

# WE'VE GOT RHYTHM!

## Clap Your Hands and Move Your Feet (in orchestra rehearsals)

by Elizabeth Prielozny Barnes

A professional life that goes in many unpredictable directions creates many challenges, but one of its great advantages is the opportunity to collect out-of-the-mainstream experiences that in turn create fabulous new information and insights to share with my colleagues. Living my musical life in the classical world—ultimately as an orchestra conductor—I was introduced to what we currently call “alternative” musical styles through one of these unpredictable shifts in direction, working with remarkable musicians representing many genres and cultures in Minnesota’s vibrant “arts-in-education” community. Very quickly I came to see how much we can learn as classical musicians and teachers from our colleagues from other cultures and genres, as we all work to bring up the next generations of musicians. This past year I had the opportunity to travel and study in Bulgaria and Paraguay, thanks to a Minnesota State Arts Board Artist Initiative Grant. Both countries are blessed with rich folk and classical music cultures, but are largely unknown in the U.S. My experiences traveling and learning in these countries not only confirmed to me the importance of what their music has to offer us as musicians and teachers, but during my travels I was able to collect and bring back printed and recorded musical resources for all of us to use.

### Paraguay

Paraguay is a relatively small country (about the size of California), although more than half of the land is desert-like and virtually uninhabitable. It has been relatively isolated from the rest of the world because it is landlocked (historically making it less attractive to exploration and development), and because since its independence from colonial rule in 1811 until 1989 it was ruled by a series of brutal dictators. Little is known about the pre-colonial music of its indigenous people, although records and artifacts from the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Jesuit missions demonstrate how fully the indigenous people of the area embraced and excelled at music and art. Thus after the missionaries who introduced European-style music and instruments were expelled from Paraguay, the native people continued to use and develop musical instruments and music making they had learned from the missionaries, to the point that the Paraguayan harp became the national musical instrument of Paraguay.

After colonial rule ended, an important element in developing a national identity was to create some uniquely Paraguayan musical styles. The most popular are a style ballad called *guaranía* (named after the indigenous guarani tribes) and dance called *polca* (which melded European polka with indigenous dance). To this day this popular music of Paraguay is an important element of every celebration, festival, and even symphony orchestra concert! Elements of this *Paraguayan popular* music (which is called *popular* rather than *folk*) are important to the country’s classical music traditions as well.

Perhaps the most recognizable of these elements are rhythmic/metric elements that derive from *popular* dance. The most ubiquitous—officially called *sesquialtera*—involves using duple and triple meters simultaneously, sort of stacking them upon each other. Such a juxtaposition of two and three can look formidable in printed music, but it is a very natural part of Paraguayan music and dance, and when approached by *feeling* the rhythms (instead of trying to

analyze them intellectually) it is a very natural sensation.

### Bulgaria

Bulgaria is a smaller country (about the size of Tennessee) in the southeastern corner of Europe (neighboring Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia and Romania). Transected by various mountain ranges, and isolated politically and culturally until the fall of the Soviet Union, its solitude led to the development of many unique folk dance traditions, music, and even musical instruments over the centuries. Naturally much of the folk dance and music’s unique rhythms, meters, and sounds have come to infuse its classical music as well, creating a rich collection of classical music from generations of fine composers.

Much of Bulgaria’s folk music accompanies dances that are composed of sequences of *slow* and *quick* steps. When the music for these steps is notated in music, a *quick* step is notated as a quarter, eighth or sixteenth note, while a *slow* step is notated as a dotted quarter, eighth or sixteenth note. Once you get the *feel* of the uneven rhythms in the dances it is quite natural and logical, but to see it notated in music with meters of 5, 7, 11 or even 13 is quite daunting to the uninitiated.

The rhythmic and metric patterns that infuse Paraguayan and Bulgarian folk music present enticing opportunities to work with rhythms and meters that are much more interesting than our customary straightforward duple and triple meters. I have found that preparing this fascinating and engaging music by orchestras offers a great opportunity to use a *blended* style of teaching, incorporating aural and physical learning to enhance our customary practice of learning and preparing music by reading it.

### Introducing rhythms and meters to an ensemble

I have found it most helpful to introduce **Paraguayan** orchestra music and its stacked duple and triple meters with rhythmic clapping exercises before even *looking* at the printed music, starting with three easy steps:

- 1) Without instruments, music (or even music stands) as distractions, I begin by clapping a slow pulse (approximately ♩ = 42-46). This constant “downbeat” is the anchor for all rhythmic variations. Once this pulse is settled, I ask the ensemble to clap with me, then follow me as I first divide the slow pulse into two claps (the equivalent of a  $\frac{6}{8}$  meter), and then three (equivalent of a  $\frac{3}{4}$  meter), returning again home to the slow pulse between each change from two to three.
- 2) Next the ensemble is divided into two groups, and continues the clapping exercises, one group clapping the slow pulse while the other group divides the pulse into two. Then they switch. We do the same thing with one group clapping the pulse and the other dividing the pulse into three, then switching.
- 3) Next we all return to clapping the pulse. One of our two groups then divides our slow pulse into two, and when that is set the other group simultaneously divides the pulse into three. Then we switch. (In a classroom setting I constantly

clap the slow pulse as a reference point, while my partner, Paraguayan harpist Nicolas Carter, plays the harp bass line in a traditional “three” rhythm for one group to refer to, and our host teacher claps the division of “two” for the other group.)

Once the ensemble moves easily between the slow pulse, two and three while their classmates clap an opposing rhythm, we are ready to enhance the basic two rhythm with further interesting subdivisions (all while one group continues to clap the constant three rhythm).

Clapping these rhythmic sub-divisions is an ideal way to introduce the exact rhythms that will be found in the printed music. Once the rhythms feel secure I will let the musicians get their

Only after all of this do we distribute the printed music (see *Asuncion* excerpt). But before we begin to read through, I point out the various rhythmic patterns in the printed music that they now already know well, so when they begin to read they can immediately connect to the rhythmic knowledge they already gleaned during the clapping exercises. Further, all through the subsequent preparation period for the orchestra pieces I will refer back to the clapping exercises, either by using them as a warm-up, or incorporating clapping breaks into the conventional rehearsal process, again to tap into the rhythms they already have learned physically, as the best way to transfer their physical knowledge into their orchestra playing.

I would *never* introduce printed **Bulgarian** orchestra music to *anybody* before teaching some of the basic folk dance steps that have define its intricate meters. It is as simple as that. For a

## INTRODUCING Sesquiáltera (or stacking duple & triple meter)

One Measure  
Or  
One Big Beat

Two Beats  
( $\frac{6}{8}$  meter)

sound/looks like

Three Beats  
( $\frac{3}{4}$  meter)

sound/looks like

DIVIDES AGAIN

Short-long	
Long-short	
Ev-en	
Swing-in-three	
Chih-gah chih-gah	

STAYS CONSISTENT

YOU WILL NOTICE:

Movement in two  
feels linear.

## Asuncion (*guarania*)

Andante F. Riera, arr. N. Carter  
 $\text{♩} = 104$  orch. E.P.Barnes

instruments and duplicate the rhythmic patterns on a set pitch or chord, so they can add the mechanics of playing their instruments to the task of producing rhythmic patterns.

first rehearsal of this music we begin having everybody seated in a circle (without instruments, music or stands), and listen to the unique folk instruments that infuse the sound of Bulgarian music.

(Of course it is ideal to have the actual musicians, but if this is not possible there are good recordings and plenty of visual images available.) Seeing and hearing these instrumental sounds that are so unusual to us completely draws everybody out of their notions of what music sounds like, and even how a rehearsal might proceed. Next the chairs are cleared away and now standing in a circle, orchestra members are introduced to the *slow* and *quick* steps that comprise Bulgarian folk dance, accompanied simply by a drum beat, first only *slow* steps, then only *quick* steps, and then various combinations of the two that actually are the basis of various dance patterns (e.g. Ruchenitsa) and the music that accompanies them. The amount of time available will determine how deeply to go into the dances; with just a little time it is enough to physically understand the progressions of and relationships between *slow* and *quick* steps. With more time it is possible to incorporate more exact patterns of foot placement, direction, and use of the hands, arms and torso. As a culmination of learning these dance steps (and as many other details as there is time for) I show the actual dances performed in costume, either with live dancers or with a recording. (If we *begin* by seeing the finished product, western musicians who have never conceived of such movement will likely be overwhelmed, but after actually experiencing the steps, the finished product can actually make some sense.) In the same way that I introduce printed Paraguayan music after finishing rhythmic exercises, I introduce the Bulgarian printed music after dancing, and show how the combinations of slow and quick steps add up to meters of 7, 11, 13, etc., which makes it possible to comprehend the types of meters and rhythmic patterns that have likely never been seen (or even conceived of) before.

Why do this? Rehearsal schedules are always compact, while these practices take some time, planning and effort, and are certainly not part of a

conventional orchestra rehearsal. However the activities can take as little as one rehearsal period, and can make for a much more fun, gracious and comprehensible way to introduce music that is a bit out of the ordinary from our traditional practices. What's more, who is to say that orchestra rehearsals should not include physical and aural learning, removed from conventional seated practices? What's more, communities of Paraguayan and Bulgarian immigrants are alive and well in Minnesota, practicing these art forms, thus offering even more opportunities to introduce your students and your communities to people and cultures that are truly fascinating but largely invisible to most observers. Working in this fashion, with these cultural and artistic traditions and practices offers a splendid way to utilize your music program as a springboard to vividly teaching about some of our many immigrant communities.

I also believe that from a purely music educational perspective working across conventional boundaries of genre and culture can introduce practices and ways of learning that can transfer into other pieces of music, making much fuller use of our brains and bodies in our musical preparations. What's more, once you have played a meter of 7, 11, or 13, a meter of 5, 6 or 9 is truly no big deal at all!

I love this music and these practices, and I have music available. Please let me know how I can help you incorporate some of this music and

blended learning into your teaching.

*Elizabeth Prielozny Barnes is an innovative orchestra conductor who has also worked extensively in the realms of outreach and arts-in-education. She has brought enlightening community partnerships to the center of her work as music director of the East Metro Symphony Orchestra. Her work across conventional boundaries of culture and genre through string music led to the development of Vox Corda, and most recently earned her a Minnesota State Arts Board Artist Initiative grant to explore music in Bulgaria and Paraguay. ♪*

### Two Ruchenitsa examples

1. from Timothy Rice: *Music in Bulgaria*

short short long

2. from *Folk Music from Bulgaria Fake Book*

short short long

1. Timothy Rice: *Music In Bulgaria, Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2004.
2. Hans Baken, compiler: *Fake Book: Folk Music from Bulgaria*. Amsterdam. 2007. (Available from: <http://www.lulu.com/shop/hans-baken/fake-book-folk-music-from-bulgaria/paperback/product-849994.html>)