The Mystery of The Mystery of Bulgarian Voices

by

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# Table of Contents

Introduction........................................................................................................2

Chapter 1: A Brief History of Bulgaria.................................................................4

Chapter 2: Bulgarian Village Music.................................................................9

Chapter 3: Obrabotki and Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares.............................16

Chapter 4: Bulgarian Music in the U.S. .........................................................29

Chapter 5: Musical Analysis.............................................................................31

  -“Polegnala e Todora”.................................................................................31

  -“Kalimankou Denkou”.............................................................................35

Chapter 6: Slavei and Eva Salina.................................................................44

Conclusion......................................................................................................51

Acknowledgments............................................................................................53

Works Cited.....................................................................................................54

Appendix..........................................................................................................57
Introduction

“Izraslo dŭrvo, dŭrvo visoko-
Vrŭh mu oprelo vŭv sinjo nebe,
Kloni mu oprelo vŭv dolna zemja
Vŭv golemi, mamo, beli manastiri”¹

Eight or ten earthy-looking Wesleyan students stood on the stage in Crowell Concert Hall and sang those unfamiliar words to the audience. I sat toward the front of the theater, spellbound. They sang in a clear, sometimes grating tone that I had never heard before, in a language I did not understand. After their first song, they announced themselves to be Slavei, Wesleyan’s only Eastern-European a cappella group. It would be another year before I auditioned for and joined Slavei, but I already knew that this music was special.

Three years later, during my senior fall at Wesleyan, I sang with Slavei for a professional vocalist of Bulgarian music named Eva Salina, whom we had brought in for a workshop. She proceeded to critique almost everything we did, from our botched pronunciation, to our overly-exaggerated nasal quality, to our faltering blending. She deemed our performance an amateur imitation of what we had heard in recordings.

That is exactly what it was. The song, “Moma Hubava,”² or “Beautiful Girl,” was a relatively new addition to our repertoire, and it had become one of our favorites. We learned it from sheet music we had found in the Slavei Dropbox, but we had help from a recording we had found by something called The Bulgarian State Television Female Vocal Choir.

¹ Appendix 1
² Appendix 2
I had been listening to this choir’s albums for a year or two, at one point proclaiming them to be my favorite band. Influence from their tight harmonies had started to creep into my own compositions, some of which would make it into my musical *If Sand Were Stone*. Eva Salina’s accusation of imitation alerted me to how little I knew about this choir, and also made me realize how little I knew about Slavei’s repertoire. I had been singing in the group for two full years, and I knew virtually nothing about any of our songs. I googled “Bulgarian State Television Female Vocal Choir,” triple-checking that I got all of the words right, and found the Wikipedia page:

The Bulgarian State Television Female Vocal Choir is an internationally renowned World Music ensemble that performs modern arrangements of traditional Bulgarian folk melodies. It is most recognized for its contribution to Marcel Cellier's *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares* (The Mystery Of The Bulgarian Voices) project. First created in 1952 as the Ensemble for Folk Songs of the Bulgarian Radio by Georgi Boyadjiev, the choir is now under the direction of Dora Hristova. The choir was granted the name *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares* by Marcel Cellier in 1997, in recognition of the fact that it had contributed most of the songs on the original compilations. (Bulgarian State Television Female Vocal Choir n.d.)

What distinguished the Bulgarian State Television Female Vocal Choir from *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares* from the Ensemble for Folk Songs of the Bulgarian Radio? Why was one of those titles in French? Where did their songs come from, and why did they sing in such a distinctive, clear timbre? I began to do research, and found a story of centuries-old folk songs, Communist propaganda, and cultural erasure and reinvention.
Chapter 1: A Brief History of Bulgaria

The Republic of Bulgaria is a country in southeastern Europe, bordered by Romania, Serbia, Macedonia, Greece, Turkey, and the Black Sea. It is part of the geographical area commonly referred to as The Balkans, which stretches from Slovenia and Moldova to Turkey and Greece.

Bulgaria sits at the junction of ancient migration trails that ran from Central Europe and southern Russia to Greece and the Mediterranean Sea. Its prime location, mild climate, and farmable soil made Bulgaria perfectly suited for ancient peoples, and it has been continuously inhabited since the Paleolithic era.

Bulgaria’s 7.4 million people have varied ethnic backgrounds that can be traced back to several nomadic tribes, the most prominent being the Bulgars and the Slavs. The Slavs have been traced to several ancient tribes: the Scythians (Iranian Eurasian nomads), Sarmatians (Iranian nomads), Thracians (an Indo-European tribe that inhabited southeastern Europe). But they also have ethnographic ties to other nomadic tribes that inhabited eastern Europe, such as the Goths, Huns, Ostrogoths, Slavs, Thraco-Illyrians, and later, the Greeks and Romans. Because of the nomadic tendencies of these tribes, the ethnography of the population of Bulgaria from the first to seventh centuries AD has been defined differently by different historians, but the people who settled in the region during this time are now referred to as the Slavs.

The Bulgars were a semi-nomadic militaristic tribe, renowned and feared for their cavalry. (The founder of the Bulgar nation, Avitokhol, is often argued to be, in fact, the legendary Attila the Hun.) They arrived in the Balkan Peninsula in the middle of the seventh century and settled between the Black and Aegean Seas, in the
land that is now Bulgaria and Turkey. Some scholars have traced the Bulgars’ origins to the Scythians, the Slavo-Tartars, and the Finno-Ugrians, while others identify them as Huns, Onogundors, Onogurs, Sanagurs, Kuturgurs, Hunugurs, Avars, and Petchenegs.

Upon arriving in the Balkan Peninsula, the Bulgars conquered the Slavic inhabitants and established a military and social hierarchy. The nature of the Bulgar-Slavic relationship in the seventh and eighth centuries has been chronicled differently in different historical accounts. Byzantine chroniclers of the time continued to distinguish between the territories of the Slavs and the Bulgars throughout the eighth and ninth centuries. But according to David Marshall Lang in his book *The Bulgarians: From Pagan Times to the Ottoman Conquest*, even as Bulgars continued to spread and occupy more territories, the majority of Slav peasants were largely free from serfdom or servitude. Remnants of Slav architecture – circular or square water-and-clay houses – and Bulgar architecture – portable leather yurts – have been found side by side in village sites; their relationship appears to have been one of coexistence rather than strife.

The *Encyclopedia Brittanica* lists the spread of Christianity as the “basis for a common culture” among the Bulgars and Slavs. Christianity was brought to Bulgaria by the Saints Cyril and Methodius, who were Byzantine brothers and Christian theologians and missionaries. In 863 A.D., they “translated the Bible into the language later known as Old Church Slavonic (or Old Bulgarian) and invented the Glagolitic alphabet, a Slavic alphabet based on Greek characters that in its final Cyrillic form is still in use as the alphabet” (“Bulgaria” 10) in the Bulgarian language.
The following year, Boris I, the current khan, or ruler, of Bulgaria, was baptized a Christian. Boris welcomed the disciples of Cyril and Methodius and “undertook the translation of church books and the training of priests” (“Bulgaria” 10). Boris I is credited with converting Bulgaria into a Christian country, which gave the Bulgars and Slavs a united culture; Bulgaria remains an Eastern Orthodox Christian country today.

In the ninth and tenth centuries, Bulgarian land was controlled at various times by the Byzantines, the Russians, and the Greeks. In 976, Byzantine Emperor Tzimiskes died suddenly, likely from poison, which led to a resurgence in Bulgarian independence in the land that is now Macedonia, led by the family known as the Comitopuli. But after just 25 years of Bulgarian reign, the land was entirely conquered by the Byzantine empire. The Byzantines retained power for nearly 200 years, though various Bulgarian revolts occurred throughout that time.

The next three centuries saw no letup in the battle over Bulgarian land. The Byzantine Empire, Crusaders, Latin Empire, and various Bulgarian noblemen gained and lost power. In the late fourteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was on the rise, a few years away from toppling the Byzantine Empire. The Turks had captured several territories in Bulgaria, and when they advanced to the capital of Sofia in 1385, Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Shishman ceded to Sultan Murad. By 1396, Bulgaria was completely under Turkish rule, a state in which it would remain for four hundred years.

The period of Ottoman rule over Bulgaria is seen by Bulgarians as a time of oppression and suffering, according to Lang and the Encyclopedia Brittanica:
Both national and ecclesiastical independence were lost. The Bulgarian nobility was destroyed - its members either perished, fled, or accepted Islam and Turkification - and the peasantry was enserfed to Turkish masters. The ‘blood tax’ took a periodic levy of male children for conversion to Islam and service in the Ottoman army. (“Bulgaria” 10)

However, with the exception of some Catholic communities in the northwest and the people of the Rhodope Mountains in the south, the Turks did not try to convert all Bulgarians to Islam; most Bulgarians maintained their Orthodox religion. Though Turkish overlords lived in towns and villages, there was not a large population of Turkish peasants in Bulgaria; the empire did not try to forcibly populate Bulgaria with Turks. By the 16th century, the Ottoman Empire divided its territories into districts within provinces. Bulgarian lands within these provinces became fiefdoms, but Bulgarians were largely allowed to retain their village traditions and ways of life.

The decline and consequent violence of the Ottoman Empire, the rise of Christian powers in Austria and Russia, and the spread of education in newly-founded Bulgarian public schools all contributed to the independence Bulgaria gained in the 19th century. Bulgarian volunteer soldiers fought with Russia in its declared war against the Turks, and in 1878, Russia granted Bulgaria autonomy, in the Treaty of Berlin.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the new Bulgarian state was rapidly modernized through the building of railways, spread of education, and expansion of trade with European countries. After several centuries of exclusion from the rest of Europe, Bulgaria was finally culturally integrated into the continent.
During World War I, Bulgaria sided with the Central Powers and suffered heavily, with hundreds of thousands of casualties. In 1945, Georgi Dimitrov returned to Bulgaria and became prime minister. Dimitrov was born in Bulgaria in 1882 and played a major role in forming the Bulgarian Communist Party in 1919. In 1923, as punishment for inciting Communist uprisings, he was exiled to Russia. He returned after 22 years and was appointed prime minister by Joseph Stalin. By 1948, the Communist Party controlled 85% of industrial production (“Bulgaria” 10), forced all workers’ organizations into the Party’s General Workers’ Trade Union, and established state supervision of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and all other religious orders. And by the 1950s, the Party took measures to reinvent and redistribute a new, modernized version of Bulgarian folk music to promote nationalism. Before I delve into this new genre, I will explore the old genre: Bulgarian village music.
Chapter 2: Bulgarian Village Music

Folk music is a sweepingly broad genre, especially in Bulgaria, where there are many layers of folk music. Bulgarian music scholar Kalin Kirilov chronicles the different layers in his book *Bulgarian Harmony In Village, Wedding, and Choral Music of the Last Century* and studies three different music systems in Bulgaria: village music from the mid to late twentieth century, wedding music from the later third of the twentieth century, and obrabotki, a separate genre which I will analyze shortly, known by many through *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares*.

Kirilov writes: “The village style, as referred to by American scholars (Rice 1994, Silverman 1989, and Buchanan 1995), is what Bulgarian folklorists and ethnomusicologists primarily consider ‘authentic’ music folklore” (9).

In his book *Bulgarian-Macedonian Folk Music*, Boris Kremenliev outlines the mechanics of Bulgarian village music. He defines folk music as an “art song” passed down and among singers:

The music of the early Slavs was purely melodic, with strong diatonic foundations; the melodies were monotonous and void of wide intervals. They closely followed the text, forming two-verse couplets. Duple meter was the most frequent, although irregular five, seven, and similar measure units which appear in later Bulgarian folk songs were sometimes used. (11)

Kirilov also establishes this point:

The oldest existing layer of traditional Bulgarian music is monophonic or diaphonic (melody and drone). This layer continued to exist throughout the twentieth century, and is the basis of subsequent styles traditionally categorized as folk music. Regardless of media influences, urbanization, and globalization processes, a number of villages in Bulgarian rural areas preserved older layers of their music, often assisted by government cultural agencies. (10)
In traditional Bulgarian folk songs, there are strophic songs (in which the same melody repeats in an AAA structure) and songs with a refrain (with an ABAB structure). Scholars and practitioners agree that the melody-and-drone model provides the basis for Bulgarian harmony.

Ethnomusicologist Timothy Rice travelled to Bulgaria in the 1970s, where he did extensive fieldwork, conducting interviews and collecting music samples. In his book *Music in Bulgaria*, he describes how he travelled to a village in Shop, a region near the capital:

My goal was to meet some village musicians….I interviewed villagers for help in understanding the details of their playing and singing. When Shop women get together for communal work in the fields or simply to socialize, they sing very loudly in a two-part polyphonic style. Like Bulgarian researchers before me, I found that the singers had their own words for each of the parts, words that described rather accurately what each singer was doing. For example, they do not use the word ‘melody’ but instead say that the woman who sings the highest part ‘cries out’ (*izvika*). They do not say that the other singers ‘accompany’ her; rather, they say that they ‘follow’ (*slaga*) or ‘bellow’ (*buchi*), the same word they use for the sound cows make. (30)

Rice then provides a transcription of a drone-based song, though he does not provide a title or translation. I can gather from a few words that the song has lyrical content involving a horse and a field in the city of Sofia:
This example’s harmonies consist almost entirely of unisons, major seconds, and minor thirds, and when sung in the “bellowing” tone Rice describes, they are simple but effective. These drone-based harmonies provide the basis for the more complicated harmonies that I will discuss in later examples.

There are several different kinds of scales that contain the diaphonic songs that Kirilov references. Kirilov states that Bulgarian ethnomusicologists classify folk scales into the following categories: pentatonic, diatonic, chromatic, and enharmonic:

According to Bulgarian scholarship, pentatonic songs represent the oldest examples of ‘authentic’ Bulgarian folk music. The idea of pentatonic melodies being the most ancient dates back to pre-scientific studies of folk music from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and was particularly emphasized in studies by Bartók and Kodály. (25)
Kirilov does not specify if these claims of pentatonic authenticity are accurate, merely writing that they are presumed to be the oldest.

The Bulgarian diatonic system follows the Western seven-note scale, though it has roots in both the Greek and Glarean systems – this can be attributed to A: Bulgaria sharing a border with Greece, and B: the country “adopting Eastern Orthodox Christianity as its official religion in the ninth century....With that came that adoption of the Byzantine chant system” (Kirilov 27).

The Bulgarian chromatic system is organized around the augmented second, or the makam, which is a Turkish term that refers to variable whole-step substitutions for half-step intervals. These chromatic scales were likely borne of Turkish culture influencing Bulgaria during the Ottoman Empire. The existence of Bulgarian makams was denied by Bulgarian ethnomusicologists during the Communist period in order to promote the “purity of folk music and erase any Turkish influences… [ethnomusicologists] mention that Turkish music left hardly a trace among the local Bulgarian populace....The similarities between Turkish and Bulgarian makams suggest that Bulgarians probably adopted the Turkish makams, but modified them based on European temperament” (Kirilov 31). Dismissal of Turkish influence in Bulgarian music, and in Bulgarian culture on a broader scale, was a common theme during the Communist period.

The final scale system, enharmonic, includes pitch collections with microtones. Kirilov writes that “the primary reason Bulgarian scholars did not study the microtones in depth is probably a combination of nationalism and anti-Turkism” (33).
While Bulgarian folk songs can be classified into four different scale systems, most Bulgarian music that is practiced in the U.S. – by amateur and professional groups – follows Western diatonic form, due to the westernization of folk songs as well as the promotion and dissemination of songs that fall into the diatonic system, which I will discuss in Chapter 3.

Asymmetrical meters, which Kirilov defines as all meters with uneven groupings, are a key characteristic in Bulgarian village music. They exist in vast number and variation, and often accompany corresponding dances:

The majority of simple and compound meters found in Western classical music are present in Bulgarian musical traditions. The most widely used are 2/4 and 6/8, although asymmetrical meters prevail. Simple or compound meters are often replaced by asymmetrical ones. For example, Bulgarians prefer the asymmetrical 7/8 (2+2+3 or 3+2+2) or 8/8 (3+2+3) over 4/4. Compound meters such as 9/8 and 12/8 are found primarily in asymmetrical versions (uneven groupings). (Kirilov 35)

Embellishments are another essential component of village music. There are upper and lower mordents, called vorschlags and nachschlags (Kirilov), and passing tone grace notes. (These rapid embellishments are used heavily on the album *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares* and are accented in slower songs in outer voices. Examples: “Pilentze Pee” and “Kalimankou Denkou.”)

Polyphony in Bulgarian village music generally involves melody and drone. Drones, whether steady or variable, are the most basic element of harmony in Bulgarian music, and they provide the basis for modern choral arrangements. Kirilov classifies drones as such:

*Steady Drones*

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3 Appendix 3
4 Appendix 4
1. Drone on the same pitch as the finalis;
2. Drone a fourth below the finalis;
3. Drones on the same pitch as the finalis and a fourth below;
4. Drones a fifth below the finalis;
5. Drones on the same pitch as the finalis and a fifth below.

**Variable Drones**
1. Drone on scale degree 1 (finalis) interchanged with the subtonic (7).
2. Variable drone in minor between scale degrees 3 and 1, where 1 is the finalis.
3. Variable drone 4-1, which implies two possible tonics. (49)

Also noticeable in recordings of Bulgarian music is a sharp, nasal quality.

Timothy Rice calls this a “loud, tense vocal quality” (21). He elaborates:

The narrow pitch range of [Bulgarian] songs creates an intensely dissonant effect, at least to most American listeners. However, when interviewed, the singers say the sound is ‘pleasant’ and ‘smooth.’ They regard their harmony as, in effect, consonant. The women appreciate the pleasurable aesthetic effect of the clash between the two or three close-together tones. They say they are trying to make the harmony ‘ring like a bell.’

To produce this effect, the singers sit or stand close together, and those who ‘follow’ sing into the ears of the one who ‘cries out.’ This is a good example of a truism that ethnomusicologists have long known, namely, that the way people understand and appreciate music, what they find beautiful or ugly, mellifluous or cacophonous, is a product of culture, not something universal. (31-2)

The “loud, tense vocal quality” that Rice references is not an accident. The goal of this performance timbre is pitch clarity to highlight intervals. Most vibrato that can be heard in popular recordings like *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares* comes in the form of *vorschlags* and *nachschlags*, or grace note embellishments. With a few exceptions, there is little use of head voice or any breathy quality, meaning that even notes that fall high in a singer’s register are belted at full volume. When you take these factors into consideration, the goal of the singers is not to sound nasal or “tense,” but to sound unified in harmony; to ring clearly and fully, indeed like a bell.
Kalin Kirilov, through his years of musicianship, field work, and study of Bulgarian ethnomusicologists, categorizes Bulgarian village music with specific guidelines and definitions, such as steady and variable drones and numerous scales. Village music varies from region to region, and with songs’ compositions spanning over hundreds of years and thousands of singers, such guidelines are essential to understanding the new genre that emerged in the 20th century.
Chapter 3: Obrabotki and Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares

The Communist period in Bulgaria lasted from 1944 until 1989. In the 1940s and early 1950s, the newly established Bulgarian Communist party poured funding and effort into resurrecting a “new and improved” form of Bulgarian folk music. By resurrecting, re-packaging, and presenting folklore to the public, the government aimed to create a national musical identity.

Nearly all villages in the country formed amateur singing groups called Hudozhestvena Samodeinost, which means “amateur art.” State-sponsored festivals featured performances from these amateur groups. They performed traditional folk music, as well as new arrangements in an emerging genre called obrabotki. Kirilov offers the following definitions of the term: “In addition to its literal translation – which is arranging, modeling, or editing—obrabotka can also mean the actual arrangement made by a composer during the socialist period, a folk song transformed through harmonic accompaniment, or the state-regulated approach to harmony” (13). Obrabotki is music based on traditional Bulgarian folk styles but with western influence, such as primary triads, chord substitutions, and additional harmonies added to the diaphonic songs. The concept of authenticity was very important for 20th-century Bulgaria in terms of nationalism and folk music. The idea was to connect the archaic and traditional with the modern – a merging of authentic Bulgarian culture with the Western values of the Party.

In order to maintain the authenticity that was so important to the Bulgarian Communist movement, obrabotki was subject to monitoring and censorship and had to follow certain rules, as outlined by Kirilov:
1. Obrabotki should preserve the original song melody and text intact.
2. Harmony should enhance the qualities of the original song without overshadowing its melody.
3. Harmony should be modern (but not too modern) and not too Western or Turkish.
4. Motivic developmental techniques should be avoided because they damage the authenticity of the song, which is considered the most valuable component of the obrabotka. (164)

In her book Romani Roots: Cultural Politics and Balkan Music in Diaspora, which is an exploration of the Western appropriation of Balkan Gypsy music, Carol Silverman writes: “Composers, ethnomusicologists, and Party ideologues boasted that they were raising the level of folk music to that of Western art music. This was part of a state-sponsored initiative to ‘modernize’ peasant culture in diverse realms. Folklore had to be ‘cleaned up’ and reworked to make it ‘art’” (215). Sponsored by the Party, these amateur groups were developing a new style that would soon become synonymous with Bulgarian music.

Kirilov writes:

Following the nationalist models of the Nazi and Soviet regimes, the Bulgarian communist party considered ‘authentic’ traditional music a principal tool for uniting the nation, a source of ancient ‘Bulgarian-ness,’ and a national cultural treasure….the ruling communist party favored certain styles and marginalized others. The favored styles were ‘authentic’ village music and obrabotki (arrangements for choirs, folk orchestras, and brass orchestras). Communist censorship suppressed wedding music, music of all ethnic minorities (Vlachs, Roma, and Bulgarian Turks), and other types of Bulgarian music that featured foreign influences….Hiding behind Marxism, an ethnic nationalism was driving the agenda. Similar music purification processes took places in neighboring social countries such as Romania. (8)

This is a key point in understanding the development and dissemination of *obrabotki* music. The Communist story went as such: during Ottoman rule, which
lasted hundreds of grueling years, Bulgarians were treated as inferiors, the country experienced cultural erasure and Islamisation, and thousands of Bulgarians were killed in honorable rebellions. The Communist party’s retaliation against such rule was a nationalist effort but was also an effort to whitewash the country’s culture, though Turkish and Romani people make up about nine and five percent of the country’s population, respectively. (Romani people are often pejoratively referred to as “Gypsies.”) The westernization of Bulgarian folk music and the rejection of Turkish and Romani music was a cultural purification effort by the government.

In fact, in 1984, the Bulgarian government led an effort to “Bulgarianize” its ethnic Turkish population. It discontinued Turkish-language publications and radio broadcasts, and also initiated the “Restoration of Names”: “The changing of names was a collective favour by the state which gave back Bulgarian names to people whose ancestors were forcefully assimilated during centuries of [what was depicted as] cruel Turkish slavery. The ‘Restoration’ was executed by police, uniformed and secret, party officials and the army and Bulgarian National Television...Nearly a million Muslims were humiliated, thousands of families were terrorised - and those seen as more influential in their communities were in fact forced to leave the country” (Popov n.d.). Throughout the Party’s time in power, the narrative was that the cruel Turks had manipulated and erased Bulgarian culture, and intense, retaliatory measures were taken.

In 1951, Filip Kutev, arguably Bulgaria’s most respected prominent composer, founded the Bulgarian State Ensemble for Folk Song and Dance. For 32 years, he led the choir, called the Bulgarian State Radio and Television Female Vocal
Choir, teaching his singers arrangements that were more and more complex.

According to Kirilov, Kutev wrote over 500 choral and vocal chamber arrangements for the group. He is essentially the father of obrabotki. Timothy Rice writes on Kutev’s style of obrabotki in *May It Fill Your Soul*, his 1994 book on Bulgarian music:

> The most important principle, and one that distinguishes his arrangements from many treatments of folk song by classical composers, was that the song melody was always heard in its entirety and then repeated in full, retaining the strophic structure of ordinary village singing. The song tunes never collapsed into melodic motives to be ‘developed’ in the manner of classical compositions. Motives might be used as countermelodies or in brief points of imitation, but the tune proceeded unbroken through a number of varied repetitions. (177)

Carol Silverman conducted interviews with former members of Kutev’s choir as well as American and British promoters to synthesize research for an essay called “Move over Madonna: Gender, Representation, and the ‘Mystery’ of Bulgarian Voices.” Silverman reports that “Kutev traveled around Bulgaria in the early 1950s to recruit the best female village singers…for the newly formed state-sponsored music ensembles” (214). Kutev recruited male instrumentalists but used only female singers because “singing in Bulgaria is predominantly a female tradition: ritual and work songs, for example, are almost exclusively sung by women. Moreover, women are symbolically associated with tradition and nationalism” (Silverman 2004: 212).

Singers from all over the country came together to sing local music from their regions and learn new obrabotki. Silverman interviewed Kremana Stancheva, a featured Choir soloist who initially received a personal invitation from Kutev. She reported that she participated in a state-sponsored course in performing and arranging:
“Our choir was a school for conductors and composers. Those that could compose and those that couldn’t all wrote music for the Radio Choir. We had no choice but to sing these songs.” Singers would sing their village music for a composer/arranger (in this case, Kutev), who then used it to write an obrabotka. All of the composers were male except for Kutev’s wife, Maria Kuteva. Stancheva says, “In terms of royalties, folk singers were in the most disadvantaged position. We sing the songs; the composer arranges them, changes them; they get the royalties…we get nothing.” (2004: 214)

Silverman writes:

Kutev’s brilliant idea was to take traditional village songs, which are monophonic in most of Bulgaria or have drone-based harmony in the southwest region of the country, and to arrange them into four- or five-part Western harmonies, to add dynamics and tempo changes while preserving the throat-placed quality. (2004: 213)

This system of communication and translation of songs placed the female singers in a position where they could easily be taken advantage of. They were paid a state salary, but they did not receive royalties for the songs they gave to Kutev: “Once an arrangement was written, the composer’s name was attached to it and the singer’s name disappeared” (Silverman 2004: 213). Here we can see the initial stage of transformation and misattribution of this music. Singers’ contributions and very names were erased from the record from the moment their part – the performance of their song, indeed the seed of every arrangement – was over. There was no copyright in place to protect the composers, whoever they may have been. These folk songs belonged to no one, and so they were taken and transformed. And from the point of view of the singers, the songs were destroyed by the arrangements; according to Silverman, obrabotki never achieved popularity in Bulgaria like it did abroad. Village music was supposed to belong to the people – to the villagers who sang the songs and
taught them to others – so when these songs were drastically changed, they were alienated from their source. *Obrabotki* was a westernized, watered down, and ultimately inauthentic version of folklore that failed to stir feelings of patriotism within its intended audience: Bulgarians.

There was a hierarchy in place during this process because singing was less valued than composing. Though women traditionally sang in groups more often than men, many families of the women Kutev tried to recruit rejected him outright, as some viewed female singers as lowly or sexualized: “Kutev faced opposition from many families of excellent female singers because they were appalled at the thought of a young girl leaving a village or small town to live alone in Sofia, the capital city, to work as a professional singer….Many parents rejected Kutev’s offer to move their young (often unmarried) daughters far away to initiate independent careers” (Silverman 2004: 219). For the women who did join, the careers they would forge would be somewhat looked down upon in Bulgaria: “In Bulgaria, the situation within the arts paralleled the larger occupational hierarchy: women were clustered in low-paying professions….within the arts, singers were indeed many notches down from composers and arrangers” (Silverman 2004: 215). These singers were valued for their talents but received no credit for their songs, low wages for their work, and even disapproval from their families and peers. And they hadn’t even released a record yet.

Silverman writes of the Party’s treatment of the women in state-sponsored ensembles, including Kutev’s:

An ensemble singer was supposed to be above all a socialist worker, a woman dedicated to the ensemble, the nation, and the communist path, not a woman interested in her own career. Her dedication was both ideological and practical. In structural terms, ensemble singers worked
for the state and had no say in what they performed, when they performed, and where they performed. Artistic decisions were made by composers and conductors, and concert and tour decisions were made by managers and administrators, most of whom were male. The lack of control over their performances was partly ameliorated by the ability of soloists to record solo songs with Radio Sofia. This way, the singers picked their own songs to record and were paid separately for them, but they still had no influence over the kind of orchestral accompaniment the recording would feature. As Stancheva narrates: ‘It was good that we soloists had the right to record as many solo songs as we wanted. Of course, everything had to pass a commission. We would go out and search for villages songs.’ In addition, singers had no access to subsequent profits that the state radio and recording companies earned from their solo songs. (2004: 221)

Kutev’s recruited singers were not formally trained. They were village singers whose experience lay in unison, and occasionally, drone-based harmonies. Timothy Rice writes of Kutev’s training and development of his choir:

He began by teaching them simple choral arrangements with little more than a drone accompaniment. Gradually his arrangements became more complex, with harmony at the third, homophonic textures, and some imitative counterpoint in a typically three-part texture with the introduction of an occasional fourth part. (1994: 177)

In the 1950s and 60s, choral obrabotki became well known (though not necessarily well liked) in Bulgaria through radio and television broadcasts, sponsored by the state. Silverman notes that, despite the government’s heavy sponsorship, “ensemble music never was and still is not widely accepted by the Bulgarian public. Perhaps because of its homogenized sound, its predictability, its removal from the ‘folk,’ and its association with socialism, ensemble music was rejected by most Bulgarians. Bulgarians were certainly proud that the West admired Bulgarian choral music, but at home nobody listened to it” (2004: 215). In her book Performing
Democracy: Bulgarian Music and Musicians in Transition, ethnomusicologist Donna Buchanan also makes this point by recounting a conversation with her kaval (Bulgarian flute) teacher and choir accompanist, Stoyan Dzhudzhev:

By the late 1980s, narodna muzika [folk music] had become essentially music for tourists, and that none of the Nonesuch or Hannibal Records disks were even available in Bulgaria. In late May 1988, during one of our kaval lessons, Stoyan recounted the difference in audience response that he encountered at home and abroad. The last time I walked onstage at Bulgaria Hall (where the national symphony performs), he explained…‘No one [here] wants to hear what I have to play.’...But in the West, he said, ‘We played every number twice,’ as fans chanted ‘more, more’ after each concert….At the end of our conversation he caustically remarked, with current obrabotka trends in mind, ‘If people here have their way, they’ll create symphony orchestras out of folk instruments!’ (372)

The state was trying to force a new, “modernized” sound onto the public, but in the 1970s and 80s, the genre most popular in Bulgaria was wedding music, a genre that combined rock’s raucousness with jazz’s improvisations and Romani instruments.

This music was too western and too Romani for the state’s approval.

According to Dora Hristova, who is the current conductor of Le Mystère, obrabotki was known only in Bulgaria until Marcel Cellier’s “discovered” it. In 1952, Swiss ethnomusicologist and producer Marcel Cellier traveled to Bulgaria to explore and record music. Over twenty years later, in 1975, Cellier produced and released an album of the recordings he made called The Mystery of Bulgarian Voices.

Different sources report different information about which groups Cellier recorded and released as part of the compilation. Hristova reports that Cellier “followed the development of the State Radio Choir for a period of 20 years” (Kirilov 14). Kirilov writes that some of the recordings date back to 1957. Goranka Coranova
of the Bulgarian National Radio wrote in 2004 that Cellier recorded the
*hudozhestvena samodeinost* women’s choir from the town of Sapareva Banya, at the
foot of the Rhodope Mountains, in 1950, two years before Kutev founded his State
Radio Choir. Kim Burton of the world music magazine *Songlines* reports that the
compilation consists of Kutev’s choir and “other groups” (2010). Rice simply says
that there are three or four ensembles’ recordings present on the album (1994).
Buchanan writes that Cellier “was struck by the singing of the women’s folk choirs
attached to Sofia’s newly created folk ensembles and soon began to collect recordings
of these groups. Some of the recordings were his own, while others he obtained from
Radio Sofia’s archives” (344). From all of these conflicting reports, we can only
gather that the first album Cellier released, which he titled *The Mystery of Bulgarian
Voices*, included performances by Kutev’s choir and some number of other
ensembles.

*Mystery indeed.* The album was packaged and presented very minimally, with
just its title on the jacket. Listeners were given no information about the group, the
songs, or the recordings. As a result, the female singers’ identities were diminished
and erased entirely. Kim Burton at *Songlines* wrote, “Often the only information
[listeners] had was the name of the recording itself, *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares*,
which indicates to us, the listeners, what we are about to hear and suggests how we
should experience it” (2010). Besides the track listing, the original release included
no mention of the singers, conductor, composers, or the various choirs featured. The
album was being marketed as magical and exotic, with no historical context to situate
listeners or even give them hints as to who was singing.
Upon release, the album did not sell very well or reach a wide audience. But in 1986, English singer Peter Murphy introduced the recordings to Ivo Watts-Russell, the founder of pop label 4AD. He was so struck by the music that he licensed the recordings from Cellier and re-released the album on 4AD (and the label Nonesuch in the US a year later), re-branding it in French as *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares*. The recording gained widespread popularity and a cult following, leading to subsequent releases like *Le Mystère de Voix Bulgares Volume 2*, which won a Grammy Award for Best Traditional Folk Recording in 1989, *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares, Volume 3* in 1990, and *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares Volume 4* in 1998. The Bulgarian State Radio & Television Female Vocal Choir, which, due to the success of the compilations has since taken the name Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares, has toured the world and still exists today under the direction of conductor Dora Hristova.

If not initially intentional, the vague branding of the album contributed – possibly even incited – the trend of Western appropriation of Balkan music. Without the least bit of knowledge about the music, consumers’ listening becomes appropriative. These recordings have a rich and complicated history. Most of these songs are *obrabotki* based on folk songs that celebrate village life or lament Turkish rule of the country: “More than anything else, the texts of these songs link them to village life, especially agriculture and shepherding. Depicting the life cycle, the emotions of traditional life, and the seasons in relation to the land, song texts are revealing interpretations of peasant life” (Silverman 2004: 223). Most were written and arranged by Filip Kutev or Krasimir Kyurkchiiski – another prominent Bulgarian composer born thirty-three years after Kutev who conducted the Filip
Kutev State Folklore Ensemble for a number of years – and performed by women from around the country who had passed strenuous audition processes and even left their families behind to forge lives as professional singers. Many of these women had been promised housing and jobs by the Party, only to arrive in cities like Sofia and face poor living conditions.

The misbranding of the records came from both the Bulgarian government and the American and British advertisers who put the album together. During the formation of the Choir, the government “promoted the symbolic association of women with traditional music through visual and aural means. For example, Bulgarian women in peasant costume were ubiquitous images for concerts, records, and tourist posters. Women were perceived as closer to local custom and lore….It is ironic that women were displayed symbolically as tradition-bearers precisely at the time that women were being recruited away from villages into wage labor for music ensembles which did not perform traditional music” (Silverman 2004: 215). Male instrumentalists performed in state-sponsored ensembles, but because women were associated with village music, the Party used women to try to invoke feelings of national pride in village music.

How did the first record go from an unnoticed folk record in 1975 to a Grammy-winning sensation in the 1980s? Misleading marketing. As I have discussed, the first editions of these releases contained next to no information about the recordings. With a completely blank slate, promoters and reviewers felt free to say whatever they wanted – including giving inaccurate historical context – about the Choir: “The marketing strategy of Nonesuch and other companies deliberately
exoticized the music as ethereal and ancient, perhaps the opposite pole from ethnic and peasant” (Silverman 2004: 217). Volume One’s liner notes contained a line from American composer Ingram Marshall that read “it is really the unique-ness of these singing voices, the ‘mystery’ of their clarity, tempered by seductive loveliness, which ultimately enchants our ears” (1975). Silverman writes that “the absence of photographs and accurate information about the women’s ages, training, musical competence, and repertoires in promotional materials in effect became part of the seductive ‘mystery’ of the musical sound, conjuring fantasies in the minds of reviewers as to how these women might appear” (2004: 223).

Reviews of the album wrought with misinformation and exoticization started pouring in. Rolling Stone wrote that the album “offered transporting sensual experiences to audiences” (Silverman 2004: 216). Newsday wrote that the album “achieves a spectral sonic beauty…is hypnotic….The notes seem to float” (Silverman 2004: 216). And in perhaps the most hyperbolized review listed by Silverman, The Hult Center for the Performing Arts (Eugene, Oregon) wrote:

Trained in centuries-old, secret vocal tradition, their voices resonate with a dense, ravishing mixture of exotic dissonances and gorgeous romantic timbres. Listeners the world over have been drawn to the mysteriously haunting songs of the all-female 24-voice Bulgarian State Radio and Television Female Vocal Choir. Performing arrangements of ancient East European folk songs and chants, these women sweep through a profusion of eerie, heart-breaking harmonies. Dark sighs. Strong, cutting resonant power….Hear the other-worldly sounds that evoke a heartbreakingly distant past. (2004: 217)

The reviews sensualize and exoticize the singers while conjuring up historical explanations out of thin air. Many reviews count these songs as being hundreds of years old; while the folk songs at the center of the arrangements might have been that
old, the arrangements were brand new. The obrabotki’s western choral influence is what the audiences and reviewers were responding to, and that was a new genre designed to combine the traditional with the western.

Despite the albums’ success, the performers were often largely unaware that the music they recorded was as wildly successful as it was. Buchanan writes:

Generally speaking, any recordings made during the socialist era by touring musicians, such as live performances by the LMVB choir, were declared reklama (advertising) by tour organizers. Musicians received few royalties for these recordings. In fact, in my experience visiting musicians usually had little sense of how many narodna muzika recordings were available in Western music stores. Because copyright usually belonged to a government agency like Radio Sofia or Balkanton, those institutions could and did issue material on compilation albums without the performers’ knowledge. In some cases, these disks were released directly by a Bulgarian firm; in others, music was given or sold to a collector like Cellier. In both instances, the recordings were issues exclusively for the Western market. Hence my musician friends were often unaware that they were featured on a particular recording or unable to obtain a copy of the release. When I showed a Bulgarian friend the array of his nation’s music available at a local Austin store in 1991, he literally slid to the floor, looked up at me in amazement and exclaimed, ‘Where are all these coming from? And why don’t we know anything about them?’ (355)

Le Mystère was an international phenomenon, but performers were given no royalties, individual recognition, or even information that their records were popular. Government agencies owned the radio and all recordings of live performances, so all royalties went back to the government and the composers (Buchanan 2006). Listeners were inundated with false advertising, fabricated history, and hyperbolized reviews. But this all occurred in the 1980s and later; let me now trace the roots of Balkan music practice in the U.S. that began 50 years prior.
Chapter 4: Bulgarian Music in the U.S.

Yves Moreau is a Canadian scholar of Bulgarian dance and folklore. He lectures and conducts workshops on these topics in North America and throughout the world; according to his website, “In 1980, Bulgaria awarded him the Order of Kiril & Metodi (1st degree) for his work popularizing Bulgarian folk culture in North America” (Bourque-Moreau Associés). He contributed an essay to Ethnomusicology in Canada: Proceedings of the first Conference on Ethnomusicology in Canada (The Institute 1990) called “Observations on the recent widespread adoption and adaptation of Bulgarian folk music and dance in North America and elsewhere.” Though somewhat dated, it traces the rise of Balkan music in the U.S., ending right before the influx of Bulgarian immigration to the U.S. in 1991 (National Statistics Institute).

The growth of Balkan music in the U.S. all began with a recreational folk dance movement in the 1930s. In the 1950s, recreational folk dancers began to practice Eastern European and Balkan dances more and more. And in order to properly learn and implement these dances, practitioners had to become familiar with the music that accompanied these dances. Many people discovered that the music was as or more appealing than the dances themselves.

Yves Moreau writes:

Today, it is estimated that in the United States alone there are well over 100,000 people who take part in this activity in some way or another. Thus, the Balkan recreational folk dance environment has been the main catalyst in the creation and development of a parallel musical movement concentrating on Bulgarian and Balkan instrumental and vocal forms. (114)
These numbers were significant in 1990. Today, those numbers are still growing. Village Harmony is a World Music summer camp that draws hundreds of participants every year; the East European Folklife Center runs similar East Coast and West Coast Balkan Music and Dance camps.

In the early 1960s, Ethel Raim, a folksinger with an Eastern European Jewish background, formed the Pennywhistlers, a women’s singing group that specialized in Eastern European a cappella folk music. Raim travelled to Bulgaria several times to collect “original material in the villages which provided her with precious new sources” (Moreau 114). Together with folk dancer Martin Koenig, Raim founded the Balkan Arts Center in New York, which became the Ethnic Arts Center and which is now the Center for Traditional Music and Dance. The Center hosts festivals, performances, and workshops for a variety of different countries’ folk musics. Raim combined her love for Balkan music with a respect for its historical and social context, and Moreau tributes the formation of many women’s Balkan singing groups across North America in the 1960s and 1970s to the success of the Pennywhistlers. Wesleyan’s own Eastern European singing group, Slavei, and Yale’s Slavic women’s chorus are two examples of amateur groups that practice music popularized by well-known recordings as well as outlets like Village Harmony.
Chapter 5: Musical Analysis

I found the Pennywhistlers 1963 record in the Olin Music Library, and discovered that the liner notes held more information than *Le Mystère Des Voix Bulgares*, which was also in Olin. The Pennywhistlers’ songs were listed as follows:

- **PAIDU VIDU** - Russian  
- **S’FALT A SHNEI** - Yiddish  
- **ZORII SECERI TORDIUR** - Rumanian  
- **LA CARMAGNOLE** - French  
- **RUN COME SEE** - Bahamian  
- **WOKE UP THIS MORNIN’** - American  
- **QUE BONITA BANDERA** - Puerto Rican  
- **AMAR RABBI AKIVA** - Hebrew  
- **KAK PA MORYU** - Russian  
- **COTTON MILL GIRLS** - American  
- **ROLL ON COLUMBIA** - American  
- **TUDORA** - Bulgarian  
- **JOVANO** - Macedonian  
- **YERAKINA** - Greek  
- **AMEN** - American

“Polegnala e Todora”

“Tudora” was the only Bulgarian song. The liner notes’ description says:

**SIDE II, BAND 6: TUDORA**

*Folk song from Central Bulgaria*

*Arranged by Philippe Koutev*

*Tudora falls asleep beneath an olive tree. She is suddenly awakened when a mountain breeze breaks a branch of the tree. She reproaches the wind for disturbing her lovely dream. ‘Little breeze blowing so restlessly, why do you flow here now? I*

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5 Appendix 5
was dreaming that my sweetheart came to see me and brought me flowers and a gold ring.

I immediately recognized it as the last song on *LMVB*, there called “Polegnala e Todora (Love Song)”⁶. “Polegnala e Todora,” which Kirilov calls “Polegnala e Todora (Todora Lays Down)” (166), was written by Kutev in 1953. Kirilov cites it as an iconic version of early obrabotki. Rice writes:

Koutev began with a traditional song tune in four measures in a meter of 11 (2+2+3+2+2), but everything else about the piece is composed. First he added a second melody of four measures to lengthen the song’s form. Then his wife, Maria Kouteva, composed a new text on a folk theme. The text tells of a girl who lies down to rest in the shade of a tree, but she becomes annoyed when falling leaves interrupt her dreams of a boyfriend...Koutev created a three-part choral score for the original melody and set his composed melody for a quartet of soloists. (2004, 65)

“Polegnala e Todora” is a beautiful song in 11/16 time with AB binary form. Section A repeats twice, with at least two singers on each of the three parts. There are two groups of at least six singers, and group one holds out the last chord, a major third, while group two sings the repeat:

⁶ Appendix 6
Section B is sung by four voices, with the lowest part resolving to an E-flat-2, a low note for a female voice to sustain. The *LMVB* version is sung in E-flat, while Kirilov’s transcriptions have it in D-major:

**Figure 2.** Transcription by Kalin Kirilov 2015: 166
Figure 3. Transcription by Kalin Kirilov 2015: 166

Perhaps Kutev put the song in E-flat-3 so his singers could hit and sustain the lowest notes. In the last repeat of Section B, around 3:06 on the \textit{LMVB} recording, the singer who has been droning on an E-flat falters. Her part drops to a B-flat in the last chord. She wavers and goes a bit sharp. This section is the section that Kutev composed - it wasn’t in the original folk song, according to Kirilov. Kutev’s singers likely were not accustomed to singing so low in their registers. Traditional Bulgarian village songs were almost all sung by duos, with one on the melody and one droning, and it is unlikely that, as these songs were performed by female singers, the songs called for such low notes. Furthermore, this part in this section calls for a drone most of the time, and for her to drop down a fourth on the resolution proved challenging, as can be heard in the recording.
The first half of the song is sung softly, with a breathy quality rarely heard on the album. But halfway through, the timbre switches to the more identifiably Bulgarian clear, bell-like quality. The song ends softly. Without a specific verse-to-verse translation, I can only surmise that the section sung in the louder chest voice tells of the girl’s frustration when “falling leaves interrupt her dreams of a boyfriend.”

Though “Polegnala e Todora” is often shown as a model of early obrabotki (Kirilov, Rice, Silverman), its newly-composed B section is a glaring contradiction to that idea. Kutev did preserve the main melody and strophic nature of the original village song, which is an essential element of a good obrabotka. But half of the song was written by himself and his wife, making this song a mixture of an obrabotka with “authentic” roots, and a composition from the Bulgarian Communist period.

“Kalimankou Denkou”

“Kalimankou Denkou (The Evening Gathering)” (Appendix 4) is the third song on LMVB. It is a stunningly beautiful and complex song that changes keys and tempos several times. The song’s introduction, which I have transcribed below, features the soloist Yanka Rupkina, using vorschlags, or upper mordent embellishments.
Kirilov also includes a transcription in his book, but his is notated without time or key signatures; all of the notes come sequentially and with accidentals. Kirilov specifies that this is a free-rhythm folk song (183). I tried to structure mine to sound as much like the recording as possible, but as this piece was written and performed in a language and style with which I have little experience, mine is not exact. My guess is that the choir followed the
conductor and soloist’s cues for cadence and flow; the pulse is not rigid, and the time doesn’t move in the way that I have been trained to think of as being metric and transferrable to notation. Although the timing and rhythms do not translate with acuity into this system, the harmonic structure has heavy western influence.

Kirilov writes of this song:

*Kalimanku Denku* is recognized as one of the most well-known choral obrabotki of Krasimir Kyurkchiiski. Hristova [the choir conductor] describes the first stage performance of Kalimanku Denku in 1971 as a turning point in the history of the choral obrabotki genre. Prior to this performance, according to Hristova, folk choirs and their repertoire were not ‘considered seriously by the [Western] European-oriented Bulgarian music society’ (2007: 55). Written particularly for the female choir at the Bulgarian National Radio, Kalimanku Denku became one of the symbols of modern Bulgarian choir traditions. The arrangement is based on a free-rhythm folk song from the region of Strandzha, Southeastern Bulgaria. According to Todorov, Kyurkchiiski does not develop an “authentic song,” but rather creates his own version of the song as sung by Yanka Rupkina, the soloist on the recording (1978: 152-6). Hristova, the current conductor of Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares, expresses a different opinion. According to her, ‘in Kalimanku Denku, the regional ornamentation of the Strandzha song is completely preserved by the authentic singer, Yanka Rupkina. In Kyurkchiiski’s texture, one may feel balance, a unity of professional and folk thinking, freedom, and improvisation.’ (183)

Kirilov goes on to say that this song “tested the limit of the singers’ abilities” and that “this choral obrabotka has been successfully recorded only once” (191). Neither Kirilov nor the vinyl liner notes provide the year this composition was recorded, nor if Kyurkchiiski conducted the performance of his composition.
I cite this piece as a major influence to my own compositions for my thesis concert musical *If Sand Were Stone*. In particular, my song “Feels Like” follows a similarly loose structure in terms of timing and rhythm; I provided my performers with a tempo and time signature, but told them to A: watch me, and B: listen to each other for cues. This is not quite the same as a free rhythm folk song, but it is certainly in the same vein. I also employed techniques like having the soloist and ensemble trade off suspensions and melodic lines (measure three below), as in measure three of “Kalimankou.”

![Feels Like](image)

**Figure 5**

Another Bulgarian influence is my use of “droning.” In “Feels Like” as well as other songs like “A Dream Or Two,” I use an inadvertently obrabotki-

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7 Appendix 7
8 Appendix 8
inspired structure of a melody and drone with the outer voices moving in different ways:

Figure 6

The last measure above has the melody moving among three different drones, two of which fall into Kirilov’s Steady Drone category, one on the tonic and one on the fourth, with the third drone on the minor seventh. This creates two
stacked open fifths, which is direct influence from the eastern Georgian music I have learned in Slavei.

In my song “A Dream Or Two” as shown below, I again employ the use of melody and different drones, those being on the fifth, seventh, and second scale degrees.

In the same song later on when the key moves to B major, the melody descends over three sustained drones, first on the second, fourth, and sixth scale degrees, and then on the first, third, and fifth:

**Figure 7**

**Figure 8**
When I wrote these two songs, my intention was not to take and use influence from *obrabotki*, but singing these arrangements in Slavei for so long has influenced my styles of composition and arrangement. There is one part of “Feels Like” that does make intentional use of this influence. The climax of Kalimankou Denkou comes in a heart-wrenching cadence around the 2:50 mark. I have transcribed it below – again, to the best of my mapping abilities – without lyrics, as I cannot decipher them from the recording.

![Figure 9](image)

The resolution in the last two measures is an authentic V-I cadence, but the voicings and clusters are unusual. Kyurkchiiski creates a sensation of closing and opening physical space. By keeping the second voice on an A-sharp and pulling voices one and three closer to create a G-sharp-A-sharp-B (6-7-1) cluster in the top with the 3 in the root, the resolved I\(^6\) chord has a more closed voicing than the preceding V\(^4\) chord. This cluster may have been
used to create maximum dissonance – leaning into the half-step 7-1 interval – or maybe Kyurkchiiski intended to enhance the “Bulgarian-ness” of the chord, highlighting the major second interval (G-sharp-A-sharp) and making it even more dissonant by adding the B.

From the first time I heard this song a couple years ago, the performance of this resolution left me fascinated and confounded. So I used a similar resolution in “Feels Like”:

I use the same clusters in the $V^{42} - I^{65}$ resolution. The melody in “Kalimankou Denkou” melody changes among voices and soloists a few times, including right after this resolution: the lowest voice takes over the melody for a measure or two after the $I^{65}$, and I use a similar melodic tradeoff, giving the third voice the melody in this section instead of the second voice, which carries the melody through the rest of the song. When teaching this song to
my cast, the three note cluster of G-sharp-A-B at the top was, understandably, difficult to execute, as such a close dissonance was unfamiliar to my singers. This further illustrated to me the virtuosity captured in “Kalimankou Denkou,” as there are many such clusters and key changes.
Chapter 6: Slavei and Eva Salina

When Eva Salina pointed out Slavei’s amateur habits (see page 3), she cracked open the door to this world of music, and I have spent the last few months pushing it wider. Brooklyn-based Salina is a performer and teacher of traditional and modern Balkan music. She came to Wesleyan last fall and gave two vocal workshops - one open to the Wesleyan public, and one specifically for Slavei.

Salina grew up in Santa Cruz, California. She has no Balkan origins, but found Balkan music as many do: accidentally. When she was seven years old, someone gave her a record of Yiddish songs, which she took to learning and imitating. Her parents found her a voice teacher named Ruth Hunter, an American woman who had been a Balkan folk dancer in Hawaii and who had since immersed herself in the Balkan music community in Santa Cruz.

Hunter had started an all-female band that played traditional music from the Balkans. According to Salina, all-female bitovs – ensembles of traditional instrumentalists – didn’t exist in Bulgaria. Three of the women in the bitov sang a combination of traditional songs, with a melody and drone, and songs arranged for three voices. Listening to these performances and beginning voice lessons with Ruth is what changed Salina’s life, though she didn’t know that at age seven. Ruth showed her the larger community of people interested in Balkan music and led her to attend Balkan music and dance workshops.

This was in 1991. Bulgarian Communism had fallen in 1989. A few years earlier, in 1984, the Party had enforced ethnic and cultural whitewashing. As a result, 350,000 Bulgarian Turks left the country. This vast, partially forced emigration of 5%
of the country’s population, combined with a declining economic situation and internal political strife, led to the fall of Bulgarian Communism.

Restraints on travel lessened, and the country’s borders were suddenly open. But Bulgaria plunged into a period of economic instability. The structures that had supported the arrangements and presentations of folk music – choirs, state ensembles, radio and television choirs – suddenly had no infrastructure to support them. And waves of Bulgarian immigrants started arriving in the U.S. They had had great careers in the Balkans as performers of traditions, and suddenly, according to Salina, the performing opportunities in Bulgaria collapsed. So they came to the States, where they found vibrant, enthusiastic musical communities.

Before the arrival of these Balkan singers and musicians, the Balkan music communities, referenced by Moreau, had acted as the enthusiastic blind leading the blind. Americans had been learning this music from recordings, which they tried to imitate and transcribe, but there was no information directly from the source. There was no effortless discovery and dissemination of material, as there is now with the internet.

And Salina happened to be there right at the height of this immigration wave. She learned from Ruth and native Balkan singers – a folk education within tradition. Because she wasn’t from any Eastern European country, she could move freely among them and learn whatever she wanted from whomever was willing to teach her, leading her to learn music from the Balkans, Ukraine, Georgia, Albania, and Russia.

At age twelve, Salina travelled to Bulgaria for the first time, where she could learn about music in an immersive, cultural context, as opposed to an academic
context. This immersion took her right to the source of all this music. In the next several years, Salina expanded her education even more by learning choral repertoire, material for soloists with instrumental orchestrations, and songs with arrangements for folk and western instruments.

At seventeen, Salina began school at UCLA, where there was a student-run Bulgarian choir. She was reticent to join, having already achieved a certain level of proficiency and expertise. But upon her arrival, a former mentor of hers, Tzvetanka Varimezova, had just been hired by the university to take over the ensemble. Under Varimezova’s leadership, Salina learned much about teaching and repertoire. The choir’s repertoire consisted largely of obrabotki arrangements, which Salina describes as stylistic variations upon folk source melodies. Salina ended up dropping out of UCLA to continue her career as a soloist and mentor to other performers.

In October of 2016, I attended Salina’s Wesleyan workshops. In the first workshop, which was open to all, she taught us a song called “Shto Si Goro Povyakhnala,” a Bulgarian three-part harmony song written by Filip Kutev. The most important thing Salina emphasized was pronunciation. Pronunciation is the trickiest aspect to portray through oral tradition. Any musician can read sheet music and sing the right melody and rhythms, but to work hard to pronounce the words correctly is to show respect for the music and culture.

The next day, at the Slavei-only workshop, Salina had us sing a song of our choosing, and we chose “Moma Hubava,” which we had learned through Le Mystère. She stopped us two measures in. We were butchering pronunciation and screeching with nasality.

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9 Appendix 9
This nasal quality is something that Slavei singers like to call “hard voice.”

Hard voice has been a staple of Slavei since long before I joined three years ago. We have taken to describing it as a “laser-beam effect” of projecting from the bridge of one’s nose. It is essentially an imitation of *Le Mystère*.

Eva explained that this technique was not inherent to Bulgarian folk music, or to Bulgarian music at all. It is inherent to *Le Mystère*. She told us that the tonal centers of the songs on those recordings had been moved up to allow for lower voices beneath the typical melody and drones. The tonal centers were moved so that the arrangements could allow female singers to reach the low notes. And the higher parts, coincidentally, were being belted in full chest voice. Hence, the nasal quality. This claim does appear to be consistent with hints from the recordings, like the “Polegnala e Todora” singer struggling to hit lower notes.

This information shattered the very identity of Slavei. We had long believed that the goal of Slavic singing was to be nasal and loud. In reality, the goal is, or should be, pitch clarity to enhance the emphasis on dissonant harmonies. Often, when we perform, we focus more on the nasal quality than the intervals, which essentially defeats the whole purpose of performing this music.

I interviewed a Wesleyan ‘11 and Slavei alumnus named Donovan Arthen to find out more about the history of the group. Slavei was created in the winter of 2005 by a then-sophomore named Ruby Ross. Ruby had been to Village Harmony camp as a teenager, and she was in the *a cappella* group New Group as a Wesleyan student. She realized that Wesleyan was rich with world music but, at the time, there were few outlets for vocal performance of non-western music. So she started Slavei, which at
first was a hodgepodge mix of singers with varying levels of experience with Eastern European music. When Donovan joined the group as a freshman, he was fresh off a gap year in Georgia, and he brought a Georgian song repertoire with him.

I asked how they chose and taught songs. Donovan told me that the members of Slavei, several of whom were Music majors, sometimes made transcriptions from recordings they had, but mainly they taught songs aurally, especially Georgian songs, which don’t always follow western notation or scales. Even when they had sheet music, not everyone in the group could read it, so they mostly taught by ear, which is still true in the group today. Bulgarian village music in its truest form is taught entirely by aural tradition (Rice), so although most of the Bulgarian songs Slavei sings are obrabotki, there is some form of aural tradition preserved in our group.

Then I asked about the group’s knowledge of the songs’ cultural context, which is something that had been reduced to virtual nonexistence at the time I joined Slavei. Donovan answered, “One of the real great things in my era of Slavei was that there was a huge amount of knowledge about the songs. When we didn’t have a translation of a song, we would find a way to get a translation, whether that was reaching out to Russian and Bulgarian students at Wesleyan, or sending emails to old teachers. We would do the work to find translations and meanings and understand the context of each song.”

When I joined Slavei three years ago as a sophomore, there was none of that. When we learned songs, we would maybe know the title of the song, and occasionally be told what language we were singing, but we almost never had a translation, and sometimes we even got the language wrong. We also learned that it was all hard
voice, all the time. When I brought up hard voice to Donovan, he said that he assumed it had been watered down, which is absolutely correct. Only recently - through this research - did I discover that “hard voice” isn’t supposed to sound intentionally nasal or grating. (As I have mentioned, certain areas of Bulgaria do value a kind of “bellowing,” but it is always done with the intention of achieving the purest pitches possible.)

When I first mentioned the word “appropriation” to describe Slavei’s treatment of our repertoire, Donovan said, “One of the things that happens when you become interested in World Music is dancing the line between appropriation and not.” Respecting the music was something he and other early members felt very strongly about. But he specified that they had the luxury of having insiders who, if they hadn’t immersed themselves in the cultures, had at least visited and spent time in the countries studying the music and learning it from the source: the people. None of our current members have that basis, but because of that, we can and should spend that extra time to learn, at the very least, the correct language, country of origin, and translation of each song in our repertoire.

When I spoke to Eva on the phone months later, she assured me that her job was not to criticize, but to contextualize. Student-run ensembles often have little cultural or academic experience. She has seen these kinds of issues in nearly every amateur group with whom she has worked – groups like Yale’s women’s Slavic chorus, which she visits every year to provide framework before the choir dives into the new year’s rehearsals.
This past year, I have made it a priority to find information about each song that Slavei sings. Now, before we start teaching a song to our new members, we talk about where the song is from, what language we are singing, what the song means, and, if possible, who wrote it and when. The pendulum had swung away from knowledge and too far into appropriation, but it is finally swinging back in the right direction.
Conclusion

People discover Balkan music through avenues like Village Harmony, Balkan camp, and recordings. They largely fall into it the way Eva and I both did: accidentally. That is not, she assured me, a bad thing. This music needs that hunger, and that casual encounter. Otherwise, it would exist only in the same circles over and over. The circles need to grow wider, and more diverse and inclusive. This faulty oral tradition is an extension of the way Balkan camps were run before there were people from the actual Balkans. For the last several years, Slavei has become a group of students shooting in the dark – subsisting from a binder of old sheet music and a Dropbox folder – with much enthusiasm but without linguistic or cultural information.

That system must change because it’s not 1991 anymore. There are more people available, like Eva Salina, who can teach us the right way to learn and respect this music. The culture around how information is disseminated has changed. And the way we learn this music also must change.

Eva describes obrabotki as complex arrangements with songs inside them. They are arrangements and interpretations of tradition; they are not tradition in and of themselves. It is up to us as singers to acknowledge that. We have a responsibility to this music, and to the people who sang it before us. The songs we sing largely overlay classical western values onto folk tradition. The repertoire does not belong to anybody. It is vital to acknowledge that there is an academic component of choral tradition that merits study. Slavei group philosophy goes on and on about how magical and wonderful this music makes us feel. It has affected me so much that I
strive to recreate that feeling in others, through my own compositions. But to be able to make this spiritual claim, we also need to claim responsibility for understanding this music’s history.
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- Thank you to my brothers, Sam and Luke, because we will always compete to be the best musician and I will always win.

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*the Steph Curry of the vibes**

**Just kidding. Steph Curry is the Jay Hoggard of the 30-foot jump shot.
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Silverman, Carol. ""Move Over Madonna": Gender, Representation, and the "Mystery" of Bulgarian Voices." Over the Wall/after the Fall: Post-communist


Song Appendix

1. “Izraslo Dŭrvo”, Slavei, 2008: https://youtu.be/gSwOcuaIYD0
Verse translation: A tree grew tall. Its top reached into the blue sky, its branches reached toward the earth below, in the big white monastery.


3. “Pilentze Pee”, the Bulgarian State Radio & Television Female Vocal Choir, 1994: https://youtu.be/ye1dgqDANWg

4. “Kalimankou Denkou”, the Bulgarian State Radio & Television Female Vocal Choir, 1975: https://youtu.be/Lak6nZekv5M


8. “A Dream or Two,” If Sand Were Stone ensemble, 2017: https://youtu.be/OleI7m0yXeM