



Research Article

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Received: 6 February 2021 / Accepted: 20 April 2021 / Published: 17 May 2021

The Cultural and Musical Tradition of Elbasan (16th - 20th Century)

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36941/mjss-2021-0021>

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore and review the role and contribution of Elbasan city in the well-known cultural and musical tradition of Albania. Referring to documents, this tradition dates back in the 16th century with the creation of the first musical bands, characteristic of that time, known otherwise as fanfarat or tajfat. During Ottoman invasion, especially during the 16th-17th century, oriental influence on Albanian folk music has been quite evident. Some musicologists think that this impact has been more evident especially in the music of the middle part of Albania. It needs to be emphasized that this influence has not been absolutely strict, since in most songs it appears either as a collaboration or a parallel version. After the 17th century in Elbasan, as well as in its surrounding regions, there was born folk music, firstly as the music of beano, and later on as a typical civic folk music accompanied by the orchestra. Ethnomusicologists think that prior to folk city music, there used to be country folk music, in the north eastern part of Elbasan, in the villages around Zaranika estuary, where old songs were sung, and very soon they were spread even in Elbasan. Meanwhile, by the years 20s and 30s of the 20th century in Elbasan there was spread civic folk music whose founders were the trio of: Isuf Myzyri, Leksi i Vinit as well as Mustafa Bodini. Folk songs of Elbasan belong to the musical style of the middle part of Albania; since they are sung in the dialect of Elbasan, they are considered as the civic folk songs of Elbasan. There needs to be highlighted that even during the first half of the 20th century, a great role in the musical and cultural tradition was played by the social and patriotic clubs, such as "Bashkimi" (1908), "Drita", Vllaznia (18 April 1908) as well as the creation of patriotic society known as "Afërdita". The latest one, in 1917 reestablished a musical band as well with the same name "Afërdita", which existed before. This band besides various marches, it used to play hymns too by using wind instruments, folk music not only in Elbasan but even in other towns in Albania. The band "Afërdita" functioned until the early years of World War 2.

Keywords: Elbasan, cultural and musical tradition, folk music, song typology, musical style, patriotic and cultural clubs and societies

1. Introduction

Geographically Elbasan is located in the middle part of Albania. His position makes it possible to connect the North and the South, the East and the West. It is the place where roads, dialects, cultures, customs, traditions and rituals intersect together, otherwise said the entire cultural heritage of Albanians. There is no Albanian region, religion or sect that does not have its own representatives in Elbasan. Due to tolerance, hospitality and generosity of the people of Elbasan, they have settled in

this town, feeling comfortable just like previous natives. This geographical position made it possible for the various dialects, traditions, customs, cultures, and traditional types of music to intersect and perfectly cohabit together. The dialect of Elbasan is understandable by all Albanians, may they be Gheg in the North Albania or Tosk in the south. Furthermore, the folk music of Elbasan was spread even in other regions for many reasons. Firstly, the quiet and happy character of the people of Elbasan, their high spirit required a happy song too, as old people used to say: “dautie”, to please them in every moment. Secondly, since Elbasan was the birthplace of many literary writers, poets and scholars, it led to the creation of many melodious texts which were easy to be sung. Thirdly, slow songs were suitable for the good and well educated people of Elbasan (Meksi 2010)

2. Musical Tradition of Elbasan during 16th- 19th Century

Elbasan was one of the towns of Albania which on Independence Eve provided a rich, cultural, artistic and musical landscape. As a town with early musical tradition such as saze (early musical formations), beano and other civic folk music, Elbasan provided the right conditions in favour of music development, gradually leading to the formation of more serious and bigger musical groups . The first data concerning the existence of folk music in Elbasan have been provided by the ottoman historian Evlia Celebiu in his book “Shqipëria para dy Shekujsh” (Albania before two centuries). In his book he also mentioned that by that time, during the 17th century in Elbasan, there existed a small win orchestra (fanfarë) consisting of 6-7 people, who used to play wind instruments twice a day at the plane tree of Bezistani (Celebia 2000). Meanwhile, the musicologist researcher Vasil Tole dates back earlier in time the beginnings of folk music, stating that by the 16th century in Elbasan there was a band (known as tajfë) consisting of 6 people (Tole 2002).

Tajfa was an oriental-islamic band, which was spread in the Albanian towns during the 16th-17th century. In Elbasan it was created since the early beginnings of its spread in the Albanian regions. Evlia Celebia, in his book mentioned above, besides being known as a researcher and well known ottoman historian, who has provided considerable data for the life of Albanians, their customs, towns, and anthropological phenomena of different regions ; he is also the one to write about Elbasan as the “town of roses and music”...(Celebia 2000). During ottoman invasion, especially in the 16th-17th century, the oriental impact on Albanian folk music was quite evident. Some musicologists share the opinion that this impact has been greater especially in the music of the middle part of Albania. It needs to be highlighted that this impact has not been so strict, since in most of the songs it either appears as collaboration or as a parallel development of music. Therefore, a researcher mentions the fact that in the horizon of Albanian music, at least from the middle ages, there has been seen a harmonious collaboration of the ethnic-national originalities with the most advanced ones of the Balkan, Mediterranean and even European regions (Hysi 1991). Meanwhile, another researcher during this period of time has observed chromatics and magnified seconds especially in the music of Middle Albania, which according to researchers they are elements of oriental music, traditionally known as Turkish music (Filja 1991).

So many researchers, especially musicologists have expressed the opinion that prior to civic folk music of Elbasan, there was the music of countries. Later on this song was sung not only in the village but even in the town. One of the oldest folk songs in Elbasan, recognized by musicologists is the one titled “Çohuni djema shaloni atin”, which dates back by the beginning of the 17th century, initially sung in the north western part of Elbasan. The tradition of this region continued even in the following decades and centuries. Therefore, the ethnologist Thanas Meksi claims that from the 19th century and onwards there is mentioned the folk orchestra of Ramë Sulejmani from Bradashesh, an orchestra which accompanied the folk songs of the middle part of Albania, from the stream of Kusha, in the estuary of Zaranika up to Funar and Krrabë (Meksi 2001).

3. Musical Band “Afërdita” during 1909-1940

Cultural tradition of Elbasan, by the beginning of the 19th century, was accompanied by a new development through the establishment of new patriotic cultural clubs and societies. Besides the establishment of the club “Bashkimi” (1908), “Drita” and “Vllaznia” society (April 18, 1908), the establishment of another society one year later (May 2, 1909) named “Afërdita” which seemed to be a reminder of “ylli i mengjesit” from the cosmogonic point of view, there seemed to be marked a significant development, since its members besides theatrical performances paid attention even to musical performances as well as the preparation of new instrumentalists. From the citizens, there were also created city musical bands whose members were people who had musical talents. In the statute of the “Vllaznia” society of Elbasan there was written: “The spread of love and affection, brotherhood and unity among the natives of the towns and villages – it is to be taken the root to civilization as well.”¹ This aim was not evident only in the status of the “Vllaznia” society but it was also mentioned in the status of all the other societies, cultural and artistic ones established in different parts.

In the statute of the “Afërdita” society, first point there was written: “This society aims at achieving the spread of love, brotherhood and unity among natives living in the town or village, with the purpose of heading towards civilization. Meanwhile in the second point it is written: “The society today will consist of a musical band known as “Afërdita”.²

“Dielli” newspaper dating August 13, 1909 which used to be published in USA, announced that there was established a musical band consisting of more than 100 members...³ Meanwhile in “Tomorri” newspaper dating April 20, 1910 Lef Nosi determined that “The purpose of this society is to spread high feelings of affection among Albanians through this musical band.”⁴

The society aimed to raise a fund in order to buy the instruments of the band from abroad, which was going to be created from the members as well as possible donators. Although the funds were managed to be raised, musical instruments were not bought due to political troubles and pressure of the Turkish invaders. The society had to be refounded, but now with a well determined platform, tightly cultural not including political purposes. Filip Papajani, who was known by the citizens of Elbasan as “Miti i Lazrit” was sent as a delegate by the society in Vienna in order to buy the instruments with the help of which the orchestra would function. This was realized only in 1916, because of the conditions of the time. The youth started to gather in a small house in Elbasan in order to learn how to play the musical instruments. The songs “Per Mëmëdhënë” of Mihal Grameno, and “O moj Shqypni e mjera Shqypni” created the first repertory of the “Afërdita” musical band. In November 28, 1917 the band, on the occasion of the 5th anniversary of the Independence Day, performed different folk and patriotic songs in the town streets inside the Castle, creating a huge enthusiasm among the citizens. Then it provided concerts in the main square of the town known as Bezistan. Ahmet Gashi and Adem Jahja worked in order to give a popular character to the wind orchestra. A great contribution for the band of Elbasan “Afërdita” was also given by the Austrian musician Anton Cimfl, conductor of the military regiment orchestra having arrived in Elbasan in the early beginning of 1916, during World War 1. He prepared and trained the musicians of this orchestra, and in 1917 he realized the famous concert in the town. He composed the march in honour of Aqif Pashë Bëçakçiu under the title “Albanian Leader” in May 1916. The composition preserves the classical form of contemporary march creating a festive atmosphere. By making use of the elements of “Himni i Flamurit” (Flag Anthem) Cimfli wrote other parts for the orchestra “Afërdita” as well as orchestrations of the patriotic songs which Ahmet Gashi used during performances of this orchestra. In 1920, during the war of Vlora, the band accompanied the volunteers from Elbasan and under the

¹ Archive of “Skampa” theater, file “Periudha e Rilindjes” (Renaissance Period), “Vëllazëria” society, page 14.

² Musical band “Afërdita” (1909-2009), Katalog, Elviprint 2009, page 10

³ Newspaper “Dielli”, 13 August 1909.

⁴ Newspaper “Tomori”, 20 April 1910.

sounds of the orchestra, the sanitary team which consisted of Petraq Popa, Mir Popa and Zekije Krasta marched towards Vlora and after having travelled for three days they came in the front line of the war. Victory in this war was something beautiful and enthusiastic.

Another society which became well known in Elbasan was "Lahuta" (Lute), which was founded when Prince Wilhelm Wied (1914) came in Albania to lead the new government under the support and care of the super powers. Thanas Floqi was the initiator of the foundation of this society, who besides being a well-known patriot who contributed significantly in the independence of the country, he was also known for his talent in music. The musical band that was created attracted many instrumentalists from the "Afërdita" society creating in this way a wider orchestra.⁵ This newly established group was temporary since the political situation in the Balkans changed due to the wars between the Balkan nations in search of their territorial pretensions over one another. Such situation made it impossible for this band to continue its musical activity. There is no data regarding the musical repertory, the realized concerts, orchestral formation, etc.

Year 1917 is well known for an important artistic musical event, the foundation of the musical band "Afërdita". Most talented people and music lovers rejoined giving shape to an orchestral formation, acceptable for the conditions and possibilities of the time. The orchestra was initially conducted by Thanas Floqi and later on by Ahmet Gashi. In its composition there were included musical instruments such as: violin, clarinet, harmonium, mandolin, çyri (musical instrument), tambour, trumpet, etc.⁶ Through the financial support of different citizens and donators of the town, there was invited as a conductor, an Austrian musician in order to give a professional shape to the orchestra. Besides the orchestral formation, in the form of a musical band, there was also established a band of musicians playing the mandolin, consisting of 15 people by increasing in this way the number of musical formations as well as the variety of musical genres that could be performed during concerts. The repertory of this band usually included different types of marches, especially those consisting of simple melodious structures, which could easily be adapted with the quantity and type of musical instruments included in the band during performance. Besides the orchestral parts of famous foreign authors which were broadly performed by the small orchestral formation and their musical instruments, in concerts there were also included some Albanian folk songs. They were adapted and became suitable to be performed by the orchestra. The 5th anniversary of the Independence Day marks the first concert of this band for the citizens of Elbasan (November 28, 1917). In the repertory of the first concert there was also included the famous French march "Marsejeza".

Some of the most well-known instrumentalists of the band "Afërdita" there were: Ahmet Gashi, Rrapush Bumçi, Adem Jahja, Shyqyri Demiri, Myrteza Krasa. One of the main arteries that guaranteed the musical repertory of the band "Afërdita", closely linked with the Albanian artistic original creativity, there were the executions of some of the most beautiful songs of the time, mostly new creations, but there were also included those of the Albanian old musical tradition. Many of the songs were sung by the choir, which consisted not only of the band instrumentalists but also talented amateurs who had joined as the song group. Some of the songs adapted with the musical band and performed in an orchestral manner were: Himni i Flamurit (Flag Anthem), Marshi i Elbasanit (March of Elbasan), and the song of Aqif Pashe Elbasani. These served as an introductory suite. They were adapted for orchestral formation by Thanas Floqi.

They served like a prelude for the following concerts of this band. It is worth mentioning well-known songs of Thoma Nasi such as : Vlora-Vlora, Kenga e Mullirit. There were also other folk songs of different regions such as Salushe, Beratçe, E hequr e qarë, Prapë erdhi vera, O moj ty me sy të zinj, Këmba-këmba majë gurit, Bilbili i Muços, Fyelli i bariut, Elbasan qytet i bukur (Manto 2004). These songs and many others which constituted the repertory of the musical band Afërdita were usually adapted with the wind instruments, but sometimes they were even sung by the choir. The members

⁵ "Përlindja shqiptare" newspaper, 21.03.1914.

⁶ "Nëndori magazine, 1968, no. 2, page 184.

of the choir were band instrumentalists but in choirs they were organized as grouped voices, usually in pairs.

Some of these songs were compositions of the famous and talented musician A.P. Tepelena, which were adapted to be performed by the orchestra. They did have a very interesting sound, since they multiplied in their power, due to the impact they created to the audience. This adaptation practice was also used with some other songs which took a choral or instrumental shape, providing in this way a different form of performance for the people. Change in performance was also accompanied by a different type of affection, encouraging a different manner of perception from the audience. This is what provided innovation brought by the orchestral executions of the band. Lack of funding and conditions prevented the band "Afërdita" from its natural development and improvement which could easily be distinguished in the number of concerts it provided. All the work was thought and created on volunteer basis. Even in those cases when few incomes were earned they were so small and negligible. Lack of funding which threatened its existence made it ask people for financial support, which led to the creation of a donation which could guarantee its maintenance in the future.

Of great interest for this band was its participation after the victory of the War of Vlora, end of August and beginning of September 1920, invited by the Committee and Commission of the War of Vlora, , under the direction of the patriot Ahmet Gashi (Kito 1971). This band gave many musical concerts for the citizens and fighters of freedom, which were welcomed and liked by them. After Vlora they organized a tour in Durrës, Peqin and Kavajë creating a festive atmosphere among crowds. In 1921 "Afërdita" band went to Tirana too, for the opening ceremony of the first Albanian Parliament. On this event there was organized a concert containing a rich repertory. There were selected songs from the well-known musical literature, parts from native and foreign authors as well as the execution of well-known Albanian songs. During 1921-1922 its activity diminished, concerts were rarer until their cancelling which came as a result of financial difficulties as well as the tense political situation of the time. An impressive accompanying of the band to the funeral procession of Aqif Pashe Elbasani is what has remained in people's mind from this band. The musical band "Afërdita", after a reorganization of its, this time not with the pupils of Normale, but with young craftsmen of Elbasan, not only did it buy musical instruments but it also managed to support many political, social, sports activities, military parades, concerts etc. organized by the Municipality of Elbasan. It continued its activity even after the fascist invasion of the country, until it was dissolved due to the increased resistance and anti-fascist war of the Albanian people.

4. The Creation of Civic Folk Songs of Elbasan

Different researchers especially musicologists think that civic folk music in the Middle Albania was born by the first half of the 20th century, during which an important role was played by the civic folk music of Elbasan founded by Isuf Myzyri. Musicologists also highlight that as a prior musical formation of civic folk music there used to be beano (aheng). Beano (aheng) is generally thought to be very old, as most authors of the songs are not known, so is even the time when it is supposed to have emerged as a musical form⁷. It is highly possible that even the 20th century orchestra of Bradashesh, led by Ramë Sulejmani, might have been organized in the form of a beano (aheng). Professor Dhimitër Shuteriqi remembers that when he was young, he used to listen to old songs in Elbasan, which were considered as civic songs filled with melisma. These songs are little used even in some near northern villages, for example in the region of Zaranika⁸. In Elbasan the first orchestra consisting of musical instruments, especially wired ones, which also marks the separation from the beano (ahengu) was established by Isuf Myzyri in 1905. It consisted of Simon Vela playing the çyr (

⁷ Gurashi Kolë, *Ahengu shkodran, dorëshkrim*, Arkivi i Institutit të Kulturës Popullore, page 1.

⁸ Shuteriqi, Dhimitër, *Nga kënga e popullit tim*, (published within the series of writings, Collections of Folklore, no.9) page 4.

musical instrument), Mahmut Ashiku playing the lute, Arif Çerma-Topalli playing the tambour, Thoma Prifti playing the clarinet, Mehmet Gurra playing the ud (mandolin with 5 wires), Ibrahim Zaimi playing çyr (a musical instrument with a long tail), Myrteza Graceni and Riza Berati playing the violin (Tole 2002).

Musical traditions in Elbasan were known since 1905 with the establishment of the orchestra of Isuf Myzyri, and by 1907 in the town there also was present a band playing mandolins. The fact that this band had given concerts by providing selected music from the Albanian folk songs and dancing, but also well-known musical parts from other countries, was evidence of a musical taste and medium which was trying to apply more professional performances through simple bands such as playing mandolins.

During the 20s-30s of the 20th century and onwards, the most obvious indicator of the cultural-musical tradition of Elbasan is the civic folk music. Usta Isuf Myzyri, Leksi i Vinit, and Mustafa Bodini were the trio who made it well-known to the other regions, and seemed to give an identity to the songs of Elbasan (Hoxholli 2009). They were not only song writers, they wrote the song lyrics, they created the music, they even sang the songs themselves together with the members of their orchestra.

4.1 *Isuf Myzyri (1881-1956)*

The ethnologist Thanas Meksi (2001) mentions in his book “Mjeshtëri i këngës popullore” (Master of folk music), that Isuf Myzyri (1881-1956) during 1929 up to 1939, over a period of 10 years wrote nearly 16 folk songs, a number which is mentioned even in international resources. Meanwhile the music researcher Vasil Tole (2001) mentions that the nickname of Isuf Myzyri managed to write 89 songs over a period of 50 years. The latter is most likely to be believed since it is based on accurate studies. Some of the most famous songs of Isuf Myzyri are: “Në zabel të gjeta”, “Iku nata, agun malet”, “Dashunija si rrufe”, “Një lulishte me trandafila”, “Midis vetllash më ke një pikë”, “Ma mirë në pyll se në qytet”, “Si bilbili në pranverë”, “Ç’u dëshirush për me të pa”, “S’paske pasë pikë mëshire”, “Errësin’ e pyllit”, “Si mësova un garipi”, “Kanga e Lules”, “Dritës tate xhevahir”, “Përse m’rri kaq i vranu”, “Kumurija po ban gu gu”, etc.

4.2 *Mustafa Bodini (1911-1970)*

He created most of his songs when he was in Tirana, since he spent most of his life there. However his songs were part of the musical style of the folk music of Elbasan, the town where he was born and spent most of his youth. He created nearly 70 songs. However, a researcher of his life and artistic work thinks that he must have written more songs, but due to financial reasons he sold or donated some of them (Hoxholli 2009). Some of his most famous songs are: “Më shikon me buzë në gaz”, “Po këndoj një kangë për ty”, “Ç’më ke dal në penxheret”, “Të vjen era lule zamaku”, “Po këndoj një kang të re”, “Nigjo zanin e bilbilit”, “Erdh pranvera plot blerime”, “Rrall kam pa ksoj bukurie”, “Ku ta gjej një goc si ty”, “Qenke ngritur si burbuqe”, “Ti mbahesh për bukuri”, “Dallëndyshe gushëbardhë”, “Këputa një trandafila”, “Vet më more me të miri”, “Të desha me hakikat”, “Sa mas dore më ke lan”, “Sytë e shkru”, “Sa e amël asht dashnia”, “Shoqet tuja moshatare”, “Ka ca dit që je largu”, “Me fytyr të qeshur po më vjen”, “Kur t’shof dy sytë e shkru”, “Mori vjollca që çel në saks”, “Shoqen ku e kam”, etc.

4.3 *Leksi i Vinit (Aleksandër Kostandin Josifi, (1903-1978)*

Although his role and contribution on the songs of Elbasan was significant, it is thought that only 50 songs were written by him. According to Thanas Meksi (2009, these songs are included in the repertory of folk music, they are also recorded in the phonotech of Tirana Radio. Many songs are not known. Furthermore, many writers have used some of his poems as part of their song lyrics. Some of his most famous songs are: “Ke çesnja e kishës”, “Moj dashnore të gjykoftë prenia”, “Ke dera, ke dera”, “Një ditë diele t’pashë me sy”, “Ti ma more zemrën”, “Vajzës normaliste”, “Ti moj Flutur”,

“Trëndafil”, and many others. Leksi i Vinit as well as Mustafa Bodini remain to be studied in the future too.

5. Conclusions

The typology of the folk music in Elbasan has the following characteristics:

Firstly, songs of Elbasan can easily be distinguished by the maintenance of a characteristic melodical-modal feature. People attracted by music when listening to such songs, would immediately declare that it was the song of Elbasan.

Secondly, Elbasan has always been known for its educational, artistic, musical and cultural characteristics from the 16th century until nowadays. From the 20th century when there were created many cultural societies as well as the Isuf Myzyri ensemble, Elbasan became known especially during the first half of the 20th century.

Thirdly, the content and topic of these songs, including history, patriotism, social aspects, personal emotions, etc. made it possible for these songs to be suitable and acceptable for the Albanian public.

Fourthly, since its early beginnings, folk music of Elbasan became widely known and was spread in all middle part of Albania, in Berat, Myzeqe, Peqin, Kavajë, Durrës, Krujë and then in other Albanian territories beyond Albanian borders; it was widely sung by people until it was well known that such songs were typical of the style of middle part of Albania, otherwise known as “the songs of Elbasan”.

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