

Beyond the Words: Framing Non-Verbal Aspects in the Performance of Songs with *Lahuta*

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Abstract

Scholars in epic studies has long recognized the relevance of various elements in epic singing that go beyond the verbal “poem”. But even though a shift from text to voice and from voice to singing has already occurred, a voice-centered approach persists in the field. In this article, I aim to tilt the perspective from (sung) voice to non-verbal aspects such as timbre, instrumental technique, and gesturality, highlighting how they relate to the voice and to one another. Balkan repertoire of songs with *lahuta/gusle* will be taken as a case study, relating the impact of classical studies to new fieldwork data. The specific case of Kosovar singer Isa Elezi-Lekëgjekaj will be discussed in detail, and used as a model for mapping the non-verbal aspects of epic singing.

Oltre le parole. Gli aspetti non verbali nella performance dell'epica eroica col lahuta. L'importanza dei vari elementi del canto epico che vanno oltre il testo verbale è stata da lungo tempo riconosciuta dagli studiosi. Benché si siano già verificate rilevanti inversioni di prospettiva – che hanno spostato il focus prima sulla voce anziché sul testo, e poi sul “cantare” anziché sulla voce – quest'ultima rappresenta ancora l'elemento di maggior interesse. In questo articolo si intende superare tale centralità, rivolgendo l'attenzione sugli aspetti non verbali come il timbro, la tecnica strumentale e la gestualità, evidenziandone il rapporto con la voce e le loro reciproche interrelazioni. Si affronterà come caso di studio il repertorio balcanico dell'epica eroica accompagnata dal lahuta/gusle, mettendo in relazione l'impatto degli studi classici con nuovi dati raccolti sul campo. Il caso del cantore kosovaro Isa Elezi-Lekëgjekaj verrà discusso in dettaglio, e impiegato come modello per tracciare una mappa degli aspetti non verbali del canto epico.

1. Listening to Epic-Making

In June 2018, I had the opportunity to accompany Nicola Scaldaferrì to Kosovo,¹ to work with Isa Elezi-Lekëgjekaj,² one of today's most acknowledged epic singers in Albanian language.³ During my first encounter with him my Albanian was limited to a fistful of words. As such, his performance of the *Kënga Martesa e Halilit* (*Song of Halil's Wedding*) could only be understood by me for its performative, not lexical, import. Thus freed from the obligation and ability to follow the narrative he was presenting, I was able to turn my attention to how he was singing, moving, and playing the *lahuta* – a one-stringed, long-necked, bowed instrument also known, in the Serbo-Croatian tradition, as the *gusle*.

What could reasonably be understood as an “impaired listening” condition – given my inability to understand Albanian – rather impelled me to consider elements of epic singing that are often overlooked when epic singing can be fully perceived as a sort of storytelling, in which a narration is presented to an audience by means of a singing voice. Although I could sense that within this tradition «words are foregrounded, music backgrounded» (Elmer and Bonifazi 2012: 298), I found myself at a unique vintage point from which to consider epic performance – that is to say, not as a sub-genre of poetry or the “language arts”, but as a primarily *musical* genre. As such, my critical attention was drawn to what Georg Herzog has called the “essential simplicity of its basic materials” – here, a repeated melodic formula, doubled by the *lahuta*, on which the verses were sung – alongside the «pulsing quality of life achieved through an abundance of expressive devices, including [melodic] ornamentation» (Herzog 1951a: XIII).

What, this article asks, does it mean to analyze epic singing beyond – or without regard to – its narrative import? This radical approach may, in fact, help reveal what more traditional, logocentric analyses have often left out. Such a perspective may also reveal how both scholars and musical performers conceptualize and describe epic performance, allowing us to put forward a methodological framework with which to complement textual analysis.

This discussion will be substantiated with examples from a specific repertoire: the *këngë kreshnikësh* (“songs of heroes” or “songs of the frontier warriors”), a genre of Albanian epic in Geg dialect of which Isa Elezi-Lekëgjekaj is one of today's most accomplished performers. Though this focus of this article is clearly derived from my own personal experiences, I will also discuss epic singing with the *lahuta/gusle* more generally in order to arrive at broader theoretical observations. This is not to nullify distinctions between Albanian epic and Slavic epic behind the «mere consideration of the manner of perfor-

¹ I owe special thanks to Nicola Scaldaferrì for introducing me to epic performance and for encouraging me to consider my limitations as an opportunity for a different mode of understanding. I am also grateful to the two anonymous readers for their suggestions that helped to refine my thinking. A final thanks goes to Henry Stoll for patiently proofreading this text.

² Isa Muriqi in civil records, born 1947.

³ For more information on the context of that fieldwork, see Nicola Scaldaferrì's article in this same volume.

mance» (Scaldaferri 2021a: 15), but rather to trace some recurring patterns that *scholars* applied (or could have applied) to both traditions, and that are relevant to the issues that I will discuss.⁴ Further investigations into repertoires and epics from other geographical contexts will surely provide new case studies to apply the approaches and observations made here.

The first necessity of a non-verbal approach to epic studies is to understand epic as a *performative* genre, created by performers during specific performative events, and co-constructed with audiences – both physical and imaginary – to whom the genre is oriented. The performative process is a wider flow which not only encapsulates its public outcomes (the performative events), but also a journey that unfolds through private practices. Private practices are sub-processes without which the essence of performance as something «*repeated, repetitive, and restored*»⁵ (L. Gratch and A. Gratch 2022: 137, emphasis original) is simply impossible to achieve. Although a critical discussion of these practices is absent even in the most recent literature on epic (see Karl Reichl’s pivotal book *The Oral Epic: From Performance to Interpretation*) – it is obvious that performers rehearse before facing their audiences and, more generally, “live” what they do by even reflecting on their practical experience. The performative process does not begin when the *lahutar* (or player of the *lahuta*) sits down and begins playing; rather, it emerges every time he is socially understood – and, on the other side, every time he self-identifies – as a performer.

Understanding epic as performance – as both the intertwine of processes and practices, and a product/event – leads to review some of the most classical concepts in epic studies. The first is the relation between the practice (epic singing) and the objects it revolves around (songs). In a traditional view, epics necessitate songs, for there cannot be epic without something of which to sing. Whether fixed in writing or composed anew in performance, the epic is no more than its songs. This same dynamic can be observed in Western art music, in which musical works – in this case, music codified into notation – are “enacted” by performers. By moving from “epic as song” to “epic as performance”, I adopt some positions taken during the so-called performative turn in historical musicology.⁶ The most consequential of these, for the present purposes, comes from Christopher Small’s well-known book *Musicking* (1998), in which the work-performer relationship, as conventionally understood, was turned on its head. Appropriating (and adapting) Small’s observations to the domain of epics, «[epic] performance does not exist in order to present musical works [i.e. epic songs], but rather, musical works [i.e. epic songs] exist

⁴ The debate about the relationship between the two repertoires has been long, intense, and inevitably complicated by many cultural and political factors. Bibliography spans from Cordignano 1943, vol. 1, to Skendi 1954, and has received a recent overview in Neziri 2006 and 2008, and Neziri and Sinani 2016. See also Scaldaferri 2021a: 15, 35n.

⁵ Gratch’s expression conveniently distills many foundational ideas in performance theory, including Schechner 1985: 36, and Roach 1996: 29.

⁶ A deliberate reference to one of the most influential essays in this field – *Beyond the Score. Music as Performance* (2013) – is made in the title of this article.

in order to give [epic] performers something to perform» (Small 1998: 20). Therefore, the concept of epic (as music) survives as a posthumous conceptualization of a living practice that we might call “epic-making” – a direct calque of “music-making”.

Besides inverting the song-singer relationship, my focus on a more global idea of epic-making (i.e. one that exceeds verbal matter) also demands that one puts aside the very notion of the “epic singer”. Though commonly accepted, such a formulation (the “epic singer”) prioritizes the presence of musical works (i.e. the epic songs) over the musical capacities, and identities, of the performer – he plays an instrument, he can dictate the poem, and in private occasions, he also recites the verses while walking.⁷ In the case of this repertoire, “epic singers” do not, in fact, self-identify as such. Rather, they prefer to present themselves as *lahutar* (Ahmedaja 2012: 101), as players of the *lahuta*, thereby distancing themselves from the act of singing.⁸ As such, I prefer to speak of a more general “epic performer”, to reinforce my distancing from a logocentric view of this genre.

In order to tilt that sort of pyramidal structure that had long placed “the words” on the top of epic performance, I will resort to a linguistic escamotage, that is defining *non-verbal aspects* a complex of many different elements that, experiencing epic singing, are not perceived as words, or better to say as *semantically-identifiable auditory streams*. The latter expression helps to prevent some misunderstandings and places my understanding of verbal elements within a precise theoretical framework. First of all, “semantically-identifiable” denotes every sonic unity that can be perceived as carrying linguistic meaning, even if the recipient is not able to understand or specify it.

I deliberately draw here on Albert S. Bregman’s studies on auditory perception and on his definition of the “auditory stream” as «our perceptual grouping of the parts of the neural spectrogram that go together» (Bregman 1990: 9). An auditory stream is what we mentally represent and objectify as a grouping of sound events related to a physical happening. It is the result of what we mentally do when parsing an auditory input made of multiple sounds unfolding through time, as we recognize one or more sonic objects (be them words, pitches, etc.) in it. For instance, «[a] soprano singing with a piano accompaniment» (*ibidem*: 10) can be an auditory stream that we identify over the other sounds we hear in a concert hall, but one that can also be subdivided into two distinct streams. However, Bregman specifies, «it is not sufficient that these clusters of properties be distinct in the physical happenings around us. *They must also be assigned by our brains to distinct mental entities.* [...] [A]uditory streams are ways of putting the sensory information together» (*ibidem*: 11, emphasis mine), according to individual or shared conventions and abilities. For the purposes of our investigation, we will assign to verbal

⁷ As in the case of Isa Elezi, as described by Nicola Scaldaferrri in this same volume. See also Scaldaferrri 2021b: 83-84.

⁸ Alternatively, singers may identify themselves as *rapso*d (rhapsodist) – that is, singers who perform *rap-sodi*, the generic name for the songs that makes up the whole repertoire of the songs with *lahuta* (Ahmedaja 2012: 103).

elements with semantic meaning the status of an auditory stream *per se*, thus bracketing the relationship that exists between “words” and “music”.

Although it is not uncommon to present transcriptions of the verses sung in an epic performance as “pure” written texts,⁹ the relevance of music to the construction of meaning appears so obvious as to be taken for granted. Georg Herzog’s findings that «through the musical performance itself, and through the disposition of the various musical motifs, the song attains and at the same time reveals a structure which the poem as text does not have» (Herzog 1951b: 63) has now been applied to the extent that melody has been recognized as a means through which «the performer [has to] ambiguously [intrude] into a character’s emotional state», and «a primary channel of communication» (Elmer and Bonifazi 2012: 308).¹⁰ Nevertheless, music (singing, in this case) does not only involve all voiced elements with verbal meaning (i.e. the sung words), but also precisely represents the element that ties verbal and non-verbal aspects, and that works as a “litmus paper” to let the latter emerge.

Before delving deeper into this line of thinking, I believe it is worth exploring some of the historical reasons why these non-verbal elements have received so little scholarly attention. In order to do so, I will briefly touch on the genealogy of Balkan epic singing research.

2. Shadows Behind the Words

There are both ideological and technological reasons for the privileging of poetry in epic studies, with the two being always intertwined to a degree as to prevent the identification of a cause-effect relationship. It goes without saying that writing down the verses the *lahutar* sang or recited was the only form of preservation possible before the advent of recording.¹¹ But even when the latter became a viable possibility – however technically complex and costly – scholars like Milman Parry and Albert Lord could do no more than try to harmonize the objective limitations of their technology with their research goals, which was to examine the oral epic as a “living fossil” – or surviving counterpart – of Homeric *poetry*.

As we learn from the account of Parry’s pupil Albert Lord in his preface to the collection *Serbo-croatian Heroic Songs*,

[a]fter experimenting with it [a “Parlograph” recorder] he [Parry] wrote: «The singing, which itself brings out the vowels and obscures the consonants, was completely drowned out

⁹ Perhaps more useful than summarizing what is a long and rich bibliography – enriched today by digital resources like the repository *Albanian Epics* (<<https://albanian-oral-epics.org/>>, accessed: 14th October 2022) – it is worth noting specific editorial projects that advocate using the printed word as a means to preserve oral repertoires. One such example is the series *Epika Legjendare e Rugovës* (*Legendary Epics of Rugova*) edited by Zymer U. Neziri (Prishtinë: Instituti Albanologjik i Prishtinës), begun in 1997 and still ongoing.

¹⁰ Additional publications on melodic aspects and their relationship to text include: Bartók and Lord 1951, 1978; Erdely 1995; Neziri and Scaldaferrri 2016; Scaldaferrri 2021b.

¹¹ See Ahmedaja 2012: 106-109 for an historical overview of transcriptions of Albanian repertoire.

by the sound of the *gusle*. It was only when I had an electrical phonographic apparatus with a device for cutting down the low frequencies of the vowels and of the *gusle* and a high-pitched microphone which could be placed near the singer's mouth and directed away from the head of the *gusle* that I was able to get *transcribable* recordings». (Parry *et al.* 1954: 7, emphasis mine)

Parry's testimony is crucial to understanding what kind of recording – and the recording *of what* – we are listening to when we resort to those historical sources. His aim was clear: to obtain recordings of the verbal text that could be later written down for study purposes. Yet to do so, he had to devise a strategy to sonically privilege, under technologically unfavorable conditions, the artifact he wished most to preserve. Paradoxically, what most confounded him in his quest was the performer himself, as the timbres of his voice and *gusle* so blended as to obscure the words of the text. In so doing, Parry's early recording device unintentionally revealed a crucial feature of singing with the *gusle/labuta*, to which I will return below.

In addition to that, we must consider that Parry never recorded the songs within their traditional performative setting,¹² but rather placed performers in front of a then-foreign microphone, surely a sterile context when compared to a gathering of men in the *oda*, the larger room of the house used to receive guests. We can thus conclude that he never succeeded in recording the *actual* performances of epic songs, but rather a series of simulated performances of specific ontological entities culturally accepted as “epic songs”. As such, besides their crucial historical value, these recordings can be seen as implicit statements of *what was epic* for Parry-recordist, namely a genre in which, to paraphrase the earlier citation, «*words needed to be foregrounded, music backgrounded*».

It is no surprise, then, that non-verbal elements tended to fade out also from the musical transcriptions of this same collection of recordings, which were essentially meant to reveal both how sophisticated the musical aspects were in epic performance, and the structural relevance that music played in the process of “composing in performance” (Lord 1960: 17). Though working on different repertoires and with different attitudes, Béla Bartók and, later, Stephen Erdely attempted to transcribe Parry's recordings. Ethnomusicologist Erdely (1995) opted for a thorough transcription of three Southslavic epic songs from Bosnia,¹³ practicing a certain degree of simplification in order to let the “big-picture” of the text-music relationship appear more easily. Doing so, he eventually revealed in all its evidence Lord's alleged assumption that «the story itself must have a

¹² I prefer the term *setting* over *context*, adopting Karl Reichl's sketch of a model for the ethnography of communication in epics studies (Reichl 2021: 51-55), and bearing in mind the distinction between the two concepts made by Edward Schieffelin, who better defines *context* as «the social, historical, and ethnographic features that place the performance in its local ethnographic and historical context and are significant to its meaning» (2005: 88).

¹³ The songs were *Ženidba Ograšović Ale* as sung by Mujo Velić (2682 verses), *Sila Osmanbeg I Pavišić Luka* as sung by Murat Žunić (1761 verses), and *Rabovanje Osmanbeg Omerbegovića* as sung by Ibrahim Nuhanović (1479 verses).

particular form which it obtains only if is told in verse *and music*» (*ibidem*: 1-2, emphasis mine).¹⁴ Erdely was deliberately focused on the melodic formulas and, as such, privileged the voice of the performer to the instrumental accompaniment, not least because these songs were not accompanied by the *gusle/lahuta*, but rather with the *tambura*, a long-necked plucked lute with two strings tuned to the same pitch (usually around middle C). As he specifies,

[t]he overall musical effect is one of alternation between the quick, smoothly flowing, meterless articulation of verses and the metrical, ostinato pattern of the tambura. The beat, being constant in Moslem epics, is not written out everywhere. (*Ibidem*: 13)

Unlike Erdely, Bartók chose to transcribe a wider variety of music,¹⁵ including a song with the *gusle* entitled *The Captivity of Đulić Ibrahim*, as sung by Salih Ugljanin in Bosniac dialect. Of the 1811 verses of the song, Bartók chose to give an extremely meticulous transcription of a few of them and a rough outline of the rest.¹⁶ In addition to the remarkable richness of Bartók's transcribing style, its gaps and shortcomings are no less important, as they highlight the limits of standard Western notation and the technical limitations of Parry's recordings we already touched upon. Yet the composer was very much conscious of the "limits of the paper". He wrote:

[i]n transcribing folk music only two dimensions can be assumed: pitch (as the vertical one) and the rhythm (as the horizontal one). The consideration of the third dimension, having relation to intensity and color of sound may well be discarded. We have no adequate signs for marking intensity (except for the well-known but too-general signs of dynamics) and no signs at all for tone color (timbre). [...] Creation of new signs for color would be not only too complicated but also probably useless; the reader could never catch the right idea of the color, however elaborate the signs or description used. In this regard, in addition to a few descriptive words, all that can be done is to refer the reader to the record itself. (Bartók and Lord 1951: 3-4)

Remarks on the more non-verbal aspects of Ugljanin's performance appear in Bartók's *Note to the Music* following his musical transcription (Bartók 1954b). For instance, the note nr. 6 at the beginning of verse 25 (Fig. 1) denotes «sung in a hoarse voice» (*ibidem*: 463).

In addition to some hard-to-transcribe non-verbal aspects, the musical text also suffers from Parry's technical decisions to prevent the instrument from obscuring the text in the recording. It is not uncommon to find question marks indicating unintelligible passages

¹⁴ I say «alleged», here, as what Erdely quotes from *The Singer of Tales* (Lord 1960: 100) is not wholly correct. The original sentence ended with «in verse»; «and music» must then be regarded as a spurious addition by Erdely.

¹⁵ As shown in the posthumous book he authored with Albert Lord on the Serbo-Croatian folk music, Bartók and Lord 1951. On Bartók's relationship with this repertoire, see Suchoff 1972 and Nicola Scaldaferrì's article in this same volume.

¹⁶ This transcription is included in Parry *et al.* 1954: 437-462.

FIGURE 1. A passage from Bartók's transcription of Ugljanin's song (Parry *et al.* 1954: 442).

in the *gusle* part (Fig. 2) or notes that reveal the ambiguity of the recording to convey information about the instrumental part – as in verse 8 (Fig. 3).

In conclusion, despite the enormous efforts Bartók put in his extremely detailed and in some ways “creative” transcription, he ended up somewhat reinforcing the idea that it is always «the recording, not the performance itself, that is transcribed» (Schieffelin 2005: 83); in other words, the idea that each transcription is an intersemiotic translation of a mediatised form of textualization (the phonographic artifact) that always witnesses an (intentional or unintentional) mode of codifying the physical reality of the performance. Like Parry, Bartók and Erdely also implicitly stated what, for them, was epic in their notational solutions and outcomes. In different respects, both highlighted the richness and importance of the performance's musical dimension (the structural function of the melody and the relationship between the vocal and instrumental parts). Yet they were only able to focus on the sonic result (the recording) instead of its mode of production (its performance), to which they had no access. Therefore, historical research on non-verbal aspects of epics can only be based on the scant clues present in aluminum discs and the guesswork of those who, like Bartók, have listened to them with extreme care. In relationship to the aspect I will now discuss, what we are left with is like a tree without its leaves: an artifact that points to an irretrievable loss.

(27) „Slû - go Râ - ko jod zem - ljê Tù - rā - kā(m),

FIGURE 2. A question mark in the gusle part (*ibidem*).

(8) Dâ - vno bí - lo sà - da po - mi - njēm[o]. (9) J-

FIGURE 3. As we read in the commentary to the musical text (*ibidem*: 467), the note 4 specifies: «A change of bow probably occurs for these long notes, and all later similar notes; which change, however, is not discernible from the record».

3. Unpacking Non-Verbal Aspects

What follows is an attempt to map out the non-verbal aspects in the performance of songs with *lahuta*. In order to do so, I will consider, first, the voice of the performer; then, his instrument; and finally, his physicality and gestuality. Rather than separate the body from the instrument, I will unpack the relationship between them, understanding both as constituent parts of a uniform whole. I will start by reviewing the features of the performer's voice.

Voiced Elements and Vocal Techniques

Heroic songs with *lahuta* are performed by singing on a variety of recurring melodic formulas, each of which is endowed with a structural function (Herzog 1951b: 62-63; Scaldaferrì 2021b: 75-78). As such, most of what we can parse as a *voiced element* has a semantic meaning. These are the sung verses. Nevertheless, not all voiced elements have a semantic meaning, nor are they all sung in the strictest sense of the word. To begin with, it is common that the melodic formulas that Herzog defined as «lines of continuity [...] because they carry the main burden of the continuity of the text» (Herzog 1951b: 63) begin with a prosthetic syllable or disyllable that has no semantic meaning. This can be *e / e-ji* or *jo / e-jo*. In this latter case, as explained by Ardian Ahmedaja, *jo* does not mean

“no”, as it would in spoken language, but rather «the vowel *o*, to which the consonant *j* is connected. [...] [I]n other words, vocables» (Ahmedaja 2012: 126). These vocables are both musical and performative: they regularly appear on a pitch that is lower than the reciting tone and outside the range of the *lahuta*,¹⁷ and then reach the reciting tone through a *glissando*. The function of these elements cannot be separated from the musical performance, yet they do not contribute to the story being conveyed. Besides certain voiced elements that are properly sung, performers may also employ extended techniques that represent personal performative devices, as David Elmer and Anna Bonifazi noted in their analysis of *Halil Hrnjičić and Miloš the Highwayman* as sung by Alija Fjuljanin and recorded by Parry in 1934 (Elmer and Bonifazi 2012). Among the types of «performance discontinuity» they identify – namely a «variation [that] is pronounced enough to stand out from its surrounding context [...] [that] is a basic melodic contour» (*ibidem*: 297) – they list those

manipulations of the voice that do not belong to melody in the strict sense: these are the use of falsetto on the one hand, and on the other, a variety of adjustments of the timbre of the voice, which we group together under the label of “parlando” effects. (*Ibidem*: 298)

Similarly, the famous singer Avdo Međedović can be heard «switching to spoken delivery» to stress a transition in the structure of the song (*ibidem*: 300).

Whatever musical choice a performer makes, there are two key features of his voice that exist independently from the way he accommodates the voiced elements on the melodic formulas. They are not merely distinctive trademarks of each singers. Rather, they lie at the core of the relationship between voice and *lahuta*. They are *tessitura* and timbre.

Voice and *Lahuta*

Each human voice has a specific range – that is, the breadth of frequencies that a human is able to produce. The portion of the range covered by a particular piece or musical form is called *tessitura* (Jander 2001). In such repertoire, the *tessitura* accords with the overall range of pitches covered by the various melodic formulas the singer employs while performing. The range is typically comparable to a major sixth in the Western musical system, sometimes reaching the width of an octave, as noted by Ahmedaja (2012: 118–19). The choice of the root pitch, on which most of the melodic contours rest or resolve, is left up to the singer, who usually opts for a *tessitura* where his voice can resonate at its best (Daja 1983: 152). He will then tune his *lahuta* to this root pitch. This explains why the root pitch can vary among singers, as we can see in a comparative table (Fig. 4) denoting the frequencies chosen by ten Albanian-speaking singers.¹⁸ Oscillations of pitch

¹⁷ More on this musical aspect below.

¹⁸ I deliberately chose to visualize the intervallic relationships on a scale for the sake of more immediate understanding. Nevertheless, it is worth bearing in mind that within this repertoire the sonic space is not organized according to the 12-tone equal temperament, nor to Western music theory. This data has been

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Isa Elezi	•	•	•						
Sylë Mushkolaj	•	•	•						
Januz Mushkolaj		•	•	•	•				
Nazmi Hajdari				•					
Gjokë Kalaj				•					
Janus Delaj					•				
Ahmet Duli					•				
Rrok Prenkoçaj					•	•			
Asllan A. Shala				•		•	•		
Rrustem Ali Meta								•	•

FIGURE 4. Root pitch chosen by ten different singers, according to their vocal register.

between various performances by the same singer are definitely possible, as we see in the case of Isa Elezi, but it does not appear these changes can be necessarily considered accidental: singers could reasonably opt for lowering or raising the *tessitura* according to the kind of performance they are supposed to give – a full performance of a song in front of the audience, a recording without a public, a short demonstration, and so on (Fig. 4).

Despite these changes, the *lahuta* always shares the pitch range of the voice. Differently from other repertoires, the instrument and the voice proceed in quasi-parallel motion, following what Herzog identified as the «so-called heterophonic technique: the voices together render somewhat divergent versions or forms of the same melodic line» (1951b: 63). As such, voice and instrument exert a mutual agency: the voice sets the ambitus, and the *lahuta* “segments” this range into pitches corresponding to the four fingers of the left hand, which fingers the only string. As noted by Ferial Daja (1983: 137), performers tend to identify some “more stable” sounds and some “less stable” sounds. In the first category are the root pitch, the “pick-up note” (around a major second lower), an imperfect fifth above the root pitch, and a fourth. In the second category are the minor third (often flattened) above the root pitch and in particular the second above the root pitch which can be quasi-major or minor – and sometimes, at least in my direct experience, just a

derived mostly from video recordings made by Zymer U. Neziri for the E5 project (2012-2016), dedicated to Albanian speaking performers of heroic songs in five different Balkan countries (Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia). A backup copy of these materials is held at the LEAV – Audiovisual Ethnography Lab of the University of Milan. The information regarding Isa Elezi has been derived from audiovisual recordings made by Nicola Scaldaferrri and me during our fieldwork, and are available on line. For a general report on the project, see Neziri 2021.

quarter tone higher than the fundamental.¹⁹ Since the left hand is used to support the instrument, it never moves down along the body of the instrument (as would happen with a cello). Therefore, the *lahuta* can cover all voice pitches except for the lowest and the highest: the former lies outside the instrument's register; the latter could only be achieved by moving the hand position downward. (For this reason, these two vocal pitches are always accompanied by the open string pitch). Interestingly, these two tones have a clear performative or expressive function: the "pick-up note" pulls the voice up to the chanting pitch, while the upper fifth – called «peak» by Elmer and Bonifazi (2012: 298) appears at the beginning of the introductory formula so as to accompany the opening invocation or to mark the beginning of a new section of the song.

The sharing of sonic space or frequency range, however, is not the only aspect linking the *lahuta* to the voice.²⁰ They also share timbre, a rather difficult-to-define term. *Tingull*, in Albanian, is understood by Isa Elezi as something different from *melosi* which defines the melodic profile or movement. *Tingull*, that is, indicates «a notion of "quality" [that] stems directly from a sense of the characteristics of a particular sound source» (Heidemann 2016: §2.7). In other words, timbre is the very sound of a source. Given the remarks I made in the previous section, it is no surprise that timbre has gone essentially unnoticed in studies of this repertoire and that the generic – and as I will demonstrate, misleading – notion of *accompaniment* has precluded any consideration of it. Understanding voice and *lahuta* as two different auditory streams, separated visually, materially, and sonically, is certainly easier than exploring certain connections between the two that go far beyond the heterophonic motion evidenced by Herzog (1951b: 63).

Curiously enough, the first and only hint about a timbral relationship between voice and *lahuta* was provided by abbot Alberto Fortis in his *Viaggio in Dalmazia* (*Voyage to Dalmatia*), an account of his visit to the region in which he provided the first description of *gusle* players. Though primarily interested in the text of their *pjesme* (songs) – to such an extent that provided the first transcription of the famous *Xalostna Pjesanza Plemenite Asan-Aghinize* (*The Sorrowful Song of the Noble Spouse of Asan Aga*), which was later translated by the likes

¹⁹ Daja's reasoning stands out for his sophisticated intuition of grouping sounds according to a "neutral" principle that clusters non-fixed intervallic distances, perceivable as fluctuating, using an implicit notion of "step". Coherently – at least to the extent of a Westernized way of thinking – he derives that steps (i.e. sounds) should be lined up on a scale, and on this concept he grounds the premise and most of the discussion of his article. Curiously enough, he glosses over several inconsistencies: 1) the fact that no scale he describes actually covers the space of an octave, nor do they function as a *transposable* system for organizing pitches; 2) the evidence that the lowest degree is actually not the tonic, but always a sort of *subfinalis* (the seventh degree); 3) the mere problem that there can be no scale with such an unpredictable variety of intervallic relationships within the same piece – an issue that inevitably leads him to call for a polymodality that is all to be demonstrated at the level of performers' awareness and capability of abstraction. After all, how is it possible to talk about scales for a repertoire which is not based «sur aucune théorie ou système musical connu et étudié» [on any known and studied musical theory or system] (*ibidem*)?

²⁰ It is worth noticing that this connection is so profound that when a singer like Isa Elezi privately "rehearses" a song without instrument, while walking, the melodic formula he uses does not exceed the same range in which he sing – albeit on a different melody – with the instrument. For more details on this practice, see again Nicola Scaldaferrri's article in this same volume.

of Walter Scott and Alexander Sergejevich Pushkin – he nevertheless remarks on a peculiar feature of their singing, noting that *gusle* players «usano anche di cantare un poco nel naso, il che s'accorda benissimo collo stromento, cui suonano» («use to sing with a somewhat nasal voice, which blends very well with the instrument they play») (Fortis 1774: 88).

What Fortis alluded to as an external observer actually accords well with the testimony of Isa Elezi who, during a 2018 interview in Koshutan (Rugova, Kosovo), explained that «the voice must meet the *tingull* of the instrument». He also recognized control over the timbre as a proof of a player's sensitivity, saying that «the good *lahutar* pays close attention to the *tingull*» (Elezi-Lekëgjekaj 2018). A sophisticated vocal-instrumental blending is thus no less a key feature to the determination of a performer's quality as much as his skills in “composing in performance”. Further investigation into this non-verbal domain will present a much richer portrait of what makes a true epic master.

Bowing the Song, Playing the Voice

Besides its close sonic relationship with the voice, the *lahuta* is also important in the overall development of an epic performance, traditionally playing *a solo* the preludes, interludes, and postludes which frame a song (see Herzog 1951b: 63; Ahmedaja 2012: 122). Mustafa Gërçaliu, interviewing an 81-year-old player, revealed the benefit of instrumental playing to let both the singer and the public “take a breath” between the different parts of a song (Gërçaliu 1986: 297, quoted and translated in Ahmedaja 2012: 126). And Bartók's transcriptions highlighted how richly and subtly these instrumental sections could be ornamented. Lord also noted how Nikola Vujnovic, Parry's assistant, «even puts the musical instrument in his [the singer's] hands and asks him to sing the verses» (Lord 1960: 127), in the event he could not go on dictating without the instrument – as singers often did. The *gusle* can then also serve as a tool to reactivate the memory. As less attention has been given to the technical aspects of instrumental technique, I focus here on two crucial aspects of *lahuta* performance: bowing and fingering.

According to Claude Cadoz, bowing is the essential «excitation gesture» (Cadoz 1988, quoted in Maestre Gómez 2009: 3) that provides the energy necessary to produce a sound, and, like with any bowed instrument, can be produced either upwards or downwards (a “down bow” or an “up bow”). In a conversation with Isa Elezi, the performer called these «the two voices of the *lahuta*» (*dy zëra lahutës*), differentiating their function within the delivery of each verse. «When I am beginning the verse I push the bow upward», he noted, «while when I want to end the verse I pull the bow downward; this is what the voice and the melody requires» (Elezi-Lekëgjekaj 2018). Anyone who has seen a *lahutar* in action knows that the melodic formula of a verse cannot fit within a single up bow, and that the players usually change the bow at each syllable. Groupings of two or three syllables are rare. In addition to this, the *legato* technique is rarely used on the *lahuta*, and only in the case of quick ornamentations. Therefore, a change of bow normally occurs when the voice moves from one pitch to another. Looking, for instance, at a

performance Isa Elezi gave in 2018 at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice,²¹ it is easy to observe that the musician tends to begin the verse with an up bow whenever possible and to end it with a down bow, only occasionally grouping syllables. If the up-down order ends up being subverted – for example, because of a hypometric verse – it is restored as soon as possible. Less explicit, however, is the reason why, as Isa Elezi said, «this [way of playing] is what the voice and the melody requires». Though the singer did not provide further explanation, it seems reasonable that the up bow intuitively joins the vocal attack, often performed through the “pick-up note” which “lifts up the voice” to the reciting tone; while the down bow better suits the release of singing and pitch, which is often executed with a gentle, downward *glissando*.

Isa Elezi is likewise fully conscious of the importance of bowing technique, asserting that «the two or three *labutar* who really stood out always had their attention focused on the right hand. [...] They adjusted the melodic inflections (*melosi*) according to the movement of the bow» (Elezi-Lekëgjekaj 2018). The vocal-instrumental relationship again becomes relevant, but in an inverted perspective, which can be adequately observed – at least as a feature of *his* peculiar singing style – when he employs a particular timbral accentuation of the voice (a quasi-*appoggiato*) on all syllables corresponding to a bow change. In doing so, he aims for a timbral fusion even deeper than the blending of the two sound sources (voice and instrument), since this type of *appoggiato* produces a sort of “vocal counterpart” to the inharmonic sounds produced by the bow change.

To conclude on the theme of instrumental technique, closely related to bowing is fingering. As we have already seen, while the thumb supports the neck of the instrument, the other four fingers, stretched upward, graze the left side of the string without pressing down on it. As the *labuta* is a non-fretted instrument, fingers do not have a fixed position, but rather are as flexible and “unfixed” as the voice. Aside from the highly virtuosic and ornamented *a solo* lines – where the fingers move back and forth one after the other, without jumps – fingerings generally follow the voice heterophonically, usually without grace notes. What is striking once again in Isa Elezi’s style is his use of a peculiar sort of *acciaccatura* at different syllable changes.²² These very rapid and precise ornaments represent the equivalent of what the musician does vocally at any bow change. The result is a rapid flickering of the sound which we should call a “grace note” only colloquially: the player is actually producing with the finger a sort of plosive interruption that establishes with the continuous sound of the string the same relationship that occurs between the inharmonic and the harmonic components of a sung word, namely consonants and vowels.

Both of the instrumental gestures I present here demonstrate the total interpenetration that the *labuta* has with the voice – a relationship that helps to preserve its exclusive use for this repertoire, together with its high symbolic value (see Ahmedaja 2012: 117-

²¹ An excerpt of the performance can be seen at the following link: <<https://youtu.be/yKBlQqn9aB0>> (accessed: 14th October 2022).

²² As it can be observed in the video quoted above.

18). This almost umbilical bond is further strengthened – if ever there was a need – by the fundamental role the *lahuta* plays in the formation of the performers, whose vocal and poetical training is impossible without playing, as various performers recall. The following opinions belong to Isa Elezi, and to a *rapsod* documented by Gërcaliu, respectively:

I started with the instrument, not with the voice. This is because the instrument pulls the voice. Without knowing how to play the *lahuta*, the voice doesn't work. (Elezi-Lekëgjekaj 2018)

First, I learned to play lahutë and that helped me more easily to learn the song and to remember them longer. (Gërcaliu 1987: 301, quoted and translated in Ahmedaja 2012: 103)

This brief introduction to these aspects of epic performance – which surely deserves more in-depth investigation – are enough at least to suggest resisting the vernacular use of *accompaniment* as the way to describe the participation of the *lahuta* in epic performance. As aptly defined by David Fuller in the *New Grove Online*, the word indicates «[i]n the most general sense, the *subordinate parts* of any musical texture made up of strands of *differing importance*» (Fuller 2001, emphasis mine). In understanding the *lahuta* as «subordinate», one falls into a logocentric bias that assigns the verbal precedence over the non-verbal – which is, as we have seen, in open contrast with the thinking of the singers themselves, and with the evidence derived from a more global understanding of epic performance. Rather than considering the instrument as something “other than the voice” – *even if* it is perceivable as an autonomous auditory stream – I suggest we reconsider the *lahuta* as coessential in a complex system of bodily and extra-somatic devices in a perpetual *correspondence* with one other.²³ By this understanding, both the *lahuta* and the voice can be seen not only as instruments in a «sonic system with which we extend mind and bodies, requiring the practice of refined movements» (Magnusson 2019: 18), but also as a sort of hyper-instrument operated by the same biomechanics of the performer's body, which alternately narrows or widens the divide between the two in performance, as needed. As products of a more general cultural logocentrism, even musical transcriptions have perhaps prevented us from venturing in the alternative understanding I just suggested, «break[ing] the flow of moving events into a series of constitutive elements» (Schieffelin 2005: 91), for whom lines would be a better representation than dots on separate musical staves. Notes, that is, are by-products of a notational culture interested in visualizing frequency and duration; lines which cross, intertwine, and follow each other are more evocative means through which to sketch proximity, direction, and activity.

²³ By recalling the concept of *correspondence* I make explicit reference to Tim Ingold's theory of a contrapunctual model in which things, rather than inter-acting – i.e. exerting agency on one another – are «in ongoing response» to one another (Ingold 2012: 437), thus blurring the subject-object linguistic divide (on which see Ingold 2017: 13).

Silent Features

A survey of the performer's bodily involvement in epic performance has so far been limited to instrumental gestures. One cannot omit to mention, however, the obvious presence – in any performance – of various «ancillary gestures» (Wanderley, Depalle 2004), or «additional body movements, not involved directly in the sound production mechanism, but linked to the performance and being able to communicate some emotional content, or even to slightly modify the sound properties» (Maestre Gómez 2009: 3).

If compared to an average performance by a professional solo player of Western art music, a performance of a song with *lahuta* is way less dynamic on a visual point of view. The performer sits firmly, usually cross-legged, and the playing of the instrument does not cause him to bend or move as a violinist virtuoso would do. The only part of his body that he can easily move is his head. In the case of Isa Elezi, it is evident that he follows a perfectly regular pattern, raising his head at the beginning of the verse, as his voice too raises, and lowering it at the end of the verse, as his voice drops down.²⁴ Even if it is difficult to determine whether this habit is conscious or unconscious, it is interesting to note the consistency with the articulation of the singing.

In addition to these more performative gestures, there are also others that relate, or help convey, the meaning of a song. When asked about this, Isa Elezi replied: «Yes, I think about expressing with my face the emotional situation of the song, but it's something that is hard to convey. It fades, it's transient, or it's something that people do not value very much» (2018).

Therefore – and at least in his case – we must conclude that gesturality plays a more personal role than a direct effect on the audience, and that it is therefore something to which not much effort is devoted. In any case, it is still a non-verbal element in the performance of songs with *lahuta*, related to the text delivery, which surely deserves more in-depth investigation through comparison with different performers.

4. Conclusions

A thorough survey of what lies “beyond the words” of a song could not be carried out without pointing out all the connections that non-verbal devices have with the conveyance of meaning. What results is an entangled meshwork that I tried to organize and represent in a diagram (Fig. 5). It may serve as a guiding map for future investigation into other repertoires – with all possible variations, such as the number of performers, their role in performance, and their mutual relationship.

Broadening our perspective on the performance of living epics raises further questions and paves the way to rethinking theoretical and methodological problems whose relevance may well extend beyond the specific repertoire examined here.

²⁴ This behavior can be clearly observed in the video example quoted above, p. 48, 21n.

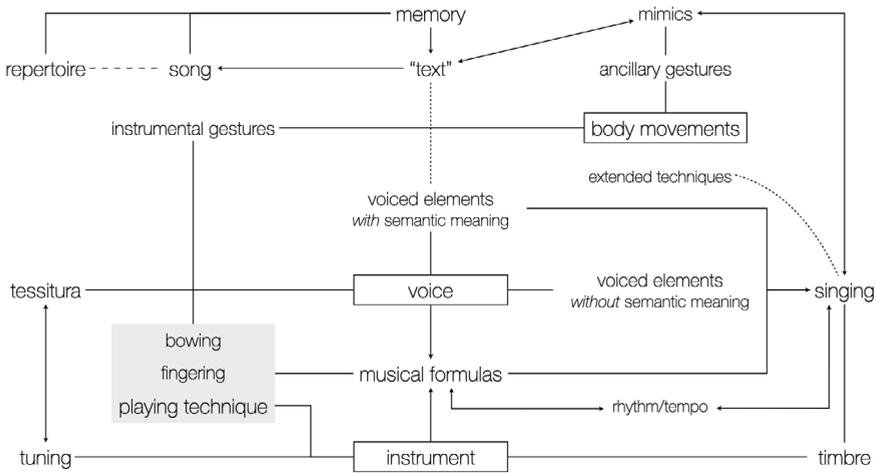


FIGURE 5. A map of non-verbal aspects in the performance of songs with *lahutë*.

Firstly, if the way verbal and non-verbal aspects relate on a micro-level has been demonstrated, it is of paramount importance to analyze the role of non-verbal elements in the more dynamic, creative process of “composing in performance”, determining how mastering the non-verbal aspects can foster (or not) this process.

For this purpose, archival documents – although of extreme historical interest – are only partially useful, as they usually “portray” a single moment in the activity of a performer. Rather, we should invest in a more diachronic analysis of living singers, trying to uncover how their poetic repertoires, musical features, and performing styles evolve through time.

In order to improve our understanding of how oral epic works globally, it will be of utmost importance to pay attention to their respective ethnotheories, or at least to gauge the extent to which they are capable of a theoretical abstraction of their doing – a body of knowledge that we must then reflect using consistent terminology and visual representation.

Moreover, an emphasis on non-verbal aspects calls for a more systematic reconsideration of the modes of transmission of epics, vastly understood not only as a repertoire of songs, but as a much more multi-faceted performative practice. Accounts like the one about the singer Rade Danilović, as cited by Parry, who recalled that «his father, Mirko, used to put the boy’s hand on his own as he fingered the string» (Lord 1960: 33), clearly prove the conventional label of “*oral* transmission” to be inadequate and misleading for a practice that is not exclusively verbal.

Lastly, an investigation into the present topic proves to problematize such traditional dichotomies as text/music or voice/instrument. Nevertheless, this heuristic operation is not at all irreversible, and has to be regarded as a possible tool to enlarge the disciplinary

perspective on epics – not, that is, as an anti-textualist approach which calls for an impossible divorce between epic studies and literary studies and ignores the essentially narrative nature of this performative genre.²⁵ Rather, to cite John Foley’s famous *incipit* «[w]ords are always situated; they cannot naturally occur but in context» (Foley 1995: XI), the approach I presented here works to paint a more comprehensive picture of how immensely big, and deep, such a context is.

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²⁵ As for my own experience, my further study of the Albanian language led me, in August 2022, to produce, with the collaboration of Orgesa Roka, a video interview with Isa Elezi in which the non-verbal elements are constantly related – not only by the interviewer, but by the singer himself – with the verbal content of the songs and with his learning experience.

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