



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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A Multi-media Documentation of Bulgarian Folk Music

Topic of Research:

The topic of my research is Bulgaria's folk music, one of the most particular and specific expressions of that nation's culture and heritage. In Bulgarian villages, musical traditions, learned via an oral tradition and spanning countless generations, are now in jeopardy due to the profound political, social, and economic changes that have been shaping Bulgaria since the fall of the Communist regime. The younger generations, the usual repository for these traditions, are more preoccupied with the business of survival in a country marked by such transition, and many have left their villages to seek better opportunities in nearby cities. With eyes to the future, they dismiss their rich cultural past as archaic and look instead to the West for guidance, inspiration, and acceptance. Bulgaria, no longer insulated or isolated from the rest of the world, is caught between two worlds where its strong traditional past is yielding to an uncertain and vulnerable future.

In light of Bulgaria's rapidly-changing musical culture, my goal is to archive a priceless cultural artifact that is not yet extinct, but certainly endangered. As an IREX fellow this past year, I began work on this ambitious and important project, traveling to pre-selected villages to record and document (via interviews, videotapes, and photographs) the music within a historic, cultural, and folkloric context.

Relevance and Contribution to the Field:

When I was compiling my list of villages to record, I consulted with some of Bulgaria's most eminent scholars (e.g., ethnomusicologists and folklorists) in the field. While certainly interested in recording and conducting fieldwork in villages that best represented the musical traditions of a particular folkloric region, I also preferred to work in villages less studied, documented, and represented by archives and other researchers, both Bulgarian and non-Bulgarian. For example, scholars and enthusiasts of Bulgarian folk music are most likely familiar with the men's choral tradition of Bansko, a small but popular town in the Pirin region of southwest Bulgaria. This (*a capella*) tradition—a single voice singing melody against many drones—is typical of the Pirin region and has been widely publicized and popularized. While my survey does include Bansko, I also conducted fieldwork in Dolna Ribnitsa, a tiny village approximately 30 miles southwest of Bansko. The musical traditions of Dolna Ribnitsa are equally interesting, beautiful, and compelling, but hardly known. There are no recordings from this village in the national archives, and their cultural customs and practices have never been documented. By recording and conducting fieldwork in more obscure villages, I can contribute new and updated material to an already established base of research. Furthermore, I can offer a different and unique anthropological perspective as an American researcher. And finally, I can continue a long tradition of Bulgarian scholarship at a time when Bulgaria is unable to fund its own researchers due to desperate economic conditions.

Approach and Research Methodology:

Preliminary design and research for this project began in the summer of 1999. To further develop my language skills, I enrolled in an intensive Bulgarian language program at the *Institut za Chuzhdestrani Studenti* (Institute for Foreign Students) in Sofia. In addition to my language studies, I collaborated with Lili and Lyuben Botusharovi, distinguished and respected ethnomusicologists and folklorists affiliated with the Ministry of Culture and B.A.N., the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. During their careers, which span more than 30 years, they have organized and coached many kinds of ensembles for various regional and national festivals, and consequently, have innumerable first-hand contacts with village musicians throughout Bulgaria. Under their guidance, I identified 7 distinct and varied folkloric regions and chose more than 75 villages throughout the country that best represented the folk music traditions of those regions.

In the summer of 2000, the Botusharovi and I traveled to Koprivshtitsa to attend the National Folk Arts Festival and to establish initial contacts with the village musicians designated to be part of this documentation; new and additional contacts were also made. We organized the research in the following manner: for example, Month #1 would be spent conducting fieldwork in villages throughout the Shope region; Month #2 would be spent in Sofia (to organize and analyze the collected data); Month #3 would be spent at villages in the Pirin region; Month #4 would be spent in Sofia; etc. Although a program and schedule had been established, I had spent enough time in Bulgaria to realize that one *had* to be flexible as schedules hardly ever run so smoothly.

Back in Connecticut and during the spring and summer of 2001, I researched and purchased superior, portable, and unobtrusive technologies (digital audio and video recorders, microphones, etc.) for this documentation project. I also worked with 2 attorneys (an American and a Bulgarian now living in Connecticut) drafting an Artist Agreement and Release form. I continued to revise and refine this document with a Bulgarian attorney in Sofia until all were satisfied. The final text was then officially translated into English and notarized.

The length of stay in each village varied from 2-4 days, and we were often invited to stay with one of the village musicians, allowing us a more personal glimpse into daily life. The first day was typically spent getting re-acquainted, usually over a large and gracious meal that lasted many hours and inevitably included music and homemade *rakiya* (brandy). During this informal gathering, the project and Artist Agreement and Release form were explained and clarified, questions, both professional and personal, were asked and answered all around, and stories and photographs were shared.

Before any recording session, repertoire was discussed and chosen, and a sound check was conducted during rehearsal to set recording levels and to determine proper placement of both microphone and performers for optimum results. The location, acoustics, and characteristics of each space, which ranged from living rooms to libraries to gardens, were carefully noted and described. The names, ages, and functions (e.g., soloist, instrumentalist, etc.) of each performer were documented, and each instrument was identified, photographed, and described. The genre of each song was documented, and all lyrics were dictated and written in Cyrillic (without “correcting” any dialect), transliterated into Latin, and translated into English. Performers were always photographed and often videotaped during the rehearsal and in their daily lives. Traditional costumes (*nociya*), boasting beautiful handiwork, were photographed and documented, and recipes, both traditional and regional, were shared and notated. In addition to a journal, in which I faithfully recorded my experiences and impressions, interviews were also conducted to collect historic, cultural, and folkloric background, providing a more complete context for the music.

Each interview included a standard list of questions: who sings this song?, when is it sung?, is it associated with any task or holiday?, is there a specific dance or ritual?, which *nociya* is worn?, etc. But I was also not too strict about directing the interviews, preferring instead to let the conversation meander and evolve. In doing so, I was able to collect a wealth of stories that not only reflected their musical and cultural traditions, but also life in general. Traditional wedding and medicinal practices were described, the experiences of “stolen” brides were recounted, and life during and after the Communist regime was depicted. While specifically Bulgarian, these vivid stories—humorous and bitter, poignant and nostalgic—reflect universal themes (e.g., love, loss, and longing) that are common to all humanity.

Between folkloric regions, I returned to a base in Sofia to organize, analyze, and translate the collected material. I worked with a recording studio in Sofia to transfer the digital audio tape recordings onto CDs; multiple copies were made. Although not yet

mastered, we did begin the first stage of editing. This involved organizing the CDs by region and village, grouping multiple takes of the same song together, editing out false starts and background noise when possible, and adjusting the relative volume.

Research Findings:

I anticipate returning to Bulgaria to complete my last 2 months of fieldwork, which would focus on villages located throughout the Rodopi and Trakia regions. I hope to continue my research sometime during the latter part of 2003.

To date, however, I have recorded and conducted fieldwork in 20 villages located throughout the Shope and Pirin regions. I am thrilled with the results thus far, as is everyone involved.

Outlined below is a summary of my research findings:

SHOPE Region:

In the **SHOPE** region of west-central Bulgaria, field work was conducted in the following villages: **Murchaevo, Bistritsa, Gorublyane, Kladnitsa, Batonovtsi, Kalishte, Rudartsi, Dolna Sekirna, Dren, Ovchartsi, and Pernik.** In these 11 villages, 73 performers (59 women and 14 men, aged 22-85) in 15 different vocal and instrumental ensembles (including soloists, duos, and trios) were recorded and interviewed. In this region, singers are predominately women, while men are the instrumentalists. Mixed ensembles (either comprised of male and female singers or vocalists and instrumentalists) are very rare. Most of the folksongs recorded by the 8 women's vocal ensembles were performed *a capella* (without instrumental accompaniment) and antiphonally. For example, an ensemble of 8 women would divide into 2 groups of 4. In each quartet, one would sing melody, while the others sang a drone held on one or 2 notes, often creating close and "dissonant" harmonies: intervals of minor 2^{nds} or smaller are common. Despite many of their advanced ages, voices were still powerful and laser-sharp. Depending on the village and dialect, the lead singer might be called "izvikvachka", from "izvikam" (to shout or scream), while the drones are called "buchachka", from "bucha" (rumble or roar). Verses are typically repeated or alternated.

Multiple takes of more than 70 vocal and instrumental folk songs were recorded, including several renditions of "Markova" ballads. These epic ballads, although stylized, are unmetered and highly ornamented. Specific to the Shope region and usually performed as solos, they sing the praises and recount the exploits of Krali Marko, one of Bulgaria's most celebrated folk heroes who fought against the Turks in the 14th century. They can last several hours. In addition, I also recorded a variety of wedding and harvest songs, as well as songs specific to different holidays (e.g., "Ignazhden": Christmas Eve), feast days (e.g., "Gergyovden": St. George's day, celebrated 6 May), and festivals (e.g., "Lazorov Den", a one-day festival for young girls held the week before Easter). Interviews elaborated on the specific rituals and customs surrounding the music. These rituals and customs varied slightly from village to village.

I also recorded solo instrumentalists and instrumental ensembles that featured a variety of traditional folk instruments: *duduk* (type of wooden flute), *dvoyanka* (double flute),

okarina (small clay whistle), *pishtalka* (penny whistle), *kaval* (end-blown wooden flute), *gadulka* (pear-shaped lute with 3 bowed strings and 8-12 sympathetic strings), *tambura* (pear-shaped plucked lute with a long fretted neck and a bright banjo-like tone, used for melody and rhythm), *gaida* (bagpipe), and *tapan* (large double-headed bass drum played with a large stick and a thin switch). Several different “*xoros*” (folk dance songs), including a “*Ruchenitsa*” (7/8) and a “*Kopanitsa*” (11/8), were recorded and demonstrated.

PIRIN Region:

In the **PIRIN** region of southwestern Bulgaria, field work was conducted in the following villages: **Gabrene, Rupite, Kavrakirovo, Purvomai, Dolna Ribnitsa, Bansko, Xadjidimovo, Pletena, and Satovcha**. In these 9 villages, 84 performers (45 women and 39 men, aged 16-75+) in 11 different vocal and instrumental ensembles were recorded and interviewed. Like the Shope region, men are the instrumentalists. Here, though, there is also a strong tradition of men’s choral music, and mixed ensembles (male vocalists and instrumentalists) are common. Women’s vocal ensembles, however, were similar to those recorded in the Shope region: folksongs were performed *a capella* and antiphonally. One highlight included the unusual “*na visoko*” (high-pitched) tradition of Satovcha, a village close to the Greek border in southeastern Pirin. Unique to Pirin and specific to this village, the ensemble of 10 women divided into 3 smaller groups: 2 quartets and a duo. While the quartets sang one song (antiphonally, repeating verses), the duo would sing an entirely different song with another meter at the same time. This duet is characterized by frequent high-pitched vocal ornaments.

Multiple takes of more than 50 vocal and instrumental folk songs were recorded, and the performers included many “*Pomatsi*” (Bulgarian Muslims) and Gypsy musicians. In Kavrakirovo, I recorded and interviewed 3 generations of *zurna* (oboe-like instrument) players, a Gypsy family of Turkish descent. The oldest, now known only as Selim, is one of Bulgaria’s best and most sought-after *zurna* players. (Like all Bulgarians with Turkish names, he was forced to change his name in the 1970s to one that sounded more Bulgarian. He was renamed “Simeon Dimitrov”.) Playing lead *zurna*, Selim performed a 45-minute wedding suite with his son and grandson (*tapan* and *zurna*).

In addition to wedding songs, I also recorded a variety of work songs (e.g., “rice-growing” songs of Gabrene), holiday songs (e.g., “*Velikden*”: Easter), and feast day songs (e.g., “*Todorov Den*”, observed during March). In addition to *zurna* and *tapan*, I also recorded the following traditional folk instruments: *tambura*, *bass tambura*, and *tarambuka* (small hand drum). As in the Shope region, interviews describing rituals and customs provided a more complete context for the music.

Preliminary Conclusions:

Based on fieldwork conducted thus far, I am more convinced than ever of the value and importance of this project. These recordings in more obscure villages will add to the general knowledge base and greatly enhance the collection of archival recordings located at B.A.N., the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. It is also very timely. Despite

spanning countless generations, Bulgaria's unique and rich musical heritage is fast becoming obsolete as interest in this music by the younger generations continues to wane. At one time, most villages boasted an active Cultural Center ("*Chitalishte*") where folk arts were supported and taught. Now, many are defunct and either closed or undergoing renovations. In the village of Batonovtsi (Shope region), I recorded a 70-year-old soloist who performed several traditional folk songs in the dusty and unheated basement of the "*Chitalishte*", future site of a bar that will feature Bulgaria's new "*chalga*" (pop-folk) music. The juxtaposition of old and new was striking and sadly ironic.

Most telling, however, was my experience in Kladnitsa, another village in the Shope region. After recording a stunning rendition of a "*Markova*" ballad by a 74-year-old soloist, I asked her if any of the young women in her village were learning this important and unique tradition. She explained that there was no more interest in this music, and then poignantly added, "You have arrived in time to catch the last train."

The precarious future of Bulgaria's traditional folk music is keenly illustrated by such anecdotes and further threatened by these difficult economic times when Bulgaria is unable to fund its own researchers or properly maintain their archives. It is, therefore, critical that this research is pursued.

Suggestions for Future Research Agendas:

Folklore studies, the study of a people's traditional beliefs and practices, is a very broad field with many different interlocking components. Folk music, the heart of my research, is only one dimension. Although my goal was to provide as complete a context as I could by exploring the customs and rituals inextricably linked to the music, I also realized that each of these aspects could be pursued independently and in much more depth. For example, different colleagues in Bulgaria were particularly interested in specific aspects of my research, depending on their field of expertise: musicologists were interested in analyzing tonal and rhythmic structures, linguists were intrigued by the dialectal variations found in lyrics, choreographers and dancers were inspired by the folk dances, visual artists were captivated by the many different colorful costumes, while social scientists examined how folk music impacts and influences the new pop-folk music, *chalga*. Such varied interests, stemming from a single research project, clearly reflect a wide range of possibilities for future research projects.