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## BULGARIAN CHOIRS OVER THE PAST 50 YEARS

### **Abstract**

In comparison with Central and Western Europe, Bulgarian choirs began their development relatively late – in the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century. The main reason for this was national, hence cultural oppression of the Ottoman Empire, that lasted for for five centuries. Since 1896, when the first choral society had been founded and especially after the Balcan wars, Bulgarian choral music reached high level of development. Despite the unfavourable circumstances from the beginning of the 1990s, artistic level has been preserved.

### **Key words**

Bulgarian choral societies, choral singing, folklore choirs, choirmasters, repertoire, Dobri Hristov.

### **The roots of choir singing in Bulgaria**

Unlike in Central and Western Europe, Bulgarian choirs began their development relatively late – in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The chief reason for this was the oppression of the Ottoman Empire, which ruled over the territory of Bulgaria for five centuries.

According to preserved documents, the first choirs were student choirs. They were established at schools or churches in Koprivshtitsa and Kotel, Ruse, Shumen and Sliven. Singing in these choirs was homophonic – a natural continuation of the traditions of Bulgarian folk songs and of Eastern Orthodox chanting. Polyphonic singing emerged no earlier than the 1860s, especially after the Russian–Turkish War of 1877-78, which ended with the establishment—for the third time—of an independent Bulgarian state. One of the first champions in this field was Yanko Mustakov from Svishtov. His choir was set up in 1868, and some 10 years later it participated in the inauguration of the First Bulgarian Grand National Assembly.

In the following years choirs were set up in Sofia (1879), Sliven (1880), Stara Zagora (1882), Ruse (1892) etc. In 1896 in Plovdiv, the composer Angel Bukoreshtliev established the first choral society. These choirs consisted of men and child–trebles. The first choir with women was set up in Vidin (1894). In the following twenty years or so, similar choirs were established in many places around the country. Their repertoire did not have much variety. They performed songs and choruses from operas from the Romantic period, church music by Russian composers, and suites or arrangements based on Bulgarian musical folklore themes.

The first attempt to organise these choirs was made in 1905 with the establishment of the Bulgarian Musical Union. This was the brainchild of the composer Dimitar Hadjigeorgiev. For more than 20 years he was also editor of the first specialised newspaper – *The Musical Newspaper*. It was again he

who managed to establish the first Musical School in Bulgaria, and after it grew into the Academy of Music, he remained its rector until his death in 1932.

The most significant international event of this period was the Festival of Danube Town Choirs. The initiative came from the Sedyanka Choir from Silistra, and the first edition of the festival was in 1910.

The First World War and the preceding conflicts among the Balkan states interrupted the activity of Bulgarian choirs. The following peaceful years gave a renewed impetus to their development. What had been established earlier was then consolidated, and new choirs were also quickly set up. In the heat of the big railwaymen's strike of 1919 the first workers' mixed choir was established. In 1927 the male choir *Kaval* made its appearance on the concert stage, followed two years later by its rival *Gusla*. The development of these choirs through the years was closely related to two highly erudite figures – Atanas Margaritov and Asen Dimitrov. The 1930s also saw the establishment of female choirs: The Sofia Schoolteachers' Choir, connected with the names of Krum Boyadjiev and later on Lidiya Dimitrova; and the Hristina Morfova Choir, established by admirers of the great Bulgarian opera singer of the same name. The Students' Choir of Sofia University (now the Academic Choir) was set up in 1933. Its worldwide popularity is directly related to the name of Angel Manolov – one of the most prominent Bulgarian choirmasters.

Compared with the choirs from the beginning of the century, these choirs achieved a higher level of choral singing – a level of more mature artistic accomplishment and of newer and more vivid repertoire, in which national music predominated. The merit for these achievements belonged to Bulgarian musicians. Some of them proposed a new union of choirs, and in 1926 on the initiative of the eminent music theorist and composer Dobri Hristov the Union of Bulgarian Choirs (later Bulgarian Choirs Union) was established.

### **Choirs, Choirmasters and Repertoire during the Second Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

The Second World War interrupted the development of the choirs again. Despite the privations and the insecurity, it was during this period – on November 1, 1944 – that the first, and subsequently the biggest, professional choir in Bulgaria was established at Radio Sofia. Its founder and first choirmaster was Svetoslav Obretenov – a brilliant master of the choir palette and an original composer. Today the same choir, under the title Bulgarian Cappella Choir, quite deservedly bears the name of its founder and continues to be the main performing body that brings to life many of the new Bulgarian works of music, as well as examples of world classics. Under choirmasters Dimitar Ruskov and especially Georgi Robev, the Bulgarian Cappella Choir has been a welcome guest on major stages around the world and has received high acclaim from the most eminent authorities on music.

In 1946 another choir was born in Sofia – the Bodra Smyana Children's Choir. Its founder and permanent choirmaster was the teacher Boncho Bochev. An excellent pedagogue and a unique creative personality, he created his own organisation and artistic methodology for working with children, which for

a short time yielded optimal results. His principles have been the object of study and discussions at international forums and conferences, and his artistic achievements are described as unique. “They do not simply sing well. They are a collective artistic personality with a single breath, a single sense, a single thought and a single feeling during concerts,” composer Dmitriy Kabalevskiy exclaimed. In the American journal *Current Musicology* George Frank wrote, “No doubt there is no other choir like this in the world!”

The year 1952 is of special importance for the development of Bulgarian choirs. It was then that using a change in the structure of the Musical Academy in Sofia, the experienced choirmaster and composer professor Georgi Dimitrov managed to create the Choirmaster (Choir Conducting) programme with a five years’ course of study. The first students were admitted. The curriculum included all basic musical subjects, theory and history of choir singing, acquaintance with a large number of musical works from Palestrina to modern times, as well as almost daily practice with a training choir. Apart from full-time professional singers, students themselves also sang in this choir as one of the key elements of the training. Separate classes were devoted to individual choir conductorship and voice training, while during the last two years students were expected to do internships as choir conductors at the most prominent musical ensembles in the capital. The most outstanding element of the training were the lectures of the professor himself: lively and vivid language, sharing not only knowledge, but also rich personal experience, as well as the valuable advice and guidance so necessary for future practice in life. This programme, with its perfect structure, accepted many well-prepared and energetic people, willing to demonstrate their abilities in the field of choir music – not only as choirmasters, but also as organisers and leaders. In the first years of its existence the choirmaster class trained a number of prominent figures: Vasil Arnaudov, Georgi Robev, Marin Chonev, Stoyan Kralev, Hristo Nedyalkov, Samuil Vidas, Veneta Vicheva, Angel Hristov, Kiril Stefanov, Liliya Gyuleva, Emil Yanev and many, many others. I feel both proud and happy that I myself had the opportunity to be a member of this amazing choirmaster class.

Besides working as choirmasters, many of these young specialists began careers as researchers and teachers at the Musical Academy and other Bulgarian universities and received high acclaim. Some of them remained in Sofia, others went to the countryside, but they were all united by the ambition to work for the success of Bulgarian choirs.

Marin Chonev became choirmaster of the mixed choir Morski Zvutsi in Varna. If one leafs through the yearbooks of the most renowned European choir competitions, the very number of the awards will suffice for an accurate and faithful idea of the artistic level of this choir. In 1967 Marin Chonev proposed organising the first Bulgarian International May Choir Competition and successfully managed each of the following years.

In Burgas Stoyan Kralev continued the good traditions of the Rodna Pesen Choir, established as early as 1910. The success of the work of both choirmaster and singers is confirmed by the great number of international prizes. Later on Kralev set up the vocal ensemble Madrigal, proving his professional excellence once again.

Veneta Vicheva has worked in Shumen for long years. Her choir, Rodni Zvutsi, is one of the oldest in Bulgaria – founded long-ago 1898. Vicheva has managed to preserve the performers' renaissance spirit, to continue the traditions and to make the ensemble one of the best in Bulgaria.

Samuil Vidas continued writing the history of Sofia Workers' Choir (now "Georgi Kirkov") and demonstrated many times the strength of the Bulgarian choir school. Evgeni Cheshmedjiev took on the long-established Post Choir and led it to new heights. Liliya Gyuleva breathed new life into the Hristina Morfova Female Choir, and Valentin Bobevski, with the choirs Gusla and Sofia, revealed the brilliance and power of male singing. Hristo Arishtirov led two choirs to enviable heights: the Mayakovski Choir from Sofia and the Male Choir from Gabrovo. Many other ensembles from outside Sofia developed quickly, thanks to their young, talented and well-prepared choirmasters: Krikor Chetinyan, Zlatina Deliradeva and Nikola Lipov from Plovdiv, Ognyan Vasilev from Haskovo, Petya Pavlovich from Kazanlak and Sofia, Varban Rangelov from Veliko Tarnovo. The list of names continues.

Especially significant and wide-reaching is the activity of Vasil Arnaudov. Even as a student he demonstrated indisputable musical ability, quick and active thinking and born leadership qualities. His career was connected with a number of persons and choirs – as a choirmaster, teacher and consultant. Most vivid were his interpretations of different musical pieces with the Rodina Choir from Ruse and the Sofia Chamber Choir, which now bears his name. These interpretations preserve the individualised image of each piece of music and of each author.

In 1960 Hristo Nedyalkov established the Children's Choir of the Bulgarian Radio. Not only did he establish the choir, but is to this moment its permanent choirmaster. And not just choirmaster – we see him as a precise vocal instructor, as an excellent expert in child psychology and, last but not least, as a very good manager. It is enough to point out that under his conductorship the choir tours constantly around the world and has been to Japan alone 18 times.

Besides the graduates of the Choirmaster Programme, there are also many other specialists in music who work at different places with no less success. Mihail Angelov's name is connected with the Dunavski Zvutsi Choir from Ruse, Ivelin Dimitrov's - with the Chamber Cappella Polifoniya from Sofia, and in Dobrich - Zahari Mednikarov's with the Dobrudjanski Zvutsi Choir and the Children's Choir. Mihail Milkov works equally successfully with the Mixed Choir of the Bulgarian Radio and with the Kaval Choir.

A general overview of the concert activities of these mostly amateur choirs shows that each of them had from 10 to 40 performances a year. These were meetings with the audience on different stages and occasions and with repertoires ranging from the short song to the long complex works such as: cantatas by Johann Sebastian Bach; works by Henry Purcell and Benjamin Britten; Requiems by Luigi Cherubini, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Giuseppe Verdi and Gabriel Fauré; *Stabat Mater* by Alessandro Scarlatti and Giovanni Pergolesi; *Magnificat* by Claudio Monteverdi; *The Seasons* and *The Creation* by Joseph Haydn; masses by Mozart, Franz Schubert and Ludwig van Beethoven; the choral part of Symphony no.9; *Te Deum* by Antonín Dvořák; *The Bells* and *Liturgy* by Sergei Rachmaninoff; *Sirènes* by

Claude Debussy; *Military Mass* by Bohuslav Martinu; *Symphony of Psalms* by Igor Stravinsky; *Village Scenes* by Béla Bartók, and other works by Georg Friedrich Handel, Edouard Lalo, Carl Orff, B. Britten etc. It is difficult to make a comprehensive list of all the titles. The choir repertoire also included many works by Bulgarian composers of different generations. An important contribution for its enrichment was made by the New Bulgarian Music Festival, organised by the Union of Bulgarian Composers.

Including such pieces in the repertoire of Bulgarian choirs was only possible with the presence of a large permanent membership of performers with quality voices, who had mastered the vocal technique, and conditions allowing regular rehearsals.

In the period from the beginning of the 60s to the end of the 80s the state actively assisted choir singing, building a stable foundation. The periodic reviews (republic festivals) laid the foundations of choir competitions and became a reliable measure of the choirs' level of preparedness at a certain moment. The numerous stage performances, concerts in Bulgaria and abroad, as well as the participation in international competitions were the much-needed additional factor that attracted many talented performers to the choirs and that rewarded their efforts. At the heart of all this was the talent and hard work of choirmasters of different generations.

Here are some statistics.

From 1968 to 1988 more than 80 Bulgarian choirs took part in 30 different European contests. 35 of them were awarded 120 first, special and grand prizes. Those awards were won in stiff competition traditional for Llangollen and Middlesborough (Great Britain), Arezzo and Gorizia (Italy), Celje (Slovenia), Tolosa and Canto Negros (Spain), Limburg, Polheim, Lindenhofshausen and Leipzig (Germany), Cork (Ireland), Debrecen (Hungary), Varna (Bulgaria) and many other cities in Austria, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, Poland, Estonia, Slovenia, France. The yearly grand prizes of the BBC and Radio Cologne were awarded to nine Bulgarian ensembles.

In addition to Balkanton, Sofia, a large share of the repertoire of many of the abovementioned Bulgarian choirs has been recorded and released by Eterna, Melodia, Pathe Marconi, Philips, Harmonia Mundi, Decca, King Record, Columbia, Teichiku, EMI, Crown, Kibaton, Supraphon, Monitor.

### **Choirs with Bulgarian folk singers**

Slightly more than 50 years ago Bulgarian choirs were enriched with the addition of a new category unknown to Central and Western Europe – the “people’s”, “traditional”, or “folklore” choirs, so called due to their specific sounding. The performers in those choirs sing in a traditional way that has established itself as a trademark school of sound production through the centuries. Rightfully appreciating this rich heritage, the state created schools in Kotel, Shiroka Laka and Pleven, aiming to preserve this type of singing. Later on the Musical Academy in Plovdiv was established with a similar purpose.

The first choir of high artistic quality was the State Ensemble for Folk Songs and Dances, set up in 1951 by the composer Filip Kutev. A similar ensemble was later established at Radio Sofia. Following

this example, numerous female folklore choirs were formed throughout the country. Their sound and especially their repertoire, closely linked to the Bulgarian folk song tradition, were a prerequisite for their enthusiastic reception in cities and villages. Again with the same purpose professional ensembles for folk songs and dances were set up in almost all ethnographic regions of the country. Their choirs moulded the image of the new genre and with their artistic qualities provided it with a permanent place within the family of the other Bulgarian choirs. One of them is the exquisite Ensemble Pirin from Blagoevgrad with choirmaster Kiril Stefanov. We should not omit also the choirs of the ensembles Trakia from Plovdiv (choirmaster Stefan Mutafchiev), Dobrudja – Dobrich (choirmaster Petar Krumov), Strandja – Burgas (Stefan Chapkanov), the Severnyashki Ensemble (Northern Ensemble) from Pleven (Ivan Valev), the ensembles of Smolyan, Vidin, Varna, Stara Zagora, Yambol, Sliven etc. The students from the Musical Academy in Plovdiv, under choirmaster Vasilka Spasova, set up their own folklore choir with a very high level of professional training. Over the past 10 to 15 years the choir The Mystery of Bulgarian Voices, under choirmaster Dora Hristova, has achieved great popularity.

These and many other folklore choirs are welcome guests on stages in Europe and around the world. What is more – they are sought by producers and impresarios. Suffice it to mention one name – that of Marcel Sellier from Switzerland. Hundreds of pages of enthusiastic reviews have been devoted to the artistic value of these choirs. A *New York Times* article about the Filip Kutev State Ensemble recalls the myth of the birth of Orpheus where Bulgaria is now, adding that it seemed to be a fact rather than a myth, since his daughters could still sing in this way.

### **Composers of Choir Music**

The community of professional Bulgarian composers started writing pieces for choirs from its very emergence at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Panayot Pipkov, for example, wrote a students' song in praise of the brother saints Cyril and Methodius, who gave us the Slavonic alphabet. For Bulgarians this song quickly turned into a second national anthem, and it recently became a symbol of the cultural unity of European peoples. Choir songs were also written by Emanuil Manolov, Petar Boyadjiev, Aleksandar Morfov, Aleksandar Krastev etc. Petar Dinev concentrated almost entirely on religious chants.

After the First World War, choir literature in Bulgaria was enriched with new works. The most prominent master of this genre was Dobri Hristov. He was followed by a new generation with its new views and artistic approach: Petko Staynov, Pancho Vladigerov, Marin Goleminov, Veselin Stoyanov, Lyubomir Pipkov. Thus, the foundations were laid.

The Union of Bulgarian Composers gave a strong impetus to the creation of new musical pieces. As early as the 1960s, the Union was organising the premiere performance of new pieces of music at yearly concerts, which have turned into an annual tradition since 1973 with the New Bulgarian Music Festival. It is impossible to list the titles of all the songs, suites, cantatas and oratorios performed at the festival. Among the authors most common are the names of Georgi Dimitrov, Dimitar Sagaev, Svetoslav

Obretenov, Aleksandar Raychev, Todor Popov, Dimitar Petkov, Aleksandar Tanev, Ivelin Dimitrov, Aleksandar Popov. Younger authors of choir songs are Aleksandar Tekeliev, Milko Kolarov, Filip Pavlov, Dimitar Konstantsaliev etc. The list goes on.

After Filip Kutev, folk choir songs have been composed by Hristo Todorov, Stefan Kanev, Anastas Naumov, Peter Liondev, Krasimir Kyurkchiyski, Ivan Spasov, Nikolay Stoykov, Petar Krumov, Stefan Mutafchiev, Ivan Valev and many others. Nikolay Kaufman is especially prolific, and writes successfully in other genres too.

Children's songs have been written by Andrey Drenikov, Dora Draganova, Haigashot Agassyan, Yordan Kolev, Krasimir Miletkov, Silviya Statkova.

The works of these and many other authors would never have reached the stage without the participation of choirs such as the Bulgarian A Cappella Choir, Sofia Chamber Choir, the Children's Choir of the Bulgarian Radio, the choirs Hristina Morfova, Gusla, Polifoniya, Alleluia, the state ensembles Filip Kutev and Pirin, the Mystery of Bulgarian Voices, Sofia Boys' Choir etc. Different ensembles from Sliven, Dobrich, Pazardjik, Shumen, Varna also make an important contribution to the high authority of the festival. Especially impressive are the two choirs – the academic and the folklore ones – of the Musical Academy in Plovdiv. Foreign ensembles with Bulgarian repertoire also take interest in the festival. Two of them already took part in the annual forum: Usmivka ("Smile") from Denmark in 2002 and Cubrica ("Savory") from the Netherlands in 2006.

Many of the newly established ensembles are well aware that to gain recognition they must take part in the New Bulgarian Music Festival. I am certain that in the future my colleagues will continue to enjoy the performance of their new choral works by Orpheus' Children, the Choir of Sofia University (choirmaster Venetsiya Karamanova), Te Deum Adoramus and Collegium Musicum (Teodora Dimitrova), Ave Muzika (Tanya Nikleva), the choir at the Musical School in Kotel (Katya Barulova) as well as many other excellent ensembles.

### **Conclusion**

Social and economic changes from the early 90s have influenced the development of Bulgarian choirs too. Some ensembles have ended their activity, and others have reduced the number of their members. Concert performances have also decreased, especially the participation in international competitions. Choirs seek financial aid from both public organisations and sponsors.

Nevertheless, the traditionally high artistic level of professional ensembles has been preserved. New, mostly young people join the amateur ensembles, most of whom share a lasting interest in the collective manner of music-making and are well-grounded in music. This is a guarantee for successful performance of the most complicated contemporary musical scores. New choirmasters also join in, adding new repertoire and new ideas. The presence of more women at the conductor's stand is a relatively new development that shows signs of becoming a lasting tradition. New songs are also being composed.

Despite the vicissitudes of cultural life, these facts give cause for optimism about the future development of Bulgarian choirs.

## Summary

In comparison with Central and Western Europe, Bulgarian choirs began their development relatively late – in the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century. The main reason for this was national, hence cultural oppression of the Ottoman Empire, that lasted for five centuries. The first Bulgarian choirs were students', organized in schools and churches..

In 1896 the composer Angel Bukoreshtliev founded the first choral society, With rather modest repertoire.

It performed choruses from romantic period operas, church music by Russian composers, and suites or arrangements based on Bulgarian folk music.

Stronger liaisons and associatiton of Bulgarian choirs happend in 1905 when the Bulgarian Musical Union was founded. The initiator was composer Dimitar Hadjigeorgiev, who was editor of the first specialized publication (*The Musical Newspaper*), and founder of the first Musical School in Bulgaria. The most significant international event of this period was the *Festival of the Danube Towns' Choirs*.

After the Balcan wars, Bulgarian choir music continued its development achieving a more serious level. Thus, on initiative of the eminent music theoretician and composer Dobri Hristov, in 1926 the Union of Bulgarian Choirs (later Bulgarian Choirs Union) was established. In 1944 Svetoslav Obretenov founded the first professional choir in Bulgaria (Radio Sofia Choir), while in 1967 Marin Chonev organized the first Bulgarian International May Choir Competition. A little more than 50 years ago Bulgarian choirs were enriched with new category – unknown to Central and Western Europe – “folklore” choirs. The first choir of high artistic quality was the State Ensemble for Folk Songs and Dances, founded in 1951 by prominent Bulgarian composer Filip Kutev.

From the beginning of the 1990's, the social and economic changes made influence on the development of Bulgarian choirs. Some ensembles have reduced or ended their activities. In spite of that, the traditionally high artistic level of professional choirs has been preserved.