

## ***Going public: female instrumental musicians in the contemporary folk and world music scene in Serbia***

**Iva Nenić**

Traditional folk music of different cultures frequently falls into gender-specific areas of performance and competence: many musical instruments function as symbols of collective identities and their employment often embodies the expectations and limits of 'proper' gender behavior (Koskoff 1989, Rice 2003, Doubleday 2008). Instruments like *gusle* (Balkan bowed lute accompanying oral epics) or *frula* (Serbian/Balkan reed-pipe) traditionally were depicted as an all-male domain both in diverse regional cultural practices and in early and modern ethnographic discourses. However, Serbian neo- and post-traditional music scenes are becoming increasingly populated by female performers, among whom many have achieved a moderate popularity, while some are on their path to stardom, and others are moving towards international world music networks. This recently obtained (but still relative) social visibility could be, for example, observed in a contemporary *frula* playing trend among young and adolescent girls, who now densely populate staged folklore events and amateur folk music competitions, previously almost exclusively occupied by male performers. Moreover, figures like young *gusle* player Bojana Peković, who won the 2012 Serbian edition of the *Who's got talent* show by performing both traditional Serbian epic repertoire and "modern", arranged pieces, challenge the dominant discourses of the neotraditional community of *gusle*, but also stir a change among the members of urban pro-Western elite who frequently scorn folk music for strongly expressed national sentiments. While certain comments and debates concerning the show's finale nominally evolve around dichotomies like praise/scorn of national folk music, or a comparison between 'folkish' and 'Western pop' qualities, a careful analysis of both discourses clustering around Bojana's participation and the way her performances were constructed and contextualized, demonstrates that the main issue at stake is precisely the *gender* of the performer, and also the way gender is employed in the ongoing negotiation of ethnicity.

I will present an overview of contemporary discourses and practices where female instrumentalists take part. Starting from a brief overview of cultural history of female instrumental musicianship, my analysis will chiefly focus on the transformation of the traditional music scene of late communist society to the nationally oriented neotraditional music culture of post-communist Serbia, with a highlighting of the issues of visibility and contemporary politics of representation of female musicians.