

## THE MYSTERIOUS VOICE! AMERICAN WOMEN SINGING BULGARIAN SONGS

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Over the past four decades, many of America's women folk singers have explored the so-called "mysterious throat sound" attributed to contemporary Bulgarian women's choruses and village singers. Currently, over 200 American ensembles either specialize in or include Bulgarian and/or pan-Balkan repertoire (Lausevic 1998:492). This article explores the social and historical roots of the phenomenon of women's Balkan music in America, and its *interpretations* within contemporary American life. I will discuss some of the conceptual and musical changes that have occurred in the appropriation of Bulgarian singing by American women, and provide possible reasons for these changes including a focus on the influence of the American women's movement. Finally, I will explore how conceptual and musical changes in the American movement of Balkan singing have together influenced the dichotomous perceptions of Bulgarian and "western" singing vis-à-vis the bio-cultural constructions of "head" and "chest" registers.

In speaking about Bulgarian singing in America, I will be exploring the phenomenon among non-Bulgarian American women. I am not referring necessarily to those Americans of ethnic Bulgarian descent, those with interests due to family intermarriage, or close proximity to large ethnic populations, but rather to those who came to Bulgarian singing through means largely disconnected from the immigrant communities. Although I will focus on the phenomenon of Bulgarian music interest in America, much of this topic expands to include pan-Balkan/Southern Slavic singing traditions. I place myself, in part, within this community of American women, and a younger generation, drawn to this art form.

Musically, my background falls within both "folk" and "classical" boundaries. My musical education as a child came from my mother who was both a classically trained pianist, and an American-style folk singer from a very musical and matriarchal family. My interest in Balkan singing started at the same time that I began my first formal bel canto voice lessons as an undergraduate studying for a bachelor degree in music. My growth as a classical singer paralleled my growing knowledge of Balkan music—and/or vice versa. Although I felt successful in both genres, the two styles of singing seemed more different culturally than their perceived musical differences. Although I could *feel* similarities between the two styles, my teachers and

peers were apt to convince me of the differences through easily perceived audible means—and in doing so, seemed to judge me and my singing by way of my participation in one genre or the other. Although I place myself as an "insider" within the classical *and* folk singing worlds, it seems that members of both "camps" have sometimes perceived me as an "outsider" because of my claim of dual "membership."

My inspiration for this article is derived from my unique experiences as an "insider/outsider." I've noticed that Balkan singing in America is sometimes described vis-à-vis classical and/or "western" bel canto singing, and therefore I believe that my insight could prove valuable. As I explored this topic, I came to realize that differences between the two genres were more "perceived" than "real." This is to say that each "camp" has a culturally constructed musical ideology that is often considered in opposition with the other "camp," but is really extraordinarily similar. My literary information is gathered from articles on Balkan singing, textbooks on bel canto singing, resources about the American folkdance/folkmusic movements, and constructivist theory as learned at the University of Oregon. In addition, I conducted three one-hour individual interviews with American women who sing Balkan music, and received e-mail responses for questions sent to four other American singers of Balkan music. I also questioned two Bulgarian women singers (who have taught singing to Americans) by e-mail, and queried another Bulgarian musician in person. I also received insight from two bel canto style vocal instructors for the purpose of this project. Finally, I researched the topic of Balkan singing in the EEFC (East European Folklife Center) e-mail archives.

### Introductions and Early Experiences with Bulgarian Singing

One way that people have experienced Balkan music is through the organization of International Folk Dance groups which gained momentum at American universities during the 1950s. John Kuo, current director of Chicago's Balkan dance ensemble, *Balkanske Igre*, speculates that interest in Bulgarian singing began in this way—first through international dancing, then through Balkan folk dancing (both recreational and performing groups), leading to refined interest in Bulgarian dancing, that eventually

resulted in Bulgarian singing and playing of Bulgarian music (Kuo 2002). My own experience is much like many others' in that I began folkdancing with a community group while in college at California State University-Chico in 1995. I felt an instant connection with musical aspects as much as the movement. Bulgarian music, more than any other genre used for International Folkdancing, seemed very different from my "western" experiences—both classical and folk. The music tugged at my heart and excited my brain. Within a year of my first exposure to this music, I began singing with and leading a Balkan folk ensemble, and taking Bulgarian folksong workshops.

The connection between dancing and singing is very important for some. "There is always the need to 'spell' dancers with music or songs...as people find enjoyment dancing Bulgarian dances, they find that they can enhance their enjoyment by extending it to playing the music and singing the songs" (Kuo 2002). For this project, I asked members of my former singing group to describe their experiences with and attraction to Balkan music through e-mail correspondence. At the time that our singing group rehearsed and performed together, all of us were dancing (at least once in awhile) with the local folk dance group, but each arrived on the "scene" at a different time, and had different stories to tell. Judy was introduced to Bulgarian/Balkan music in the early 1970s through a folkdance music show on Public Radio KPFK in L.A. Later she joined folk dance clubs in L.A., Ventura, and Chico, and began singing Balkan music. When I first inquired about reforming a singing group in Chico, Judy was my mentor—someone who had words and music to folk dance songs, and had experience singing them. Judy wrote, "(When singing Balkan/Bulgarian music) I feel very challenged and I enjoy that... When the harmonies are really solid, I feel transported to another realm of experience and as I continue to dance it helps me feel even more connected to the music, rhythms, etc." Linda joined our folk dance group in Chico shortly after I did in 1996 or so, and also became quickly interested in Balkan music through folk dancing. "I was dancing to these new and wonderful songs with novel melodies, harmony and meters," she wrote, "I wanted to sing these songs as well as dance to them... Bulgarian music and singing mesh beautifully with my enjoyment of Bulgarian Balkan folk dance... It means experiencing music, singing, dancing and life in a different and fuller way!"

Other American singers were introduced to Balkan music by friends, teachers, or through "serendipity." Martha Forsyth, a Balkan singer in Boston, told me how her music teacher, knowing how strange Bulgarian could be to first time American listeners, said, "When you first hear this, you'll probably just about 'die,' but eventually, it will grow on you, and you won't be able to imagine life without it." This perception of difference and exoticism within

this non-western music genre was very attractive to some American women, while other women felt an unexplainable familiarity with the music. LeeAnn, who was the newest member to my first singing group at the time I left Chico, and whose smiling face "glowed" every time she sang wrote, "I don't remember when I first heard Balkan music, but I do know that I was attracted to it immediately, especially Yugoslavian village music. I loved it. This music makes me feel 'home.' I do not get enough now that our group has quit for a while. I am really bummed. I need my daily fix. I could not live my life happily without it... This music is very much a part of my life. I sing it every day. I really wish I could sing it with other women." Researcher, Mirjana Lausevic concurs that "many women who have been actively singing have stated that the female bonding that comes as a result of singing together is one of the most beneficial outcomes of their involvement with Balkan music" (Lausevic 1998:333). This is an aspect of Balkan singing that is shared by some Balkan women also. Iliana Bozhanova, a Bulgarian ethnographer of Bulgarian folk music and dance writes, "In the group, I feel stronger between my friends—it is an interesting relationship. If I sing alone, I feel more responsible, but if I sing with other singers—I feel more free" (Bozhanova 2002).

Enough time has passed, and children born since initial Balkan music interest in the 1960s and 1970s, that a new generation of American Balkan singers has emerged as the offspring of the first. Second generation American Balkan singer, Amy Mills wrote, "I don't really remember (when I first heard Balkan music). My mother was/is an international folkdancer, so there was always this kind of music around the house... In general, I feel at home when I am singing Balkan music, especially Bulgarian. I don't ever remember the music sounding strange to me, so it was just like expressing a certain side of myself. I –love– singing Balkan songs" (Mills 2002). Although her response mirrors some "first generation" responses, her experience is much like those experienced in Bulgaria. Iliana Bozhanova wrote, "All my relatives love folk music... The most important thing for me and my family is that none of us is a professional musician or singer, but all of us love it and enjoy it a lot. Folk music is part of our lives" (Bozhanova 2002). Similarly, Amy wrote, "Singing in performance is a great thrill, but singing from the heart is the point for me, so it will always be part of my life, as long as it's legal to sing in the shower and whistle while you work" (Mills 2002).

Whether singers were first attracted by difference, or familiarity, it is important to note that for most singers, the attraction to Balkan music was "immediate and powerful" (Lausevic 1998:429). As mentioned before, this study explores the phenomenon of non-Bulgarian women, and therefore, each person drawn to this musical subcul-

ture joined-in based on “choice and affinity rather than heritage or cultural proximity” (Ibid.). Mirjana Lausevic synthesized several quotes that described perceptions of Balkan music as “unique, strikingly different from familiar musical expressions, beautiful and powerful compared with some other kinds of music, and has specific musical elements such as drone harmonies, modalities, textures, and vocal production that people find aesthetically pleasing and fulfilling” (Lausevic 1998:440).

Lausevic also lists several words that were among interview responses regarding first connections with Balkan music. Verbs and expressions chosen include, “I was shocked, hooked, addicted, obsessed, smitten, drawn, I latched on, I melted, fell in love, it captivated me, touched me, moved me, turned me on, it hit me, I got goose bumps, I got excited, my hair rose...” (Lausevic 1998:433). Lausevic further notes that these responses are physical, irrational and instinctive—felt “on a gut level.” In “western” society, these kinds of feelings themselves are considered “feminine,”—undesirable in a patriarchal system, yet desirable for the feminist resistance of the patriarchy. The ability to have a “feminine” response with this type of music may have enabled its popularity among American women influenced by the women’s rights movement, and seeking to explore their otherwise self-monitored emotions and systems of expression.

Some American singers explain that beyond merely a “physical” response to Balkan music, they have felt a spiritual connection or bond. “Bulgarian music is part of my soul...It’s as if I’ve found a niche in which my voice can thrive...” (Mills 2002). It is important to them to have found a unique place in the world with which they connect on an unexplainable level. Citing Bourdieu, Lausevic writes, “Taste is what brings together things and people that go together.” Lausevic continues, “What one ‘recognizes’ is a projection of one’s own world view rather than penetration or adoption of a different world view...What makes this experience for some people ‘familiar’ and ‘close to the heart’ or ‘harmonious with who they are’ is a certain resonance between their understanding and perception of what they hear/see with their value system. Or, in some cases, a projection of the desired perception of oneself” (Lausevic 1998:437). When singers feel a deep spiritual love for Balkan music, and sing with others who share this passion, these individuals may also feel this community as a surrounding of “kindred spirits.” Later discussion on particular American singing groups and their performance treatment of Balkan music will show examples of how American women have projected themselves and/or their desired perceptions of themselves onto the American Balkan tradition.

There were at least two different styles of Bulgarian music that inspired American women to begin singing

Balkan music themselves. Some were attracted to the “traditional” village-style singing, often consisting of one or two vocal parts. Others were introduced to Balkan music through “westernized” socialist constructed polyphonic choral arrangements of Bulgarian songs such as those performed by “Le Mystere des Voix Bulgares.” Each of these styles expresses an aesthetic of femininity different from those in Western Europe and North America.

A typical American perception of “traditional” Bulgarian village singers places the “village” women out in “the field,” singing in a shouting style so that they can be heard by the other harvesters. For some, this imagery represents the pastoral/earthy aspects of the music, and suggests community cooperation through musical collaboration. Some categorize “traditional” village singing by other musical elements such as vocal quality, and arrangement. “Village style,” as spoken about by Americans, often means using an “un-refined” or “natural” voice” with singers creating a melody with or without a drone based harmony. The appeal of this kind of music often relates to perceptions of it as an “ancient” tradition, “dying” tradition, and/or “non-western” tradition.

Another pervasive Bulgarian singing model for Americans comes from the Koutev-style performance choir tradition that began in Bulgaria in the early 1950s. Using traditionally monophonic or drone based Bulgarian village melodies, Philip Koutev made arrangements with four and five part western harmonies, adding dynamics and tempo changes, while preserving the throat-placed vocal quality in order to “invent” a new genre of a *cappella female* chorus (Silverman unpublished). Hailed as “national music” of Bulgaria, Koutev’s choir consisted of women from specific and different regions of Bulgaria singing homogenized versions of village music often outside of their original tradition. This new music tradition *based* on “village” style music ironically developed while the “original” village traditions suffered censorship from the Communist government. Unlike the imagined scenario of the “village” woman singing in the field, many Americans didn’t have a visual concept of who the singers in the Bulgarian state choirs were, what they looked like, nor what their lives were like. This lack of information about such groups like the Philip Koutev Ensemble forced listeners to engage in the music solely on an auditory level (Buchanan 1997:136). People in Bulgaria felt equally distanced from the state ensembles and their music. “Perhaps because of its homogenized sound, its predictability, its removal from the ‘folk,’ and its association with socialism, ensemble music has been rejected by most Bulgarians. Bulgarians were certainly proud that the West admired Bulgarian choral music, but at home, nobody listened to it” (Silverman unpublished).

Nevertheless, first Europe, then the United States “went wild” upon hearing the Bulgarian women’s choral sound

(Ibid.). Perhaps Koutev's most famous arrangement is of a love song entitled, "Polegnala e Todora," (Todora lay down). Many people have said that it was *this* song that initiated their "conversion" experience to musical Balkanism. Marshall writes, "Here is an example of a simple melody of limited range which gains expressive power through repetition, antiphonal choral spacing, a lilting, asymmetric meter, and, of course, pure timbral intensity...Perhaps *this* is the 'Mystery of the Bulgarian Voice:' that it manages to be both sweet and powerful, restrained and aggressive" (Marshall 1987 in liner notes for "Le Mystere des Voix Bulgares"). In Marshall's description, the "exotic" is romanticized and defined by "western" notions of a sexual feminine mystique—weak, yet strong, passive, yet feisty, "eerily beautiful" and "holy," while manifesting a "carnal texture," "worldly" yet "spiritual" (Ibid.). With a certain sort of French "I don't know what," Marshall's kind of media representation orientalized and mythologized the women's ensemble and their art by portraying them as both "timeless and timely, ancestral to contemporary life and cosmic in power" (Buchanan 1997:136). While on tour in 1955, The Philip Koutev Ensemble sold out their concert hall engagement for a month in Paris. A live recording was made and released as a Nonesuch album (later on CD), that introduced "Polegnala e Todora" to the rest of the world (Kuo 2002).

During the 1960s and '70s, the first generation of Americans interested in Bulgarian music had a harder time learning how to learn the song words and music. There weren't any Balkan singing teachers in the United States during Communism, nor was there an established Balkan singing tradition necessarily available to American Balkan music lovers. Carol Silverman, noted anthropologist on the Balkans, also came to love Balkan singing through participation in International Folk Dancing Clubs and college groups while living in New York in the 1970s. Although she enjoyed the dancing, the music was the "thing" that really attracted her—especially that of Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Bosnia. "It was definitely the singing that drew me in," she said. "I can't remember any particular emotion I felt (at the time), other than just loving the music!" She was drawn to the drone of two-part songs, thought the melodies were beautiful, and the rhythms interesting (Silverman 2002). She and a group of friends got together, wanting to sing the dance music, and "sounded" out texts from the record albums. With no one to teach them, they relied upon songbooks, and mimicking recordings. According to Mirjana Lausevic, "This learning situation, where all the information was gathered aurally, somewhat parallels the conditions of oral transmission, except that the corrective element provided by the traditional community was lacking" (Lausevic 1998:323).

Silverman and a number of others began to travel to Bulgaria to attend festivals and learn songs. In 1971, she went to the folklore festival in Koprikshtitsa, Bulgaria, and began making friends and contacts there. She began collecting recordings from Bulgaria, as well as Balkan songbooks. Later, she learned about summer language programs offered in Bulgaria, and so she attended these during three summers beginning in 1974 (Silverman 2002).

After a song-collecting trip to Bulgaria, Ethel Raim, leader of the NYC *Pennywhistlers*, released the first album containing Bulgarian songs sung by (non-Bulgarian) Americans, and began giving classes in Balkan singing (Kuo 2002; Silverman 2002). Her albums stimulated interest in Balkan singing among folk dancers because they contained printed lyrics. Therefore, those who purchased the album could also learn how to sing the songs (Kuo 2002; Silverman 2002).

Carol Silverman was one of Ethel's students in Balkan singing, and told me about her experiences. Although students paid for the class, it was really like a group of friends. As well, Ethel Raim didn't really "teach," but rather they all seemed to be learning together. One of Ethel's important contributions was the development of some vocal exercises that are still used today by American singers of Balkan music. Carol's criticism of Ethel's teaching is that she never had the class listen to original recordings. Instead, the students copied Ethel's interpretation of Bulgarian singing, although most of the students were listening to Balkan music on their own, anyway (Silverman 2002).

From the mid '70s to 1980s, Balkan vocal groups mushroomed all over the country. As the early dancers got older, many eased out of dancing and became more interested in music and/or singing (Kuo 2002). Balkan camps, that later evolved into the East European Folklife Center, were founded by Mark Levy on both the West and East Coasts, and provided formal instruction in Balkan music and singing. When communist states fell in Eastern Europe and the Balkans in the late 1980s, Bulgarian dancers and musicians began entering the United States with more frequency and ease. It became much easier for Americans to learn Bulgarian singing from master Bulgarian singers such as Tatiana Sarbinska, Donka Koleva, Svetla Angelova and others.

Yves Moreau notes that the "interest in Balkan women's songs became especially popular in the wave of the women's liberation movement of the seventies" (Lausevic 1998:329). "When you go to the Balkans," Carol Silverman explained to me, "you are struck by how much singing is done by women" (Silverman, 2002). Perhaps this is why American women are drawn to singing rather than other instrumental outlets in Balkan music. The appropriation of music of different cultures creates an arena for "code



switching.” Many amateur and professional American ensembles have adopted Bulgarian and/or Balkan singing and combined its musically strong sound with varying degrees of “western” feminist ideals. “American women recognized vocal power, the tightness and female bonding created through the performance of the (Balkan) songs. However, they understood these qualities within their own cultural context, as aesthetic values opposed to those dominant in the American mainstream...It is ironic that music created in an extremely patriarchal society became a means of resisting patriarchy in another. The loud vocal polyphony of rural, Balkan, female songs is not an expression of female freedom, or liberation...However, this does not mean that opposite meanings cannot be assigned to the music genres in American culture” (Lausevic 1998:329). Silverman, herself, helped organize a performance ensemble of women’s music during the 1970s called, “Zhenska Pesna,” meaning “Women’s Song” in Bulgarian. As American women have adopted Bulgarian singing, Bulgarian songs, and to some extent, Bulgarian culture, they have also altered content, concept, and/or style in order to fit their own new definitions of womanhood, beauty, voice, naturalness, sexuality, their own concept of identity, and their own cultural context. Some have chosen to further exoticize, while others eroticize, some “educate,” and others “simply” subvert.

Zhenska Pesna was interested in singing “village” songs, using very little, if any, instrumental accompaniment. The women gravitated toward 2-part songs from Pirin, Macedonia, Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia, and the Shope region. Ideologically, the group didn’t want to “sell-out” to a commodified interest. Society and media had seemed too aggressive in defining how folk music should be accepted by American audiences. Instead, they wanted to create their own “market” using less “Americanized” versions of the folk music. They were successful in developing a niche that provided regular engagements at cafés and other establishments.

Although the participants in Zhenska Pesna varied from year to year, three consistent members, Carol Freeman, Lauren Brody, and Carol Silverman, continued the structure of the ensemble. The group chose repertoire for its musical aesthetics first, and discussed texts in addition as a secondary criterion. They chose not to sing songs that they didn’t understand for cultural or linguistic reasons, and abandoned songs that were objectionable—such as those promoting domestic violence. They found sexist and patriarchal values in many texts, and were challenged to present these translations to their audiences. It was always important to them to explain the texts and contexts to the audience—they wanted to present the *values* of the Balkan culture in addition to the music. The education of the audience was part of their mission—they wanted people

to learn, rather than just romanticize about the Balkans. Thus, the women presented songs with both respect and criticism.

For some Americans, the possible patriarchal and sexist oppression of Bulgarian women only enhanced their desire to practice Balkan style singing as a form of empathetic agency. The extent to which women are truly oppressed in Bulgaria is not necessarily important in this phenomenon, as much as the *perception* by Americans that Bulgarian women *are* oppressed. “Oppression,” itself can be a problematic word, as it denotes a “western” standpoint of the Balkan woman “Other,” who exists, conceivably, in a social and political environment far too complex to be generalized in a single word. Balkan specialist, Mark Forry wrote in an e-mail, “Many individual (Balkan) women, in some communities, might see their position as particularly hard or disadvantaged. But I sense that village women often see that *life* is hard, and that *each* family member experiences oppressive conditions in carrying out familial roles, not just *them*. They do often feel that they are subordinate: to husbands, to older adults. But often, they do not question that subordination, for reasons that are very complicated” (EEFC e-mail archive, emphasis added).

Nevertheless, in America, women are prone to project their own sense of “western” feminism in order to align themselves in support of a romanticized image of the less fortunate, suppressed spirit of the “Third-world” woman. A woman wrote to the EEFC mailing list, after reading Tim Rice’s book, *May it Fill Your Soul*, “Their lives seem to have been very bleak as they had to leave their homes when they married, and work very hard in their husband’s homes. Their music centered around singing so that their hands could be kept free to work—men could play the instruments because they didn’t have to do so much housework.” In my interpretation of this e-mail, the writer seems to project an American viewpoint of feminine oppression—getting the husband to share in household duties! As if in agency for herself and “Bulgarian” women, the writer continued, “I’ve been doing a lot of Bulgarian singing recently, practicing in the ‘chest voice’ that makes Bulgarian music distinct. I find that after I sing for awhile in chest voice, I feel a tremendous release of tension and a sense of power...When I sing, I try to put myself in the place of Bulgarian women, who used to sing this music in the villages. I think about how oppressed and tired they must have felt...” For some, this kind of perception of global unity among women is an important element of their understanding and appreciation for Balkan singing. In the American patriarchal context, strong, loud women are neither the “ideal” nor the norm. Lausevic writes how “singing loudly, in all women’s groups, in harmonies dissonant to the western ear, was rather a resistance

and opposition to the norm. Balkan singing provided, for some American women, an alternative singing style, and enabled them to make an empowering statement" (Lausevic 1998:331).

In addition, many American singers of Balkan music perceive a great responsibility for the preservation of an otherwise "dying" tradition. This perception is sometimes revealed when American women visualize the women who *used* to sing this music in the villages. Perhaps in my first singing group experience in Chico, this perception of preservation took place in our diligent copying of old "authentic" recordings, and our "village" like costume choice for folk dance party performances (see figure 1).



Figure 1

### Conceptual Representation of Bulgarian Music Performance

Ideas of nature, sexuality, and female bonding derived from the "western" perception of tightly harmonized Balkan music are attractive to some American women. For instance, KITKA, a women's vocal ensemble from Oakland, specializes in "songs from Eastern Europe and Beyond." The cover art for their CD albums include "western" folk art renderings of colorful goddess-like women surrounded by flowers and birds (see figure 2). Perhaps elaborating on the "feminine mysticism, ruralized authenticity, and cosmological phantasmagoria" of *Mystere* marketing, KITKA's Americanized album covers continue symbolic themes regarding the "procreative potential of young women" (Buchanan 1997:133,134). Describing the ensemble, inside covers of the albums "Nectar," and "Voices on the Eastern Wind," include words such as, "*elemental, natural, diverse, beauty, evocative, passion, dazzling, exotic, lush, power, strength, and deeply rooted in women's experiences of Eastern European village life.*" Adding further "femininity" to



Figure 2

the group in a juxtaposition of organic-sexuality and naturalness, my favorite portrait of the women singers shows their made-up faces grouped together intimately, while a dark tuft of hair sprouts from one woman's armpit, raised above natural-fiber eveningwear (see figure 3). While make-up, not shaving one's arm pits, and organic clothing are not related to Balkan music, they are related to a shared value system among some "communal," "peaceful" American folk. Among other things, these characteristics can express "natural beauty." Although this ensemble has traveled to Eastern Europe and the Balkans to see the less

exotic (yet still fascinating) “reality” of musical life there, the ensemble romanticizes their own identity as musical vessels of the ancient, sexual, and feminized materialization of nature—a position commonly claimed among contemporary American feminists.

In America, the strong, loud, singing is also re-coded as “liberated.” VIDA, a group of women in their mid and late twenties, hails from Bloomington, Indiana, and uses significant amounts of Balkan music amid their global music repertoire. While KITKA seems to draw on ideas of strength, beauty, and unity, VIDA falls into what I would call the “liberated, you go, girl,” category. The front cover of their album, “in bloom,” picturing a red, curvaceous, O’Keefe-like poppy, with opening petals suggests a state of heightened sexuality, while the back cover features the four women casually attired in jeans and cotton shirts, in a very active and perhaps “primal” pose of expressive, aggressive singing, subverting the “western” notions of the “desirable,” passive woman (see figure 4). The first song on their album is notably, “Dilmano Dilbero,” a “modern” arrangement of a “traditional” Bulgarian Shope song that reportably compares the planting of peppers to copulation (Silverman unpublished).

Just to be clear, the ideas expressed by these ensembles—of a naturalized, mysterious, sexual identity within Bulgarian women’s songs—are uniquely American. This is to say that the function of and associations of Bulgarian songs in Bulgaria is completely different from the ways that some Americans identify with Bulgarian music. Here are a few examples of how these changes can be insightful and/or problematic. While singing in Bulgaria tradition-



Figure 3



Figure 4

ally functioned as part of “everyday” work, entertainment, and ritual, Americans sometimes view such singing traditions with over-appropriate reverence and mystery. When Americans perform Bulgarian songs, it is usually only in the context of recreation and/or performance. These out-of-context aspects can distance Bulgarian music from both American and Bulgarian experience—helping to perpetuate orientalizing and “Othering.” While Bulgarian singers may choose to vary their performances of any given song, it is common for Americans to learn songs by memorizing only one recorded version—thus never introducing variation. Although folk singing certainly can have a communal and “sisterly” function within Balkan societies, American women sometimes elaborate on this concept



to project feminist ideals of global women's unity which can essentialize who "women" are, how they identify themselves, and what the meaning of "womanhood" is. In Balkan countries, women's singing exists within a categorical "patriarchy," yet some American women choose to use Balkan singing in *resistance* to patriarchal systems. Recent generations of Bulgarian citizens are less interested in "antique" varieties of local traditions, while Americans excitedly embrace Bulgarian/Balkan music as both new/global and old/traditional. "Motherhood" is rarely a topic in the performance of Balkan music in America, but can be an important part of the singing tradition in the Balkans. Iliana Bozhanova wrote, "I have two sons. I used to sing for them when they were babies. It was the biggest pleasure for me—during the day. Holding the baby—swinging him and singing quietly. I criticized myself for trying to sing the ornaments in the right way, but it was a sacrament for me, and very intimate" (Bozhanova 2002). Most Americans, I think, do not discuss Bulgarian music with the possibility of singing "quietly," nor would they necessarily choose their perception of Bulgarian singing while cradling small children. "Original" Balkan singing traditions include many vocal placements, while Americans focus almost exclusively on "chest" placement. This latter issue will be discussed later in more detail.

In pointing out the ways that American women have conceptually changed Bulgarian singing in America, I do not mean to criticize the phenomenon as a whole. Since the rise of the women's movement in the 1960s, American women have been seeking a new voice in society with which to deconstruct previous (and current) Puritanical and patriarchal notions of femininity in order to create a modern identity independent of these notions. Perhaps due to worldly conceptions of Western "maleness," and Eastern "femaleness," many women have looked outside "western patriarchy" to explore and appropriate "non-western," "primitive," or more "earthy" traditions as a means of reconnecting with "true" or "natural" femininity, and redefining self by seeking personal spiritual connection and awareness. By using a "foreign" voice, communities of American women singers of Bulgarian music have been able to adopt new traditions as an expression of self-identification and cohesively help redefine the ways in which they and other women are viewed by "western" society. A Balkan singer named Cathy explained, "I do feel that women need to be heard, and I just don't think they are heard often enough, loud enough, clear enough, or respectfully enough...and this music helps bring that out" (Lausevic 1998:331).

Grass-roots women's singing groups did not reconfigure Balkan music's "modern" feminist image completely on their own. Media representation, especially those of Balkan women's choirs, had a lot to do with America's

perceptions about the "Mysterious" voice. To begin with, Americans had greater access to Bulgarian mediated music after the fall of communism. Marcel Cellier's recordings of Bulgarian music as presented in "Le Mystere des Voix Bulgares," reached American audiences in the late 1980s, and garnered a Grammy nomination for the first album, and an award for the second. The choir toured the United States in 1988 to sold-out audiences. Even though the choir was full of older women fitting normative middle-aged descriptions, media marketed the ensemble in youthful, sexualized terms (Silverman unpublished). The television series, "Xena, the Warrior Princess," used an uncredited Bulgarian couple, Dimitur and Zhivka Konstantinov, performing gaida (bagpipe), and vocals (Kuo 2002). Although Bulgaria's socio-familial systems are patriarchal, the Konstantinovs' performance of Bulgarian music was re-coded in juxtaposition with the "girl-power" of Xena. English pop singer Kate Bush featured the Trio Bulgarka on her 1989 album, *The Sensual World*. Soon after, an arrangement was made for a fusion of Bulgarian women's choir with the Kronos Quartet. Also in 1989, Judith Jamison used Bulgarian choir music for her choreography, "Forgotten Time," for the Alvin Ailey Dance Company. In the late 1990s, Audi utilized Cellier's recording of *Polegnala e Todora* as a soundtrack for a car commercial. As well, Chicago native Irish dance champion, Michael Flatley, incorporated Bulgarian dance and music into his first *Riverdance* (Kuo 2002). With increasing opportunities to experience Bulgarian music, American listeners became less likely to associate the songs with Bulgarian culture and "traditional" life. "The effect of these collaborations was not only to bring Bulgarian music to the attention of wider audiences, but also to decontextualize it further and present it as pure sound, in the service of a greater art...Whereas in village singing, the text is the most important musical element to listeners, in Bulgarian choral arrangements, the text is secondary to the sound, reflecting western polyphonic aesthetics. In many collaborations of choirs with western artists, a further step is taken, the text itself is obliterated or rendered unintelligible, even to native speakers" (Silverman unpublished).

### Musical Aspects in Representation of Bulgarian Singing

Perhaps as a result of media influence, American women have made changes in the way the voice itself is represented in Bulgarian singing. As mentioned above, text is often the most important musical element to listeners in the "village" setting, yet most Americans are attracted to the "music" first, and learn about the text and context later on. This makes perfect sense—most Americans don't speak Slavic languages. Although many different kinds of music and learning take place in Bulgaria, Martha Forsyth



theorizes that for villagers, ornamentation of melodic notes is thus a “by-product” of the words—both of their meaning, and phonetic sound. Americans, however, tend to make the ornamentation itself most important. Instead of trying to “sing” the songs, American singers try to “do” the ornaments (Forsyth 2002).

Some American singers, whether consciously or unconsciously, clearly perform Bulgarian songs outside of the original tradition. For instance, VIDA's rendition of “Dilmano Dilbero,” (the “pepper” song mentioned earlier) uses a wide, lush vibrato that would be unlikely in the village setting. Remark- ing on such alterations, Martha Forsyth confided that her “pet peeve” was the “American” habit of saying that “you have to make a song ‘your own,’” since this attitude often reflects an underlying ignorance or naiveté regarding the original tradition (Ibid.). Regarding such individuality, Ethel Raim commented that in America, some singers are valued for their ability to sound most “traditional, while others are valued equally for their ability to step outside the tradition (while still maintaining an excellent musical product) (Raim 2002). By making a song “one's own,” some Americans are talking about trying to maintain an “authentic” performance of Balkan music, while employing the vocal tools that they have available at that moment in the learning process. A possible difference between “folk” and “classical” styles is the ability of the folk performer to resist conforming behavior, and accept, to a great extent, whatever voice is “available” to them. Donka Koleva, an internationally known Balkan singing teacher, wrote, “I think that in Bulgarian singing the tie between the song and the singer is very tight and personal, singing is natural, and for every performer it is individual in style and liveliness.” One woman wrote, “I started singing Balkan over 20 years ago, at Balkan Camp, and have had many years of classes with Carol Silverman and Carol Freeman. I spent the first 5 or so years pushing, pulling, and squeezing my own natural voice, trying to make it sound more “Balkan”—what- ever that was...I couldn't believe that Carol or Carol's voices could both be “right” since they sounded so different from each other, and neither one of them sounded like any of the recordings I had...I eventually decided, “To hell with it, I've got the voice I've got, and I'm just going to have to live with it... The next time I went to a class with Carol F, she said, “Wow, you sound so much better than you ever have before!” Others concur, that most important in singing *women's* music, is finding one's own *voice*. Regarding the maintenance of tradition versus allowing new traditions emerge, Lausevic theorizes that “the concepts of authenticity and preservation- ism are used to regulate the scene, to censor, and evalu- ate. People often fail to realize that grappling with issues of authenticity and preservationism is not about Balkan culture, nor is it done for the sake of this culture. These concepts help people explain and validate their involvement with Balkan music and dance” (Lausevic 1998:455).

### American Pedagogy of Bulgarian Technique

With so little access to Bulgaria in earlier years, and so many mixed musical messages later on, how did American women learn to sing, or come to believe they could sing Bulgarian songs in a “Bulgarian” style? Carol Silverman said that from the beginning, Americans had a problem visualizing the “placement” of Bulgarian singing. When they thought of “singing,” they would often end up with a light and airy sound. Both Ethel Raim, and Carol Silver- man had discussed how teachers needed to “trick” Ameri- cans into thinking that it *wasn't* singing. They two would do this by using various vocalizations, extending the length of speech using a speaking voice, or calling across a room—maintaining that support from the diaphragm is very important (Raim 2002; Silverman 2002).

Other Balkan singers, participating in a discussion over the Eastern European Folklife Center e-mailing list, described similar techniques for initially acquir- ing the “Balkan” sound: (1) “Bend over from the waist as if you were cutting grain or weeding or working in the garden, and sing. The first time I ever tried this,...I was ASTOUNDED at the sound that came out, with NO EFFORT AT ALL.” (2) “Another person told me that “chest voice” (Bulgarian voice) is like shouting ‘hey dog!’ across the street...Since the best way to sing “chest voice” is loudly, one way I've been developing my chest voice is by singing songs over great bodies of water. I have a favorite place on a bridge overlooking the Mississippi River, where I shout ‘heeeeyyyyy’ in different keys to a railway bridge a half a mile away. It's great fun! And when you get profi- cient, you can wiggle the place just behind your tonsils to get all sorts of interesting ornaments” (EEFC e-mail archives).

There are many people, as represented above, who equate Balkan and Bulgarian singing with “shouting” or “yelling,” yet others more clearly define the art within terms of singing. As well, I will address the notions of “chest” and “head” voice as perceived by American singers of Bulgar- ian music. But first, I will illuminate ideas of “naturalness” through discussion of tension, nasality, and the speaking voice.

In my own experiences taking voice lessons from prominent Bulgarian singers such as Tatiana Sarbinska, and Jordanka Ilieva, I have often asked where the voice comes from and where it travels on its way out of the body. In presenting this question, it is necessary to place myself within the context of “western” classical pedagogy. Although I had spent twenty years singing American and Western European folk music, my arrival into a Vocal Performance degree program as an undergraduate re- contextualized my own notions of singing into concepts of breath support from the diaphragm, tension-free larynx,

resonance in the cheeks, and sound that “swam” from the forehead. I had learned to feel resonance in different areas of my head and throat, and therefore wished to know where the sound resonated in the production of Bulgarian singing. My Balkan teachers were often perplexed, and sometimes annoyed. I remember Jordanka Ilieva saying something like, “You breathe in, you breathe out. On the way out, you make noise, and it comes out your mouth.” Needless to say, I didn’t find this explanation very helpful at the time. Her response did not line up with my “bel canto” expectation, yet seems very appropriate within the Balkan singing tradition, and is more enlightening than I originally grasped. For instance, Carol Silverman, who is noted for her ability to teach Americans the Balkan style, said that she indeed thinks of the sound coming from her throat and straight out of the mouth. I asked her about resonances in any part of the face, but she said that at different times, in different ranges, she feels resonances in her cheeks. An e-mailer on the EEFC list wrote that she had asked Tatiana Sarbinska, who is known for her “Bulgarian folk” and “western” capabilities, about similar placement and resonance. Tatiana had told her that the sound resonated in the sinus cavities—the ones around the eyes that get involved with sinus headaches. She also spoke about how the air column follows a lower path than with classical voice—it comes straight out of the mouth, rather than looping up first (EEFC e-mail archives). All of these ideas are easily converted into “western” classical rhetoric. When speaking of “lower” or “higher” placements, it is important to remember that the vocal cords are always in the throat, and sensations associated with the face are only conceptual ideas to motivate the vocal cords to do what the singer intends. When speaking of “western” and “Balkan singers, it seems that they both breathe deeply, and let the air pass naturally through the mouth, allowing the cheekbone area to resonate. In addition, “western” classical singers allow the resonance, or ringing sensation, to progress to the top of the head, while it seems that Bulgarian singing centralizes the sound in the lower face. This small difference is recognized by both Balkan and “western” singers, but does not denote a “chest” register necessarily.

Carol Silverman continued that she used to think of “tightening” the throat, but abandoned this instruction in her teaching because this idea often introduces tension, which is “bad.” Instead, she thinks of the village sound as “concentrated,” though singers should avoid nasality. Any *good* singing is relaxed, she said. Although there are different timbres in different regions of the Balkans, the difference is not an issue of relaxation or tension. It is more like a *focused* sound (Silverman 2002). Again, I must point out, that *all* these ideas of relaxation, focus and lack of nasality are congruent, and even essential in the performance of “western” singing. Another EEFC e-mailer wrote a differ-

ent, yet insightful commentary; “To me what gives Bulgarian women’s singing its sound is a certain narrowing or tightening of the throat muscles so as to make the voice as un-breathy as possible. The result is a very rich, resonant tone that produces strong upper partials (overtones)...that we often hear as “nasal” in this singing. And it is this efficiency of air that allows singers to sing such long phrases. It is very important to note that Bulgarian singers are not yelling or trying to force their voices, or even thinking of what they are doing as trying to be loud. They are trying to produce a rich, vibrating tone that they then blend with other singing voices” (EEFC e-mail archives). Tatiana Sarbinska’s student also conferred against nasality and forced timbre, offering Tatiana’s suggestion to hold one’s nose while singing in order to avoid nasality (Ibid.).

Essential to the American’s idea of singing is “naturalness.” Many people on the EEFC mail list wrote about the natural quality of song as compared with speech. Evidently, both Bulgarian, and American teachers have taught beginning Balkan singers that singing needs to be as “natural” as extended speech. A woman wrote, “I wonder if what you say about singing the way you speak is more an issue of letting your voice do what it does naturally/best/most/often. It (the voice) gets much more practice at speaking. Those muscles are well developed, strong and flexible. Thus they can handle the demands singing puts on them” (Ibid.). Others have qualified this by saying that “Bulgarians” sing how “Bulgarians” speak. A Bulgarian woman wrote, “In Bulgaria the folksingers come from a specific region where they talk and sing one specific style, typical for the region...Once I asked the singer Vesela Ilieva how to sing Balkan songs and she told me—you will sing unconsciously the style of your region naturally” (Ibid.). Although this idea essentializes Bulgarian women’s voices, many people have perceived similar differences regarding what seems “natural” for Bulgarians and “natural” for Americans. When one woman asked about how her low speaking voice functioned for singing, another wrote in, “(Mine is low, too,). On the other hand, the normal speaking voice placement for Balkan women (if one can make such a sweeping generalization) is a little to a ‘lot’ higher than our normal American woman’s voice” (Ibid.). Lastly, another wrote, “I have heard some say that Balkan singing is like speaking. I have also heard western teachers say that about good voice placement (Ibid.).

### Body Parts Associations with Singing: “Head” and “Chest”

One way that conceptual and musical issues in American Balkan singing intersect is in the question of vocal production/vocal placement. Central perhaps, to the binary of “western” and Bulgarian styles is the question of difference

between “chest” and “head” vocal registers. Although there are wide variations of vocal production throughout the Balkans, there is a common misconception that “Balkan” singing refers only to bright, strong, singing in the “chest” register, and that “western” classical bel canto singing refers only to “head” voice. I will take a moment to explain some terminology. Most American women, and certainly American men, speak in the low part of their “chest” or “natural” register. Some women who speak very low in this register include Lauren Bacall, and Martha Stewart. There are some American women who speak in their “head” or “falsetto” register, such as culinary chef, Julia Childs. The names of these vocal registers are metaphorical and cultural—both “chest” and “head” voice are made in the throat, and neither one is essentially “natural,” or “false.” I will argue here that the binary of “chest” and “head” voices is also cultural, and that many vocal possibilities exist in reality.

In classical music rhetoric, “chest” and “head” voice fall into discourse regarding vocal “register.” Cultural constructs of vocal register are at least as old as the sixteenth century “western” classical systems and were identified by “breaking” points in the voice (Alderson 1979:151). These “breaks” in singing sometimes sound like a “click” or “yodel” and are what one might hear in the stereotypical example of an adolescent boy’s changing voice. The “place” in sound where the break occurs between registers is known as the *passaggio*—a passage from one area to another. The best students in classical music training were those that were able to negotiate through the *passaggio* without a noticeable “break” (Ibid.).

To confuse the issue, register categories have not always been the same. In 1835, professionals changed their singing style from a “white” tone in which the larynx rose on each ascending pitch, to a darker, richer, mellower tone in which the larynx was consistently low (Alderson 1979:152). The changes in larynx position altered perceptions of register categories. Additionally, it was noticed that tonal “placement” shifted along with entrance into different “registers.” “Various theories have been proposed which number the registers from none (registers do not exist) to pan-tonic (a register on every note)” (Ibid.). Commonly, contemporary bel canto singers speak of low/chest, middle, and high/head registers.

My following argument is not intended to deny that registers may exist (or might be useful figurative categories), but to remind that the concepts of registers are culturally constructed, and that change between “registers” may be negotiated in many ways. While “classical” singers train to pass through the *passaggio* effortlessly, Balkan singers may use and develop the *passaggio* as its own “register.” One way that bel canto singers negotiate the *passaggio* is to “mix” their “head” and “chest” registers. I believe that many

Balkan singers rely on various percentages of that “mix” of “head” and “chest” register areas in addition to issues of nasality, tone, timbre and vocal “placement” in order to produce variations of the “Balkan” folk singing “sound.” In short, although register “breaks” might exist in distinct places among individual singers, registers themselves might better be perceived as a continuum rather than a dichotomy.

One manifestation of this vocal register dichotomy can be seen as a fear factor employed by some bel canto singers in the discussion of harmful vocal practices. Many “operatic” teachers have warned their Balkan singing students not to “belt” or use a “chest” voice when singing too high—“Never belt, dear, Belting is bad for the voice.” Often, singers are frightened to try “chest” voice in fear that they will *lose* their “head” register. Many people addressed this issue over the EEFC mailing list. One woman explained clearly and eloquently that, “Balkan singing can wreck your head voice ONLY if you do it improperly. I have found that since I started Balkan (singing) my head range has expanded and the tone strengthened. Singing in head voice can also ruin your head voice, if you do it improperly. The danger lies in ignorance. The tension and “forcing” of tone and volume is what destroys your vocal cords...” (EEFC e-mail archive). I have experienced the two genres (classical and folk/Balkan) in similar ways—if I practice each with good technique, I am apt to improve at each without consequence to one or the other. Another woman wrote, “When done properly, Balkan singing is a very natural, relaxed, open-throated singing, and should not be harmful to anyone. It should not feel tight, tense, or in any way strained. If the singing doesn’t feel comfortable, then the technique is not what it should be and needs improvement.” She continued that the problems are often encountered by those who misinterpret the Balkan sound as strained, and have no formal instruction in order to advise them otherwise (Ibid.). Others defined that bad placement and ignorance included, “struggling, choking, or repressing part of your sound.” Instead, one should, “Send your air high and free, let it flow high across your palate, focus higher, maybe even outside your body...imagine sparkling water in a narrow quick-moving stream, or a bright laser beam” (Ibid.). Hmmm, I thought, that imagery is an awful lot like the descriptive ideology of bel canto singing...

My first real clue that these binaries existed in culture, but not in nature, came to me over this past year when a “bel canto” instructor disdainfully accused me of using my “chest” register, and a Balkan singing teacher told me to “stop using my head voice.” I was truly perplexed. This is preposterous, I thought. I have sung for all of my life, and have a degree to show for it—surely I (ought to) know whether my own voice is using “head” or “chest” registers!



Table 1

Example:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Bacon	head	pushed/head	hard/belt	chest/closed	chest/open	chest/pushed
Kirilov	classical	closer	close enough	breathy/Bulg.	Bulg. folk	Bulg. folk
Silverman	classical	folk/throaty	nasal/throaty	lower/throaty	louder	nasal/throaty
Tedards	head	mixed	nasal/mixed	chest/mixed	louder	nasal/louder

I later hypothesized that the system of meaning between the two singing traditions might be disjunct. Perhaps, I ruminated, the differences in opinions lie in the subtleties of where the boundaries of each vocal genre begin and end. I had been convinced in the past that possibilities outside the polarized concepts of “head” and “chest” voice existed, and maybe others accepted this through discussions of “mixing” ranges. Therefore, I created and conducted an auditory survey presented to two “classical” vocal teachers at the University of Oregon (Dr. Ann Tedards, and Jennifer Bacon), one “authentic” Bulgarian singer and researcher (Kalin Kirilov), and one American singer and educator of Balkan music (Carol Silverman). For each, I sang six examples that combined a succession of varying degrees of “head” to “chest” voice, as well as nasality, and levels of resonance. Each of the vocal “placements” (all on the vowel, “Ah”) are among those that I have used, or been asked to use while performing vocal music in my career. I asked them to give written responses in order to determine how each defined the boundaries of both their own genre (self), and the other genre(s) (other), and to indicate where my examples fell within their own system. Although not especially scientific, the test showed me something important—nobody really agreed on how to label what I was doing with my voice, and in doing so, also disagreed on where boundaries existed for each genre.

My examples representing my own understanding of the voice, are presented as follows:

- (1) **Classical head voice**—the register, timbre, tone, and vibrato used in my performance of classical music, as well as some Anglo-American folk music.
- (2) **“Flattened” head voice**—similar to (1), but no vibrato, and a more “centered” sound—focusing resonance on the middle and lower sections of my face. By “flattened,” I also mean that I allowed my mouth cavity to collapse instead of striving for a “cavernous” space. Some vibration felt in throat. I have used this style to sing many styles of American folk, and Northern Slavic music.
- (3) **Further “flattened” head voice**—vowel “Ah” flattened/collapsed further toward nasal sound. Inside my head, this “voice” sounds focused and “pointy/strident.” I have used this placement to sing higher pitched Macedonian and other Balkan songs.
- (4) **Soft chest voice**—speaking pitch range, somewhat rounded, but neither loud, nor pointy. I have used this for

“pretty” Balkan songs like some of the “Stare Gradski Pesni” style.

(5) **Hard chest voice**—speaking pitch range with loud, direct sound. Similar “centered” feeling of second example. I have used this for “village” style Balkan singing.

(6) **Hard nasal chest voice**—loud, speaking pitch range, with forceful, nasal sound. I have used this for “hard-core” (very loud, seemingly nasal) “village” style Balkan singing.

Table 1 above is a breakdown of how the aforementioned informants responded regarding their perceptions of my six examples. I have abbreviated their responses, in some cases, from the full sentence form.

Although all participants categorized my first example within the “western” classical traditional terms, there are immediate discrepancies in perception beginning with the second example. Bacon claimed it within the “classical” tradition, Tedards and Kirilov neutralized it as an in-between, and Silverman claimed it for folk style singing (although she didn’t specify any particular folk genre). In the third example, Tedards and Silverman are in agreement about the nasal quality, yet Bacon and Kirilov focus on the harder qualities. Bacon, Kirilov, and Silverman placed #3 within the folk terminology, while Tedards neutralized it again as a “mix.” Although all four agreed that the fourth example was in the “chest”/“throat” register, each focused on a different description—closed, throaty, breathy, mixed. My fifth example seemed different to me compared with #4, yet was described by all of my listeners as simply “louder.” And again, while all were in “agreement” regarding example six, each used different modifiers.

Even more striking, were the different descriptions of recorded Balkan singers. In addition to using my own voice, I also invited my participants to hear and comment on vocal styles used by artists, Neli, Radka Koushleva, and the women of Vida. Neli is a young singer from the folk music conservatory at Shiroka Luka in Bulgaria. Her specialty is singing in the “Rhodope” style, and she currently performs with an international Bulgarian group named “Bulgari.” Radka Koushleva is also a commercial singer of Bulgarian music who is featured on a Balkanton CD, “The Magic of the Rhodope Mountains—100 Kaba-Bagpipes.” I perceive that she has a different vocal quality than Neli, although the recording I used of Radka Koushleva was also of a Rhodope song, “Bela Sum, Bela, Yunache”—albeit orchestrated in the “Koutev” style. Vida, as mentioned ear-

lier, is a young American women's quartet from Indiana. I used their "village style" version of the Shope region song, "Dilmano Dilbero" for this test. Slyly, one reason that I chose these three recordings in particular, was not only to show a diverse selection of "Bulgarian" singing styles, but also because the Bulgarian singers seem more "head" voice oriented than their American counterparts. My test wasn't constructed in a way to find out how my selection choice affected responses, but I hope that it made a difference that my examples were not indicative of the "American" essentialism that "Bulgarians" sing in "village style," while "Americans" struggle along with "head" voices. In any case, responses were mixed and "inconclusive." Jennifer Bacon described both Neli and Radka Koushleva as having pushed, mixed registers—airy on top, and chesty on the bottom. Ann Tedards also found similarities in these two singers, but described them both as using a "head" voice with strong nasality. Carol Silverman said that she believed that Neli was using a nasal, high, throat voice. Kalin Kirilov, who appeared unimpressed with Neli's vocal production, declined to make any definitive statements about her voice. Both Bacon and Tedards perceived VIDA's lead singer as having a nasal, pressed, "chest" voice. Silverman, on the other hand, commented that her voice was "nice," but obviously not singing in correct Shope style, because she used a wide vibrato.

All this, perhaps, shows to some extent, that members' meanings within groups of singers are not well defined, and perhaps contribute to a lack of understanding between classical and folk singers. For yet another interesting example, almost all participants indicated that Neli had a nasal voice, even though Balkan singers report that nasality is undesirable, and not authentic. From my understanding, Neli is a very popular "traditional" singer in Bulgaria—it is odd that her highly valued vocal qualities do not match up with "authentic" ideals. Kirilov, however, stated that he had heard Bulgarians sing anywhere from my example #3-#6. To refresh the reader's memory, this *does* include my "nasal" examples.

Although there wasn't any real agreement about what I was doing with my voice, or the Bulgarian and American women's recorded voices, I inquired further to see if there was agreement among American singers in defining the "Balkan" voice. Most often, American singers of Balkan music used words such as "hard," "strong," "full," "present," "honest," "grown-up," or "natural," to describe proper Balkan singing. Interestingly, the concept of these words was very often placed against "bel canto" singing which was described by the same women as "light," "airy," "high," "destructive," "fake," "subservient," "silly," and "little girlish." However, when I reviewed other technical and practical instructions for singing Bulgarian songs, and compared these with the technical expectations of "bel canto"

singing, the results were *scandalous*. Conceptually, the metaphors and ideologies of both "bel canto" and "Balkan" singing are very similar. Common to both traditions are the expectations of good posture, good breath support, using a tension-free body, creating a relaxed sound, reducing nasality, increasing resonance, and using a focused sound.

So what's the deal here? I pondered. If these singing traditions are so alike, are there any "real" differences between them? Why is the presumed opposition so important to (some) American Balkan singers? The answer to the first question is easier given, yet really should be left to people with throat-invading pathology cameras, and other mechanical instruments that measure sound, nasality, and other "biological" things. Simply put, there *are* differences between "bel canto" and "Bulgarian" singing traditions. I'm sure that you can hear them. However, these differences have less to do with the dichotomy of "head" or "chest" voice, and more to do with other musical choices such as use of nasality, timbre/tone, vibrato and ornamentation. Although the concept of opposition between the so-called "head" and "chest" registers can be useful as an analytical tool, in reality, there are many vocal placements on a continuum, in which register(s) is only one element, between these two perceived extremes. Both "western" bel canto, and American Balkan traditions are culturally motivated to accept a binary approach rather than discuss the many vocal placement possibilities in a multi-genre arena. Among other things, *image* is at stake!

The cultural significance of "head" vs. "chest" voice binary may intersect with gender issues, according to Jane Sugarman. She explained that in many places around the world, including the Balkans, both men and women sing equally in "chest" register. In bel canto singing, men sing almost exclusively in "chest" register, while women sing almost exclusively in "head" register—thus polarizing the two genders and presenting them as fundamentally different (EEFC e-mail archive). Some American singers might reject "head" register singing because higher voices suggest women's subordination and oppression. Women often equate the bel canto/soprano voice with Disney's submissive servant girl, Snow White, without realizing that there is also variation within so-called "classical" singing (i.e., whatever happened to Wagner's horn-helmeted, breast-armored Brunhilde as the "poster-girl" image of operatic singing?).

Laying aside, for the moment, the dilemma regarding whether Bulgarian singing takes place in the "chest" register, I also question American women's choice of pitch range as did an EEFC e-mailer who wrote, "From what I hear on the 'authentic' Bulgarian voice' on the resource tape I got from Carol Freeman a couple of years ago, they sound piercingly high and 'little girlish,' mak-

ing me quite skeptical that we can refer to the 'Balkan voice' as always in 'chest placement,' especially when singing high..." (Ibid.). Almost without exception, EEFC e-mailers referred to the undesirability of high voices regardless of whether they spoke of "western" or "Bulgarian" singing. For instance, a woman wrote, "My classical singing instructor tried to get me to talk the way I ought to sing—a sweet, high pitched girlish lyric soprano voice that made me feel utterly silly" (Ibid.). The consistency of terminology suggests that some American women choose lower pitches in their "natural" voice as a way of rejecting the higher voice associations with "unnatural" patriarchal control. In doing so, they often embrace Balkan singing and reject "classical" singing.

The rejection of "classical" style singing by some American Balkan singers is unfortunate because it denies the many vocal types accepted in the classical tradition, and the many "western" traditions (such as early English madrigals, liturgical music, etc.) that are considered "classical" yet bear resemblances to related folk traditions. Higher voices, however, don't "naturally" mean "classical," nor does "classical" equal "little girlish." Marilyn Horne is an example of a famous retired bel canto contralto who used to sing lower and richer than some Balkan singers. Opera singers in general do not reach vocal maturity until their late 20s or early 30s—hardly girlhood. Almost all "mature," "classical" singers are expected to have rounded, resonant, and rich voices. Even those who play "pants-parts" (operatic roles in which women perform in the character of adolescent boys), such as Cecilia Bartoli, have strong, penetrating, "womanly" voices.

Some e-mail writers suggested that American women prefer lower register singing because they associate lower voices with the authoritative, sexy voices of women such as Lauren Bacall, Kathleen Turner, and other women public speakers who've accepted that "model." Balkan specialist, Mark Forry wrote in an EEFC e-mail regarding American perceptions of voice and Balkan singing, "We have been taught that low, smooth voices are sexy. Many women whose natural-born speaking and singing voices might well have been high, light and perfect for lead on Bulgarian songs have instead trained themselves to emulate Lauren Bacall. Speaking in an artificially low, husky, 'sexy' range can permanently alter your singing voice." Forry also speculated that American women simply emulated the vocal styles presented on early recordings—those that reflected the (patriarchal) tastes of "academic organizers and judges of festivals who made the selections that eventually got to recordings" (EEFC e-mail archive).

Others have defended that American women prefer lower Balkan music because it is simply *easier* for untrained singers. The accessibility of using the speaking voice for singing generates feelings of competence and per-

sonal expression among those without "formal" instruction. "I *loved* singing music where I didn't have to go into my head voice because I always had a problem with some of those transitional notes, and I felt less 'honest' in my singing when it was in the upper registers... Somehow, certain kinds of songs seem more honest and heartfelt for me when they are sung with power" (Mills 2002).

I suspect as well, that recent generations of women reject the "formal" qualities of bel canto singing, in lieu of the informal and/or "subversive" aspects of Balkan folk singing because women's power has often operated "underneath" or "outside" of official American culture. In general, this folk sub culture has attracted people who did not feel at ease in most social circumstances, or amidst "popular" culture. "Its value lies partly in the fact that it is not 'force-fed,' but actively sought. The fact that Balkan music was not readily available, that it was not suggested for consumption through media advertisement, made it additionally attractive to the 1960s and 1970s counterculture, in which the act of resisting the media was, in itself, a valued action (Lausevic 1998:450).

Most of all, American women choose the "chest" voice because of its voluminous power, strength, and ability to symbolically project gender equality in a patriarchal system. Influenced by the American women's movement, singers latched on to Bulgarian singing as an expressive form of "modern" female identity. Perhaps in order to compete in a man's world, it is necessary to walk softly, and carry a big voice!

In conclusion, the Bulgarian voice, as used by American women, is a cultural construction stemming from "western" feminist ideology. The codes and symbolic meanings of "traditional" Bulgarian music have been reframed in order to fit an American context. Because of the perceived musical qualities of strength, naturalness, and sisterhood, some Americans are particularly drawn to the "harder," "folky," or more "chest-like" quality of some Bulgarian singing styles. Despite a perceived dichotomy of "chest" voice/Balkan singing and "head" voice/bel canto singing, there are many intermediary vocal placements on a continuum between the two assumed binaries, and including many other elements aside from the notion of "register" itself. After all, if Bulgarian singing merely meant "chest" voice, there wouldn't be any *mystery*!

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