

THE THREE SEASONS – PRAGUE SPRING, WORLD YOUTH
SUMMER, AND ‘SOFIA AUTUMN,’ OR: THE ANTI-EVENT, THE
AVANT-GARDE, AND THE BEGINNING OF BULGARIA’S NEW
FOLKLORE WAVE¹

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ТРИ ГОДИШЊА ДОБА – „ПРАШКО ПРОЛЕЋЕ“, „СВЕТСКО
ОМЛАДИНСКО ЛЕТО“ И „СОФИЈСКА ЈЕСЕН“ ИЛИ:
АНТИДОГАЂАЈ, АВАНГАРДА И ПОЧЕТАК НОВОГ ФОЛКЛОРНОГ
ТАЛАСА У БУГАРСКОЈ

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the events of 1968 in Bulgarian musical culture. Departing from recent Bulgarian discourses that have emerged in the new millennium and often regard Bulgarian responses to the Prague Spring as nearly non-existing, a closer look at music and the arts reveals a more detailed picture. Here, ‘1968’ is especially interesting since it saw the beginning of a Bulgarian New Folklore

1 This article presents an expanded version of a presentation given at the REEM-BASEES Study day at the University of Bristol, on 9 November 2018. I am grateful to the participants for the interesting discussion following the presentation. Furthermore, I thank the Alfried Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach Foundation and the German Academic Scholarship Foundation (GASF, *Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes*) for their support through the scholarship program “Metropolises in Eastern Europe”, as well as the GASF for their Exposé scholarship that allowed me to spend time in several Bulgarian archives and related institutions. A more analytical approach to the Bulgarian year 1968 and Konstantin Iliev’s *Fragments* appears in my forthcoming monograph (Becker-Naydenov 2021).

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Wave that challenged existing compositional models for adapting folk music. Furthermore, right before the military intervention in Czechoslovakia in August, the Bulgarian capital Sofia became a center of international attention for hosting the 9th World Festival of Youth and Students. Finally, a look at a series of infamous party meetings held at the Union of Bulgarian Composers in November 1968 reveals that unknown protagonists managed to destroy paper evidence that could have shed a better light at the events of this year.

KEYWORDS: Cold War, music, transsystemic exchange, music analysis, music historiography.

АПСТРАКТ

Овај рад упознаје читаоце са догађајима из 1968. године у бугарској музичкој култури. Удаљавајући се од скорашњих бугарских расправа које су се појавиле у новом миленијуму, а које бугарске реакције на „Прашко пролеће“ често виде као готово непостојеће, пажљивији поглед на музику и уметност открива дубљу слику. Наиме, година 1968. посебно је занимљива зато што је тада отпочео бугарски нови фолклорни талас, који је довео у питање постојеће композиционе моделе третирања народне музике. Штавише, непосредно пред војну интервенцију у Чехословачкој у августу, бугарска престоница Софија нашла се у центру међународне пажње као домаћин деветог Светског фестивала омладине и студената. Најзад, поглед на низ злогласних партијских састанака одржаних у Савезу бугарских композитора у новембру 1968. године, открива да су непознати протагонисти успели да уклоне папирне трагове који би могли боље да осветле догађаје из те године.

Кључне речи: Хладни рат, Музика, трансистемска размена, музичка анализа, музичка историографија.

INTRODUCTION

The 50th anniversary of 1968 in 2018 saw an increased scholarly and public interest into this ‘year of the revolt.’ The same holds true for Bulgaria. Yet, the Bulgarian perspective could not be more different than general accounts in, say, Germany. In 2018, Bulgarian newspapers, radio stations, talk shows, and blogs all dedicated space to the “stormiest year of Socialism,” as a newspaper called it (Stoyanova 2018). However, the essential question that looms through all these accounts is why there were seemingly no effects of Prague Spring in Bulgaria.

PATRICK BECKER-NAYDENOV

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For example, in a newspaper article, the influential literary critic and professor of contemporary history at Sofia's St. Kliment Ohridski University, Iskra Baeva, asks: "Why Didn't We Have a Dissident Movement in Bulgaria after Prague Spring?" (Baeva 2018). According to her:

The intelligentsia created dissident movements everywhere in Eastern Europe. In our country, too, many of its representatives also thought about their East European counterparts, but they did this in secret, at their homes, not in public. That is why the Bulgarian dissident movement could not be born after 21 August 1968 (Gospodinov 2008).³

Such accounts have led the Bulgarian writer Georgi Gospodinov to conclude the Bulgarian year 1968 was an 'anti-event' *par excellence*:

Sometimes time and geography differ dramatically. The same year can happen in Paris, Prague, Berlin, get to Belgrade and fail to enter Sofia. Compared to all the abundance of celebrations, discussions, memories of '68, today Bulgaria remains silent. That might have even looked nice if it were not traumatic. It is easy to say that Bulgaria was silent in '68, so what is there to celebrate today (Gospodinov 2008)?

However, these statements are rather superficial to the historian's eyes, as Gospodinov notes, too:

Well, that silence has to be noted, to be explored. The silence must be spoken. [...] In the literal sense, the Bulgarian year '68, if we assume that it happened, is an anti-event. I am referring to an event in the strict sense of the word, as an interruption in the established order, an interruption of the usual flow. [...] The Bulgarian case is a sad exception. We say "Czech events" or "Hungarian events," but did you hear about "Bulgarian events" (Gospodinov 2008)?

These accounts notwithstanding, something certainly happened in Bulgaria in 1968. To be more precise, the year 1968 coincides with the beginning of this country's 'New Folklore Wave' in Bulgaria.

THE BULGARIAN NEW FOLKLORE WAVE

Rarely is it that simple to relate an emerging stylistic tendency with the premiere of a new work: The Bulgarian New Folklore wave started with Konstantin Iliev's *Fragments for Large Symphony Orchestra*, a four-movement composition created for the 40th anniversary of the Sofia Philharmonic Orchestra and premiered by this ensemble on 13 November 1968.

3 All translations by Patrick Becker-Naydenov, unless stated otherwise.

The research of other scholars on Poland (Mika 2008) and the Soviet Union (Re-depenning 2008) suggests that the re-incorporation of traditional musical material – at least on the side of this music’s reception by contemporary audiences – could bear a heightened sense of opposition against the state.⁴ However, does Iliev even aim at *resistance* against socialist realism’s ‘authoritative discourse’ (Yurchak 2006)?

The special place of *Fragments* in Iliev’s *œuvre* points to the same direction if Iliev’s remarks in his 1986 autobiography *Being and Work* hold true:

During the performance, the sold-out hall responded in a way that puzzled me, initially. Due to the unusual movements of the conductor, which indicate the beginnings of the segments and cues of the instruments or groups of instruments, the audience began to comment loudly the unfamiliar sight. But gradually it became quiet until there was no sound at the end of the work, not even coughing or sneezing in the hall. When *Fragments* ended, I experienced one of my greatest successes, the audience shouted “Bravo!” and applauded so that I had to come on stage seven or eight times (Iliev 1997).

Is Iliev’s composition an answer to the events of 1968? How did people in the country receive the news from Prague and what role did these unfolding events play for members of Bulgaria’s cultural elite such as Iliev?

1968 IN BULGARIA

In contrast to the 1956 Hungarian uprising, Bulgarian intellectuals were quite well informed about the events happening on both sides of the Iron Curtain – given the growing influence of mass media such as radio and TV. However, it is not even necessary to look that far because the Prague Spring came to Sofia, too.

The most critical event in this respect was the First Congress of the Bulgarian Union of Writers (BUW) in May 1968. On 20 May, the writer and delegate of the Czechoslovak delegation Petr Pujman addressed his Bulgarian colleagues participating in the Congress to explain and defend the new measures taken in his home country. Fortunately, there is still a tape recording available of this speech that allows quoting Pujman’s actual text:

Very often such questions arise: What are these Czechoslovak writers doing? What is actually going on in Czechoslovakia? The question stood before the writers: Did they close their ears, shut their mouth, close their ears, and kill their conscience? The writers decided to speak. We decided: We are for the truth. Now, very briefly, what is happening at our place? No return to capitalism! No counter-revolution! It is an ideal

4 The German translation of Mikhail Bakhtin’s book on Rabelais suggests a connection between the monograph’s first publication in 1965 and the Soviet New Folklore Wave. In the German version, the book’s subtitle is *Popular Culture as Counterculture*. Cf. Bakhtin 1987.

PATRICK BECKER-NAYDENOV

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attempt to unite socialism with freedom! We want the people to control the government and not the government to control the people. I will refute the last argument that could be made against us – the argument of “non-freedom”. There is a saying in our country that whoever is afraid, should not go into the forest. We are not afraid. Today, I would like to say, and again to guarantee that Socialism in Czechoslovakia will remain. So, what about socialist realism? (Laughter.) Those who want to write it will write it, and those who do not want to write it will write differently. So, then it will eventually come out, which is one better (BUW [Petr Pujman] 20 May 1968).

This speech was an occasion that the Bulgarian intellectual elite discussed in detail. However, even after the military intervention in August, only very few accounts of open protests among these figures or the younger generation exists.

THE 9TH WORLD FESTIVAL OF YOUTH AND STUDENTS

For Bulgaria, and even more so for its capital, Sofia, the most important event during the summer of 1968 was the 9th World Festival of Youth and Students. Between 15,000 and 20,000 people from around 140 countries came to Sofia under the slogan “For solidarity, peace, and friendship” – overall, a fulminant representation of Bulgaria’s cultural power and the seemingly unwavering attractiveness of state socialism. Although contemporary media coverage in Bulgaria suggested that the event was flawless, some foreign guests could not fail to notice the heated atmosphere of the festival. For example, in August 1968, shortly after the Festival’s conclusion, the West-German magazine *Der Spiegel* printed an article titled “Schöne Schweine,” a colloquial pun playing with the peculiar feco-sarcasm of the German language:

Czechoslovak and West German Young Socialists denied the festival-bureaucrats’ hope for a World Youth Meeting without the world youth’s favorite pastime: world revolution. They turned the traditional meeting of young Communist officials into a demonstration of the worldwide youth movement against establishments of all stripes and colors – even red ones. [...] There, they already caused official displeasure at the opening ceremony: During the march in front of the government loge in Sofia’s Vasil Levski stadium, they shouted “Dubchek, Dubchek.” Startled, the head of the Bulgarian KP, Todor Zhivkov, dropped his clapping hands. Shortly after that, the Czech delegation appeared with images of the Czechoslovak Party Leader, who is also unloved in Sofia. Zhivkov retired angrily to the party loge. Zhivkov’s icy welcome to the Praguers prompted the young leftists from Yugoslavia, Romania, and the Federal Republic to show solidarity with the snubbed Czechoslovaks against the festival establishment. [...] The festival’s motto “solidarity, peace, and friendship” had given way to a sharp ideological duel in the left-wing camp (Anon. 1968).

What none of these participants could know was that they all missed most significant act of the festival – a Beatles concert that the band had requested months before. As the protocol “A’ 225” of the Secretariat to the Bulgarian Communist Par-

ty's Central Committee from 14 May reveals: "[The Secretariat] instructs the National Committee's Operations Bureau to find a suitable form to divert the request of the Beatles to take part in the 9th World Festival of Youth and Students, which will be held in Sofia in July this year." (BCP CC Secretariat 1968)

PARTY GROUP MEETINGS IN THE UNION OF BULGARIAN COMPOSERS

As we approach the premiere of Iliev's *Fragments* in November 1968, we arrive at one of the pivotal events in the Union of Bulgarian Composers. In October, members of the Union's party group organized meetings to bring fellow members back on track after the military intervention. These meetings were held simultaneously with similar events in the other Bulgarian artistic organizations. Although Bulgarian musicologists agree on the importance of these meetings, they are an actual riddle for researchers:

These [oppressive mechanisms] led to the famous "illegal" party meetings in the Union of Bulgarian Composers in October 1968. They turned out to be "illegal" because they were organized in compliance with all rules of conspiracy – hence no one can find these documents or printed information today (Khlebarov 1997).

The composer Ivan Spasov – 34 years old at that time – makes more detailed indications about these meetings that were held on the 4th, 8th, 11th, and 16th of October in his 1993 autobiography:

These meetings of the party group during the [...] night would become memorable. Although they were "secret," we learned about what was discussed, and who said what, on the same night. Moreover, shamefully, many things were said. When will those documents be published and where are they kept? [...] Once, I looked for these [...] recordings – and no one knew anything. No, gentlemen, everything is known! It is known, who [...] played which role. It is funny to me that, today, in the "renewed" Composers' Union, some of these birds [still] flutter around in the managing board (Spasov 2004).

In a footnote to his remarks cited above, the musicologist Khlebarov explains he once saw a magnetophone tape recording of the sessions that were transcribed into a protocol with the title: *Party Group of the BKP at the Union of Bulgarian Composers. The Essence of the West European "Avant-Garde" and its Influence on Bulgarian Music*. A protocol that, according to Khlebarov, is 386 pages long.

It is possible to see how, shortly before the premiere of Iliev's *Fragments*, a new oppressive wave swept away the liberal atmosphere of Prague Spring. The tide of the zigzag-course had turned again.

PATRICK BECKER-NAYDENOV

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THE FRAGMENTARY RE-EMERGENCE OF THE PAST: ILIEV IN THE LATE 1960S

It does not seem entirely far-fetched to see Iliev’s *Fragments* as an answer to the events of 1968. Yet, did the composer intentionally create this work with those events in mind, or is it rather its relation to the more general discourses of a New Folklore Wave and temporal proximity that makes it appear as an authentic product of the Bulgarian year 1968?

It is tempting to say that this work and its composer are a typical example of a closet dissident, whose music contains multiple layers of meaning. However, I argue for an immanently compositional solution. The key to this piece is Iliev’s use of aleatorics in it. Yet, Iliev had already started using aleatorics in the early 1960s. What differentiates *Fragments* from these earlier attempts and characterizes the work as opening up an entirely new approach is not the application of a technique, but Iliev’s attempt to synthesize avant-gardist means and folklore material.

In contrast to Iliev’s more abstract intentions, it is possible to trace this more technical goal back to some extant sources. For example, the Bulgarian musicologist Angelina Petrova in her monograph on Iliev’s colleague and close friend Lazar Nikolov explains that Iliev had already argued for the combination of aleatoric and folklore music on several occasions in public meetings of the Composers’ Union during the mid-1960s (Petrova 2003). Lazar Nikolov himself remembers that Iliev, beginning around 1965, tried to persuade Nikolov that their compositions had always employed folklore elements without them even noticing (Petrova 2003). Furthermore, Iliev’s second autobiography from 1986 contains an illuminating remark about his oratorio *Eulogy of Konstantin the Philosopher, called Cyril* (1970) – a central document to Iliev’s growing interest into traditional musical material is a book, first published in 1966:

A few years before [I finished the composition], Prof [Petăr] Dinekov’s book *Old-Bulgarian Pages* was published. In it, the famous literary critic had collected a considerable number of texts from different medieval authors, legends of the Bogumil movement, and apokrypha. These interesting documents fascinated me with their pristine viridity and deep wisdom. From the beginning, I thought about writing a choral work on the ingenious *Alphabetical Prayer*. But it was not yet the time to realize what an idea I had formed. [...] I admit that it was my intention to write a work that would not only be understood by the audience (I was confident about that), but that would also force the vindicators of Realism to understand the purpose of my twenty years of activity (Iliev 1997).

Thus, it is easy to see how Iliev’s *Fragments* were not so much born out of the moment as they were the result of the composer’s renewed interest into Old Bulgarian culture. Nevertheless, using Georgi Gospodinov’s aforementioned notion of the “anti-event” as an “interruption of the established order, an interruption of the usual

flow” (Gospodinov 2008), the premiere of *Fragments* in November 1968 was very much an anti-anti-event. Something happened and it would remain incomprehensible, were it not for music historiography to discover the conditions of post-World War II Bulgarian culture that made this New Folklore Wave possible.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Bulgarian year 1968 shows that – at least in the domain of music history – this time marked a decisive shift. The Bulgarian post-World War II avant-garde seemingly turned away from their ideal of absolute music devoid of any extra-musical meaning. Instead, it began to engage with Bulgarian folk music – a new musical material that could be hailed by the official, authoritative discourse of socialist realism, yet simultaneously still change the attire of socialist realism itself.

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PATRICK BECKER-NAYDENOV

THE THREE SEASONS – PRAGUE SPRING, WORLD YOUTH SUMMER, AND ‘SOFIA AUTUMN,’
OR: THE ANTI-EVENT, THE AVANT-GARDE, AND THE BEGINNING OF BULGARIA’S NEW FOLKLORE WAVE

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ПАТРИК БЕКЕР-НАЈДЕНОВ

Три годишња доба – „Прашко пролеће“, „Светско омладинско лето“ и „Софијска јесен“, или: антидогађај, авангарда и почетак новог фолклорног таласа у Бугарској

(РЕЗИМЕ)

Овај рад упознаје читаоце са догађајима из 1968. године у бугарској музичкој култури. Удаљавајући се од скорашњих бугарских расправа које су се појавиле у новом миленијуму, а које бугарске реакције на „Прашко пролеће“ често виде као готово непостојеће, пажљивији поглед на музику и уметност открива дубљу слику. Јер 1968. година је посебно занимљива зато што је тада започео бугарски нови фолклорни талас, који је довео у питање постојеће композиционе моделе третирања народне музике.

Студија упознаје читаоце са интелектуалним дебатама после 2000. године и историографским покушајима да се 1968. опише као такозвани антидогађај током којег се, како се сугерише, није догодило ништа. Међутим, неформални и формални контакти спонзорисани од професионалних организација, као и медијско извештавање, омогућили су заинтересованим бугарским посматрачима да стекну представу о догађајима у Чехословачкој. Штавише, непосредно пред војну интервенцију у августу, бугарска престоница Софија нашла се у центру међународне пажње као домаћин деветог Светског фестивала омладине и студената. Тада је Секретаријат Централног комитета Бугарске комунистичке партије успео да спречи наступање „Битлса“ на Фестивалу. После завршетка Фестивала и војне интервенције, Савез бугарских композитора је крајем 1968. одржао неколико састанака тајних партијских група, с циљем обнављања чврсте партијске линије након периода све веће либерализације у ери „одмрзавања“ после 1956. године. Међутим, поглед на те злогласне партијске састанке одржане у Савезу бугарских композитора у новембру 1968. открива да су непознати актери успели да уклоне папирне трагове који би могли боље да осветле догађаје из те године. Дакле, из данашње перспективе још увек није могућно одговорити на питање како се бугарска 1968. манифестовала у тадашњој музици. Ипак, пример *Фрајмената за велики симфонијски оркестар* Константина Илијева, премијерно изведених 13. новембра 1968. године, указује на потенцијалне правце будућих студија.

Кључне речи: Хладни рат, Музика, транссистемска размена, музичка анализа, музичка историографија.