BOOK REVIEW

Nicholas Tochka's *Projekt Jon*

(Bloomsbury Academic, 2024)

VINCENT W.J. VAN GERVEN OEI[1]

The monograph *Projekt Jon* is the second extended engagement of ethnomusicologist Nicholas Tochka with Albanian "light music" after the publication of his first book *Audible States: Socialist Politics and Popular Music in Albania* (Oxford University Press, 2016). *Projekt Jon* has appeared in the Bloomsbury Academic series "33 1/3", which is dedicated to compact monographs exploring specific music albums, and zooms in on the eponymous album by Ardit Gjebrea, one of Albania's most popular exponents of light music, which Tochka describes as "for intellectuals the most politically significant musical form, and for listeners, the most cherished" (p. 7).

Across four chapters bookended by an Introduction and a Coda, Tochka gives a broad overview of the political-cultural context and sweeping societal changes that eventually shaped the release of *Projekt Jon* in 1998. Chapter 1 lays the groundwork, sketching out the cultural and political landscape of Albania under the communist dictatorship in the 1970s and '80s. In

[1] Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei is a publisher and philologist living and working in Tirana, Albania, since 2010.

particular, it discusses the position of light music within it, operating between "serious" or classical music and folk music, and balancing non-Albanian influences with native ones under a regime that mandated ideological purity. Questions of instrumentation, lyrics, and affect, all considered within a strictly hierarchical cultural machine, shaped Gjebrea's early career, and he was eventually able to secure a vaunted scholarship in Italy due to favorable family connections.

Chapters 2 and 3 chart the deep political shifts that occurred in the early 1990s, when multiparty democracy and rapid economic liberalization were introduced in Albania after a series of anti-government protests. These reforms both weakened the state apparatus that had controlled music production and interpretation up to that point and also contributed to the creation of a thriving black market for pirated tapes, leading to the dual collapse of the conditions that had allowed musicians to make a living as well as the ideological constraints that had presided over them. Within this new, disorienting landscape Gjebrea is able to carve out a novel place as an exemplary *kantautor* (singer-songwriter), an individualist form of author- and musicianship that heretofore had been ideologically suspect. At the same time, the ideologically determined form of light music—counterpoised with the Western pop music flooding the country—enters into a crisis. What is the current relevance of this form and how to determine its proper content under the new conditions of democracy and capitalism? We follow Gjebrea and others as they struggle with these questions and work through a variety of solutions.

Finally, Chapter 4 narrates the antecedents and events of

1997, when the complete collapse of a series of large-scale Ponzi schemes precipitated widespread social unrest and brought the country to the brink of civil war. This deeply traumatic series of events provides the background for the release of *Projekt Jon* a year later, which critics hailed as a "musical realization of *pajtim*—reconciliation" (p. 117). As Gjebrea's album included folk-musical elements from both northern and southern Albanian musical traditions, it symbolically mended the stark geographical division that had emerged during the 1997 crisis between the north and south of Albania. *Projekt Jon* was thus called upon to accomplish a *political* task, of reunifying the country into a single national whole.

This brings us to the issue that preoccupies Tochka throughout his book, namely the question of the relationship between art, in this case "light music", and politics. "Could light music serve a didactic function […]?" (p. 75), he asks. This question has consistently preoccupied Western philosophy since its beginnings. Plato, to start with, was already very much concerned with the relations between music and politics: "For a change to a new type of music is something to beware of as a hazard of all our fortunes. For the modes of music are never disturbed without unsettling of the most fundamental political and social conventions."[2] With regard to *Projekt Jon,* Tochka formulates this question as follows:

"In Albania, intellectuals had long understood songs (*këngë*)

[2] Plato, *Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969, 424c. Available at *Perseus Digital Library*, http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0059.tlg030.perseus-eng1:4.424c [last accessed: 28 September 2024].

> to be a key resource for shaping listeners into a modern, national body politic. […] So as specialists working with the 'subjectivity-forming symbolic means' of a particular social order, musicians are incredibly useful to states—but also potentially dangerous. In handling the symbolic stuff that makes us who we are, do musicians typically challenge the status quo? Or support it?" (pp. 4–5)

It is interesting to note that with regard to Gjebrea, this question remains fundamentally unanswered. In the introduction, Tochka creates a web of associations around the title *Projekt Jon*, as referencing both Gjebrea's newborn son Jon, the Ionian Sea between Albania and Italy, and the term "projection"[3]: "A projection of what—and for whom?" (p. 4), the author asks. Returning to his initial question about the nature of the "projection" of *Projekt Jon* in the Coda, Tochka concludes:

> "If a projection, then one of a modern nation-state that had retained a sense of self—at least a sense of self as conceived by the intellectuals who had long specialized in crafting the beautiful, national songs that demonstrated what it meant to look, sound, and *feel* 'Albanian'." (p. 122)

After the sweeping overview of the monumental transformations in Albanian society over two decades, this conclusion may feel somewhat anticlimactic, in the sense that limiting the "sense of self" of the "modern nation-state" to that of artistically inclined intellectuals isn't much of a nation-state's sense at all. Tochka indeed adds that *Projekt Jon* "may also be a

[3] Tochka plays here on the sonic similarity between *Projekt Jon* and the Albanian word *projeksion*. i.e., "projection".

testament to the impossibility of adapting that socialist-era project to post-socialist conditions, at least in the long run" (p. 122), but this amounts to saying that Gjebrea, with *Projekt Jon*, ran into a *qorrsokak*, a "blind alley" on the path to Albania's new music.

And yet, despite this failure in terms of esthetic direction and realigning light music with a project of civilizational statecraft, Tochka indicates that Gjebrea has managed to reinvent himself as a producer and businessman who "organizes hugely popular private singing contests and hosts television programs; his media network produces history documentaries and nostalgic cultural programs" (p. xiii). This process does not follow the "remarkably efficient means of identifying new talent" of the socialist period, implemented to locate and hone "the valuable human resources required for operating Albania's expansive cultural machinery" (p. 11), but rather recasts figures such as Gjebrea as "gatekeepers", as Tochka suggests in a recent interview.[4] Instead, Gjebrea's singing contest *Kënga Magjika* exemplifies a privatized cultural industry, where not talent, but connections and monetary interests determine winners and losers.

In this respect, *Projekt Jon* emerges as the "late", if not "final" articulation of what Albanian state music could have become, an inflection point after which the alliance between art and politics in Albania was no longer articulated in terms of an esthetics, a grounding in the national *taban* or soil as Tochka

---

[4] Daniel Petrick, "Nicholas Tochka: 'There Was No Blueprint for How to Manage Culture in a Socialist Society'", *Kosovo 2.0*, 9 May 2024, https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/nicholas-tochka-there-was-no-blueprint-for-how-to-manage-culture-in-a-socialist-society/ [last accessed: 28 September 2024].

suggests (p. 15), but in terms of the ever more complicated entanglement with the economic machinery that keeps the current Albanian narco-, I mean nation-state operational. What has increasingly become of value is not an art that *represents* the nation-state, but rather forms of art that are able to sustain and launder the money flows that traverse the country while projecting an image not of socialist modernity but of the bourgeois quasi-conceptual sensibilities that rule the neoliberal art market, keeping Albania superficially aligned with the EU's and the US' "artistically inclined intellectuals".

As such, it is relevant that in the Coda Tochka makes a tentative connection between Gjebrea and Edi Rama, Albania's current prime minister who started his political career in the aftermath of *Projekt Jon*'s release. Gjebrea is one year his senior, placing them squarely in the same "goldilocks" generation: "too young to have ascended all that high within the state's cultural hierarchy, they had nevertheless enjoyed support, training, and access to late-socialist creative networks" (p. 76). Their paths run parallel in many striking ways that Tochka only hints at. Both had strong connections to the communist ruling class. Gjebrea was the son-in-law of politburo member Besnik Bekteshi, Rama was the son of Kristaq Rama, Albania's most celebrated socialist realist sculptor. Both were able to travel outside the country when this was impossible for most. During the anti-government protests in late 1990, Gjebrea was in Italy, Rama in Greece, albeit briefly. Like Gjebrea, Rama spent much of the 1990s out of the country, in France. And like Gjebrea's, Rama's is a story of post-1997 reinvention. Whereas Gjebrea left an active career as a *kantautor* to build his media empire with *Kënga Magjike,* Rama built a political empire. Indeed, looking at Rama's career through an "ethno-artistic" lens such as Tochka's may prove valuable in the future.

With his analysis of Gjebrea's development as an artist under the socialist and post-socialist Albanian regimes, using *Projekt Jon* as a culmination point, Tochka has provided an insightful and valuable contribution not only to the study of Albanian pop music—a topic that with the elevation of Albanian-speaking musicians to international stardom will hopefully elicit more scholarly interest in the coming years—but has also given a panorama of how the complex links between art and politics developed across periods of significant rupture.

If I had to level any point of criticism at the book, I would say that it feels somewhat lopsided. Most of *Projekt Jon* looks at the conditions for the album's emergence within the Albanian cultural-political landscape, but its transformative effects on Gjebrea's career and the way in which pop music currently operates, its "icon" status (p. 6) so to say, are relegated to a few brief remarks in the Coda. This may well be a reflection of the limitations of the book series, but the fact that Tochka describes Gjebrea's career solely in terms of "state socialism" and "post-socialism" (p. 7) belies perhaps a failure to recognize that 1997 was at least as substantial a rupture as 1990 before it. And perhaps this is the reason why Tochka's initial question, "In handling the symbolic stuff that makes us who we are, do musicians typically challenge the status quo? Or support it?" remains in the end unanswered, for this would require a full study of the art and political economy of post-1997 Albania, a project that is yet to come.