

# IMPROVISATION AND VARIATION: POST-COMMUNIST BULGARIA CHALLENGES NATIONAL FOLKLORE TRADITION

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**Abstract:** The paper discusses the tension in post-totalitarian Bulgaria between the national folklore tradition of Communist times with government-sanctioned state ensembles and festivals and age-old Balkan multiculturalism now represented in a westernized free-market consumer society, where spontaneity and improvisation bridge the urban and the rural, the local and the global. Folk pop, folk jazz or other mixed genres reverberate with humor, parody and, above all, freedom and love of improvisation.

**Key words:** *chalga*, high and low culture, individual dynamic folklore improvisation, national folklore tradition, state folk ensembles, wedding orchestras

*“Communism was... modernity streamlined, purified of the last shred of the chaotic, the irrational, the spontaneous, the unpredictable.” (Bauman 1992: 2)*

The Communist view on folk and intelligentsia focused on the necessity to preserve and elevate folk culture. This idea was not new. Ever since the 19th century when Herder's theory of *Volk und Seehle* conquered the National Revivals on the Balkans, folklore traditions became part of the national ideology and great efforts were made not only to preserve the folklore tradition but also to purify it of contamination. The Communist state spent generously on new state and amateur folk ensembles, village music collectives, national folk festivals, building up a wide network of professionally trained folk musicians. In contrast, the 'town culture' of before the Second World War, which developed in a multiethnic environment, was rejected. In the towns Bulgarian folk music mingled with Jewish and Gypsy improvisational talent on numerous occasions: at fairs, markets, birthday and name day celebrations, wedding feasts. Since the 19th century, the town culture of the Balkans has been a meeting point of different music traditions.

To a great extent the town instrumental music of Romania, Ukraine, Poland and Hungary developed in cooperation with Gypsy and Jewish violin professionalism. To the south the Greek town instrumental lore was influenced by the ‘multicolored’ Mediterranean musical culture, where Persian-Arabic, African and European music met and created the town music of the 19th-century Balkans (Kaufman 1990).

Balkan provincial towns presented a colorful patchwork picture. Take for example the town of Ruschuk or Rousse (northeast Bulgaria), where at the beginning of the 20th century,

*aside from the Bulgarians who often came from the countryside, there were many Turks, who lived in their own neighborhood, and next to it was the neighborhood of the Sephardim, the Spanish Jews ... There were Greeks, Albanians, Armenians, Gypsies. From the opposite side of the Danube came Rumanians. There were also Russians here and there* (Canetti 1999: 6).

In such cosmopolite surroundings the popular folk and town music promoted contact and mingling of cultures – *музика не българска, не гръцка, не румънска, а музика балканска, но с малки, вариантни различия в отделните етнически общности* (‘music not Bulgarian, not Greek, not Romanian, but Balkan music with small variational differences in the different ethnic communities’; Kaufman 1990: 25).

In the 1950s, Communist commissaries defined such town culture as reactionary and bourgeois. Musicologists strove to create/reconstruct the ideal folklore music, *a selected, centralized, government-sanctioned version of folklore labeled ‘authentic’* (Silverman 1996: 237).

Especially in extremely nationalistic Communist systems, as was the case in Bulgaria and Rumania, the aim was to create folklore homogeneity, so unnatural of the Balkans.

Most important was to cleanse it of Turkish influences, stamped as anti-national, but ignoring existing cross-cultural patterns. The main idea was to raise the educational and cultural level of the masses, installing pride in one’s folk traditions, pure and of high esthetic value. State composers (re)wrote authentic folk music of a characteristic control and discipline, so much desired by the state. The result was beautiful academic recordings of folk music. Among the most prominent in Bulgaria, Filip Kutev’s folk ensemble presented high professionalism of its academically schooled musicians and performers, gaining world-wide recognition and admiration for Bulgarian folk music.<sup>1</sup>

The rise and fame of *Le Mystere des Voix Bulgares* in the 1980s is a good example of that paradox being a classic folk performance, *rigidly formal, manu-*

*factured by a disciplined work force of trained musicians... They express the goals of a state for its citizens in the future ... and stand in stark contrast to the drab and difficult lives many Bulgarians lived during the Communist period (Rice 1996: 182).*

But this was a highbrow enterprise. Did the folk enjoy this music? Brass music bands were almost extinct, Sunday village dances fell into disrepute, village pubs were losing customers, because the reason people sat there was not so much to get food, but rather eat a meatball or two to listen to their popular songs, and hear their favorite singers... (Kaufman 1990). Thus popular town music was silenced, small village orchestras were not able to support themselves. People turned to other sources of music.

In southern Bulgaria people listened to Greek and Turkish radio stations, in northern and western Bulgaria they tuned to Serbian and Romanian radio stations.

The 1980s were marked by a relative rise in individual economic standards. An alternative grey-market economy catered to the more luxurious needs of offering jeans, Western cigarettes and music cassettes with forbidden Western pop music, as well as folk pop from neighboring Serbia and Macedonia. Wedding orchestras, which had previously fallen into disrepute because their musicians represented mostly Muslim minorities, flourished again. The typical wedding musicians, otherwise known as 'chalgadzhii'<sup>2</sup> were mostly five to six in number and played traditional as well as Western musical instruments, such as clarinets, saxophones, accordions, electric guitars and basses, and drums.

They played at family events, mostly weddings, but also at Muslim ritual feasts, such as Ramadan, etc. What they were loved for was improvisation, virtuosity, a mixture of Balkan music styles and simple lyrics.

The 1980s saw also a clandestine proliferation of music cassettes, obtained through international channels – India, Indonesia, Egypt, Turkey, Yugoslavia. Even party bosses invited the popular Gypsy wedding orchestras to the weddings of their offspring. The wide gap between the state folk ensembles and the unofficial wedding bands (see Table 1 on p. 10) was then bridged, for despite media exclusivity and marginalization, the bands gained wide popularity. The best example in this category is the wedding band of Ivo Papasov (Ibryama). Born in the town of Kardzhali in the Rhodopes region (Southwest Bulgaria) of a mixed Turkish-Roma background, Ivo showed early musical talent, inheriting his father's and grandfather's talent and love for music. Playing the clarinet, he developed his own improvisational virtuoso style, mixing Bulgarian, Greek, Turkish, Serbian folk music. His wedding band Trakya was the best paid and prestigious wedding band of the 1980s.

Table 1. Comparison of unofficial wedding orchestras and state-supported folk ensembles.

WEDDING ORCHESTRAS	STATE ENSEMBLES
Ethnically mixed musicians, highly representative of minorities (Gypsy, Turkish).	Professional Bulgarian musicians, state-educated and media-run.
Family events, markets, fairs, pubs and taverns. Amateur cassette recordings.	Official folk concerts, radio recordings, state-sponsored folk festivals.
Freedom of improvisation, unpredictability, staccato virtuosity.	Controlled, pure, disciplined esthetic performance.
Representing a dynamic vision of the present.	Representing a collective idealized vision of the nation's past.

During the period 1984–1989, when the Communist Party under the lead of Todor Zhivkov<sup>3</sup> started a rigorous ethnic cleansing campaign, wedding orchestras were banned for playing foreign (Turkish) music. Papazov and his musicians were arrested twice during that period for playing the forbidden Turkish belly dance *kyuchek*.

It was around the same period that a British impresario Joe Boyd (Hannibal Records) organized a sponsored tour of Trakya in Europe and the United States. In an interview with students and lecturers at the University of Texas, Austin, in May 1992, Papazov spoke about his wedding band and their credo, defining his music as '*balkanski dzhaz*' ('Balkan jazz')

*... struggling to create a musical style that supersedes his local sense of identity as a member of the ethnic Turkish and Rom subculture of Bulgaria, as a citizen of the Bulgarian nation and as a representative of the Balkans* (Buchanan 1996: 223).

His latest recording entitled *Fairground*<sup>4</sup> is a celebration of the freedom of improvisation and virtuosity, where each musician is given a solo moment and an opportunity to demonstrate his talent. Different styles, instruments and melodies draw the public into the multicolored world of the market place, today's meeting place where innovation is possible, and where the marginal confronts the dominant.

In post-totalitarian Bulgaria the political reality is marked by fragmentation and absence of a convincing political vision. Regional self-awareness has

become stronger and more pronounced. The ethnic scene is complex, due to the problematic relationship Bulgaria has had with its neighbors, the dominant historical narrative about the Ottoman past<sup>5</sup> and the place and role of Gypsy (Roma) musicians in Bulgarian popular folk music.

The state folk ensembles have split into numerous smaller privately organized folk groups. At the same time there is a growing market for other music genres, folk pop, Black American rap, Spanish flamenco, etc. Immensely popular *chalga* bands,<sup>6</sup> consisting mainly of Roma musicians, draw thousands of listeners to their concerts. *Chalga* music also booms at full blast in public transport.

Abhorred by the intellectual elite as kitsch and vulgar, but popular with the masses, its success has led to the proliferation of tape, CD and DVD production companies, such as Payner, Union Stars, Lazarov Records, and others. From 1994 onwards they have sponsored private folk festivals in Stara Zagora, Dimitrovgrad, etc.

Bulgarian Roma musicians seem to mirror the low status and high prestige in the music of African Americans using shocking lyrics and behavior – erotics, illegal activities, macho behavior. But there is also humor, parody and self-caricaturizing in the songs. They appeal to a youthful audience fed up with the false morals of the Party. The pull of the cities, commercialization and free market demands have led to a great hybridization in traditional folk music. In the era of globalization and post-Communism, culture is invariably linked to the demands of the market.

In 1999 a round-table conference on the phenomenon of *chalga* took place at the New Bulgarian University of Sofia under the title *The Chalga – Pro and Contra* (Чалгата – За и Против, 1999). The questions and discussions at the above conference clearly marked the proponents of high and low culture. Evgenii Dainov, a well-known Bulgarian publicist and writer drew parallels with the heated discussion or rather the cultural upheaval with the 1960s when rock-and-roll music first reached Bulgaria. In a similar way the then dominant intellectual elite defended Socialist esthetics against Capitalist decadence (Dainov 1999b).

The Communist assumption that the taste of the folk will have to be refined/purified contradicted the ideal of highly esthetic folklore. In his *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Bourdieu (1984/1970) stresses the social basis of the different perceptions of taste. The Communist “idealized folk” can easily turn down dominant values and revolt against the cultural hierarchies of upbringing and education *substituting the pleasures of the soul for the common satisfaction of food, sex (and pop-music sic.)* (Bourdieu 1984: 491). What for the ‘high culture’ is a matter of form, restraint, propriety, style

and rules is converted into the pleasure of substance or matter, with the emphasis on plentitude and freedom. Compare the bourgeois meal (see Bourdieu 1984: 194–196), as a *disciplined food consumption*, a social ceremony, with food cut, portioned and esthetically presented in uniform dishes and tableware, with the working class (Sunday) meal, characterized by abundant dishes, where plates are not changed for each new dish, food is served with a ladle or a spoon, to everyone's enjoyment of plentitude and freedom.

However, another consideration will have to be taken into account and this is the present global cultural world, subjected to the rules of commerce, mass production and media marketing strategies. It seems that now the distinction between “high” and “low” culture is getting blurred. The rise of the gangsta rap in the 1990s confused existing distinctions between art and pop, but also between political correctness and pornography. Violent, sexual and misogynic themes supply shock elements but they often go hand in hand with protests against police harassment and racism. Thinking of the old *highbrow–lowbrow* distinction, John Seabrook (2001) introduced the term *nobrow* in his study of present-day mass culture in the USA in 2001. The predominance of marketing interests, the aural and visual cacophony of billboard advertisements represent the era of consumerism where everything is possible if it can be sold.

Echoes of these developments and social changes can also be noted in former Eastern Europe. The westernization of Bulgarian society and the effects of free-market consumerism can be seen as the mechanisms behind the hybridization of Bulgarian folk music. The blurring of cultural esthetics can account for the mingling of tradition and modernity, urban and rural, native and foreign. *Chalga* music has appropriated African-American rap, adding to it typical Gypsy ornaments and Balkan tunes. The instrumental improvisation of the musicians introduces often formerly forbidden Turkish/Oriental elements. The lyrics celebrate macho behavior – money, fast cars and girls in various stages of undress. Interestingly, the lyrics seem to reflect the prevalent socio-economic situation in Bulgaria – grey and black markets, sharp contrasts between the nouveau riche and extreme poverty, drug dealing, prostitution and weapon marketeering (Ivanova 2004).

Paradoxically, both the *chalga* lyrics and the political propaganda of pre-election times promise the same, only the style is different: while politics promises improvement of individual standards of life, *chalga* promises enjoyment of life (“kef”); while politics promises increase in salaries and pensions, *chalga* promises money; while politics promises international acceptance, acceptance to the EU; *chalga* promises travels and work abroad (Gospodinov n.d.). Both promise a better life, and neither can be taken seriously. The vulgar and erotic lyrics seem to offer an escape from a confusing and depressing reality. The

cultural elite but also different ultra-nationalist movements violently reject this music as kitsch, bad taste, but also as downright offense to Bulgarian nationality and national folklore traditions. Is the *chalga* phenomenon a protest, a subversion or an example of consumerism and as such a reaction to the needs of the free market? Two aspects will have to be clarified here: First, that most *chalga* musicians represent Bulgarian minorities (Roma and Turkish minority) and second, the massive political disillusionment and disorientation in post-totalitarian Bulgaria. Mass anxiety, disorientation, inability to cope with an unstable present and vague future are all part of today's political situation. There is, on the one hand, the belief in Bulgaria's place in the European Union, proof of the country's Europeanness and, on the other hand, the popular expressions of Orientalism (belly dancing in pubs, Roma orchestras), which are seen as signs of backwardness. There is, on the one hand, still belief in the Communist doctrine of the folklore as being the moral and esthetic core of the Bulgarian nation and, on the other hand, *the celebration of irrationality*, the popular preference for oriental tunes and irrational pub behavior (van de Port 1998). Mattijs van de Port's study on *Civilization and Its Discontents in a Serbian Town* depicts the mechanisms which Serbs in Novi Sad have at their disposal, while trying to escape the cruelty and irrationality which led to the *death of Yugoslavia*. The parallels between the above disintegration and the disintegration of post-totalitarian Bulgaria because of the crash of moral and political values are quite obvious. In both situations, Gypsies (a) as outsiders can *destroy the existing* cultural arrangements,... transgress rules of decency and moral prescriptions,... deny the laws of language and logic,... present the truth at one moment as an *evanescent figment of the imagination and at another as a crude obscenity* (van de Port 1998: 213). In both cases a fictional reality is being destroyed.

Another parallel with van de Port's study is the explanation of the essential duality of the Balkan identity: primitive – civilized, provincial backward – modern European.

In van de Port's study, the Serbs of Novi Sad are passionately and desperately in search of *prava istina* ('the real truth') outside the truth as it was told (van de Port 1998: 213).

Such demonstrations of irrationality in present-day Bulgaria – belly dancing on the table in the pub to the accompaniment of *chalga* music – are also mechanisms for the negation of old values and a search for other narratives, which help the individual to face reality, restructure it to the image in the street, create with humor and parody a livable world. The critique of the intellectual elites points correctly to the lack of new esthetic values, but is shortsighted considering the popularity of new forms of mass entertainment.

On the background of Gypsy performances in Serbian pubs, van de Port compares a folk dance performance attended at the Serbian National Theatre at Novi Sad as follows:

*A friendly peasant life in a clean and pure world. Healthy young boys and girls with rosy cheeks, immaculate costumes without a crease... Their performance left no room for individuality, character or passion (van de Port 1998: 55).*

Folk pop, folk jazz, or *chalga* lay bare another reality, another preference – that for individuality, freedom of improvisation, irresistible in innovation. The dissatisfaction of the elite can also be seen as a demonstration of that old sense of Balkan inferiority or self-stigmatization, a sign that

*we are simply frightened, frightened of the terrible specter that walks and bears the name 'the Balkans' – everyone is frightened of janeča čorba (lamb's soup) of mousaka and baklava, but still, secretly, they all tuck into this food, lick their fingers and cry out, "More! More! More of this wild man's food!" ... Everything which shows our real nature, and the culture that is really ours, is primarily a source of shame for us (Dejan Krsic cited in van de Port 1998: 59).*

Similarly, Evgenii Dainov in *The Chalga – Pro and Contra* points to the presence of “high culture” by the Bulgarian intellectual elite, while at the same time secretly hastening after the opera performance to the pub “Jajceto” (‘the Egg’) to toast real life with a glass of grape brandy (the folk’s most popular drink)(Dainov 1999a: 69).

Do the above examples show that the Communist image of a monolith folk tradition was a construction, which was part of a sterile world that everyday life in Bulgaria never was, and which nowadays has exploded into intricate new patterns? Ivo Papazov’s new CD, entitled *Fairground* celebrates Bulgarian and Balkan folk music and its marriage with contemporary world music. The latest CD of the vocal tambour ensemble Kordova entitled *A distant echo* celebrates cherished family rituals, engagements, weddings and christenings. Karandula, a Gypsy brass orchestra from Sliven, with its CD *A Gypsy summer/Tales of surviving* is a sparkling mix of oriental and overseas jazz. The new international tour of Le Mystere des Voix Bulgares is entitled *Balkanology* and mixes Bulgarian, Greek, Serbian and Romanian folk music.

In conclusion, this paper has stressed the clash between the Communist ideal of a monolithic national tradition and the typical age-old Balkan multiculturalism; the contrast between the government-sanctioned cultural purity and authenticity and the spontaneous, improvisational popular folk music be-

yond the limits of the national, appreciated by the audience, successfully bridging urban and rural, local and global, contesting past and neonationalist ideologies in celebration of the freedom of choice. Contesting some feelings of shame and shock of the elite, this paper ends on a positive note. The creative energy liberated in this way will continue to flow and produce new and other examples of musical democratization. The modernization of music styles and performances is an expression of a new freedom and an old love for improvisation, which has always been at the core of the folklore tradition.

The shocking folk pop music, or *chalga*, reverberates with humor, parody and, above all, a wild refusal to conform. On the background of a crumbling political system, a lacking civil society and economic chaos, this music reflects the concerns and needs of the masses in its crudest form.

## COMMENTS

<sup>1</sup> Music sample – Philip Kutev’s *Bulgarian National Ensemble of Folk Song and Dance* (1970) performance of the folk song *Reche mamo da me zheni* (‘Mother decided to marry me off’). Excerpt of the CD material in Rice 1994. Music sample available online at <http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol39/kutev.mp3>.

<sup>2</sup> *Chalga* – *chalgadzhia* – from Turkish *çalgı* (‘musical instrument’). This was the art of *chalgadzhia* (‘musician’), a type of musician who could play virtually any type of music, but added his distinctive rhythm to the song.

<sup>3</sup> Todor Hristov Zhivkov (1911–1998) – former President of Bulgaria, leader of the Communist Party from 1954 until November 10, 1989, when the Communist regime was toppled and a multi-party system was established in Bulgaria.

<sup>4</sup> Music sample – Ivo Papazov and his band perform No. 9 *Fairground* from the identical CD, 2003, Roots, Kuker Music, Bulgaria. Music sample available online at <http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol39/papazov.mp3>.

<sup>5</sup> For uninformed readers the complicated Ottoman past of the Balkans may seem confusing. A good guide is the works of the historian Maria Todorova (e.g., Todorova 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Music sample – *Male le* from the CD of DJ Folk Collection, Payner Music, 2004. Music sample available online at [http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol39/male\\_le.mp3](http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol39/male_le.mp3).

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