



PERFORMER CORNER

Gadulka in a World of Violins

by Elizabeth Prielozny Barnes

Prelude

Some years back I was introduced to the extraordinary world of Bulgarian folk and classical music by Minnesota-based Bulgarian cellist Nickolai Kolarov, who in turn introduced me to two Minnesota-based Bulgarian folk musicians, Nikola Nikolov (who plays the gaida—a type of bagpipe) and Nikolay Gueorguiev (who plays the gadulka—a type of bowed string instrument). So astonished I was to begin to learn about the rich and fascinating worlds of Bulgarian folk and classical music—most of which is completely unknown in the U.S.—that I began a quest of discovery which this past year brought me to Bulgaria (courtesy of a Minnesota State Arts Board grant) to study folk dance at the Bulgarian Folk Music and Dance Seminar at the Music Academy in Plovdiv, and to try to get my hands on some of the wonderful orchestra music based on their folk traditions, working with the Bulgarian Composers Union in Sofia. Returning home after this trip seemed a great time to catch up with and learn more about Nikolay Gueorguiev and the path that led him to become a master gadulka player, and that ultimately landed him here in Minnesota.

The Story

Nick began his musical studies in much the same way that many of us did: he tagged along with his older brother to a music lesson, and was invited to become a student himself, returning home with his very own instrument. What makes this story different from many others you already know is that Nick's full name is Nikolay Gueorguiev, his story begins in the city of Silistra in north-eastern Bulgaria, and the instrument he brought home was a gadulka.

Bulgarian folk music took an important role in the Gueorguiev household; Nikolay's father was an active amateur musician, and his older brother Dimitar began his musical studies at an early age on the accordion. However the accordion was considered a

classical instrument, so in keeping with a family's commitment to folk music, Dimitar moved on to the gadulka, and this was when the 7-year-old Nikolay followed his brother to a lesson and came home with a gadulka himself. Both brothers excelled at their musical studies, and so each brother was accepted as a student at the prestigious Philip Koutev High School in the town of Kotel. Sending your children to this high school was a challenge for families of modest means, since it meant living



far away from home. But the school's top-notch education included studying all things musical—theory, solfeggio, history, and of course performance—as well as the regular high school curriculum.

Rather than continuing immediately on to university, Nikolay wanted an escape from education, so performed his military service—none of which included music. After finishing his military service he earned his college degree in music pedagogy. Even though he hadn't been an enthusiastic student, he found that his intensive high school music curriculum brought him easily through the first couple years of his college curriculum, and even today speaks with awe of the highly disciplined, comprehensive music education he received.

Since he was highly accomplished on the gadulka, as opportunities presented themselves, Nikolay slid rather naturally into the role of professional musician,

ultimately as a member of his hometown Silistra Ensemble performing folk music. His life revolved around rehearsals and performances, much the way things work with the classical orchestras we are more familiar with. And similar to the ways of professional musicians everywhere, Nikolay did outside performing with smaller groups of musicians, for weddings and other events. He describes a fierce competition and high expectations for professional musicians. If you could not meet the highest standards there was always somebody coming along who could! In sum, he truly enjoyed his life as a professional musician in Bulgaria, doing the work he loved and making “decent money.”

Nikolay's coming of age came at a critical time in Bulgarian history: since the close of World War II Bulgaria was strongly under the influence of the Soviet Union. One thing the Soviets did very well was to recognize the extraordinary depth and breadth of Bulgarian folk traditions, which included music and dance forms that are exclusive to literally hundreds of villages across the country. The Soviet Union strongly supported arts education in Bulgaria and developed professional performing ensembles that traveled internationally to display the wealth of the nation's historical and cultural traditions. But once the Soviet empire collapsed in the late 1980s, the strong financial support that had nurtured and professionalized Bulgarian music and dance also disappeared. This was a very difficult time for the country, yet at the same time the country was able to open up to Western Europe and the U.S. for the first time. Given this combination of circumstances, many young adults sought out opportunities to travel abroad, hoping for opportunities to create a better life for themselves.

Nikolay was one of these young adults, coming to the U.S. on an exchange program in agriculture. (Ironically, soon after Nikolay was accepted into an exchange

program—and had even managed to scrape the money together to purchase his airline ticket to the U.S.—a musical hometown hero, Theodosii Spassov took Nikolay and his longtime friend, gaida player Nikola Nikolov aside at a joint performance and invited them to come perform with the most prestigious Bulgarian folk ensemble, the Philip Koutev Ensemble of Music, Drama And Dance. Nikolov joined the ensemble, while Nikolay came to the U.S.) Nikolay was placed in a greenhouse business in North Carolina. Naturally with all he had to do to try to make sense of the English language (with the TV on all the time as tutor) and culture, as well as doing his work, there was no time for music. Thankfully his then-girlfriend (now wife) Chris had a brother living in Minnesota, and after visiting they decided that Minnesota was a better fit for them than North Carolina.

So how does somebody new to the U.S., and a master performer on an instrument that is largely unknown in the U.S., find opportunities to ply his craft? For Nikolay it was a chance encounter between his old friend Nikola Nikolov (then touring the U.S. with the Philip Koutev Ensemble) and a member of Minnesota-based Ethnic Dance Theater, following a performance by the Koutev Ensemble in Chicago. When the dancer mentioned she was from Minnesota, Nikola mentioned his friend Nikolay the gadulka player who also now lived in Minnesota. From this chance encounter Nikolay began to work as a musician for Ethnic Dance Theater, performing the gadulka, creating arrangements of traditional Bulgarian music, and training EDT's musicians on authentic Bulgarian musical practices.

This is probably a good place to say something about traditional Bulgarian music. Probably the two most important elements of the music are its (by conventional western standards) quite unusual meters, and intricate methods of embellishment and improvisation. Much traditional Bulgarian music is based on folk dances, which in this part of the world customarily include patterns of quick and slow steps. Of course traditional music and dance have always been learned by listening, watching and repeating, rather than by reading written notation. But when in the last couple hundred years the music began to be tran-

scribed into written musical notation, the combinations of quick + slow steps were translated into duple + triple beats. A quick step might be notated as a quarter note, while a slow step would then be notated as a dotted quarter note. Thus if a dance pattern included two quick steps + one slow step the musical meter becomes $\frac{7}{8}$. (Oftentimes a quick step will be notated as an eighth note or sixteenth note, while a slow step will thus be notated as a dotted eighth or sixteenth note, making for some pretty intimidating meters for those musicians raised on $\frac{2}{4}$, $\frac{3}{4}$ and $\frac{4}{4}$ (with the occasional $\frac{6}{8}$ thrown in). It truly takes a master practitioner to begin to unravel the mysteries of this fascinating music, so for EDT Nikolay was a treasure.

However the work he could find as a professional gadulka player was not enough to support himself and a now-growing family, so Nikolay ultimately decided to take advantage of his education in the greenhouse business in order to make a secure life for himself, his wife and two daughters. Music takes a decidedly second place in his life today, although he occasionally performs when needed for special and informal events. He hesitates to market himself as a performer today simply because he cannot play at the high standards he expects of himself. Nikolay says that in the past when the gadulka was totally unknown here in the U.S.—and even now when presented to people for the first or second time—it is enough just to show the instrument and play “not so very well” to impress people, simply because it is a new experience. However as the instrument becomes more well-known and as the Bulgarian communities grow in the U.S., people can expect much more than he can deliver these days with a full-time job and two young children at home. However he still holds the thought that someday he will be able to return in a more dedicated fashion to the instrument and music that he knows and loves so much. In the meantime he is constantly amazed at how traditional Bulgarian musicians are exploring and mixing with alternative worlds of music. It is now quite common to hear traditional Bulgarian music immersed in jazz, combined with other popular and ethnic musical practices, and permeated through generations of Bulgarian classical music. When the day comes that Nikolay can turn more fully back to his

music, he wonders exactly what music will have become.

Postlude

- Wiki article introducing the gadulka: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gadulka>
- Wiki article about the fascinating history of Bulgaria: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Bulgaria
- Wiki article on Bulgarian folk and classical music: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_of_Bulgaria
- Bulgarian Composers Union website: <http://www.ubc-bg.com/en>
- Philip Koutev Ensemble website: <http://www.philipkoutev.com/en/>
- Le Mystere des Voix Bulgares is probably the most widely known Bulgarian performing group to Westerners: <http://themysteryofthebulgarianvoices.com>
- Bulgarian Folk Music and Dance Seminar website: <http://www.folkseminarplovdiv.net>
- Ethnic Dance Theatre website: <http://www.ethnicdancetheatre.com/>
- Orkestar bez ime (orchestra without a name) Balkan dance music ensemble based in Twin Cities: <http://www.rogaria.com/about.html>
- There are a variety of Bulgarian Community Organizations in the U.S. The one in Washington, D.C. has the most comprehensive website: <http://www.bgusa.org/home/>
- The Bulgarian School of Minnesota teaches language and culture to all ages: <http://www.bgschoolmn.org/>
- Visit Theodosii Spassov's website to see some of the fascinating work he does through Bulgarian folk music and jazz: <http://theodosiispasov.com/en/archives/930>
- A remarkable list of links to all sorts of Bulgarian folklore resources: <http://www.bourque-moreau.com/bglinks.htm>
- An amazing collection of notated Bulgarian folk tunes in pdf format: http://www.lulu.com/items/volume_45/677000/677233/1/print/Fakebook_Bulgarian_Music.pdf

Chicago native Elizabeth Prielozny Barnes is an innovative orchestra conductor who has also worked extensively in the realms of outreach and arts-in-education. ♪