

Slovenian *Trubači*:
The Economies of Affect
within and beyond
Ethno-Racialized
Difference

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*We offer a little more than others. I think that we are the only ones who have a singer. We even have two singers [...] Basically, it's like I can offer everything: from Avsenik,¹ Plestenjak,² to hardcore Serbian pieces for an hour ... I have such a wide range. Basically, we do it for the finances, but also because we love it, M. Š., the trumpet player and manager of the brass band Čaga Boys from the Slovenian town of Velenje, explained to us what makes the band popular in Slovenia (2021, June 18).³ In our conversation over Zoom, he extensively described his strategies for online promotion of the band at the website *trubaci.si* (*Trubači Slovenija*) and the social media platforms of Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook, which significantly contributed to their success.*

Having a close look at the Čaga Boys' digital presence, we discovered that phrases such as “the best offer,” “the most adjustable repertoire,” or “fast and reliable execution of the performance” are used to offer the band's performing services to potential clients.⁴ Moreover, a quick internet search on the keyword *slovenski trubачi*⁵ led us to several other websites whose content

1 *Ansambel bratov Avsenik* (The Avsenik Brothers Ensemble), active from 1953 to 1990, is the most recognizable Slovenian folk-pop (*narodnozabavna*) ensemble.

2 Jan Plestenjak is one of Slovenia's most popular pop singers and has been active on the music scene since 1994.

3 The translations of the interviews, lyrics and website content that are in Slovenian or Serbo-Croatian are by the authors.

4 See Čaga Boys' on YouTube (“Čaga Boys - Velenjski Trubači” n.d.), Facebook page (“Čaga Boys - Velenjski Trubači” n.d.), and Instagram account (“Čaga Boys” n.d.) for further information.

5 Roughly, Slovenian Balkan brass band. The etymology of the term *trubači* comes from *truba*—a trumpet, meaning players of Balkan brass music. A more detailed explanation of the usage of this term by musicians in Slovenia and in the popular and media discourses follows in the next section.

combines banners announcing “the best Slovenian *trubači*,” “best *trubači* for weddings and celebrations,” “best Guča,” “real prices” with photos of Balkan brass bands playing live.⁶ The websites invite interested parties to contact the bands by e-mail, phone, Viber, and WhatsApp, to which the bands will “respond fast,” “come immediately,” and “play the best music.” However, we soon realized that websites dedicated to *Slovenski trubači* are used by the Roma bands based in Serbia to advertise their services in various cities in Slovenia.⁷ The textual context of the website proved a poor translation (probably by Google Translate) of the original Serbo-Croatian text into Slovenian, with numerous non-understandable sentences written, a mix of both languages, and grammatical mistakes. Does this testify that “Slovenian” does not denote an actual ethnic belonging but is added to *trubači* as a marketing strategy to attract potential customers? Or?

In this chapter, we explore how the label of *slovenski trubači* circulates as a commercial good in the music market in Slovenia. We focus our analysis on how musicians draw on the discourses and sonic imaginations attached to *trubači*—as the genre able to generate the highest intensity of affective encounters—to ensure a better position in the market. The ways musicians cultivate and curate affect to produce and modify the emotional states of the audience have recently gained scholars’ attention. In the case of professional musicianship, scholars testify to the key importance of embodied labor with affect as a key to labor practice.⁸ By examining affective encounters between musicians

6 See “Trubači Slovenija: Najboljši trobentači za svadbe i veselja” (n.d.), “Trubači Slovenija. Trubači Milana Petrovića.” (n.d.), “Trubači Ljubljana” (n.d.), “Trubači Slovenija 071/240-284” (n.d.).

7 At the time of writing this chapter, they also used the names of those cities—Trubači Slovenska Bistrica, Trubači Nova Gorica, Trubači Celje, Trubači Velenje, etc. at the website “Trubači Slovenija. Trubači Milana Petrovića” (n.d.). However, this website is not active anymore, but the content migrated to the new webpage “Trubači Slovenija. Povoljni trubači” (n.d.). The same marketing strategy is taken by the same bands in other western European countries, such as the Netherlands, Switzerland, the UK, France, etc. See “Trubaci Nemacka” (n.d.), “Trubači Holandija” (n.d.).

8 See the works of Tatro (2014), Hofman (2015), Tocka (2017), Kölbl (2020), and Desai-Stephens (2020). For the practice of curating affect by musicians, see Conte (2021).

and the audience through the lens of capitalist productive relations, several studies further examine affect as an object for commodity exchange or cultural value (Gill 2017; MacMillen 2019) and as a tool for channeling desires and aspirations of a neoliberal subjectivity (Desai-Stephens 2020).

Drawing on those works, we focus on the mechanisms of the neoliberal market and the utilization of the presumed ability of *trubači* sound to generate intense embodied and sensorial engagement by musicians to capitalize on the post-Yugoslav listeners' imaginations, aspirations, and expectations. In examining the case study of the band Čaga Boys, we explore how musicians do not simply utilize the existent ethno-racial imaginations and Slovenian, Romani, Serbian, Balkan, or Yugoslav identity. Instead, those categories circulate as labels that are constantly reconstituted by the neoliberal market and filled with different sounds, performance practices, and meanings.

Our approach concentrates on the neoliberal demands for flexibility and adaptability and the entrepreneurial ethos that has been aggressively introduced in the area of former Yugoslavia after its dissolution as the crucial channel of subjectivation in professional and private lives. Consequently, we situate our discussion of affect in the context of post-socialist socioeconomic "reforms" that brought about not just privatization and dispossession of the socially-owned infrastructure and increased social inequalities but also "the destruction of the non-market-driven lifeworlds" (Atanasoski and McElroy 2018, 293). For this reason, we employ the analytical framework of Richard and Rudnykyj's economies of affect, which concentrates on the connection between neoliberal economic transformation and affective transactions (2009, 58).

The questions we pose are: How does the label *trubači* circulate in the national market in Slovenia? What strategies do bands use to target "the ordinary listener" and to attract the broadest possible audience? How, in the constant adjustment to clients' needs and their demands for "the best party," do bands utilize the discourses of ethno-racial difference?

Trubači in Slovenia

In the first decade of the new millennium, bands using *trubači* to define their musical style and performances⁹ started to emerge in the Slovenian music scenes as a result of the global “Balkan fever.” Balkan music saw an international market breakthrough in the late 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, fostered by the worldwide popularity of Emir Kusturica’s movies, which used Goran Bregović’s arrangements of Romani brass music from Serbia, Macedonia, and Kosovo as an integral part of their soundtracks.¹⁰ The so-called Gipsy Brass, Balkan Brass, Balkan Beat, or Balkan Music became a globally recognized genre in the world music scene, with leading musical icons such as Bregović, Boban Marković, and Fead Sejdīć. Their music was presented to the Western audience as the “new old European sound” (Kaminsky 2015) coming from the “unexplored fields” behind the iron curtain and post-socialist Eastern Europe.¹¹ This phenomenon has already been widely studied in the light of the exoticization, commodification, and appropriation of Romani music by the Global North (Silverman 2007, 2011a, 2013; Marković 2009, 2013; Marković 2015; Gligorijević 2020) and in terms of how the global circulation of the genre affects the musical scene in the region (Pettan 2002; Marković 2012; Hofman 2014). These studies confirm that the popularity of Balkan brass bands relies on the internalized discourse of the Balkan as a European internal Other (Todorova 1997, Buchanan 2007) and the figure of the Roma as an embodiment of this ambiguous position. The world music market grossly exploits the racialized imagination of the Roma, where Gypsiness and

9 Members of the bands rather occasionally use *trubači* (Balkan brass bands) to define their musical style and performances. Still, this term predominantly appears when advertising their performances and in the media discourses.

10 On Bregović’s work of appropriating the Romani brass music, see Aleksandra Marković (2013); for more on the popularity of Balkan music or what she calls “Balkan fascination,” see Laušević (2015). For more on Kusturica’s movies, also see Dijana Jelača’s chapter in this book.

11 For Kaminsky, it is a term that denotes a “bricolage of Romani, klezmer and Balkan styles” (2015, 143).

Balkan culture have become conflated in the media and public discourses (Marković 2015, 266). In turn, Romani brass musicians strategically navigate the expectations of Western audiences by enacting a “proper Gypsiness”—sufficiently primitive and exotic yet cosmopolitan—as this enables them to position themselves and earn more in the music market.¹²

The Slovenian *trubači* scene consisted of at least nine bands that drew upon the repertoire and performance style of what they call the Serbian, Balkan, or Romani *trubači* tradition.¹³ According to research done in 2007 by Mojca Kovačič (2009) and Urša Šivic (2013), the band members, who identify themselves as “real Slovenians,” became familiar with this genre through listening to the prominent performers or by watching Kusturica’s movies. To be more proficient in performing Balkan brass music, they learned as much as possible about this style by listening to the bands that gained visibility at the most popular international brass bands festival organized in southwest Serbia—the Guča Festival (*Dragačevski sabor trubača u Guči*),¹⁴ as well visiting the festival themselves. However, band members were not totally inexperienced in playing brass music as almost all played in local wind orchestras (*pihalni orkestri*)¹⁵ and had at least a primary musical education; some also had a university degree in music. As a reason to shift to *trubači* style and form the band, the musicians granted the enthusiastic reaction of the audience when they first informally performed a few popular pieces of “Balkan music.”

12 About a similar debate, see also the study of Siv B. Lie (2020).

13 The interlocutors use the terms Balkan, Gypsy, or Serbian *trubači* interchangeably.

14 For a more extensive examination of the Guča Festival, see Timotijević (2005), Tadić et al. (2010), and Gligorijević (2020). For the “Guča na Krasu” festival, the peculiar “little Guča” organized in the border zone between Slovenia and Italy, see Hofman (2014).

15 From the 19th century until today, wind orchestras (*pihalni orkestri*), or wind ensembles, have represented a strong segment of community music activities in Slovenia (along with choirs). They often involve different generations of players (from school children attending public music schools), including amateur, professional, and veteran musicians. Today, many of the wind ensembles have an important role in local musical life, playing at funerals, weddings, and other occasions.

Romani brass bands from Serbia also recognized the audience's increased interest in *trubači*. According to Alexander Marković (2015), they could earn a much better income for performing in Slovenian clubs and restaurants than for the same gigs in their towns. Examining the local brass band scenes in Vranje, Serbia, in 2011/2012, Marković writes that Romani musicians strategically adjusted their appearances and performances to the clients in Slovenia, whom they primarily considered “foreign” or “incontrovertibly part of the ‘West’” (2015, 273).¹⁶ Regardless of how tactical, their performances continue to carry a premise of “authenticity” and “direct experience,” something the members of the Slovenian *trubači* scene aspire to but are clearly not able to achieve due to the presumed lack of “inherent knowledge” available only to Romani (or Balkan and Serbian) musicians. The usual way of analyzing such positionalities and aspirations includes the interpretative framework of nesting Orientalisms in Yugoslavia and cultural stereotyping of the “Eastern nations” (Bakić-Hayden 1995), which draws on the long-standing imaginaries of the Balkans as not only “wild” and “uncivilized,” but also irrational and a hedonist place of joy, with the emblematic figure of Gypsy at the center of this imagination (see van de Port 1998, 7–9; Silverman 2011b, 20; Silverman 2015, 8; Marković 2015, 266).¹⁷

Slovenian *trubači*, however, cannot be simply analyzed from the perspective of the “West/Balkans” binary, which does not consider the shared historical project of socialist Yugoslavia and the post-socialist radical political and economic transformation. As we will demonstrate in the following section, opting for the label Slovenian *trubači* is not just a result of the need to ethnically (self-)position and symbolically detach from the Balkans. While the ethno-racialized imaginations and stereotypes associated with Balkan brass

16 In their studies, Siv B. Lie (2020) and Carol Silverman (1988) also show how musicians use and manipulate the notion of being “different” as an economic opportunity.

17 Mattijs van de Port (1998, 178–206) and Alexander Marković (2015, 260–285) write about the relationship between the audience's fantasies and the strategic adoption of essentialized image of Gypsy among the Roma themselves.

music are certainly a significant part of it, we argue that the discourses of Orientalism/Balkanism cannot capture the complex labor realities behind a market presence of *trubači* in Slovenia. For this reason, we stand for the analytical framework that is less focused on the identity and the politics of belonging constituted through the sound of *trubači* and its affectivity. Instead of pre-figured categories filled with different notions (and sounds), we are interested in their ongoing constitution and circulation mechanisms that do not happen in limbo but within the realm of capitalist productive relations.

Velenje Trubači, Party Trubači, Classy Trubači, or the Čaga Boys

In the last decade, the popularity of the Slovenian *trubači* has gradually declined. Only one band formed around the turn of the millennium is still active, Dej še'n litro.¹⁸ Two new bands were also founded—Pivo in čevapi from the town of Postojna (active since 2011) and the Čaga Boys from Velenje (active since 2017). The latter is our primary case study in this chapter.¹⁹ We conducted semi-structured interviews with the band's manager and clients who hired the band, along with online ethnography, participant observation at gigs and concerts, and an online survey with the band's fans.²⁰ The band uses

18 The band was officially formed in 1999 in a student dormitory in Ljubljana. The musicians come from various places in the region of Primorska, but most of them were members of a wind ensemble from the town of Koper. Over the years, they have developed their own original style, also combining elements of New Orleans jazz and Balkan brass music.

19 The Balkan Boys, who initially referred to similar *trubači* music as the aforementioned bands, have started mixing "Balkan" with other genres and began to write their own music, which is now a central part of their repertoire. The band's leader is also the trumpeter of the band Dej še'n litro. Since they make original music based on mixing the brass band sound with other genres, they are not (self-)identified as a *trubači* band.

20 We conducted our research in the course of 2021/2022. In April 2022, we conducted a short survey with 68 members of a Facebook group of *trubači* fans (listeners of the Čaga Boys, Dej še'n litro and Pivo in čevapi) and gained some insights into their experiences.

various names to (re)present itself in media, such as Slovenski trubači (“Slovenian *trubači*”), Velenjski trubači (“Velenje *trubači*”), Party trubači, Classy trubači, and the Čaga Boys. We learned that using various names primarily stems from an attempt to build a market image of the already existing locally and regionally recognized *trubači* bands. Namely, the band inherited a great deal of the audience, repertoire, and music style from the local Fešta Band from Velenje, active from 2006 to 2016 and also known as Velenjski trubači. When deciding on the band’s name, the Čaga Boys members followed the same strategy by addressing the local audience through the “domestication” of a band name. Instead of *fešta*, they opted for *čaga*, the word with the same meaning of “party” or “entertainment” in the local Styrian slang.²¹ At the same time, they did not abandon the name Velenjski trubači, which already has an established meaning and value as a trademark in the Slovenian music scene.²² This naming is also a key to their market promotion and the decision to use the web domain *trubaci.si*: *It seemed a little unnecessary to me; why would I then explain to him [the client] on the website, in the short time he’s looking at it, that we are the Čaga Boys? It seemed a bit pointless to me. Let him believe that we are trubači. After all, he does not really care what our name is, does he?* (M. Š., 2022, January 16).

Unlike the majority of Slovenian *trubači* in the 2000s, which invested their efforts in tentatively listening to the best quality bands, analyzing their performances, and striving to meet the aesthetic standards set by the world-renowned Balkan brass bands, the members of the Čaga Boys are not particularly concerned with the quality of the sound. The band’s website lists the title

21 *Fešta* is used more widely in Slovenia slang, while *čaga* is more commonly used in the Styrian region. For the meaning of the word *čaga* and its usage by the people in the Styrian region and how *čaga* is used as a synonym for affect of a “best fun” or a “complete entertainment,” see also the chapter by Rajko Muršič in this book.

22 Similarly to other Slovenian *trubači* active today that employ terminology typically associated with hedonism and more or less directly with the Balkans: Pivo in čevapi (Beer and *čevapi*), Balkan Boys, Dej še’n litro (Give me one more liter).

of Golden Trumpet of Slovenia for 2017/2018.²³ It indicates that the members have visited Guča, which is supposed to prove their “competence.” However, despite all being musically trained and educated musicians, the band members are less driven by the goal to meet the “most original” *trubači* performance but to satisfy the audiences’ demands and the “pleasure of performing *trubači* music.” M. Š. confirmed this by saying that the key to acquiring a new gig is a *loud, affective brass sound since the audience does not demand or recognize more technically accomplished music* (2022, January 16). He added that this had already been proved by several failed attempts from the academically trained band members, who tend to present more technically demanding and complex solos, which have been less well-received by the audience.

For this reason, the Čaga Boys invest more time and energy in branding the band and developing marketing strategies and media representation. *We’ve worked a lot on the logo because I think it’s very important. Everything here is very well thought out and fully centered on the audience we want to reach*, explained M. Š. with pride and asserted that his management skills were essential to the band’s success (2022, January 16). He granted that the well-envisioned presence on digital media platforms plays a key role in the band’s visibility beyond the regional context of Velenje and Styria. The band’s digital presence is based on the image of highly flexible performances that can adapt to various audiences, places, and regions, including family celebrations (weddings, birthdays) and company parties.

If one takes a closer look at the band’s website and social media, the potential clients of the Čaga Boys can expect the best of *trubači* performance, which

23 This probably refers to receiving the Golden Plaque, awarded by the Public Fund of the Republic of Slovenia for Cultural Activities (JSKD). Since 2008, many *trubači* bands have regularly or occasionally participated in this national competition that serves as the pre-selection for the group that will represent Slovenia in Guča Trumpet Festival. The Municipality of Lučani in Serbia, which includes the town of Guča, and the Municipality of Dravograd are partner municipalities from Yugoslav times and have renewed their relations in the sports, cultural, and humanitarian fields after the breakup of Yugoslavia. In the Guča Festival, brass bands compete for the First Trumpet of the festival for a particular year. Along with this award—the most prestigious one—there are also other awards, such as the Second Trumpet, Best Orchestra, and Golden Trumpet, and awards given by a prominent jury of journalists (see Guča Festival n.d.).

is divided into two types of service—Party *trubači* and Classy *trubači*. The distinction between these two offers is made to fit two types of listeners. As M. Š. explained, one is *the villagers who don't care how they're dressed and for whom they [the Čaga Boys] play mainly at local traditional events* as Party *trubači*. The other group, for whom they made the Classy *trubači* offer, are people with *higher demands who live primarily in or near the bigger cities (Maribor, Ljubljana)*. Classy performances are reserved for high-end venues where *you can't be without a tuxedo, you can't be without (the right) attitude* (M. Š., 2022, January 16). On the website, Party *trubači* portrays band members performing on the stage for a mass audience. At the same time, in their classy iterations, they are dressed in tuxedos, depicting a more “cultured,” “high-class” performance. In providing additional information for website visitors, the website indicates that Classy *trubači* targets companies and assures potential clients a customized repertoire, performance tactics, and interaction with the audience: “A high level of formality and professionalism. Suitable for high-end, elite, and classy celebrations, classy surprises, classy group endings, highly professional and classy, but still a strong, loud, interesting, and bouncy surprise” (“Trubači Slovenija” n.d.).

When comparing the two offers, we notice that “classy” differs from “party” *trubači* in a higher price and the discourse of “limited, more exclusive gigs” for the companies or people with “deeper pockets.” In other words, the market strategy behind the classy performance is to offer a sense of “special treatment” for clients ready to pay more for a more professional and sophisticated performance that assures the best party atmosphere tailored to the audience’s demands.²⁴ The “extra” offer optionally includes using additional tools—such as the scare gun—that contribute to the extraordinary *trubači* experience. As M. Š. told us, the gun is usually used during the performance of Bregovič’s popular piece “Kalašnjikov” (Kalashnikov, an automatic rifle) to foster “euphoria”

24 Playing gigs at posh urban clubs or for closed parties is not unknown to the internationally touring brass bands: Alexander Marković writes about Romani bands’ gigs in Dubai or Beirut as a common practice (2015, 268).

and bring the heated atmosphere to culmination. They took this idea from the Fešta Band, whose performance with the scare gun was extremely well-received by the audience.



The image shows a webpage layout for a band's services. It features two columns of offers. The left column is titled 'PARTY TRUBAČI' and the right is 'CLASSY TRUBAČI'. Each offer includes a photograph of the band performing. Below each photo are two bullet points: 'Cena in čas igranja' and 'Opis in posebnosti'. At the bottom of the page, there are instructions for more information and contact details, including a phone number (031 696 225) and fields for 'Vaše ime' and 'Vaš e-mail'.

Picture 1: Musical offer at the webpage <https://trubaci.si/>.

Creating two offers is informed by the imperative to assure the clients that the Čaga Boys can provide the best party for any type of audience in Slovenia. It is also motivated by the capitalist promotion logic that presupposes targeting the broadest possible market while still sustaining a product's market value by offering a more special, more worthy performance. M. Š. explained that the price of 600–700 EUR per gig allows them to acquire enough clients yet still be able to make a selection and avoid overburden (2022, January 16). For him, it is important to keep an image of the band as able to play in different contexts and for different occasions and audiences without having to accept every single

gig, like the “street” Romani *trubači* who come to Slovenia in search of gigs and play for very modest reward or for tips, which we address in the final section of the chapter.

Trubači as an Empty Signifier: Yugo-Rock Čaga

The marketing tactics of the Čaga Boys are based on the promise of professionalism, efficiency, and adaptability, which is best summarized in the promotional slogans of “offering more,” “the fastest,” “the best,” “the performance adjusted to the widest possible audience.” In the everyday practice of music labor, fulfilling this promise means constantly adjusting the sound, repertoire, and performance tactics. As their market strength is the ability to adapt to different audiences, including those who do not typically listen to *trubači*, the band members adjust their performances to different musical genres, such as pop, rock, and pop-folk. This performance adjusting is done through the combination of instruments and by including additional instruments to the usual brass band ensemble consisting of baritone, tuba, drums, clarinet, and saxophone. The Čaga Boys have enriched their ensemble with a piano accordion—an instrument that is “indispensable in Slovenia”—and two male vocals that are, in their words, “typical of ‘Yugo rock’ and ‘Serbian folk’ music” (“Trubači Slovenija” n.d.). Such a large ensemble allows accepting a gig even if someone is missing, as only the tuba playing the bass line and a singer are indispensable. The two singers alternate according to the repertoire—one performs “only Serbian songs [...] and the other Yugo rock and Slovenian songs” (M. Š., 2021, June 18). Consequently, their singing styles are adjusted to different repertoires. For example, a lower voice with melismatic ornaments suits the Balkan pop-folk style, while a higher voice suits Slovenian folk-pop, rock, and pop.

The core of the band’s cross-genre repertoire comprises songs from different times and genres that were popular during the Yugoslav era, as well as the new hits popular in the region. The priority is to deliver what “an average

listener” wants to hear,²⁵ what the band members in their accounts identify as Yugo-rock, Croatian-Dalmatian,²⁶ folk-pop, pop, and commercial genres popular in Slovenia. A key to a successful gig, according to M. Š., is to start with the well-known pieces people like, as they are usually not particularly familiar with the typical Balkan brass repertoire. Regardless of the genre, the most important is to deliver a performance that “feels” like *trubači*, which assures that the audience is offered the high-intensity affective experience as a key to the best party. It is not an especially difficult task, as for ordinary listeners in Slovenia, the sound of *trubači* immediately recalls the notion of wild partying: *When we hear trubači, wow, we all already imagine Guča and everything that goes with it, a huge party. If that’s what people expect, that’s what they get* (M. Š., 2021, June 18).

During the fieldwork we conducted from June 2021 to April 2022, we attended a gig at the café of the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Ljubljana organized by the Association of Defense Studies Students and *Tigri* Student Club. Interestingly, the event was not promoted as a *trubači* or Slovenian *trubači* performance but as a Yugo rock party. The organizer also announced the Čaga Boys as a Yugo rock band. However, the band hardly performed a Yugo rock repertoire. They started with Yugoslav pop hits from the late 1980s (the Eurovision songs “Hajde da ludujemo” by Tajči and “Ja sam za ples” by Novi fosili) and “Sanjao sam moju ružicu,” a popular song from the mid-1990s by the Croatian pop band Leteći odred. As the student audience was not overwhelmingly enthused, the band started warming up the atmosphere by swiftly shifting from one genre to another. The first singer was replaced by the second, who specializes in Balkan pop-folk and tried to animate the audience with Balkan pop-folk hits such as Mile Kitić’s “Šampanjac,” Yugoslav rock band Bijelo dugme’s cover of the Romani song “Đurđevdan” and their well-known piece

25 Alexander Marković (2015, 270) portrays the same situation. His interlocutors from Romani brass bands in Vranje reported that they could please the majority of Western audiences by playing just three pieces: “Kalašnjikov,” “Đurđevdan,” and “Mesečina” (the ultimate brass band hits, popularized by Bregović).

26 On the popularity of “Dalmatian melos” and the emergence of *klapa* singing groups in Slovenia after 2000, see Šivic (2009).

“Hajdemo u planine,” inviting listeners in a combination of Serbian and Slovenian to start dancing: “Come on, let’s go, folks, where are your hands, let’s go, hop hop hop” (*ajde gremo društvo, gde so ruke, idemo, hop hop hop*). As a last attempt to engage the audience, the first singer re-entered the stage while the band shifted to the cheerful rhythms of polka and Slovenian folk-pop with a block of songs by the popular ensembles Kingston and Modrijani, which finally drew the audience’s attention, and people started chanting and dancing.



Picture 2: Yugo rock party in Ljubljana, June 2022

Later, we learned that advertising the gig as “Yugo rock” and using the label “Yugoslav” were done to make the event more attractive to the audience in Ljubljana, to whom the Čaga Boys are relatively unknown. The organizers and the band manager thought that including Yugoslav rock in their announcements would be a good way to attract younger generations who come from different regions of Slovenia and former Yugoslavia. The Styrian term *čaga* obviously did

not have enough marketing potential neither did simply using the label *trubači*. For this reason, the organizers emphasized the shared cultural space as something that would be widely recognized and recall the experience as the best party. In the words of M. Š., although students did not belong to the group that had a personal experience of living in Yugoslavia, its notion recalls the time when *we were all friends regardless of what you are or where you are* and engenders the specific senses of (be)longing to the Yugoslav cultural spacetime. In our conversations, he uses the expression “Yugoslav euphoria” to describe the affect that mobilizes peoples’ bodies as a result of their emotionally-charged attachment to the shared Yugoslav experience: *[...] in my opinion, that leap, for an average Slovenian, an older one who was part of that Yugoslav story, it takes a leap for him to feel that euphoria* (2021, June 18). Even if listeners are unfamiliar with the *trubači* genre or repertoire, Yugoslav rock or any music in the Serbo-Croatian language might endorse “Yugoslav euphoria.”

In that sense, we can say that using Yugo rock to advertise the concert draws on the established meanings, stereotypes, imaginations, and expectations attached to the memories of Yugoslavia in Slovenia.²⁷ However, both Yugoslavia and Balkan are primarily used to indicate the specific economies of affect and the best party experience. M. Š. explained this by saying that what guides the usage of Yugoslav or Balkan in framing their gigs are the mechanisms of supply and demand in the contemporary consumer culture in which we live. In his opinion, market success is ultimately about quickly satisfying the audience’s needs: *In the past, people were used to a musician coming on stage and playing his songs. Now, the audience can demand the songs; they no longer have to wait. The modern age is like that: we [the audience] have become kings: what we want at a certain moment, we have to get* (M. Š., 2022, January 16).

Therefore, meeting clients’ needs means the usage of *trubači* as the trademark while constantly tailoring its notions and sounds. As written on the

27 Mitja Velikonja asserts that the notions of the Balkans and Yugoslavia are often used as synonyms and that talking about Yugoslavia in Slovenia inevitably includes the discourses of Balkanism (2013, 10).

website: “If you wish, we can base your repertoire solely on Serbian-brass music or completely the opposite,” meaning that one can simply choose which pieces “one likes to listen to” (“Trubači Slovenija” n.d.). In providing instant satisfaction, the Čaga Boys rely on the audience’s feelings, appraisals, and “making sense [...] of sound” (Lie 2020, 385) of *trubači* by putting intensive embodied and affective encounters at the center regardless of the given identity categories or particular musical genre. By strategically navigating the audience’s fantasies to ensure a high intensity of affective exchange,²⁸ the primary “product” of the Čaga Boys is delivering the best party experience.²⁹

What Matters the Most is a (Wild) Party

The key to Slovenian *trubači*’s market potential is the expectations behind what this performance does. In the words of affect theory, it means the degree to which *trubači* sound affects listeners’ bodies and increases the capacity of bodies to affect other bodies. This means how the representations and imaginaries attached to *trubači* that we have analyzed in the previous section are curated in “the concrete and physical world of action and experience” (van de Port 1998, 188). While the vocabulary of affect often tends to be seen as escaping the mechanisms of market calculation, the embodied labor practices of professional musicians are deeply shaped by the logic of profit, as several studies show.³⁰ Simultaneously, the pragmatic approach does not presuppose affective encounters between musicians and the listeners being less authentic or fake. For the Čaga Boys, the *trubači* affective impact on bodies comes to the fore,

28 About the commercial potential of Yugonostalgia in music see Velikonja (2002), Muršič (2007), and Kovačič (2009).

29 About the notion of music as affective labor, see Hofman (2015).

30 Anaar Desai-Stephens, for example, writes how in the singing school in India, pupils learn to sing with “feelfully,” as producing affect is something that brings a bigger success and eventually also financial reward (2020)

particularly at private parties such as weddings and birthdays, where the band is usually hired as a “gift” to the person who is celebrating or as a surprise for the guests.³¹ The band promotes its services as “the best surprise,” which includes a very loud, fast-tempo performance style—in the words of band members, *tutta forza (udarni špil)*.³² Exemplified in Bregović’s “Kalašnjikov,” a surprise performance guarantees clients an atmosphere of euphoria. The status of being a special guest pays off, as the audience is already “warmed up” by the regular band (if it plays), already drunk and excited, and therefore fully prepared to get crazy, M. Š. explained. This status provides the musicians with a good source of income for actually less working time (they usually play two rounds of 45 minutes each): *The less you play, the best party you dive into, because you don’t have to worry about whether it’s going to be a party or not, because you always know it’s going to be a party, don’t you?* (2021, June 18).

Playing at private parties brings other advantages for “curating” affect and getting listeners faster to a state of euphoria: without a stage, the usual hierarchical relationships between the performers and the audience are challenged, and the performance is much more interactive. In such settings, band members are directed more toward *approaching people, jumping on a table, standing between people, standing behind someone, playing music “by ear”* (M. Š., 2021, June 18) or playing around a dancing person.³³ Physical closeness also captured them in the affective atmosphere, making their labor less tiring and the time spent playing “go faster.”

That you basically connect with them in this way. You’re basically a complete stranger, but at the same time, you’re there, let’s say, hugging someone, and we are partying together. And he also feels that closeness and is drawn in. He

31 The Čaga Boys have around 80 such gigs per year (they also had the same quantity of gigs during the COVID-19 pandemic).

32 Alexander Marković also notes that due to prioritizing “fast pieces,” speed, and staccato playing to adjust to the audience’s demands, the “slower repertoire” remains rather abandoned (2015, 274).

33 About the direct engagement of the audience/patrons with the brass bands musicians’ bodies by tipping them on the parts of the body, see Alexander Marković (2013).

perceives you very differently. He doesn't perceive you as an outsider who's come to perform, but you are actually partying with him, he understands that, he then has to relax. (M. Š., 2021, June 18)

The Čaga Boys clearly capitalize on the presumed capacity of a *trubači* performance to generate an extraordinary affective experience, usually referred to as a “wild party” (*hud žur*), “crazy atmosphere” (*noro vzdušje*), “total debauchery” (*totalni razvrat*). The atmosphere of total wildness or madness³⁴ indicates that listeners immerse themselves in the “extreme” of their embodied and emotional capacities.

The statements of the fans of the Čaga Boys and Pivo in čevapi we collected through the online survey confirm the sense of intimacy and sociability *trubači* sound engenders. Survey participants report the intense sensory and embodied interaction, which they articulate as a “high energy” that suddenly overwhelms them, so they start “dancing and jumping:” *I am going wild [...] the fast and bouncy tempo raises my energy to new heights, I'm singing like a lunatic and enjoying myself to the full*, one of the fans wrote. Their experiences fully illustrate the “impact of vibration—as well as its amplification or absorption in the body” that “can be registered as movement, force, energy, pain, texture, sound, music, emotion, pleasure, and so on,” as Luis-Manuel Garcia writes (2015, 72). In exploring affective encounters in the context of electronic dance music parties, he concludes that affect becomes haptically manifested as force and movement (Garcia 2020, 26). Another participant in the survey describes the experience of being “touched by sound” as *when a good song starts, you feel like you're inside a laundromat because everyone around you is going crazy and jumping around!*

Listeners experience the high, wild energy associated with a *trubači* performance as bringing them into a state beyond rationality, even into a state beyond the body or beyond human. For example, M. Š. identifies crazy dancing,

34 As van de Port asserts, the figure of the Gypsy enables an “insight into the irrational, wild human being,” which is associated with the presumed deep emotionality that they are able to convey through music (1998, 306).

drinking, the breaking of glasses, and the ripping of shirts as an “animal feeling” that people embrace, often claiming that this comes unwillingly. In his opinion, getting wild at a *trubači* performance reveals something listeners actually long for but do not want to openly admit—to fully surrender to the affective power of the sound. In his opinion, the reason for this seemingly “irrational surrender” lies in a “different way of partying,” which is not usual for “typical” Slovenian celebrations where the music (usually the Slovenian folk-pop) or dances (of polka or waltz) do not easily allow such a wild behavior.

M. Š.'s reflection recalls what, in other contexts, scholars identify as the specific “Balkan brass party atmosphere” (Marković 2015, 266). It generates the sense of a “totalizing affect,” mobilizing the racialized discourses attached to *trubači* that draw on the long-standing imaginations of the Balkans not only as the wild place of joy but also irrationality and wildness, centered around the figure of Gypsy, as the ultimate “Other” in the Balkans. Mattijs van de Port argues that Gypsy music allows *kafana* patrons to step into a different reality, different space and body, as a way of “re-inject[ing] the self with otherness” (1998, 306). In the context of brass band music, as several research shows, this often presupposes the embodied practices of being dressed as Gypsies or dancing in the Gypsy way (Hofman 2014, 82), which musicians skillfully and strategically exploit.³⁵ This fully corresponds with the claims of Carol Silverman and Aleksandra Marković that the label of Gypsy music “has become such a powerful trademark in itself, both commercially and symbolically, that it no longer requires any references to actual Romani music, nor any involvement of actual Romani musicians” (in Gligorijević 2020, 16).

The Čaga Boys clearly capitalize on the ethno-racial stereotypes that infuse the sound of *trubači*. However, their task is to sell their sound in a way that ensures a proper experience of euphoria for listeners in Slovenia. The presumed “rawness” or “wildness” of *trubači* is strategically dosed for different clients. We learned that M. Š. invests time into getting information about the band's

35 About the strategies of Slovenian *trubači* for embodying Gypsiness, see Kovačič (2009; 2021).

potential clients, which helps the members best respond to the clients' needs. In preparation for each gig and customizing the repertoire, he tries to learn as much as possible about the occasion and venue and particularly about the background of the audience in terms of age and ethnicity:

The first aspect is that I talk to every person who calls me for a very long time, at least 20 minutes or half an hour, so I really understand why they want, why they called us, where it will be, what kind of people there will be, what do they expect, what nationality they are, where do they hang out, and whether there will be other nationalities there or only Slovenians. If you understand all this, it is easier to approach it. (M. Š. 2021, June 18)

This quote shows that identity belonging nevertheless plays a role in commodifying affective experience and guides the “professional” execution and “efficient” product placement in the market. However, to what extent are we talking here about the ethno-racial difference?

“We tell everyone that we are Slovenians”

The Čaga Boys utilize the adjective “Slovenian” to establish a specific position and promote their services in the national music market. However, as we showed in the opening vignette, the fact that non-Slovenians—the Romani bands—also use this term for advertising their gigs makes it difficult for the Čaga Boys to sustain their peculiar market presence. To deal with this, M. Š. shared with us that he often sends future clients the link to the YouTube video of a Čaga Boys performance, so clients can not only check the appropriateness and quality of the performances but also “verify” that the band members are not “black.” In responding to our question about the necessity of this type of check, he explained that while the most popular Romani brass bands are praised for their musical quality, there are many street brass bands, *the ones who walk up and down the Ljubljana River [in the city of Ljubljana]* (M. Š., 2022, January

16), whom he qualified as “less-worthy,” “begging musicians” who can endanger the status of the whole genre of *trubači*. It also shows that although “Slovenian,” “Balkan,” and “Gypsy” are tokens that allow musicians to strategically navigate through the music market (and cover the broadest possible audience and their demands), the very presence of “other bodies”—musicians who look like Roma (or non-Slovenian)—is seen as potentially harmful to the market value of Slovenian *trubači*.

Such a statement attests to the long-standing racialized discourses, where the musicians highly capitalize on the appropriation of stereotypes about Romani musical exceptionality and their extraordinary ability to affectively mobilize listeners while simultaneously ignoring/silencing “the realities of Romani musical practices, aesthetic tastes and professional status” (Marković 2015, 282).³⁶ Yet, the argument of an ethno-racial difference, we argue, cannot offer a complete understanding of the Slovenian *trubači* phenomenon if detached from the mechanisms of capitalist productive relations and the reality of musicians’ labor regimes. The key to the Čaga Boys’ success is flexibility and adaptability, on which the band builds its market presence. Caught in the mechanisms of the neoliberal market that dictates the constant effort to reach more clients, the Čaga Boys are aware that they must provide the best party to the clients and sustain Slovenian *trubači* as a recognizable trademark that promises multiple choices not only in terms of sound, repertoire, and musical genres but also performance style and venues.

For the Čaga Boys, Romani musicians’ ethno-racial belonging is not harmful per se. The main anxiety for them is the devaluation of Slovenian *trubači* as a trademark through the image of a *trubači* performance as a “low level,” “begging” activity. In the ongoing market struggles, street playing, which means playing for tips, testifies to “low-class” labor that potentially diminishes the total value of a *trubači* performance. In that sense, they do not distance from the

36 For the discourses of “Romani difference” and Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav antiziganism as a type of racism directed toward Romani people, see Sardelić (2014).

particular racialized subjectivity but from the racialized labor practices based on a loss of dignity and economic (self-)exploitation. A sense of dignity here is directly conditioned by an ability to sell the service for the highest possible reward. In other words, labor that does not bring substantial financial remuneration can potentially diminish the value of the *trubači* trademark, which the Čaga Boys have carefully cultivated for the Slovenian market.

The example of Čaga Boys demasks the broader mechanisms of the neoliberal market that exploit the ethno-racial identity formations and further radicalizes inequalities between “different classes” of musicians according to their (in)ability to earn. Regardless of the identity or geographical location, bands that want to survive in the market have to sell their service as the “best,” “most efficient,” and “the fastest and most reliable.” Only if they constantly prove the market value of their service can musicians live from their labor, which includes promising everything (and more) to beat the competition.

To summarize, an easy application of ethno-racial difference that is recently the dominant framework for examining Romani musicians’ activities can neglect other forms of inequalities. In the post-Yugoslav context, an entrepreneurial spirit has been historically an inherent part of the musical craft in the popular music genres, which largely operated within unregulated and highly precarious labor conditions (Hofman 2020b). After the breakup of Yugoslavia, however, entrepreneurship has become the main mantra of the restoration of capitalism. It is at the core of (successful) neoliberal subjectivity. The imperative to adequately place the product and please the consumers is a key to professional survival, as anthropologist Carla Freeman points out: “Few if any spheres of life appear exempt from the neoliberal demands for flexibility, from the structures of economic markets to the nuances of individuals’ subjectivities as citizens, producers, consumers, migrants, tourists, members of families, and so on (in Moore 2016, 36).

Capitalizing on the presumed ability of *trubači* sound to endorse affect, the Čaga Boys sell the best party experience to their clients. Their marketing strategies and type of service are based on flexibility and adaptability: on the one hand, they provide the broader possible offer that would attract an

“ordinary listener” and prove an ability to swiftly shift the sound, repertoire, and performance style to meet the individual preferences, on the other. In doing that, *trubači* is utilized as an empty signifier; it serves as a point of (self-) identification only to the extent that it can be profitable or helpful in navigating the market.

Therefore, instead of understanding the existence of Slovenian *trubači* in the music market as an ultimate proof of the racialized difference, we look at the politics of difference as subsumed to the logic of profit, imposed flexibility, and competition. One’s money-making (and spending) abilities and entrepreneurial mindset drive not only economic but also social positionings and dominate all aspects of social life.

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