

Review Article

Understanding Albania's Musical Landscape: An Overview of Current Trends and Influences

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Abstract

The history of music in Albania spans thousands of years, blending influences from the Balkans, the Mediterranean, and various empires that ruled the region. Albania's music scene has evolved tremendously, yet it faces several challenges that impact the preservation, development, and international recognition of its musical heritage. This paper will be focused on the review of the current trends and influences of the musical landscape in the Republic of Albania.

Keywords: Music; heritage; trends; musical landscape; traditional; contemporary.

1. Introduction

The history of music in Albania spans thousands of years, shaped by a blend of Balkan, Mediterranean, and various imperial influences [1]. From ancient times to the present, Albania's music scene has seen significant evolution, while facing challenges that affect the preservation, development, and international recognition of its musical heritage [2].

Albanian music traces its origins back to the Illyrians, the region's earliest known inhabitants, who had distinctive folk songs and dances. As Albania became part of the Roman Empire and later the Byzantine Empire, it absorbed musical elements from these cultures, incorporating instruments like the lyre and the harp. The spread of Christianity in the Balkans further enriched Albanian music, with Byzantine chant exerting a deep influence on early medieval church music.

During Ottoman rule, Albania was exposed to Turkish and Persian musical styles, as well as new instruments and forms. Traditional Albanian instruments such as the "çifteli" (a two-stringed instrument) and the "lahuta" (a one-stringed instrument) bear similarities to those used across the Ottoman Empire. This period fostered the growth of Albania's distinct folk traditions, often tied to regional identities [3, 4]. Southern Albania, in particular, is known for its unique polyphonic singing with a richly layered vocal harmony that remains a hallmark of Albanian music. Storytelling through epic poetry and song was also common, with "songs of bravery" recounting tales of historical resistance.

In the early 20th century, as Albania pursued independence from the Ottoman Empire, music emerged as a powerful expression of national identity [5]. Songs celebrated

Albanian heroes and traditional life. In a later development, of the most thriving period of the Albanian monarchy (the '30s), the fruits of all these two-way efforts were much more visible, see Figure 1 [6].



Figure 1. Famous musicians' artists, from left to right (Jorgjie Truja, Lola Gjoka and Tefta Tashko Koço) [6]

Afterward, under the communist regime (1944–1991), folk music, especially polyphonic styles, was promoted by the state to cultivate a national identity distinct from Western and other Balkan influences. Western music was largely restricted, with classical, folk, and patriotic songs dominating public life. During this time, the state-sponsored National Song and Dance Ensemble performed stylized versions of Albanian folk music and dance, and large events such as the National Folklore Festival in Gjirokaštër showcased these cultural forms.

Following the fall of communism in 1991, Albania opened up to diverse musical influences. Western genres such as pop, rock, and jazz found enthusiastic audiences, especially among the younger generation. The Albanian music industry has since expanded, producing internationally recognized stars like Dua Lipa and Rita Ora (ethnic Albanians based abroad). Albanian-language rap, hip-hop, and electronic music have also gained popularity within and beyond the country's borders. Efforts to preserve traditional music continue, with organizations supporting folk festivals and educational programs on Albanian music and dance. In recognition of its cultural significance, southern Albania's polyphonic singing was designated a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Polyphonic singing, a complex style of group singing known for its distinctive vocal techniques and harmonies, is considered one of the oldest forms of polyphonic music in Europe. Traditional instruments like the “*çifteli*”, the “*lahuta*”, and the bagpipes are integral to Albanian music, used both in solo performances and group ensembles.

Albania's musical legacy embodies resilience and adaptation, balancing modern influences with a strong commitment to folk traditions. The rich heritage of folk, classical, and contemporary music continues to shape Albanian cultural identity. Our study focuses on the challenges, current trends, and influences shaping the musical landscape in the

Republic of Albania. This study provides an overview of key historical milestones and examines the contemporary issues impacting Albanian music today.

2. Music Challenges

While Albania's music scene has transformed significantly over the years, it faces numerous challenges that hinder the preservation, development, and international visibility of its musical heritage. Below are some of the primary issues impacting Albania's music landscape.

- **Loss of traditional music:** Globalization and the rise of Western pop music have contributed to a decline in traditional Albanian folk music, especially among younger generations. Many urban Albanians have become less familiar with their country's polyphonic singing and traditional instruments, risking the loss of unique cultural expressions.
- **Inadequate Archival Resources:** The preservation of Albania's musical heritage, particularly rural folk traditions, is hampered by limited archiving. Although some preservation efforts exist, there is a lack of a comprehensive, accessible archive of traditional music, putting regional musical traditions at risk of being forgotten.
- **Limited access to music education:** Access to quality music education in Albania, especially in rural areas, remains limited. Institutions like the Academy of Arts in Tirana provide specialized training, but the lack of music programs outside urban centers makes it challenging for young people across the country to pursue formal musical training.
- **Insufficient infrastructure and funding:** Albania's infrastructure to support musicians, especially those exploring non-commercial or experimental genres, is underdeveloped. Concert halls, recording studios, and performance spaces are limited, and public funding for the arts remains inadequate, affecting artists' ability to produce and perform their work.
- **Financial instability for musicians:** Many Albanian musicians face financial difficulties, with low wages, limited sponsorships, and a small local market. The industry is largely dominated by a handful of popular artists who achieve success domestically and abroad, limiting opportunities for emerging or niche musicians.
- **Emigration of talent:** Many skilled Albanian musicians emigrate to Western Europe or North America in search of better opportunities. This "brain drain" affects Albania's music industry, leading to a talent gap and limiting the development of a robust, self-sustaining local music scene.
- **Prevalence of music piracy:** Music piracy is a major issue in Albania, with widespread downloading and sharing of music through unofficial channels. This affects artists' revenue and discourages investment in local music production, making it difficult for musicians to sustain their careers.
- **Weak intellectual property laws:** Albania's copyright laws are underdeveloped, making it challenging for musicians to protect their work or earn royalties. This discourages the production of original content, as artists lack both financial incentives and legal safeguards.

- **Limited international exposure:** Despite Albania's rich musical heritage, its traditional and contemporary music often lack international recognition. Polyphonic singing, for example, has UNESCO recognition but is still relatively unknown globally.
- **Lack of support for touring and distribution:** Albanian artists have limited resources and support for performing abroad. Without sufficient touring infrastructure or international connections, it is difficult for Albanian music to reach global audiences and gain international traction.
- **Dominance of pop music and monopolization by media outlets:** The Albanian music scene is dominated by pop music, with a small group of popular artists receiving the majority of radio and media exposure. Television networks closely aligned with certain music labels promote their affiliated artists, limiting the diversity of music available to the public.
- **Homogenization of sound:** The commercial music industry in Albania often promotes mainstream, Western-style pop music, which stifles creative diversity. Many young artists feel pressured to produce commercially viable music rather than exploring traditional Albanian sounds or innovative styles.
- **State interference and bureaucracy:** Political influences sometimes affect cultural initiatives, limiting artistic freedom and funding for the arts. Bureaucracy can slow down efforts to organize music festivals, preserve heritage, or promote Albanian music internationally.
- **Censorship legacy:** Although formal censorship has largely diminished since the communist era, the lingering effects of that period still shape the arts. A cautious approach to politically sensitive or experimental forms of expression remains, affecting the creative landscape.

These challenges collectively impact Albania's music scene, complicating efforts to balance tradition with contemporary influences [7]. Addressing these issues will be essential for fostering a thriving and diverse musical culture in Albania.

3. Musical Landscapes

Today, Albania's musical landscape is a captivating fusion of ancient traditions, emerging pop culture, and diverse influences shaped by the country's rich history and recent embrace of global trends. Below is an overview of key trends and influences shaping the current music scene in Albania:

- **Preservation efforts:** Traditional Albanian music, particularly the distinct isopolyphony from southern Albania, has been undergoing a revival. Recognized by UNESCO, *iso-polyphony* is celebrated as a unique musical form and has gained renewed interest among Albanians and folk music enthusiasts globally.
- **Modern folk fusion:** Young Albanian musicians are now experimenting with folk fusion, blending traditional Albanian music with modern genres like jazz, electronic, and rock. Artists are reimagining folk tunes and traditional instruments, like the "*çifteli*" and "*lahuta*", within contemporary music, creating a fresh sound that appeals to younger audiences while honoring cultural roots.

- **Pop stars with global reach:** Albanian-speaking artists like Dua Lipa, Rita Ora, and Bebe Rexha, though based abroad, have achieved international fame and pride in their Albanian heritage. Their success has inspired younger musicians in Albania and boosted local interest in pop music.
- **Influence of the Albanian diaspora:** Albania's large diaspora in Europe and the United States has had a major impact on its music scene. Diaspora artists frequently collaborate with local musicians, and many songs mix Albanian lyrics with English or German, reflecting the multicultural background of the artists.
- **Online platforms for exposure:** Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have transformed how Albanian musicians reach their audiences. Many artists are bypassing traditional media and using these platforms to build followings both domestically and internationally.
- **Digital production tools:** Access to affordable music production software has enabled more musicians to record and produce music independently. This accessibility is especially beneficial for young, independent artists in Albania who may lack resources but are creatively ambitious.
- **Growth of music festivals:** Music festivals in Albania have become increasingly popular, especially on the coast. Besides electronic music, there are festivals celebrating Albanian rock, folk, and hip-hop, creating a festival culture that attracts both locals and tourists.
- **Regional collaborations:** Albania's music industry frequently collaborates with artists from neighboring Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro, where Albanian-speaking populations reside. This interconnected music scene has fostered regional hits and collaborations, reinforcing shared cultural identities across borders.
- **Pan-Balkan influence:** Albanian music, particularly pop and hip-hop, has drawn influence from other Balkan music traditions. Musicians often incorporate Balkan rhythms, melodies, and even elements of turbo-folk to appeal to a wider Balkan audience. These collaborations bring a uniquely Albanian perspective to the broader regional music scene.
- **Piracy and copyright issues:** Music piracy remains prevalent, affecting artists' ability to earn a steady income. The lack of strong copyright protection and royalty structures poses financial challenges, particularly for independent musicians.
- **Limited infrastructure and resources:** Despite a growing music scene, Albania's music industry infrastructure is still developing. Recording studios, live performance venues, and promotional resources are limited, especially outside Tirana. Many musicians rely on small-scale, self-funded projects to produce and promote their music.
- **Environmental and cultural themes:** With the rise in environmental awareness, some artists focus on themes related to Albania's natural beauty and preservation. These topics often blend with cultural preservation themes, with musicians exploring Albania's landscapes and folklore in their work.

4. Conclusion

This study provides a brief overview of Albania's contemporary musical landscape, a vibrant reflection of the country's rich cultural heritage intertwined with modern influences. Traditional and contemporary elements coexist, creating a dynamic music scene that resonates with both domestic and international audiences. The rise of digital media, growing interest in fusion genres, and the increasing popularity of music festivals all point to a promising future for Albanian music. However, challenges in infrastructure, financial stability, and cultural preservation remain. Albanian music today serves as a bridge between its storied past and a globally connected future, presenting a distinctive identity that continues to evolve.

Conflict of Interests

The authors would like to confirm that there is no conflict of interests associated with this publication and there is no financial fund for this work that can affect the research outcomes.

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