradigm shift as the aesthetic demand for a deeper subjectivity in music increases in the later half of the nineteenth century.

This wish for a direct, immediate, and pure music—and the performative aspect of Gypsiness as a stylistic alternative to Western performative practice—is then exemplified in the analysis of Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsodies*. They are, according to Malvinni, the first rigorous attempt to bridge the aesthetic chasm separating Western art-music and Gypsy music (p. 90). This is a new interpretation of Liszt's work, hence it serves as an explanation why Gypsy music is neglected and marginalized in the Western canon. Furthermore, for Liszt, the triumph of absolute music represents a huge historical mistake and misunderstanding of what music is. Unfortunately, this is precisely what happened in the construction of the Western canon, which subsequently led to prejudices against Gypsy music (p. 103). In other words, Malvinni's thesis is "that the category of Gypsy music represents one of the great populist aesthetic intrusions into European nineteenth- and twentieth-century art music, while conceptually remaining a blurry, hidden, and marginalized topic." (p. 2).

One aspect in the chapter about Liszt is somewhat irritating: Malvinni characterizes virtuosity as a male signifier and lays out Liszt's effect of music on women—making a case along Nietzschean lines. Why the gender aspect enters the discussion here remains unclear.

With the chapter about Bartók (Chapter 9), the author introduces Liszt's most commonly cited critic. Bartók's critique is based on his ethnomusicological field recordings and concludes that the Gypsies do not play proper Gypsy music but borrowed the material from Hungarian peasants. Thus, Bartók criticizes that Gypsy music became a symbol for the Hungarian national sentiment *per se*. At the same time, he criticizes the very nature of Gypsy music, but Malvinni can show that his opposition is actually and ultimately aimed at the Hapsburg Empire and the German language hegemony. With Bartók, there is a seismic shift in the valuation of Gypsy music: it became a problematic phenomenon. In his eyes, Gypsy music represents a contaminated, tourist-traffic music geared towards a mass audience (p. 141).

Even though Malvinni shows a differentiated picture of Bartók's critique and does not lapse into the usually found dichotomy of Liszt versus Bartók, he excoriates Bartók and his ethnomusicological field recordings so severely that the need for this within his study appears questionable.

Finally, with the aid of film-music analyses for six different examples, Malvinni shows that "under the topic of Gypsy film music [there] is actually a series of questions around questions of (intellectual) property, ownership, and what ties these two together, a notion of self (here, of the one who owns)." (p. 163). His interest is the deconstruction of a certain discourse practice—the international distribution of films—by way of relating films as a possibility for discovering a "truth" about self or society. Among others, Malvinni analyzes *Latcho drom* by Tony Gatlif at length. He achieves an interesting perspective on

Gypsy music as he can show how these films suggest in different ways a reality: how they institutionalize the existence of Gypsy music, and how the development has advanced into a mass spectacle. This marketing of Gypsiness via film receives a boost as Gypsy music as a representation of the “Other” sells best after the fall of the Iron Curtain. The author diagnoses the creation of a new, unique Gypsy identity, a “Gypsy/Roma hyper-national identity” (p. 187).

This argument brings the beginning and end of Malvinni’s book together: He links the music as a marker of identity with politics in the sense that it is no coincidence that the Roma-right movement has emerged simultaneously with globalization. The latter is seen as the precondition for the movement. Malvinni proclaims that the contemporary “imagined community” of the Roma relies on Gypsiness in music—it is therefore no longer possible to think about Gypsy music without considering the Roma-right movement.

In the last chapter, Malvinni introduces the idea of three autonomous Gypsy music “bins”, a categorization found also in the marketing of contemporary Gypsy music CDs (1. folk music, 2. music beyond the West, 3. Gypsy world-music). This is a strategy not often undertaken in musicology and with it he illustrates the different perspectives on Gypsy music in their coexistence: different approaches which are usually “either/or” are combined here for use in a non-competing way. Hence, Gypsy music is authentic, an expressive musical style, *and* a cognitive construction of the Gypsies’ and the Western mindset at the same time (pp. 212–14). Because of the shifting nature of Gypsy music, “The category mutates before our eyes.” (p. 213); a realization that is known in other disciplines (like in anthropology) but not in musicology.

In summary, Malvinni’s approach to the subject of Gypsy music is not new in its component parts, but in combining them and in differentiating them as appropriate for the subject matter, his approach is new. In some points he appears biased, for example, when he speaks about virtuosity as a male reference or when he claims that there is an emerging relationship between Gypsy music and America (which means the United States!) which will bring an important contribution to Gypsiness. He himself is surely an advocate of Gypsies and Roma—but, one can conclude, a good one.