

# Bulgarian Rhythms: Past, Present and Future

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This contribution reports on a project that was completed in 2009 as part of the master research program at the Conservatory of Amsterdam. In this program, students explore topics from the vantage point of their performing practice, with a view to create new work, offer new perspectives, or propose new musical roles. The project was presented both in writing and in performance. While the text below summarizes the ideas underlying it, the musical examples give the reader a glimpse of its implications for performers.

## Introduction

The music of Bulgaria with its powerful women's voices, complex melodies, exotic musical instruments, and energetic, intricate dances, has fascinated music lovers, musicians and music scholars since the beginning of the twentieth century. This article tracks the origin and historical devel-

opment of two significant elements of Bulgarian folk music: its meters and rhythms.<sup>1</sup> This development will be situated in the contexts of some political and cultural permutations, similar to the analytical approach of scholars like Timothy Rice and Carol Silverman, who have been conducting a comprehensive research on the music

- 1 In this text, 'Bulgarian meters' refer to even tone durations (beats) grouped in uneven units. Thus, the smallest possible asymmetric meter is a unit of two equal beats, followed by a unit of three beats (groupings of twos and threes). The two-beat pulse is named 'short beat', and the three-beat pulse 'long beat'. This leads to the occurrence of two consecutive pulses of uneven length, which comprise the simplest asymmetric meter. This meter can be notated as a 5/8 measure. In the context of Bulgarian music repertoire, a 5/8 meter will be commonly felt, counted, and interpreted with this uneven pulse subdivision, either with groups 2:3 or 4:6 (if the number of beats is doubled). In very rare occasions, the three-beat pulse (long beat) will take a first position in the measure (3:2). The next possible asymmetric unit is the 7/8. Divided into two short pulses, followed by a long pulse: 2:2:3 or 4:4:6. This meter is also quite common in the variation 3:2:2 or 6:4:4.

'Bulgarian rhythm' could be used interchangeably with 'Bulgarian meter', since in folk music the rhythm often overlaps with the meter structure, especially in terms of melodic passages. However, what further defines 'Bulgarian rhythms' as such, are the specific accents, syncopated beats and timing inflections (such as little exaggerations or slurred beats), which sometimes outline the meter, but often go against it and create rhythmic tension and release within the measure structure. Furthermore, many rhythms in Bulgaria give a strong character to the song, instrumental piece or dance, regardless of the meter they are in. A good example would be the rhythmic frame of the dance *Graovsko Horo*, which remains distinguishable for any dancer, performer/listener, regardless of the meter in which it is notated. In addition, this example illustrates that 'Bulgarian rhythms' are not associated only with asymmetric meters.



of Bulgaria since the late 1950s to the present day. Some of the statements in this text are based on common knowledge, non-official interviews with Bulgarian musicians, or the author's personal experience. Therefore, the article does not pretend to be a strictly academic source of information. Nonetheless, the author believes that the topic of the article is relevant to the discourse of the Eastern European cultural heritage.

### Asymmetric Meters and the Academy

A considerable amount of research, both by Bulgarian and non-Bulgarian scholars, targets the description and explanation of the unusual metric structures. There is a variety of terms, used to describe the meters: crooked, epileptic, complex, irregular, additive, odd, asymmetric etc. Dobri Hristov was the first Bulgarian scholar who theoretically framed the asymmetric rhythms of Bulgaria. In one of his books, Hristov offers a chart of the most common asymmetric meters found in Bulgarian folklore (see later in this text).<sup>2</sup> The chart does not exhaust all the possibilities. Later music researchers such as Vasil Stoin, Atanas Stoyanov, Ivan Shishmanov, Nikolay Kaufman and others have discovered many more unusual metric structures. Hristov's chart, however, does represent the predominant meters found in songs and dances.

Asymmetric rhythms are present in the traditional music of other Balkan countries: Romania, Serbia, Macedonia, Turkey, Greece, Albania, as well as in some Central Asian, Indian and Sub-Saharan cultures. Nevertheless, most theorists agree that their biggest prevalence and variety is in Bulgarian music. The term *Bulgarian rhythm*, as a means to describe the asymmetric meters in Bulgaria, was first coined by the Hungarian composer/pianist and music theorist Béla Bartók (1881-1945), after he became acquainted with the impressive collection of Bulgarian folk songs, comprised by the Bulgarian folklorist Vasil Stoin (1880-1938).<sup>3</sup>

Bartók also incorporated some of the rhythms that fascinated him in his works *Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm* (a part of his series of piano pieces *Mikrokosmos*). As early as the 1960s, non-Bulgarian scholars, such as the Romanian ethnomusicologist Constantin Brailoiu (1893-1958), admitted that Bulgarian musicologists were the first to thoroughly investigate and describe rhythmic asymmetry, even though it is not a specifically 'Bulgarian' phenomenon.<sup>4</sup>

Among the hypotheses about the origins of Bulgarian rhythms is the ongoing debate whether these rhythms originated in the language, in the steps of the dancers, or in both. Scholars such as Stoyan Djudjev (1902-1997) observed a connection between the asymmetric meters and the quantitative metric patterns in Ancient Greek poetry, for instance.<sup>5</sup> Popular meters like 7/8, 5/8 and 8/8 remind Djudjev of the Pyrrhic, Iambic, and Amphibrachic steps. The same author reckons that compound meters are comprised by simple metric phrases, which the listener eventually hears as homogeneous units due to the fast tempos of many songs and dances in the folkloric repertoire.

Theorists Dimitrina and Nikolay Kaufman evince a less common theory.<sup>6</sup> According to them, the extended three-beat odd grouping in the asymmetric models often occurs by subtracting a larger even unit, such as a four-beat one. For instance, a structure such as 5/4 can easily be interpreted and notated as 9/8, as the tempo increases.

#### Example 1

Interpretations in attempts to notate folk melodies.



2 Dobri Hristov, *Ritmichnite osnovi na narodnata ni muzika* [Rhythmic Foundations in Our Folk Music], Book XXVII, Sofia: SbNU, 1913.

3 Béla Bartók, *Essays* [1976], ed. Benjamin Suchoff, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992; Vasil Stoin, *Bulgarskata Narodna Muzika* [Bulgarian Folk Music], Sofia, 1956; L. Velcheva, L. Peicheva, *Neravnodelnostta-Sistema za Izuchavane* [Asymmetry – A Learning System], Sofia: Sv.Kliment Ohridski, 2005.

4 Constantin Brailoiu, *Folklore musical: Encyclopédie de la musique Fasquelle*. Paris: 1959.

5 Stoyan Dzhudzhev, *Bulgarskata Narodna Muzika*, Volumes 1&2 [Bulgarian Folk Music], Sofia: Nauka i Izkustvo, 1970.

6 Nikolay Kaufman, *Biilgarska Narodna Muzika* [Bulgarian Folk Music], Sofia: Muzika, 1977.

The Kaufmans register that there was a tendency in early ethnomusicological research towards the notation of some unevenly stressed rhythmic structures as a combination of even and odd phrases, even when the occurrence of such structures was not particularly audible. Timothy Rice comes up with, in his own words, ‘a highly speculative suggestion’, that the irregular rhythms may have arrived to the Balkans with the *Bulgars*, Central Asian horsemen-warriors who settled in the Balkans in the seventh century A.D.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Rice suggests that it is highly probable that the Ottoman Turks, who dominated the territory of Bulgaria between the 1300s and the 1800s, have brought the most widely used Bulgarian percussion instrument: the *tupan*. This is a large double-headed bass drum, which the drummer slings from a strap over his shoulder, marking the main beats with a big wooden beater in one hand, and the off-beats with a thin flexible wand, with a high-pitched sound on the other drumhead. Although it was originally used to execute military rhythms, all Bulgarian asymmetric rhythms are well articulated on the *tupan*. The performance of the drum also registered and followed the development of the music. Today, there is a noticeable intricacy and complexity in rhythmic variations and inflections.

### Essence and Structure of the Asymmetric Meters

The commonly accepted notation of Bulgarian asymmetric meters is a construction indicating the even beats, strung in groups of twos and threes (‘short’ and ‘long’ pulses). Every first beat of each grouping indicates a downbeat. The ‘long’ pulses/downbeats are spelled by pronouncing the number with a longer vowel. The following figure gives a good visual representation of the popular rhythm *ruchenitza*, written

Example 2  
*Ruchenitza* – in 7/8 time.



in 7/8:

Although the downbeats are linked to the steps of the dancers, they do not necessarily overlap with them. Thus the popular dance *Kopanitza*, is organized: 2:2:3:2:2, where the long downbeat is in the middle of the measure. Dancers interpret the same meter by organizing it into 4:3:4 and for them, the long pulse is the four-beat grouping and the short pulse the three-beat grouping.<sup>8</sup>

There are many possible combinations of ‘short’ and ‘long’ pulses which accounts for the large variety of asymmetric meters in Bulgarian music. Example 3 lists only the most common meters, in correspondence to the meter chart of Dobri Hristov in succession of their complexity. Above each meter, the popular dances commonly written in that meter are mentioned. Single asymmetric meters are often combined to obtain longer structures. These are known as mixed meters. The possibilities are many; in Example 4 some very common ones are listed. Some innovative composers carried this to the extreme. Accordion player Petar Ralchev’s composition ‘Nyakade Iz Trakiya’ (‘Somewhere in Thrace’) from his album *Bulgaria* is an example of a very intricate rhythmic structure. Example 5 shows the first few bars, written in the quarter note notation of the meters, since that represents the way it is counted, if we regard the daring tempo.

### Do all Bulgarians Comprehend Asymmetric Meters?

A popular myth states that ‘asymmetric meters can be comprehended by all Bulgarians’. Until the 1970s, and especially after the Communist revolution from 1944, what predominantly filled the airwaves was indeed folkloric and classical music. Provoked by nationalistic models, the Communist Party considered ‘authentic’ traditional music an effective tool for uniting the nation and creating a national cultural treasure. The state actively supported traditional music and dance as a part of its ideological agenda. On the other hand, the popular music from Western Europe and especially the United States was considered decadent and a ‘bad capitalistic influence’. It was progressively removed from the broadcasts of the national

7 Timothy Rice, *May it Fill Your Soul: Experiencing Bulgarian Music*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 22.

8 Ludmila Velcheva, *Muzikalniat Metroritum* [The Musical Metric Rhythm], Sofia: Sv. Kliment Ohridski, 2007.

*Example 3*

Asymmetric meter chart.

## PAIDUSHKO HORO



## RUCHENITZA



## CHETVORNO HORO



## DAYCHOVO HORO



## CHELEBISHKO HORO



## KOPANITZA/GANKINO HORO



## KRIVO SADOVSKO HORO



## BUCHIMISH

*Example 4*

Extended/mixed meters.

## YOVINO HORO



## SEDI DONKA



## DILMANO-DILBERO



## Example 5

Petar Ralchev, 'Nyakade Iz Trakiya' ('Somewhere in Thrace'), first bars.

media and was not distributed to the domestic market. Radio and television signals from abroad were silenced or distorted.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, people found ways to smuggle vinyl recordings and cassettes across the border and spread them around. Western music was worshipped even more because listening to it symbolized protest against the Communist regime. Therefore, the generations of Bulgarians growing up between the 1970s and 1990s, especially people from the urban areas, listened to rock, hard rock, pop, and disco much more than folk music. During the post-socialist transition period, Bulgaria experienced a decade of political instability, hyperinflation, and a crisis of values. Both state-sponsored folk music and wedding music began to decline. Most wedding ceremonies or public festivities employed DJs instead of bands, and the music was mostly non-traditional. Although most Bulgarians are to a certain extent familiar with asymmetric rhythms ~~to a certain extent~~, for many it is rather uncommon to recognize the precise rhythm and being able to dance to it.

### Rhythm, Drums and Drumming in Bulgaria in the 1900s

Before the industrialization of the 1950s, most Bulgarians lived in villages. Bulgaria was primarily a rural society with an agricultural economy. People's lives, including singing, playing and dancing, were tied to the cycle of seasons. Songs were sung at harvests and at communal work parties at homes. Wedding celebrations included group dancing and singing. Songs were often accompanied by a single instrument, usually a *gaida* (bag pipe),

*kaval* (rim-blown wooden flute), or *gadulka* (pear-shaped bowed lute) and a *tupan*. Instrumentalists usually responded to the phrases of the melody with embellished variations, thus creating short melodic statements. Some of those segments evolved into short riffs, which were sometimes strung together, thus forming instrumental pieces, to accompany the *horo* (dance). However, since the late nineteenth century manufactured instruments began replacing traditional ones. Clarinet, saxophone, trumpet, accordion and later on keyboard became the most widespread wedding music instruments. As these instruments are not as limited in range as the traditional instruments, therefore more complex melodies, arpeggiated chromatic passages and key changes were now possible. Instrumental music developed substantially and by the late 1960s and 1970s, players had the facility to perform fast and intricate instrumental dance pieces.

Until that period, the Bulgarian traditional drums, the *tupan* or the *darbuka* (another Middle-Eastern rhythm instrument, most likely introduced by the Ottomans), had the primary function to mark or stress the strong beats of melodies, mainly to help emphasizing the dance steps. Melodic accents and rhythm closely overlapped; therefore, the drum accented the down beats with a low sound and colored the offbeats with high-pitched strokes. With the development of wedding music and instrumental works, some melodies became more complementary to the main rhythm and sometimes stretched over a few bars. Improvisation evolved from repetitive two-, four- or eight-bar symmetrical phrases to more loose,

9 Carol Silverman, 'Reconstructing Folklore: Media and Cultural Policy in Eastern Europe', *Communication* 11 (1989), 141-160.

polymetric extended passages. As a response, drummers included more syncopation in their accompaniment and began displacing and extending rhythmic phrases in a similar manner. When the drum kit became common somewhere around the late 1960s, it began dominating the *tupan* and *darbuka*, but Bulgarian drummers incorporated the sound and the language of the traditional drums in a unique way. The drum kit opened many possibilities to orchestrate and further expand traditional rhythms. A very important development of wedding music after the 1970s was the incorporation of elements from American and European styles of music. Improvisation and compositional ideas from jazz and jazz-rock captivated instrumentalists who then wrote new instrumental music, using these influences. Much of it was too complex and too fast to be dance music, so it was used in the opening ceremonies of weddings and other public celebrations to 'showcase' the virtuosity of the musicians from the ensemble. Bulgarian wedding drummers responded to these changes by adapting western drumming styles on the drum kit (such as jazz, rock, funk, various Latin and African styles, etc.) to asymmetric meters and invented unique hybrid grooves. Drummers developed a stunning facility on the drum kit in order to meet the growing demands of horn players, keyboard and string players and their elaborated solo instrumental language.

### Learning Traditional and Contemporary Folk Music

A very interesting phenomenon, that became noticeable mainly towards the end of the Communist regime (1989) and continues today, is the way traditional music is taught in Bulgaria. In traditional village culture, the cognitive and motor skills necessary to play instrumental music were learned but not specifically taught. Young musicians learned melodies and songs from older players by simply watching them play and mimicking them. Rhythms and dance steps were assimilated and mastered in the exact same manner. Traditional players did not recognize rhythms in any other way than by their sound. Still today, many great dancers and drummers, schooled only in the oral tradition, are not aware of the fact that they perform music in meters such as 7/8, 11/8, or 13/8. To them, melody reveals rhythm, and rhythm reveals melody.

Analyzing and theorizing asymmetric meters, was an ambition of Bulgarian musicologists from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, but it did not affect the way rhythms were learned by musicians, at least not until the opening of the governmental schools for folk music in 1967 and 1972. These were necessary in order to prepare musicians, singers and dancers for the many professional folk ensembles established in nearly every major city throughout the country. In these institutions, training is conducted in a similar manner to Western European classical conservatories. Students familiarize themselves with asymmetric meters through analysis and note reading. The gap between learning the music through this type of education as opposed to assimilating it directly from the musical source became apparent already in the early 1980s. Wedding music was developing and rapidly transforming traditional folk music into a new exciting and vibrant form.

### Wedding Music during the Communist Regime

Wedding bands often performed three-day long ceremonies continuously through the entire spring-summer period. As a result, musicians developed incredible stamina and control over their instrument, and were constantly coming up with challenging repertoire and fresh solo ideas. They also pumped up their sound through elaborate and powerful sound systems, which they could afford with all the tips, earned from weddings. Professional wedding musicians were making remarkable individual profits for Bulgarian standards. Besides good instruments and gear, this gave the musicians a lot of motivation. The level of the governmental ensembles, although still relatively high, could not match the compelling energy of the wedding bands. Many students from the governmental high schools skipped lessons to go to wedding ceremonies and record the bands with portable tape recorders. Everyone was transcribing solos and tunes from the wedding masters. Some students dared to perform wedding compositions at their exams, for which they were often penalized and even expelled. Even though enormous funds were directed towards the collection and the preservation of old folk melodies, the organization of music ensembles, choirs and dance groups, as well as

state-sponsored festivities featuring 'authentic' folklore, Bulgarian audiences soon got completely disconnected from the music imposed by the state and only sought after the exciting wedding bands for their celebrations.<sup>10</sup>

The Communist Party favored certain music styles and outlawed others. Especially ignored and impeded was the new wedding music, since many of the professional wedding bands included musicians from the minorities (Roma or Gypsies, Vlachs and Bulgarian Turks), who were not tolerated. The academia saw the influx of musical elements from the Roma and Turkish cultures as a tremendous threat to purity. The wedding musicians would 'deprave' Bulgarian music with a disturbing 'oriental' sound. In the early 1980s, the famous wedding band of clarinet player of Turkish descent Ivo Papasov (original name: Ibriam Hapazov) was arrested for performing Turkish music at a Bulgarian wedding.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, in the 1980s, the popularity of this style and players (such as Ivo Papasov, Petar Ralchev, Georgi Yanev and many more) became uncontrollable and national media finally had to acknowledge their existence. Towards the end of the decade, commissions from *Direktzia Muzika* (a government agency for controlling music activity) organized competitions (*Stambolovo*) in order to determine the performing level of wedding orchestras. This was an attempt at government control over the growing influence of wedding music. However, the academia refused to accept wedding music as a social reality and continued to restate authentic musical values with an ideological imposition. On the other hand, scholars such as Silverman, Buchanan and Rice studied the performance and cultural characteristics of the wedding style in depth and accentuated the tension between the socialist state and wedding musicians from the minorities.<sup>12</sup>

Rice noticed another phenomenon in traditional music, which later became a common practice in wedding music as well.<sup>13</sup> He

introduced the term 'metrical transposition' – changing the meter of a melody in order to create a new melody, by changing accents of the note values. This shows the flexibility of asymmetric meters, as they go beyond the limits of being simply associated with their original melodies, and proves that asymmetry is an independently functioning metric language, to which many musical forms can be translated. Representative examples are provided in the works of the renowned Bulgarian *kaval* player Theodossii Spasov, who not only writes many original melodies in asymmetric meters, using melodic material from other sources than folk music, but also effectively rephrases American jazz standards and other popular Western melodies to fit Bulgarian meters.

### The Drummers of the Wedding Era

Wedding drummers from the 1980s and the 1990s, played a major role in expanding the rhythmic vocabulary of asymmetric meters. By introducing more syncopated accents and polyrhythmic figures, they extended the simple meters over two- and even four-bar phrases. This way the meters received an elasticity, which allowed soloists to perform more freely over them, and interact more with the rhythm section. Interesting accents occurred when offbeats were drawn to the foreground, thereby obfuscating the obvious perception of a downbeat. Since the meter was already complex, the rhythmic illusion enhanced greatly by anticipating or delaying the appearance of a downbeat. Similarly, another technique, called *razdrobyavane* or subdividing, introduced note durations from sublevels of beat division (sixteenth notes or smaller), as well as polyrhythmic groupings (such as the duplets for the groupings of three and triplets for the groupings of two). This type of subdivision, in combination with accented offbeats, produced rhythmically challenging phrases, which did not align anymore with the corresponding downbeats of the meters.

10 Donna Buchanan, *Performing Democracy: Bulgarian Music and Musicians in Transition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

11 Carol Silverman, 'Music and Marginality: Roma (Gypsies) of Bulgaria and Macedonia', in: Mark Slobin (ed.), *Retuning Culture: Musical Changes in Central and Eastern Europe*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1996, 231-253.

12 Carol Silverman, 'The Politics of Folklore in Bulgaria', *Anthropological Quarterly* 56 (1983), 55-61.

13 Timothy Rice, *Music in Bulgaria: Experiencing Music, Experiencing Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Another innovation was the grouping of pairs of measures, allowing the creation of larger metric structures. This was accomplished mainly by looping rhythmic elements, over the bar line, in order to resolve them after a symmetric sequence of measures. In his dissertation Bulgarian scholar Kalin-Stanchev Kirilov refers to this phenomenon as a 'megameter'.<sup>14</sup> Performers of advanced wedding styles used visual cues in determining those megametric ideas, so that they can be used as a tension and release strategy in an improvised musical situation. However, it is important to note that dancers do not appreciate the lack of downbeats. For a listener without a strong sense of the downbeats in asymmetric meters, megameters and the resulting rhythmic tension may sound disorganized. These rhythmic innovations became more common in the 'showcase' instrumental music, performed during the openings of ceremonies or state competitions. These developments are now part of the vocabulary of contemporary folk music.

Drummers like Ivan 'Paicho' Ivanov and Salif Ali (both drummers of clarinet legend Ivo Papasov) to name a few, found a creative way to use the language of the *tupan* and *darbuka* on the drum kit. The bass drum, played by the foot, took over the function of the big beater of the *tupan*, which executes the low downbeats. The snare drum and tom toms took the high-pitched answers of the tiny wand. Now that both hands of the drummer were free to play offbeats, the phrases instantly became more sophisticated and ornamented. The drummers inserted little rolls and flam strokes, which were previously impossible with one hand. Four-way coordination, an emblematic feature of the drum kit since its creation, allowed them to spread rhythms over the instrument and create the illusion of more than one drummer playing at the same time. The sound of the *darbuka* was first imitated by a set of bongos, placed next to the drummer's hi hat. Salif Ali was one of the first drummers to substitute them with the rototoms (shell-less drums, which consist of a single head in a die-cast zinc or aluminum frame. Unlike most other drums, they have a variable definite pitch. They can be tuned quickly by rotating the head, which sits in a threaded metal ring). When tuned high the standard set of three rototoms successfully

duplicates the sound of the *darbuka*, but there are more possibilities available, since there are three surfaces to hit on, instead of one. By default, the three rototoms are attached in line to a straight metal rail. In order to make it more accessible on the drum set, Bulgarian drummers chopped the rail and welded a piece of it to the remaining part, so that the rototoms were positioned in a triangle. That way they became a compact unit, which could now be reached from both hands and played simultaneously with the rest of the kit. That seemingly simple innovation led to the development of a unique drumming style. The grooves, derived from the *darbuka*, were expanded and embellished with additional orchestration from the rest of the drum kit. By combining typical elements from western drumming styles, many hybrid grooves appeared. Some typical traditional rhythms now sounded more like unconventional funk grooves or jazz patterns, but modified to fit asymmetric meters.

### Further Drumming Innovations: Stoyan Yankoulov

A great innovator who experimented a lot with hybrid grooves is drummer Stoyan Yankoulov (particularly associated with *kaval* player Theodosii Spasov). Yankoulov has a background rooted in the wedding percussion tradition, but also received a classical education both at Sofia Music School and the National Academy of Music. He studied the styles of various American rock and jazz drummers thoroughly and incorporated them into his Bulgarian drumming. Many of the grooves he invented inspired the more traditional players, who inserted some of those ideas into standard repertoire. Besides being a skillful drum set player, Yankoulov is one of the biggest virtuosos of the *tupan*. In addition to revolutionizing Bulgarian rhythms, the drummer updated the language of the *tupan* by incorporating many techniques, patterns and grooves from the drum set into it and vice versa, his drum set playing benefited greatly from his astounding skills at the *tupan*. Through Yankoulov, many young drummers (from the post-Communist generations) discovered their passion for this wonderful, but lately often neglected instrument. In the 1990s Yankoulov developed his unique set up which

14 Kalin-Stanchev Kirilov, 'Harmony in Bulgarian Music', PhD Dissertation, University of Oregon, 2007.

combines a custom-made *tupan*, with a special shape, snares and tambourines inserted in it in order to receive a larger variety of sounds, together with elements from the drum set – hi-hat, cymbals, cowbells, etc. With this set up, he further refined his style and once again created a class of disciples.

### The Percussion Expertise of Dobri Paliev

While many drum set players were assimilating the innovations from the great wedding drummers of the 1980s, a Bulgarian classically trained percussionist took Bulgarian rhythms to a different level by incorporating them into the classical percussion language. Dobri Paliev (1928-1997) was the first Bulgarian percussionist to receive a doctorate and to hold an academic chair in percussion.<sup>15</sup> He was head of the percussion department at the National Music Academy for many years and taught generations of prominent drummers in the country. One of his many contributions is the creation of an entire repertoire of classical etudes and percussion pieces based on asymmetric rhythms. In his pieces and books, he gave these rhythms a different inflection than the ones played in the folk tradition by dressing them up with typical elements from marching snare drum playing, timpani playing etc.<sup>16</sup> His own percussion ensemble *Polyrhythmia*, which still exists today, sets a high standard for percussion group performance, with complex and innovative performance in asymmetric meters.

### Rhythmic Interpretation and Precision

A phenomenon worth mentioning at this point is the difference between school educated and 'street' educated musicians. In his own experience, the author has noticed that the drummers who have acquired their skills through oral tradition in general seem to possess more creativity and a more personal sound than the ones who learned from books. Often, due to the lack of trained and refined technique, drummers from the first category articulate the nuances of the rhythm not particularly precisely and 'correctly' in correspondence to the metronome. However, this gives their interpretation of the

rhythms a very lively inflection, which is often impossible to reproduce by others. Through a creative use of unmeasured 'rolls', 'buzz' strokes (letting the stick bounce on the drum head) and 'dead sticking' (where the stick stays on the drum or cymbal for a certain time, thus producing a short, dull, and higher pitched sound), these drummers give their own character to every measure.

Schooled drummers (there are exceptions, of course) in general tend to interpret the rhythms more precisely. When put into strict cognitive frames, the rhythms lose to a certain extent some of their 'magic'. On the other hand, because of their formal education, school trained drummers have the opportunity to think more 'out of the box' and take rhythmical ideas to unfamiliar territories, while many orally skilled drummers are often confined by the tradition.

### Popular Culture and the Drummers of Today

In the last two decades, globalization has exposed traditional music to foreign influences more than ever before. In Bulgaria, after the post-Communist political and social changes, popular music has expanded exponentially to include elements from the music of the Bulgarian minorities who were not accepted in the past, as well as sounds from the surrounding Balkan countries and the Middle East. In the 1990s, the outgrowth of these influences was the emergence of a new style, named *popfolk* or *chalga*, which dominates the popular market and media to the present day.<sup>17</sup> *Popfolk* unifies all the 'forbidden fruits' of Balkan culture: the outlawed Rom, Turkish and other Balkan music, the provocative, often sexual lyrics and image of the singers, the oriental 'belly dance' styles and the loose behavior. In the eyes of many purists, *popfolk* destroyed what was left of the values of folk music; to them, it is a vulgar, simplified display of a Balkan sound, devoid of esthetics and artistry. Others recognize it as a 'modern folklore'. This controversy is beyond the scope of this text, but it should be noted that *popfolk* did open many doors for musical development, and rhythms were certainly not left out of this process.

15 L. Velcheva and L. Peicheva, *Neravnodelnostta-Sistema za Izuchavane*, 2005.

16 Dobri Paliev, *Pieces for Snare Drum with Piano Accompaniment*. Sofia: Iztok-Zapad, 2008.

17 Timothy Rice, *Music in Bulgaria*, 2004.

The basic marker of *popfolk* is the Rom *kyuchek* rhythm, or more precisely, *kyuchek* rhythms. They are mostly in duple meter (4/4) or in a more subdivided 9/8 bar, grouped as 4:4:4:6. Predictably, most of the latest updates in these rhythmic styles came from the Roma musicians. Even without having the metric intricacy of other Bulgarian rhythms, the contemporary *kyuckek* patterns are performed with such creativity and rhythmic liberty that they can fool the listener's ear and sound asymmetric. Rom drumming masters such as Sasho Bikov, Zaprian Zaprianov and Vesko Rikov, to name a few, are taking these essentially simple rhythms to the level of the most complex grooves patterns from the wedding era. Within Rom music itself, many doors opened since communication between the neighboring Rom cultures increased. In Bulgaria, a variety of rhythms arrived from the music of the Albanian Gypsies, together with a whole repertoire of exciting tunes. Previously unfamiliar Middle Eastern, North African and Indian rhythms also found their way to the Balkans. While the style of the 1980s and 1990s wedding drumming is still widely reproduced, there is a great new movement in popular folk drumming.

### Bulgarian Rhythms and Globalization

Some Bulgarian musicians tirelessly continue to explore the possibilities within asymmetric meters. Musicians who are now free to travel and receive proper jazz education in Western Europe and the United States, are making new musical connections between classical and contemporary jazz styles and Bulgarian music, opening the doors for creativity (upcoming musicians such as pianists Dimitar Bodurov and Konstantin Kostov, saxophonist Vladimir Karparov and trombonist Georgi Kournazov come to mind). The experimentation with Bulgarian music abroad dates back to as early as the 1970s, when the American jazz musician Don Ellis in a collaboration with Bulgarian piano player Milcho Leviev (who fled the country during the Communist period) wrote and performed music with a jazz band, using Bulgarian meters. Since then a number of musicians and groups have made their own contribution into exploring Bulgarian music. Some of the notable groups to mention are the Avishai Cohen Trio (Israel/USA), Pachora (USA), Paradox Trio (USA) and Farmers Market (Norway).

In the vibrant era of the new millennium, one cannot predict what is going to happen to Bulgarian music and its rhythms. Music education's tremendous globalizing tendencies are most likely to bring information about this culture to the forefront and give the opportunity to musicians both from Bulgaria and abroad to learn the traditions of the rhythms with a deeper understanding than before. Many open-minded musicians and composers today are turning their minds towards this relatively unexplored territory.

### Discography

- Béla Bartók, *Mikrokosmos*, Books 1-6, Naxos, 2006.
- Bodurov Trio, *Stamps from Bulgaria*, Challenge, 2009.
- Stian Carstensen's *Farmers Market*, Winter & Winter, 2000.
- Avishai Cohen Trio & Ensemble, *At Home*, Sunny Side, 2005.
- Avishai Cohen Trio, *Continuo*, Sunny Side, 2006.
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