

MIKAELA MINGA

RESEARCHING A MULTIPART SINGING TRADITION:
THE HUMAN DIMENSION AS A DRIVING FORCE
FOR PRESERVATION AND CREATIVITY
AMONG THE VLACH-AROMANIANS OF DRENOVA (KORÇA)

ABSTRACT

Questo contributo nasce da un progetto musicale per l'album *Aromanian Songs from Drenova*, (Squilibri, 2018) con brani poliovocali a tre voci degli aromeni (valacchi) di Drenova, paese appartenente alla regione di Korça, a sudest dell'Albania. Quest'area è stata tra le più rappresentative per questo tipo di polifonie vocali e una minoranza etnica come quella dei valacchi ha avuto un ruolo rilevante. Un lavoro di ricerca etnomusicologica ha accompagnato il processo di registrazione sonora per indagare questa presenza abbastanza trascurata di queste pratiche musicali. In questo contributo verrà presa in considerazione la dimensione umana di questa pratica tramite l'analisi di quattro aspetti assai eminenti: storia personale, incorporazione, l'espressione di sé, personificazione e azione congiunta. Questi aspetti rappresentano una forza motrice nella creazione e nella preservazione di questa pratica.

PAROLE CHIAVE Polivocalità, la minoranza degli aromeno-valacchi in Albania, performance, affetto, 'cantare in compagnia', incorporazione

SUMMARY

This article evolves from a musical project for the CD album *Aromanian Songs from Drenova*, (Squilibri, 2018) with multipart songs from the aromanian-vlach minority of Drenova, a village in Korça's district, in southeast Albania. This area has been among the most vital ones in the three-part singing style and this minority has played a significant role. Alongside the recording process, a research on the documentary level evolved, for investigating a rather neglected presence of singing practices of this group. This article explores the human dimension focusing on four eminent aspects: personal history, embodiment, self-expression, and joint action. The latter have been a driving force for creativity and preservation in this singing practice.

KEYWORDS Multipart singing; aromanian-vlach minority in Albania, performance, affect, 'singing in company', embodiment



1. Introduction

IN the early 2016, I meet four aromanian-vlach singers: Aleks Mihallari, Spiro Gramozi, Spiro Bello, and Thanas Tona.¹ They lived in Drenova, a village in the nearby of Korça's district, and used to spend time singing together. At a certain point, they had the idea to record the repertoire and make a musical album. For such purpose, Spiro Gramozi, the most active from them, had initially contacted the composer Josif Minga. The latter had been a long time artistic director of numerous institutional traditional music ensembles, with an extensive experience and knowledge of traditional music in Korça district and, generally, in all southeastern Albanian region. I was invited to join them in one of their gatherings, which as I am going to further expand, represented a first step for a musical project through which they accomplished their aspiration for the musical album.²

The group performed mostly songs in Aromanian language, in the distinctive three-part singing format, regarded as the three-part *Tosk* polyphonic style in Albania.³ There is a main part, the one that takes the melody of the song for which the singers used the expression: 'ljau tini', 'ljau cãntãcli'. In the Albanian language this part is identified as 'marrësi' and has the same meaning. Then, there is the second part that intersects with the main one. The singers used the expression: 'su tsãn mini', which means 'I hold it for you'. It corresponds with what in Albanian language is called 'prerës' and has multiple meanings in terms of interaction: to uphold, to respond, to get musically

1. Aromanian communities, also known as 'vlachs', 'çoban' (meaning shepherd) live in different parts of Albania, and broadly in that of southeast Europe. They speak a distinct Romance language, belonging to the eastern Romance language family that has many dialectical differences among the widely scattered populations (KAHL, *Ethnizität und räumliche Verbreitung der Aromunen*. For the Aromanians' in Albania see: SCHWANDER-SIEVERS, *The Albanian Aromanians' Awakening*). The presence of aromanian-vlach communities has played an important part in the multicultural landscape of Korça's region, with historical narratives that go back in time. Korça has been among the most important regions of residence, being at the same time very significant to both their ancient and recent history. One of the most important traces can be found in the cosmopolitan city of Moscopolis (Voskopojë). Inhabited mostly by Aromanians, it came to prominence in the 18th century and for a brief period it was the second cultural and commercial center of the Ottoman Empire, especially renowned for the printing press. Destroyed in 1788, its legacy is physically traceable nowadays in the numerous surviving churches and manuscripts, while its impact has been felt in the revitalization of many adjacent urban areas, Korça notwithstanding. (DADO – XHUFË *et. al.*, përg., *Qytetërimi i Voskopojës*). Of no less importance, although not properly known, is the role Aromanians played in the development of a national Albanian consciousness.
2. *Aromanian Songs from Drenova/Këngë arumune të Drenovës*, CD, edited by Mikaela and Josif Minga, Squilibri, Roma, 2018.
3. For a further analysis of the 'Tosk' style see: TOLE, *Folklori muzikor*, pp. 72-83; AHMEDAJA – REINHARD, *Dein Herz soll immer singen!*, pp. 28-30; AHMEDAJA, *Approach*, pp. 252, 254; This part-song concerns also Albanian speaking communities beyond the national borders (SUGARMAN, *Engendering Song*, pp. 62-74) and also Greek populations from North Epirus (for a wider geographic-oriented perspective of analysis see: KOÇO, *Styles of the Iso-Based Multipart Singing*).

involved with the main part; but also coming across the melody and holding it further in its own way. The third part is the bourdon, widely known as ‘iso’ and sung on the vowel ‘e’.

However, my intention in this contribution is not so much the analysis of the music *per se*, as the human dimension, that is, the focus on the people who give life to this music. Different scholars have underlined the importance of this dimension suggesting to focus «on specific music scenarios, namely, concrete persons and their reciprocal relationships».⁴ The case investigated here is a specific scenario and as such provides a very stimulating context for the exploration of reciprocal relationships in multipart singing practices among the aromanian-vlachs of Drenova.

Aleks Mihallari, Spiro Gramozi, Spiro Bello, and Thanas Tona identify themselves as *armăn* or *fărshărot*. Until the early 1960s, their families lived a transhumant life moving to the highlands of Korça during summer, and to the mild climate of Konispol (nowadays, the southernmost region of Albania), during winter. They settled in Drenova in the early 1960s, due to the mobility restrictions that were imposed by the regime and which were considered particularly suspicious in the border areas. Such measures put an end to their old way of life as nomad shepherds, for a new one, as labor force in the state-owned economy.⁵ Aleks Mihallari (1935-2022) became a forestry worker. Spiro Gramozi (b. 1945) worked at the geological state enterprise. Spiro Bello (b. 1948) had a position as team supervisor (brigadier) at the agricultural collective farm. Thanas Tona (b. 1957), after completing higher education, worked as specialist of agriculture.

2. Macro and Micro Histories

The aspects that struck us from the very first moment of our encounter with them were the outstanding singing capacities of these singers; the ways that they mastered the repertoire, either on an individual level, or as a group. On the other hand, this repertoire has been largely overlooked and, to a certain extent, even ignored, either from the institutional traditional music scene, or from a scholarly level.⁶

4. MACCHIARELA, *Theorizing on Multipart Music*, p. 13. See also: FELD, *Sound Structure*; BLACKING, *How Musical Is Man*;
5. Drenova, in spite of its rather modest population of 2500 inhabitants, counted some of the most important socialist enterprises in Korça's region, from the industrial coal mines, to the agricultural collective farms. MANÇO, *Drenova*.
6. Among the few contributions see: KAHL, *Multipart Singing Among Aromanians*. To the short list of studies on Aromanian music provided Kahl (p. 269), few others have been added in the recent years: SHETUNI, *Muzika tradicionale arumune*. KOÇO, *Styles of the Iso-Based Multipart Singing*, pp. 264-273. A very important contribution from an ethnomusicological and ethnographic perspective is the anthology on CD: *Armănjliji di Andon Poçi – Cântitsi Shi Isturii* [The Aromanians of Andon Poçi - Songs and Stories] Muzeul Țăranului Român [The Museum of the Romanian Paesant]/Fundația Alexandru Tzigă-

This concerns primarily the dictatorial regime (1945-1991). The latter did not recognize the Aromanians as a minority. They were not allowed to represent their own traditional culture in the public music scene, a scene in which traditional music practices perpetuated largely the ethno-national ideology of the dictatorial regime.⁷ Such practices were represented by socialist folk ensembles where local performers were enrolled. In their case, Spiro Gramozi and Aleks Mihallari have been chosen as members of these local folk ensembles. They also participated in a number of editions of the 'National Folklore Festival of Gjirokastër', the most prominent and celebrated event for staged folklore performances during the dictatorial rule. But they were not there as Aromanians, rather as exceptionally gifted performers of multipart singing from Drenova. As such they were praised for their vocal qualities, but they were not allowed to sing in their mother tongue. Nevertheless, a few songs from their repertoire have been performed on stage, but the lyrics have been either translated or adapted in Albanian language.

The fall of the regime in the early 1990s vitalized the contacts of this minority with broader cultural networks dedicated to Aromanian culture, especially those in Greece and Romania. Still, they did not get recognition as a minority in Albania. They were not considered as a national minority, but only a 'linguistic and cultural one'.⁸ The status did not prevent them from setting up their own cultural network for holding together the people living in the country. Yet, things did not move towards a unitary path and the associations revived the 19th century political split between those that sustained a pro-Romanian ascendancy and those that followed a pro-Greek one.⁹

On a micro level, Spiro Gramozi and Spiro Bello migrated in Greece, together with their families, after the regime collapsed in the early 1990s. During this period, they revitalized contacts with relatives, kin and friends whose connections were lost when the Albanian border was closed. They also participated in a few cultural events – mostly festivals, held in Greece and dedicated to the Aromanian culture. It can be said that both became attached in many ways with this country, living in Greece for almost 25 years. Their comments on such ties entwine their ascendancy, how their predecessors had moved and settled in different areas of now northern Greece and southeast Albania, with more contemporary narratives. The latter revolve on issues such as economic prosperity and well-being through very hard work in Greece after leaving an impoverished and disorganized Drenova, and, generally, the Albanian reality of the early 1990s. From this perspective, their ethnicity has represented for them a path for the integration and adaptation in the new realities.

ra-Samurçaj, CD 012, 2006. The Anthology contains fieldwork recordings from the village Andon Poçi and has been compiled by: Florin Iordan, Maria Bara, Speranța Rădulescu, and Thede Kahl.

7. The ideological use, besides extracting folk practices from their original context and bringing them on stage, included also the creation of a 'newly composed' repertoire (Folklori i Ri/New Folklore) addressed to socialist life and its achievements.
8. KAHL, *The Ethnicity of Aromanians*, p. 156
9. KAHL, *Aromanians in Greece*, pp. 206-211; ID., *The Ethnicity of Aromanians*.

In 2017, that is, nearly 27 years after the regime's fall, the Albanian government recognized the Aromanians as a national minority (Law No. 96/2017, on the protection of national minorities).¹⁰ It was during the time that we were working on the recording of this album, thus prompting even more to carefully take into consideration the various implications that such historical, political, and cultural layers have on the music that we were going to record but, most of all, on the people that sang this music.

3. Personal History, Self-Expression, Embodiment, and Joint Action

The making of this album has been an interface between a valorization of a musical expression conceived as an artistic performance and an ethnomusicological work, focused on the protagonists of this music. This bearing in mind that what was being performed and recorded here was a «specific human combined activity with peculiar symbolic contents and values».¹¹ A very stimulating context for ethnographic investigation emerged during the production of what we considered as a 'high fidelity ethnographic field recording'.¹² Such context has been shaped in a number of 'rehearsal meetings' that preceded the final recording sessions on the 28th of July and the 1st of August 2017. Additionally, I also conducted several personal conversations with the singers for unravelling more specific details on the ways that they came together as a group, what were they singing, as well as enquiries that emerged during our meetings and that I wanted to further elucidate with them.

Four inter-related aspects came out during this ethnographic work: personal history, self-expression, embodiment, and joint action. I am going to explore them in this section and the successive one. Personal histories, self-expression, embodiment, and joint action are vital in configuring each member as *part* of the group, intended not only on the level of music production, but also on that of its coming into existence as a social entity. In fact, such «a [small] music group is an unusual type of social group whose interactions involve a deep degree of intimacy and 'connivance' not equalled by other kinds of groups».¹³ As such, scholars suggest focusing on their inner dynamics that,

10. <https://rm.coe.int/law-on-protection-of-national-minorities-in-albania-english/1680a0c256> (accessed 22 March 2024)

11. MACCHIARELLA, *Theorizing on Multipart Music*, p. 11.

12. The concept of 'high fidelity field ethnographic field recording' derives from TURINO, *Music as Social Life*.

I need to point out that such approach shares elements in common a previous recording project dedicated to Korça's urban song and one of its most eminent singers: Spanja Pipa. This was done in collaboration with Nicola Scaldaferrri and Josif Minga. (MINGA – SCALDAFERRI, *Spanja Pipa*). However, this case had also specificities on its own, analyzed in this contribution.

13. MACCHIARELLA, *Theorizing on Multipart Music*, p. 18.

in our case are deeply impregnated with the historical, cultural, and political narratives already described above.¹⁴ Each of the singers has individually inherited them as part of his personal histories. In this sense, self-expression turns to be an important pattern of their output, both in terms of creativity and in that of communication; self-expression is also a necessity they have for rendering audible one's voice within the groups' voice. This capacity reminds us once again that «musical time is also a social time offered to the senses and directed at the affects».¹⁵ Therefore, the inner dynamics of the group show us how they 'use' music to make sense of themselves. Such 'use' is embodied and manifests in specific bodily actions. It is always fundamental how the song leader, that is, the main part expresses his individuality from one piece to the other, from one leader to the other, and how the other parts inter-relate to him in each song. Particularly significant for each of those who perform the main part is the choice of the second part, which, although subordinate to the main part, has a fundamental importance to the leader; important to the extent that, if the second part does not fulfill his expectations, he will not perform the song.

But there are also exceptional cases, such as the one I will consider below, when the singer chooses deliberately to perform both main and secondary part. Whatever the case, each part's division represents joint actions which are coordinated and concerted with each other.¹⁶ Finally, all their actions and choices are coordinated keeping in mind that, in the end, this is going to be a final music product, which has to fulfill also specific aesthetic and artistic values.

Personal histories play a major role in the relationship these singers have with specific songs. And one story, more in particular, has served as a sort of incentive for the meeting of the singers.

In 2014, Spiro Gramozi retired and left Greece for re-settling in Drenova, with his wife. Apparently, the Greek economic crises had revived a new migration drive in his family. His two sons decided to move to Britain, to work. The family split apart, and the departure of his second son, with whom he was particularly attached, has been a very hard moment in his life. It is even harder for him to talk about it, even during our work on the album, although more than 5 years had passed from his son's departure. His only comment was on the need to sing out this situation through a song that, as he observes, 'came' to him ('i erdhi') during that hard time. The need 'to find friends for singing it', as he points out encouraged him to search for them once back in Drenova.

First, he contacted Spiro Bello and then Thanas Tona, whom he knew personally. With the former he had participated in two Festivals of vlach-aromanian singing tradition in Greece. One of them was held in Metsovo, in the mid-1990s.¹⁷ Furthermore, Spiro Bello had returned from Greece a few years

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18. See also COTTRELL, *Professional Music-Making in London*, pp. 83-84

15. LORTAT-JACOB, *Singing in company*, p. 28

16. MACCHIARELLA, *Theorizing on multipart music*, p. 12; LORTAT-JACOB, *Singing in Company*, p. 27

17. Metsovo is a small town in northern Greece, in the Pindus mountains, considered as central to vlach-aromanian culture in Greece. Important festivals and cultural events are

before him and had experienced the same family split from migration, with his daughters moving to Germany and he and his wife returning to Drenova. The three of them decided to get together and choose to meet in a small restaurant at the outskirts of Drenova. After the initial meetings, Aleks Mihallari heard about their gatherings and asked to join them.

Eckehard Pistrick has carefully analyzed the various layers of creativity and singing nostalgia in south Albanian multipart music as a way for overcoming absence and silence. He explores the semantic level, and the emotional ones, but observes that they are not enough without the performance situation, the role of the body and the social interaction.¹⁸ Spiro Gramozi operates within a multipart mode of musical thinking. Apparently, he needed people to sing with and was searching for the persons with whom to 'part' the song. However, to 'part' the song that Spiro Gramozi claims in autobiographical terms is not supposed to mean a simple division of musical roles. Instead, it is a process through which - following Feld and Pistrick - the situated meaning of these sound patterns provides paths through which an individual experience is shared and becomes communicable with others. Indexical to the situated meaning is the intertwining of the migration song with lament practices.¹⁹

The song entitled *Tsi mi lo doru* (track 17 in the album) is a sort of lament; a mourning, with a deep sense of longing and yearning for the children gone. They confess that it took its final shape during the first meetings with Spiro Bello on the second part, responding to him. Although there is no concrete reference to migration in the lyrics, the idea of absence and longing suggest clearly that kind of situation. The text makes use of the affective language of nostalgia, and those 'un-translatable' words, such as *doru* (dor in Romanian) that appear constantly in these contexts.

Tsi mi lo doru/Longing

O lele tsi mi lo doru, o lele doru
 Iu o-am feata, iu o-am ficioru, o lele ficioru
 Luna shi soară o-acătsă noru, o-acătsă noru
 Ni 'nsurat fudzi ficioru, o ficioru
 O lele feati shi ficior, o lele feati ficior
 Scăpătat muntsiă cu nor, o muntsiă cu nor
 Pisti-amari azburat, o azburat o
 Părintiă singur ai-alăsat, o ai-alăsat

[I am longing/Where is my daughter, where is my son/The sun and the moon has been covered by the cloud/My son left unmarried/They crossed mountains of clouds/Flew over the sea/Left your parents alone.]

held regularly, celebrating and bringing together vlach-aromanians from different places. From the ways that the singers mention this festival and the town itself, it can be said that performing at Metsovo's festival represented a standard of prestige.

18. PISTRICK, *Performing nostalgia*, pp. 59-98; p. 221.

19. FELD, *Sound Structure as Social Structure*, p. 404; PISTRICK, *Performing nostalgia*, p. 93.

‘Working’ on the song for them did not mean creating something *ex novo*, but molding and re-enacting a pattern that ‘was already there’. Lortat-Jacob speaks about this process in terms of a ‘concerted action’ aimed at the production, or better re-creation of an acoustical form that needs to be mastered: «No doubt, [this means] doing again what has been done already, but it happens that [...], this ‘already done’ always has a taste of novelty».²⁰ This song embarks this taste of novelty because it has to produce an affect, an emotional reaction related to Gramozi’s personal history. Therefore, singing and mastering this song means working on the possibilities to achieve an emotional reaction from it and share it together, as a companionship. But, it should be also underlined that this affect is not supposed just to touch them. On the contrary, this affect represents them as an embodied experience.

Really impressive from this point of view, is Spiro Gramozi’s vocal emission, starting with a sort of exclamation performed loudly, in the higher register of the voice, which is characteristic to this song, in particular. Although during the final recording session he became very emotional at the moment of its performance, he managed to overcome it. One of his final remarks about the song was that he was glad that besides assisting him in a hard moment of his life, he was able to ‘give’ a life to this piece through their performance and then, through the album.

4. ‘Singing in Company’ and Rehearsing in Company

As time went by, their meetings gained a certain consistency. They confessed that this was not based on any fixed schedule. Rather, each time one of them was free, would call the others on the phone and if they were available, the meeting was set. The place became stationary and so the four of them. Other people joined from time to time but just once.²¹ Such gatherings are structured according to what Lortat-Jacob has defined as ‘singing in company’, that is, as a musical practice where people come together for singing as a group of friends, kin (farefis) or in-laws (krushq), settled around the table, with a drink and some food.²²

In this vein, singing practices served as a sort of *aide-mémoire* for pieces that were historically performed within their community until the early 1990s, in weddings or special events; a repertoire that they had learned by ear, listening to the elders, and that were able to remember through singing in company. Their comments on these practices revealed an important detail:

20. LORTAT-JACOB, *Singing in Company*, p. 27.

21. Gramozi explains the renunciation for financial reasons. Singing in company meant also spending a necessary amount of money for the consumption of food and drinks. Not all who joined were willing to do that recurrently. To the economic reasons, I would also add depopulation of the village from both internal and external migration. Nowadays, the population of Drenova is drastically reduced to more or less, 260 habitants.

22. LORTAT-JACOB, *Singing in Company*.

A latent form of multipart singing among Drenova's vlach-aromanians has been preserved in spite of the assimilation politics during communism and the public exclusion of any performance in Aromanian language. The latter had evolved and been active outside the staged performances; in informal social events, family gatherings, and especially within the wedding ritual, which Spiro Gramozi defines as «the real 'festival' of their music».

On this basis, they explain to me how specific songs performed at a wedding from one lineage, were absorbed, becoming 'popular' in the successive ones, or in their special events. He also mentions people in the village who were known for their exceptional singing abilities, getting also nicknames for their vocal talent. After the regime's fall, these songs were not actively practiced. The reasons for that are to be found in the situation that followed and which has been already described above. They were somehow lost because people did not have such chance of being together and sing as before. Therefore, it can be said that their singing in company and the recording project contributed in reviving them.

Based on the way that their 'singing in company' has been structured, and then on how they have followed each other in these gatherings, for finally aspiring to record the pieces in an album, this elements altogether suggest that their meetings were not structured around the *muhabet* (or *muabet*) art of discourse as suggested by previous contributions.²³ Speaking and singing maintain reciprocal relationships and social discourse has its own part in the getting-together. Nevertheless, the core of their company seems to be centered on singing acts, rather than discursive ones.

At the moment when we joined their company, a specific music scenario started to be shaped. The latter revolved around the preparation of the album and therefore was rather different from the standard singing in company they had experienced until that moment. It differed also from the ordinary ethnomusicological observational-based fieldwork. We had to set out a number of meetings. The first one dated, as I mentioned in the beginning, on January the 4th 2016. It was a rather relaxed get-together, for familiarizing with each other. As a matter of fact, they were already acquainted and I was the only person to be introduced for the first time with them. However, entering this male singing context was rather easy for me, as Josif Minga's daughter. On that occasion, Spiro Bello's wife sat on the table with us, as did also some friend of theirs who wanted to listen.

We were settled on the table at the restaurant where they used to meet. Drinks and food were served. On this occasion they sang different songs, shared details about their gatherings, remembering 'old times', that is, until the regime's fall and singing practices before and after. (see Figure 1, 2, 3). It was during this meeting that we decided together for the album and its specificities. I explained to them the approach I intended to develop, how and where they were going to be recorded and then, how me and Josif Minga intended

23. PISTRICK – DALIPAJ, *Celebrating the Imagined Village*, pp. 176-179. See also: SUGARMAN, *Making Muabet*.

to proceed with the album production. They seemed particularly comfortable with the idea of recording there, *in situ*, instead of the recording studio. Also, were willing to share with me anything I needed.

The first meeting paved the way for the second one, a much longer encounter that took place on the 17th of April 2017. Different dynamics distinguished this second meeting. It started as a sort of ‘audition’: they began singing, with a little bit stress, perceiving us in the role of listeners. It looked as formal presentation with a sort of dividing line between the two groups, so to say, something that it was not sensed in the previous one.

But things became gradually more relaxed and informal after a couple of performances. After performing the first three-four songs, Spiro Gramozi complained about the fact that he was tired because he had to sing in a row either the main or the second part for all the songs and asked for a better coordination between them, so that he could rest a little bit. After his complain, Aleks Mihallari took the main part of the following song (*Di când deadi llaia lluna*, track 9) and Spiro Gramozi sang the second part. Their performance ended with a toast ‘*gëzuar*’, and a glass of raki, something that they had been very hesitant doing until that moment. (Drenova is known especially for the mulberry raki. All the protagonists are masters of its production and, of course, of its consumption.) Sat around a table, with some delicious finger food and drinks, the previous discussion regarding the coordination of performance was left behind. After the toast, Josif Minga intervened singing a version of this song in Albanian and Aleks Mihallari, followed as second part (*prerës*). Minga’s intervention was well-received and played a crucial role in dissolving that kind of initial apprehension and division between us and them.

Another song in Aromanian language followed and afterwards Minga and Mihallari interacted once again together, performing *Vallë vjen behari kurrë*, a well-known love song, of the Devolli area, performed by male singers, in Albanian language. Josif Minga sang the main part (*marrësi*) and Aleks Mihallari, the second one (*prerësi*). They had already performed a song in our first meeting. However, this turned out to be much more passionate and both were very engaged in the performance. At a certain point, Thanas Tona tried to interrupt the performance by asking Aleks Mihallari to stop and take a rest, and inviting Spiro Gramozi to perform the second part instead. Spiro Gramozi replied to Thanas Tona that there is no space for him in their performance and that they should not interfere in anyway but leave them alone to sing.

The performance was not only relaxed and stress-free, but very felt and emotional from both sides. They were revolved towards each other, in what has been described as «an interaction between sound bodies».²⁴ Thus, the others had no other choice but to sustain them singing the iso part; and, at the end, praising their performance with the well-known greeting: *Ju këndoftë zemra!* (May your heart always sing!). Very felt and long toasts followed, with salutes and tributes (*urime*) to the performers. Very significant in this context

24. MACCHIARELLA, *Theorizing on Multipart Music*, p. 11.

was also the 'silence' that followed their performance, a necessary break after this emotional moment, in which the words, apparently were not needed. Afterwards, Spiro Gramozi started the successive Aromanian song.

It can be said that this particular moment was the peak of the entire meeting and needed an analysis. Aleks Mihallari and Josif Minga had met for the first time in 1978, on the occasion of the Gjirokastra National Folk Festival. Both participated for the first time: Minga as artistic director and Mihallari as singer. In a way, these two meetings had revived a sort of reconnection between two people that somehow shared the same passion for such a practice, although through different approaches. Their performance invigorated peculiar ties and solidarities that have been established during these occasions and that have found ways to go beyond the formality and conventions that an event such as the Gjirokastra National Folklore Festival imposed to all the participants. Such tie and cohesion are consequences of that embodied dimension, which, as Martin Clayton and Laura Leante suggest, relates not only to the individual subject, but also to the social dimension. The latter is also an essential component of the embodied cognition.²⁵ They had not performed together before, but through such cognitive states they were able to develop 'a joint action' grounded «both on [the] capacity of mutual entertainment and on simulation».²⁶

So, their performance was fundamental for breaking any sort of dividing lines between us and them and things became much more relaxed. The order of the successive songs has been structured around the idea of suite, as Lortat-Jacob has remarked when discussing multipart drinking and singing in south Albania.²⁷ And the toasts persisted in the end of each song.

The recordings from this gathering served as the backbone for working with the album. They represented the main source for Josif Minga and me. However, we did not choose to make decisions on our own and instead opted for a dialogical approach.²⁸ We meet again with the group on July the 22nd and 25th, two sessions that preceded the final recording sessions on the 28th of July and that of the 1st of August. These meetings were not focused that much on performance, rather on listening and discussing the best choices that could be made for the album. Each of us had its own ideas, which had to be shaped as collective choices and decisions (Figures 4-5).

We focused on the recording done previously, commenting step by step the songs and discussing possible choices. Different aspects came into discussion. For Josif Minga, among the most important ones was establishing the appropriate tonal center for each song, considering the vocal abilities and the range of every protagonist. Open to discussion between us was whether we were going to invite other performers to join us. The name of Eli Fara has been brought into discussion. She was a female popular artist that came

25. CLAYTON-LEANTE, *Embodiment*, pp. 193-194.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

27. LORTAT-JACOB, *Multipart Drinking (and Singing)*, pp. 10-11.

28. MACCHIARELLA, *Cantare a cuncordu*.

from the Drenova's aromanian-vlach minority. She gained popularity in the early 1980s as leader of a number of multipart songs and then of newly composed 'popullore' songs. She had performed with Spiro Gramozi in the 1980s Gjirokastra Folklore Festival. After discussing the matter, our decision was not to include her and the reasons for that were because she would be as a sort of intruder to the group's compatibility, although she might know the songs. We discussed also about the possibility of another male singer, Lefter Pulici, that could join the group. He too has been well-known on stage and was a friend of theirs. But he lived in Greece, which carried on practical issues of organization and coordination between us.

Very thought-provoking in our discussions were the dynamics regarding self-expression for negotiating their roles within the group. Everyone had its own voice in the discussion.²⁹ Nevertheless, the protagonist was Aleks Mihallari, who instigated continues debates and discussions. He was also very demanding on how he wanted certain elements to be performed, to the point that he had specific requests solicited to Josif Minga.

Aleks Mihallari was the oldest of the singers (actually he passed away on the 19th of January 2022). He evinced his personality and temperament from the beginning. The age factor played a role in regarding him with a special respect among his companions. This respect was also related to his reputation as a very talented singer but, above all, was his personality, that emerged constantly when he wanted to clarify his own intentions and the other's role partition.

Mihallari made his presence felt since the beginning of our meeting with a number of observations. One of them dealt with an expression, in the song's lyrics - actually the only one that they perform in Albanian language. It is the exclamation: *More shokë* (O friends), repeated in each verse (track 4).

Në këtë dynja/In this world

Ah po në këtë dynja, *more shokë*, ç'kemi kënduar
 Ah po gaz e muhabet, *more shokë*, kemi trashëguar
 Ah po të gjithë sa kanë qenë, *more shokë*, e sa kanë shkuar
 Ah po me balt' e me gurë, *more shokë*, ah ç'i kanë mbuluar

[We have sung a lot, in this world, fellows/Joy and conversation have inherited/ Everything we said is gone/Covered with mud and stone.]

Gramozi performed the main part, while Mihallari the second one. At a certain point, he refused to sing the word «shokë» clarifying that in the versions he had heard, that word was not pronounced, so it was foreign to him.

29. For example, Josif Minga was rather hesitant for inserting *Americă laiă* (track 14), a migration song that they had 'learned' from an audio-cassette that a relative from Canada had sent to them in the mid-1970s. Spiro Gramozi and then Spiro Bello insisted for including it. They explained to him that this song's lyrics have been adapted in Albanian language and performed on stage in the late 1970s, so it was important for them to perform it in the original version, as they had learned from the audio-cassette.

All the others opposed, sustaining that they had always heard it in that way. A debate about songs' repertoires that belonged to one lineage from their families compared to the other followed. They commented on the partition of the song repertoire based on the lineages and the fact that they circulated when they were together in weddings or ritual celebrations. Evidently, the song was popular and had different versions, performed with both versions. At a certain point of the discussion, Mihallari seemed persuaded, but in the end, after they performed the song once again, he stated clearly: «I will not say 'friends'» («Unë, shokë, nuk e them dot») and he did not in the final registration.

Another aspect was the iso: two singers that had to sing the iso part when the other two were performing the main roles, were not enough. All of us were conscious about this lack so we discussed who could join from their community. During such conversations, Mihallari insisted continuously that no more than three people were needed to do that, for not 'ruining' the song. Since they were not able to find singers, Josif Minga chose two Albanian multipart singers from the region for 'filling' the iso part.

However, the most controversial requests of Mihallari, those that caused the toughest discussions, regarded the song *Di cënd deadi laia lunë* (track 9). The first, was his request about a *kaba*, before performing it. He asked Minga if a sort of lament (*vajtim*) – alluding to the *kaba* or *miroloi* genres – could be played as an introduction and then he could proceed with the song. The others opposed strongly. Spiro Gramozi commented that their songs were not for the orchestra. They should be locked where they are. The old ones should not be changed. (*Këngët tona nuk janë për orkestër; Te vjetrat s' duhen trazuar fare*). Mihallari responded that, he had heard this model and, in any case, it was worth try. In spite the other member's skepticism, Minga sustained Mihallari's idea and said that they were going to try.

The second request was even more controversial and the discussion even stronger. Mihallari suggested that it would be better for him to perform the main and second part alone. For the other members' point of view, this was unacceptable. «It is not in our tradition» was one comment. However, Mihallari had an answer also for that, a significant one. It could be reassumed more or less in this way: «When you are not here, and I do not have any other to sing with, I sing on my own both parts. So let's give it a try. I want to sing it myself».

Due to this discussion, Josif Minga suggested to try both versions: Initially with Spiro Gramozi on the second part; then Mihallari individually. In the first version, Minga, in the position of a trained musician, evidenced a sort of clash between the mayor third and a minor third that each singer produced. This incompatibility went in line with Mihallari pretensions and his sense of being uncomfortable with Gramozi as second part. However, Minga tried another version, asking to Spiro Bello whether he could sing the second part of the song. Bello tried but he was not able to do that. So, the final decision was that Aleks Mihallari performed the song both as leader and second part.

An evident aspect emerged from these debates. Each of the singers had its own song repertoire, as leader. In a way, each of the pieces had its 'owner'

so to say, which was the performer of the main part. They did not interfere in the other's songs; and did not perform different versions of the same song either. This personalization leads us to think that what they were performing was not just a song; but their *own* song; as a sort of mark of their own personality. This sense of belonging has been further elaborated during our conversations when they explained to me that, each of the lineages had their own song repertoire, and also that certain families sang in different forms. Spiro Gramozi has pointed out to me that his own family lineage used to sing loudly, with more strength, in comparison to that of Mihallarë (the lineage of Aleks Mihallari) who had a quieter and softer approach of singing ('këndonin shtruar' as he specified in Albanian language). On the other hand, they were also conscious about their own repertoire as compared to other vlach-aromanian communities in Albania. During one of our meeting I put songs from these communities. Spiro Bello, remarked that he as well had listened to them on youtube, yet, he did not perform any of the songs. Very drastic was Aleks Mihallari, who, with a conclusory tone, stated that, although they performed similar repertoires, they had their own, just like the language dialects.

Finally, this personalized feature is fundamental in the preservation of these songs all these years. This gains a particular significance when considering that they are the last generation to master this multipart singing practice among the vlach-aromanians of Drenova.

5. Conclusions

The most evident aspect that emerged from this research is the embodied experience that each of the singers brought when the group firstly came together as a spontaneous initiative of Spiro Gramozi. Their individual renderings were fundamental for the existence of the group, as the synergies generated when performing together. The role of embodiment and self-expression, of personal histories and joint action have been driving forces of both preservation and creativity among their singing acts; during the dictatorial regime, in its aftermath, up to the moment they decided to sing together. Perhaps they could not articulate this element as I do, but my final observation is that beyond their desire to make a CD album of their songs so they would not be forgotten, there was also an unconscious cognition for capturing these singing states, the immediateness of that one moment, that one song, or even that of the act of singing in company, so that they «could have them» («që t'i kishin») together with the songs. Aleks Mihallari passed away in 2022, a sad circumstance, reminding us how this human dimension shrinks irremediably with the passing of time.

APPENDIX



Figure 1. Gathering (4 January 2016)



Figure 2. Gathering (4 January 2016)



Figure 3. Gathering (4 January 2016)



Figure 4. Rehearsing (25 July 2017)



Figure 5. Rehearsing (25 July 2017)



Figure 6. Rehearsing (25 July 2017)



Figure 7. During the recording session (28 July 2017)



Figure 8. Spiro Gramozi and Aleks Mihallari during the recording session (28 July 2017)



Figure 9. Spiro Bello, during the recording session (28 July 2017)



Figure 10. Thanas Tona, during the recording session (28 July 2017)

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NOTA BIOGRAFICA Mikaela Minga è etnomusicologa e ricercatrice presso l'Istituto di Antropologia Culturale di Tirana. Si interessa di pratiche musicali urbane e di *popular music* in Albania e nei Balcani; di musica nei contesti dittatoriali e quelli post-dittatoriali e di musica da film e sound studies. Inoltre, tiene due corsi d'insegnamento presso l'Università delle Arti di Tirana: Jazz e Popular Music e Musica per film.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE Mikaela Minga is an ethnomusicologist at the Institute of Anthropology in Tirana. She is also guest lecture at the University of Arts in Tirana, teaching Jazz and Popular Music and Film Music. Her main disciplinary research focuses on urban music practises and popular music in Albania and the Balkan area; music in the dictatorial and post-dictatorial regimes; film music and sound studies.