



Repertoire & Resources

World Musics and Cultures



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To Chicago and Back: The Travel Story of a Multiculturalist

by Madlen Batchvarova

Some of you may very well recognize the resemblance in the title. Only those few who may have come across pieces of late-nineteenth-century Bulgarian literature may find it familiar. Aleko Konstantinov (1863–1897), a prominent, and, according to some, dissident Bulgarian writer decided to send his most popular story character, Bay Ganyo, on a trip from Bulgaria to Chicago. During this adventure, the character attempts to understand and function within the American cultural idiom. The journey also becomes a satire of a particular Bulgarian archetype and further confirms the popular saying “travel abroad to learn about yourself.”

Some years ago, motivated by the novel, I plunged into the internet in search of information and inspiration. There I was, an Eastern-European-born, mid-western college professor who wanted to share with the world what it means to teach Bulgarian choral music to American students. And I had a lot to share! For decades, I have lived in and loved two countries—the

United States of America and Bulgaria. It has been easy to explore American music with my Bulgarian colleagues, as it is reasonably well published and promoted, but bringing Bulgarian music to the Americans has been a puzzle—a challenging and exciting puzzle. Sharing my cultural heritage, the essence of the Bulgarian soul expressed in song, is the story of my life.

When we study a Bulgarian folk song arrangement, I sit in a circle with my choristers. We sing in 10/16, learn the Cyrillic alphabet and (try to) read the song text in its original form. I share stories of my family dynamics that would inform their understanding of the fun fact that Bulgarian young men were characterized by the folk songwriters as silly, crazy, or wild when they would knit motley socks to give as gifts to the young women who have captured their hearts. We would watch a video of the dancers of the Philip Koutev National Ensemble for Folk Songs and Dances perform a fiery folk dance ruchenitsa, and spent the final minutes of every rehearsal for two weeks trying to learn and perfect the dance steps, before ultimately singing and dancing “Er-gen Deda” by Petar Lyondev.

In 2019 (what perfect timing) my choir spent their spring term abroad studying in and touring Bulgaria. The Bulgarians were thrilled to experience their own music performed by American singers, taught, and directed by a native Bulgarian conductor. My American students were astounded by the standing ovations, bouquets of flowers, and audience appreciation they received on and off stage. And I wept! My two worlds did not collide. They sang together in a perfect symbiosis, demonstrating the flawless harmony of the human soul.



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My singers, however, needed more than Bulgarian music. As I searched the listing of world music conferences, I realized that I also craved to communicate with other professionals with similar backgrounds and interests. I needed to recharge my artistic batteries with new ideas, outlooks, and experiences, born out of research, creative writing, travel, and connection with other cultures. The answer to my wishes was the Biennial International Symposium and Festival of the Centre for Intercultural Music and Arts, at the time held at the University of Granada, Spain. I was excited by the aims of the event to provide a forum for discussion among composers, scholars, performers, educators, critics, publishers, artists, and others involved in intercultural idioms, and to facilitate the process of development, study, and understanding of the new intercultural idioms in music.

Over the years, the organization and its events were transformed or no longer exist. However, the forum in Spain was a noteworthy opportunity for me as a pianist, singer, educator, and music historian with interests in ethnomusicology to feature my research, and further my knowledge in the field. As a choral conductor I had the chance to meet other colleagues and exchange valuable information on selecting world music pieces

for my choral ensembles and presenting them successfully to the American audiences. I felt fortunate to have gained some understanding of varied cultures, and confident that I could study, teach, and interpret their specific cultural and musical characteristics with integrity and appreciation.

So, here I am, the curious world traveler, sitting in my midwestern American home, planning my new season of choral programs. One of them, “An International Quilt,” will soon be presented on the campus of Hanover College. By the way, if your inquisitive mind wants to check out “To Chicago and Back” by Aleko Konstantinov in English translation, just search the wide world of the Internet.

World Musics and Cultures Repertoire Recommendations

by Madlen Batchvarova

Makedonska Humoreska

Composer: Todor Skalovski

Editor: Kathleen Rodde

SSA divisi unaccompanied



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Macendonian composer Todor Skalovski created his electrifying *Makedonska Humoreska* for mixed and for treble choirs. This playful, humorous folk-like song utilizes a Phrygian dominant mode (Phrygian with a sharp 3rd scale degree) that is traditional in the Middle Eastern, Eastern European, and Flamenco music. The song offers endless possibilities in interval studies (augmented melodic seconds and tritones), and mastering mixed meters (7/8, 8/8, 3/4). An IPA pronunciation guide is included with the octavo.

Nochka (Night) - (No. 2 from Six Choruses)
(with Russian and English texts)

Composer: Sergei Rachmaninoff

SA, piano (with occasional divisi to SSAA)


Language: Russian

Nochka is the second from Sergei Rachmaninoff's "Six Choral Songs for Treble Voices," opus 15. It combines the expressive, arch-like melodies with the inspired, romantic piano accompaniment. The six pieces work well in a set or individually, programmed as part of a concert program dedicated to nature, the secular music of Russia and Eastern Europe, or as a lyrical centerpiece. The original Russian text is accompanied by a singable English translation by Mark Herman and Ronnie Apter.

Sednalo e Djore dos

Arranger: Sara Shakliyan

SATB divisi, unaccompanied

This unaccompanied work is a joyful, yet challenging arrangement of a popular Bulgarian folk song. It builds upon the native tradition while employing more modern harmonic elements. The piece starts moderately fast to build to a sparkling final accelerando. It is a perfect combination between the straight-forward, humorous folk lyrics and the delight of the melodic, harmonic, and linguistic bouquet of sounds. For Bulgarian pronunciation assistance, contact the recommender, Madlen Batchvarova. 



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