Svatbarska muzika and Chalga: The Fusion of Music Genres that Contributes to a Social Change

The paper examines the emergence and development of two contemporary genres of Bulgarian music and their close ties with Roma and Turkish music traditions. It provides a brief historical overview in order to explain the reasons for the acclaim of music that merges Bulgarian folklore elements with the rhythms of Bulgarian minorities. The analysis also focuses on the spread of Bulgarian music in Western Europe and the United States through the virtuoso performances of Roma musicians and the increase in popularity of Bulgarian chalga singers.

In the years of 1944-1989 Bulgaria was part of the Eastern bloc and was considered one of the most loyal satellites of the Soviet Union. The Communist ideology affected all aspects of life, including Bulgarian music. The state encouraged the existence of music genres that served the purposes of the Communist party and forbid those styles of music that were influenced by foreign nations or Bulgarian minority groups. However, the state-imposed restrictions did not manage to impede the development of a genre known as svatbarska muzika (“wedding music”) that closely resembled the rhythms of Roma and Turkish music and quickly turned into an “anti-government expression of freedom” (Smiderle, 6). Svatbarska muzika “became an icon of the possibilities of personal freedom and expression within a totalitarian regime” (Rice, 27). The genre attracted hundreds of people, invited or uninvited, to wedding receptions and other events, such as baby showers, engagement parties, baptisms, etc.

The Communist party was nationalistic which, in the case of Bulgaria, meant “extreme hostility toward the Ottoman Empire and a negative attitude toward its own “Ottoman legacy” (Rice, 28). “Wedding music” conflicted with the Communist ideal of a perfectly

Alexandrina Dimitrova
homogeneous nation because it was rooted in the culture of Bulgarian minorities. The wedding orchestras consisted predominantly of “Muslim minorities,” Roma and Turks, who were loved for their “improvisation, virtuosity, a mixture of Balkan music styles and simple lyrics” (Agoston-Nikolova, 9). It is apparent that the musicians were influenced by Turkish music tradition as they played on instruments that could be found in predominantly Muslim towns in Bulgaria, such as the clarinet and the accordion, and their performances were frequently accompanied by kyuchek, Turkish belly dance (Rice, 32).

A prominent performer of “wedding music,” who is frequently referred to as the creator of the genre, Ivo Papasov (Ibryama), is of a mixed Turkish-Roma origin (Agoston-Nikolova, 9). His wedding band Trakya quickly gained popularity in Bulgaria in the first half of the 1980s. During the period 1984-1989 the Communist party started a cleansing campaign against the Muslim minority in Bulgaria and as a result, the members of Trakya band were arrested twice for popularizing what was considered by the government purely Turkish music (Agoston – Nikolova, 10). It was around the same time when a British impresario Joe Boyd (Hannibal Records) “organized a sponsored tour of Trakya in Europe and the United States” (Agoston-Nikolova, 10). The tour helped the band sell a large number of records and “bring Eastern-European music to a Western audience” (Zwerin, 10). In 2005 Papasov won the BBC’s Radio3 World Music Awards “with the highest number of votes in the contest’s history” contributing to the spread of Bulgarian “wedding music” and proving that the mixture of Bulgarian, Roma and Turkish music produces a successful outcome that is appreciated abroad (Walker, 8).

With the fall of Communism in 1989 a new genre evolved that replaced the “virtuosic instrumental solos” of “wedding music” with the “verse-refrain-interlude structure of popular music” (Rice, 30). The new type of music further incorporated the “Rom musicianship and Middle Eastern – especially Turkish – modes, rhythm and performance idioms” (Buchanan, Alexandrina Dimitrova
5) and heavily resembled Turkish pop music (Rice, 30). Not only is the new music genre influenced by Turkish popular music, but its most commonly used name, *chalga*, is originally a Turkish word. *Chalga* means a “musical instrument” and “captures the association of the genre with Roma music and with Turkish cultural influences” (Rice, 31). A similar term that is still in use is *chalgiya*. The literal meaning of the word refers to a small ensemble that “played Ottoman-derived urban music” using Middle-Eastern and European instruments (Rice, 31). However, the Bulgarian interpretation of the word usually bears a negative attitude towards the genre, regarded by its opponents as tasteless music for the masses: “in places, the very mention of the word “chalga” causes reactions bordering on scorn” (The Sofia Echo Staff, 1).

A great number of Bulgarian intellectuals oppose *chalga* because it has created a whole new cultural wave in society that they believe is detrimental to the young generation. *Chalga* is often associated with provocatively dressed women who move their bodies in a Turkish belly dance. The lyrics of the songs are usually simple and refer to “macho behavior – money, fast cars and girls” (Agoston-Nikolova, 12). Furthermore, the producers of *chalga* music are often accused of being funded by representatives of the Bulgarian mafia, known as “*mutri*”.

The Bulgarian *mutri* emerged in the 1990s and since then they have had a serious influence on Bulgarian political, economic and cultural life. With the fall of Communism in 1989 the average person in Bulgaria was enthusiastic about the future believing that the democratic changes would take place immediately and make life easier. However, the lack of political and civil experience after 45 years under Communism made the transition towards democracy a long and hard process. As a result, many people took a distorted view of the term “democracy.” They believed that they could do whatever they wanted with little regard to “ethics or law” and their attitude “promoted criminal and mafia operations of every

Alexandrina Dimitrova
conceivable sort, from money laundering to trafficking of women” (Buchanan, 3). A new social group, which was soon called the Bulgarian mutri, emerged and promoted “easy life.”

The Bulgarian mutri usually have little or no education and can be seen in posh cafes and night bars, ordering expensive alcohol and then getting in the newest cars. Their lifestyle is the one depicted in the chalga songs and the fear is that the more famous the chalga music becomes, the more appealing to the young generations the mutri’s life will be. In her reportage about a famous Bulgarian chalga club, named after the French palace Versailles, the BBC’s reporter Janet Barrie said, referring to chalga music: “there have been a lot of connections with the mafia as well and lots of concerns of their links with organized crime” (BBC News). Only three months later, in May 2010, the Bulgarian Ministry of Interior started an operation against illegal prostitution. Interestingly enough, the first club in which arrests were made was the chalga club Versailles.

It is well-known in Bulgaria that the Bulgarian mutri support chalga music by building chalga clubs, sponsoring chalga singers and taking part in chalga music videos. In an article called “48 hours in Sofia,” published in the Toronto Sun Newspaper, the author recommends that her readers “experience the joy of “chalga”, Bulgaria’s eclectic blend of folk and pop music, combining live dance tunes with oriental and gypsy motifs” (Tsolova, 1). But she also makes sure to tell them to “beware black-clad men with dark glasses and heavy gold chains” (Tsolova, 1). In fact, the author simply described the looks of the typical representatives of the Bulgarian mafia, warning her readers to avoid them if they happen to go to a chalga club.

The idea that the chalga music is the music of the Bulgarian mutri is widely-spread. A famous Bulgarian journalist, Martin Karbovski, however, takes a different approach. He believes that it is not the Bulgarian mafia that made chalga music popular but the Bulgarian nation as a whole because, in his words, “Chalga does not make a nation look simple. A
simple nation gives birth to *chalga*” (Rice, 35). In his articles on the issue he often refers to Bulgaria as “Chalgaria” (Rice, 35) explaining how the values promoted in *chalga* songs are distorted values but are also the values that appeal to the average Bulgarian.

Although these are all arguments supporting the thesis that the imitation of *chalga* singers’ appearances and behavior by youngsters might have a negative effect on them, the music itself has its values that are now spreading in Western European countries and the United States through the music of Bulgarian Roma. With Bulgaria having been a member of the European Union since 2007, it has become easier for the Bulgarian Roma to travel outside the country and spread their music.

Many Bulgarian Roma have managed to popularize what is known to be Gypsy music but what is in fact a mixture between Roma music, Turkish pop music and Balkan music, including Bulgarian *chalga*. The spread of Gypsy music in Western Europe is apparent with the participation of Roma musicians at “large international festivals” as well as “Gypsy nights” in clubs (Szeman, 99). The Roma bands that perform in Western Europe often include the word “Balkan” in their names and in their marketing and advertising campaigns (Szeman, 102), thus associating their music with the Balkan and in this sense Bulgarian rhythms. Moreover, some Roma musicians of Bulgarian origin perform in American clubs owned by Bulgarian emigrants. A good example is a club in New York called “Mehanata” that offers “Gypsy nights” with live Gypsy music. A famous performer of the club is Yuli Yunakov, the former saxophonist of the Trakya wedding band, who has lived in New York since 1994. Yuri Yunakov also participated in the so-called Gypsy caravan tour that took place in the United States in 1999, a “family reunion” of Roma musicians from Russia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Spain (Pareles, 7). In an article about the tour, The New York Times described Yuri Yunakov as taking up “the melody” and “zigzagging all around it” (Pareles, 7).

Alexandrina Dimitrova
Bulgarian *chalga* singers have recently started to popularize their music abroad as well. Many of them have held concerts abroad, usually in other European countries and in front of audiences that predominantly consist of Bulgarian emigrants. Most of these concerts are organized and sponsored by the biggest *chalga* producer, “Payner” company, and then broadcasted on the famous *chalga* TV channel, “Planeta” (Planet).

The United States and Canada are still expensive destinations for most of the *chalga* singers and they rarely perform in these countries. An exception is Slavi Trifonov and his Ku Ku band. Their American tour in the fall of 2010 proved to be a huge success. Concerts were held in Boston, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Montreal, and Toronto. According to the Bulgarian newspaper “Monitor,” the performances were so successful that the band is already planning their next tour in North America (Monitor Staff).

Another means the *chalga* singers use in order to become appealing to the foreign audience is the incorporation of new elements in their songs. They often try to escape from the Oriental sound and replace it by pop, rock, and even hip-hop rhythms. A good example is the Bulgarian *chalga* performer Sofi Marinova who started performing with a Bulgarian rap singer and their duet has been famous ever since. They have recorded songs, performed in clubs, and held concerts together. Other examples include the *chalga* singers Preslava and Anelia whose songs often have a rock sounding. Sometimes they even perform with rock bands on stage.

The Bulgarian *chalga* singers make duets with performers of other genres in order to mix the different styles of music. The *chalga* singer Andrea, along with her Romanian producer Costi, went even farther. They started recording together under the name of “Sahara” duet and already have a few songs in English with American musicians, such as Shaggy and Mario Winans, as well as with the famous French DJ Bob Sinclair. According to
an article in a Bulgarian news website that refers to Andrea’s success, the time has come for Bulgarian *chalga* music to be appreciated abroad (Dnes BG Staff).

Despite the attempts made by producers and performers alike, *chalga* music still remains a relatively local Bulgarian trend. Indeed, there has been an interest in the music by foreign journalists as well as musicians but the music rarely leaves the confines of the country.

Before 1989 Bulgarian musicians lacked the opportunity to experiment with different genres and contribute to the European music culture. There still exist restrictions on them, especially in terms of financial means, but they are free to improvise and use the creativity of their artistic minds. Bulgarians have managed to take advantage of these new opportunities and express themselves through music. In this way, they are slowly starting to create a better image of the post-Communist country infamous for the past oppressive treatment of its ethnic minorities.
Works Cited:


