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Rumen Sirakov – the master of the “poor piano”. The performing technique of Rumen Sirakov

Abstract:

The problems related to the cultural heritage, in particular to the Bulgarian musical folklore, excite a large part of the scientists in Bulgaria. The performing art of the masters of folk instruments has been the subject of constant interest and research since the beginning of the 21st century in Bulgaria. In this case the unique performing art of one of the best tambourine performers in Bulgaria is presented. Rumen Sirakov is an emblem of the most perfect playing of the Bulgarian tambourine. He is defined as the ancestor of the national performing style of playing. His instrumental legacy is enormous. His compositions are a clear proof of his exceptional talent. Created on the basis of a number of folk songs, enriched with his improvisations, they become classic tambourine pieces. Rumen Sirakov’s performing art is highly valued not only in Bulgaria, but also far beyond its borders. His connoisseurs are the world-famous manager Joe Boyd, George Harrison, Eric Clapton, Kate Bush.

Keywords:

Bulgarian folklore, cultural heritage, musical performance, pedagogic practice.

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Академия за музикално, танцово и изобразително изкуство

“Проф. Асен Диамандиев” – Пловдив

Румен Сираков – майстора на “сиромашкото пиано”. Изпълнителската техника Румен Сираков

Резюме:

Проблемите, свързани с културното наследство, в частност с българския музикален фолклор, вълнуват голяма част от учените в България. Изпълнителното изкуство на майсторите на народни инструменти е обект на постоянен интерес и изследване още от началото на ХХ век в България. В случая е представено уникалното изпълнителско изкуство на един от най-добрите изпълнители на тамбура в България. Румен Сираков е емблема на най-съвършеното свирене на българска тамбура. Той е определян като родоначалник на националния изпълнителски маниер на свирене. Инструменталното му наследство е огромно. Композициите му са ярко доказателство за изключителният му талант. Създадени на основата на редица народни песни, обогатени с импровизациите му, те стават класически пиеси за тамбура. Изпълнителското изкуство на Румен Сираков е високо оценено не само в България, но и далеч зад нейните граници. Негови ценители са световно известният мениджър Джо Бойд, Джордж Харисън, Ерик Клептън, Кейт Буш.

Ключови думи: български фолклор, културно наследство, музикално изпълнителство, педагогическа практика.

Introduction

The tambura player, Rumen Sirakov, was among the emblematic Bulgarian folk musicians, with whom the contemporary processes in the development of the instrument tambura are connected, as well as the formation and establishing of a novel performer's style, with which he changed the traditional tambura playing in Bulgaria. As early as his birth, Rumen Sirakov was destined to be devoted to music. He was born on October, 1st, 1943, in a family of extraordinary singers and musical performers in the beautiful Bulgarian village of Blateshnitsa, which is located at the foot of the Risha Mountain. This old medieval village was mentioned by the same name even in the chrysobull Mrachka Gramota, which the Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Alexander bestowed in 1347 to the Monastery “Saint Nicola”. The village itself is located 75 kilometers west of Sofia.



Figure 1. The photo of Rumen Sirakov

This region is known in Bulgarian folkloristics as the Shopluk. It spans through the whole of Western Bulgaria and not a small part of the lands in Serbia and is divided into the Large Shopluk and the Small Shopluk. The shopi are the creators of a unique folklore, known for its wild and temperamental dances, the famous throughout the world shopi two-voice singing, the yunak (markovski) epic songs.



Figure 2. The region Shopluk

In such a region and environment, Rumen Sirakov spent the first years of his life – with the songs of his grandmother, the playing of his grandfather, with the wild village square horos.

The father of Rumen Sirakov was the renowned performer of gnaoian songs, Pavel Sirakov, who was from a long-line of masters of folk instruments. The gnaoian songs are characteristic for this region, distinguished by a unique vibrato of the voice.

Rumen Sirakov began playing an instrument from a young age - in the beginning - on penny whistles and flutes, later on – on mandolin, accordion and guitar, and, lastly – on the tambura. That instrument became the favorite one of Rumen and he called it affectionately the “poor man’s piano”, since the tambura is not only a melodic, but also a harmonious instrument. As young as 17 years old, he became an orchestra player in the Orchestra of Folk Music at the Bulgarian National Radio.

Together with the kaval player, Stoyan Velichkov, and the gadulka player, Mihail Marinov, at the end of the 1960’s, he created the instrumental group “Trakiyska Troyka”. In the mid 1980’s, “Trakiyska Troyka”, together with Trio “Bulgarka” formed the band “Balkana”. Produced by Joe Boyd, this formation, featuring Rumen Sirakov, showcased Bulgarian folk music on hundreds of concerts abroad (USA, Australia, Western Europe).

The instrumental heritage of Rumen Sirakov is immense. His author’s instrumental pieces are a bright proof of his incredible talent. Created on the basis of songs, enhanced by his improvisations, they became classical pieces for tambura. The performer’s art of Rumen Sirakov is highly praised not only in our country, but far beyond the borders of Bulgaria, as well. Among his appreciators are the world-famous manager Joe Boyd, George Harrison, Eric Clapton, and Kate Bush.

The present study has for a goal to clarify the performance problems in tambura playing, which are related to the tambura technique of Rumen Sirakov. These problems clarify some questions, connected to traditional and modern techniques, which define the characteristic and specific aspects of Rumen Sirakov’s style.

On an empirical and theoretical level, there are expansive publications, which give a clear idea of the origin, structure, technical capabilities and regional distribution of the Bulgarian folk musical instruments, but not of instrumental technique as a phenomenon, which forms the manner of playing in different regions of distribution of the instrument, passed on and enriched by generations of tambura players.

All of this defines in general terms the SUBJECT OF STUDY of the present work – the instrumental technique of Rumen Sirakov. The OBJECT of the study is derived from the above and consists in:

- The specific methods, through which the performance is achieved;

- The performance of ornaments, which are an essential part of tambura playing.

Thus “formed” is the GOAL OF THE STUDY, namely: description, defining, ways of writing and methods of performing the elements, which comprise the performer’s technique of Rumén Sirakov. Special attention is paid to their combining, place and way of usage.

To achieve the goal, the specific completion of several important TASKS is needed:

- A description of the “mechanics”, or that combination of movements of the fingers of the left hand and the movement of the plectrum (the pick) in the right hand, through which R. Sirakov realizes his performer’s activity;
- An extensive analysis of the ornaments and their technical performance when playing, in accordance to specific methods (seeking analogies with such, used in other peoples and related to the tambura classical instruments).

1. Information about the tambura

According to written records, the *tambura* was known to ancient peoples as early as the sixteenth millennium BC (Ancient Egypt), so it is one of the oldest musical instruments, known in the history of music and archeology. Tamburas, images of which can be found rather often on the ancient monuments, *have always almost the same shape - with two or three pairs of strings and are played with a plectrum.* The wide spread of the tambura among different peoples from the Near, Middle and Far East show that it is one of the oldest instruments, known to the ancient peoples.

Even in the past, the tambura was an instrument with universal usage in various musical activities. It was used for solo instrument performances, as well as for accompaniment, but mostly for ritual purposes – the playing of varied hymns, at the coronation of tsars, etc. This statement is confirmed by the fact that this instrument is depicted in the ancient Egyptian pyramids, accompanying the pharaoh in his last journey. It is all described in the ancient Egyptian scrolls and the cult drama “*The Lament for Osiris*”, where in the remarks by the playwright from three thousand years ago, it is written that the sound of a tambura should be hurt after each verse.

In Bulgaria, the instrument exists with its two names – *tambura* and *bulgariya*. The first historian to find the specific characteristics of the *bulgariya* (the Bulgarian tambura) was the French man, Guillaume André Villoteau. He introduced into scientific literature the definition “tambur bulgary”. The small four-string bulgariya from the middle of the

19th century, described by Villoteau, was found not only in the Rhodopes, but also in the Pirin Region, where it was known by the name “bulgare”.

The French historian, Rasinet, found and described a small tambura with four strings with the Algerian people, known under the name tambur bulgari, which the author considered to be of Bulgarian origin.

The French musical historian, F.J. Fetis also studied the Bulgarian tambura and came to the conclusion that it is not of Arabian origin, since its intervals are diatonic and chromatic on each string, i.e., halftones and whole tones, and there are no quarter tones, characteristic to Arabian music. This has been confirmed also by Bulgarian organologists in all their field research.

With the creation of the modern orchestras of folk music, formed with typical Bulgarian folk instruments, the tambura underwent various changes in its construction and its tuning. This led to an expansion of the functions of the instrument, to the unification of its tuning and to the elimination of the different tunings of the tambura in the separate regions. Contemporary tamburas have:

- a metal tuning peg mechanism (holds perfectly the musical temperament);
- metal frets (24 metal frets, embedded in the fretboard and meticulously aligned to create a chromatic scale);
- sound hole on the soundboard (on the front and larger, with a diameter of about 4-5 cm);
- a metal saddle, placed on the bridge, for stronger and more metal sound;
- tuning in unison (e¹, h, g, d);
- steel strings, made with different thickness;
- unification of the size of the crafted tamburas (length and size of the body, fingerboard, etc.).

All of these improvements have a significant role in the technique for playing, in regards to the sound production, timber capabilities, acoustics and other.

Today, there are two variants of the contemporary tambura:

- **six-string tambura** – with three courses of doubled strings with a tuning: g¹, d¹, a and d¹, a, e. These variants of the tambura are at the core of the folk orchestra of Ensemble “Pirin”.
- **eight-string tambura** – with four courses of doubled strings with a tuning: e¹, h, g, d. This is the most widely spread variant of the modern tambura, used in ensembles and folk orchestras, and is what Rumén Sirakov played.

2. Performance technique of Rumen Sirakov

The instrumental performance art is among those phenomena in folklore, which are distinguished by accelerated rates of change – not only between the different generations of musicians, but also within the span of a single lifetime. Along with keeping with tradition, instrumentalists, to a varying degree, have a sense for innovation in music, they are prone to showing creativity, to developing an improvisation-variation style of performance. This is observed in most of the specific region studies of instrumental music from different areas in the country.

In the years after 1935, with the creation of the first instrumental groups for Bulgarian folk instruments at Radio Sofia (Bistrishka Chetvorka, Trakiiska Troyka, Ugarchinskata Grupa and others), the tambura had an important place in the bands as an accompanying and less often as a solo instrument, without its tonal and technical capabilities being used to their fullest. Only when the orchestra of Bulgarian folk instruments was formed, the tambura, in its modern variant, took its designated place.

The first distinguished traditional players of tambura, using the full melodic, harmonic and technical capabilities of the instrument, formed a characteristic performance style through different skills and methods. Its creation was set forth by two things:

- a) the technical capabilities of the instrument (including innovations, changes, etc.), which are an explicit condition for the creation of specific methods of playing;
- b) the personality of the performer:
 - creative taste, sense, creativity, innovation;
 - transition of experience, borrowed from other instruments;
 - keeping in line with traditional playing of the older performers and introduction of innovations by their successors.

The greater possibility of personal expression of the performers maintained in them the strife for personal improvement and this became an essential factor for a competition in achieving “*improvements*” in folklore music. In such a way, traditional musical models were changed, updated, transformed to a different quality. In particular, these processes helped for the development of the tambura playing and led to the appearance of the so called “*Shopi*” tambura style, whose founder was the famous instrumentalists, Rumen Sirakov. At present, this tendency is rather well pronounced and helps for the technical development of the music for tambura.

When playing the tambura, Rumen Sirakov used a large set of methods and ornaments, very often in complex combinations among them. Here, I will review in detail a large part of the performance techniques and ornaments, used by the master.

Drones. This method is characteristic of all folk instruments. It is found in the playing of gadulka, bagpipe, kaval, whistle and others. It is an approach that has gathered popularity among players. The name of the method – “drone” (“*podlagane*” in Bulgarian – *laying a basis*) – gives an idea of the role the player assigns to it – the usage of a specific tone for stabilizing the scale. *Droning* is the oldest and most characteristic method in tambura playing; it is used especially often by the old master tambura players. The performers “drone” on the open first string (there are cases of droning on the 2nd, 3rd, or on the 4th string, as well). In tambura playing, this “drone” is at an interval of a perfect fourth, a perfect fifth or an octave below the tonic, but it is especially pronounced in the scale with one drone tone, with which the first string is at an interval of a perfect fourth higher than the second string. The reasons for “droning” with an open first string can be different. The aim is to:

- achieve a sound effect and a saturation of the melody;
- create a rhythmic texture plan;
- create a rhythmized second drone tone;
- technical convenience, when moving the left hand to a higher or a lower position, etc.

Regardless of the reasons of using an open string: for convenience when changing the position of the hand or purely a phonic effect, this method is very characteristic and often used. The below examples illustrate a drone on the 1st (e¹) and the 2nd (h) string.



Figure 3. From “Tsonino Horo”



Figure 4. From “Zemenska Rachenitsa”



Figure 5. From “Festive Horo”

The above examples give an idea of the drone effect on the 1st and 2nd strings. Very rarely, *droning* of the shown type is performed on the 3rd (g) and the 4th (d) strings.

Lately, young tambura players have been using this approach, performing it, skipping one string. In this way, they avoid the ringing of the open string, and the achieved tone is softer, but in some aspects – duller, as well.

Silencing (*Zahlupvane*) (muting) – stopping the sounding of the string, with a slight touching of the string, usually with the 3rd or 4th finger, which produces an overtone from the rest, open strings. This results in the characteristic “*ringing*”. This new to the tambura method is taken from the instrumental practice of gadulka and kaval playing, more specifically from the Thrace instrumental style, but it’s found also in guitar playing. Some folk players called it also “*haltsane*” (*hiccupping*), “*klepane*”, “*klepchene*”. The place of the *silencing* is marked with a note, whose head is in the form of an (x) at the place of the tone, which we silence (mute).



Figure 6. From “Festive Horo”



Figure 7. From “Kyustendilsko Horo”



Figure 8. From “Breznishka Rachenitsa”

Finger substitution. This method is used in the playing of all string instruments (both classical and folk). In tambura, it consists in replacing a finger on a single segment between the frets, without reducing the finger pressure. This is an often-used method in the instrumental practice of Rumen Sirakov, who borrowed this method from the instrumental practice of gadulka players. He applied this new to the tambura practice method, when there was a sequence of two identical tones and its performance was done only with a replacing the 1st with the 2nd finger within a single segment between frets. Rumen Sirakov also used often this method, because of its sounding, reminiscent of the lower mordent ornament. This type of *substitution* is marked with the symbol \sphericalangle , which means that the performance of the *substitution* begins with the 1st finger, replaced in the repetition of the tone by the 2nd finger.



Figure 9. From “Ihtimansko Horo”



Figure 10. From “Zemenska Rachenitsa”



Figure 11. From “Zemenska Rachenitsa”

In some cases, *substitution* is also use for the change in position of the hand. These cases of usage of the method are marked with the symbol \square , and the fingering must be indicated. This technical approach has a great application in the performer’s practice. Due to its specifics, it is preferred for quicker passages. On the other hand, produced at a strong metrical beat, the method underlines the rhythmic pattern of the melody and provides greater clarity of the sound.

Slide. This is a method, used in string instruments. It is found also in the playing of folk instruments, close to the tambura – oud and bouzouki. *Slide* is relatively new method in tambura performance and it has been borrowed from the gadulka practice. Its usage is observed not only in string folk instruments, but also in classical instruments (violin, guitar). This method could be likened to the *portamento*. It's marked with a small arrow (\rightarrow), written over the note, from which the technique starts. When performing this technique, one of the fingers, at specific tone sequences, slides and presses the neighboring upper or lower segment between frets, without decreasing the pressure from the finger, before the next tone of the melodic sequence is played. It is used, when there is an ascending or descending movement in the melody or transitions from the 1st to the 2nd string, respectively – 2nd to 3rd, etc. This method is applied very often in the performances of Rumen Sirakov, and as an imitation – by all younger tambura performers. Varied ornaments are performed with it, as well, for example – mordent (short trill), lower mordent, nachschlag, vorschlag.



Figure 12. From “Festive Rachenitsa”



Figure 13. From “Paydushko Horo”



Figure 14. From “Graovska Rachenitsa”

Double neck. An instrumental method, known from other instruments. It consists in the performance of two voices. In the tambura, it is characterized by the performance of two tones with one stroke of the pick (always Π), when the melody moves, most often, from one string to the next one (from 1st to 2nd; from 2nd to 3rd). Double neck is performed most often with the 2nd and 3rd finger. It is marked by a

small note, written above the note, together with which the tone, located at a major second, minor third or major third tone, is played.



Figure 15. From “Paydushko Horo”



Figure 16. From “Megdansko Horo”



Figure 17. From “Grancharsko Horo”

This new to the tambura instrument practice method is very characteristic to the performer’s manner of Rumen Sirakov. Under his influence, many tambura players from the younger generation apply double neck, when they play. An example of double neck is observed also when moving from the 2nd to the 1st string. Then, sounding together with the 2nd string is the open 1st string. It is marked with a small note, written under the note, together with which the open 1st string is played.



Figure 18. From “Graovska Rachenitsa”



Figure 19. From “Krivo Horo”

Tapping – performing a tone from a melodic sequence in ascending direction, without the usage (stroke) of the plectrum. The tapping on the string is brisk, after which the finger is held (pinned down) for a moment to the fingerboard, according to the value of the performed note. The sound is weaker, duller, but tenderer. It is performed with the 2nd, 3rd or 4th finger at an interval of from minor second up to major sixth, depending on the melody. It is marked by the symbol $\hat{\text{T}}$, written above the note.



Figure 20. From “Breznishka Rachenitsa”



Figure 21. From “Dzhagarsko Horo”

Most popular in Bulgarian folk music are the trill-like ornaments, through which a specific tone of the melody is enhanced in the most natural way. On the other hand, from a technical stand point, they are the easiest to perform. Very often the original trill-like ornaments not only enhance, but also built the melodic line.

The oldest and most often used ornament for enhancing long note values or with repetitions of the same tone, when playing the tambura, is the *pralltriller*. In almost all cases, when it is performed, the closest upper tone stands at a **half-tone** from the root tone. This way of performing is characteristic to the instrumental practice of folk players, while, in the tambura performance, it is most natural to use the closest upper segment between frets, located at a half-tone from the ornamented one. For this reason, a accidental mark is not placed over the symbol for pralltriller.



Figure 22. From “Blateshnichka Kopanitsa”



Figure 23. From "Vasilovska Kopanitsa"



Figure 24. From "Gankino Horo"



Figure 25. From "Didinata"



Figure 26. From "Kyustendilsko Horo"

Another very characteristic ornament in the performer's manner of Rumen Sirakov and for playing melodies from the Shopi Region on the tambura is the *lower mordent*. It can be performed also with the 2nd and 3rd fingers, while the very good players can also use the 3rd and 4th fingers.



Figure 27. From "Chetvorno horo"



Figure 28. From "Praznichna rachenitsa"



Figure 29. From “Kyustendilsko Horo”



Figure 30. From “Radomirska Rachenitsa”



Figure 31. From “Radomirsko Horo”

Nachsschlag. An ornament, relatively rarely used in tambura playing. Its usage could be found mostly in the performance technique of Rumen Sirakov and some of his students.



Figure 32. From “Radomirsko Horo”



Figure 33. From “Tsonino Horo”



Figure 34. From “Galabovska Kapanitsa”

The nachschlag could be performed also with the sliding method and is marked with the symbol for slide →.

Discussion

The current study on the performance style of Rumen Sirakov raises the problem of preserving a unique heritage that has been preserved and developed over the years. It is an emanation of the performing manner of playing the Bulgarian tambura in different folklore regions in Bulgaria. The tambura instrument that exists in our country has its similar variants in a number of countries in Asia and Europe, but mainly in the countries of the Balkan region. This gives a starting point for the study of the performing manner of playing similar or similar to the Bulgarian tambourine instruments.

Conclusions

The contribution of Rumen Sirakov to the development of the tambura playing style can be summarized in several general moments, namely that he ***established changes*** in a relation to:

a) ***the posture of the right hand*** – all old performers do not lay the right hand on the soundboard of the tambura, but held slightly the body of the instrument with the elbow of the right arm. This posture is kept by all players in the Pirin Region and has a significant importance for their way of playing. The movement of the plectrum is with a wide amplitude of the wrist, together with the forearm.

The right hand of Rumen Sirakov is laid on the tailpiece, the soft part of the palm slightly touches the “*bridge*” of the tambura, while the movement of the plectrum comes only from the wrist. Many of the young performers are taught this posture of the hand in the musical academies and schools for secondary education.

b) ***grip of the plectrum with the right hand*** – all old performers and representatives of the Pirin Region style of playing hold the plectrum with the thumb and index finger of the right hand, while only in certain moments using the ring finger for support.

Rumen Sirakov and the tambura players of his school hold the plectrum with three fingers: thumb, index and middle finger, which leads to softening the tone.

c) ***4th finger of the left hand*** – all old musicians (with very few exceptions) do not use this finger.

From a young age, Rumen Sirakov included in a skillful manner the usage of the 4th finger. This explains the great freedom of playing and the performing of technically complex passages in his pieces.

d) *specifics of the movements of the plectrum:*

When playing, R. Sirakov moved the plectrum, underlying the three-beat groups in the irregular meters, while, in $2/4$, he broke each fourth into a triplet, while each triplet started with a downward movement of the plectrum, which provides a certain style of playing. For all performers from the Pirin Region, the movement of the plectrum is only downwards and upwards and they do not play in triplet groups.

In general sense, the content of the study meets the set task – **clarification** of problems, related to the specific manner of playing of Rumen Sirakov. In these problems, the following semantic aspects are focused:

- ornaments in playing the tambura;
- substantial differences, regarding the posture (observed in different performers, as well as in the performance practice of different regions);
- specification of the differences, related to the characteristic performer's techniques of Rumen Sirakov (traditional and modern, taken from other instruments) – the name of the methods (some – popular, while others – introduced and representing a terminological apparatus in the catalogue of terms for performance technique); graphic representation (new), which gives an accurate indication for their performance. Some of them concern the performance of the ornaments, which represents a subtopic of the present study;
- presentation of the problem of ornaments in playing the tambura: description – technical characteristics.

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