

# New Folk:

The phenomenon of *chalga* in modern Bulgarian folk



*“Edno ferari s zviat cherven, edno za teb, edno za men...”* Slavi Trifonov, *chalga*  
(One red Ferrari, one for me, one for you)

They were silly, kitsch, synthesized tunes, which started appearing in Bulgarian media, and in the general Bulgarian cultural life in the early 1990s. Now, *chalga* has successfully found a niche in the Bulgarian music scene with a new image and a new name: pop folk. Initially characterized by simplistic lyrics and 'oriental' street sound, *chalga* tunes have become more popular in a few short years than any other developing music genre in Bulgaria.

It is no coincidence that some of the first and most popular *chalga* singers and musicians were Roma<sup>1</sup> or ethnic Turks. These two minority groups have distinct musical roots, very different from Bulgarian folk, which were suppressed by the state for over 45 years during the communist regime. Today, in a seemingly democratic environment, music styles in Bulgaria are thriving and folk music is reclaiming new ground after years of state control. I have to admit, I, too, was one of the skeptic connoisseurs of classical and Western popular music, who thought *chalga* was a low-culture Gypsy genre unworthy of attention. Having now been away from Bulgaria for four years and being immersed in Vancouver's diverse music scene, I have gained a more rounded cosmopolitan perspective on music. I don't see *chalga* or even Bulgarian folk as sporadic unrelated music genres anymore, but as interdependent events, richly influenced by each other, as well as by the music of Turkey, Greece and the rest of the Balkans.

Returning to Bulgaria this summer, I saw that *chalga* has not only persevered, but it has flourished and changed and became even more popular. While for many this genre still represents cheesy synthesized folk-ish tunes, more and more individual music *chalga* artists are creating some fascinating fusions of Roma music and Bulgarian folk with Turkish, Greek and Serbian elements.

This paper is an exploration of the socio-political conditions, which have affected the formation and development of *chalga* in modern Bulgarian folk. Briefly, I will discuss the history of Balkan folklore, Roma musical and historic roots, and the reality of Roma and Turkish minority music in Eastern and Central Europe. I will show how all of these aspects have played a part in the formation of contemporary trends of folk music in Bulgaria, the most popular and controversial of which is the *chalga*.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper I will refer to the general population known as Gypsy, as Roma

I am discussing all of this from the position of a first generation Bulgarian, who has grown up in Bulgaria with some local knowledge of Bulgarian music, customs and society. As well, I am presenting my own personal perspective.



To world music fans, Bulgarian folk is probably *Trio Bulgarka*, the Filip Kutev choir ensemble and *Les mystères des voix Bulgares*. The complex polyphonic singing harmonies, however, are not the only musical gems that Bulgarian folk has to offer. Although geographically small, the musical richness of the Balkans have shaped quite a few distinct folkloric areas with unique sound, singing styles and instruments.

Within Bulgaria alone we find over six distinct music areas. “The earthly, almost plodding dances from Dobrudja in the northeast are quite different in character from the lightning-fast dances of the Shopes, and the long heart-rending songs from the Thracian plains contrast with the pure melodies from the northwest.”<sup>2</sup> Along with those areas, the musical traditions of the Rhodope mountains in the southeast and those of Macedonia on the southwest make for a rich, diverse and sometimes tense cultural and music expression.

One thing that all these areas share is the tradition of line/ring dancing – the *horo*. Its rhythm is highly unique and its sound is unmistakable with the contagious trills and patterns of the *gaida* [pipe], *tupan* [drum] and *kaval* [wood flute]. The most popular ring dance, *racheniza*, is counted in 2-2-3, followed closely by the Shope *kopaniza* counted in 2-2-3-2-2.<sup>3</sup> In Macedonia there are similar counts, with measures of 7/8 counted as 3-2-2, and even measures of 22/16 counted as 2-2-3-2-2-3-2-2-2-2 such as the song *Pominisli Libe Todoro*.<sup>4</sup> *Horo* dances are generally lively, jagged-rhythm instrumentals, which require considerable skill to perform both from the musicians and from the dancers. The traditional instruments of Bulgaria give it its particular timbre and contour.

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<sup>2</sup> Burton, Kim. (1994) *World Music: The rough guide*. London: Rough Guides: Penguin Group. P74

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p75

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p92



The *gadulka* [see picture on left], is a relative of the medieval rebec and has 3 or 4 bowed strings and as many as 9 sympathetic strings for resonance. It has no frets or finger positions. It is held in front of the body and played with a bow, allowing for a distinguishable resonant sound.<sup>5</sup> It seems like a simple instrument but when mastered it could produce compelling speed and patterns.



The *tambour* [also known as *dranakia*, prominent only in some folkloric areas, ones, Macedonia, which borders with Greece and Turkey. The type of tambour played in Macedonia has a very sweet, resonant mandolin-like sound to it, and it complements the melodic singing style of this area.

*dzunga*, or *bailama*] is especially the southwest



The *tupan* is an instrument present in every folk orchestra and in every social setting. It has a diameter of 50 to 60 cm and is beaten from the one side with a big wooden *kiyak* and from the other side with a thin *osier*, simulating a bass drum *and* a small drum sound.<sup>6</sup> Generally, its rhythms are measured in 5/8, 7/8, 9/8 etc.



There are two main types of *gaida* in Bulgaria – the high, *djura gaida*, and the mountain low *kaba gaida*. The *kaba gaida* is native to the Rhodope region and is mostly played as a drone or a sequence of resonant pitches complementing the voice of a singer. The most common drone tone for *gaidas* is G.

The wooden *kaval* is a cousin to the *nei* in Turkey, with eight or nine holes on top. There are at least two other instruments that seem to have always been an essential part of a Bulgarian folk orchestra – the clarinet and the accordion. Yet, it wasn't until the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when instruments started being manufactured and exported from Central and Western Europe that they came to the Balkans.<sup>7</sup>

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the clarinet and accordion have more or less replaced the *gaida* and *gadulka* in folk music sound. They are particularly present in the modern *horo* instrumental and the so-termed 'wedding music.' Because music in Bulgaria is so

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p77

<sup>6</sup> Balkanfolk. *Tupan*. < <http://www.balkanfolk.com/shopitem.php?code=040800>>

<sup>7</sup> Burton, Kim, p77

traditionally intertwined with social customs, musicians develop naturally from within communities. Thus instruments, techniques, approaches to melody, rhythm and improvisational patterns are passed down to generations. Originally, men tended to specialize in musicianship, while women excelled in singing. The type of polyphonic sound that Bulgarian women ensembles are famous for throughout the world has come to life through women's sharing of social spaces and social customs together. Other important social rituals where music plays central role are weddings, christenings, name days, and the 'seeing off' of young men to mandatory army service.<sup>8</sup> Wedding music in particular has gained almost legendary popularity by the 1950s, and has been elevated to extraordinary technical heights by talented Roma musicians.<sup>9</sup>

Upon gaining independence from Ottoman rule and the advancement of industrialization in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Bulgarian folk music began to split. The old-time 'authentic' *narodna muzika* (rural folk) remained seemingly preserved in its form, while new genres of *moderna muzika* (modern music) incorporating Western and/or 'oriental' elements started gaining more and more popularity. Yet neither of these genres could sufficiently describe the wedding music genre – a grassroots form, which developed as a participatory community genre, where the local *chalgadji* bands played at country fairs and accompanied *horo* dancing.<sup>10</sup> Their name comes from *chalga* (possibly from Turkish) – “high levels of technical virtuosity coupled with rapid-fire improvisation on traditional musical motifs and scalar passages, as well as extremely fast tempos, profuse ornamentation, very loud amplified sound, and the incorporation of multiple themes, frequent key changes, and the use of complex, sometimes chromatic harmonies.”<sup>11</sup>

Wedding orchestras were subsequently diversified and popularized by Turkish and Bulgarian Roma musicians in the 1900s. They used some of the traditional instruments – gaida, kaval, gadulka, as well as accordion, clarinet, electric and bass guitar, drum set, synthesizer, violin, saxophone and trumpet.<sup>12</sup> Because wedding bands thrived on playing at expensive, lavish weddings and other social events, they soon became a token of urban life, prosperity and celebration. Many ethnomusicologists have commented on the legendary character of some of these bands. Donna Buchanan

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p75

<sup>9</sup> Buchanan, Donna. (1996) Wedding Musicians, Political Transitions and National Consciousness in Bulgaria. *Retuning Cultures: Musical Changes in Central and Eastern Europe*. In eds. Mark Slobin. London: Duke University Press. p204

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p202

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p203

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p202

examines the career of Ivo Papasov – a Thracian from a Roma-Turkish family who formed the *Trakya* ensemble in 1974.<sup>13</sup> Soon his band became extremely popular and highly requested for weddings, because of the virtuosity of the musicians and the originality of Ivo Papazov as a composer and arranger of traditional folk music. His repertoire included versatile improvisatory elements of *narodna musica* (folk) with “stylistic elements of Greek, Macedonian, Serbian, Romanian, Turkish and Roma traditional music, as well as American rock and jazz.”<sup>14</sup> In order to understand the importance of the diverse ethnic elements that wedding music brought to the Bulgarian cultural life, it is important to trace the history of Roma music and its relation to Bulgarian folk and the state.

The Roma people came to the Balkans in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. Their diaspora started in Rajasthan, India when different tribes and strands migrated to different parts of Europe, Russia, Asia and North America. The ancestors of the Bulgarian Roma migrated through Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Turkey, Greece and finally settled in the Balkans.<sup>15</sup> Thus, they brought with them the styles, customs, instruments and colourful music from parts of India, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean. Even in Rajasthan, the Roma were known to be good musicians and had a history of playing at weddings.<sup>16</sup> Naturally, they quickly gained respect as musicians on the Balkans, yet, that was the only kind of prestige they did get. Seen as dark-skinned and lower-class imposters, they soon found themselves on the margins of Balkan societies, and were even enslaved in Romania and Hungary.<sup>17</sup>

With the onset of communism in Bulgaria in 1949, there was a preoccupation by the state with carefully designing a monoethnic society, based in ‘authentic’ Bulgarian cultural and musical traditions. This period was marked by the formation and propaganda of state-sponsored folk ensembles, such as the Filip Kutev women’s choir and others whose role was to assert a ‘pure’ unifying Bulgarian folk tradition, untouched by outside influences. It is important to understand that these state-sponsored groups were not bad musicians or composers, but their presence was used by the state to negate any other ‘underground’ music activity as un-Bulgarian.<sup>18</sup> The state therefore imposed very strict standards for what could be considered Bulgarian folk, thus estranging folk from its

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p203

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Strom, Yale.

<sup>16</sup> Siddiqi, Jameela, (1994) *World Music: The rough guide*. London: Rough Guides: Penguin Group. p233

<sup>17</sup> Strom, Yale

<sup>18</sup> Burton, Kim. P78

original meaning – music for the people. As is evident in the works of many musicologists, including Timothy Rice, the state version of folk was not what the people wanted. This explains the extreme popularity of wedding bands during the years of communist regime. Their music was not only more fluid and open to various influences, but its diverse stylistic elements reflected the ethnic diversity of Bulgaria – Turks, Pomaks (Slavic Muslims) Roma, Jews, and Bulgarians. This was precisely the diversity that the communist state wished to eradicate through carefully crafted ideas of unity, monoethnicity and cultural purity.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, there was particular zest in the state's attempts to prohibit the music of [Roma-Turkish] wedding bands and the dancing of the Mediterranean *kjuček* (Turkey) and *sertaki* (Greece). For centuries singing and dancing of the *horó* have served as central elements to the cultural preservation of Slavic ethnicity during Ottoman rule. Part of the communist state's propaganda was the assertion that Bulgarian folk had somehow magically remained untouched by Ottoman influence, so any music which evoked Turkish, Greek or generally 'oriental' themes were seen as a threat to national unity.<sup>20</sup> Yet, as theorist Donna Buchanan points out,<sup>21</sup> it was exactly the same Ottoman musical influence, which gave Bulgarian folk instruments such as the *zurla* (a Turkish oboe), the *duduk*, and the *daire* (a tambourine from the Middle East); as well as its warm-timbre Mediterranean sound and deep vibrato singing style.

Wedding bands, then, served as a negation to the state's attempts to assimilate and homogenize Bulgarian folk. In the words of Timothy Rice, "the fact that the personnel of wedding ensembles was predominantly ethnic minority and that wedding music asserted a new improvisatory, free-performance style, effectively challenged the homogenous notions of Bulgarian national identity and folk music authenticity."<sup>22</sup> Not only that, it challenged the implications of the ethnic makeup of Bulgaria, the existence of Islam and of Roma minorities which the state had been trying to deny.

Thus Ottoman, or Turkish musical symbols have been framed in the Bulgarian mind as carriers of 'orientalism' and tokens of the 500-year Ottoman occupation. Wedding music is seen as the impersonation of these 'oriental' musical symbols. Interestingly, the situation in neighbouring Serbia, Romania and Macedonia was similar. There was a proliferation of underground wedding music, performed mostly by ethnic

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<sup>19</sup> Buchanan, Donna, p206

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.216

<sup>21</sup> Buchanan, Donna. p216

<sup>22</sup> Resmussen, Ljerka, p108

minority musicians – Turks and Roma.<sup>23</sup> While they all shared a stylistic sampling of ‘oriental’ music, each group had a distinct set of instruments, repertoire, traditional elements and singing styles. In Serbia there were the Gypsy brass bands, in Romania the talented cimbalom players, in Macedonia – the tambour and dumbac [Turkish drum] players. In Bulgaria, as mentioned earlier, wedding musicians used traditional Bulgarian instruments, as well as Western and Oriental instruments. Even though their free-performance style was innovative and reflected their ethnic and musical heritage, at least one Bulgarian musicologist has pointed out that the way they “give life” to wedding music is done in the same manner as “traditional musicians construct *horos* by improvising on traditional motives or phrases called *persenkove* or *kolena*.”<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the tradition of the *chalgadji* or *sviridji* accompanying the *horo* and other social rituals in rural Bulgaria, emerges as the foundation for wedding music, over which various ethnic and stylistic elements are overlaid. In Macedonia, wedding music was also known as *chalgajiiska* music whose “most characteristic feature is the complete unison between the vocal and the instrumental parts. The voice and the instruments follow an identical melodic line that each one reproduces in the octave best suited for its range.”<sup>25</sup> It becomes clear that since both Bulgarian and Macedonian wedding music derived from *chalgajiiska* music, modern Bulgarian *chalga* has descended from the wedding music tradition with the aide of Turkish arabesk, Greek rembetica and the new Serbian–*novocomponovana*<sup>26</sup> music.

*Novocomponovana* Serbian music draws its appeal, not surprisingly, from Bosnian folk with its Turkish influences. Its pop version, the turbo folk, is the closest approximation to modern Bulgarian *chalga* as it emerged in the early 90s. The Serbian pop folk star Lepa Brena (pretty Brena) was an iconic figure, who became popular early in my childhood, long before *chalga* had gained any musical significance in Bulgaria. As Kim Breton points out, her music was criticized for being “kitschy, unoriginal and most bizarrely, sadomasochistic, in reference to its Turkish influences.”<sup>27</sup> Lepa Brena was a bottom-up success story of a simple girl from Bosnia who represented the new folk – the new music of the people, which explains her success all over the Balkans. She not only flirted with Turkish and Greek ‘oriental’ elements, combined with Western sound, but she

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<sup>23</sup> Burton, Kim, p92

<sup>24</sup> Buchanan, Donna, p220

<sup>25</sup> Macedonia. *Dumbec*. <<http://members.tripod.com/~dimobetchev/music/instruments.html>>

<sup>26</sup> Burton, Kim. p87

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.



also presented a highly sensuous and sexualized image of herself, in sharp contrast with the almost a-sexual puritan look communism projected. Thinking back, Lepa Brena developed a unique singing style – a deep chest breathy alto sound, which was picked up by the majority of *chalga* singers in Bulgaria.

In fact, the first popular *chalga* stars who emerged as early as 1992, Gloria, Extra Nina, Nelina, Petra, and others, could have been the mirror image of Lepa Brena – dyed blond hair, big cleavage and a Western, but familiar look. Yet, in the context of Bulgaria, *chalga* had a particular path of development and a unique socio-political relationship with music. Donna Buchanan mentions that famous wedding musicians became very wealthy even during the communist period, because of the importance of music in weddings and other social occasions to regular Bulgarians. However since they were repressed and played ‘underground’ they could not openly tour, perform concerts, advertise or appear on the media - they were constrained to the wedding party. After 1989, the emergence of *chalga* was strongly associated with the ‘new riches’ class, who emerged suddenly in the midst of privatization and right away favoured *chalga*. They were thought to have become illegally wealthy, in a ‘rags to riches’ scenario, and *chalga*, with its simple lyrics and Mediterranean orchestration, catered to their ‘uneducated musical taste’.

Another element, which also points to a relationship between wedding music and *chalga* is the fact that *chalga* right away settled in the musical niche of the *mehana* - a taverna-like restaurant with lavish live performances. With a decline in weddings and a general worsening of people’s economic situation in the 1990s, socializing in a *mehana* setting proves to be one of the last traditional social rituals in Bulgaria. *Chlaga* is therefore fulfilling a social need earlier provided by the wedding bands, but not sanctioned by the state at the time. As a form, however, *chalga* has undergone some structural changes. In contrast with the highly improvisational ultra fast *horo* sequences of wedding music, *chalga* is characterized by a ‘heavy-heart’ medium to slow rhythms, evoking more sensuous, ‘oriental’ dances, such as the Turkish *kjuček* or the Greek *sertaki*.

We can also see how this performative setting has pre-determined some of the stylistic elements of *chalga* – specifically the choice of instruments. Because *chalga* bands are small and they emphasize the singer [the musician/s are often invisible] in an attempt to evoke a ‘star’-image, it is not efficient to carry lots of instruments to perform at different settings. Thus commercial *chalga* musicians have largely reverted to using a

drum machine set and a synthesizer to simulate the sound of many traditional folk instruments.

As a result of this, skill and musicianship are somewhat sacrificed for the sake of an overall 'shiny package' with the singer's often overtly sexualized image. As far as originality, *chalga* did start as a copycat of Serbian new folk, Lepa Brena style, with very simplistic lyrics and forced rhymes: "We know each other for a long time and we hate each other, like a cat and a dog."<sup>28</sup> Yet, this genre has many important cultural implications and a lot of musical potential, as is becoming clear in the last few years.



Its importance for ethnic minorities in Bulgaria is also indisputable. The communist legacy of assimilation and ethnic invisibility in Bulgaria left Turks and Roma people and their cultural heritage on the margins of society. It is no surprise then that the *chalga* genre is populated with Bulgarian Turks and Roma musicians and singers. Via this genre, they have been able to raise awareness about their historical, cultural and musical existence in Bulgarian culture. Most of the top *chalga* performers are in fact Roma or Turkish. Probably the most controversial and glamorous figure from this league is the pop folk star Azis [see graphic on the left]– a Roma singer, who is probably the first commercially famous Bulgarian performer to also sing in Romany – the Roma language. Some of his repertoire has a distinct Greek sound with the resonant trills of the *bouzuka* and the low breathy chest voice; other have a Turkish touch – syncopated bass drum, layered with *dumbac* rhythms, along with the sound of the *daire* [tambourine]. He also incorporates traditional horo music, in a 'wedding music' spin – with rapid improvisation intertwined with Turkish motives. His singing style is very distinctly 'oriental' and Roma – with longing sliding vowels, frequent vibrato and high-pitched angst.<sup>29</sup>

While wedding musicians had to conceal their ethnicity and cultural references, Azis is proud to be Roma and his presence in the music scene is empowering for other Roma performers and individuals.



Reihan, another new Bulgarian pop folk star has pushed the envelope even further – her entire album *Inan Sevgilim* is in Turkish. As I was reading some message boards on a Bulgarian pop folk site, it became

<sup>28</sup> Gloria, *Kato kuche I kotka*. <<http://pop-folk-chalga-music.bulgariancds.com/cgi-bin/p.cgi?p=pr&id=485&st=1&si=4>>

<sup>29</sup> Azis: *The Best*. Sunny Label, 2002

clear to me just what the implications of this are. The fact that most people found it strange and even reprehensible that she sings in Turkish, even though she is Bulgarian<sup>30</sup> did not surprise me. She is in fact a Muslim Roma, another invisible minority. However, the fact that her album exists, reflects the very existence of Muslim Roma and Turks, and it is a sign that maybe Bulgaria is on the way to becoming the multiethnic space that it is.

Ultimately, *chalga* as we know it today may not be the most musically compelling genre, but its cultural and political importance for ethnic minorities in Bulgaria and the Balkans in general, is crucial. In addition, even though it is looked down upon by Bulgarian folk music 'purists,' *chalga* is a legitimate development of underground wedding music, reflecting diverse musical influences in Bulgaria, yet still founded in forms and conventions of traditional Bulgarian folk. And its popularity with audiences in Bulgaria confirms its status as folk – music for the people.

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<sup>30</sup> Reihan Comments section. <<http://pop-folk-chalga-music.bulgariancds.com/cgi-bin/p.cgi?p=pr&id=639&st=1&si=4>>