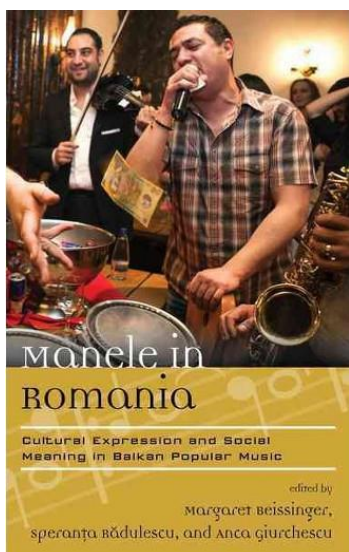


Popular Music Genre in Interdisciplinary Narratives: *Manele* in Romania

Manele in Romania. Cultural Expression and Social Meaning in Balkan Popular Music. Edited by Margaret Beissinger, Speranța Rădulescu, and Anca Giurchescu, Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.



The turbulent, uncertain and confusing reality of the post-socialist countries marked with the intense processes of EU integration and the prevalence of the neo-liberal cultural values has been widely discussed in scholarly literature. Consequently, as a powerful and representative agent of cultural expression, popular music from the transitional times of East-European countries, generatively signified as Balkan ethnopop, has also been the subject of many academic writings. Contrary to Serbian *turbo-folk*, Bulgarian *chalga* and Turkish *arabesk*, which has been discussed among scholars, *Manele in Romania: Cultural Expression and Social Meaning in Balkan Popular Music* is the first English-language volume on a controversial, both deeply embraced and loudly disputed

musical genre in Romania today – *manele*. This very well equipped and comprehensive publication, carefully edited by Margaret Beissinger, Speranța Rădulescu, and Anca Giurchescu, contains nine articles which purposefully illuminate the *manea* phenomenon from various perspectives and different disciplinary positions.

Although the history of *manele* can be traced to much earlier periods, it became widely spread and extremely popular all around Romania (especially in Bucharest and its southwestern areas) after the collapse of the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1989. The oppression of this musical genre during the communist period was grounded on the fact that it was practiced mostly by Roma *lăutari* musicians who did not fit into the totalitarian fiction of the pure Romanian culture. Additionally, *manele* were also oppressed by official authorities, intellectuals and media because of their “Oriental” musical features:

syncopated rhythms, modal and maquam-based melodic patterns, piercing instrumentation and harsh sonority of (primarily male) vocal interpretation. However, during the 2000s it almost exploded all around the country. As Beissinger points out in the opening chapter, *manele* “was adopted as a symbol of youth, working-class, and nouveau-riche culture, and it gained a massive, passionate public fan base”. As a widespread and vital phenomenon which was hotly debated in Romanian public space, the *manea* phenomenon certainly deserved a careful analysis. This excellent book offers elaborated discussions of all discursive layers of *manele* which cover a wide range of its musical, kinetic, poetic and performative features, interpretational and contextual singularities, cultural meanings and aesthetic values. Above all that, through their reflexive writings, based for the most part on decades-long field research, all seven authors in this publication, passionately discuss the challenging and uncertain reality of contemporary Romanian society in general.

Framed by the Introduction (by Beissinger) and Epilogue (by Rădulescu), this volume comprises nine chapters. Their high scholarly but also wider communicative applicability is supplemented by the accompanying website (available at [manele-in-romania](http://manele-in-romania.com) web address), where various illustrative materials (musical transcriptions, photos, maps, numerous video clips) by displaying musical features of *manele*, their geographical dissemination, and visual and performative peculiarities in the private and public sphere visually reinforces the arguments put forward by the authors.

The first four chapters are linked together by their focus on *manele* discussed in ethnographic, historical, and comparative perspectives. In the article “Music, dance, performance: A descriptive analysis of *manele*”, which opens this part of the book, Anca Giurchescu and Speranța Rădulescu in remarkable ethnomusiological and ethnochoreological comprehensive scholarly narratives analytically identify musical, kinetical, and to some extent, poetic features of *manele*, historically tracing its roots from Ottoman forms of dance and dance music (those are *köçek*, *cengi*, and *çiftetelli*). The historical overview of the genre is additionally explored in the following chapter “A history of the *manea*: The nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century” written by musicologist Costin Moisil. He discusses *manele* by drawing on available historical sources from the mid-1800s and argues that Romanian *lăutari* who were mostly Roma adopted it from the Turkish/Ottoman urban musical tradition during the first decades of the nineteenth century. The following, third chapter, is entitled “How the music of *manele* is structured”. Here, through grounded ethnomusiological analysis, Speranța Rădulescu discusses the extremely heterogeneous musical features of the genre more precisely. She identifies three stages of its reshaping and historically links them with the demographic, political and economic development of the Romanian capital, Bucharest. As Speranța Rădulescu claims and all other authors agree, no matter which of the various musical

appearances of *manele*, roughly divided into Oriental and Occidental forms, the common denominator and one of the most distinctive musical feature of the genre, is its syncopated rhythm. This part of the book ends with the article “Romanian *manele* and regional parallels: ‘Oriental’ ethnopop in the Balkans” written by Margaret Beissinger. In this chapter Beissinger positions Romanian *manele* in the broad category of “east-central Balkan ethnopop” by knowledgeable comparisson with Serbian *turbo folk* and Bulgarian *chalga*: all three musical genres emerged in the 1990s when Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania started a long and uncertain struggle for the new political and cultural reality after the long period of socialist regimes. As the author argues, distinctly gendered and ethnic identities of all of those related genres could be partly explained “by the contrasting way in which the power elite in Yugoslavia/Serbia, Bulgaria, and Romania have controlled and influenced the gendered and ethnic Others of their societies – women and Roma”.

The central part of this volume, which also consists of four chapters, focuses on the complex relationships between *manea* performers (*maneliști*) and all others involved in its performance (audience, dancers, patrons and the media), but also those who are indirectly connected with the dissemination of the genre (politicians and cultural activists). The cultural and aesthetic values, motivation, social and political positioning of all those various social groups that is involved in some way with *manele*, is discussed in the article “Actors and performers” written by Rădulescu. Grouping them in four categories of fans, young people, “wiseguys” and emigrants, the author explains their joint connection with *manele* through their common “belief in the absolute power of money, nurtured by an unstable, disoriented Romanian society undermined by the corruption in which they live or originate”. Anthropologist Victor Stoichiță’s following article “The ‘boyar in the helicopter’: Power, parody, and carnival” focuses on ironic and parodic aspects of the textual features of *manele*. Through inspired and reflexive analytical narrative, Stoichiță explores the semantics of the poetic traits of *manele*, discusses some of its musical features (rhythm and sonority) and effuses possible ways of interpretation of this genre in the perspective of the European feast tradition, the carnival. Rădulescu’s attitudes toward money as one of the keys of the power of *manele* are confirmed in the chapter “*Manele* and the underworld” in which journalist Adrian Schiop offers the critical overview of the social reality of *manea* performers and consumers through the anthropological perspective of an insider. This part of the book ends with the chapter “Village *manele*: An urban genre in rural Romania”. In this article Margaret Beissinger gradually, through a detailed and vivid ethnography based on her field research since the late 1990s, explains how the village musicians gradually adopted *manele* conceptually blurring the boundaries between village and urban musical tradition.

The last segment of the book consists of two texts: the last chapter and the epilogue. In the first of them, “Turbo-authenticity: An essay on *manelism*”, anthropologist Vintilă Mihăilescu opens a new discourse of discussing *manele* scrutinizing them in a political perspective. Through piercing, sharp and reflexive narrative, Mihăilescu argues that *manele* should be considered as a wider social phenomenon which he calls *manelism*. “It seems possible to see *manelism* from the perspective of a sudden opening-up of society and forced Westernization (whose traces are found in the very structure of the latest *manea* music) and of emotional reactions to this new context”, argues Mihăilescu. Focusing on the emotional aspects of performing and consuming *manele*, the author opens a perspicacious discussion of its social meanings within the broader perspective of market-oriented society which functions according to the ruthless principles of, as he calls it, “moral Darwinism” and “primitive accumulation of desire”. Similar to Stoichiță, leaning to the associations with the carnival, the author concludes that *manele* are “a sui generis story of post-communist confusion, to which society as a whole still mainly reacts in an emotional way”. Finally, in the last segment of the book proposed as an “Epilogue”, Speranta Rădulescu gives an inspired overview of *manele* from, once again, the perspective of a deeply involved insider, pointing to the latest receding tendencies of the genre and opening questions of its further reshaping and dissemination.

As already mentioned, this extraordinary book has a high applicability both among scholars from various disciplines and the wider public of those who want to achieve a greater understanding of the turbulent social reality Southeastern countries are struggling with. Unfortunately, readers will not have the opportunity to discuss any of numerous perspectives which this volume inspiringly opened with one of the book editors, Anca Giurchescu. If it could be any consolation, this volume is dedicated to her and it will shine as one of her latest outstanding achievements.

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