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**SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO:
GENDERED MIGRATIONS AND
MUSICAL IDENTITY AMONG
FEMALE JAZZ MUSICIANS
FROM THE BALKANS**

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Should I Stay or Should I Go: Gendered Migrations and Musical Identity Among Female Jazz Musicians from the Balkans

Gendered exclusion, structural precarity, and transnational mobility significantly shape the professional trajectories of female jazz instrumentalists from the Western Balkans. As a jazz musician, composer, and researcher born in Serbia and working between the Western Balkans and Western Europe, I initiated the project *Should I Stay or Should I Go: Exploring Gendered Migration and Reintegration Strategies for Balkan Female Jazz Musicians* to examine the complex intersections of artistic and social identity, migration, and institutional legitimacy. Drawing on a methodological framework that integrates ethnographic interviews, cultural policy analysis, and artistic research, this project aims to articulate how women in jazz negotiate their professional, aesthetic, and identity positions across national and genre boundaries.

While gender inequality remains a pervasive issue across the European cultural and creative sectors (CCS), recent reports

underscore that these disparities are particularly severe in the Western Balkans (European Commission, 2021; 2022). The intersection of patriarchal norms, underfunded cultural systems, and non-transparent institutional practices exacerbates the exclusion of women from leadership roles and opportunities in cultural production. The emigration of female jazz musicians from the region illustrates broader patterns of skilled labor migration within the CCS, a phenomenon shaped by economic marginalization, gendered labor markets, and inadequate institutional support (Cvetičanin, Nikolić, & Bobičić, 2023). In Serbia, chronic underinvestment in the cultural sector and the absence of gender-sensitive funding policies further restrict women's participation. As a genre historically coded as masculine, jazz presents additional challenges through its normative performance cultures and institutional canons (Jovićević, 2023). These factors together produce conditions of double exclusion for female jazz instrumentalists: from both national cultural institutions and transnational jazz circuits.

The research presented here addresses three interrelated dimensions: (1) the individual and collective experiences of female jazz musicians who have migrated from the Balkans; (2) the influence of national and supranational policy frameworks, such as the European Union's Creative Europe program and the European Jazz Network's Gender Balance Manifesto, on access and reintegration; and (3) the use of artistic research to reflect on and critically examine the experiences of displacement and adaptation, particularly through improvisation and composition.

Gendered Positioning in Jazz

In jazz and other music genres, there is an aspect of social organization that informs one's understanding of gender, masculinity, and femininity (as well as class and race), alongside facilitating the exploration of individual and collective identities. Critics, historians, journalists, along with audiences and musicians, often passively regard women's position in the jazz scene as "normal" and "natural," perceiving female jazz musicians as outsiders, "unique," and distinctive, rather than as equals. There

is an implicit “him” in all scholarly assertions that have normalized the status of female jazz artists.

Jazz, as both an art form and a cultural phenomenon, has predominantly been associated with male dominance, reflecting a hegemonic structure that has persisted over time (Dobson 2010, Gibson 2006, Oliveros 2006, Caudwell 2010). Despite women’s integral presence and substantial contributions to the evolution of jazz since its inception, female musicians have been consistently marginalized, with their accomplishments frequently disregarded or relegated to the periphery within the predominantly male-centric narrative that has shaped the historical trajectory of this art form. As Angela Y. Davis states: “Women have always been inside jazz and have always helped to produce the field that we call jazz, but precisely because of patriarchy, are continually *imagined* as on the margins, outside of jazz, as having to fight to even be included within the category” (Carrington, 2023). Due to its interactive nature, jazz improvisation emerges as a social construct through which historical linear narratives and the repetition of practice ideologically delineate a male field of power (Trine, 2003). Within this sphere, stereotypes, norms, relational structures, practice codification, and idioms are affirmed, controlled, and fortified. It is within this framework that the dominant discourse of jazz has been shaped, primarily by male figures. Still, the question of gender in jazz has rarely been analyzed in the context of jazz music (Wills, 2008).

The global positioning of women in jazz remains profoundly influenced by structural inequalities and gaps in representation. Historically, the genre has constructed itself through masculinized narratives of genius, technical mastery, competitiveness, and dominance – qualities embedded in both the performance practices and institutional histories of jazz. Female musicians, especially instrumentalists, have frequently been excluded from these narratives or included only through exceptionalist discourse, rendering their presence both hyper-visible and structurally marginal. As scholars such as McClary (1991) and Tucker (2000) have noted, jazz history often sustains the myth of the individual (male) improviser, while obscuring the collective and gendered labor of music production.

The omission of women's contributions to jazz does not reflect their absence from the genre's development; rather, it is a consequence of the patriarchal ideologies and sociocultural norms that have perpetuated a myopic perspective, systematically overlooking or diminishing the roles and achievements of female instrumentalists throughout jazz history. Within the jazz world, women often face barriers and discouragement from pursuing certain training avenues such as composition, theory, brass instruments, and percussion during their education. This lack of access to comprehensive training and mentorship from the outset limits their opportunities for growth and leadership roles as they progress in their careers (Jordannah, 2023). While recent years have seen more female artists across various musical fields, the world of jazz still lacks adequate representation of women, often relegating them to a minority status, exceptional, or different (Gibson, 2006).

Traditional jazz as a music genre has been "embodied" by the behavior, gestures, stylized speech, and playing (musical language) of musicians since its very beginning in the early 20th century. As a practice influenced by a broad range of cultural factors, jazz music critically encompasses identity formation and performativity processes during its enactment (Wilson, MacDonald, 2012). Masculinity has been established as a norm and as a hierarchical societal structure built upon the patriarchal ideology within jazz.

Artistic creation in jazz is not merely a direct and immediate expression of an individual emotional state, nor is it a simple translation of personal experience into music. Music seldom exists in isolation in this way. Instead, it results from a lengthy process of practicing, imitating, refining, mastering idioms, and applying formal jazz styles, conventions, forms, and structures. Only after engaging in these multifaceted processes does the actual performance occur, influenced by continuous interaction with fellow musicians, culture, society, history, and the audience. The language of music carries within it a complex genre construction that is not merely the result of a gifted individual but is deeply influenced by predecessors and societal dynamics. The art crafting process, the artist's developmental trajectory, and

the inherent quality of the artwork are substantially influenced by the social context at a specific moment, forming an “integral component of broader societal frameworks” (Wilson, MacDonald, 2012) that encompasses institutional structures and discourse systems.

Building on Judith Butler’s notion of performativity (1990), I have argued that jazz functions as a gendered field where identities are enacted and negotiated through embodied practices, interactional roles, and sonic choices. Genre performativity in jazz is not neutral: it encodes expectations around authority, virtuosity, and visibility, which are distributed unequally across gendered lines. Female instrumentalists often confront a paradox of representation – they are expected to perform at the level of their male peers, yet they are burdened by gendered perceptions that frame their competence as surprising, derivative, or inauthentic (Jovićević, 2023).

In the Western Balkans, these exclusions are intensified by the region’s status in the European cultural geography as a semi-periphery. As I have explored in *Good Morning, Jazzwomen* (Jovićević, 2023), the semi-peripheral status of Balkan jazz musicians involves a structural double exclusion: from dominant Western jazz narratives and from local cultural institutions that remain male-dominated and under-resourced. Drawing on the work of Marina Blagojević (2009), the semi-periphery is a site of “dependent modernities,” where aesthetic and institutional norms are externally defined, and where women’s creative labor is often rendered invisible or devalued. In this context, female jazz musicians in the Balkans are not only marginalized within their local scenes but also frequently perceived in Western Europe as lacking authenticity, professionalism, or cultural capital, as jazz never truly took root in the Balkans. Their legitimacy is constantly negotiated in relation to both dominant Western aesthetic standards and patriarchal regional norms. As a result, their identity formation is marked by ongoing processes of adaptation, defiance, and strategic invisibility.

To capture this complex interplay of factors, I will later use the concept of *hyper-identity*, building on Stuart Hall’s (1996) under-

standing of identity as processual and relational. Hyper-identity refers to the intensified and multilayered subjectivity that female jazz musicians negotiate as they traverse cultural, national, and institutional contexts. It encompasses aesthetic positioning, institutional belonging, and the strategic presentation of self in spaces where gender, genre, and geography intersect.

Gender and Policy in the Cultural and Creative Sectors

Recent European Union policy reports present gender equity as a central objective across cultural sectors. The European Commission's (2021) report *Towards Gender Equality in the Cultural and Creative Sectors* identifies persistent gaps: women constitute 48% of total cultural employment in the EU but occupy only 20% of registered composer positions and 16.3% of executive roles in public broadcasting. Pay disparities are also significant, with women earning on average 30% less than men.

Several initiatives aim to address these imbalances. The Key-change Manifesto outlines a 10-point agenda targeting pay equity, inclusion in programming, and workplace safety. The European Jazz Network's (EJN) Gender Balance Manifesto commits its member institutions to practices such as gender parity in staffing, conducting internal gender audits, and performing public impact assessments. While these policies represent progress, their implementation remains voluntary and inconsistent. Data collection across the EU is inconsistent, and many institutions lack enforceable accountability mechanisms (Creative Europe, 2020).

In contrast, Serbia exemplifies a more entrenched structural exclusion. In 2024, only 0.68% of the national budget was allocated to culture. Of this, less than 10% was distributed via open calls, and just under 3% reached civil society organizations. The remainder, approximately €4.3 million, was allocated through non-transparent emergency funds controlled by the Ministry of Culture (Cvetičanin, 2024). Serbia's per capita investment in culture was €18 in 2023, compared to €54 in Croatia and more than €100 in Slovenia. These structural deficits disproportionately

affect women. Although they represent the majority of cultural workers in Serbia, women hold only 30% of leadership positions, most of which are in underfunded or low-prestige institutions. There is no formal national policy to promote gender equality in the cultural sector, and support for female artists is largely confined to externally funded NGO projects or international initiatives.

Within jazz specifically, gender inequality is severe. The national big bands of Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia do not employ any female instrumentalists, composers, or conductors. At Serbian jazz festivals, only 4% of performers are women instrumentalists, and just 1% are from the region (Jovičević, 2021). These figures illustrate the systemic barriers that female jazz musicians face in accessing both symbolic and material resources.

The empirical data I collected on gender representation in jazz education throughout Serbia and the broader region of the former Yugoslavia reveals a persistent and systemic underrepresentation of female educators at both the secondary and tertiary levels (Jovičević, 2023). Despite the increasing visibility of women in the global jazz scene, the institutional structures of jazz education within the Western Balkans remain markedly patriarchal, particularly with regard to faculty composition and leadership roles.

At the higher educational level, jazz departments exist at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade (Serbia), the Faculty of Music in Štip (North Macedonia), and the Academy of Music in Ljubljana (Slovenia). Across each of these institutions, there are no female professors appointed to teach instrumental jazz, arrangement, or composition. The only female educators in these departments are confined to vocal studies, reflecting a broader trend of gendered division of academic labor in jazz education. For example, the jazz department in Belgrade has enrolled only five female instrumentalists over ten years, with an annual intake of approximately ten students. During this period, no women have been hired to teach instrumental subjects, improvisation, ensemble work, or jazz theory. Comparable situations have been observed

in North Macedonia and Hungary; at the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music in Budapest, for instance, no female instrumental jazz professors have been appointed over the past forty years, again with the exception of voice instruction.

Secondary music education mirrors these disparities. Music high schools such as the “Stanković” School in Belgrade, the Subotica Music School, the Conservatory of Ljubljana, and the Secondary School for Popular Music in Zagreb all display low levels of female representation. Female students in jazz departments are typically enrolled at a rate of about one every three years. Teaching positions are overwhelmingly male-dominated, with few isolated exceptions, such as a female piano teacher in Vršac and another female instructor assigned to mandatory piano lessons at “Stanković.”

These structural imbalances contribute to a hostile learning environment for female students. Many report experiences of social exclusion, low self-confidence, and lack of institutional support, which often leads to withdrawing from educational pathways before reaching higher education (Jovićević, 2023). The absence of visible role models and mentors reinforces the perception of jazz as a male-dominated field, thereby perpetuating gendered patterns of exclusion and limiting women’s access to professional opportunities in jazz.

Hyper-Identity and Transnational Subjectivity

The migration of female jazz musicians from the Balkans to Western Europe involves not only geographic relocation but also a reconfiguration of artistic and professional identity. Drawing on Grossberg’s (1992) notion of spatially and temporally situated identity, the term *hyper-identity* is employed to describe the accumulation of contradictory roles, expectations, and aesthetic codes that female musicians must navigate. Existing literature on musical identity demonstrates how artists internalize the norms of their musical environment while constructing self-narratives that align with or resist dominant expectations (Wilson & MacDonald, 2012). For women, this process is complicated by

gendered stereotypes that conflate artistic competence with visual appeal, emotionality, or exceptionality. These dynamics are intensified in migratory contexts, where female musicians from the Balkans are perceived both as gendered minorities and as cultural outsiders.

In such contexts, music performances become sites for strategic negotiation. Artists must navigate institutional expectations, audience perception, and personal artistic vision. The result is a hyper-visible identity that is continually subject to evaluation, contestation, and reinterpretation. These processes are not merely biographical but are deeply political, reflecting the broader logic of exclusion and recognition that structures the cultural field.

Female musicians in migration – interviews¹

The following section examines the above-described dynamics through ethnographic case studies of Nevena Pejčić, a Serbia-born jazz pianist and composer who migrated to Germany, and Lada Obradović, a Croatian jazz drummer and composer. The trajectories of Nevena and Lada illustrate how hyper-identity is negotiated through artistic practice, institutional affiliation, and critical reflection.

Nevena Pejčić²

Nevena Pejčić studied jazz piano at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade for both her bachelor's and master's degrees before earning another master's degree in composition in Cologne. Currently based in Germany, Pejčić holds a Hungarian passport, which has facilitated her access to EU residency and cultural funding. Her migration was driven by both aesthetic aspirations and struc-

¹ Find video project presentation <https://youtu.be/3nqY0-PVKBA> acc.10.04.2025.

² Find online interview with Nevena Pejčić <https://youtu.be/k1MqplkrK9U> acc. 10.04.2025.

tural constraints, including the absence of opportunities for jazz composers, particularly female ones, in Serbia.

Within the Serbian jazz context, opportunities for jazz composers – especially women – are extremely limited. Institutional support is minimal, and original works by female artists are seldom included in major programs or commissions. This issue became particularly evident during my project from 2013 to 2015, the *New Spark Jazz Orchestra*, a regional all-female big band initiative that brought together young jazz musicians from Serbia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro. The project served as a platform for composition, performance, and collective learning. Many participants expressed uncertainty when presenting their own compositions, not due to lack of ability, but as a result of internalized social conventions that had discouraged them from identifying as composers or improvisers. Even when women do compose and arrange, their works are frequently relegated to marginal contexts – performed in alternative venues or student concerts, while festival main stages remain dominated by male-authored repertoires.

These exclusions are reinforced by informal mechanisms within jazz institutions that favor male social networks. During an interview, a male member of the RTV Slovenia Big Band described the selection criteria for joining the ensemble not only in terms of musical competence but also social compatibility. He stated that a key criterion was whether “you can go for a beer” with the rest of the band. This seemingly casual remark reflects a deeper system of informal male bonding that functions as an unwritten rule of inclusion. Women, even when they are technically and artistically competent, often remain excluded based on perceived social incompatibility within male-dominated ensembles.

Pejčić emphasized the stark contrast between the institutional environments of Belgrade and Cologne. In Germany, she had immediate access to large ensembles, rehearsal facilities, and public funding. Unlike her experience in Belgrade – where she was denied the opportunity to rehearse or develop her own compositions with the ensemble, despite being enrolled in the jazz

department that included a big band – she was granted immediate access to the big band upon starting her studies in Cologne. During her first year and first course, she was able to rehearse her own pieces with the entire ensemble, a level of support she described as unimaginable in Serbia. Her composition *Jackie, Jackson!* was performed by a school big band during her studies and final diploma performance – an experience that marked a fundamental shift in her perception of institutional possibilities. The piece departs from the traditional dramaturgy of jazz composition, emphasizing ensemble interaction, polymetric textures, and distributed authorship over individual solos or climactic structures.

This compositional approach, while rooted in jazz idioms, reflects a deliberate distancing from the formalism of her earlier training. Pejčić explicitly links this aesthetic evolution to her migration experience, which she describes as essential for artistic growth. In Cologne, her deviations from genre norms were interpreted as innovation rather than error.

Despite these institutional advantages, Pejčić expressed ambivalence regarding gender inclusion initiatives in Germany. Although she participated in a program aimed at supporting women in jazz, she was critical of its discursive framing, which positioned female musicians as a minority category that needs support, rather than as integral and equal members of the jazz community. She noted that gender parity within official ensembles remains rare, with most professional big bands in Germany comprising only one or two women. In contrast, gender-balanced or female-led ensembles are often self-organized and remain marginal in terms of institutional recognition and visibility, despite the existence of EU-level affirmative policies and funding structures aimed at promoting equality in music. This paradox highlights the limitations of formal equality measures when they are not matched by deeper structural and cultural transformation within the institutions themselves.

Pejčić also offered a comparative reflection on broader societal attitudes toward music and the arts. She observed that in Ger-

many, music education is more widely accessible and not restricted to specialized schools, which fosters a general cultural literacy and public appreciation for music across social groups. Learning an instrument is seen as a normal part of a well-rounded education, and this inclusivity translates into a more diverse, engaged, and culturally active audience. Concert attendance, participation in cultural events, and financial support for the arts are far more widespread and socially embedded than in Serbia. Audiences are not only larger in number but also more prepared to invest time and resources in supporting artists and artistic production. As a freelance European artist, Pejčić has benefited from this ecosystem through access to various project-based funding opportunities and international residencies, underscoring the significance of public arts funding and institutional infrastructure in sustaining creative careers.

When asked about the possibility of returning to Serbia, Pejčić stated that she would be open to it, provided that the conditions allowed for meaningful artistic and educational engagement. She expressed particular interest in composing for an institutional big band or teaching jazz composition – roles that, in practice, remain inaccessible to most women. While she did not indicate that she had applied for such positions, her reflections point to broader structural constraints in the Serbian context. As I argue in this research, despite following formal protocols, the hiring procedures for academic posts and positions in institutional ensembles are often tailored to pre-selected candidates. These processes retain the appearance of transparency but, in effect, reproduce closed professional circles.

Such practices stem from a broader culture of informal selection and social gatekeeping. As previously illustrated in the case of the RTV Slovenia Big Band, inclusion frequently depends on interpersonal familiarity and social compatibility, rather than on objective artistic or pedagogical criteria. In the regional context, no professional big band has included female composers, conductors, or instrumentalists in permanent positions. Similarly, as discussed earlier, there are currently no female professors teaching instrumental jazz, composition, or arranging in higher

education institutions throughout the region. These structural exclusions reflect a deeply gendered distribution of authority and access, where institutional frameworks nominally promote equality while continuing to sustain practices that limit women's participation and advancement in the field.

Pejčić's professional identity, in her own words, is shaped not only by access to resources but also by the experience of dislocation, which she describes as creatively generative. Migration, in her account, functions as both a rupture and a possibility. As I discuss in this research, artistic migration often produces a form of *hyper-identity* – a dynamic position shaped by cultural displacement, multiple belongings, and continuous adaptation. Both Nevena Pejčić and Lada Obradović emphasized how working across different national and institutional contexts expanded their creative possibilities while also confronting them with new forms of exclusion and negotiation. Their identities as composers and performers are not anchored in a single tradition, but are shaped through ongoing movement, redefinition, and creative response to transnational realities.

Lada Obradović³

Lada Obradović, a Croatian jazz drummer and composer, presents a more longitudinal case of transnational navigation. With extensive professional experience, her career has spanned Austria, Switzerland, and France, shaped by systemic exclusions, legal constraints, and collaborative resilience. Initially trained in drums through informal mentorship and summer workshops in Croatia, Obradović pursued formal jazz education at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Graz, and later in Switzerland. Despite her success in Swiss institutions and her artistic recognition, she was legally required to leave the country upon graduation, a condition imposed on her as a Croatian citizen. She described the paradox of being institutionally celebrated while personally excluded: her compositions continued to receive

³ Find online interview with Lada Obradović: https://youtu.be/KB_Yv55Cubk acc. 10.4.2025.

funding in Switzerland, yet she was denied the right to remain and work.

This exclusion was mitigated by her relocation to France, made possible by her marriage to her music partner and French citizen, David Tixier. French citizenship granted her access to the *intermittent du spectacle* system, a unique employment structure that provides monthly income to freelance artists who meet an annual quota of 42 paid performances. This model has afforded Obradović financial stability and institutional support, allowing her and David to tour extensively across Europe as a music duo. Moreover, the duo format meets gender balance requirements increasingly mandated by European festivals, enhancing their eligibility and visibility within the circuit.

Despite these institutional benefits, Obradović expressed critical reflections on gender inclusion mechanisms. She recounted being asked to sign a form identifying herself as a minority – based on gender, sexual orientation, or disability – in order to qualify for enhanced fees. She felt that such framing and instrumentation of her gender identity went against her desire to be recognized for artistic merit rather than demographic positioning. Earlier in her career, a professor warned her that, as a woman, she would have to be “ten times better” than her male peers to be taken seriously. This standard, she notes, has shaped her professional ethic and compositional voice.

Obradović remains largely disconnected from the Croatian jazz scene, receiving no recognition or institutional support from her country of origin. She rarely performs there and perceives no viable professional future in that context. The lack of infrastructure and artistic innovation, in her assessment, renders a return undesirable. She stated that at this moment, she has no plans to ever return to her home country. Yet, her artistic work continues to grapple with themes of displacement, memory, and transnational belonging. For example, *Flying Home*⁴ evokes the ambiva-

⁴ Obradovic Tixier Duo. *Flying Home*. https://youtu.be/i6G_ykPAjxk?si=PIYXsD-1dJS-eTwez acc.10.04.2025.

lence of artistic success abroad and the emotional detachment from one's origins. Similarly, *12:19*⁵ and *Unchained Hope*⁶ use sonic metaphors – earthquakes, broken chains, and sensory vibration – to narrate trauma, recovery, and resilience.

Lada's compositional process resists traditional jazz idioms. Rather than beginning with formal scores, she outlines conceptual frameworks and develops pieces through rehearsal and improvisation. Her music unfolds as a collective and introspective process, driven by emotional resonance rather than adherence to harmonic conventions or linear form. Improvisation functions not as a virtuosic display but as expressive experimentation. Gender is not an explicit theme in her work, yet her aesthetic choices implicitly challenge the masculinized logic of technical mastery and competition historically dominant in jazz.

This refusal to conform – whether to genre norms, institutional expectations, or identity scripts – positions Lada at the margins of the jazz canon. Her innovations are often received not as contributions to the genre but as eccentricities. While male composers are praised for experimentation, women's aesthetic deviations are more frequently framed as idiosyncratic or non-serious. Obradović's insistence on a personal and affective compositional language is thus both an artistic and political stance: a redefinition of jazz authorship that emphasizes interiority, conceptual design, and collaborative emergence.

⁵ Obradovic Tixier Duo, *12:19*. https://youtu.be/_KNbGs6W-DA?si=9rlW5Kd-KYoISBDst acc.10.04.2025.

⁶ Obradovic Tixier Duo, *Unchained Hope*. <https://youtu.be/9k62dJD7vTc?si=b-JC4UT6vJwQ7gs8e> acc. 10.04.2025.

Element	Traditional Masculine Jazz Traits	Nevena's Approach	Lada's Approach
Composition	Defined sections, climaxes, brass-led orchestration strict form (number, metrics, function)	Trough-composed, evolving forms, non-linear reharmonization, mixing styles	No strict compositions - structures arise organically in performance, non-defined styles, fluidity
Improvisation	Competitive, high-energy, individualistic solos	Improvisation embedded into the structure rather than dominating it	Improvised narratives rather than <i>showcase</i> solos
Rhythmic Function	Strong backbeat, high-energy comping, aggressive punctuation, steady	Layered rhythmic interplay, rhythmic patterns changing, emphasis on sonic textures	Rhythmic soundscapes rather than strict time-keeping, not strict metrics
Soloist Role	"Cutting contests", dominant instrumental voices	Ensemble balance-individuals emerge from the structure rather than overpowering it	Non-hierarchical approach to drumming - emphasis on groove, melody, and resonance

Comparative Discussion: Navigating Semi-Peripherality, Legitimacy, and Artistic Autonomy

The trajectories of Nevena Pejčić and Lada Obradović illuminate shared patterns and distinct strategies in negotiating gender, geography, and genre. Both artists originate from national contexts characterized by weak cultural infrastructure and negligible gender equity measures. They have both migrated to Western Europe, where institutional access, public funding, and cultural capital are more readily available. Yet their positions within these systems remain contingent – shaped by their cultural background, citizenship status, and the politics of identity.

Nevena, who is at an earlier stage of her career, emphasizes the transformative power of education and access to ensembles, grants, and audiences. Her aesthetic development reflects a break from formalist jazz training in Serbia and a growing confidence in non-linear, ensemble-oriented composition. Her reflections highlight the dissonance between aesthetic freedom and gendered reception.

Lada, who has more experience and security regarding citizenship, articulates a more ambivalent relationship with institutional frameworks. While she benefits from structural support in France, she critiques the bureaucratization of identity in inclusion policies and remains skeptical of tokenistic diversity initiatives. Her compositional approach focuses less on genre codes and more on narrative, emotional, and performative dimensions. Her music reflects a long trajectory of displacement and adaptation, structured around sensory metaphor and internal dialogue.

Both artists exemplify *hyper-identity* as a lived condition: their artistic subjectivities have formed through layered negotiations across national, institutional, and aesthetic terrains. They occupy positions of conditional inclusion – they are recognized within certain frameworks but excluded from others. Their work reflects the contradictions of semi-peripherality: while they are marginalized in their home contexts, their legitimacy in Western Europe remains contingent and uneven. The need to constantly translate artistic vision across cultural boundaries reinforces a state of productive instability.

This instability, however, also creates opportunities for aesthetic innovation. Neither Pejčić nor Obradović adheres to the dominant dramaturgies of jazz composition. Both reject the centrality of soloistic virtuosity and explore alternative logics of form, interaction, and sonic meaning. Their work challenges the genre's historical alignment with masculine authority and proposes different models of authorship grounded in collectivity, dissonance, and affect. By foregrounding their experiences of migration and exclusion, they articulate a politics of sound that resists assimilation and reimagines the conditions of music belonging.

Conclusion

The stories of Lada and Nevena reveal the persistent structural asymmetries within European cultural policy, as well as the potential for artistic practices to reconfigure dominant narratives. Both artists demonstrate how displacement can be a site of critical reflection and aesthetic expansion – not merely a biographical detail, but a generative condition for authorship.

Their narratives have policy implications. While Western European initiatives offer frameworks for gender inclusion, their implementation must progress beyond tokenism and symbolic representation. Support systems must acknowledge the compounded exclusions faced by artists from semi-peripheral regions and design mechanisms that address both structural and epistemic inequities. In the Western Balkans, cultural policy reform must prioritize transparency, gender parity, and public investment to facilitate sustainable artistic careers.

Finally, this study highlights the importance of practice-based research in capturing the embodied and situated aspects of musical identity. Artistic practice, particularly in improvisational and compositional forms, serves as both a site of knowledge production and a form of critical intervention. By highlighting the voices and works of female jazz musicians from the Balkans, this research contributes to a broader reimagining of jazz as a field of diverse narratives, where gender, geography, and genre are not fixed categories but sites of continual negotiation.

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