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Research Article

Traditional musical materials and compositional language in twentieth-century Albanian art music: An analysis of selected works and a basis for comparison with Kosovo

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Abstract

This article, "Language Models in Albanian Professional Music," identifies the ways in which artistic language functions as a means of communication between the creator and the audience. Art is understood here as an expressive system that enables direct aesthetic and emotional communication, through which artists establish a lasting relationship with their audiences. This relationship takes shape through the distinctive expressive system of each artistic discipline. Literature, music, and painting develop their own semantic and aesthetic codes, reflecting different realities and experiences of life. Each art form thus constructs a distinct system of communication containing different structures of meaning and aesthetic expression. To make the analysis clearer and more concrete, the article presents representative examples from literature, music, and painting that illustrate how different models of artistic expression operate. It then turns to language models in Albanian professional music, examining how Albanian composers drew on elements of traditional music to develop compositional practices that preserve and develop its stylistic characteristics. The incorporation of traditional musical elements contributed to the development of a vivid and expressive musical language, one of the distinguishing features of Albanian music in the contemporary professional context. For research on Kosovo's musical culture, this analysis provides a basis for examining how Kosovar composers have likewise drawn on traditional music in developing their compositional styles.

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Introduction

In Feim Ibrahimi's concertos and ballets, rhythmic idioms associated with northern Albania and pentatonic modes drawn from southern vocal traditions become part of a modern compositional language (Skënduli, 2006, p. 15). Heard in an orchestral setting, these materials carry traces of the traditions from which they came while taking on new expressive roles. Their transformation offers a concrete example of how musical language connects a composer's individual choices with a cultural tradition.

Language Models in Albanian Professional Music

In everyday life, alongside activities that benefit the individual and the community, people need to satisfy inner, spiritual needs that extend beyond entertainment. People work to live, and they also live to experience emotions that bring

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pleasure and aesthetic meaning. Art fulfils this particular function as a powerful form of human experience and expression.

A closer examination of the nature of art reveals its functions as both a means of expression and a form of communication. In this sense, musical language extends beyond the signs and symbols used in reading music or performing it in public. It constitutes a more complex aesthetic and semantic structure. A proper understanding of this structure also serves as a criterion for distinguishing art from non-art, professional from amateur creation, and different levels of artistic mastery.

Musical language is thus closely connected to the artist's individual style. It can be understood as a component of that style and as an element that reflects and identifies it. Its role extends beyond technical or formal matters. From this perspective, artistic language and style are inseparable, and their relationship becomes apparent in the manner of expression and its constituent elements.

The aim of this article is to analyse the language models that characterise Albanian professional music, identifying how Albanian musical tradition was incorporated into the compositional languages of leading composers in the second half of the twentieth century. The study draws on a theoretical analysis of musical language and an examination of selected representative works by Albanian composers.

Three examples from literature, music, and painting illustrate different ways in which artistic expression takes shape. The first example comes from William Shakespeare's comedy *Twelfth Night*:

Music, they say, is the food of love.

If that is so, play on, let me have my fill,
Until my appetite turns to disgust.
Again, that strain that seemed to fade away.
It caressed my ear like the southern breeze
That blows over violets and, unnoticed,
Fills the air around us with fragrance. (Shakespeare, 1982, p. 82)

These words are spoken by Orsino, the enamoured duke, who expresses the inner turmoil stirred by his passion for Countess Olivia. Shakespeare conveys this emotional state through simple, poetic language characteristic of his dramatic style in his other comedies as well. Music and literature thus emerge as art forms built on the organisation of sound and poetic imagery, creating structures of meaning and emotion closely connected to aesthetic experience.

The second example is an excerpt from the first movement of the Piano Sonata, Op. 27, No. 2, known as the *Moonlight Sonata*,[2] by Ludwig van Beethoven, a representative of the Classical period. The work expresses a profound sense of human intimacy through musical sound, creating a distinct emotional experience for the listener. As in Shakespeare's comedy, the artistic language has a strong communicative capacity. Here it operates through the medium of musical sound.

The third example of how another art form expresses love is *The Kiss*, a painting by the Austrian artist Gustav Klimt.[3]

In all three cases, the same feeling is expressed through three different artistic languages. Each discipline encompasses a variety of expressive forms and languages of its own. As the musicologist Fatmir Hysi observes, "language brings with it a different background of life, a different field of thought, and the presence of different people" (Hysi, 2005, p. 78).

These examples illustrate that in literature, artistic reality is articulated through the sentence or through a group of figures of speech constructed from words, with meaning arising beyond the individual word in isolation. In music, the melody or melodic phrase serves an analogous role as the basic unit through which individual notes are organised into meaningful relationships. In painting, the corresponding unit can be understood as the line, which conveys or suggests external reality. The arts therefore encompass many systems of expression within a broader artistic language, and language is one of the elements through which an artwork can be identified.

[2] The Moonlight Sonata was composed in Hungary in 1801. It comprises three movements: I. Adagio sostenuto, II. Allegretto, and III. Presto agitato.

[3] Gustav Klimt was an Austrian painter. He was born on 14 June 1862 in Baumgarten and died on 6 March 1918 in Vienna.

From this perspective, recognising the many and varied subdivisions of artistic languages also means recognising that these subdivisions represent the concept of "style." Here, style extends beyond an artist's manner of expression, individual taste, or creative ability. It can exist as a broader aesthetic system that an artist adopts, transforms, abandons, or reconfigures in response to creative choices and artistic context. It acquires a personal character when it interacts with social and cultural realities, the artist's consciousness, and the techniques and expressive means the artist employs.

The concept of a "perfect style" is difficult to sustain in any artistic genre because style is dynamic and develops as social and cultural realities change. In this regard, Fatmir Hysi notes that "language itself may be compared with the artist's style. In this comparison, it may be aligned with style, regarded as an important part of it, or even identified with it through its distinguishing features" (Hysi, 1998, p. 32).

In *Estetikë në tri pamje* (Aesthetics in Three Perspectives), Hysi also writes that "the languages of music derive from the underlying conception, and language is a means of communication as well as the direct material expression of musical form and content. It makes it possible to distinguish the endless variety of figures and, further, the particular features of each" (Hysi, 2005, p. 78).

From this perspective, musical language extends beyond a system of signs and symbols used for reading or public performance. It gives direct expression to human thought and, in music, to sensitivity and emotional experience. An account confined to formal elements such as morphology, orthography, or rules of notation would leave much of its artistic and expressive character unexplained.

The relationships within artistic languages vary across forms of expression and change over time. At each stage in the historical development of society, artistic languages evolve. This can be seen in the development of artistic language and musical style across successive periods, from medieval vocal music to Renaissance vocal polyphony, from the Baroque and Rococo to the operatic and symphonic styles of the eighteenth-century Classical period, and from nineteenth-century programme music to twentieth-century modern movements.

As art developed and aesthetic thought advanced, the structures of artistic languages grew increasingly complex and refined. Different artistic schools and movements emerged in this historical process. They gave priority to particular elements of artistic language according to their aesthetic and stylistic orientations.

More broadly, the preceding comparisons suggest that musical language is both a form of expression and a distinctive way of articulating artistic ideas. It is also shaped by the material and cultural sources from which it derives, including tradition, historical background, and artistic temperament. In *Filozofia e artit* (The Philosophy of Art), the French positivist historian and philosopher Hippolyte Adolphe Taine identifies "race, milieu, and moment" as fundamental factors in the formation and determination of artistic values. He further states that "if we pursue this line of reasoning, we conclude that questions of art cannot be addressed without identifying the reciprocal connections between folk languages and forms and the mainstream of art" (Taine, 2004, p. 138).

This principle has played a fundamental and enduring role in the historical and aesthetic development of Albanian music. Alongside changes in society, musical language and style passed through stages of transformation towards a new philosophy and aesthetics. As new compositional techniques and aesthetic approaches developed, composers at times had to negotiate a delicate relationship with audience tastes. In the twentieth century, musical language and style reached a level of elaboration that sometimes called into question the "agreement" between composers and their audiences. Stravinsky offers an example. Driven by distinctive aesthetic ideas and intellectual concerns, his work attracted a group of supporters alongside listeners who regarded his music with reserve or disagreement. His output also includes periods clearly oriented towards a Russian national style, particularly in his ballets.

Musical language developed and changed even more markedly as research expanded and artists experimented with the new structures, sounds, and technological effects made available by scientific advances.

The Beginnings of Albanian Professional Music

During the first half of the twentieth century, musical art in Albania developed considerably later than it did in other European countries. Historical, economic, political, and social factors shaped the pace of cultural and institutional development.

Until the middle of the twentieth century, Albania was among the European countries with the most limited infrastructure for professional music. It lacked specialised music schools, symphony orchestras, musical theatres, and institutions responsible for organising and developing artistic life. It also lacked a dedicated cultural administration that could design and implement policies for the development of professional music.

Musical life consequently developed chiefly through informal, individual, and private initiatives. Musical art drew primarily on Albania's rich folk music tradition, which provided the most important foundation for national musical identity.

An important turning point came during the reign of Ahmet Zog I, when a number of artists trained in European conservatoires and other musical institutions returned to Albania. They brought new artistic and professional experience, enriching the country's cultural life and helping to create a more favourable environment for professional music.

These artists performed Albanian folk songs, some in stylised arrangements, as well as lyrical songs by European composers, operatic arias, and other pieces from the vocal repertoire, usually with piano accompaniment. These activities gave Albanian audiences their first encounters with cultivated forms of art music and marked the beginning of an important process in the formation of professional musical culture in Albania.

The composers of this period were united above all by a strong patriotic spirit and commitment to Albanian culture and folklore. A common aesthetic programme and the systematic use of developed professional forms and genres had yet to emerge. Composition in this period was directed chiefly towards affirming national identity, with music serving as a means of cultural and civic expression.

Works from this period were predominantly small in scale, with a simple compositional language based largely on the melodic material of Albanian folklore and clear, straightforward rhythmic structures. As *Historia e muzikës shqiptare* (History of Albanian Music) states:

They are chiefly arrangements of folk songs, stylised songs for solo voice with piano accompaniment, romances, and choral songs. More developed forms also occur, such as the rhapsody, poem, march, and potpourri. A pronounced use of folklore and a national style that also drew on elements of Romanticism were characteristic of all these composers. (*Historia e muzikës shqiptare*, 1984–1985, p. 32)

This provides a general overview of the development of Albanian professional music up to the 1950s. Although institutional and artistic consolidation was still in its early stages, this period laid the foundations for a national school of composition and created the conditions for the further development of professional music in Albania.

As noted above, Albanian professional music developed without the long-standing tradition of cultivated music found in many other European countries. Through their dedication and creative vision, Albanian composers gradually shaped their own aesthetic and musical language models. They worked to master and consolidate contemporary compositional techniques, adapting them to the national musical tradition.

The formation of a national school of composition around the middle of the twentieth century, together with the return to Albania of a generation of composers who had graduated from major musical institutions in the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Romania[4], marked a new stage in the development of Albanian professional music. It was during this period that what musicological studies have termed the *fizionomi kombëtare* (national profile) of Albanian music began to take shape.[5]

Albanian composers had by then developed their own creative profiles and individual ways of writing music. The development of their work was shaped by the political and ideological circumstances of the time. Within a closed system, artistic freedom repeatedly came up against censorship, while the adoption of contemporary musical practices had to be

[4] Artists of the first generation trained abroad included Dhora Leka, Albert Paparisto, Çesk Zadeja, Tish Daija, Rifat Teqja, Lukë Kaçaj, Hamide Stringa, Avni Mula, Gjon Athanas, Ibrahim Tukiçi, Mentor Xhemajli, Milto Vako, Rikard Jorganxhi, Simon Gjoni, Ymer Skënderi, and Sandër Rafael, among others. Their collective contribution made possible the establishment of the first national institutions, including the Opera and Ballet Theatre (1953), the State Folk Song and Dance Ensemble (1957), the Albanian Radio and Television Orchestra (1962), and the State Conservatoire in Tirana (1962).

[5] Fizionomi kombëtare (national profile) is the term used for the period of musical works, including symphonies, ballets, and operas, that drew on national folk elements.

reconciled with the ideological requirements of socialist realism. A number of often contradictory tendencies coexisted in this context, including tradition and modernity, conformity and individual creativity, and adherence to official norms alongside the search for new forms of expression.

Under these constraints, artistic quality and compositional craftsmanship remained decisive factors in giving a substantial part of the period's musical output its lasting significance. The State Conservatoire, now the University of Arts, played a fundamental role in this process. For many years, it was the main institution for the professional training of Albanian musicians. Alongside its teaching role, it served as the principal centre of aesthetic and artistic debate. Contemporary developments in music and new approaches to composition were discussed there within the limits of the period.

The earliest models for professional composition took shape at this institution, first through teaching and later through the creative work of its faculty and composers. The Albanian repertoire consequently expanded to include nearly all the principal genres and forms of cultivated music, including symphonic, instrumental, vocal, chamber, stage, and film music, as well as other important genres of professional composition.

Across the genres of professional music that developed in Albania, musical language models took different forms according to each composer's creative individuality and aesthetic outlook. These models draw on fundamental elements of musical language such as melody, harmony, polyphony, rhythm, and orchestral timbre. The way composers organise these elements according to their creative intentions determines the stylistic identity of a work.

Melody is one of the most characteristic components of this language. In Albanian professional music, it generally has clear contours and stable tonal organisation and incorporates important elements of traditional folk music. Depending on the subject and aesthetic orientation of the work, its melodic material draws on a wide range of patterns from traditional Albanian melodic syntax.

The works of Albanian composers thus include modal structures inspired by the vocal and instrumental repertoire of northern Albania, modal constructions derived from the instrumental traditions of central and south-eastern Albania, and melodic patterns based on pentatonic modes and the rich tradition of southern vocal polyphony.[6]This diversity of traditional styles is integrated into the language of cultivated music and becomes part of the thematic construction and compositional development of professional works.

Selected Works by Albanian Composers Based on Albanian Traditional Music

Many Albanian composers have integrated language models inspired by Albanian traditional music into their work. The analysis in this article focuses on some of the most representative composers, in whose output these elements appear particularly clearly and play an important role in shaping musical language.

Modality is one of the fundamental characteristics of Çesk Zadeja's compositional language. As early as his Symphony No. 1[7] and the vocal romance *O ju male* (O You Mountains), Zadeja built thematic material on modal structures, chiefly of the Dorian type. In some instances, he incorporated elements of the tonal system, including the natural and harmonic minor, creating a musical language that brings elements of Albanian folk tradition together with the compositional techniques of cultivated music.

Zadeja's work also includes elements of polytonality and bitonality. He uses them as expressive means of enriching harmonic structure and expanding the range of musical colour. These features are particularly evident in the ballet *Delina* and in the Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, where traditional tonal organisation is combined with more contemporary compositional procedures.

Tish Daija's work likewise brings the compositional techniques of cultivated music together with characteristic elements of Albanian folklore. His musical language is generally grounded in the tonal system, and modal structures in many of his works enrich the musical discourse and give it a distinct national colour.

[6] In Enciklopedia e iso-polifonisë popullore shqiptare (Encyclopedia of Albanian Folk Iso-Polyphony), Tole (2007) presents the following modal types: the pentatonic mode, a five-pitch scale characterised by a third, the tetratonic mode, a four-pitch scale whose principal interval is a sixth, the three-pitch mode, characterised by a second, and the two-pitch mode, characterised by a perfect fifth.

[7] Zadeja's First Symphony, described as the first Albanian symphony, was composed in 1956. It grew out of the composer's intellectual and creative abilities and crowned the aspiration to create music with a distinctly national character that could serve as the basis for further developments in Albanian cultivated music.

One of the most representative examples of this approach is the ballet *Halili dhe Hajria* (Halil and Hajria). Its thematic material draws on the melodic idiom of Albanian traditional music and is developed through established compositional techniques. Alongside modality, rhythmic organisation is a distinctive feature of Daija's work. Changes in texture, syncopation, and rhythmic disruptions create a dynamic musical discourse with an internal energy. This gives his music a lively temperament and expressive character, one of the most distinctive features of his compositional style.

Feim Ibrahimi was equally interested in the modal resources of Albanian traditional music. In addition to his choice of modal themes, he paid particular attention to "rhythmic dynamics" based on northern rhythmic idioms and "made equally effective use of the pentatonic modes derived from southern vocal music." These practices appear in the Piano Concerto No. 1,[8] the Concerto for Oboe and Orchestra,[9] the Piano Concerto No. 2, chiefly in its second movement, and the ballet *Plaga e dhjetë e Gjergj Elez Alisë* (The Tenth Wound of Gjergj Elez Alia) (Skënduli, 2006, p. 15).

By the mid-1980s, Albanian stage music had accumulated considerable experience in ballet. Examples include Tish Daija's *Halili dhe Hajria* (Halil and Hajria, 1963) and *Bijtë e peshkatarit* (The Fisherman's Sons, 1972), Çesk Zadeja's *Delina* (1964) and *Shqiponja sypatrembur* (The Fearless Eagle, 1972), and Nikolla Zoraqi's *Cuca e Maleve* (The Mountain Girl, 1970), *Tokë e pamposhtur* (Undefeated Land, 1977), *Shote e Azem Galica* (Shote and Azem Galica, 1982), and *Joniada* (1984). Thoma Gaqi also made effective use of modality in his themes and especially in his harmonic layers. His work also displays instances of polytonality. Examples include the symphonic poem *Borova*, the Double Concerto for Violin, Cello, and Orchestra, and *Vallja simfonike me dajre* (Symphonic Dance with Frame Drum).

Orchestral sound also enriched the structures of Albanian musical language. A carefully organised, polytimbral orchestral language[10] that remains accessible to the ear is used effectively by Çesk Zadeja in Symphony No. 1, Feim Ibrahimi in *Plaga e dhjetë e Gjergj Elez Alisë*, Kujtim Laro in *Pylli i lirisë* (The Forest of Freedom), and Thoma Gaqi in his Double Concerto for Violin and Cello, among others. The compositional styles of Zadeja and Ibrahimi stand out in particular for their effective use of contrapuntal techniques.[11]

In formal terms, the compositional structures of Albanian professional music showed considerable continuity. Musical forms generally drew on classical models inherited from the European tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As composers enriched their musical language with national elements, they retained established approaches to formal organisation and thematic development.

In expressive terms, the compositions of this period are characterised by predominantly epic-heroic, epic-lyrical, and narrative qualities. These features are combined with elements of the melodic syntax of Albanian traditional music, creating a musical discourse that brings national identity together with the compositional models of cultivated music.

Another important feature of Albanian musical language is its communicative character. This is most apparent in vocal music, where the combination of poetic text and musical expression enables more direct communication with the public, particularly with listeners who have no professional musical training. Under the political system of the time, music was also assigned a clear educational and ideological function in accordance with socialist realism. The same tendency was evident in literature, painting, sculpture, theatre, and other arts, where artistic creation was regarded as part of the aesthetic and ideological education of society.

Despite the restrictions imposed by the political system, Albanian professional music underwent substantial artistic consolidation. The gradual adoption of contemporary compositional techniques, the enrichment of musical language, and the broadening of aesthetic horizons created confidence that the work of Albanian composers could hold its own internationally. The Albanian school of composition thus developed a distinctive artistic identity and trained a

[8] The concerto was written in 1971. It was the first work to signal a search for a more advanced musical language compared with other works of Albanian art music. Through this concerto, the composer made a marked departure from the stereotyped patterns of a musical art that had become excessively idealised and, arguably, self-censored.

[9] For the composer and for the Albanian repertoire, the work represents a further consolidation of the concerto genre through its adaptation of musical language to the technical capabilities of the oboe and the engaging concert atmosphere it creates for listeners.

[10] Polytimbral refers here to the simultaneous sounding of more than two tones.

[11] In music, counterpoint is known as the art of preserving the melodic independence of voices within a harmonically balanced polyphonic texture.

generation of composers and performers who made a significant contribution to cultivated music under conditions of ideological restriction.

Conclusion

The analysis of musical language in Albanian professional music shows that its development resulted from a continuing interaction between national tradition and the aesthetic models of European cultivated music. As the Albanian school of composition consolidated, its musical language took shape through a careful balance between preserving national identity and adopting contemporary compositional techniques. The works and compositional practices of the period's leading composers reveal four fundamental categories that characterise the development of Albanian musical language: protagonism, cosmopolitanism, standards, and openness. These categories interact in the formation of the aesthetic identity of Albanian cultivated music.

Protagonism is expressed in the efforts of Albanian composers to develop creative individuality and a distinctive artistic profile. Cosmopolitanism involves the critical adoption of European practices and their integration into a national context while preserving the features that identify Albanian music. Standards reflect an aspiration to a high professional and aesthetic level in musical creation. Openness reflects a tendency to broaden creative horizons through engagement with contemporary developments in international music.

Despite stylistic changes and restrictions imposed by historical and ideological circumstances, Albanian professional music maintained a lasting connection with folk music. This connection was expressed through the use of folk-derived thematic material and through the adoption of modal, rhythmic, melodic, and timbral models that became integral to the language of cultivated music.

One of the most significant achievements of Albanian composers in this period was their ability to draw creatively on the experience of European schools of composition and adapt it to Albanian musical tradition. This synthesis of national identity and universal experience is one of the most characteristic features of the Albanian school of composition and one of the most enduring qualities of Albanian cultivated music in the second half of the twentieth century.

For the study of Kosovo's musical culture, this analysis offers a basis for examining how Kosovar composers have incorporated traditional music into their own compositional languages. Comparing the works discussed here with selected works from Kosovo could show how composers in both settings treated folk-derived themes, modes, rhythmic patterns, and timbre, and how these choices reflect regional traditions and individual styles.

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