

# Revival of Bulgarian Folk Music During Socialism and the Post-Socialist Transition: Music and Cultural Identity

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*Abstract: This article juxtaposes two periods of Bulgarian folk music revival, which were separated by a period of rejection of Bulgarian traditions and cultural values, and problematizes the success of chalga, a pan-Balkan musical phenomenon from the post-socialist period. By engaging current research of American and Bulgarian scholars and reflecting on the author's recent fieldwork and personal experiences as a performer of Bulgarian folk music, this study raises questions regarding the relationships between state-imposed nationalism and folk traditions, village culture and modern life, the role of media in the dissemination of musical traditions, and the importance of folk music in the construction of modern Bulgarian cultural identity.*

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This article compares two periods of Bulgarian folk music revival (1944-1989 and 2005-2010) separated by a period of rejection of Bulgarian traditions and cultural values (1989-2005). The current study raises questions regarding the relationships between state-imposed nationalism and folk traditions, village culture and modern life, the role of media in the dissemination of musical traditions, and the importance of folk music in the construction of modern Bulgarian cultural identity. The facts and data presented in this study are based on my personal experiences as a performer of Bulgarian folk music since the early 1980s and my fieldwork in Bulgaria during the 1990s-2000s. This study follows a historical chronology: it begins by surveying folk music during the socialist period (1944-1989) and proceeds towards the changes in Bulgarian music which occurred during the post-socialist transition (1989-2010).

## Bulgarian Folk Music during Socialism: “Authentic” Music

The socialist period had an immense impact on the musical traditions of Bulgaria. As early as the 1950s, the Bulgarian socialist government initiated series of activities aiming towards a “revitalization” of ancient, “authentic” Bulgarian traditions. This “state-sponsored revival,” powered by Soviet-modeled nationalism, channeled folk music into new, state-controlled directions. The process of “revitalization” was paralleled by a process of “purification” of existing practices from foreign, polluting musical or non-musical elements. As a young performer of Bulgarian folk music, I witnessed the “authenticization” of existing music practices decades after this process was initiated. In 1986, I appeared in front of a jury as a potential participant in a large national festival. I performed an old, free-rhythm folk song from Northern Bulgaria. After my performance, the jury “advised” me to consider more carefully my repertoire in the future if I wanted to have a successful performance career. Apparently, the lyrics of the old song I had chosen contained a reference to the Ottoman occupation of Bulgaria (1396-1878) which was not in line with the current Party-approved vocabulary regarding the period of Ottoman domination.

In the quest for “pure Bulgarian folk music,” Party censors promoted and sponsored only certain music styles. The favored “authentic” styles were: village music performed by musicians and singers with no professional training; and stage-oriented village music performed by *kolektivi* (amateur folk ensembles) supported by the nationalist socialist movement known as *Hudozhestvena Samodeinost*.

Village music, as referred to by American scholars (Rice 1994; Silverman 1989; Buchanan 1995), is what Bulgarian ethnomusicologists consider “authentic” music – the oldest layer of traditional Bulgarian music (primarily monophonic or diaphonic of the type “melody and drone”) which continued to exist throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and became the foundation of subsequent styles traditionally categorized as folk music. Regardless of media influences, urbanization, and globalization processes, a number of Bulgarian villages preserved older forms of folk music. In rural areas, where folk music was still a living tradition, the Party officials developed a system of censors which permitted only “authentic,” “pure” Bulgarian songs to be performed at public celebrations or state-sponsored festivals. In non-rural areas, where village music was not a vital tradition, “authentic” village music was artificially “revitalized” and even imposed by *Hudozhestvena Samodeinost*. The literal translation of *Hudozhestvena Samodeinost* is “Everyone Creates Art.” In fact, this was a movement which engaged the population of Bulgaria in artistic activities promoting or preserving nationalistic cultural values.

In the early 1950s, Hudozhestvena Samodeinost began sponsoring the creation of kolektivi in every settlement within the borders of Bulgaria. The amateur ensembles' primary function was to preserve and present "the beauty of the local, authentic folklore" on stage at community celebrations, national holidays, and government-sponsored festivals. In her article "Reconstructing Folklore: Media and Cultural Policy in Eastern Europe," Silverman provides detailed information about the nature of kolektivi:

These amateur groups rehearse the folk music, dances, and rituals of the recent past, the pre 1950s. The result is a staged presentation of preserved folklore. Kolektivi are most visible at folk festivals, where participation is carefully screened with an eye to "authenticity." (1989:146)

Hudozhestvena Samodeinost and its kolektivi played a major role for the channeling of village music in particular, carefully managed directions. Although amateur by nature, kolektivi were led by professional choreographers or performers educated at highly specialized Soviet-modeled high schools of folk music in the towns of Pleven, Kotel, and Shiroka Laka. In addition, beginning in 1972, the folklore department at the Higher Institute for Music Education (presently Academy for Music, Dance, and Fine Arts) in the city of Plovdiv began to supply highly qualified conductors and arrangers from its newly established program under the name "Leading Folk Ensembles." While a student at the high school of folk music in Pleven, and later at the Music Academy in Plovdiv, I was trained in the same programs which prepared *kadri* (specialists) or leaders of folk ensembles and kolektivi.

## Bulgarian Folk Music during Socialism: Government-Sponsored Ensemble Folk Music

While at the village level kolektivi regulated the continuation and "revival" of selected folk traditions, in every city, the government established state folk orchestras, folk choirs, and large professional folk ensembles. All these types of ensembles had the role of creating, delivering, and propagating new, modern folk music-based artistic forms. These forms included carefully choreographed ensemble performances, created by professional choreographers, and arranged folk songs and instrumental pieces written by classically trained composers.

In 1951, Filip Kutev<sup>1</sup> founded the first state-sponsored ensemble which

paved the road for the development of choral and instrumental arrangements, ensemble music, and staged ensemble dance performances. In her article, “Metaphors of Power, Metaphors of Truth: The Politics of Music Professionalism in Bulgarian Folk Orchestras,” Buchanan provides valuable information regarding the models followed by Kutev and his goals as a modernizer of both vocal and instrumental Bulgarian music:

In 1951 Filip Kutev, inspired by the Soviet folk ensemble “Pyatnitski,” created the first professional, state-supported Bulgarian folk ensemble. Eventually the leading exponent in a larger system of fourteen such organizations established in urban centers throughout Bulgaria, Kutev’s ensemble performed arrangements of traditional music and song characterized by harmonies, contrapuntal techniques, and formal structures associated with Western classical music on many of the world’s concert stages. The goal of such ensembles was to popularize the musical traditions of Bulgaria’s six primary ethnographic regions (the Shope area, the Rhodopes, Thrace, Pirin-Macedonia, Northern Bulgaria, and Dobrudzha) in a new, sophisticated theatrical venue. (1995:388)

In order to accomplish his goals, Kutev had to also modify the Bulgarian folk instruments<sup>1</sup> and adapt them for their new roles in the large folk ensembles. According to Buchanan, “Kutev... employed two highly skilled instrument makers, Ivan Katsarov and Boris Drakev, to design new instruments - modeled on traditional prototypes - that would meet his needs” (2006:150). Kutev’s biggest problem was the lack of chordophone instruments for his string sections. He requested traditional *gadulka*s and *tamburas* to be made in various sizes (Buchanan 2006:151). According to Buchanan, Kutev was searching for a folk parallel to the sound of a symphonic orchestra (2006:155). In an earlier article devoted to the creation and development of folk orchestras, Buchanan explains the ensemble formation process:

The professional folk orchestras, which featured twelve to twenty-five musicians, expanded the prior instrumental group of diverse instruments into a neotraditional philharmonia of orchestral families. Not only were the five principal instruments found in traditional Bulgarian culture (*kaval*, *gadulka*, *tambura*, *gaida*, and *tupan*) represented by multipart orchestral sections, but new instruments like the viola, cello, and bass *gadulka*, and piccolo *kaval* (*kavalche*) were commissioned by Kutev from Ivan Katsarov, a master instrument crafts-

man, who manufactured them on the basis of symphonic models to extend the range of the instrumental spectrum. For a time, some of the new instruments were equipped with fingerboards derived from the western violin. The forms and sizes of all of the instruments were reshaped and standardized. Tunings, also, were modified and regularized. The construction of these new instruments was accomplished to create orchestral consorts capable of performing melodies in four-part harmony. (1995:389)

Soon after their creation, the folk ensembles and their performances became the “official form” of Bulgarian folk art and the one exclusively marketed to the rest of the world.

From all types of modern, state-sponsored folk music created during socialism, the choral arrangements, which were popularized worldwide by the Bulgarian state female choir, *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares*, became the most prominent symbol of modernized Bulgarian folk music. In her article “Move over Madonna: Gender, Representation, and the ‘Mystery’ of Bulgarian Voices,” Silverman elaborates on the formation of the first Bulgarian vocal choir and the role of Filip Kutev for the establishment of the choral arrangements genre:

Kutev’s brilliant idea was to take traditional village songs, which are monophonic in most of Bulgaria or have drone-based harmony in the southwest region of the country, and to arrange them into four- or five-part Western harmonies, to add dynamics and tempo changes while preserving the throat-placed vocal quality. With the goal of creating a national folk chorus, Kutev traveled around Bulgaria in the early 1950s to recruit the best female village singers and instrumentalists for the newly formed state-sponsored music ensembles. (2004:213)

Folk ensembles and choirs played a major ideological role in the national media and at Party events and celebrations. As Silverman points out:

[E]nsemble music became a significant ideological marker of the elevation of “folk” (or “peasant”) to the realm of “nation”: it was hailed as the “national music” of Bulgaria, as opposed to competing regional and ethnic musics and to popular/folk fusions played at weddings. Composers, ethnomusicologists, and Party ideologues boasted that they were raising the level of folk music to that of Western art music. This was part of a state-sponsored ini-

tiative to “modernize” peasant culture in diverse realms. Folklore had to be “cleaned up” and reworked to make it “art.” (2004:215)

### Bulgarian Folk Music during Socialism: Styles Outlawed by the Socialist State

During socialism, the Party employed folklore as a tool for uniting and homogenizing the population within the Bulgarian borders. The concept of “authenticity” by itself implied the existence of “non-authentic” music repertoires. The “non-authentic,” polluting elements were: songs and melodies of ethnic minorities; the music of the neighboring countries; and all Western influences. From the perspective of ethnicity, the elevation of Bulgarianness (in terms of folklore and moral values) and the establishment of Bulgarian traditions as “the standard” targeted minorities, such as Roma, Bulgarian Turks, and Vlachs.<sup>2</sup> Besides the musical traditions of minorities, the Party censors also targeted wedding music, a genre known for its fusion of styles, ethnic music elements, and foreign influences.

Since the 1950s, censorship suppressed the music of all ethnic minorities and outlawed all types of music that featured Turkish, Western, or any other foreign influences. For example, during the 1960s, Hudozestvena Samodejnost created kolektivi in nearly every village of the region of the city of Vidin, Northwestern Bulgaria, a region with predominant Vlach population. However, many restrictions were applied to the performers of Vlach folklore; traditional songs in the local Romanian dialect were not allowed to be performed in public or included as part of staged presentations of rituals. The complex, nationalism-driven processes of purifying the Bulgarian culture from non-Bulgarian elements are well studied by several Western scholars. As Silverman describes:

We can now better comprehend the government policy of the 1970s and 1980s which seeks to remove all Turkish elements from contemporary culture, leaving the “pure Bulgarian stock.” Thus, in the early 1970s, the Moslem names of Bulgarian-speaking Moslems (*Pomaks*) and of Gypsies were forcibly changed to Slavic names, and in 1985 changes were forced upon the ethnic Turks living in Bulgaria. (1989:144)

The renaming process was parallel to similar processes, such as purifying the literature and Bulgarian language from non-Bulgarian elements.

The music of the Roma and the Bulgarian Turks was considered especially dangerous by the censors owing to its direct musical correlations with Turkish music. Musical folklore of the Bulgarian Roma and the Bulgarian Turks was neither studied by Bulgarian folklorists and ethnomusicologists nor allowed to be performed in the media or at the state-sponsored festivals.

During the late 1970s, in the middle of the socialist period, a new layer of folk music, wedding music, emerged. It shared many melodic and rhythmic characteristics with village music, but it introduced a new emphasis on improvisation, harmony, ornamentation, and influences from American and European rock, jazz, and Indian film music. Wedding music, performed by amplified bands,<sup>3</sup> gradually developed into a new style and became an alternative to the socialist, censorship-regulated folk music dominating the media during this same period. In this context Timothy Rice compares the wedding style to the “official” state-sponsored and regulated folk music:

The important differences between wedding music and the state’s version of “narodna muzika” included (1) new musical instruments, (2) new recording technology, (3) expanded repertoire, (4) growth in technique and virtuosity, (5) more modern techniques from jazz and popular music, and (6) more freedom to improvise. (1994:242)

Wedding orchestras performed in various contexts including calendrical<sup>4</sup> holidays and family celebrations. At weddings, these orchestras performed in restaurants and *barakas* (large tents temporarily erected on the streets). During the 1970s, weddings, the central life-cycle celebrations of Bulgarians, were festive events involving hundreds or thousands of guests. Such weddings lasted up to three days and included processions, indoor activities, and dance events in the village or town squares. Because of the performing context, musicians and scholars, both in Bulgaria and abroad, began to refer to the music as “wedding music,” or “wedding style.”

Officially, wedding orchestras were prohibited from performing Serbian, Greek, Turkish, Romanian, or any kinds of “ethnic” music, particularly, the music of the Roma. Commissions from *Direktsia Muzika* (a government agency that controlled music activities) organized competitions in order to determine the performing level (*kategorija*) of every wedding orchestra. These competitions were a form of government control of the growing phenomenon of wedding music during the 1980s. The incorporation of Western rock and jazz elements, which typify wedding music of this period, were considered particularly dangerous trends since they promoted styles popular in the

capitalist West. Bulgarian scholars completely disregarded wedding music as a phenomenon during socialism and throughout the first decade of the post-socialist transition. To Bulgarian scholars, performers of wedding music were a class of non-professionally trained musicians playing a poorly organized, semi-improvisatory music, which endangered the “authentic” Bulgarian culture. In contrast, Western ethnomusicologists and folklorists, such as Carol Silverman and Timothy Rice,<sup>5</sup> studied in depth the performance and cultural aspects of the wedding style and particularly the tension between wedding musicians and the socialist state.

In the 1980s, wedding music bloomed and reached its climax of popularity. An alternative to the socialist-controlled “authentic” and ensemble music, wedding music performances attracted audiences of thousands. Silverman writes:

The popularity of this contemporary “wedding music” is enormous and a few musicians and singers are as famous as rock stars in the West. The few times these famous contemporary folk musicians are permitted to perform live on television, the viewer turnout is staggering. People crowd around televisions in hotel lobbies to hear and see the improvised music they adore but rarely hear through the official media. A well-known contemporary wedding musician can earn as much money playing at a two-day wedding as an ensemble musician can make in two months. (1989:155)

In 1985, in an attempt to restrict wedding music, the Bulgarian communist government organized festivals in which wedding music could be performed in censored venues. As Silverman observes:

For the first time in 1985, the [Bulgarian] government organized a “Festival of Wedding Music” and offered a prize for the best band. A few hundred bands entered, but no band won first prize. The rationale for withholding the first prize was that no one played “pure” Bulgarian music. Moreover, all band members were required to attend a meeting after the festival in which an ethnomusicologist lectured them about how they have allowed foreign elements to corrupt Bulgarian music. Their mission should be to purify the music to its original state. (1989:156)

Timothy Rice further elaborates on the Stambolovo (Thrace region) wedding music contests.<sup>6</sup> The festivals were the primary impetus for new wedding



music concert repertoire:

The festival proved so successful that by 1988 it had been “nationalized,” controlled by the central “concert direction” in Sofia, and augmented by preliminary regional festivals all over the country. By taking control of the festival and its aesthetics, the state apparatus tried to alter, defuse, and diminish the anti-establishment challenge of wedding music. (1994:251)

Initially, at Stambolovo, wedding orchestras performed instrumental suites, dance tunes from their dance repertoire, and wedding style songs. Later in the 1980s, most of the concert repertoire consisted of suites and medleys featuring fast tempos, thematic contrasts, improvisations, and mixed meters. All of these compositions were modeled after the trend-setting pieces of Ivo Papasov and his Trakiya (Thrace) orchestra.

The negative influence of wedding music was considered particularly dangerous for young performers trained at the specialized high schools of folk music. For example, after enrolling at the “Panayor Pipkov” music school in the town of Pleven, I was forced to sign a petition stating that I agree to be expelled from school if caught performing at a wedding.

## The Post-Socialist Transition: Decline of Bulgarian Folk Music

The socialist regime collapsed on the 10th of November, 1989 and the Bulgarian society entered a period defined by Western scholars as a “post-socialist transition.” According to Rice:

Since 1989, the citizens of Bulgaria have been involved in an economic, political, ideological and musical struggle – thankfully peaceful – to redefine themselves in a world of new possibilities, free of the constraints of the previous forty-five years. (2002: 25)

Most Bulgarians also perceived the 1990s as a transitional period from a totalitarian regime to a new, democratic society. In the early 1990s, most of the political agencies in charge of music censorship were disbanded. On one hand, after decades of suppression, wedding music quickly began to carve its niche in the national media. On the other hand, hyperinflation and the destabilized economy impoverished the true sponsors of wedding music, the patrons hiring wedding orchestras to perform at family celebrations. In the winter of 1994, hyperinflation reached its

peak. Within a year, many Bulgarians lost their life savings including funds set aside for elaborate weddings. After losing its patronage, wedding music entered a period of gradual decline.

In the early 1990s, Bulgarians began hiring DJs for their family celebrations. DJs were an alternative, cheaper form of entertainment, which provided a huge variety of music, satisfying the musical preferences of large groups of people. Hiring one person was far more affordable than hiring a wedding orchestra consisting of at least five members.

A primary characteristic of the “transition,” a period of change in social, economic, political, and cultural spheres, was a rejection of previously established cultural values. Many types of folk-based music genres (village, ensemble, and choral) suffered a massive audience withdrawal because of their association with the socialist regime and its ideology. In spite of the global success of *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares* (a Grammy award in 1990) in the 1990s, it became harder and harder for composers, conductors, and performers to attract audiences. The economic crisis in the country, along with unpredictable hyperinflation, affected composers and their endeavors to further explore new forms of Bulgarian folk music.

In light of the weakened state and the association of *Hudozhestvena samodeinost* with socialism, the post-socialist governments stopped subsidizing amateur activities. However, some of the collectives survived and continued to perform on stage during post-socialism even though the remaining performing contexts included only state festivals.

After decades of state-supported folk music, there was a definite need for something new in the Bulgarian sound space, something similar to the Serbian turbo-folk, disco-folk, and the Greek *Rembetika*. With the new political changes, the democratization of the post-totalitarian society, and a hope for higher standards of living, Bulgarians embraced and expected the emergence of new musical genres. According to Rice:

During the later years of the communist period many people tuned out the national radio station that broadcast that music and that ideology and tuned in to Serbian, Greek and Turkish radio station, which broadcast new forms of popular music that Bulgarians could relate to – music with a Balkan accent. (2002:31)

## The Post-Socialist Transition: The Rise of *Chalga*

In the early 1990s, a new genre named *chalga* (a pan-Balkan folk-pop fusion) began to gain popularity throughout Bulgaria. Many private radio stations be-

gan broadcasting chalga which gradually became the style of preference for many Bulgarians. Due to the formulaic structure of chalga songs, which include simple harmonizations and easy-to-remember refrains, Bulgarians began singing a new repertoire: chalga songs and especially “the catchy” chalga refrains.

On one hand, it is challenging to define chalga due to its diverse nature. On the other hand, chalga could be easily defined as an amalgamation of all elements prohibited and suppressed during communism: *kyuchek* (Romani belly dance) rhythms, *taksim* (Turkish free-rhythm melodies) improvisations, foreign influences, vulgar texts, sexist language, and excessive demonstration of female sexuality. In his 2002 article “Bulgaria or Chalgaria: The Attenuation of Bulgarian Nationalism in a Mass-Mediated Popular Music,” Rice provides a similar definition of chalga: “Whether called *popfolk* or *chalga*, it began as an appropriation of what once were considered, during the communist regime, foreign and therefore suspect musical styles and a rejection of the kinds of music that were supported during that period” (2002:31).

The chalga genre draws on many diverse repertoires: Serbian Turbo and Disco Folk, Greek Pop, Turkish and Middle Eastern pop music, Romani music, Macedonian music, Latino rhythms, Flamenco, Western Pop, Rock, Blues, Bollywood music, etc. Chalga has utilized elements from every profitable music style – clichés, melodies, harmonic formulas, textures, rhythms, and stage presentation.

In its early days, what is known today as chalga carried different names: pop-folk, ethno pop, Pirin folk, modern folk, ethno-rock, etc. Because of the original negative connotation of the word chalga (non-professionally or semi-professionally made music), chalga performers deliberately attempted to distance themselves from the term in the media space. Prior to the end of socialism, there was no formal training in chalga singing in Bulgaria. In the 1990s neither folk musicians nor pop musicians would associate themselves with chalga. Several natural rhetorical questions arise: who performed chalga, where did the performers learn how to sing chalga, and how did chalga become the dominant musical genre in Bulgaria so quickly?

Some of the first performers of chalga were musicians making a living by singing at restaurants and bars. These performers created the first chalga songs, translations of Greek and Serbian pop-folk songs. The names of the first chalga stars were: Gloria, Toni Dacheva, Rumiana, Sashka Vaseva, Orhan Murad, all of whom were experienced restaurant singers.

The subversive effect of early chalga triggered a fiery debate in the Bulgarian media and newspapers. The Bulgarian intelligentsia was appalled by chalga and the inappropriate moral values it promoted. Teachers, scholars,

and musicians launched a verbal crusade against “the ultimate evil” – chalga. Most of the musicians who lost their state support or market niche blamed chalga for their lack of work. Folk musicians from the state ensembles patiently awaited a revival, a return to the “pure Bulgarianness.” Village music and kolektivi practically disappeared with the end of socialism and the withdrawal of state support. The wedding musicians had to give the stage to DJs who provided cheap entertainment. At the same time, politicians promised “quick progress towards democratic regime” and a near end of the economic crisis. Regardless of the promises or predictions of politicians, intellectuals, and folk musicians, the crisis did not end and instead of disappearing, chalga received a serious boost.

The fairly new post-communist music distribution industry, which sold primarily Serbian, Greek, and Wedding music tapes, began to make quick profits from the first chalga recordings. Entrepreneurs, who sold pirated tapes on flea markets and public squares, advertised at high volumes the first hits of chalga *Radka Piratka* (Radka the Pirate), *Piramidi-Faraoni* (Pyramids and Pharos), and *Kamanite Padat* (Falling Stones). Subsequently, entrepreneurs established home- and garage-based recording studios with one main purpose: quick manufacturing of chalga tapes and CDs. In the late 1990s, the studios obtained two powerful software programs – one of which was a software plug-in – which forever changed the Bulgarian audiences.

Auto-Tune Pitch Corrector is software developed by the Antares Company and released in 1997 which automatically adjusts out of tune notes to a predefined scale. The graphic mode of the program allows more precise pitch adjustment. Auto-Tune Pitch Corrector was also released as a hardware unit (a real time pitch adjustment processor) which became a crucial component of chalga production. My first encounter with Auto-Tune Pitch Corrector was in 1998 when the sound engineer of LGS Studio Plovdiv, Lyubomir Seymenski, introduced me to the program. Realizing the potential of the software for creating computer-enhanced music, such as chalga, I reconsidered my future as a performer of Bulgarian folk music and decided to continue my education abroad.

Melodyne is second generation pitch-correction software developed by the Celemony Company and released in 2001. Melodyne allows recording engineers to process audio data as MIDI. Most importantly, this software allows individual pitches to be dragged up-down to change frequency and left-right to adjust timing and duration without audible side effects. In the hands of professional sound engineers, Auto-Tune Pitch Corrector and Melodyne became the magic tools which could make a “music idol” from virtually anybody. As a result, ironically, the determining criteria for becoming a new chalga star

became the physical appearance.

In the early 1990s, Mitko Dimitrov, an owner of a recording studio in the town of Dimitrovgrad, founded a company named *Payner* which quickly grew into a chalga empire. A sound engineer himself, Mitko Dimitrov knew what he was after – he selected female chalga singers through beauty contests and employed the best sound engineers. Since the visual aspect of chalga was of utmost importance, in 1995, Mitko Dimitrov invested in video production equipment and soon began producing video clips comparable in quality to the ones on MTV.

By the year of 2002, Mitko Dimitrov had created enough chalga stars and video clips to begin broadcasting his own music channel *Planeta* (Planet). The channel had an enormous success. However, the Bulgarians – and particularly the younger generations – wanted to hear their idols performing live. This posed a problem – most of the idols could not sing. Ironically, the problem turned out to be a minor one – the audience did not object to the playback and to the fact that there were no musicians on stage during any of the concerts organized by Payner.

By the year of 2004, the chalga singers had completely mastered the playback techniques. In the summer of 2004, Payner organized its first national tour, *Planeta Prima 2004*, featuring the most popular chalga stars. Tens of thousands of young fans crowded the stadiums in every major city of Bulgaria and sang along with the chalga stars Gloria, Ivana, Anelia, Desislava, Azis, and Emilia. The folk music performers and the anti-chalga crusaders had to accept their public defeat. Moreover, the powerful chalga industry continued to expand by recruiting many talented poets, composers, and arrangers.

## The Post-Socialist Transition: Beginning of a Second Folk Music Revival

In 2005, Bulgaria was given a “green light” for joining the European Union. A year later, in January 2006, Bulgaria officially became a member. The acceptance in a larger political structure forced many Bulgarians to face questions related to cultural and national identity.

Although powerful, the chalga industry relied heavily on clichés. In 2003, Georgi Seymenski, a freelance arranger working for Payner, shared with me that several of his new arrangements were rejected by Payner for being “too innovative.” Unable to go beyond the clichés, the chalga industry had to face its main problem – it could only rely on new faces and exaggerated displays of female sexuality assisted by plastic surgery and silicon implants.

Thus, the weakening of chalga paralleled the beginning of the second revival of Bulgarian folk music, a process rather different from the one during socialism. Apparently, by 2005, many Bulgarians had enough of playback, silicon, and formulaic chalga.

While it is unlikely that Bulgarian folk music would ever reach the same levels of prestige, popularity, and support as during socialism, many children have become, since 2005, progressively more interested in learning to play folk instruments compared to the previous decade. After 2005, more and more entrepreneurs began investing in village-style restaurants featuring live folk music or wedding bands. The stabilized economy essentially brought back weddings with live music. The surviving wedding orchestras began to perform at such weddings and regain prestige. The few state ensembles, which miraculously survived the transition, also began to attract audiences to the concert halls. On the music radio stations, an increased amount of folk song requests made the sound engineers dust off some old folk music CDs. In searching for an alternative to the chalga dance clubs, teenagers and college students have begun, since 2006, to form recreational folk dancing clubs in the cities and learn village folk dances.

In 2006, the first Bulgarian folk music channel was launched, Folklore TV, a channel not sponsored by the chalga industry. The mission statement of its producers, as listed on their website, states: "Let's preserve what is truly Bulgarian." The increasing interest in folk music forced Payner to reconsider its markets. As a result, in March 2007, Payner launched a second music channel, Planeta Folk, featuring only folk music. In June 2007, a third folk music TV channel, Tyankov TV, began featuring some of the wedding orchestras from the 1980s as well as newly formed folk music groups.

## Conclusion

This article juxtaposes two periods of folk music revival and describes some of my own experiences and observations as a Bulgarian music performer. As researchers, concerned with proper citations and other specifics of academic writing, we sometimes forget that behind our words, there are life stories of real folk music performers. The life story behind this article is my own. In the 1980s, I participated in Hudozhestvena Samodeinost and its kolektivi. Being from an ethnic minority (a Vlach from Northwestern Bulgaria) I had to face the "purification" restrictions and navigate my performance career through multiple layers of state censorship. In the late 1980s, as a wedding musician, I interacted with the censors of Direktsia Muzika. In the 1990s, as

a state ensemble performer, I witnessed audiences leaving the concert halls in the middle performances – a silent way of expressing dissatisfaction with music symbolizing the socialist past. In the late 1990s, similarly to many of my colleagues, I had to acknowledge that chalga had succeeded in attracting the Bulgarian audiences, dominating the media space, and completely displacing folk music. Unable to accept my defeat by pitch-correcting software, I immigrated. ❁

## Notes

1. Among Bulgarian composers, Filip Kutev is perhaps the most recognized name worldwide. He was one of the most respected and important Bulgarian musical figures. In 1929 he completed his musical education under Dobri Hristov in composition and under Hans Koch in violin. In 1951 he organized the first Bulgarian State Ensemble for Folk Song and Dance and turned his attention to folk music. He led this ensemble for 32 years and wrote over 500 choral and vocal chamber arrangements for it, establishing a new tradition of Bulgarian choral music. In his arrangements, Kutev retained the style of singing with free and open voices, reflecting the influence of a living folk heritage. Some of these songs, such as *Polegnala e Todora*, *Dragana i Slavei*, and others, are considered monuments to the tradition he established.

2. Primary Bulgarian folk instruments used in folk orchestras are *gaida* (goat-skin bagpipe), *kaval* (an end-blown flute that is similar to the Turkish *kaval* and the Arabic *ney*), *gadulka* (a bowed string instrument held vertically), *tapan* (a large cylindrical drum worn over the shoulder and hit with a beater on one side and a thin stick on the other), *tambura* (long-necked plucked lute), and *tarambuka* (an hourglass-shaped hand-drum similar to the Turkish and North African *darbooka* and the Greek *doumbeleki*). State-sponsored ensembles also included artificially created instruments on the basis of *gadulka* such as *viola gadulka*, *cello gadulka*, and *bass gadulka*. Because of its poor sound quality, the *bass gadulka* was replaced by a double bass in the 1970s.

3. Roma (also known as Gypsies) are an ethnic minority originally from northern India who arrived in the Balkans in the 14th century. For more information about Roma, refer to Silverman (1996:232-235). Bulgarian Turks are descendants of Ottoman Turks who settled in Bulgaria during the period of Ottoman rule (14th-19th centuries). Bulgarian Vlachs can be considered part of a large group of people speaking languages based on Latin, who live all over the Balkans.

4. Typical instrumentation in wedding bands includes: clarinet, saxophone, accordion(s), rhythm guitar and a drum set. Wedding bands may also include a trumpet, bass guitar, and synthesizer(s), as well as traditional Bulgarian instruments such as *kaval*, *gadulka*, and *gaida*.

5. Calendrical holidays follow the calendar of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

6. For more information, refer to Rice 1994 and Silverman 1989.

7. The Stambolovo festivals were marketed as *Natsionalna Sreshta na Instrumentalni Grupi za Balgarska Narodna Muzika* (National Meetings of Instrumental Groups for Bulgarian Folk Music). For fuller descriptions of the Stambolovo festivals, see Silverman (1989), Buchanan (1991:541-550), and Rice (1994:250-255).

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