Tsyganshchina (цыганщина) and Romani Musicians in Tsarist, Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia: Change and Continuity

Anna G. Piotrowska
Jagiellonian University, Poland

Abstract
The main goal of this paper is to recognize and explain the specificity of the public presence of Romani musicians in Russia, predominantly in the long nineteenth century as well as in the new (Soviet and post-Soviet) political situation of the twentieth century. The article offers a historically oriented outline of the Romani musical traditions deeply embedded into the cultural, political and economic situation of the country. A special focus is placed on the phenomenon of the so-called ‘Gypsy choirs’ and their reception in Russia both by Russians and by foreigners, the latter being often surprised that while in Central and Western Europe Romani musicians were known for instrumental music, in Russia their vocal music (particularly so-called ‘Gypsy romances’) gained considerable popularity. The paper argues that Romani musicians from ‘Gypsy choirs’ identified and learnt to address the Russian aesthetics and thus managed to secure and sustain their unique position within the Russian culture.

Keywords
‘Gypsy choir’, ‘Gypsy romance’, Roma in Russia, Romani musicians

With the advent of purely commercial phonograph recordings taken in Russia, enjoyed in both private and public spheres, the so-called ‘Gypsy romances’ became the public’s hot
favourite.\textsuperscript{1} Several Russian (and Russian-related\textsuperscript{2}) phonograph companies advertised the release of such ‘Gypsy romances’ in the press.\textsuperscript{3} They also assured the public that they had striven to maintain the highest possible standard. In practice, it meant that the companies had searched for the best – i.e. preferably Romani – performers.\textsuperscript{4} Although these ‘Gypsy romances’ were also recorded by Russians, the Romani performers were favoured, as they had been renowned for their singing and appreciated in Russia since the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{5} The Roma in Russia organized choirs which gained international acclaim, and Romani singers oftentimes managed to accumulate small fortunes. The choirs managed to survive under Soviet rule and the popularity of Romani musicians never waned in the post-Soviet times. Their performances, especially in major Russian cities, can be credited for shaping the urban sonic space of those places and can be viewed as instrumental in negotiating the centrality of the Romani aural presence in Russian public spaces.

This article offers a historically oriented insight into the uniqueness of musical practices cultivated by professional Romani musicians in Russia as related to the tradition of the acclaimed ‘Gypsy choirs’ [singular: цыганский хор/tsyganskiy khor]. An analytical narrative for examining the criticality of the Romani contribution to the sonic uniqueness of Russian public spaces is developed and illustrated by refuting the idea of Romani musicians as being solely passive objects of othering (i.e., as the ideologized ‘Gypsies’). However, the focus throughout the article is on such notions as ‘Gypsy choirs’, ‘Gypsy romances’, etc., introduced and defined as distinctively Romani propositions. Hence, also the concept of ‘Gypsyism’ or ‘Gypsiness’ [tsyganshchina/цыганщина] discussed in this article is treated as a linguistic variable encountered in the Russian language which allows us to unpack the phenomenon of the omnipresence (rather than subalternity) of the aural aspect of the Romani culture in Russia. Special attention in this paper is consequently paid to the public presence of Romani musicians in very concrete and tangible places. While Romani music-making occurred in particular venues, the performances were aimed at particular listeners and involved specific interactions and responses. Hence, within this article, not only are the relationships between places and Romani musical practices highlighted, but also those between Romani musicians and their audiences.

\footnote{1} Panteleymon Grunberg, ‘The Phenomenon of Early Recording in the History of Russia at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century’ [Пантелеймон Грюнберг, ‘Феномен ранней грамзаписи в истории россии начала XX века’], Вестник Московского государственного областного университета, Vol. 2 (2011), 42–50, here 45.

\footnote{2} As was the case of the Syrena Record company founded in the Russian-occupied part of Poland by Juliusz Feigenbaum (1872–1944). See: Tomasz Lerski, Syrena Record: pierwsza polska wytwórnia fonograficzna [Syrena Record: Poland’s first recording company] (New York; Warsaw 2003), 13.

\footnote{3} See: The Gramophone Life [Граммофонная жизнь], issue 13, 5 October 1911. Available at: https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image_id=4882&l=Russian, accessed 15 September 2020.

\footnote{4} See: The Gramophone Life [Граммофонная жизнь], issue 13, 5 October 1911. Available at: https://www.russian-records.com/details.php?image_id=4882&l=Russian, accessed 15 September 2020.

\footnote{5} Alexander Kuprin, ‘On the Passing of Gypsy Song in Russia’, The Lotus Magazine, Vol. 8, No. 9 (1917), 409.
The Origins of ‘Gypsy Choirs’ in Russia

Studies dedicated to the relationship between music and place/space often assume the crucial interaction between musicians and their audience determines the everyday life experience in concrete locations. In other words, it is widely accepted that local musicians actively construct the urban narratives of the places they live in and contribute towards establishing the identity of these places. Hence, in order to provide substantive arguments concerning the cultural and social values of Romani musicians entailed in their input into the sonic space of Russian cities, it seems crucial to underline that the Romani musicians in Moscow and St. Petersburg, as featured in ‘Gypsy choirs’, constituted a separate stratum and avoided contacts with other Roma, who were usually associated with other types of activities. While originally the Roma in Russia were, among others, hired as smiths or armourers in the army, it was horse-trading that became their signature profession. However, travelling Roma also worked as craftsmen, specializing in repairing iron or copper utensils. Sedentary Roma in villages turned to farming, and in towns they were merchants and artisans, but especially musicians.

The degree to which Romani performers were widespread in imperial Russia and the extent to which their aural presence in the public spaces of major Russian cities of the nineteenth century was treated as a natural component of everyday life is confirmed by numerous accounts of their performances. Several descriptions suggest that they were, already in the early nineteenth century, highly valued: the Roma sang in front of musically educated foreign visitors. For example, when an Italian soprano Angelica Catalani (1780–1849) toured Russia in the 1820s, she had an opportunity to listen to Romani singers, as did the pianist Franz Liszt (1811–1886). Having arrived in Moscow in 1843, he became interested in the local Romani traditions and decided to visit a Romani camp near the city. His stay there was prolonged and, as a result, he

6 Barry Shank, Dissonant Identities: The Rock ‘n’ Roll Scene in Austin, Texas (Middletown, CT 1994).
7 Their names were recorded in registers as Vasko Tsigan, Stepan Tsiganchuk, Dmitro Tsiganchuk – the word ‘tsigan’ meaning in the Russian language ‘a Gypsy’. Hence it is assumed that these people were of Romani origin. On interpreting such surnames as validating their ethnic origin in the 15th and 16th centuries, see: Lech Mróz, Dzieje Cyganów-Romow w Rzeczypospolitej XV–XVIII w. [The history of Gypsies – Roma in fifteenth–eighteenth-century Poland] (Warszawa 2001), 53.
8 Lev Tcherenkov and Stéphane Laederich, The Rroma (Basel 2004), 531–54.
9 The Roma in Russia were allowed to travel freely, but were obliged to register their permanent residence and to pay taxes. They were predominantly treated as other serfs.
10 Albert Soubies, Histoire de la musique en Russie (Paris 1898), 78.
11 For example, in the Polish press of the Grand Duchy of Posen it was reported that ‘Gypsy choirs’ were supposedly even better than Russian choirs (‘Od niepamietnych czasow Cyganki w Rossyi tak wywyzyszyly sie w spiewie, ze nawet w tym kraju, gdzie doskonałosc muzyki wokalnej do tak wysokiego doprowadzono stopnia, chorych spiewaków cygańskich pierwszeństwo przed rosyjskimi mają’). See: N.a. ‘Cyganki w Rossyi’ [Gypsy women in Russia], Gazeta, No. 241 (1836), 1311. See also: N. a., ‘Cyganka’ [A Gypsy woman], Gazeta, No. 210 (1837), 1689–91.
12 Svetlana Lashchenko, ‘Angelica Catalani in Saint Petersburg’ [Светлана Лашченко, ‘Анджелика Каталани в Петербурге’], in Музыкальный Петербург XIX века1801–1861. Материалы к энциклопедии (том 14) [Musical Saint-Petersburg of the 19th century 1801–1861. Materials for the Encyclopaedia (Vol. 14)] (St. Petersburg 2017), 208–23, at 222.
was late for his own concert at the Bolshoi Theatre; that evening he improvised on a well-known Romani tune. However, Romani singers not only performed for but also, on a par with foreign musicians: in 1898, the Italian operatic soprano and actress Lina Cavalieri (1874–1944) – who was romantically involved with a scion of a rich Russian family, Prince Alexander Baryatinsky (1870–1910) – appeared during a lavishly organized concert accompanied by one of the typical ‘Gypsy choirs’.14

Although they gained recognition throughout the whole of the nineteenth century, the first Romani choirs had already developed by the late eighteenth century, capitalizing on the popularity of vocal music in Russia. While the social and cultural dynamics of the country were developing in parallel with Western European ideals, already in the pre-Petrine period, folk sentiments were cultivated to appreciate the uniqueness of the Russian identity, as expressed, for instance, in folk tunes performed by simple peasants.15 This interest in folk music traditions initiated the process of converting the ‘burgeoning national consciousness into a more specifically nationalistic consciousness’.16 In 1751, the collection *Idle Hours Away from Work, A Collection of Various Songs* [*Между делом безделие, или собрание разных песен*] by Grigory Teplov (1717–1779) appeared in print. Folk-styled songs (the so-called *народные песни*) became favoured, and vocal, particularly choral, music was considered typical of the Russian culture as rooted in its religious foundations, becoming a clear symbol of its great power formula.17 As Marina Ritzarev points out, ‘church music, or, more precisely, ancient chant’ became ‘the super-icon of Russian’ music connected with pro–Byzantine values looking backward to the Greek Orthodox past and clearly differentiating Russians from Roman Catholics or Protestants.18 Consequently, vocal music thrived throughout the nineteenth century, cultivated also in the form of folkish and military songs, the so-called ‘bylny’ (epic songs), laments, chastushki (limericks), songs of barge-haulers, etc. The flourishing vocal ensembles (e.g., the Imperial Court Capella or the Slavic Capella) specialized in public performances of both sacred and secular choral music.19

Romani musicians also focused on vocal performances, and most probably they could be heard in public in the early eighteenth century. For example, in St. Petersburg they

---

13 See: Stanisław Szenic, *Franciszek Liszt* (Warszawa 1969), 180.
14 Paul Fryer and Olga Usova, *Lina Cavalieri: The Life of Opera’s Greatest Beauty, 1874–1944* (Jefferson, NC 2004), 23–4.
15 Robert C. Ridenour, *Nationalism, Modernism and Personal Rivalry in Nineteenth-Century Russian Music* (Ann Arbor 1981), 79. In the second half of the nineteenth century, it was Vladimir Stasov who strongly adhered to the idea that folk tunes should be featured by Russian composers in their works.
16 Marina Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism from Glinka to Stalin* (New Haven, CT 2007), 2.
17 A. N. Shakarov, ‘The Main Phases and Distinctive Features of Russian Nationalism’, John Andrew, trans., in Geoffrey Hosking and Robert Service, eds, *Russian Nationalism: Past and Present* (London 1998), 11 and 12.
18 Marina Ritzareva, ‘”A Singing Peasant”: An Historical Look at National Identity in Russian Music’, *Min-ad: Israel Studies in Musicology Online*, 2007, 12. Available at: http://www.biu.ac.il/HU/nu/min-ad/07-08/Ritzarev-A_Singing.pdf, accessed 19 May 2014.
19 See: Richard Stites, *Serfdom, Society, and the Arts in Imperial Russia: The Pleasure and the Power* (New Haven, CT 2005), 96.
would appear, among others, at the masquerades thrown by Peter I (1672–1725). By the end of the century, Romani singers had consolidated their position as singers by forming professional choirs.20 Initially, such ensembles were sponsored by the landed gentry, but Romani musicians soon emancipated themselves and managed to establish choirs functioning as trademarks of their musical competence. The first, semi-legendary ‘Gypsy choir’ transformed into a professional ensemble was founded by Count Alexei Orlov (1737–1808). On his order, in 1774, a collector of Russian folk songs, Ivan Sokolov (1740–1807) gathered Romani serfs to entertain, among others, the courtiers of Catherine II (the Great).21 The members of the choir were freed in 1807 and fought as hussars and lancers against the French invasion during the Patriotic War of 1812. However, they also skilfully exploited anti-French sentiments by performing patriotic Russian songs, thus sustaining and creating the demand for their musical services. Romani singers often performed at open military gatherings, during meetings of officers, etc.

When the original Orlov choir relocated to Moscow in the early nineteenth century, it functioned as a professional singing troupe. A dancer and guitarist Ilya Sokolov (1777–1848), who was Ivan Sokolov’s nephew, became its new leader. The ensemble, accordingly, was known as the Sokolovsky choir [соколовский хор]. Because of its primary position, the choir soon acquired the status of an archetypal ‘Gypsy choir’ and served as a paragon for subsequent choirs. Other Romani musicians often claimed direct ancestry to, or at least close relations with, the original Sokolovsky choir. It became a common practice to organize choirs along family lines and to hire family members (the wife and niece of Ilya Sokolov sang, for example, in his choir22). The position of the conductor was commonly handed down in the male line; e.g., Ivan Sokolov was substituted by Ilya Sokolov, while Ilya’s brother, Peter Sokolov, established his own choir. As a consequence, the ‘Gypsy choirs’ gave rise to artistic clans, such as the Sokolovs or the Shishkins, who established well-functioning networks, which resembled similar musical dynasties encountered at that time in other European cities (with the Strausses of Vienna being one of the finest examples).

Sonic Noticeability

Since music is inextricable from the lifestyles and textures of daily urban life, the acclaimed Sokolovsky choir found excellent conditions once in Moscow. There, while securing their source of income, the Romani singers planned their performances with local concerns in mind; i.e., they appropriated certain spaces of the city which they occupied and presented their songs as an expression of their community. The musicians

20 At the same time in 1759, the empress Elizabeth Petrovna (1709–1762) forbade any occasional visits of travelling Roma to the capital city and its vicinity, insisting they should settle there permanently.
21 Aleksei Gessler and Efim Druts, The Gypsies: Essays [Алексей Гесслер, Ефим Друц, Цыгане. Очерки] (Moskva 1990), 202–4.
22 Evgenii Kuznetsov, From the History of the Russian Estrada [Евгений Кузнецов, Из прошлого русской эстрады] (Moskva 1958), 66.
tended to flock together: performing, touring and living in close-knit neighbourhoods. It was similar in the case of Moscow and St. Petersburg: the Romani singers dominated particular parts of the city, which were often renamed as ‘Gypsy districts’. In St. Petersburg, they chose to reside near the banks of the Black River [Чёрная речка/Chornaya Rechka] and the place became known as a ‘Gypsy residence’ [цыганская резиденция/tsyganskaya rezidentsiya].23 In Moscow, Romani singers opted for the northwest part of the city recognized for its amusement facilities, including the Petrovsky Park, which had a popular restaurant opened in the 1820s and which featured merry-go-rounds and an open stage where orchestras or Romani choirs performed.24 This section of the city was tagged a ‘Gypsy corner’ [цыганский уголок/tsyganskiy ugolok].25 Neither in Moscow nor in St. Petersburg did those districts function as ghettos, but instead they were topographical signs of Romani visibility on the map of the city. The Romani aural presence was also often connected with those areas as the singers usually held their performances in their vicinity.

The sonic spaces of Moscow or St. Petersburg were marked by the aural presence of ‘Gypsy choirs’ as their popularity grew steadily in the first half of the nineteenth century. Although the interest in the choirs ebbed and flowed throughout the whole century, they nevertheless managed to sustain their high rank, often due to the recognition attained by particular individuals – conductors and soloists, who acquired what today can be compared to celebrity status. Some Romani female singers enjoyed very successful careers (e.g., Domasha Danchenko, Olga Shishkina or Liza Morozova26), and often married Russian bureaucrats, military men, artists, etc. Following their marriage, they usually left the choirs and pursued the life of society ladies, although they kept close contact with their Romani families, supporting them financially.27 The existence of such intermarriage was well acknowledged in the European press.28 These liaisons, and the growing fraternization, alas laced with patronization, between Romani singers and Russian society became publicized, and were reflected in several cultural texts of the era.

There was also a blurring between concerts open to the public and private meetings accompanied by music making. The close interaction with the audience as promoted by Romani singers remained central to the auditory aesthetics of Romani performances,
often of a ludic character and purposefully encompassing elements of a merry, if not flirtatious, play. At the same time, the Roma remained the hosts of the performing spaces as they usually sang in their own districts. The listeners assumed the role of guests visiting Romani districts during special outings, often initiated by the command ‘to the Gypsies’ [к цыганам!] / tseyganam]. It became a well-known phrase signalling a search for contact with Romani singers, who were either summoned to particular places or met directly in particular restaurants where they performed on a regular basis. Listening to ‘Gypsy choirs’ functioned thus as a kind of urban entertainment which was enjoyed by occasional and frequent visitors alike and often treated as a pretext to consume plentiful amounts of alcohol. Both listeners and musicians could drink heavily, and singers were even believed to perform better when intoxicated so they were sent complimentary bottles of vodka or champagne.

The predominantly male listeners sexualized Romani female singers, inviting them to function rooms supposedly for private concerts, often asking them to perform particular songs and engaging them in small talk. The ‘male gaze’ determined the reception of Romani female singers and their public image as women of exceptional beauty, wearing extravagant jewellery (for example, made of glittering coins). The feminization of ‘Gypsy choirs’ was also viewed by music critics as a factor determining the sound of Romani concerts. Although most Romani vocal ensembles were in fact mixed, the women tended to be more exposed to the public and they seemed to prevail both visually and aurally (male members often worked as conductors, dancers or accompanists playing the guitar). The feminization of Romani musical ensembles was not exclusive to Russia, but in Eastern and Central Europe it was instrumental, rather than vocal, bands – usually comprised of male musicians – that dominated. Yet a similar feminization trend was observed, for example, in Spain (e.g., in the 1613 novella La Gitanilla, Miguel Cervantes depicted such an all-female Romani ensemble). The overexposure of women in Romani musical ensembles was often equated with their objectification, since, according to some scholars, they could be perceived as ‘useful’, as ‘amigas’, to the extent that they provided men with “friendly relations”, and/or when treated as a source of ‘erotic stimulation’ by male viewers. However, the dominance of female

---

29 For example, such popular places in Moscow at the turn of the twentieth century were the Strelna restaurant and the Yar.
30 Scott, The Nineteenth-Century Russian Gypsy Choir, 28–9.
31 Ivan Rom-Lebedev, From the Gypsy Choir to the ‘Romen’ Theatre [Иван Ром-Лебедев, От цыганского хора к театру ‘Ромен’] (Moskva 1990), 41.
32 Camille Bellaigue, Un Siècle de Musique Française (Paris 1887), 262.
33 Some researchers suggest that all-female (or predominantly female) Romani performing groups could have been perceived as less dangerous, while at the same time remaining attractive for largely male audiences. See: Meira Weinzweig, ‘Flamenco Fires: Form as Generated by the Performer – Audience Relationship’, in Matt T. Salo, ed., 100 Years of Gypsy Studies. Papers from the 10th Annual Meeting of the Gypsy Lore Society, North American Chapter, March 25–27, 1988 (Cheverly, MD 1990).
34 Charles D. Presberg, ‘Precious Exchanges: The Poetics of Desire, Power, and Reciprocity in Cervantes’s La gitanailla’, Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1998), 58.
35 Weinzweig, ‘Flamenco Fires’, 227.
singers in Romani ensembles encountered in Russia corresponded well with the general tendency observed in the nineteenth century among operatic circles all over Europe. Female, rather than male, opera singers often gained the status of divas, based on their artistic accomplishments and social standing. Hence, the principal role of female singers in Romani choirs can be read as a strategic manoeuvre by ‘Gypsy choirs’ to address expectations imposed by the audiences which stemmed from their growing awareness of general musical tendencies. Romani choirs relied on, among other things, an analytically oriented and musically erudite audience which, since the 1820s, formed the so-called ‘musical intelligentsia’ ready to discuss any musical performances in which they indulged themselves. It can then be speculated that the feminization of ‘Gypsy choirs’ was also aimed at satisfying the pretensions of the listeners who were striving to find, and to define, the mysterious and seductive femininity as located outside of the mainstream society but preferably in the scope of popular exotic associations. That proposition can be supported by various pieces of evidence, among others by the form of stage presentation endorsed by ‘Gypsy choirs’. The erotic fantasies of male audiences were thus adroitly capitalized on by means of shortening the physical distance between singers and listeners. At the same time, the social distance was shrinking as Romani female singers were patronizingly known in the public by their first names, often additionally shortened to affectionate diminutives. For example, the famous singer Tatiana Demodieva (1808–1877) was referred to as Tanya, and commonly introduced as ‘Gypsy Tanya’, while other singers were simply addressed as Stesha (instead of Stefania), Masha (instead of Maria), etc.

At the same time, Romani female singers frequented public occasions and were recognized as public figures. It can thus be argued that Romani female singers used their voices as an argument while transforming their position and allowing to be absorbed into the ‘urban mythspace’. Romani women were hence predominantly recognized in connection with their vocal abilities and the sonic qualities of their voices turned into their ultimate assets. The Romani women were perceived in the Russian culture through these aural associations to such an extent that even poetical works featuring Romani heroines were treated as potential operetta librettis, as attested by the poem The Gypsies (1824), written by Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837). The text about the idealized ‘Gypsies’ was immediately seized for its musical potentiality: as early as 1829, another Russian poet – Mikhail

36 To mention Henriette Sontag and Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient among singers, or the actress Harriet Smithson, and many others.
37 James H. Johnson, Listening in Paris: Cultural History (Berkeley, CA 1985), 216.
38 The linking of the exotic and the erotic found its reflection in several musical stage works with half-naked dancing women epitomizing the Orient as a love object. In nineteenth-century texts, depictions of dancing Romani girls were supplemented with information on their unmarried status, thus allusively suggesting the (erotic) aim of their dance being performed. See, for example: Teodor Narbutt, Rys historyczny ludu cygańskiego [Historic Sketch on the Gypsy People] (Wilno 1830), 121.
39 Most Romani singers actually had Russian names which were followed by patronymics as customary in the Russian culture.
40 The notion conveys ‘understanding the changing relationship between social and physical landscapes as they are constantly re-shaped’. See: Adam Kaul, 'Music on the Edge: Busking at the Cliffs of Moher and the Commodification of a Musical Landscape’, Tourist Studies, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2014), 88.
Lermontov (1814–1841) – attempted to adapt its parts as a libretto\textsuperscript{41} (possibly inspired also by the opera \textit{Pan Tvardovsky} by Alexey Verstovsky,\textsuperscript{42} given that a ‘Gypsy song’ from that particular opera was to be featured in Lermontov’s unfinished project).\textsuperscript{43} Pushkin can also be credited with validating the symbolic status of Romani singers among the Russian intelligentsia, being the godfather to a daughter\textsuperscript{44} of Olga Soldatova from Ilya Sokolov’s choir, who married his close friend Pavel Nashchokin (1801–1854).\textsuperscript{45} Although the poem \textit{The Gypsies} was written while Pushkin lived in the Bessarabia Governorate (Bessarabia Oblast), known for its Romani population, upon the poet’s return to Moscow, he met with Romani female singers, including the above-mentioned Tatiana Demodieva. She skilfully capitalized on the relationship with the poet during her subsequent career lasting until the 1850s. Heavily advertising her acquaintance with Pushkin, she elaborated the legend of her last meeting with Pushkin that apparently had occurred in the same year when the poet married Natalia Goncharova (more precisely, and more dramatically, two days before their wedding in 1831). The myth of the highly emotional character of that encounter was propagated and commented on by Demodieva for many years.\textsuperscript{46}

Romani female singers enunciated their public presence by means of their voices, violating the imperative that female singing should be cherished in the privacy of domestic space. The idea of the connection between women’s voices and their sexuality – dating back to ancient times – was still entertained in modernity.\textsuperscript{47} Hence, by cultivating the myth of singing with supposedly untrained voices, Romani female singers cleverly alluded to their ‘wildness’ and sustained the sought-after qualities of naturalness and spontaneity ingrained in their vocal performances. While Romani choirs were, in fact, highly professional ensembles, the sound of the strong, allegedly untrained, female voices conveyed the impression of a seemingly inborn talent and was used to promote the Romani musical sensitiveness. The voices of renowned Romani singers, for example that of Varvara Panina (1872–1911), were accordingly perceived in terms of their magical charm and described as ‘marvellous’, even ‘extraordinary’ and perhaps ‘strange’ [дивный/\textit{divnyy}].\textsuperscript{48}

The sonic noticeability of Romani female singers in nineteenth-century Russia was so popular that it permeated various artistic works of the epoch. For example, Yevgeny

\textsuperscript{41} Mikhail Lermontov, \textit{Collected Works}, Vol. 3: Dramas [Михаил Лермонтов, \textit{Собрание сочинений}, том 3 Драмы] (Leningrad 1980), 7–8.

\textsuperscript{42} The opera, with a libretto by Mikhail Zagoskin, was staged at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow on 24 May 1828.

\textsuperscript{43} The fragment was first published in 1859 in an article by Stepan Dudyshkin ‘Lermontov’s Student Notebooks’ [Степан С. Дудышкин ‘Ученческие тетради Лермонтова’] in \textit{Domestic Notes} [Отечественные записки/Otechestvennye zapiski], Vol. 125, No. 7, part I, (1859), 26–7.

\textsuperscript{44} Unfortunately, the girl died in infancy in the summer of 1831. See: http://pushkin-lit.ru/pushkin/pisma/428.htm, accessed 10 October 2020.

\textsuperscript{45} Sigurd Schmidt, \textit{Encyclopaedia ‘Moskva’} [Сигурд Шмидт, \textit{Энциклопедия «Москва»}], \textit{Moskva: Bol’shaya Rossiskaya Entsiklopediya}, 1997, 976 (entry on: Демьянова, Татьяна Дмитриевна).

\textsuperscript{46} Scott, \textit{The Nineteenth-Century Russian Gypsy Choir}, 11.

\textsuperscript{47} See: Wayne Koestenbaum, ‘The Queen’s Throat: (Homo)sexuality and the Art of Singing’, in Diana Fuss, ed., \textit{Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories} (New York 1991), 205–324.

\textsuperscript{48} It was the impressionist painter Konstantin Korovin (1861–1939) who marvelled at Panina’s voice. See: Israel Nestiev, \textit{Stars of the Russian Estrada} [Израиль Нестьев, Звёзды русской эстрады] (Moskva 1970), 39.
Baratynsky (1800–1841) in the poem *The Mistress (The Gypsy Girl)* of 1831 [Наложнича (Цыганка)/Nalozhnitsa (Tsyganka)] or Afanasy Fet (1820–1892) in his 1844 poem *To a Gypsy Girl* [Цыганке/Tsyganke] explicitly characterized Romani heroines by alluding to the quality of their voices and associating Romani singing with naturalness (i.e. smoothness and sweetness). They also referred to the mesmerising effect (especially the charm of love) of songs performed by Romani women. In his 1854 poem *The Gypsy Girl* [Цыганка/ Tsyganka], Vladimir Sollogub (1813–1882) described a song by the Romani heroine Stasha as an outlet for suppressed emotions, and, in a similar vein, Ivan Turgenev (1818–1883) praised the figure of a ‘Gypsy singer’, referring to such notions as ‘imaginativeness’, ‘poetical and artistic giftedness’, or ‘sense of dignity’.49

The ultimate proof of the degree to which the Romani choirs functioned as part of the daily urban experience can be found in the play *The Living Corpse* [Живой труп/Zhivoy trup] written around 1900 by Lev Tolstoy (1828–1910). The text can be treated as a piece of historical evidence depicting the inner organization of Romani choirs while confirming the vital importance of female singers for their functioning. The protagonist of the play – Fedor Protasov – becomes involved in an affair with a Romani singer Masha, who is a soloist in a well-known ‘Gypsy choir’. Tolstoy realistically demonstrates how her life revolves around rehearsals, either with the whole ensemble or with the guitarist. Masha belongs to an affluent musical family and her parents openly object to her matrimonial plans; not only do they consider Protasov to be too poor for her, but they also realize that the marriage would deprive the choir of its main attraction and thus hinder its future prospects.50 As presented by Tolstoy, Romani choirs functioned like small entrepreneurships, holding regular rehearsals, carefully planning their travels, etc. One of the scenes offers an insight into the everyday routine of a Romani choir: a group of musicians is shown as diligently preparing their songs, making notes, worrying about their vocalist, etc. The work of a ‘Gypsy choir’ as described by Tolstoy reveals to what degree they took care of the quality of their performances, aware of the competition and offering professional productions which would perfectly resonate with the Russian intellectual circles.

**Understanding Needs as a Key to Generating Needs: The Case of ‘Gypsy Romances’**

It can be argued that Romani musicians astutely adjusted to the urban life of prominent Russian cities, not only by delivering the appropriate repertoire, but, as matter of fact, also by stimulating the demand for that type of repertoire. Arguably, one of the secrets of the popularity of ‘Gypsy choirs’ was the choice of songs that were deemed as highly attractive by the public. The repertoire mainly consisted of typical Russian songs, although occasionally the ensembles proposed the so-called Gypsy camp songs [singular: таборная песня/tabornaya pesnya], usually in the form of long, recited stories. However, above all, they introduced songs that became known as the separate genre of

---

49 See: David Crowe, *A History of the Gypsies of Russia and Eastern Europe* (New York 2016), 169.

50 In the text, the idiomatic and quite offensive ‘голыш’ is used, meaning skint, cleaned out [literally, a naked one].
‘Gypsy romances’ [singular: цыганский романс/tsyganskiy romans]. These songs were performed in the Russian language (hence, they are sometimes designated in the English language as ‘Russian Gypsy songs’) and became so tremendously popular in Russia that they came to be categorized as typical of the so-called ‘Kitschkunst’. Despite their name, it was not only ‘Gypsy choirs’ that specialized in performing them. At the turn of the twentieth century, particularly noted for their interpretation of ‘Gypsy romances’, the female Russian singers, Anastasia Vyaltseva and Nadezhda Plevitskaya (1884–1940) stood out among others. At that time, several Russian singers attempted to capitalize on the potential of ‘Gypsy romances’, even posing as Romani performers. For example, the violinist Jakov Rubinstein (1866–1902) played a prank pretending to be a Romani singer, while a well-known baritone from Odessa, Yuriy Morfessi (1882–1949), was even nicknamed the ‘king of Gypsy song’. The wide popularity and circulation of ‘Gypsy romances’ can be read as a sign of the success of ‘Gypsy choirs’ endorsing their own version of the Romani legacy. The willingness of Russian performers to sing ‘Gypsy romances’ also attests to the extent to which that type of repertoire resonated with the emotional and cognitive schemes of Russian society and their aspirations to reassert their uniqueness.

Also tagged as ‘Gypsy romances’ were songs known as ‘Gypsy ballads’ or simply ‘Gypsy songs’. The genre of ‘Gypsy romances’, despite the name, was not related to songs performed in camps, and, from the outset, it was conceived as an art song composed by predominantly Russian composers, the masters of lyrical romances Alexander Varlamov (1801–1848) and Alexander Gurilev (1803–1858) among others, and performed by ‘Gypsy choirs’. In their lyrics, however, the ‘Gypsy romances’ strived to convey the ‘spirit and the very essence’ of the Roma, remaining nevertheless similar to the so-called ‘Russian romances’, also very popular in nineteenth-century Russia. In reality, there existed a variety of romances known under different names, notably the ‘urban romance’ [городской романс/gorodskoy romans], alternatively known as the ‘domestic romance’ [бытовой романс/bytovoi romans] since it was inspired by everyday themes. Immersed in romantic aesthetics, with a high degree of emotionality, even sentimentalism (often dwelling on the theme of sensual love), these romances offered at the same time an atmosphere of mysticism and exoticism. Among others, their refrains often featured non-semantic,
yet alien-sounding phrases such as: ‘Oh, ne ne, ne’ or ‘tiri dari dari’, etc. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, the lyrics started being touched by a tinge of cynicism, revealing a more nihilistic and individualistic approach to the presented topics; their characteristic, unexpected changes of tempi ossified in the form of stereotypical contrasts of the slow and fast sections. The feature characteristic of all vocal romances was their emotional richness, coupled with a juxtaposition of melodic and declamatory sections (as they were partly sung and partly recited). The romances were typically accompanied by a seven-string guitar, traditionally in the open G tuning. Oftentimes, the singers strummed the strings to produce a bass line functioning as a counterpoint to the vocal melody, alternatively performing with a guitarist who played a series of rapid arpeggios. The Romani singers were occasionally heard with the accompaniment of other instruments (e.g., violins, drums).

The uniqueness of ‘Gypsy romances’ was associated with a characteristic performing style adopted by Romani singers. Arguably, the compelling distinctive quality of their irreproducible interpretation immediately captivated the audience’s attention and became the most recognizable feature of Romani performances. An unrestricted treatment of rhythmic structures (including abrupt tempo changes) and an unconventional approach to the issue of timing (accelerations coupled with a crescendo juxtaposed with subdued and slowed-down phrases) provoked highly emotional responses. Romani performances always took on the character of improvisation sessions (produced by irregular changes of tempo and of dynamics), although – as indicated, for example, by Tolstoy in The Living Corpse – they were carefully pre-planned and thoroughly rehearsed to be executed properly by the whole choir. It may be speculated whether and to what degree the characteristic performance mannerisms of Romani interpretations served to incite and reinforce emotional reactions, but ‘Gypsy choirs’, besides appearing enigmatic and unfathomable, were also known to evoke emotional turmoil. The French music critic Camille Bellaigue (1858–1930) commented on the Romani choirs from Moscow, writing about their ‘divine mystery’ and ‘secret of their songs’. Bellaigue, as other listeners, was captivated by the outburst of emotions, and especially by the feeling of melancholy permeating the harmony and the lyrics. The overall stylistic features of ‘Gypsy romances’ resonated particularly well with the Russian public of the second half of the nineteenth century, when decadent moods prevailed and many intellectuals, including musicians, succumbed to feelings of depression and resignation. Musical romances perfectly suited that gloomy atmosphere, as ‘Gypsy romances’ predominantly drew on the nostalgic themes of tormented and unrequited love or long-lost innocence. They abounded with imaginative descriptions of the nature and beauty of the beloved and/or the lost love. One of the best examples of such a song, enjoying international popularity still today, is the romance Black Eyes [Очи чёрные/Ochi chyornye], which extols the allure of the

56 Richard Stites, Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900 (Cambridge 1992), 13.
57 Camille Bellaigue, Un Siècle de Musique Française (Paris 1887), 267.
58 Yuri Keldysh, Mussorgsky’s Romances [Юрий Всеволодович Келдыш, Романсовая лирика Мусоргского] (Moskva 1993), 7.
59 Józef Smaga, Dekadencją w Rosji [Decadence in Russia] (Wrocław 1981), 195.
passionate ‘black eyes’ of the dearest one. The lyrics by the poet Yevgeny Grebyonka (1812–1848) were first published in 1843 and often set to music by various composers: several vocal versions of this poem circulated by the 1870s. However, the romance gained a wider recognition only in the 1880s, when it was set to a tune taken from Florian Hermann’s Valse Hommage, op. 21 (1879).

Various popular tunes were used as a basis for ‘Gypsy romances’ and Romani musicians often transformed Russian folk songs into ‘Gypsy romances’, either by adapting new tunes or by reinventing older songs. In cases when the singers were unable to remember the lyrics, they often replaced some lines with meaningless syllables (e.g., ‘ta-ra’, or ‘ne-ne’) reminiscent of the sound of exotic languages, thus alluding to the myth of the mysterious ‘Gypsies’. Having skilfully reinvigorated the existing musical standards, the Romani singers excelled at blurring the differences between ‘Gypsy romances’ and ‘Russian romances’ and presented their propositions as uniquely Romani by suggesting the supposedly ancient origin of their romances with the appropriate subtitle of ‘old Gypsy romances’ [старинные цыганские романсы/starinnye tsyganskie romansy]. The strategy of authenticating their repertoire helped professional Romani choirs to reduce, or even to camouflage, the gulf between themselves as representing the category of urban (sedentary and well-off) Romani musicians and other, usually still travelling, Roma in Russia. Hence, the ‘Gypsy choirs’ strove in their repertoire to capture the atmosphere of Romani camps in order to sustain the claim of being continuators of musical traditions inherited from their ancestors. By the end of the nineteenth century, the urge to underline the Romani legacy was motivated not only externally – i.e., by the need to distinguish ‘Gypsy choirs’ from Russian performers specializing in ‘Gypsy romances’ – but also by the ambiguous status of the professional Romani musicians within the Romani society in Russia, especially in the light of the appearance of the Kelderashi and Lovari groups in the country.

**Tsyganshchina**

In the early twentieth century, Romani choirs became criticized for losing their credibility. Although still extremely popular and visible in public spaces, they were scrutinized and perceived as inauthentic entertainment proposals. With the advent of Soviet Russia, Romani choirs, associated with their aristocratic sponsors, were affected by the antibourgeois ferment and the term ‘tsyganshchina’ [‘Gypsyism’ or ‘Gypsiness’] emerged, denoting a ‘Gypsy craze’ marred by pseudo-Romani pretentions. In order to unpack the notion of ‘tsyganshchina’, it is crucial, however, to look back at the Russian fascination with the ‘Gypsies’ viewed as objects of idealization confronted with the Russian idiosyncratic experience of Romani choirs. The attitude of the Russian intelligentsia towards them reflects the ambivalence of the Russian self-perception: the country’s elites positioned themselves as part of the European legacy, at the same time feeling the urge to emphasize their distinctiveness by means of a self-imposed and self-oriented idea of otherness. When blurring the lines between the ‘Russian’ and ‘Gypsy’ vocal romances, Russian intellectuals

---

60 The lyrics were printed in the volume of *The New Russian and Gypsy Songbook with Arrangements by Molchanov* [Новейший русский и цыганский песенник с оркестрованными Молчановым песнями] (St. Petersburg 1874), 11.
clearly embraced the fluidity of their own self-definition, as both types of romances alluded to the same aesthetic categories of nostalgia and melancholy. Hence, such literary figures as Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881) and later Alexander Blok (1880–1921) explicitly talked about the striking similarities between the ‘Russian poetic genius’ and the ‘Gypsy soul’.61 It can be further claimed that the infatuation with ‘Gypsy choirs’ demonstrated the role of the Romani musical tradition as a catalyst in the processes of the Russian self-identification, as the notion of ‘Gypsy music’ has served in Russia as the ultimate embodiment of collective fantasies. While affected by Western European trends, but nevertheless associated with domestic traditions, the notion became part of the Russian experience. Eric Scott speculates that the intimate nature of contacts maintained with Romani musicians prompted Russians to ‘believe they could claim an entée into Gypsy culture that was denied other Europeans, and thus the peculiarities of the Russia-Europe relationship translated into a unique Russia-Gypsy relationship’.62 In other words, Romani culture as filtered by ‘Gypsy choirs’ was treated as an extension of the Russian identity. Hence, ‘Gypsy’ motifs penetrated everyday Russian life, both in a literal and figurative sense. The Roma were, for example, willingly portrayed in – popular since the late seventeenth century – ‘lubki’ [singular: лубок/lubok]; i.e., ‘cheap, often crudely hand-coloured prints that circulated at urban stands, rural markets, and through colporteurs to illustrated weekly magazines sold by subscription to a general readership and themed publications for women, children, hunters, and even hairdressers’.63 The Roma were predominantly shown as young people dancing and singing merrily (popular captions included such self-presentations as ‘I am a fine Gypsy fellow; neither a peasant nor a merchant’).64

The image of a Roma as an entertainer was surely connected with the popularity of ‘Gypsy choirs’. Their fame spread to Western Europe and some composers associated Romani musical traditions from Russia with vocal practices, as attested by the titles of some salon miniatures from the second half of the nineteenth century, such as Les Bohémiens, Chansons populaires russes, op. 57 (1861) for piano solo by Jacques Blumenthal.65 However, around the same time, the success of Romani choirs was also capitalized on by local (Russian) music publishers, who started printing collections of the so-called ‘Gypsy songs’.66 The popularity of ‘Gypsy’ motifs was also connected with the

---

61 See: Scott, The Nineteenth-Century Russian Gypsy Choir, 14.
62 Ibid.
63 Jeffrey Brooks, ‘The Russian Nation Imagined: The Peoples of Russia as Seen in Popular Imagery, 1860s–1890s’, Journal of Social History, Vol. 43, No. 3 (2010), 535.
64 Brooks, ‘The Russian Nation Imagined’, 545.
65 The piece explicitly conveys ‘Gypsy’ innuendos in an annotation placed on the title page (the miniature is described as a transcription of a popular Romani song from the ‘Petite Russie’, as the territories of the Ukraine were known). See: Jacques Blumenthal, Les Bohémiens, Chansons populaires russes, op. 57 (Paris 1861). Several such compositions were published throughout the nineteenth century, including, for example, Adolf von Hanslet’s Fantaisie sur un air bohémien-russe, op. 16 (1842), Julius Schulhoff’s Caprice sur des airs bohémiens, op. 10 (1850), Leopold de Meyer’s Air bohémien–russe, op. 45 (1868) or Air bohémien russe (Tziganes), op. 3 by N. de Wolkoff.
66 By the mid-nineteenth century, the ‘Gypsy romances’ became available in print and the image of the romanticized ‘Gypsy life’ was enjoyed by middle or upper classes performing songs at home. See: Richard Stites, Russian Popular Culture, 14–15.
endorsement of the idealized ‘Gypsy’ heroes in musical works staged in tsarist Russia. These propositions were, however, originally only imported. For example, in 1838, Russian theatre-goers enjoyed the ballet La Gitana, the Spanish Gypsy [Гитана, испанская цыганка/Gitana, ispanskaya tseyganka], featuring the famous dancer Marie Taglioni performing with the Imperial Russian Ballet, and, one decade later, in 1848, the ballet Esmeralda (after Victor Hugo with music by Riccardo Eugenio Drigo) premiered in St. Petersburg, with an opera under the same title appearing in 1847 in Moscow. Russian music lovers were also well acquainted with other popular operas featuring Romani heroes – The Bohemian Girl (1843) by the Irish composer Michael (William) Balfe (1808–1870) and Carmen (1875) by Georges Bizet (1838–1875). The Russian audience would have inevitably observed similarities between the tragic story of Carmen and that of Zemfira from Pushkin’s The Gypsies.67 The imported literary models introducing Romani characters were especially popularized in the realm of Russian opera: Esmeralda after Hugo was composed by Alexander Dargomyzhsky (1813–1869) between 1838 and 1841. Only in 1893, Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943) presented a musical version of Pushkin’s poem in his opera Aleko. The popularity of ‘Gypsy’ motifs was exploited also by Romani musicians (e.g., by the directors of the renowned ‘Gypsy choirs’ who offered their own versions of medleys based on Romani and Russian songs). Notable for such arrangements was, for example, the choirmaster Nikolai Shishkin (1845–1911), known for his operetta titled Gypsy life [Пьеская жизнь/Tsyganskaya zhizni].68 Furthermore, competitions for the title of the best performer of ‘Gypsy romances’ were organized, an example of which was a highly publicized contest held in the year 1911 at St. Petersburg’s Passage theatre. Among others, the operetta star Natalia Tamara (1873–1934) competed for the title of the ‘queen of the Gypsy romance’,69 because performers of ‘Gypsy romances’, usually professional musicians of both Romani and Russian descent, benefited from lucrative show business opportunities, such as touring frequently, etc.

As already mentioned, ‘Gypsy choirs’ functioned as successful musical companies whose members could afford a very comfortable lifestyle and to educate their children, etc. The discrepancy between Romani singers and other Roma was so glaring that – as suggested by Eric Scott – the ‘Gypsy choirs’ needed to enact their ‘Gypsiness’ and cultivated it as a meticulously designed and perfectly staged myth, executed on multiple levels. In most cases, they sustained musical features deemed typical of Romani musical traditions (by adhering to the traditional line-up, preferring a seven-string guitar, resorting to tempo rubato, juxtaposing declamatory and melancholic sections, etc.). ‘Gypsy choirs’ carefully recreated their ‘Gypsiness’, rehearsing and refining their performance techniques and drawing attention to the attire, stage sets, etc. These attempts

67 David A. Lowe, ‘Pushkin and ‘Carmen’, 19th-Century Music, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1996), 72.
68 Nikolay Bessonov, ‘The History of the Gypsy Diaspora of Saint Petersburg’ [Николай Бессонов, ‘История цыганской диаспоры Санкт-Петербурга’], Фонд возрождения исторических и культурных традиций — Народный Дом. Available at: http://rusnardom.ru/nikolay-bessonov-istoriya-tsyganskoy-diasporyi-sankt-peterburga/, accessed 9 October 2020.
69 See: Elizaveta Uvarova, ed., All the Stars: Russian Stage: 20th Century: Encyclopaedia [Елизавета Дмитриевна Уварова «Все звёзды», эстрада России: XX век: энциклопедия] (Moskva 2004), 269.
to authenticate the performances of ‘Gypsy choirs’ were criticized as bogus in early twentieth-century Russia, and some authors complained about

the passing away of the gypsy song – its sad, slow, but sure decay. Another score of years and nothing will be left, not even a fleeting remembrance of it. The old field camp melodies that in the years gone by were handed down from memory, from generation to generation, clan to clan, are sung no more, and no more do faithful souls, collect, memorize and treasure them with love and care. The sentimental song of olden times is not in vogue just at present, and vain are the efforts to bring it to life again.70

Under the changed political circumstances, new expectations were set for music. Although the Roma were not the subject of any special legislative or administrative regulations, the situation of Romani musicians in the USSR changed as their immediate aristocratic sponsors were no longer able to support them. Furthermore, Romani singers became ostracized as those who had mingled with the Russian bourgeoisie and been able to afford a luxurious lifestyle. The Russian writer Alexander Kuprin (1870–1938), exposing the moral decay of his times (e.g., among the officer caste, as in his book The Duel of 1905), also looked back at signs of Romani extravagance: ‘daring escapades, elopements, scandals and famous duels’.71 Generally though, Romani musicians were accused of servility to their bourgeois sponsors. These ‘fraternal’ or even ‘comrade’ relationships, either real or imposed and produced in a very unequal, even unjust social framework, were presented as the Romani legacy of providing ‘lucrative service to the Russian host society’.72 Once treasured, in early twentieth-century Russia, the so-called ‘Gypsy choirs’ were criticized, seen as flamboyant, blasé, and ‘less and less distinguishable from their audience’,73 while their musical style was defined as ‘decadent’ and their concerts as a ‘bourgeois’ type of entertainment, little short of the ‘café-chantant’ mannerism.74 All in all, their musical traditions were pejoratively classified as manifestations of the so-called ‘Gypsyism’ [цыганщина/ tsyganshchina].

Under these circumstances, following the dispersion of their traditional clientele, several Romani singers found themselves unemployed, and had to actively seek alternative ways of securing their income. In the 1920s, some of them emigrated and ended up performing in cabarets, revues, etc., of various European cities (e.g., in Paris or Warsaw). Others continued to sing in Soviet Russia, often in smaller groups, giving concerts in factory clubs, etc., for proletarian audiences. ‘Gypsy romances’ were still sought after and widely recorded, but also enjoyed in night clubs, common rooms, etc., thus gaining the status of an urban entertainment. Under the new regime, Romani musicians transformed what formerly functioned as a ‘Gypsy craze’ into a promotion of Romani folklore once they became recognized as one of the many peoples inhabiting the

70 Kuprin, ‘On the Passing of Gypsy Song in Russia’, 407.
71 Ibid., 408.
72 Scott, The Nineteenth-Century Russian Gypsy Choir, 42.
73 Ibid.
74 Kuprin, ‘On the Passing of Gypsy Song in Russia’, 408.
USSR. The Roma often benefited from policies aimed at the preservation of different cultures and languages of the Soviet Union and quickly found state-supported jobs, for example, in Leningrad (i.e., the former St. Petersburg), where the Ethnographic Theatre was established in 1928 to propagate folkloristic awareness. In 1929, the theatre welcomed a group of about forty Romani performers, mostly stemming from acclaimed Romani musical families, therefore representing the Romani intelligentsia. Additionally, a similar initiative was undertaken in Moscow, and the Indo-Romen studio, soon transformed into the Roma Theatre, opened in 1931. It became an important centre for Romani culture in Russia, and is still in operation today. The idea of a state-supported Romani theatre originated among Romani intellectuals and, among others, one of its founders was Ivan Lebedev (1903–1991, also known as Ivan Rom-Lebedov). While focusing on Romani folklore, the Roma Theatre became home for several prominent musicians and actors of Romani origin, such as the legendary singer Lyalya Chernaya (1909–1982), born to a Romani mother and a Russian father, or the guitarist Vava Poliakov (1907–1967), Nikolai Slichenko (b. 1934), etc. Similarly, the unwavering popularity of the ‘Gypsy theme’ was capitalized on during the interwar period by Soviet cinematography: in 1935, one of the co-creators of the Roma Theatre, Moise Goldblatt (1896–1974), directed (together with Yevgeni Shneider) The Last Camp [Последний табор/Posledniy tabor]. The tradition of introducing Romani characters was, however, established already in Imperial Russia in early silent films, such as Vladimir Siversen’s Drama in a Gypsy Camp Near Moscow [Драма в таборе подмосковных цыган/Drama v tabore podmoskovnykh tsygan] (1908). Most characteristically, the popularity of ‘Gypsy choirs’ was reflected in the realm of cinematography, as the play A Living Corpse by Tolstoy was screened several times, among others by Cheslav Sabinsky in 1918, or in 1929 as a German-Russian co-production (directed by Fyodor Otsep). After the Second World War, there appeared even more films depicting Romani heroes, such as At Great Cost [Дорогой ценой/Dorogoy tsenoy] by Mark Donskoy (1957) or films by Emil Loteanu, for example The Lautars [Лаутары/Lautary] (1972), and especially Queen of the Gypsies [Табор уходит в небо/Tabor ukhodit v nebo] (1976), as well as The Gypsy [Цыган/Tsygan] by Alexander Blank (1979). These pictures became well known for their music element, especially The Lautars, Queen of the Gypsies and My Affectionate and Tender Beast, also known as A Hunting Accident [Мой ласковый и нежный зверь/Moy laskovyi i nezhnyi zver’], made in 1978 and featuring a soundtrack by Eugen Doga (b. 1937). Romani topics also permeated the Soviet cinematography of the 1980s, to mention only such films as Gypsy Happiness [Цыганское счастье/Tsyganskoye shchas’t’e] by Sergei Nikonenko (1983) or The Return of Budulay [Возвращение Будуляя/Novrashchenie Budulya] by Alexander Blank (1985), and continued to be explored after the collapse of Communism, as evidenced by Dufunya Vishnevskiy’s films: It’s My Fault [Я виноват/Ya vinovat] of 1993 with the sequel I am Guilty 2, or The Sinful Apostles of Love [Грешные апостолы любви/Greshnye apostoly lyubvi] (1995).
The tradition of ‘Gypsy choirs’ attests to the crucial role that the Romani musical presence played in public spaces of Russian cities. It can be still experienced on a daily basis in our century. Back in 2013, when I was strolling along one of the main streets of St. Petersburg, my attention was drawn to a large banner advertising a ‘Gypsy evening’ to be held in one of the local restaurants. Concerts of that kind, featuring Romani musicians, are still often organized, as the label of ‘Gypsy music’ [цыганська музыка/tsyganskaya muzyka] serves as a guarantee of quality entertainment. Its significance for Russian and Soviet culture cannot be, however, easily summarized or analyzed from a single perspective. Its significance should be read across textual sources with their different stated purposes, while the dispersed character of spaces and particular moments important for documenting the activity of Romani musicians in Russia needs to be carefully taken into account. Often misinterpreted or even silenced, the history of ‘Gypsy choirs’ and ‘tsygangschchina’ calls for further detailed studies in which voices of different backgrounds and perspectives should be incorporated for a better understanding of the phenomenon of Romani musicians as cultural agents, often acting under disadvantageous circumstances in Tsarist, Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia. While acknowledging the fact that Romani agency was the focus of various, often competing, literary and scholarly interpretations, this article ultimately attempts to show that various cultural practices, e.g. that of contestation or hybridization as related to the Romani musical presence in urban spaces, may – and should – be viewed as Romani potency.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The research for this publication is framed in the project BESTROM, financially supported by the HERA Joint Research Programme (www.heranet.info) which is co-funded by AoF, NCN, AHRC, AEI and the European Commission through Horizon 2020.

Author Biography

Anna G. Piotrowska studied musicology at the Jagiellonian University and Durham University. In her current research she focuses on the cultural aspects of musical life and the place of music in human society. Her numerous books and articles focus on the role that music plays in shaping, impacting and mirroring cultural and political contexts. Studying the issues at the intersection of musical culture and the concepts of race and ethnicity, Anna G. Piotrowska has published, among other works: Music, City and the Roma under Communism (New York 2022), From Gypsy to Bohemian (Turnhout 2021) and Gypsy Music in the European Culture (Boston 2013). Anna G. Piotrowska is a recipient of several prestigious fellowships and awards; among others, she was a Mercator Fellow in 2021 and a Fulbright Fellow in 2010. In the years 2014–2017, she took part in the Balzan Research Project Toward a Global History of Music. In the years 2019–2022 Anna G. Piotrowska was one of the principal investigators in the HERA-sponsored project Beyond Stereotypes: Cultural Exchanges and the Romani Contribution to European Public Spaces.