

Microtonality in Serbia: A (Paradoxical) Mediator between the National and Global

Abstract. Even though Serbian, like any traditional music, is not based on the twelve-tone equal temperament, microtonality in Serbian art music was introduced not from folklore but by Serbian composers who studied in Prague with Alois Hába, which was taken to be almost a gesture of renouncing the national tradition and embracing global trends. Nonetheless, the waning interest in microtones was revived in the second decade of the 21st century among a generation of younger composers just finishing their doctoral studies. Almost invariably, they connect microtones with their interest in all things ancient, traditional, ritualistic, and mythological, and, very importantly, in incorporating them into modern musical languages and composing techniques. Ethnic traditions are important, and the composers have demonstrated their readiness to embrace the traditions of the most diverse ethnicities, which makes inclusiveness the hallmark of their creative endeavors. They regard microtonality (or, precisely, quarter-tones as the approximation of all non-tempered tuning systems) as an important agent of recreating ancient or demotic traditions. Consequently, the role of microtones can be seen as (at least) doubly mediating. It mediates between various traditions, as their common denominator, as it were. At the same time, microtonal systems are capable of performing another kind of mediation, being, on the one hand, highly artificial, resulting from mathematical calculations and cutting-edge technology capable of producing them, and on the other, belonging to a world that is ancient, primordial, unadulterated by civilization. Within the present considerations of the national vs global, the former aspect is generally seen as standing outside national associations, while the latter bears national traits regardless of whether the origin is in a single nation, several of them, or in some kind of abstract idea of the national.

Keywords: Serbian music, microtonality, national, global.

Writing about microtonal music in Serbia does not appear to be a fruitful and promising task. True, several notable Serbian composers studied at the Prague Conservatory,¹ and some were students of Alois Hába. They left a handful of quarter-tone compositions that nobody has performed for decades, and which add very little to their reputation. Over the last several decades, some colleagues of mine did sprinkle a quarter-tone or two through some of their compositions. So did I, for that matter. However, it was only in the previous decade that microtones aroused some interest among the composers belonging approximately to the millennial generation, but they are still limited to a dozen or so compositions, and we are yet to see where we are going therefrom. Of course, some peculiar intonations occur in folk music (Fig. 1), but this is the case with any ancient or demotic tuning system.

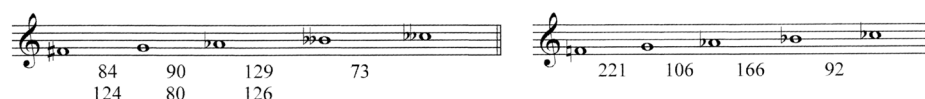


Figure 1. Serbian folk scales with adjacent intervals expressed in cents (Golemović 2016, 21)

Another important thread of the Serbian musical tradition is the chant of the Serbian Orthodox Church based on *Octoechos*, the system of eight *echoi*, modes, or rather a specific combination of modes, melodic formulae, and spiritual qualities associated with them. Non-equally tempered tuning is present there as well. To be precise, non-tempered tuning does not necessarily include narrow intervals, but insofar as professionally educated musicians generally take the twelve chromatic notes for granted, the difference between them and a given non-standard tuning can be expressed in microtones. We could call this “latent microtonality,” but for the present article this distinction will not be relevant.

It is not only the question of the quantity of output. There is hardly a work in the history of Serbian music that is considered a national masterpiece that contains microtones. Moreover, the microtones I am referring to are almost exclusively quarter-tones as a subdivision of the equally tempered twelve-tone scale. In the entire analyzed corpus, I have identified only one single composition with two or three instances of sixth-tones. We do not encounter any of the more sophisticated procedures, such as experimenting with other divisions of the octave and so on. Nor are the roles ostensibly assigned to microtones structurally significant. Generally, they are used sporadically, with little harmonic function, and virtually no structural weight. More often than

¹ Among them, particularly notable are Jovan Bandur (1899–1956); Mihovil Logar (1902–1998); Dragutin Čolić (1907–1987); Ljubica Marić (1908–2003); Milan Ristić (1908–1982); Stanojlo Rajičić (1910–2000); Vojislav Vučković (1910–1942).

not, they are not even deeply embedded in melody. A typical passage containing microtones would look like the one presented in Figure 2.

a) Stanislava Gajić: *Travels and Talks*

b) Ana Kazimić: *Muerto de amor*

Figure 2. Quarter-tones in melody

The notated quarter-tones serve to embellish or enrich the melody, and are clearly subsidiary to “regular” chromatic pitches. Much less commonly, they are used as part of harmony, and it is perhaps only in the composition by Nikola Vetnić that we find something like an emerging harmonic system based on microtones (Fig. 3).

a) Draško Adžić: *Archaic Scenes—Cries and Whispers for Vocal-Instrumental Ensembles*

b) Nikola Vetnić: *...of Uruk the Sheepfold*

Figure 3. Microtones in harmony

Yet, if a music analyst cannot find remarkable material for study, nor a dedicated microtonalist a source of inspiration, there is still a sense in which this issue is highly relevant for our present interests. Namely, it is precisely when we discuss the national vs international vs global that Serbian microtonal music merits particular attention. A careful listener will have noticed that so far I have used expressions such as “appear” and “ostensibly,” and I qualified my statements with “almost,” and “more often than not.” Microtonality has never been a major factor in the development of Serbian music, but its role may have been more significant than these introductory statements suggest. I already demonstrated this in my contribution to the volume entitled *Microtonal Music in Central and Eastern Europe* edited by Rūta Stanevičiūtė and Leon Stefanija (Zatkalik 2020).

This presentation is largely based on that article, but now the emphasis is on the relationship between the national and supranational aspects.

I will begin by highlighting a paradox. As was the case with many small nations, marginalized in various ways, Serbia entered the world of Western art music—roughly in the third quarter of the 19th century—through musical tradition. As I have indicated, the Balkan ear is tuned to non-tempered scales and narrow intervals. Our first professional composers explicitly stated their awareness of this fact. Yet, they harmonized, arranged and built upon folk music within the strict equally tempered tuning. The logic behind this is clear. Serbs, struggling for their national, cultural, and political emancipation and their liberation from the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, sought to achieve this not only militarily and by asserting their national identity, but also through urbanization, modernization, and adaptation to Western cultural models. This tendency remained prominent throughout a great deal of subsequent history. Building on tradition was a perfectly logical path, but so was the translation of folk music into idioms accessible to a broader, global cultural community. The Western European canon of the last decades of the 19th century and the turn of the 20th offered virtually no alternative to the twelve-tone equal temperament.

However—and herein lies the paradox—what little microtonality existed in the history of Serbian music before the present century was introduced from Western sources, even if we had our “national” microtonality at hand. This was part of the same tendency of assimilating Western culture, only this culture had changed. In other words, a small nation, catching up with the big world while riding the wave of 19th-century romantic nationalism, for all its love for all things national, felt that it still needed to dispense with certain aspects of its tradition to become more compatible with the trends in what was at that time modern composing. The coarse, dissonant, “out-of-tune,” rustic sound had to be sacrificed. When modern composing evolved into something else, being part of it meant, for some composers, transcending the twelve tone barriers. Hence Ljubica Marić and other students of Hába. Admittedly, Hába’s and Wyschnegradsky’s quarter-tones constitute a tiny portion of European inter-war avant-garde. Likewise, the microtonal element is by no means a major contribution of that generation of Serbian composers, but is certainly a radical and striking feature, a readily recognizable token of their readiness to go global and embrace state-of-the-art composing techniques.

After World War II, however, for a variety of reasons they practically never returned to quarter-tone writing. Among them, Ljubica Marić, who stands to this day as one of the leading composers in Serbian history, may be tentatively regarded as an exception. Retaining a great deal of her modernist past, she also delved deep into Serbian demotic, and especially ecclesiastic tradition. Her use of microtones is very limited, but, for instance, in the composition *Octoechos Monody* for solo cello from 1984, microtones suggest themselves again as a token, but with the opposite sign, fulfilling a function contrary to the one this same composer assigned them decades before (Fig. 4). Formerly a badge of modernity, a distancing from tradition, now it precisely evokes tradition. Ljubica Marić draws her inspiration from the Orthodox chant, and microtonal inflections are a significant symbolic gesture within the prevailing twelve-tone chromatic framework.

a) Original chant transcribed in 12-ET

Cantabile ♩=ca. 30

b) *Monody* with microtonal inflections

Figure 4. Ljubica Marić, *Monodia Oktoeha*

Microtones in her work enter into yet more complex relations, as in her *Asymptote* for violin and strings (1986) where quarter-tones are used sporadically in the violin part. While retaining their function as an indicator of traditional Serbian cultures, they also serve as a probe into the micro-world of musical tissue, a striving toward the infinitesimal while never, of course, attaining it, just as a curve reaches its asymptote only in infinity. In the liner notes for her CD, she compared this to humanity's struggle to achieve life's goal. Thus, scant as they are, microtones constitute a point of intersection between a specific (ethnic) tradition and more abstract and universal philosophical reflection.

This notwithstanding, we need to bear in mind that we are talking about a handful of composers, a handful of compositions, each with a handful of quarter-tones. The second decade of this century, however, saw an eruption of interest in microtones. I use a cautious formulation "interest in," because this again hasn't resulted in significant advancement in microtonal music *per se*, or in any quantitatively impressive contribution, yet the composers in question routinely introduce microtones and make a point of that fact.

The composers I am engaging with are listed below, with their birth years, affiliations (where applicable), and the titles of their representative works.

- Draško Adžić (1979), assistant professor, Faculty of Music, University of Arts in Belgrade: *Arhaiski prizori—šaputanja i krici za vokalno-instrumentalne ansamble* [Archaic Scenes—Cries and Whispers for Vocal-Instrumental Ensembles] (2017).
- Milan Aleksić (1978), professor, Academy of Arts, University of Novi Sad: *Povratak* [Return], for orchestra and narrator, based on the *Eighth Book of Odyssey* (2015).
- Stanislava Gajić (1980), assistant professor, Academy of Arts, University of Novi Sad: *Putovanja i razgovori* [Travels and Talks]: *Song Cycle for Soprano, Tenor, Flute and String Quintet*, lyrics by Dimitrije Kokanov (2014).
- Ana Kazimić (1985), *Muerto de amor—Dance Fantasy for Vocal-instrumental Ensemble and Electronics* (2016).
- Dragan Latinčić (1982), associate professor, Faculty of Music in Belgrade: *Batal—Preludes for String Orchestra* (2013).
- Nina Perović² (1985), lecturer, Music Academy, University of Montenegro in Cetinje: *Ritus—ritual songs for women's choir, chamber orchestra, piano, percussion and electronics* (2015).
- Vladimir Trmčić (1983), assistant professor, Faculty of Philology and Arts, University of Kragujevac: *Late Autumn—A Landscape for Alto Flute, Two Harps and Two Accordions* (2016).
- Dorotea Vejnović (1986), lecturer, Academy of Arts in Novi Sad: *Kraljice* [Queens]—chamber fantasy for vocal-instrumental ensemble, female voice and electronics (2018).
- Nikola Vetnić (1984): *...of Uruk the Sheepfold for Chamber Ensemble, Singer and Narrator* (2016).

On this occasion, I left out some of their younger colleagues, as well as Serbian composers living abroad. An exception to this latter restriction will be the Serbian-Swedish composer Đuro Živković (also spelled Djuro Zivkovic), for the reasons explained below. The works listed were written as doctoral projects at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade, but these compositions are far above mere schoolwork. The very titles tell a great deal about their preoccupations, and this is explicitly corroborated by the statements they have made about their creative poetics, sources of inspiration, aesthetics, and ideology. The diversity of cultural references is astounding. Thus, the return from Aleksić's title is the return of Odysseus to Ithaca. He discovers affinity between the Homeric and Serbian epic traditions, and since Serbian tradition is better preserved, it also serves as a proxy for the ancient Greek one. In this revival of Serbian/Greek tradition, all parameters are affected, and he even reproduces the Aristotelian formal organization of the tragedy. Microtones naturally enter into the picture as part of that recreation. In fact, he is iconoclastic against twelve-tone equal temperament, calling it unmusical and claiming that its use has done the greatest damage in the history of music. The natural acoustic eco-system, he opines, the natural dwelling place of music over thousands of years, has been replaced by a rigid, essentially unmusical system.

Draško Adžić emphasizes mythological aspects, Slavic and Irish, as well as folk music from the Balkans, which inevitably brings up the subject of non-tempered intonation. At the same time, he makes references to the traditional Japanese No Theater. In addition, he finds inspiration both in so-called pagan expressionism of Stravinsky and Xenakis's *Oresteia*, complete with microtones.

² A Montenegrin composer, her inclusion in this list is justified by her being a Belgrade student.

Stanislava Gajić starts with the myth of Orpheus, but then adds a number of other extramusical references. Musically, her influences include Serbian *Octoechos*, folk music from various regions: Serbia, Armenia, Argentina, as well as 20th-century composers Ravel, Ligeti, again *Oresteia* by Xenakis, and Ljubica Marić.

Ana Kazimić in her *Muerto de amor* starts with the poetry of García Lorca, which “legitimizes” a range of procedures proper to Andalusian musical tradition, with particular emphasis on microtonal melodic inflections. Flamenco itself is already an amalgam of cultures, but her omnivorous interests are further reflected in her pitch organization that includes Indian scales, Arabic maqam, Locrian and Spanish Phrygian modes, but at the same time procedures derived from dodecaphonic thinking. This last aspect seems particularly incongruous, but we will account for that later.

Dragan Latinčić talks about the dialogue of cultures. The title of his piece alludes to the carpet-weaving traditions of the Balkans and Middle East, and his aim is to translate the musical language and selected motifs from the cultural, historical, and spiritual experiences of the East into the musical language and experience of Western civilizations. Vladimir Trmčić conjures up Chinese landscape paintings, but he also refers to Claude Debussy, Toru Takemitsu, and especially to Olivier Messiaen. In Nikola Vetni’s title we recognize the epic of *Gilgamesh*.

The Grawemeyer Award-winning Serbian-Swedish composer Djuro Zivkovic (also spelled Đuro Živković, 1975) does not fit into my selection, but his international renown, and at the same time strong ties with his national soil make him a very good case for our present interests. Of particular interest is his composition *On the Guarding of the Heart* for piano and chamber orchestra. Again, those who are truly microtonally-minded might find the whole affair disappointing: microtonality in his works is actually reduced to occasional quarter-tones, often placed in a texture that precludes the recognition of any individual pitch. Yet, there is more to this than meets the eye: in fact, microtones do play an important role, and it will transpire that they owe part of their significance to what they are not, to the roles they do not perform.

Microtonality in Zivkovic arises from several sources. He draws on various facets of Serbian traditional music. These include ancient rural heterophonic singing, wailing for the dead, chanting of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the chordophone instrument *gusle* used to accompany the reciting of epic poetry. This certainly suggests “the national.”

At the same time, he is very much involved with exploring mathematical-acoustical relations. This is in turn connected with his interest in Ancient Greek philosophers/mathematicians/acousticians, Pythagoras and Archytas. Of course, in this context the “Greek” qualification greatly surpasses national boundaries, given how their ideas shaped the entire Western culture. Zivkovic thinks of them in terms of mathematical relations in music (Zivkovic 2015), but also of the metaphysical and ethical quality of their ideas and the unity between harmonies: astronomy, music, and humanity. He endeavors to achieve totality, to “condensate everything in mind and soul,” which points to spiritual, indeed mystical aspects to his work. Joining him in his spiritual quest, and looking for a beacon, we would probably find it in his statement about “trying to squeeze yourself and art together to get the essence. ... fighting for the essence³ is the most important in the creation of art.” With microtones, he probes the “subatomic” level of musical substance in the pursuit of that essence. The substance is infinitely divisible: we are on a mission of reaching for the infinite. That infinite is not some great beyond, it does not require any expansion of boundaries: it is infinite difference within the matter, indeed within ourselves.

The infinite divisibility also means that the essence remains unattainable. A line must be drawn somewhere. Zivkovic draws it at quarter-tones. As a practicing musician—a professional violinist and improviser—he is aware how problematic smaller divisions become both for the performer and the listener. But it is not only practical considerations as to why a limit is needed. His microtonal milieu is there to mediate between the unfathomable depths of the essence he searches for, and the experiential world. It could be conceived of as an event horizon, a barrier—even if an arbitrary one—beyond which the acoustic substance condenses into an acoustic black hole; it guards us against the dark matter/energy of the musical universe. We need to be guarded. The composer cautions us to examine ourselves constantly. We ought to pay attention to our inner kingdom, the heart: we should “guard our heart”, not allowing any wrong things to enter into it.

³ Statements by Zivkovic are taken from his 2017 interview. Coincidence with the title of Pierre Krebs’s book *Fighting for the Essence* is unclear, but we surmise that it is unintentional.

This said, we have pinned down the key source of his spirituality. It revolves round Eastern Orthodox mystical texts collected under the title *Philokalia*, written between the 4th and 15th centuries by spiritual masters of the hesychastic tradition. In particular, his award-winning *On the Guarding of the Heart* directly refers to the *Philokalia* text “On Watchfulness and the Guarding of the Heart” by a 13th-century monk Nikiphoros. While the text itself aims at religion and spirituality, thus divested of anything that could be seen as narrowly national, this type of spirituality has become integral to Serbian, as well as Greek cultures.

Microtones do not establish a system of pitch organization. They do not (meaningfully) add a number of pitch classes to the overall pitch collection. They do not enhance functionality by sharpening or flattening leading tones. They do not decorate melodies. They do not even directly invoke their demotic, ecclesiastic or ancient Greek sources. Microtones are not even perceptible as such. When all plausible identities are subtracted, what remains may be the world of Democritus’ atoms or particles in Brownian motion. They do not so much affect the listeners as create conditions for the exchange, reciprocal determination, mutual transformation of the several worlds to which we could ascribe the properties of the individual, national, international and global.

If we consider now the entire body of music we have engaged with, it is obvious how nationalism and internationalism enter into the picture, and then how microtones fit in. They are somehow treated as a mediator or the common factor for Serbian, Balkan, Armenian, Indian or whichever musical cultures. However, what is at stake here it is not always a specific ethnicity, rather a gesture indicating the general idea of the traditional, the primitive, the demotic. And sometimes, it is not only about ethnicity at all, but rather the relations between the demotic vs the ecclesiastic (recall references to *Octoechos*): two cultures, while nationally unified are still sufficiently distinct; but then, they share some common traits, and microtones are used to capture that commonality. And there is the ritual on top of that, to bring together the sacred and the profane.

From a broader perspective, retraditionalization is ubiquitous in contemporary Serbian society, often detrimentally so, particularly in the context of the political situation. The younger composers’ interest in all things ancient, traditional, ritualistic, and mythological is no surprise. Of course, the composers from our sample do not by any means want to be stuck in the past. They are creative and inquisitive; they are all keen on creating something original or unique. Therefore, a more precise formulation would be: what they are onto is a dialogue between the past and the present, incorporating the past into the present. Perović and Vejnović recreate ancient rituals with electronic sound. The Andalusian tradition of Ana Kazimić is not only tradition, it is refracted through the verses of a modernist poet García Lorca, and then combined with dodecaphonic and many other procedures. Twelve-tone writing is *par excellence* an equally tempered system, but juxtaposing it with microtones is just an instance of the widespread tendency to integrate a large number of approaches. We could relativize the issue of the national vs global by treating twelve-tone composition as some kind of Austrian brand—after all, the moment we mention it, we think of the Vienna School—but I believe most of us will agree that it is, or was, rather a global phenomenon.

Anyhow, being inheritors of postmodernism, the composers under consideration feel they have the entire history of music, and the entire world at their disposal. And having mentioned postmodernism: microtones, once an indication of radical modernism, a glaring sign of renouncing the past, and of exclusiveness, are now used as a token of this all-embracing, globalizing attitude. More than that, they can serve as an agent that brings the two together. Thus, the briefest possible microtonal formula would read as shown below.

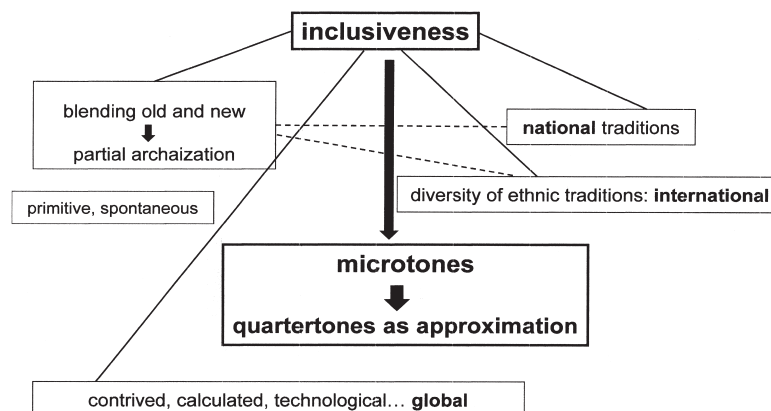


Figure 5. Microtonal formula

Microtonality also bridges the gap between what we could loosely call the highbrow and lowbrow cultures. It is highly artificial, resulting from mathematical calculations and sometimes cutting-edge technology capable of producing it, and at the same time, it is associated with a world that is ancient, primordial, unadulterated by civilization, often uneducated. In the context of this conference's theme, and with some simplification, the former aspect can be generally seen as standing outside any national associations, therefore representing the global, while the latter bears national traits regardless of whether the origin is in a single nation, several of them, or in some kind of abstract idea of the national. Or so it seems, until we start thinking about the archaic and primordial as something shared by the entire humanity, which would again make it global.

With Djuro Zivkovic, however, we surpass even that. His spiritual quest opens out to the realms beyond, however one conceives of that realm. More precisely, it opens in two directions. Outward, beyond the personal, beyond the national, beyond the global toward the cosmic, and finally possibly the metaphysical. At the same time, he turns inward, and away from his national heritage and his international reputation, toward the deepest realms of the soul. This infinity within oneself is beyond the individual, reaching the field of intensities where the artist's affects and percepts (along with the philosopher's concepts and the scientist's states of affairs) only begin to take shape as pre-individual singularities; indeed even deeper to the primordial chaos.⁴ Not only the national or global cease to play a role there: even the individual is dissolved.

While the microtonal share in the Serbian overall compositional output is tiny, it proves to be a multifaceted and fruitful resource. To divide a semitone by half may not seem like a spectacular achievement in the 21st century, but used with talent and skill proves to be the fulcrum around which revolve a myriad of facets of human culture, in precarious balance between total integration and irreconcilable fragmentation.

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⁴ These ideas are loosely based on the concepts advanced by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, especially in Deleuze & Guattari (1994). I have also relied on Delanda (2002) for specific interpretations of Deleuzian ontology, as well as Grosz (2008) for discussion on chaos and art. I explore connections with the music of Djuro Zivkovic in my forthcoming article.

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Mikrotonalumas Serbijoje: (paradoksalus) mediatorius tarp nacionalumo ir globalumo

Santrauka

Serbų tradicinė muzika, kaip ir bet kuri kita, nėra pagrįsta tolygia dvylikos tonų temperacija. Dėl to gali atrodyti paradoksalu, kad, visų pirma, kai pradėjo formuotis serbų profesionalioji muzika (maždaug XIX a. trečiajame ketvirtyje), ji griežtai laikėsi Vakarų Europai būdingos tolygios temperacijos, nors daugeliu kitų aspektų buvo giliai jaugusi į nacionalinę terpę. Antra, mikrotonalumas atkeliavo su tarpukario avangardo banga, kurią sukėlė tuo metu Prahos konservatorijoje studijavę serbų studentai, ypač tie, kurie mokėsi pas Aloisą Hába. Tačiau tai neturėjo jokių nacionalinio paveldo pėdsakų ir netrukus išblėso. Tik XXI a. antrajame dešimtmetyje ką tik baigusios doktorantūros studijas kompozitorių karta vėl ėmė naudoti ketvirtatonus, bet prie tarpukario kompozitoriams būdingos praktikos negrįžo. Jie beveik visada pabrėžia, kad domisi senovės, tradiciniais, ritualiniais ar mitologiniais dalykais ir, svarbiausia, integruoja juos į šiuolaikinę muzikos kalbą ir komponavimo technikas. Etninės muzikos tradicijos yra svarbios, tačiau šiuo atveju kompozitoriai demonstruoja, kad yra pasiruošę priimti įvairių etninių grupių tradicijas, todėl jų kūrybos bruožas – įtrauktis. Mikrotonalumą (tiksliau, ketvirtatonus, kuriuos jie paprastai naudoja kaip visų netemperuoto derinimo sistemų aproksimaciją) jie laiko svarbia senųjų ar demotinių tradicijų atkūrimo priemone. Todėl, kaip atskleidžiama straipsnyje, mikrotonai atlieka bent dvejopai tarpininkaujantį vaidmenį. Jis tarsi funkcionuoja tarp įvairių tradicijų, yra jų bendras vardiklis. Kartu mikrotoninės sistemos gali atlikti ir kitokio pobūdžio tarpininkavimą dėl savo (bent jau) dvejopos prigimties: viena vertus, jos yra dirbtinės, atsiradusios dėl matematinių skaičiavimų ir pažangiausių technologijų, kita vertus, – lengvai suvokiamos kaip priklausančios senoviniam, pirmykščiame, civilizacijos nepalietam pasauliui. Dabartinių svarstymų apie globalumą ir nacionalumą kontekste pirmasis aspektas paprastai laikomas esąs už nacionalinių asociacijų ribų, o antrasis turi nacionalinių bruožų, nepaisant to, ar jo ištakos glūdi vienoje tautoje, keliose iš jų, ar kokioje nors abstrakčioje nacionalumo idėjoje.