Musics of the new times

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Romanian *manele* and Armenian *rabiz* as icons of post-communist changes

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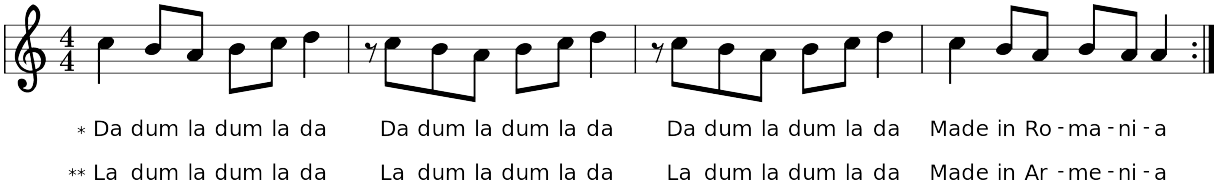
Introduction

As a starting point for this article we propose to consider two musical tunes. One was performed in Armenia, the other in Romania. Both share the same melody, the same rhythm, and their lyrics are closely related at the chorus (transcribed below). Moreover, both are sung by children "prodigies" : the Armenian Grisho Asatryan, and the Romanian Ionuț Cercel.



Caption:
***: Chorus of *Made in Romania*, sung by Ionuț Cercel (album *Manele made in RO.Mania*, 2008).**
****: Chorus of *Made in Armenia,* sung by Grisho Asatryan (*Star collection vol. 4,* 2009).**

Grisho Asatryan is the son of Artash Asatryan and grandson of Aram Asatryan, two famous singers in an Armenian musical genre called *rabiz*. In the rest of the song, the lyrics underline Grisho's familial and national heritage : « I am a little singer / Aram's grand son [...] I sing with my father [Artash] / Tata and Tatul [two famous *rabiz* singers] are my friends / and I am made in Armenia ».

Ionuț Cercel is the son of Petrică Cercel, a famous singer in a musical genre called *manele*. The rest of the song deals with ethnicity, tolerance and national unity: « Whoever you are / Whatever language you speak / This is your country / Romania / Come on, the Moldavian / Come on the Romanian / Come on the Gypsy / We're all made in Romania ».

That closely related melodies may be found all over Europe should not be a matter of surprise. Béla Bartók has been amongst the first researchers to document the phenomenon in the context of a newly born "science of folklore" (Bartók 1997, pp.158-162). In his time, which coincided with well known processes of nation building, this kind of finding inevitably led to debates on the "origins" of the tune : who borrowed it from whom, which "nation" was the song's creator, to whose "patrimony" should it belong ? Such questions lost most of their relevance in scholarly literature during the second half of the XXth century (although they regularly return under focus in mass media). In the Balkans, ethnomusicologists have stressed that

the circulation of tunes always implied a strong dose of creativity, and that discussions on cultural belonging or identity could only make sense at a broader regional level. Comparing several tunes performed by Gypsy and non Gypsy musicians in Kosovo, Pettan (1996) refers to a "Balkan *Musikbund* ", which he describes by analogy with the term *Sprachbund*, used in linguistics to characterize a geographic area of dialectal convergence and crossroads. Similarly Dona Buchanan opens the book suggestively titled *Balkan Popular Music and the Ottoman Oecumene* with a collection of variants of the same tune gathered from Bulgaria, Turkey, Greece, and extending to America, through Jewish *klezmorim* musicians (Buchanan 2007a). This same tune and its transformations had also been discussed previously by Katsarova (1973) and by Peeva (2003) in the film *Whose is this song?* Our opening example suggests that the idea of a musical *sprachbund* or *oecumene* should probably be extended beyond the Balkans, to encompass as well the eastern side of the Black Sea.

Other tunes could probably have illustrated the same point. But this particular example goes beyond musical influence. The two versions show very close resemblance not only in their sound structures and lyrics, but also in the image of their interprets (both children prodigies), which in turn is closely linked to the social status of the genre in which they (and their respective fathers) perform. This net of similarities suggests that *manele* and *rabiz* may share the same cultural model. To further investigate this hypothesis we propose hereafter a synthetic and comparative description of both cultural trends.

Bibliographical sources are still scarce on these topics. One may find valuable informations on Armenian *rabiz* in Abrahamian (2005) and Abrahamian and Pikichian (1990). Romanian *manele* drew more attention in recent years: see Beissinger (2007), Rădulescu (2002; 2004; 2010), (Voiculescu 2005) and (Stoichita 2008, p.66; 2011b). In what follows, our informations are drawn from these sources and from our ongoing fieldworks, respectively in Armenia and Romania. This is to our knowledge the first comparison between popular musics in each country[1]. After providing some basic ethnographical data from both sides, we will sketch possible landmarks for future investigations.

Musical features

Rabiz

Both *rabiz* and *manele* are performed primarily by professional musicians. They record CDs and shoot videoclips, but their main financial income is provided by the live performances. These may occur at ceremonial gatherings (mostly weddings and christenings), village fairs, or political meetings. In the urban areas, *manele* and *rabiz* are also performed in night clubs and restaurants. The songs and videoclips are occasionally broadcasted by the national mass media, and they circulate widely on the internet.

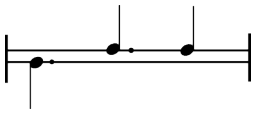
Rabiz songs use many rhythms and tunes. Their melodic motives, ornaments, and instrumental sounds often convey a distinctive flavor, which Armenian commentators characterize either as "traditional" *(avandakan)* either as "oriental" *(arevilian)*. The first term refers to an idea of autochtonous music from pre-soviet times (the *gusan* bard repertoire or any other music seen as "national Armenian"). The second refers to Turkish, Arabic or Azeri influences

1 We are grateful to the New Europe College in Bucharest for the many opportunities it provided us for discussing this comparison with other researchers interested in the area. Our article benefited particularly from reactions of the participants at the symposium Black Sea Link (New Europe College, April 2010).

(mainly to the *mugham/maqam* type of melismatic elaboration)[2]. The two ideas easily converge for Armenian listeners: Arabic, Turkish or Azeri elements refer nowadays to an oriental "Other", but also to a shared Ottoman past, of which many Armenians tend to be nostalgic. In Armenia's musical landscape, *rabiz* is also remarked by the use of electronic sound techniques (amplification, sonic effects, synthetic drumkits, etc.). The mix of "traditional" or "oriental" moods with these "modern" timbres seems to stand at the core of the genre for most Armenian commentators.

Manele

According to professional musicians, there are 2 rhythmic possibilities to play *manele*[3].



or

These define very much the genre. Contrary to *rabiz*, *manele* are not necessarily performed with electronic sounds (one may recognize a *manea* even when played acoustically, provided it is built on one of these rhythms). However, nowadays *manele* are generally played with amplification, synthesizers and a full range of electronic effects.

In Romania, *manele* are heard in much the same contexts as *rabiz* in Armenia: festive events (weddings, christenings or rich peoples' birthdays for example), or public spaces like bars and restaurants. They are also recorded to be sold on popular markets, and are often copied and exchanged through the internet. Like *rabiz*, *manele* are performed mainly by professional musicians, whose economic model relies on live performances. The musicians are part of the *lăutari*, a complex status linked with Gypsiness and professional musicianship in traditional contexts[4].

The two rhythms which stand at the core of *manele* do not really have equivalents in local folklore. Romanian commentators generally view them as "Turkish" *(turcesc)*, "Oriental" *(oriental)* or Gypsy *(țigănesc)*. The tunes are also in "orientalist" moods, often built on scales reminding of Middle Eastern *maqam*, and performed with a richly melismatic style of ornamentation. On the other hand, the chord progressions which accompany these melodies are typical of Western tonal music. For local listeners, this mix of "Western" and "Oriental" sound features is a sonic signature of the genre. Compared to most other musics in the country, *manele* display a paradoxical exoticism, which often arises in the aesthetic judgements of local listeners, either as a positive or as a negative feature.

2 For a description of the influences of neighboring countries' musics on *rabiz*, see Abrahamian (2005, 100-105).

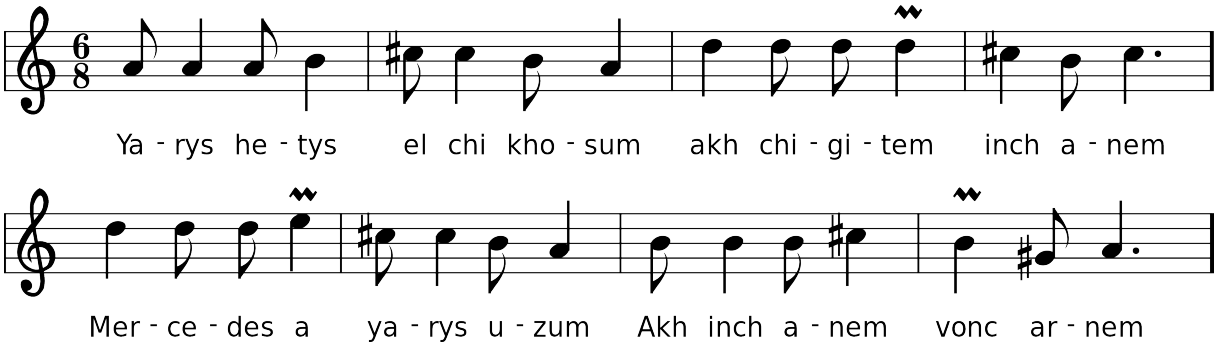
3 Some Romanian commentators extend the range of the term *manele* to tunes which based on much slower and non danceable rhythms. They are performed by the same musicians, in the same settings, and in the same general « mood ». However performers and fans use different names for these slow tunes (either *bluzuri* or *rame*). In connoisseur talk, *manele* tend to be linked with dance, and with one of the two rhythmic formulas transcribed here.

4 For an in-depth description of the role and status of the *lăutari*, see Beissinger (2001; 1991), Rădulescu (1984; 1988; 1996; 2002; 2004), and Stoichita (2006; 2008; 2010).

Lyrics

Rabiz

From a statistic point of view, one of the most prominent topics in *rabiz* songs is certainly love. It comes in all its shades: happy, burning, impossible, deceptive, etc. Other important themes are material wealth and consumer society, with a slight ironic touch on occasion.



Caption : First verses of *Tun Tanem* sung by Armen Aloyan on the album *Love story* (2008). "My beloved doesn't speak (with me) / Oh I don't know what to do / She wants a Mercedes / Oh, what can I do, how can I buy it?". On the album the name of the song is followed by *(katak yerg)* meaning "funny song".

Armenian commentators often consider this kind of lyrics as an emblem of post-soviet times.

Other songs deal with loss, nostalgia and sad feelings. Exile from the village or from the country is a common topic in *rabiz* lyrics. Some songs also evoke the mourning of dead heroes, in a tragic vein close to both traditional laments and epic songs[5]. Mayis Karoyan for example sings the following lyrics in the song *Khabar* (1999): "Hair turned white / The pain turned tears into stones / On the road of the lost son / She is waiting for him all-day long". The song commemorates soldiers who died during the Karabagh conflict. In the same ethos, one may encounter lyrics about the victims of air crashes, or about *mafiozi* leaders killed in armed fights (Amy de la Bretèque 2008).

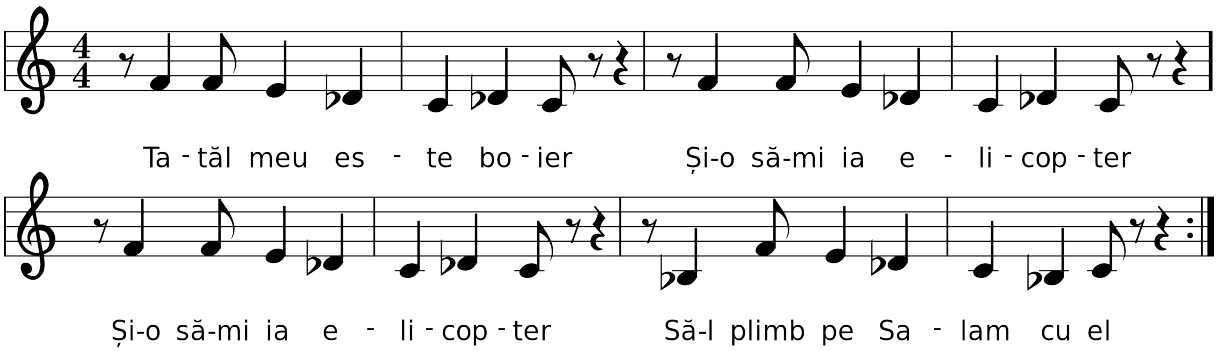
Manele

As in *rabiz*, *manele* lyrics often deal with love, from a dominantly male perspective. During the 1990's, they were heavily discussed in Romanian society for their raw references to sex and prostitution. This trend became less obvious in the lyrics at the turn of the century, although the videoclips and night clubs remain the stage of many belly dances and teasing postures. At the time of our writing, some *manele* praise the plastic qualities of "girls" *(fetițe)* and "chicks" *(gagici)*, but a significant repertoire is also devoted to the "wife" *(nevasta)*, and to the joy of having children.

As in *rabiz*, the second most important topic in *manele* lyrics is probably material wealth. The songs often value quick and easy money making (as opposed to hard work). They are dominated by the figure of the clever, smart and wise guy *(șmecher)* who may also be desig-

5 On the links between laments, *rabiz* and epic songs, see Amy de la Bretèque (2010).

nated as a *mafiot* or a *criminal*[6]. Hyperboles are most usual in this kind of songs, with frequent references to "kings" *(regi)*, "emperors" *(împărați)* and "squires" *(boieri)* from the Ottoman times. Here too, pride and parody are never far from each other.



Caption : Sung by Florin Salam in a Romanian wedding in Valencia (Spain, 2010). The lyrics were adressed to the groom: "My father is a squire / And he'll buy me a helicopter / And he'll buy me a helicopter / To give Salam a ride with it".

In live contexts, many *manele* turn into praise songs. Members of the audience frequently tip the musicians to command specific tunes and lyrics, either for themselves or as an offering for someone else. The singers announce the dedications on the microphone, leading to quick escalations in the amounts of the tips and the intensity of the lyrics.

Historical background

Rabiz

There is no consensus on the exact origin of the word *rabiz* in Armenia. Listening to café conversations in Yerevan, one can hear all kinds of popular etymologies. Some people claim that "*rabiz"* is made of the first syllables of the Russian words "***rab**otniki **is**kusstva"*, the Art Workers. This was the name of a soviet institution created in the early 1920s, whose aim was to integrate popular melodies into new soviet compositions. Other people think that *rabiz* comes from Turkish or Arabic roots. One such popular theory has it that "in Urdu the word 'rab' means creator or god, and Armenians use the Arabic word 'Aziz' to say 'darling', so it became *rabiz:* the beloved god".

For most people in Armenia, *rabiz* music is linked to *blat* songs (*blatnie pesni* or *blatnyak*). *Blatnyak* became known in USSR as songs from the gulag. They were attributed to the "outlaws": the brigands and criminals but also the political opponents. Both *rabiz* and *blat* music suggest subversion and illegality. The use of heavy Russian slang is another common feature. In *rabiz* conversations one can often hear words such as *kukla* ("doll"), *pitukh* (litt. "rooster", *i.e.* seducer) or *tormoz* (litt. "brake", *i.e.* mishap). In addition, *rabiz* lyrics also feature words evoking the Ottoman past. *Aziz* or *yar*, ("darling"), *bala* ("sex pot"), *darman* ("ointment/remedy") or *khabar* (the "news", as in the title of Mavis Maloyan's song mentioned above) are examples of such references. Thus many people in Armenia, consider *rabiz* as the capitalist heir of the communist *blat*.

6 On the concept of *șmecherie*, and its relation to music see Stoichita (2008).

Until the 1990's, *rabiz* was virtually unknown, be it in the newly independent Armenia or in the diaspora. During the last decade of the century, it quickly became a key element in Yerevan's soundscape. Walking in Yerevan's city center at the beginning of years 2010, one can surely hear, among car horns and birdsongs, *rabiz* files played on speakers installed at the entrance of various shops. As each shop plays a different tune, the general feeling is that of a heterophonic auction.

Manele

Like *rabiz*, *manele* became prominent during the 1990's. Their previous history is no less ambiguous. Some Romanians think that the genre is an old remain from Ottoman times. There are indeed early mentions of *manele* in 18th and 19th century texts (Oişteanu 2001; Beissinger 2007). Little is known however of the way those *manele* sounded, and there is no historical evidence of their direct link with the present day phenomenon. The first modern *manele*, at the end of the 1980's carried clear stylistic marks of Yugoslav *novokomponovana narodna muzika* ("newly composed folk music", see Rădulescu 2002; Beissinger 2007)). Thus it is not clear whether the genre should be thought as having a continuous history on Romanian soil, or as a recent synthesis of regional influences. This matter pairs the hybridism of the sonic structures themselves (see above) and is often discussed by local commentators.

In such debates, most *manele* lovers emphasize the novelty of the phenomenon. Apart from the electronic music tools, and the lyrics, their arguments also bring forth the renewal rate of the repertoire. Indeed, the life span of a song rarely exceeds six months. After that, it is already deemed "old" (*veche*), and the musicians cease to perform it at public events. On the popular markets, where most recorded media are sold, it is virtually impossible to buy a CD more than two months old. In this respect, *manele* stand out as a peculiar phenomenon in Romania's cultural landscape: although they are deeply rooted in previous musical practices, their audience is not prone to build this past up to a tradition. As a musician put it to us, the genre is constantly "improving" *(progresează)*, exactly as cars, planes or cell phones do. Novelty is a core value in this respect, and the past a mere collection of former attempts. So whatever the roots and the previous history of the genre, for *manele* lovers the songs stand out as new music.

Ethnicity, nation, and patriotism

Rabiz

In Caucasus nationalism highly increased in post-soviet times leading, in Armenia, to the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict (1988-1994). During the war, *rabiz* music became an icon of armenianness. Many *rabiz* singers (like Aram Asatryan, Grisho's grand father) sang for the soldiers:songs about the battles, the dead heroes and the martyrs (*fedayi*). More generally *rabiz* lyrics often emphasize armenianness and « Armenian values » like the family and the respect of « authentic traditions ».

The respectful attitude to traditions, values and rules is probably rooted in the former *blat* culture. Like *blat*, *rabiz* strongly emphasizes a kind of honor code, as manifested by the lyrics and by the behaviours of the performers and the audiences. *Rabiz* lovers identify themselves with the heroes of the *blat* music from the Soviet times: the "thieves in the law" (*Vory v zakon*) and many lyrics glorify the memory of dead *vory v zakon.* Other lyrics promote the ideal

of an unbreakable brotherhood among *rabiz* people. It is common to hear *rabiz* listeners call each other *akhper* (literally "brother", in Armenian), thus paralleling the use of Russian kinship words like *brat* ("brother") or *otets* ("father") in *blat* culture (see Holzlehner 2007).

Meanwhile, and nevertheless, many *Yerevantsi* also voice the opinion that *rabiz* is influenced by musics of the neighboring countries. In the words of one of our interlocutors, "*Rabiz* is not our music, it is Arabic, Turkish... The slow parts are influenced by Azeri music, you know, *mugham*..." (Lilit M., p.c. 2008). In saying this, Lilit not only distinguishes *rabiz* from Armenian culture, but also links it to the nation's "enemies". The nationalist and exotic characterizations of *rabiz* often coexist side by side in the same commentaries.

Manele

In Romania, the general public associates *manele* with Gypsies. For most listeners, the songs are "Gypsy music" *(muzică țigănească)*, embodying Gypsy aesthetics and ethical values. It should be stressed that many professional musicians deny that *manele* would be preferred by Gypsy audiences. According to Gypsy performers, Romanians are in fact the biggest consumers of *manele* (Rădulescu 2004). Such a claim is also consistent with the commercial success of the genre (records sold in many places, tv broadcasts, etc.), which could hardly be explained by the tastes of the sole Gypsy minority. The association of *manele* and gypsyness remains popular knowledge nevertheless. Ethnicity constitutes a kind of shared cultural background for most debates on the social significance of this music.

Gypsy musicians have a long tradition of playing for non Gypsies. But until *manele*, Romanians used to insist that the musicians whom they hired perform only "Romanian" music at their parties. The features of musical "gypsiness" and "romanianness" may be difficult to tell apart, but the prevailing idea, expressed by both listeners and musicians in traditional contexts, is that "Romanians" prefer "Romanian" music (Lortat-Jacob 1994, p.107; Rădulescu 2004; 2003; Stoichita 2008, pp.89-104). On these grounds, the success of *manele* is sometimes commented as a threat to national culture and folklore (Gypsies are supposed to be alien to both). On the other hand, the fact that a significant number of Romanians appreciates *manele* as "Gypsy music" may illustrate a recent shift in the perception of Gypsy culture.

This ethnic knot is a significant characteristic of *manele*, as compared with Armenian *rabiz*. The latter may display sonic features of exoticism, but is not attributed to any particular ethnic group in the country. When Ionuț Cercel, son of a well known Gypsy singer, sings "[we are all] *made in Romania*", he is making a challenging claim, much more than when Grisho Asatryan sings "[I am] *made in Armenia*".

Social and moral aspects

Rabiz

In the early 1990s, the upcoming of rabiz music was linked to heroic characters. One of the most widespread is the mafioz. Such a person is supposed to have become very rich, very fast, probably in illegal ways during the early years of independence. Mafioz and rabiz quickly became synonyms in daily conversations. Beyond musical taste, rabiz now means an attitude, a way of speaking, of dressing and generally, a way of life. Typically "rabiz men wear either black suits or leather jackets with black trousers or jeans. Their preferred shoes (nicknamed

çiçak, litt. “peppers”), are leather loafers, usually black and narrow, with a slightly high heel and an unusually sharply pointed toe curving upward. The hair is cut very short. Dark, rectangular sunglasses and black belts with large square platinum-colored buckles are worn as accessories. A small case containing the latest mobile telephone model is strapped to the belt and placed on the hip” (Hacob K., p.c. 2008). Rabiz stereotypes also include postures, like “squatting low to the ground, with forearms resting on the knees” (Anna M., p.c. 2009). Over the years, rabizness underwent some transformations: “the belly now protrudes over the belt in a display of wealth, affluence and power” (Anna M., p.c. 2009). Women in the rabiz trend are supposed to have a particular taste in clothing: “shocking colors are preferred. Jeans (worn very tight) or mini-skirts are fitted. Long boots or pump shoes with unusually high and thin heels are preferred, and the toe is usually pointed sharply. The hair is occasionally dyed in light blond shades, and if curly it is usually straightened. Make-up is always heavily applied” (Hacob K., p.c. 2008). Finally, *rabiz* may refer to tastes in various other fields. In architecture, for example, the *rabiz* standard is characterized by ostentatious and monumental buildings, shiny surfaces (mirrors, dark glass, polished stone, or marble), and neon lights.

This extension may help to explain why everybody in Armenia has an opinion on *rabiz*. The genre is certainly one of the most disputed forms of art in the country. Most intellectuals are strongly against it. They argue that *rabiz* music and *rabiz* behaviors are a poison (*tuyn*) to culture and to society in general. But for the listeners, *rabiz* is merely music of “our time” *(mer jamanak)*: one can dance or cry to it, celebrate a wedding or commemorate a brother's death... For *rabiz* lovers, it is the sound of new Armenia, altogether patriotic (*hayrenakan*) and modern (*jamanakakits*).

Manele

Manele brought to music, and indeed to the realm of public culture, the figures of the *șmecher* and the *mafiot* (see above). As in *rabiz*, there is a close association of dressing, presumed moral values and economic activities, which is supposed to stand at the core of musical taste. In theory, one can spot a *manelist* (*manele* lover) anywhere: pointed shoes, branded sunglasses, golden necklaces, fancy beards and haircuts are typical attributes. For women, short skirts, high heels, dyed hair, false nails, colorful makeup and shiny jewelery form an emblematic conjunction. The stereotype male *manelist*, as it is pictured in the lyrics, the mass media, and daily conversations, is supposed to earn lots of money in Romania or in Western countries, in quick and generally illegal ways. The stereotype female *manelista* is supposed to live under his protection, as his companion or as a prostitute.

It should be stressed that such stereotypes are encountered not only in anti-manelist discourse but also in the lyrics of many songs, and in the commentaries of many *manele* lovers. While they may seem overtly pejorative for Western readers, the commentaries arose by these emblematic characters in Romania are often more ambiguous. Indeed, many Romanians express the feeling that the post-communist “transition” *(tranziția)* is a sort of social and economical jungle where one cannot succeed without being a *mafiot*. It is a common (though often deplored) thought that honesty and hard work lead nowhere in this new world. The stereotype manelists are all the more controversial as they seem to merely push one step further such general assumptions.

As in Armenia, disliking *manele* often becomes an ethical question. Being “against *manele*” *(împotriva manelelor)*, is a common posture, which involves much more than musical taste. Elites and patriots often describe the trend as a threat to social and moral values, and

some even ask for its prohibition in mass media and public spaces. It should be noted that the posture of *manele* lovers is not symmetrical. There is far less activism in their discourse. The musicians say that they play what the public requires (they are not expressing their own emotions/opinions). The listeners say that it is good party music *(muzică de petrecere)*, clever and catchy *(șmecheră)*, suited for dancing and in the mood of the time (*muzica de azi*, lit. "todays's music").

Interestingly, both *manele* and *rabiz* feature a few children prodigies amongst their mediatic singers. Their presence necessarily suspends the accusation of corruption, evil morals and perverted sexuality. In this respect, both Ionuț Cercel and Grisho Asatryan may be seen as "alibis" for their respective fathers, and also for those casual listeners, who feel the need to justify their musical tastes. For example young female students explained to us that *manele* were not necessarily "dirty", taking as an example of innocent love another song by Ionuț Cercel, sweetly named "Kiss" *(pupic)*. But on the other hand, the children singers have only a limited discography, and hardly ever perform at weddings or in night clubs, which are the most important contexts for the other musicians.

Music of the "new times"?

The synthetic description of both cultural trends shows many similitudes. For example, both are linked to post-soviet times, economic liberalism, modern sound technologies, nation building and ideas of otherness. *Manele* and *rabiz* are also animated by parallel tensions. Although they are obviously popular, both are attributed in local discourse to a mere minority of marginal listeners (Gypsies and/or mafia). *Rabiz* cheered up Armenian soldiers during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, while at the same time being commented as "Azeri" or "Turkish". *Manele* display musical and textual references to Ottoman times, but their listeners praise them for their modern novelty. Furthermore, despite their exoticism, listeners do not seem interested by musics of the neighboring countries. *Manele* lovers do not listen to *rabiz* and *rabiz* listeners do not listen to *manele*. Only professional musicians seek ideas in nearby genres, as illustrated by our first example. The same holds true for other popular musics in the "Ottoman oecumene" (Buchanan 2007b): although exotic in style, and although available on transnational media like Internet and satellite televisions, they only make sense when rooted in local social networks.

It is remarkably difficult to understand such cultural trends as "symbolizing" or "expressing" meanings. The ideas constructed in the songs do not always represent the actual values of those who appreciate them. And far from striving towards a unified discourse, the songs themselves show a tendency to bring together extreme opposites, as if only to highlight their contradictions. On the other hand, they certainly provide unified experiences for the listeners, who not only appreciate them aurally, but also embody them through dance. The ability of music to act as an immersion medium is a key feature here.

Manele and *rabiz* construct "enchanted" worlds, which allow listeners to live certain emotions (maybe contradictory indeed) and interact in specific manners (maybe assuming roles remote from their daily lives)[7]. As enchanted worlds, manele and rabiz do not necessarily "mean" something. Musical space and time construct realms of interaction where listeners are free to mirror, exaggerate or contradict ideas and behaviors borrowed from their daily lives.

7 On artworks as techniques of enchantment see Gell (1992). For a discussion of this framework in relation to music see Stoichita (2009; 2011a; 2011b).

Communist future is gone. Are we heading East or West ? Is the promised modernity really different from our well known past ? In this context, *manele* and *rabiz* appear as utopian playgrounds populated by characters ranging from "fictional" to "real". Their enchanted realms are open to many kinds of listeners, allowing them to enact or interact with the fears and hopes of their uncertain position.

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