

mobilisations, it becomes obvious that the actors of cultural demarcation have also been looking westward in recent years.

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MUSICS OF THE NEW TIMES: ROMANIAN *MANELE* AND ARMENIAN *RABIZ* AS ICONS OF POST-COMMUNIST CHANGES

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Introduction

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

* Da dum la dum la da Da dum la dum la da Da dum la dum la da Made in Ro-ma-ni-a
** La dum la dum la da La dum la dum la da La dum la dum la da Made in Ar-me-ni-a

*: Chorus of *Made in Romania*, sung by Ionuț Cercel (album *Manele made in RO.Mania*, 2008).

** : Chorus of *Made in Armenia*, sung by Grisho Asatryan (*Star collection vol. 4*, 2009).

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

Ionuț Cercel is the son of Petrică Cercel, a famous singer in a musical genre called *manele*. The rest of the song deals with ethnicity, tolerance and national unity: "Whoever you are / Whatever language you speak /

This is your country / Romania / Come on, the Moldavian / Come on the Romanian / Come on the Gypsy / We're all *made in Romania*."

That closely related melodies may be found all over Europe should not be a matter of surprise. Béla Bartók was amongst the first researchers to document the phenomenon in the context of a newly born "science of folklore" (Bartók 1997: 158-162). In his time, which coincided with well-known processes of nation-building, such findings inevitably led to debates on the "origins" of the tune: who borrowed it from whom, which "nation" was the song's creator, to whose "patrimony" should it belong? Such questions lost most of their purchase in scholarly literature during the second half of the twentieth century (although they regularly recur in the mass media). In the Balkans, ethnomusicologists have stressed that the circulation of tunes always implied a strong dose of creativity, and that discussions about cultural belonging or identity could only make sense at a broader regional level. Comparing several tunes performed by Gypsy and non-Gypsy musicians in Kosovo, Pettan (1996) refers to a "Balkan *Musikbund*" which he describes by analogy with the term *Sprachbund*, used in linguistics to characterize a geographic area of dialectal convergence and crossroads. Similarly Dona Buchanan opens the book suggestively titled *Balkan Popular Music and the Ottoman Oecumene* with a collection of variants of the same tune gathered from Bulgaria, Turkey, Greece, and extending to America, through Jewish *klezmerim* musicians (Buchanan 2007a). This same tune and its transformations had also been discussed previously by Katsarova (Katsarova 1973) and by Peeva (2003) in the film *Whose is this song?* Our opening example suggests that the idea of a musical *Sprachbund* or *oecumene* should probably be extended beyond the Balkans, to encompass as well the Eastern side of the Black Sea.

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

Bibliographical sources are still scarce on these topics. One may find valuable information on Armenian *rabiz* in (Abrahamian 2005; Abrahamian, Pikichian 1990). Romanian *manele* drew more attention in recent years (Beissinger 2007; Rădulescu 2002; Rădulescu 2004; Rădulescu 2010;

Voiculescu 2005; Stoichita 2008: 66; Stoichita 2011b). In what follows, our information is drawn from these sources and from our ongoing fieldwork, in Armenia and Romania respectively. This is to our knowledge the first comparison between popular music in each country.¹ After providing some basic ethnographical data from both sides, we will sketch possible landmarks for future investigations.

Musical features

Rabiz

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

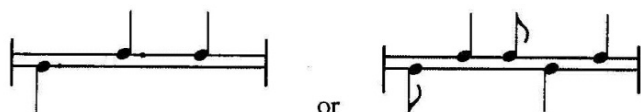
Rabiz songs use many rhythms and tunes. Their melodic motives, ornaments, and instrumental sounds often convey a distinctive flavour, which Armenian commentators characterize either as "traditional" (*avandakan*) or as "oriental" (*arevilian*). The first term refers to an idea of autochthonous music from pre-Soviet times (the *gusan* bard repertoire, or any other music seen as "national Armenian"). The second refers to Turkish, Arabic or Azeri influences (mainly to the *mugham/maqam* type of melismatic elaboration).² The two ideas easily converge for Armenian listeners: Arabic, Turkish or Azeri elements refer nowadays to an oriental "Other," but also to a shared Ottoman past, of which many Armenians tend to be nostalgic. In Armenia's musical landscape, *rabiz* is also marked by the use of electronic sound techniques (amplification, sonic effects, synthetic drumkits, etc.). The mix of "traditional" or "oriental" moods with these "modern" timbres seems to stand at the core of the genre for most Armenian commentators.

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

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

Manele

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



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

In Romania, *manele* are heard in much the same contexts as *rabiz* in Armenia: festive events (weddings, christenings or rich peoples' birthdays for example), or public spaces like bars and restaurants. They are also recorded to be sold on popular markets, and are often copied and exchanged through the internet. Like *rabiz*, *manele* are performed mainly by professional musicians, whose economic model relies on live performances. The musicians are part of the *lăutari*, a complex status linked with Gypsiness and professional musicianship in traditional contexts (Beissinger 2001; Beissinger 1991; Rădulescu 1984; Rădulescu 1988; Rădulescu 1996; Rădulescu 2002; Rădulescu 2004; Stoichita 2006; Stoichita 2008; Stoichita 2010).

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

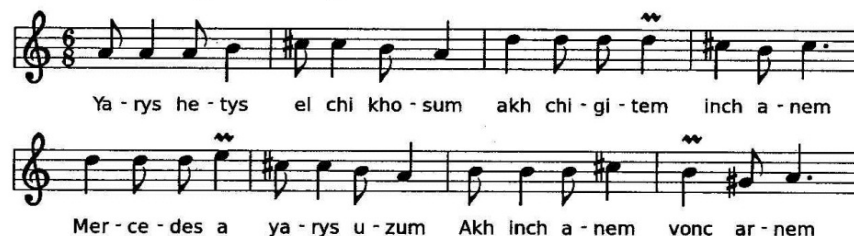
³ Some Romanian commentators extend the range of the term *manele* to tunes based on much slower and non-danceable rhythms. They are performed by the same musicians, in the same settings, and in the same general "mood." However performers and fans use different names for these slow tunes (either *bluzuri*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

manele display a paradoxical exoticism, which often arises in the aesthetic judgements of local listeners, either as a positive or as a negative feature.

Lyrics

Rabiz

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



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

Armenian commentators often consider such lyrics an emblem of post-soviet times.

Other songs deal with loss, nostalgia and sad feelings. Exile from the village or from the country is a common topic in *rabiz* lyrics. Some songs also evoke mourning for dead heroes, in a tragic vein close to both traditional laments and epic songs (Amy de la Bretèque 2010). Mayis Karoyan for example sings the following lyrics in the song *Khabar* (1999): "Hair turned white / The pain turned tears into stones / On the road of the lost son / She is waiting for him all-day long". The song commemorates soldiers who died during the Karabakh conflict. In the same ethos, one may encounter lyrics about the victims of air crashes, or about *mafiozi* leaders killed in armed fights (Amy de la Bretèque 2008).

Manele

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

As in *rabiz*, the second most important topic in *manele* lyrics is probably material wealth. The songs often value quick and easy money making (as opposed to hard work). They are dominated by the figure of the clever, smart and wise guy (*șmecher*) who may also be designated as a *mafiot* or a *criminal* (Stoichita 2008). Hyperbole is most usual in this kind of songs, with frequent references to "kings" (*regi*), "emperors" (*împărați*) and "squires" (*boieri*) from the Ottoman times. Here too, pride and parody are never far apart.



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

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

Historical background

Rabiz

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

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

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

Manele

Like *rabiz*, *manele* became prominent during the 1990's. Their previous history is no less ambiguous. Some Romanians think that the genre is an old remnant from Ottoman times. There are indeed early mentions of *manele* in eighteenth and nineteenth century texts (Oișteanu

2001; Beissinger 2007). Little is known however of how those *manele* sounded, and there is no historical evidence of their direct link with the present day phenomenon. The first modern *manele*, at the end of the 1980s, carried clear stylistic marks of Yugoslav *novokomponovana narodna muzika* ("newly composed folk music," see Rădulescu 2002; Beissinger 2007). Thus it is not clear whether the genre should be thought of as having a continuous history on Romanian soil, or as a recent synthesis of regional influences. This reflects the hybridism of the sonic structures themselves (see above) and is often discussed by local commentators.

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

Ethnicity, nation, and patriotism

Rabiz

In the Caucasus nationalism greatly increased in post-Soviet times leading, in Armenia, to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (1988-1994). During the war, *rabiz* music became an icon of Armenianness. Many *rabiz* singers (such as Aram Asatryan, Grisho's grandfather) sang for the soldiers: songs about the battles, the dead heroes and the martyrs (*fedayi*). More generally *rabiz* lyrics often emphasize Armenianness and "Armenian values" such as family and respect for "authentic traditions."

The respectful attitude to traditions, values and rules is probably rooted in the former *blat* culture. Like *blat*, *rabiz* strongly emphasizes a kind of honour code, as manifested by the lyrics and by the behaviour of performers and audience. *Rabiz* lovers identify themselves with the heroes

of *blat* music from the Soviet times, the "thieves in the law" (*Vory v zakon*), and many lyrics glorify the memory of dead *vory v zakon*. Other lyrics promote the ideal of an unbreakable brotherhood among *rabiz* people. It is common to hear *rabiz* listeners call each other *akhper* (literally "brother" in Armenian), thus paralleling the use of Russian kinship words like *brat* ("brother") or *otets* ("father") in *blat* culture (see Holzlehner 2007).

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

Manele

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

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

appreciates *manele* as “Gypsy music” may illustrate a recent shift in the perception of Gypsy culture.

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

Social and moral aspects

Rabiz

In the early 1990s, the rise of *rabiz* music was linked to heroic characters. One of the most widespread is the *mafioz*. Such a person is supposed to have become very rich, very fast, probably in illegal ways during the early years of independence. *Mafioz* and *rabiz* quickly became synonyms in daily conversations. Beyond musical taste, *rabiz* now means an attitude, a way of speaking, of dressing and generally, a way of life. Typically “*rabiz* men wear either black suits or leather jackets with black trousers or jeans. Their preferred shoes (nicknamed *çiçak*, lit. “peppers”) are leather loafers, usually black and narrow, with a slightly high heel and an unusually sharply pointed toe curving upward. The hair is cut very short. Dark, rectangular sunglasses and black belts with large square platinum-coloured buckles are worn as accessories. A small case containing the latest mobile telephone model is strapped to the belt and placed on the hip” (Hacob K., p.c. 2008). *Rabiz* stereotypes also include postures, like “squatting low to the ground, with forearms resting on the knees” (Anna M., p.c. 2009). Over the years, *rabizness* underwent some transformations: “the belly now protrudes over the belt in a display of wealth, affluence and power” (Anna M., p.c. 2009). Women in the *rabiz* trend are supposed to have a particular taste in clothing: “shocking colours are preferred. Jeans (worn very tight) or mini-skirts are fitted. Long boots or pump shoes with unusually high and thin heels are preferred, and the toe is usually pointed sharply. The hair is occasionally dyed in light blond shades, and if curly it is usually straightened. Make-up is always heavily applied” (Hacob K., p.c. 2008). Finally, *rabiz* may refer to tastes in various other fields. In architecture, for example, the *rabiz* standard is characterised by ostentatious and monumental buildings, shiny surfaces (mirrors, dark glass, polished stone, or marble), and neon lights.

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

Manele

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

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

As in Armenia, disliking *manele* often becomes an ethical question. Being “against *manele*” (*împotriva manelelor*) is a common posture, which involves much more than musical taste. Elites and patriots often describe the trend as a threat to social and moral values, and some even ask for its prohibition in mass media and public spaces. It should be noted that the posture of *manele* lovers is not symmetrical. There is far less

activism in their discourse. The musicians say that they play what the public requires (they are not expressing their own emotions/opinions). The listeners say that it is good party music (*muzică de petrecere*), clever and catchy (*șmecheră*), suited for dancing and in the mood of the time (*muzică de azi*, lit. "today's music").

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

Music of the "new times"?

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

It is remarkably difficult to understand such cultural trends as "symbolising" or "expressing" meanings. The ideas constructed in the songs do not always represent the actual values of those who appreciate them. And far from striving towards a unified discourse, the songs

themselves show a tendency to bring together extreme opposites, as if only to highlight their contradictions. On the other hand, they certainly provide unified experiences for the listeners, who not only appreciate them aurally, but also embody them through dance. The ability of music to act as an immersion medium is a key feature here.

Manele and *rabiz* construct "enchanted" worlds, which allow listeners to live certain emotions (maybe contradictory indeed) and interact in specific manners (maybe assuming roles remote from their daily lives) (Gell 1992; Stoichita 2009; Stoichita 2011a; Stoichita 2011b). As enchanted worlds, *manele* and *rabiz* do not necessarily "mean" something. Musical space and time construct realms of interaction where listeners are free to mirror, exaggerate or contradict ideas and behaviours borrowed from their daily lives. The Communist future is gone. Are we heading East or West? Is the promised modernity really different from our well known past? In this context, *manele* and *rabiz* appear as utopian playgrounds populated by characters ranging from "fictional" to "real." Their enchanted realms are open to many kinds of listeners, allowing them to enact or interact with the fears and hopes of their uncertain position.

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