Bulgarian Chalga: Forming a Post-Communist Identity through Music

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Bulgarian Chalga: Forming a Post-Communist Identity through Music

by

Megan Drevits

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Music in Music Composition (primary major) and Music History (secondary major) in the School of Music, Jordan College of Fine Arts of Butler University

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Introduction

During the mid-1990s, against the background of a dizzyingly unstable economy and a corrupt and transitional political climate, a new genre of popular music rose to prominence in Bulgaria and came to be viewed by many as a complex symbol of this new, post-communist society. Although it has been given several names in its short history, this genre is most commonly known today as *chalga*, a designation that has a variety of connotations, both purely musical and purely derogatory. At its core, *chalga* is a fusion music genre that combines elements of Bulgarian folk music, Roma and Turkish music, popular and folk music from neighboring countries, western popular music, and an earlier genre of Bulgarian music known as *svatbarska muzika*, or “wedding music.” How *chalga* relates to Bulgaria’s post-communist, western identity has been a source of great controversy with much attention being given to the ways in which *chalga* accentuates elements of Bulgaria’s Ottoman past.

At the center of this controversy is the ongoing process of Bulgarian identity formation, which has been particularly self-conscious and schizophrenic since the 1989 resignation of Todor Zivkov, Bulgaria’s communist leader of nearly twenty-five years. With the political changes that have occurred in the past two decades and particularly with the entry of Bulgaria into the European Union in 2007, Bulgarians have made many official steps toward ensuring that their new identity is a western one. However, this transitional period has coincided with an explosion of *chalga*, and the relationship of this

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expression of Bulgarian identity to the western values of democracy and capitalism has been the subject of much speculation and debate.

There has been a strong acknowledgment among scholars of the ways in which chalga is an anti-communist expression that has been made possible by the new democratic society. According to this argument, chalga, as a popular synthesis of diverse ethnic and cultural influences, is symbolic of a more inclusive Bulgarian identity that was not possible under communism but is now possible amid new democratic freedoms and experiences. Certainly there is much truth in this. Chalga could not have existed (or at least not on such a large or visible scale) during communism, and democratic and capitalistic freedoms have been quite important in allowing chalga to flourish. However, is chalga pro-democracy and pro-capitalism? What is the relationship between chalga and these new social systems, and what does this relationship tell us about the new Bulgarian identity and sense of progress? In this thesis, the music, lyrics, videos, history, and controversies of chalga will be analyzed in their relationship to Bulgarian identity and, in particular, to Bulgarian democratic and capitalistic identity during this transitional time. The process of post-communist identity formation in Bulgaria has been a controversial and complicated one, and I will use my analysis of chalga to highlight and comment on the nuances of this process.

In support of my analysis, I will be drawing on many scholarly writings on chalga as well as my own experiences and conversations with my Bulgarian friends and my

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Bulgarian husband who have had an *emic* experience of this musical phenomenon. Much of the scholarly literature on this subject has focused on the clash between the supporters of this new multicultural phenomenon and the members of the Bulgarian cultural elite, who are thought to be in support of the earlier concept of a mono-ethnic Bulgarian identity. What is expressed in *chalga*, however, is not straightforward and is complicated by the heavy use of parody and humor in its portrayal of the new Bulgarian society. This thesis, therefore, is intended to supplement these existing understandings about *chalga* through an analysis of what is expressed in *chalga* and whether or not this expression is in fact supportive of Bulgaria’s progress toward a new, more western identity.
Is Bulgaria of “the East” or of “the West?” This is the question at the heart of the controversy surrounding chalga, and it is certainly not an easy one to answer. One might be wise to answer it with a simple “Yes.” For a brief survey of Bulgaria’s cultural and territorial history reveals that, rather than being more heavily defined by either the East or the West, Bulgaria has been defined by a steady state of conflict between these two cultural constructs, a conflict that dates back to its ancient history and has not been resolved in modern times after decades of nationalist ideology.

In the year 1972, three seemingly unconnected phenomena coincided and can serve as a suitable starting point in understanding Bulgarian cultural history, both ancient and modern, and the historical context of chalga. The first of these phenomena was the budding popularity of svatbarska muzika, a genre that has been viewed by some as a precursor to chalga in both musical style and artistic impulse. This genre, which was heavily dominated by Turkish and Roma musicians and was very much influenced by the musical styles of these ethnic groups and of Bulgarian folk music, would go on to become a potent anti-state symbol and would be actively policed by communist authorities.  

The second phenomenon, which in many ways contradicts the widespread popularity of wedding music, is the fact that the years 1971 through 1973 also marked a

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dark chapter in what had been an ongoing “assimilation” project throughout the duration of the Bulgarian communist regime. The goal of the project was to “cleanse” the country of Turkish and Roma influence, and the means to this goal included forced name changes, the banning of traditional clothing, customs, and language, and at times, the use of violent force against minority groups. Efforts to force Bulgarian Muslims to take Bulgarian names and identities led to multiple violent clashes, imprisonments, injuries, and deaths during the spring of 1972.4

The year 1972 was also the year of an important archaeological discovery with implications for Bulgaria’s historical identity. Just north of Bulgaria’s eastern seaside city Varna, archaeologists were stunned to uncover a necropolis of two hundred and ninety-four graves filled with the oldest golden artifacts known to man and dating from the fifth millenium B.C. Right there at the edge of communist Bulgaria were the remains of the first European civilization.5 Therefore, while the story of Bulgaria as a country begins with its founding in 681 A.D., an understanding of Bulgarian cultural identity requires brief commentary on the people who came before and were eventually assimilated into the newly formed Bulgarian state.6

These people, the ancient Thracians, had established themselves in Bulgaria by roughly 1000 B.C. and would survive the domination of several external cultures to be assimilated into the Slav and Proto-Bulgarian tribes that are credited with the early formation of the Bulgarian state.7 The Thracian people were important to the

development of European culture through their influence on ancient Greek culture, and their gifts to the world include the mythical Orpheus and the god Dionysus. Professor Ivan Venedikov of Sofia’s Bulgarian Academy of Sciences wrote of the great variety and wealth discovered at this site, stating that it was the result of Thrace’s close proximity to four major cultures of the time: Greek, Persian, European, and Scythian. According to Venedikov,

Thrace could most easily pass from within the range of one into the range of another, accepting elements from all these cultures. Moreover, when it is borne in mind that in the last three centuries of the first millennium B.C. the Celts and, after them, the Romans penetrated deep into the Balkan Peninsula, we cannot expect a steady and calm development in Thrace, such as has been observed in western or central Europe.

Today in Bulgaria, what is left of the ancient Thracian culture can be seen most clearly in the numerous Thracian burial mounds that checker the landscape and in the continued observation of the mummer (or kukeri) tradition in which men greet the new year by adorning themselves in costumes and masks and dancing through the village in an attempt to scare away evil spirits and bring good health and fortune to the village’s inhabitants.

When Rome was divided in 395 A.D., Thrace became part of the Byzantine Empire. The Slavs in the north descended into the territory of modern-day Bulgaria during the sixth century and were later overtaken by a Turkic horse-breeding tribe known as the Bulgars in the seventh century. The Bulgars were officially granted the right to rule the lands just south of the Danube in a peace treaty signed in 681, but throughout the

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11 Kasarova, Liner Notes.
duration of its pre-Ottoman history, the Bulgarian state was frequently in conflict with the Byzantine Empire.

What Western musicians are most likely to have encountered in terms of Bulgarian music is its folk music, which maintained its unique identity in spite of Ottoman domination and was the predominant form of secular music making from pre-Ottoman times (Bulgarians were under Turkish yoke from 1393 to 1878) through the early twentieth century. As with the music of most traditional cultures, Bulgarian folk music was connected to seasonal changes and to major life events and was passed down as an oral tradition. Several Bulgarian folk instruments, such as the gaida (a type of bagpipe), the zurna (a double-reed instrument), and the tapan (a large drum) have survived to be incorporated into the chalga sound palate, even if only through electronic imitation.

Whereas men were the primary instrumentalists, the vocal tradition was largely carried by women. Songs were mostly monophonic with great attention paid to melodic ornamentation through glottal stops and brief yodel-like figurations; however, diaphony did exist in all the major regions of Bulgaria and has been of particular interest to western scholars who often note its striking "dissonances" and the village musicians' lack of perception of such intervals as dissonant. Although such vocal dissonances are not typically a feature of modern chalga, aspects of traditional vocal production have been somewhat preserved through ornamentation and the characteristic bright, nasal timbre of the female singers' voices.

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Another aspect of Buglarian folk music that has received much international attention (most likely due to the popularizing influence of Béla Bartók) is its frequent use of asymmetrical rhythms. Meters such as 7/16, 13/16, and 15/16 can be found as the basis of traditional Bulgarian dances and can be conceived of as phrases or patterns of smaller duple and triple units strung together.\(^5\) Although Bartók called these rhythms “Bulgarian,” they are also found in many neighboring Balkan countries and in Turkey and the Caucasus.\(^6\) Bulgarians received much international attention for these rhythms, and although they can occasionally be found in *chalga*, they have largely been replaced by a popular Roma dance rhythm in this genre.

Traditional music in Bulgaria was nurtured and developed even during the long period of Ottoman domination. Although cultural unrest was a persistent feature during this period, tensions grew towards the end of the eighteenth century as nationalistic sentiments spread among the Bulgarian people and culminated in the fight for independence that was victorious in 1878.\(^7\) This period leading up to the end of Ottoman rule in Bulgaria is known as the *Vazrazhdane* (“Bulgarian Renaissance” or “Revival”). It was during this time (in the 1830s specifically) that interest in Bulgarian folk music led to the recording of folk song texts by early folk music enthusiasts, who were also often political, educational, and literary leaders.\(^8\)

In the second half of the century a type of urban music known as *gradski pesni* became quite popular. In the final years of Ottoman rule in Bulgaria, the larger cities were a place of great ethnic diversity with various external cultural elements being

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\(^7\) *Oxford Music Online*, a.v. “Bulgaria.”

\(^8\) Krader, “Bulgarian Folk Music Research,” 249.
brought in by Turkish administrators, Balkan merchants, and emigrant workers from neighboring countries. These travelers brought their musical customs with them, and soon the songs of Greece, Turkey, Russia, and Germany were being translated into Bulgarian or given new Bulgarian texts altogether. It was not long before Bulgarian songs, with known authors, were being newly composed in these foreign styles. These songs, which consisted mostly of love songs and patriotic songs, were enormously popular, and some were even published in the official literary collections of the Vazrazhdane. In major Bulgarian cities during this time, one would have also encountered small foreign bands from neighboring Balkan nations and ensembles of Roma musicians that were known as svirdzhii or chalgadzhii. These chalgadzhii were frequently able to play traditional music and instruments and the music as well as the instruments of Western Europe. They traveled and played at balls, weddings, festivals, and other public events and were quite virtuosic performers with a talent for improvisation and embellishment. Their style of playing in which a highly embellished melody was improvised over a bassline was often referred to as chalga.

In spite of the widespread influx of eastern and Balkan musical styles, Bulgarians during this time were also very much looking westward. Ludmilla K. Kostova wrote of this time period in Bulgarian history,

Central to the scenario was the denigration of the period of Muslim-Oriental rule and its representation as a historical detour from Bulgaria’s ‘proper’ road of development within Eastern Christian civilization. Predictably, the scenario was targeted at healing the trauma of the nation’s separation from that civilization. ‘Catching up’ with ‘Europe’ and the rest of the ‘enlightened’ world was part of


However, whether this attempt to “catch up” with Europe was a widespread sentiment rather than an elite movement is a matter of some debate. While in hindsight, Bulgaria seems to have existed as a well-defined cultural (although not always territorial) entity for centuries, there is evidence that such a firm national consciousness was still in jeopardy as late as the mid-twentieth century. The author of the first Bulgarian textbook, which was written in the 1820s, quite remarkably identified himself as a Thracian, and education in Bulgaria was taught in Greek rather than Bulgarian up until the 1850s. In 1873 a teacher of the Bulgarian revolutionaries’ children remarked, “Children do not know their mother tongue well, which is the language of instruction at the school. They speak Greek at home, only at school do they speak Bulgarian.” Particularly along the borders of Bulgaria, the sense of ethnic identity was more flexible. One Bulgarian soldier assigned to a household in the borderlands of Bulgaria and Serbia during World War II asked a young child if she was Serbian or Bulgarian and received the response, “With you I am Bulgarian, at home I am Serbian.” That such flexibilities in the perception of national identity persisted into the twentieth century explains how many Bulgarians towards the end of communism felt a stronger connection to the popular music of surrounding countries than to the artificially preserved Bulgarian folk music presented by the state folk ensembles.

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22 Crampton, Bulgaria, 10; Crampton, Bulgaria, 50.
24 Crampton, Bulgaria, 11.
25 Rice, “Bulgaria or Chalgaria,” 32.
For if one were to summarize the effect of communism on Bulgarian traditional music, one might say that communism simultaneously preserved and destroyed it. The rapid industrialization and the consolidation of farms forced many villagers into the cities, and their folk music practices lost their traditional contexts, particularly with the changes in and bans of various religious and ritualistic practices that were carried out in village life. However, just as music was disappearing in village culture, the communist government was starting to perceive traditional music as a powerful symbol that should be "preserved" and promoted as the embodiment of the "common man" or the new society. The communist government's main way of representing the ideal society through music was through a blending of Bulgarian folk music, which represented the proletariat, with European or western art music's aesthetic, which to them represented progress.

With this ideology in mind, the government created state folk ensembles of both song and dance and created educational institutions that trained and supplied musicians for these ensembles. In addition to receiving training in Bulgarian folk music, musicians at these schools were trained in music theory, music notation, and ensemble performance (which was generally not a traditional method of performing Bulgarian folk music). Bulgarian folk songs were then arranged with western common practice harmonic progressions and for large ensembles. The dancers were given artificial costumes and taught to arrange their dances (many of which were traditionally performed in circles) for performance in front of an audience. Instrumentalists, likewise, learned to perform on stage rather than in a traditional context. One of the main communist influences on

Bulgarian folk music practice, then, was to create a situation in which there was a certain separation between the performers and the audience that had not been as pronounced in traditional village practice.\textsuperscript{29} The audience no longer participated actively in traditional music making through dancing or singing as it had in the past. These performances, and Bulgarian folk music in general, were, as one musician noted, locked up “like a museum.”\textsuperscript{30}

The repertoire of the folk ensembles consisted mostly of folk material arrangements, known as obrabotki, in which the material was structured in a western-style symphonic format.\textsuperscript{31} The obratotki were created primarily by composers who belonged to the Bulgarian Composers Union and were usually trained in western classical music. If a folk instrumentalist had compositional talent and strove to arrange a melody for an ensemble, he or she had to first submit it to the Bulgarian Composers Union and would often receive it back full of corrections and changes as if it had been an assignment with specific instructions.\textsuperscript{32} Donna Buchanan, an ethnomusicologist who spent time observing and talking to members of the state folk ensembles, noted that “From 1970 to 1990 obrabotki increasingly featured countermelodies and internal harmonic lines, chromatic harmonies, altered chords, arpeggiated passages, and internal modulations.” She also pointed out that “Despite the length, difficulty, or relative unconventionality of such compositions, orkestranti performing publicly (as opposed to in a recording studio)
were required to play them from memory to create the visual impression of the oral
improvisation germane to village musical culture."\textsuperscript{33}

While many Bulgarians were enthralled by folk orchestra performances, a sign
that such music was failing to establish a connection with the general population by the
1970s can be seen in the tremendous popularity that a genre known as \textit{svatbarska muzika}
(“wedding music”) began to achieve during this time. Many Bulgarians, mostly due to
the poor availability of consumer goods, had amassed sizable personal savings and were
able to spend their savings in the “gray economy,” which included, among other things,
the hiring of musical performers for private events.\textsuperscript{34} It was not uncommon, therefore, for
Bulgarians to host lavish weddings that often lasted for days, and the music that was
played at these weddings came to be very popular and a cause for concern for
governmental officials.\textsuperscript{35}

Wedding music performers were largely Roma musicians, and the music itself
was an eclectic mix of jazz, western popular music, Roma dance music, Bulgarian folk
music, and the folk and popular music of nearby countries.\textsuperscript{36} The instrumentation varied
from one ensemble to the next, but common instruments included the clarinet,
saxophone, accordion, electric guitar, electric bass, drum set, synthesizer, and a
vocalist.\textsuperscript{37} One quite distinguishable feature of wedding music, however, was its use of
electronic amplification, and through this feature it came to be seen as strongly connected
to western popular music.\textsuperscript{38} It is worth noting that popular wedding musicians usually had

\textsuperscript{33} Buchanan, “Metaphors of Power,” 391.
\textsuperscript{34} Rice, \textit{Music in Bulgaria}, 70.
\textsuperscript{35} Silverman, “Bulgarian Wedding Music,” 71-72.
\textsuperscript{36} Rice, \textit{Music in Bulgaria}, 71.
\textsuperscript{37} Silverman, “Bulgarian Wedding Music,” 70.
\textsuperscript{38} Silverman, “Bulgarian Wedding Music,” 70.
little difficulty affording electronic musical devices since the musicians' salaries for a single event were sometimes as much as a typical Bulgarian monthly salary.\textsuperscript{39} Work as a wedding musician was much more lucrative than that as a state folk musician, and many of the state folk musicians played at weddings in order to supplement their incomes.\textsuperscript{40}

Wedding music's success in this gray economy and its inherent rejection of the notion of an ethnically "pure" Bulgaria led communist authorities to police it and attempt to control it. The most famous of all wedding music performers, Roma clarinetist Ivo Papazov (who played with the band \textit{Trakia}) was frequently harassed by government officials and even spent time in jail doing manual labor.\textsuperscript{41} He and his band eventually became quite adept at running from the police and at turning a \textit{kyuchek} (a popular Roma dance style that was banned during the heightened stage of the assimilation policy in the 1980s) into a \textit{hora} (a traditional Bulgarian dance in the same meter).\textsuperscript{42} There were signs, however, that the state was not as rigid in these matters as it claimed to be. Papazov even noted that some of his biggest fans were policemen and that he was frequently hired to play for their special events.\textsuperscript{43} The judge at his trial was reported to have given Papazov a lighter sentence because he admired his skill as a performer.\textsuperscript{44} Many of wedding music's biggest fans were students at the state folk music schools who, although they were strictly forbidden from attending such demonstrations of "bourgeois conspicuous

\textsuperscript{39} Silverman, "Bulgarian Wedding Music," 72.
\textsuperscript{40} Rice, \textit{Music in Bulgaria}, 70.
\textsuperscript{41} Silverman, "Bulgarian Wedding Music," 74.
\textsuperscript{42} Silverman, "Bulgarian Wedding Music," 74.
\textsuperscript{43} Silverman, "Bulgarian Wedding Music," 76.
\textsuperscript{44} Silverman, "Bulgarian Wedding Music," 76.
consumerism," frequently snuck out to see their favorite performers and often reported seeing their own professors in the audience.46

Ironically, the fall of communism in Bulgaria was one of the main factors that led to the decline in wedding music's popularity. One of the reasons for wedding music's popularity had been its position in Bulgarian society as an anti-state symbol. Once the former "state" ceased to exist, so did the sense of rebellion experienced by wedding music's fans.47 Another notable reason for its decline in the 1990s was the failing transitional economy. During socialism many Bulgarians had plenty of money, but little to spend it on and were thus able to spend it on wedding musicians and elaborate celebrations. These personal savings were depleted due to rapid inflation, and the Bulgarians of the 1990s found themselves with a huge influx of consumer goods, but little money to buy them with. Most no longer had money to pay live musicians, and a prerecorded medium was starting to overshadow wedding music in popularity.48 This prerecorded genre was chalga, and it came to be representative of Bulgaria during this transition from communism to democracy and capitalism.

46 Silverman, "Bulgarian Wedding Music," 75-76.
47 Silverman, "Bulgarian Wedding Music," 86.
Chapter II

Chalga: Definition and Analysis

Chalga, as a term, has many connotations and historical meanings, and as a genre, chalga encompasses the music of many different cultures and is derived from several preceding musical traditions both in Bulgaria and in surrounding countries. The word itself is of Turkish origin, and various forms of the word have been used in connection with Turkish and Roma musicians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including chalga (a Turkish word for musical instrument), chalgadzhiya (a Rom instrumentalist), and chalgadzhii (wedding musicians who played an eclectic mix of popular and traditional music in small ensembles). However, in the context of the communist government’s assimilation policies of the 1980s and even in the wake of heightened racial tension during the troubled economic times of the 1990s, the word chalga took on a distinctly derogatory connotation that had not been previously understood. The strong media backlash against the genre in the mid 1990s led to the new understanding of the term to mean something of poor taste or a piece of music of low quality. Whereas the term popfolk had been (and still is) frequently used in connection with similar musical styles both in Bulgaria and in neighboring countries, the term chalga is a specifically Bulgarian term that calls attention to the controversy surrounding the genre.

Although this controversy came to a fore in the mid to late 1990s, this was not the first time that such music had been performed in Bulgaria. As a type of fusion music, chalga has many precedents and encompasses a wide variety of musical styles. One of

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the immediate Bulgarian predecessors to the genre was the already discussed wedding music of the preceding decades. As wedding musicians became more and more virtuosic in their playing, their music became more of a type of concert music and less of a type of dance music. However, the Roma dance style known as kyuchek had always been a part of the wedding music genre, and the popular kyuchek rhythm is one of the strongest, most recognizable unifiers of diverse types of chalga. The virtuosic and improvisatory instrumental solos that were also a part of wedding music (and before that, of Bulgarian, Roma, and Turkish traditional music) are frequently found in chalga, but they are often more restrained and secondary to the maintenance of the underlying dance rhythm.

While wedding music and, to a limited extent, traditional Bulgarian music were important early precursors to the chalga genre, much of the early formation of this genre is indebted to trends in surrounding countries. During the final years of communism in Bulgaria, the government made a strong effort to prevent Bulgarians from consuming popular music from surrounding countries and from the United States and Europe, but for many Bulgarians, such consumption was as simple as tuning into the radio stations of neighboring countries. In fact, this practice seems to have begun in Bulgaria as early as the 1960s. When music critic Edward Greenfield visited Bulgaria in 1961, he noted with surprise,

The days appear to have gone, too, when the authorities were effective in stopping the infiltration of western-type popular music. The Musicians' Union told me that they rely on quality telling in the end. In any case, they said, they could not prevent people from listening to Radio Bucharest or Radio Istanbul if they wanted, and so Radio Sofia too has had a good measure of western-style music, though its proportion of serious musical programs is laudably high – often of Italian and French opera.

52 Rice, "Bulgaria or Chalgaria," 32.
Given this early access to popular music that was not officially sanctioned, it is not hard to see why, by the time communism officially ended in Bulgaria, Bulgarians were already quite familiar with music produced by their neighbors and other parts of the world. In fact, Finnish musicologist Vesa Kurkela has pointed out an irony in the development of chalga — that it largely came to Bulgaria from the West and the South, rather than from the East; it came primarily in the form of the Greek popular genre Laika and the Serbian genre known as “Newly Composed Folk Music” (hereafter referred to by the acronym NCFM). In the 1970s, Serbians had mixed elements of Roma music with folk and popular music to create NCFM, and Bulgarians borrowed heavily from this style in their creation of chalga.

Chalga, like many other contemporary popular music genres, is much more than just its music, and a productive analysis of chalga requires that one take into account all of its interconnected parts: music, lyrics, performances (both live performances and music videos), production, and context. It is important to remember that, for Bulgarians, the negative or positive reactions to chalga have been reactions to all of these factors taken together, although individual aspects are often singled out by various critics. This is especially important to remember for the listener who might have had the unique etic experience, as I did, of being introduced to the various parts of chalga in isolation. My early introduction to chalga came during social events in the United States with a group of Bulgarian international students who frequently listened to chalga. I did not

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55 Rice, Music in Bulgaria, 92.
understand Bulgarian and had not viewed the music videos. The only context I had for
the music was what knowledge I had of these few Bulgarian students who listened to it.
My early experience with chalga, therefore, was an almost purely musical one. My
Bulgarian companions, knowing that I was studying music (and predominantly art
music), were surprised to learn that I enjoyed chalga. I, knowing almost nothing about
chalga or Bulgarian cultural history, was surprised to learn that I “shouldn’t” enjoy
chalga.

Music
When wedding music reached its peak popularity in the late 1980s, it in many ways
represented the newfound democratic desires of the population. Wedding music was
valued for its emphasis on improvisation, solo performance, eclectic mixing of diverse
musical genres, and its generally “anti-state” associations. However, the increasing
emphasis on the intricate rhythms and structures of the solo improvisations led to
wedding music’s failure to fill its earlier niche as a social dance music. In the 1990s,
chalga filled this musical niche in Bulgaria, and although not all chalga is created for
dancing, one of its most recognizable and unifying features is a simple dance rhythm
known as the kyuchek rhythm, which is derived from traditional Roma and Turkish dance
music (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Notation of kyuchek rhythm.

56 Rice, Music in Bulgaria, 72-73.
57 Rice, Music in Bulgaria, 92.
This same rhythm had been used in the Serbian NCFM that Bulgarians heard on the radio during communism, and during the 1990s, it became a defining feature of chalga and one that has been maintained in the genre to the present day. (Note: The term kyuchek has a second meaning related to chalga — it can also refer to a subgenre of purely instrumental dance music that is set to this rhythm.) Not all chalga is set to this rhythm, however, and notable exceptions include many of the slower love songs and songs that appropriate popular rhythms from around the world.

Formally, the vast majority of chalga songs follow a standard verse and refrain structure with most songs having three verses with an instrumental introduction and an extended instrumental solo or improvisatory section prior to the third verse. This improvisatory section is one of the few connections chalga has to traditional music and Bulgarian wedding music (although this style of instrumental playing is also quite popular in Turkish and Roma music). Whereas the solos in wedding music had been complex to the point of becoming concert music rather than dance music, the solos in chalga are performed over the underlying beat (usually the kyuchek beat) and do not interfere with the danceable quality of the music.

Although the instrumental sections of chalga often bear the torch of a more traditional sound, many of these sections, even early on in the development of the genre, were not played on traditional instruments but rather on synthesizers. Although the synthesizer sound palate used is frequently chosen to mimic traditional instruments, the use of the synthesizer was not necessarily used as a simpler or cheaper alternative to hiring performers; in many cases, its use can be viewed as a symbol of modernity and

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58 Rice, Music in Bulgaria, 92.
59 Rice, Music in Bulgaria, 71.
western influence. Electronic amplification had played an important role in creating a wedding music sound that appealed to a more modern audience in the 1980s, and chalga seems to have carried on this tradition through the continued use of electronic amplification and the unabashed replacement of traditional instruments with synthesizers that mimic the sounds of traditional instruments.\textsuperscript{60} The increasing popularity of chalga over wedding music during the 1990s can be seen, in part, as a change caused by the worsening economy. Playing a prerecorded medium over a sound system was much cheaper than hiring a wedding band, and Bulgarians during the economic slump of the mid-1990s were definitely drawn to cheaper options of entertainment.\textsuperscript{61} Although wedding music could be recorded, a large part of its appeal was its performers’ improvisatory skill on stage.\textsuperscript{62} Chalga, on the other hand, placed less emphasis on live improvisation and worked quite well in a prerecorded, electronic format.

This is not to say, however, that the use and appeal of electronic amplification and prerecorded performances in chalga is a purely an economic concern. If the decision to use synthesizers had been an economic decision, then one might expect their use to be obscured and for music producers to strive to create the illusion that traditional instrumentalists have been employed. However, this is exactly the opposite of what is seen in chalga. Early chalga videos seem to draw particular attention to the use of the synthesizer and other electronic means of music production.

The music videos of the early chalga group known as Orchestra Kristal are a notable example of this with a popular example being the 1996 video for the song Zlatna

\textsuperscript{60} Silverman, “Bulgarian Wedding Music,” 70.
\textsuperscript{61} Silverman, “Bulgarian Wedding Music,” 83-84.
"Jitsa [The Golden Cable]." This video not only features a synthesizer, but also electric guitars and a drum set, which were additional markers of modernity and the West in chalga. Solos that might sound traditional in performance practice and instrumentation are often shown on music videos as actually being played on a synthesizer. This "traditional instruments meet modern electronic music" concept is demonstrated with humor in another popular music video of the mid-1990s that goes by the nonsensical name Lasmagi, Jasmagi. This video features extended solos on the gaida, a traditional Bulgarian bagpipe, and an accordion, which had become a popular wedding music instrument in Bulgaria in the mid-twentieth century. However, in the middle of one of the solo sections, the two instrumentalists can be seen suddenly not playing the music but rather listening to it from a boombox (which they handle gingerly and with wonder while laying their traditional instruments on the ground!). They smile while hearing their music come from the speakers of this electronic device and seem to agree that this is an appropriate (and perhaps even an improved) method of performance for their music. The text of the song itself is essentially a listing of all the new possibilities (largely commodities) that are available to Bulgarians today, and the dissemination of electronically produced music seems to be one of those possibilities.

Much of the controversy surrounding the music of chalga can be found in its melodic content, for here techniques are frequently employed that are often viewed instinctually as signifiers of "the East." Some of these signifiers include the frequent use of the augmented second interval, the use of the Phrygian mode, the use of the Hicaz

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65 Rice, Music in Bulgaria, 69.
tetrachord, and the bending of or sliding between pitches. One of the most popular chalga songs, *Levovete v Marki* [Leva into Marks] by Sashka Vaseva serves as a good example of many of these melodic and harmonic characteristics. The melodic structure of the verses is essentially that of C Phrygian; however, the refrain melody begins in F Minor and ends with a descending F-E-Db-C, which in this context can be interpreted both as the upper four notes of the F harmonic minor scale and as a Hicaz tetrachord beginning on the verse tonic of C.67 The wailing instrumental solo roughly halfway through the song slides between pitches, at times lingering on microtonal pitches. The underlying beat of the song, however, is a definite mix of East and West in its combination of the expected *kyuchek* rhythm with a strong bass drum emphasis on all beats that displays a western disco or techno influence.68

Many chalga singers began their careers as Bulgarian folk music singers. In terms of performance practice, then, much of the vocal line sounds like a cross between western popular song and traditional Bulgarian song. Although the vocal sound is thoroughly modern, the slight trace of traditional vocal ornamentation, placement, and styling can be heard amidst the more contemporary sound.

**Lyrics**

I often surprise Bulgarians by telling them that I, a classically trained musician, do enjoy chalga. The next words out of their mouths have become quite predictable: “Well, that is because you do not understand the lyrics!” For although the musical “controversies”

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66 Kurkela, “Bulgarian Chalga on Video,” 150-152.
68 Kurkela, “Bulgarian Chalga on Video,” 151-152.
mentioned above are perhaps perceived mostly by musically and culturally sensitive Bulgarians, the lyrics and subject matter of *chalga* songs can be understood by all in a much less abstract manner, and the lyrics do not always paint Bulgarian society in a progressive or favorable light.

In the lyrics, one can perceive the sudden and dramatic changes that overwhelmed Bulgarian society during its recent transitional period. The pronounced value shifts, the new economic and political realities, and the changing gender relations are subjects frequently referenced in the lyrics of *chalga*. As one *chalga* singer, Lyubka Rondova, stated, “Each era, each generation, has its own new music. Naturally our children cannot, in this fast-paced technocratic period, sing about lambs, wedding kegs, and [traditional] leggings.”

However, the controversy regarding the lyrics of *chalga* is seldom a reaction to the topic of the lyrics alone, but rather also to the crude, vulgar nature of the lyrics. Many Bulgarians remember the scandalous refrain to the 1996 song *Radka Piratka* [Radka the Firecracker] “If only I could catch you, Radka, I would rip your jeans right off you!” Few, however, would argue that it was scandalous because it referred to jeans and not traditional leggings. Therefore, both the topic of the lyrics and their manner of expression have been sources of controversy for *chalga*. The lyrics are quite far removed from what one might expect in a nation that has supposedly adopted a new democratic identity. This can be partially explained by the fact that Bulgarian democracy during the 1990s was anything but ideal; however, Bulgarians who had lived through communism were perhaps not used to having their societal problems put on such public display.

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69 Rice, “Bulgaria or Chalgaria,” 34.
70 Statelova, *The Seven Sins of Chalga*, 85.
Compounding the problem was the fact that lyrics detailing such problems were generally set to music of a celebratory tone. In fact, in chalga one often has difficulty deciding where to draw the lines between parody, celebration, and ambivalence. Difficult or heavy subjects are commonly treated with humor and lightheartedness. Topics such as crime, political corruption, strained gender relations, the loss of village life, and the objectification of people under capitalism are all taken as opportunities for dance and merriment.

The lyrics (see figure 2) and mood of the earlier mentioned song Zlatna Jitsa serve as a good example of the typical subjects and style of chalga, particularly that of the mid-1990s. In the song, the main female singer (the well-known Toni Dacheva) complains about her husband’s and his friends’ line of “work,” which is essentially stealing public cables or wires and melting them down in order to sell scrap metal. This was (and still is to an extent) a common crime in Bulgarian society. The woman in the song laments that her husband’s line of work is not more dependable or respectable, and he and his friends retort that she doesn’t understand how difficult it is to come home every night with money. Her own moralizing is undercut in the end when the men are caught and put in jail, and she, after finding a hidden stash of money in the apartment, seems to have spent it on a new, sparkling red dress that she can show off when she visits the men in jail.

Woman: Each night you are gone, and the fog is great.
It is difficult to understand your game.
Men: You are a woman, you don't understand how I labor every night! It is not easy to return tomorrow with a new stack [of cash]!

Woman: Wire, wire, full bowl [of soup]. Wire, wire, golden coin.

Men: You are a woman, you don't understand how I labor every night! It is not easy to return tomorrow with a new stack!

Woman: Wire, wire, full bowl. Wire, wire, golden coin.

Men: Where, guys, where is the golden cable? Hey, busters, what are you doing here? Don't move, give it to me!

Woman: And when they lock you up and your games end? It will not be easy, I know while you're there!

Men: You are a woman, you don't understand how I labor every night! It is not easy to return tomorrow with a new stack (of cash)!

Woman: Wire, wire, full bowl. Wire, wire, golden coin.


The lyrics, then, address the very real problems of crime and the poor economy in transitional Bulgaria while at the same time questioning the motives and true impulses of
the supposedly moral persons in society. The main singer, after all her nagging about where the money is coming from, doesn’t have any moral qualms against squandering it once the men are in jail for the crime. Throughout the song, however, the illegal activity is not presented as a crime, but rather a risky means of securing the basics of food and money in life: “Wire, wire, full bowl. Wire, wire, golden coin.”

Another notable characteristic of the text for *Zlatna Jitsa* is the use of more than one language, in this case Bulgarian and English. The words “Where, guys, where is the golden cable? Hey, busters, what are you doing here? Don’t move, give it to me!” are spoken in English. This mixing of languages is not uncommon in *chalga* and is a sign of both the increased globalization Bulgarians experienced after communism and the historical roots of *chalga* in the musical traditions of a variety of other cultures. English is often inserted into otherwise Bulgarian lyrics, but the languages of neighboring countries are frequently used as well. Some *chalga* songs are sung completely in Romany and still gain popularity among those who do not understand the text.

The troubled economic times of the years 1996 through 1997 are also captured in the text of Sashka Vaseva’s already discussed *Levovete v Marki* (see figure 3).

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Listen, listen, listen, dear, to my request:
Tonight, tonight, to get drunk

I’ll exchange my leva for marks, for to drink wine at this hour.
Dollars work, leva don’t.
I’ll get drunk in dollars at least.
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You don’t have, dear, You don’t have, dear, You don’t have money?
You don’t have, dear, You don’t have, dear, You don’t have marks—dollars?
It’s dreadful, it’s gloomy, don’t you have money?
To drink and to sing all day long doesn’t work.

Figure 3. *Levovete v Marki*. Music and Lyrics by Sashka Vaseva. Payner, 1996. Translated by Nikolay Stoyanov.

To say that the early part of 1997 was a difficult time economically for Bulgarians is, in fact, quite an understatement. Economic vertigo is perhaps a more apt description for the economic changes that took place at the end of Prime Minister Zhan Videnov’s term, which came to an end with rioters storming the parliament building. The rate of inflation had reached 2000% by March of that year, and as a result, the prices of goods in stores were changed several times each day. Workers were forced to spend their paychecks as soon as they got them in order to squeeze more value out of their earnings. Bulgarians’ personal savings, which had been accumulated during the years of communism in which consumer goods were not readily available, were quickly depleted.71

The text of *Levovete v Marki*, then, reflects this troubled state of affairs for the *lev*, the Bulgarian currency, by the singer’s rejection of it as a currency capable of allowing her to have a fun evening. She prefers the dollar or the German mark, without which life is “dreadful” and “gloomy.” The singer sings to a significant other, and the implication seems to be that, should he fail to come up with dollars or marks, she will move on to another who can succeed in doing so. This suggests an increased tension

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between the sexes during this economic struggle and a new emphasis on a man's necessary ability to make money if he is to attract a woman. The lyrics also speak to a more general tone of personal and social apathy in Bulgaria as the singer seems to only want the money in order to get drunk. She is unabashed in her consumerist inclination. Money is, in a sense, earned to be spent and wasted quickly, and there is no thought beyond the immediate "tonight." The final line, however, reveals that singer suspects her own attempt at drinking and singing her sorrows away is futile as she admits it "doesn't work."

Whereas *Levovete v Marki* shows a woman valuing a man for his economic worth, a song from 2000 titled *Stoka* [Goods] reveals an advancing stage of capitalism in which the female singer seems to embrace her own value as a "good" on the market with a sense of humor and playfulness (see figure 4).

They watch me with a smile, invite me to drink with them, and I know they cry: "This one is good!"

Good, but rare young, very cute! A lot, a lot it costs difficult to buy it!

They look at me, ponder, They're already buying me. Goods, if they are there-you pay and take!

Good, but rare young, very cute! A lot, a lot it costs difficult to buy!

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They look at me, calculating,
They measure my legs.
Are they begging for my horn-
teasing me like that?  

Good, but rare
young, very cute!
A lot, a lot it costs
difficult to buy it!


The singer, therefore, equates herself to a piece of produce, perhaps, as she is examined, evaluated, and measured for price, appearance, and freshness. The image created by this analogy is in many ways symbolic of Bulgarian society, which in its quick transition, has maintained an aesthetic juxtaposition of an older village mentality (represented by the image of the marketplace) with a newer, jaded, capitalistic mentality (represented by the objectification of a person as mere “goods”). Bulgaria has entered democracy and capitalism at a time of pluralism and globalization. This is not the time of the French Revolution or the Declaration of Independence when, it seemed, a new morality was born. The more fluid and unstable nature of morality in contemporary society combined with the ongoing corruption of the democratic system in Bulgaria have led to Bulgarian society perhaps experiencing capitalism much more strongly than it experiences the democratic aims of equality and social justice. The text of Stoka reflects this relationship between the new political and economic systems in which capitalism dominates. Is this the new Bulgarian woman? She may be a commodity, but commodities are highly valued in the new consumer society. Judging from the upbeat, celebratory

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73 This line is difficult to translate – it means something similar to “Are they trying to make me playful or feisty?”
manner of the music, the singer seems to be embracing this new ideology, but as with most chalga, she does so with a knowing smile and wink, and the distinction between parody, ambivalence, and celebration is quite blurred.

**Videos and Performances**

The performances of chalga fit into two categories: video performances and live performances. Live performances, either in chalga clubs or on stage at concerts, constitute a primary source of income for most chalga performers, and the more formal concerts cater to a diverse audience with members of a huge age range (from young children to adults in their forties and fifties). This widespread appeal is in keeping with the famous slogan of one of the more popular chalga and contemporary folk radio stations Radio Signal +: “Music for your grandparents and your grandchildren.”

Although the behavior and attire of live chalga performers is perhaps shocking to many in Bulgaria, the main performance controversy in chalga is its music videos, which are used to actively promote new songs and artists. Sources of controversy and scandal include overt sexuality and revealing clothing (on women), the glorification of crime and the mafia, the emphasis on money and consumerism, and the use of “oriental imagery.”

This final category, oriental imagery, has been analyzed quite thoroughly by Finnish musicologist Vesa Kurkela in his article “Bulgarian Chalga on Video: Oriental Stereotypes, Mafia Exoticism, and Politics.” In his research of chalga music videos produced between 1995 and 2000, Kurkela has analyzed the various images for “oriental”

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74 Timothy Rice, “Bulgaria or Chalgaria,” 36.
75 Timothy Rice, “Bulgaria or Chalgaria,” 36.
76 Kurkela, “Bulgarian Chalga on Video,” 143-173.
77 Kurkela, “Bulgarian Chalga on Video,” 143-173.
stereotypes and signifiers. He suggests that many of the images found in chalga videos are “modern exoticisms” that correspond to commonly understood and interpreted “classic oriental images.” For example, what is viewed as “sexist soft porn” in chalga videos can be seen as a modern adaptation of the image of “erotic bellydance” and “harem women.” The use of the mafia in chalga videos is, according to Kurkela, a modern extension of the oriental sultan or sheik. Other analogies in his analysis include the representation of “nomadic gypsies” through “sailing, wind surfing, costly hobbies”; “horse and camel riding” through “expensive German cars”; “Arabian and Indian wonderlands” through “western opportunities, money-making”; and “wine drinking and conviviality” through “whiskey drinking.”

Kurkela also presents a method of categorizing chalga videos based on their structure. The three categories he suggests are “concert documentations,” “narrative videos,” and “music-based videos.” Videos that fall into the concert documentation category show (or at least pretend to show) the performers playing the music, often in exotic or scenic locations or in a more typical concert setting where audience members’ reactions are also part of the video. Narrative videos, which are similar to contemporary music videos produced in the United States, usually involve the overlapping of at least two or three scenes that are used to tell a story related to the text of the song. In the third category, music-based videos, at least two or three visual images are again overlapped, but no plot or story is apparent; the goal here is to represent the music and mood in a

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78 Kurkela, “Bulgarian Chalga on Video,” 143.
79 Kurkela, “Bulgarian Chalga on Video,” 162-163.
80 Kurkela, “Bulgarian Chalga on Video,” 148-152.
more abstract manner. Both the narrative and music-based videos, then, are similar to the MTV formats that are common in the West.\textsuperscript{81}

These content and structural categories suggested by Kurkela provide an excellent starting point for analyzing \textit{chalga} music videos. However, in terms of content, the dichotomy between “classical oriental stereotypes” and “modern exoticisms,” while helpful, does not touch on the entire thematic and symbolic content of the videos and perhaps attributes this content too strongly to eastern influence. Additional themes that are common in \textit{chalga} music videos will be discussed as they pertain to the following examples.

A video that encompasses quite a few of these characteristics is the music video for the already discussed \textit{Zlatna Jitsa}. Although this video is predominantly of a narrative structure, it includes elements of all three structural categories outlined by Kurkela. The images tell the story of the wire thieves, the nagging wife, and the eventual imprisonment of the criminals. However, during much of the video, the members of \textit{Orkestur Kristal} can be seen playing their electric guitars, percussion, and synthesizer much as they would in a live performance. Even Toni Dacheva, the singer, pretends to play the electric guitar at one point. These images add a touch of the concert documentation structure. A hint of the music-based video format can be seen in the at times random juxtaposition of images that do little to further the plot of the video. A good example of this is the portion of the video during the chorus when the imagery is the viewpoint of someone who is hand gliding over a beach full of people. Other images not directly connected to the plot (although perhaps related to the content) include images of money and gambling and of a woman bellydancing on a stage.

\textsuperscript{81} Kurkela, “Bulgarian \textit{Chalga} on Video,” 148-152.
Whereas many videos have been criticized for an eroticism that approaches that of pornography, this video demonstrates quite pointedly Kurkela’s assertion that this can be seen at times as a modernization of the classical oriental image of bellydance. The female singer wears a modern, almost metallic-looking dress for much of the video, and images of her are shown alternately with the female bellydancer. At times they are even side by side in the same screen. Although the singer’s moves and behavior do not approach pornography, she behaves in a flirtatious manner and can be seen as a modern transformation of the bellydancer. One also finds in this video the “seascapes,” “wind surfing,” and “expensive hobbies” that Kurkela sees as modern exoticisms of “nomadic gypsies” and “old Bulgarian townscapes.” These can be seen in the images of hand gliding, gambling, and the view of the seaside.

The image of criminality is all-pervasive in this video; however, one can hardly call the characters in the video the mafia. They are, rather, an amusing parody of organized crime. They conceal their faces (and identities) with a bizarre selection of Halloween-type masks (one of which looks like a clown mask) and can be seen at the beginning of the video walking a small lap dog (not the first choice of animal for a gang of criminals). The big “take down” scene where they are caught and prosecuted for their crimes occurs at the hands of a rather relaxed officer and proceeds almost without incident (one of the men does try to run clumsily up a hill and away, but is quickly brought down by the officer). The scenes of the female singer nagging them about their work and lack of money while dishing up their soup also do little for their rough, tough, criminal image.
In fact, the image of the nagging or demanding wife, mother, or girlfriend is an image often used for comic effect, particularly in early chalga, and the sensitive topic represented by these images is the effect of the struggling economy on the male pride and sense of power. In Zlatna Jitsa, the woman, after all her nagging, gets the last laugh when she seemingly spends the jailed men’s money on a new dress and goes to visit (or rather, taunt) them in jail. For further evidence of this demanding woman motif, one need look no further than the humorous video for the 2000 song Zet Zavryan.\(^{82}\) "Zet Zavryan" is a disparaging term for a man who lives with his wife in her parents’ home (most likely due to financial difficulty), and the male singer in the video is featured wearing a frilly apron and slaving away in the kitchen in order to meet the demands of his mother-in-law, who spends her days sunbathing. Much of the imagery involves the son-in-law’s fantasies of how to get back at his mother-in-law for this abuse. Another comedic video from 1998, Skupi, Kupi Mi Neshto [Honey, Buy Me Something], details an elaborate and very pricey shopping trip during which a woman drags her significant other from store to store expecting him to buy her a stunning array of jewelry and clothing.\(^{83}\) He keeps pulling out the money and carrying all her bags, which are so numerous by the end of the day that he can hardly keep from dropping them. Luckily for the man, it turns out to have all been a horrible nightmare, and the video ends with him sitting bolt-upright in bed with a look of panic and terror.

This “demanding woman motif” often goes hand in hand with another common visual image in chalga videos: the juxtaposition of wealth with poverty. In this image, a

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singer, usually a female, will be dressed or groomed in a way that makes him or her stand out from otherwise drab surroundings. An example of this is the appearance of Toni Dacheva in a flashy red dress when she visits the men in jail at the end of Zlatna Jitsa.

Sashka Vaseva’s appearance in portions of the video for the 1997 love song Ochi v Ochi [Eye to Eye] also falls into this category of images.\(^4\) She can be seen being chauffeured on a horse-drawn carriage by, what appears to be, a Roma driver wearing a t-shirt, bandanna, and cowboy hat. She, however, is wearing bright white, high-heeled boots and a flashy jacket and short skirt ensemble. Horses and other animals are a common symbol in early chalga and can be seen as representative of either the Roma population specifically (it is not uncommon for Roma still to drive a horse-drawn cart into Sofia) or as part of an earthy, village aesthetic that will be discussed.

Popular chalga singer Kamelia’s 1998 video for Ti Si [You Are], which is a good example of a typical chalga love song, is another example of the “rich and poor” motif and shows the singer in absolute contrast to her surroundings.\(^5\) The room in which the video is shot is designed to look dusty, dark, and unkempt. In fact, for much of the song, people behind the singer can be seen moving furniture trying to straighten up the stage on which she sings. The person listening to her smokes a cigarette throughout her performance and leaves his winter coat on (as does she her expensive fur coat) to create the sense of a gloomy, cold environment. Kamelia, however, literally sparkles from head to toe with the help of a long shimmery dress and profuse amounts of glitter on her skin and in her hair.


In both *Ochi v Ochi* and *Ti Si*, there is no overt reason (according to the lyrics) for the contrasting images to be in these videos. Their presence perhaps speaks more to the broader economic situation in Bulgaria during this time, which was one of “haves” and “have nots.” Those who could find a way to thrive in the new capitalist (or black market) society were often not shy about flaunting their success, and those around them likely envied them and saw them as the rich among the poor. This image, then, is likely a sign of the economic disparity that has been a feature of Bulgaria’s transition from communism to capitalism and democracy.

However, another visual image that is quite common in early *chalga* alternately glorifies and parodies an aesthetic that was common in Bulgarian life: the village aesthetic. This aesthetic, which is made possible by Bulgaria’s particular circumstance as a country with one foot in the village and one foot in the twenty-first century, can be either artificially created or can occur quite naturally in early videos, which were often filmed outside in scenic or traditional village settings. That Bulgarians are acutely aware of this precarious position is evident in their ability to laugh at and parody traditions that are in fact quite dear to many of them still (or at least were in the not-so-distant past). An example of this humor can be seen in the video for *Lasmagi, Jasmagi*. In this video, which is essentially a listing of all the possibilities in the new capitalist Bulgaria, the singer can be seen relaxing on a boat as she sings. However, these images are frequently interrupted by those of villagers dancing a traditional *horo* while wearing the stereotypical village dress that was worn by professional folk orchestra performers during communism. The film of the dance has been artificially sped up to match the new upbeat, “modern,” pace of the music, and their movements look jerky and comical. The parody is
solidified by a short clip of a village chicken also dressed in the traditional village costume.

A humorous video by the Kulinovi Brothers is titled simply Shkembeto, or “Tripe Soup.”86 Tripe soup is a dish that has been very common in Bulgaria for much of its history, and although it is still quite loved, Bulgarians realize that it is a culturally acquired taste. In my visits to Bulgaria, I have tried many traditional culinary delights that have been pushed upon me enthusiastically; however, no one has ever offered me tripe soup. It is, in a sense, too Bulgarian for a foreigner to understand it. “It’s made with vinegar, hot pepper seeds, and lots of garlic. It makes you sweat and stink,” my Bulgarian friends and family have told me. In this video, however, the two male singers parody a simple village mentality as they shamelessly sing the glories of shkembeto (see figure 5) and can’t imagine that anyone outside of their culture would not be as enthusiastic about it as they are. In as sense, they have not yet realized, as many Bulgarians have come to realize, how small their traditional world is.

Is there anything higher than the sky? No, there isn’t. No, there isn’t.
Is there anything deeper than the sea? No, there isn’t. No, there isn’t.
Is there anything hotter than shkembeto? No, there isn’t. No, there isn’t.
It will overtake the world with two slices of bread.
And shkembeto, and shkembeto – hot, hot!
It is my most favorite thing.
Morning and evening – eat shkembeto,
It strengthens and gives courage.

Figure 5. Shkembeto. Performed by Kulinovi Brothers. Bulgarska Muzikalna Kompaniya, 2001. Translated by Nikolay Stoyanov.

The humor here lies in the singers’ enthusiastic belief that shkembeto can “overtake the world with two slices of bread,” and in the video it certainly seems to work.

wonders for all involved. Beautiful women dance on the tables in honor of shkembeto, festive parades are thrown in the streets, and money is thrown in the air. Is there a hint of sadness and sentimentality behind the video, music, and lyrics? It is a reminder of how far Bulgarians have come in a short amount of time. In the fast-paced, modern, technological world, is tradition capable of “strengthening” and “giving courage?” Or, is it better to laugh at such traditions and move on? The village aesthetic in chalga is often presented humorously, but underneath the humor one can often detect a hint of sadness and sentimentality.

Production

When contemporary popular music first came to Bulgaria, it was largely in the form of pirated cassette tapes that were circulated illegally and under the radar of the communist party. Much of the music on these cassettes was the popular music of neighboring countries. Evgenij Dimitrov, who worked for an important early chalga recording label, said of these initial stages prior to chalga production,

People had a need to listen to music that was close to their hearts and souls, and so there occurred an influx of music from neighboring countries: Serbia, Greece, and Turkey. This music was nowhere officially allowed or produced, but it was accepted with open arms by ordinary people... The recordings were sold illegally in street stalls, in markets. They made pirate copies. People found every way to obtain them. In those days there was no local equivalent.

This was all soon to change, of course, and Bulgaria now stands out as one of the few countries of Eastern Europe where the local popular music scene has been able to thrive in spite of continued piracy and the continued availability of pirated western

87 Kurkela, “Bulgarian Chalga on Video,” 145.
88 Rice, “Bulgaria or Chalgaria,” 32.
popular music.\textsuperscript{89} As of the year 2004, \textit{chalga} production made up more than 80 percent of the recorded music market in Bulgaria.\textsuperscript{90} In the late 1990s, a popular \textit{chalga} song could sell over 100,000 copies in a country where the total population was roughly 8 million.\textsuperscript{91} The commercial success of \textit{chalga} has been largely the result of the shrewd capitalist efforts of the company Payner, which, until recently, remained relatively unchallenged as the premier producer of \textit{chalga} in Bulgaria. Payner was founded in 1990 and initially was involved only in the basic production of video and cassette tapes. However, its influence in the popular music industry quickly grew, and it now controls multiple aspects of the production process from the scouting of talent and creation of audio and video recordings to the ownership of its own MTV-style satellite television channel, the planning of large tours and publicity events, and the opening of Payner night clubs.\textsuperscript{92}

The change in the Bulgarian soundscape during the 1990s was quite shocking for most Bulgarians. Even though similar types of popular music and the \textit{kyuchek} songs of wedding music had been popular in Bulgaria for over a decade, the Bulgarian image that had been presented in the public and to the rest of the world until quite recently was still that of the communist professional folk music ensembles. Although this was a welcome change for quite a few Bulgarians, there were others who lamented quite publicly that Bulgarian society was being “\textit{chalga}gized.”\textsuperscript{93} In this context, the term \textit{chalga} was used to describe the cheapening of culture that many feared it represented or, perhaps, that it

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{89} Kurkela, “Bulgarian \textit{Chalga} on Video,” 145.
\item \textsuperscript{90} Rice, \textit{Music in Bulgaria}, 90.
\item \textsuperscript{93} Kurkela, “Bulgarian \textit{Chalga} on Video,” 148.
\end{itemize}
caused. This sentiment that *chalga* and in particular the capitalist mass production of *chalga* had somehow robbed Bulgaria of its cultural heritage was echoed by the famous wedding music clarinetist Ivo Papazov, who, in the 1990s remarked that “Payner company owns and runs Bulgaria today.”

The musical examples and videos that have been used so far to define the genre of *chalga* have all been produced during the earlier half of the genre’s existence – a time when many of its defining characteristics were solidified and a time when the genre was propelled into widespread popularity and notoriety. A discussion of how *chalga* was received in Bulgaria during the 1990s is necessary before the more recent trends of the genre are analyzed. This will allow a more thorough understanding of how modern *chalga* relates to the earlier controversies and continues to reflect Bulgarian identity in new and complex ways.

Chapter III
Controversy

In a 2007 survey titled *Velikite Bulgari* ("The Great Bulgarians"), which was conducted via a Bulgarian television station and designed to determine who the modern populace saw as the most important Bulgarians of all time, soccer hero Hristo Stoichkov was found to be the highest ranking living Bulgarian and the thirteenth greatest Bulgarian of all time. After him, the next highest ranking and only other living Bulgarian to make the list was controversial *chalga* singer Azis, who came in twenty-first.\(^95\) How can a soccer player and a popular singer be considered the greatest living Bulgarians? The connection between soccer and popular music in transitional Bulgaria was astutely pointed out in 2002 by ethnomusicologist Donna A. Buchanan in her article "Soccer, Popular Music and National Consciousness in Post-State-Socialist Bulgaria, 1994-1996."\(^96\) For in the years 1994 and 1996, at the height of its transitional economic struggle and political frustration, Bulgaria managed to produce a soccer team that put them on the international radar as a force to be reckoned with.\(^97\) In 1994 the team placed fourth in the World Cup after a decisive victory against Germany, a country many Bulgarians admired for their technological and economic advances, and Hristo Stoichkov was the hero of the Bulgarian team.\(^98\) Another important aspect of this tournament was that it was held in the United States, and the Bulgarian media coverage of the players' experience there did


\(^97\) Buchanan, "Soccer," 4.

much to bolster the collective fantasy of the luxuries democracy and capitalism could bring to a country. Bulgarians’ obsession with soccer in the mid-1990s, then, can be seen as integral to their changing identity and as an opportunity for them to redefine their relationship to the nations of the West after being locked into a communist isolation for decades.

The controversies surrounding *chalga* in the mid-1990s can also be viewed in relation to this changing identity and attempt to realign with certain ideologies and countries. However, deciding who is “for” and who is “against” *chalga* can be quite tricky as *chalga* at times seems to be a rebellion against nearly all available value systems. At least three main “cultural choices” seem to be at play here: the West, as represented by the United States and Europe; the East, as represented by communism and the former Eastern bloc; or the East, as represented by the Ottoman heritage and Roma and Turkish populations within Bulgaria.

The most vocal opponents of *chalga* in the mid- to late-1990s seem to have been those who felt threatened by the strong representation of Roma and Turkish musical elements in *chalga*, particularly to the near exclusion of the traditional Bulgarian musical elements that had been praised during communism. At least two types of people potentially fall into this group: those who were part of the cultural elite under communism and those who are in favor of a new, western identity. In his book *Music in Bulgaria*, Timothy Rice has pointed out the antagonistic position of *chalga* in post-communist society after a decade in which the display of Turkish and Roma cultural traditions was explicitly forbidden.

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Popfolk began as an aesthetic phenomenon with political implications. That is, it is an appropriation of what was considered, during the communist regime, foreign and decadent and therefore tightly controlled. The musical styles on which it is based were popular at least in part because of their status as forbidden fruit under the previous totalitarian regime. Their adoption as a favorite expressive form was partly a political act in a new era of relative freedom.\(^\text{100}\)

One must not assume from this, however, that what annoyed the former communists would please the new democratic elite. Communists in Bulgaria frequently had their attention directed to western culture as a model of artistic and cultural achievement. Although the political and economic ideals of the current cultural elite might be new, such ideals have not necessarily been expanded to make room for minority populations that were oppressed under communism. As Claire Levy has pointed out in this regard,

> Bulgaria has been the subject of increasing ideological argument on the cultural identity of Bulgarians and their ‘civilization choice,’ a slogan-cliché that has again penetrated public space since the 1989 watershed and implied a clear national orientation towards western values and standards. Such an orientation, at least according to the ruling cultural elites, is supposed to ignore any oriental infusions in culture, especially in popular music, where they are more visible than in other forms of cultural expression.\(^\text{101}\)

The implication here is that the current cultural elite in Bulgaria is quite interested in the end products of democracy and capitalism seen in the West, but is not quite as interested in freely implementing democracy and capitalism, both of which require equal opportunity for minority groups. The cultural elite is perhaps still tied to the communist manner of controlling how the country is represented when the results of the capitalist and democratic systems are not in accordance with its vision for the country.

Although there certainly are members of the cultural elite who maintain this social outlook (and perhaps even many or most of them do), one must not assume that if

\(^{100}\) Rice, *Music in Bulgaria*, 98.

something is highly represented in *chalga*, which is highly popular music, then that something is also highly popular in society. In fact, *chalga* has been notorious for glorifying aspects of Bulgarian society that many Bulgarians consider to be shameful or that they would prefer not to acknowledge. Crime, corruption, and base capitalism are all commonly represented in *chalga*; how does this affect the democratic hope that the inclusion of Turkish and Roma cultural elements in *chalga* is a sign that such groups are being accepted into the new society even by the mass audience that consumes *chalga*? Would one argue that the domination of female singers in the *chalga* genre, particularly in the newer more sexually graphic music videos, is a sign of progress for women in Bulgaria?

Interestingly, although the Roma and Turkish minority populations were quite oppressed culturally prior to the fall of communism, their situation did not improve practically with the new democratic reforms. In fact, the decade of the 1990s, which saw the initial explosion in the popularity of *chalga*, was an extremely difficult decade socially and economically for these minority populations. A special report commissioned in 1998 for the “Social Assessment of Bulgaria,” concluded that “The transition process has proved to be disadvantageous to large ethnic minorities and, in the absence of targeted programs, led to further marginalization and exclusion of these groups.” The report also noted, now specifically about the Roma minority population,

Along with the modernization of Bulgarian society and the sharp decrease in the need for the services provided by Roma, negative stereotypes towards them have increased. Their image is one of persons, unable to adapt to the changing reality; useless for society, living parasitically on private charity and social funds. There

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are increasing tendencies towards the isolation of Roma. They are gradually “dropping out” of the non-Roma world. This leads in practice to backwardness in all spheres of society – education, culture, social and economic status, participation in political life.”

This assessment of racial relations in Bulgaria at the end of the 1990s seems contradict the suggestion that the popularity of chalga might be a sign that Bulgaria is becoming more accepting of its Roma and Turkish minority populations and asserting its new democratic identity and quest for social justice. In fact, much of what is valued in the world of chalga songs and videos is often that which is seen as problematic in Bulgarian society. The themes of crime, political corruption, and economic struggle, for example, are celebrated in chalga because they cannot be celebrated in real life. Chalga, then, can be said to function as a kind of collective Bulgarian fantasy identity – a cultural realm in which past and present failures are celebrated as triumphs. Bulgaria has, over the past millennium, had its share of perceived failures: the failure to escape from Ottoman domination for five hundred years, the failure of communism, and what seemed to many in the mid-1990s like the failure of democracy. It has, for centuries, lived under the political control of one of three major super powers: the Ottoman Empire, Russia, and Europe. This historical fluctuation in value systems combined with Bulgaria’s post-communist exposure to concepts of pluralism and cultural relativism seems to have given Bulgarians a cynical view of the concept of progress. Cultural values and behaviors are frequently parodied in chalga, and this use of parody makes it difficult to conclude that the promotion of an idea or the representation of a group of people in chalga is an indicator of the idea’s or the group’s popularity. Therefore, drawing conclusions about the changing Bulgarian identity based on such representation in chalga does not tell the

103 Ethnic Dimensions of Poverty in Bulgaria by Ilona Tomova.
full story of Bulgarian values and often might paint a picture quite opposite to that of Bulgarian identity.

Nowhere is the problematic nature of such assumptions more clearly illustrated than in trying to understand the phenomenon of Azis, one of the most popular (and controversial) chalga stars of all time and one of only two living Bulgarians to be recognized on the Velikite Bulgari survey list. Having examined many chalga videos, I was quite used to the capitalistic use of shock value to sell a product and rarely felt personally offended or uneasy about what I was seeing and hearing. However, I quickly realized I was wholly unprepared for Azis, and after watching my first Azis music videos, my gut reaction was to exclude him from my research efforts and focus on more mainstream chalga. However, I quickly realized that Azis is mainstream chalga. In fact he dominates the airwaves with his music and his own television show. As Michael Palin summarizes in his New Europe segment on Bulgaria (for which he interviews Azis), “In a predominantly conservative and homophobic country, you couldn’t be much more out of line than a gay gypsy transvestite, and as a result, he’s wildly popular.”

Although Azis became popular in the late 1990s when he acted out predominantly heterosexual roles in his music videos, his persona has become more and more flamboyant and provocative through his penchant for skimpy female clothing, high heels, and elaborate makeup and through his controversial sexual orientation, which ranges from ambiguous to homosexual in his videos. Many of these changes appear in the early 2000s and have become more and more apparent in recent years.

An important song of this transitional phase for Azis is the 2003 hit duet *Edin Zhivot Ne Stiga* [One Life is not Enough], for which he collaborated with the well-known chalga singer Sofi Marinova. The melodic structure and formal content of this song are fairly typical for chalga. The melody emphasizes the Phrygian mode, and the verse and refrain alternation is broken by an improvisatory wind instrument solo. Several aspects of this song, however, go beyond what is typical of chalga to create a sense of ambiguity in gender and sexual orientation.

One of these aspects can be heard in the music itself, particularly in the vocal performance of the music. Sofi Marinova and Azis are both known for the unique timbre of their voices, and interestingly, their voices sit in a similar range and have other similar qualities that are brought out in this song. Many chalga singers, particularly by the early 2000s were adopting a more western, popular music sound to their singing. Although traditional ornamentation and vibrato can be heard in many of their voices, Sofi Marinova’s and Azis’s voices stand out as having a particularly “raw” or “edgy” sound that is typical of a village singer’s vocal production style. The unique natural vibrato of their voices as well as the use of ornamentation creates a tense sound that is particularly effective in adding to the tension of this video. That their voices have a similar sound is also important in this song because it contributes to a sense of gender ambiguity that is enforced by the lyrics and the visual content of the video.

In the video, the female singer works as a singer and dancer at a club where she seems to have been summoned by a male customer. This customer is Azis, who is dressed conservatively (for Azis) and listens and watches attentively throughout the

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performance. However, at the beginning of the song, Azis’s new flamboyant persona emerges from the image of the observer and becomes a performer next to the female onstage, where he assumes the role of bellydancer and singer just as she does. Although the duet is essentially a love song, Azis and Sofi Marinova do not seem to be singing to each other — rather both of them are singing to the male observer. The implication seems to be that Azis the observer is watching Sofi Marinova and, rather than lusting over her as would be expected in such a scenario, is in fact regretting that he is not allowed to express himself in the same manner that a female is allowed to express herself. That Azis the observer is experiencing personal turmoil during the performance of this song is conveyed by images of implied drug use and the presence of tears in his eyes as the song ends.

In fact, although the lyrics seem to be those of a typical love song, a closer examination of their structure reveals ambiguities that are typical of the lyrics in many of Azis’s songs (see figure 6).

Love of mine, insatiable
Sun and moon,
Happiness first and last-
You for me are a gift from heaven-
Stay like this to the end.

You are a sunrise for the eyes.
My shining hour.
And drunk from love I sing,
And for you I long.
Forever the love will live in us!

One life (together with you) we will divide!
One life is not enough tenderness to share!
Like wind again caressing me is your hair!
Like fire today your unknown lips are igniting me - I feel your love!
I want, with love, to drink of your heart.
This real magic in you, keep it!
I, in front of you, will reveal new worlds!

Figure 6. Edin Zhivot Ne Stiga. Sunny Music, 2003. Performed by Azis and Sofi Marinova. Translated by Nikolay Stoyanov.

Bulgarian is a gendered language, and one must go out of his or her way to avoid implying gender, which is often expressed through the agreement of adjectives with the gender of the noun they modify. The lyrics of this song manage to achieve this effect through the clever use of metaphors in place of adjectives. Rather than having any adjectives applied to the ambiguous object of the song, metaphoric descriptions such as “a gift from heaven” and “a sunrise for the eyes” are used. Rather than a simple phrase construction such as “You are magical,” in which case “magical” would have to agree in gender with the noun, the listener is instead given “This real magic in you, keep it!” In fact, not a single line in these lyrics implies gender, and in Bulgarian, this is not likely to happen unintentionally.

Edin Zhivot Ne Stiga is a well-known and well-liked song in Bulgaria in spite of its ambiguities in expression of gender and sexual orientation. In fact, over the past decade the level of sexual explicitness has increased markedly in Azis’s videos and does not seem to have negatively impacted his popularity. One might expect that a country that supports or at least tolerates such a popular icon would have fairly liberal leanings in regards to gender expression and sexual orientation or that the popularity of Azis would be a sign of increasingly liberal views on these topics. However, as with the seemingly paradoxical relationship between an increasing popularity of chalga and a decreasing
tolerance of the minorities associated with such music that was noted earlier, the relationship between Azis’s popularity in Bulgaria and widespread Bulgarian views on gender and sexual orientation is quite complex and at times contradictory.

Although it is likely that Azis is a powerful and admired figure for Bulgarians who personally identify with his views on sexuality and gender, the majority of Bulgarians seem to have remained conservative on such issues, and change in this area has been much slower than one might expect in a country where a performer like Azis can be so popular. Bulgaria’s first “Gay Pride Parade,” which was held in Sofia one year after Azis was nominated to the Velikite Bulgari list, ended with 88 people being arrested for tossing rocks, firecrackers, and Moltov cocktails at the roughly 150–200 marchers. Although the organizer of the parade, Aksinia Gencheva, stated that such actions were representative of minority extremists, she did note that most Bulgarians were not very supportive of the parade. When reflecting on the mainstream Bulgarian views on this issue, she explained, “Part of our mentality is to say: I don’t discriminate against gay people, I just don’t want to see them marching.” Gencheva later acknowledged that the march had been successful because, in spite of the threats received leading up to the parade, no one had been killed.

How, then, does one explain the paradox of Azis’s popularity in Bulgaria, a country that seems to have limited tolerance of the gay rights community and of its ethnic minorities? I would like to propose that there is a potential disconnect between what Azis is expressing in his performances and what much of his audience is expressing in its

107 Ciobanu, “Hate Wave Threatens New Gay Pride.”
108 Ciobanu, “Hate Wave Threatens New Gay Pride.”
consumption of his music. Azis has been quite vocal and visible in both the gay rights community in Bulgaria and the movement to improve the conditions of ethnic minorities in Bulgaria, and it is quite likely that he hopes his music and image will improve the status of both of these groups. However, keeping in mind the pervasive use of parody in chalga and the frequent glorification of that which is deemed improper or backwards by society, I find it quite possible that many of the Bulgarians who are fans of Azis view him as a kind of parody of the new democracy — the end result of true freedom of expression. They perhaps respect his ability to take all that is “backwards” in himself — his race, his gender expression, his sexual orientation — and to celebrate and triumph over these aspects of himself, but it does not necessarily follow that they respect his race, his gender expression, and his sexual orientation. This is a fine distinction, but an important one in the context of Bulgarian identity, particularly Bulgarian democratic identity.

An American Fulbright scholar who blogs about her experiences teaching English in Bulgaria recently posted about her experience seeing Azis perform live: “His entrance was impressive: dressed in full-length white angel wings, high heels, and a tight, revealing bathing suit. But his performance went downhill from there. Most of the time he was sitting on a couch onstage, occasionally belting out a few lines with another singer.” She then notes, “And you can hardly blame him. Soon after this underwhelming show, Azis announced publicly that he will be leaving Bulgaria for good, off to an unspecified location. He cited the lack of respect for his talent and the growing level of homophobia as reasons for his departure.”

Indeed such reports have been circulating in the media since November of 2011, although it is difficult to confirm the legitimacy of such rumors. Azis has been quoted in a major Bulgarian newspaper saying, “I am sick of it! I’m sick of the homophobia, the racism, and the fact that this country does not recognize my talent.” It is strange that a star who has been so enormously successful in his country would accuse his country of not appreciating his talent. Perhaps Azis, too, senses a disconnect between what he expresses in his music and what much of his audience expresses in their consumption of his music. His attempts to use his image to further the cause of minority populations in Bulgaria, then, have been largely thwarted by a large part of his audience that might view his provocative persona as a parody of the new free and equal democratic citizen.

Chapter IV

Recent Trends and the Parody of Capitalism

As Bulgaria pulled out of the 1990s, the economy took a turn for the better, and with Bulgaria’s accession into the European Union in 2007, its place in the democratic western world seems to be more and more solidified. Chalga, as a genre, is still alive and well in Bulgaria, although, as one might expect, it has changed quite a bit as the country itself has continued to undergo dramatic changes. When I asked my husband what he believes the main difference is between the chalga of the 1990s and early 2000s (which is already frequently referred to as “retro chalga”) and the more recent chalga that has come out in roughly the past five years, his answer matched my own suspicions that I’d developed while trying to make sense of the huge mass of chalga that has been produced in recent times: “The new chalga has no sense of humor.” Indeed, the newer chalga songs, videos, lyrics, and performers can seem overwhelmingly like a cheap product that has been quickly created and marketed and is devoid of the self-consciousness of earlier chalga, which included social and political criticism in its videos and lyrics, an eclectic mix of musical elements, and almost always, humor.

But has recent chalga really lost its sense of humor? After analyzing many songs and videos that have come out in roughly the last five years, I’ve come to the conclusion that parody is still alive and well in contemporary chalga. However, it can be difficult to detect the newer use of parody because there is a new character in the plot: the viewer. With the maturation of capitalism in Bulgaria, there has also been a maturation of the most important capitalist relationship: that between the consumer and the consumed.
What I would like to explore in my analysis of newer chalga is how many of the recent trends in the genre are a reflection of this new important relationship. I would also like to suggest that recent chalga can be interpreted as a parody (either intentional or unintentional) of capitalism and the hopes and dreams of Bulgarians (and members of other countries) under capitalism.

Many of the themes that were discussed in relation to earlier chalga videos and lyrics require a refined explanation in reference to more modern chalga. Perhaps the most notable change, which is apparent in both the music and the videos, is what could be termed the new “studio aesthetic.” Musically, this refers to a much more electronic sound that is frequently closer to the sound of western popular music or western dance music than it is to chalga’s traditional Roma, Turkish, or Balkan music. The improvisatory solo that was prominently featured in the middle of earlier chalga songs, is often more understated, less improvisatory in character, or at times absent altogether. Although the kyuchek rhythm is still a hallmark feature of chalga, it is now frequently overlapped or at times replaced by a disco-style beat that reflects the high demand for chalga that can be danced to in modern nightclubs in Bulgaria. In fact, when my husband and I visited a chalga club in a Bulgarian community in Chicago, we arrived early (at about 9:00 p.m.) in order to eat dinner before the kitchen closed and were confused that not a single song played on the Bulgarian radio station in the club was chalga. Most of it was European popular music or non-chalga Bulgarian popular music. However, at 10:00 p.m. a D.J. lazily climbed into his sound booth, turned up the volume considerably, and played only chalga for the rest of the night. All of it was recent chalga, which is particularly suitable for the modern club scene.
The studio aesthetic is also quite apparent in the new chalga music videos. As would be expected, the visual quality of the videos is vastly improved from the earlier videos. However, the content of the images has also changed remarkably. Earlier videos often had elements of the “village aesthetic,” with nature scenes, animals, domestic scenes, and images of people enjoying traditional food and customs. In recent chalga, however, the setting is frequently indoors in a cool and sleek environment or perhaps even in a wholly digitized and imagined environment. Scenes that are shot outside frequently portray only city images and minimal amounts of nature (or, often, if they do portray nature, it is a snowy, lifeless, or obviously fake nature scene). This is the aesthetic of the modern city and the new digitized environments of the videos are the aesthetic of modern capitalism in which anything can be produced to meet the demands of the consumers. The setting need not actually exist in order for someone to supply it as a product.

A good example, both musically and visually, of the emergence of the new studio aesthetic is the song Grad na Greha [City of Sin], which was recorded in 2006 by Gloria, “The Mother of Chalga.” This production is quite different from earlier chalga in many of the ways discussed. The fact that it is sung by one of the leading chalga stars seems to be one of the only factors tying it to the genre. Musically, the kyuchek rhythm is completely absent, and a more contemporary western dance beat is used in its place. The standard improvisatory solo, too, is missing and has been replaced by a rhythmic, repetitive, electronic motif. Gloria’s vocal styling is smooth and fluid with not a hint of traditional ornamentation or the more nasal timbre that is associated with traditional

Bulgarian singers. Her singing on “ooh” and “oh” vowels at the end of the song is not
typical of chalga and seems instead more reminiscent of popular female vocal techniques
of the West. The video also fits the studio aesthetic with its cool, stagnant indoor images
juxtaposed with digitized, imaginary settings.

Gloria’s image and behavior might come as a surprise to one who has only seen
earlier chalga; however in many ways, her role in this video is very representative of the
new female image in recent chalga. Whereas the earlier image of the humorously
nagging or demanding female was quite prevalent in chalga and was often used to
highlight the economic anxieties experienced by men at the time, relationships are
presented quite differently in recent chalga. The image most commonly presented by
both genders is that of success. For men, this almost always is equated with being very
wealthy and being surrounded by beautiful women. For women, success seems to be
defined as being attractive and sexually appealing, presumably so as to be capable of
getting a wealthy man to spend his money on her. Interestingly, however, as is the case in
Gloria’s Grad na Greha, it has become quite common for the man in the equation to be
entirely absent from the video and music. Who, then, is the source of money these
women are working to attract? It seems to be the viewer. This is the new relationship
dynamic of chalga – that between the consumer and the consumable product, which is
increasingly a highly attractive female. Whereas in earlier chalga women could often be
seen playing the role of a beautiful woman as Toni Dacheva does when she visits the men
in jail in Zlatna Jitsa, in recent chalga the woman’s role is, quite explicitly, to attract the
consumer.
When the owner of the largest *chalga* production company, Payner, was asked about the practice of putting attractive women (who may or may not have been the singers) on the cassette covers, he responded, “The question of what the musicians look like is no problem to us. If an artist is not good-looking enough, we use these pin-up girls for our cassette covers.” That was in 1996, and it would seem that it has become increasingly important in the industry that the singer herself actually appear to be attractive, especially with the modern marvels of cosmetic surgery and airbrushing ready to meet the new demands. What is important, above all, is that the average (and therefore most profitable) paying consumer’s fantasy be satisfied. As with the digitized scenery, there are ways around reality, and these new “fake” and fantasized images are an important part of the new studio aesthetic and the new capitalist society in general, which must be kept believing that reality is inadequate if it is to continue spending and keeping the machinery of capitalism spinning.

Recent *chalga*, then, seems to be connected to capitalism in at least two ways: as a product of capitalism and as a genre whose content is a reflection (and at times a parody) of capitalism and the mentality of people under capitalism. As with any “successful” (where successful means lucrative) capitalist product, modern *chalga* seems more and more formulaic and includes only those elements that are necessary for it to attract a wide audience of consumers. What this means practically is that the goal for *chalga* is often to fulfill the most widespread fantasies in the population, which in Bulgaria today seem to be the desires for money, sex, and power. Musically, a repetitive, electronic sound (often with the *kyuchek* rhythm and a sound palate reminiscent of earlier *chalga*) that is suitable for the dance floor is often enough to meet the new goal.

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112 Kurkela, “Bulgarian Chalga on Video,” 164.
This differs remarkably from the goals of those who were in charge of music production under communism, who were of course, members of the communist government. In this situation, music was created to fulfill such goals as the unification and “purification” of the Bulgarian population or to instill pride and a sense of culture in the nation’s citizens. By the end of communist rule, many of these goals seemed quite outdated and the freedom to make music based on alternative and individual goals was welcomed by many in the 1990s. The chalga of the 1990s was definitely one of the results of these new capitalistic and democratic freedoms. However, the need to satisfy a consumer has always been an important goal in the creation of chalga and the difference between early chalga and more recent chalga reflects an increased awareness of how to accomplish the goal of fulfilling the population’s widespread fantasies in the most efficient manner possible. Whereas the widespread desires for money, power, and sex are reflected in earlier chalga, they are often decorated with humor, musical creativity, and social consciousness. In the vast majority of recent chalga, these latter elements are largely disposable and perhaps not economically expedient. In this way, recent chalga has as one of its defining characteristics its position in society as a product of capitalism. Recent releases by the newer generation of chalga performers, such as Andrea and Emanuela, and modern-style releases by more veteran performers, such as Malina and Azis, are all evidence of chalga as a product of capitalism.

Although the majority of recent chalga seems to be little more than a product of capitalism, some of it does, in its content, react to and reflect on the current capitalist society in a more self-conscious manner that is reminiscent of the social consciousness and humor often found in earlier chalga. While such productions are still capitalist
products and include all the elements mentioned in relation to such products, they manage in some way to call attention to this aspect of their production and exaggerate it to the point of absurdity. The tricks of the industry, in a sense, rather than simply being used to trick the consumer into purchasing the product, are brought to the consumer’s attention in a shameless or humorous manner.

Since many of the criticisms of recent *chalga* relate to its videos, it is in the videos that such humor and self-consciousness can usually be found. An aspect that is criticized by society, such as the fake and overly sexual appearance of contemporary female *chalga* performers, is often featured prominently in such videos and in fact taken to the extreme so that, in this case, the woman would appear so fake and provocative that she would seem almost animated or not quite human and, likely, not quite suitable for daytime television.

An example of such parody can be found in a 2010 video for the song *Haide Opa* (an energizing expression that translates roughly into “Let’s Go”), which features Andrea, a *chalga* star of this newer generation. The video opens with a shooting star (presumably Andrea herself beaming in from Planet Fantasy) crossing the peaceful night sky in what seems to be calm, tidy, suburban America. Several characters (a young girl eating an ice cream cone, a middle-aged couple relaxing on a park bench by a fountain, a young “macho” man by a car, a casual neighbor mowing his lawn, and a man who has returned from the store with a bag of wholesome groceries) are all present when Andrea pulls up to their street in her expensive Ferrari and steps out to walk into one of the neighborhood’s houses. The entire first part of the video consists of her walking from the

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car to the house wearing red high heels and a flashy, short, very low-cut red dress, which is one of the more conservative clothing items she wears in the video. Her appearance is over-the-top polished, artificial, and sexual. The studio aesthetic of fakeness is treated humorously as the Ferrari itself changes colors while she drives it, her leggings digitally fly off her legs when she steps out of the car, and she is able to cause a jeweled bracelet to appear on her wrist with the mere touch of her hand. Her entire walk from the car to the house is in slow motion, as are the surrounding characters’ reactions to her. The men’s mouths hang open, the young girl drops her ice cream cone, the middle-aged woman gives her a look of scorn, and the man with the groceries drops them on the ground. They can’t take their eyes off of her, and the implication would seem to be that she has achieved a look and fascination that strongly attracts a diverse population: the perfect capitalist product. In fact, the entire visual sequence, with its slow-motion pace, has the distinct feeling of a television commercial. In keeping with the characteristics of this style of *chalta*, the music is electronic, repetitive, and designed for club dancing. Minimal effort is required of the singer, who is never actually shown to be singing. The *kyuchek* rhythm has been retained, and an introductory trumpet solo reminiscent of the wind instrument solos in earlier *chalta* ties it to the genre.

In videos such as this, one can also witness what is one of the biggest sources of controversy in more recent *chalta*: the overly sexual nature of the modern *chalta* stars. *Chalta*, as a genre that thrives on controversy and turns societal ills into assets in its own fantasy world, has, through its videos and performers, taken sexual provocation to the very boundary (and in some cases beyond the boundary) of what can be considered non-pornographic material. Although in this particular video, there is a certain sense that this
overly sexual image is being parodied, the image is there nonetheless. Can this really be the product of a country that only two decades earlier was represented to the world by the women of *Le mystère des voix Bulgare*, who performed in traditional Bulgarian clothing and were chosen to perform exclusively based on their musical talent?

The parody, then, is toward the mass population of viewers, who, like the characters in the video, cannot take their eyes off of the singer and have been analyzed for profit in the new system. Through the suburban setting of the video, the United States seems to be implicated as an important player in this new system, and thus, the concept of progress as Bulgaria moves toward a more western identity is called into question. For certainly here Roma and Turkish populations can no longer be held responsible for the lamented “decline” of Bulgarian culture that seems to be largely the result of western influence.

Whereas this video calls attention to absurd aspects of the modern production style of *chalga* and to how the relationship between the consumer and consumed has been highly manipulated for profit in contemporary Bulgarian society, another quite recent production highlights the naïve dreams of the population under capitalism. This 2012 song titled *Mister Shiki* can be found in two forms.\(^{114}\) The first form, which is likely designed to be played on the radio and in clubs for dancing, seems to be an upbeat praise of “the good life,” which under capitalism is shown to mean that of the wealthy. The singers have stumbled upon good fortune through the aid of a wealthy man named Mr. Shiki, and when they partner with him, all of their hopes and dreams (which seem to be mostly dreams of attractive women, fancy cars, and a sense of power and importance) are

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fulfilled. The moral of the song seems to be that with money, all of life’s problems can be solved.

However, the second form of the song, which is used in the official promotional video, includes a frame around this upbeat portion that adds an element of parody to the views expressed in the main portion of the song. For this second form opens with a very bleak factory scene with disgruntled workers and newspaper headlines that read “Without Pay: Metallurgical Plant Workers Have Remained Three Months Without Pay” and “Pernik [an industrial city in Bulgaria] Hit Hard by the Economic Crisis.” The music reflects the situation through its metallic and melancholy sound. However, just as one worker seems to have lost all enthusiasm for life, his friend runs in and excitedly shows him a new headline: “Mr. Shiki Invested in the Pernik Economy.” The workers go on to gloat “Mr. Shiki is the biggest man in the city!” and “Let us tell you about him!” It is at this point that the main portion of the song begins; therefore, the good life expressed in this portion is very clearly set up to be a fantasy in this second form of the song. The singers’ belief that all of life’s ills can be solved with money, then, is the dream being parodied.

The aesthetic of the video and the music is definitely that of the new studio aesthetic and, more specifically, seems to be heavily influenced by the aesthetic of rap or hip hop music and videos from the United States. Much of the text is spoken rhythmically rather than sung, and rhythm, rather than melody, is the driving concept of the song. As in a western rap video, the three male vocalists (Erik, Angel, and Mr. Juve) perform standing outside while surrounded by attractive women. The women themselves, as with Andrea in Haide Opa, have an absurdly fake and sexual look that borders on parody.
Their appearance calls to mind a group of Barbie dolls, with each one differing from the others only in terms of hairstyle and color of dress. Proportions and behavior have been completely standardized by capitalism. In keeping with the studio aesthetic, the outdoor scenes in the video are devoid of life – snowy, stark, and uninviting. There is no sun – in fact, the only bright lights outside are those coming from the headlights of the expensive cars surrounding the dancers.

The text is in three languages: Bulgarian, Romanian, and English. Although English is only used briefly in the lyrics as one of the women utters a common expletive, it is notable and perhaps evidence of increasing western influence on Bulgaria that the title character is referred to as Mister Shiki and not Gospodin Shiki, which would be the Bulgarian equivalent. The singer who actually plays the role of Mr. Shiki in the video is a Romanian singer who goes by the stage name Mr. Juve, and perhaps in honor of him and in honor of chalga’s history of mixing diverse ethnic elements, the chorus of the song is sung in Romanian by all three singers.

In the video, this second form of the song closes with a continuation of the earlier bleak factory scene. This time one of the workers has fallen asleep and, presumably, the previous images of Mr. Shiki have been nothing but a dream. When his coworker complains that he has been doing all of his sleeping friend’s work, the friend wakes up and, rather than apologizing, yells in disappointment, “Am I dreaming again?”115 He is back to the real, tense life of economic struggle and feelings of inadequacy that is likely more representative of life for Bulgarians than the fantasy identity continually represented in chalga.

115 All text from the Mister Shiki video is translated by Nikolay Stoyanov.
Is Mister Shiki, then, a modern Shkembeto? Although such an association was likely not intended, there is a striking similarity in the type of parody being employed. For in Shkembeto, the belief being parodied was that of the village aesthetic, where tradition could be counted on to “overtake the world with two slices of bread.” Tradition could be counted on to bring courage to its people, and quite humorously in the music video, the consumption of tripe soup, the specific tradition in question, could be counted on to attract beautiful, dancing women and bring “the good life” to the two male singers. Tradition was the value of the villagers, and money is the new value of capitalism in Bulgarian society. But are the modern expectations about what money can bring any more reasonable than the parodied village beliefs about tradition? The elements of parody in Mister Shiki seem to suggest that the beliefs about money, too, are nothing more than an illusion.

This analysis of recent trends in chalga, then, suggests that Bulgarians have, in a short time, made a remarkable shift toward a new capitalistic identity. The studio aesthetic found in the music and music videos is reflective of this new identity and also indicative of increasing western influence on Bulgaria as it takes its place in the European Union and the global community in general. Many of the earlier characteristics and themes of chalga have been updated or transformed in more recent chalga to reflect these widespread social changes. Parody and humor, although perhaps not as obviously employed as they were in earlier songs, have remained an important part of the genre and are used as a means of highlighting and questioning the new values of capitalism. Increasingly the free and equal consumer or viewer is a character in this parody as he or she has been analyzed and easily manipulated in the production process.
Conclusion

The road to democracy in Bulgaria has been a sinuous one, full of many twists, turns, and surprises. Pre-Ottoman Bulgaria was founded in 681 and lasted roughly seven hundred years until it fell to Ottoman forces in 1393. These forces would rule the land for another nearly five hundred years until Bulgarian independence was declared in 1878. The Bulgarian Revival, during which Bulgarians attempted to reconnect with the western world, lasted nearly seventy years until the beginning of communism in 1944. And communism, as large and significant as it might seem in the minds of the modern Bulgarians, lasted only forty-five years – democracy has already lasted half as long. Bulgaria, then, is not entering democracy in the eighteenth century, a time when the new democratic ideals were pitted against the old aristocratic ideals with the hope that democracy would be the new, permanent, enlightened way. Bulgaria, it would seem, does not have the luxury of believing in permanence. The transition to democracy and capitalism in Bulgarian society has occurred in this context and has been decidedly less decorated by the sense of idealism and the sense of permanent progress that accompanied the European and American transition of more than two centuries ago.

Evidence of Bulgaria’s less idealistic and more cynical reaction to its cultural transition made headlines around the world when, in summer of 2011, Bulgarians were greeted by an elaborately (and quite skillfully) vandalized monument in the center of Sofia. The monument dated from 1954, the ten year anniversary of Russia’s liberation of Bulgaria, and is (or, at this point, was), a monument to the brave Soviet forces. The

graffiti artists, however, managed to transform the monument overnight into a monument to the capitalist (and perhaps specifically American) forces that have “rescued” Bulgaria today. One now sees, painted over the bodies of the Soviet heroes, the likeness of Ronald McDonald, Santa Claus, Superman, and other capitalist “heroes.” Spray painted underneath is the phrase “V Krak c Vremeto” (“In Step with the Times”). Although many Bulgarians, of course, were outraged, the graffiti artists (who were eventually revealed to be a group of artists known as “Destructive Creation”) went unpunished, and many reacted favorably to the updated monument, with the Bulgarian Finance Minister quipping, “I’m more of a fan of Superman than Lenin.”

Instability and transition have been prominent features of the lives of many Bulgarians, and as in the graffiti paintings and the music, videos, and lyrics of chalga, humor and parody seem to be commonly employed as coping mechanisms during unstable times. Progress itself, as a concept, seems to be questioned through these uses of humor and parody, with the each new governmental, economic, or social movement perhaps being nothing more than a new mask in a grand kukeri dance performed to ward off the evil spirit of nihilism.

One of the first songs I examined when I began researching chalga more pointedly, is a song titled Iztyrvahme Konya. The title is an idiomatic expression in Bulgarian that translates roughly to “Dropped the Horse” and means to drop the reigns or otherwise lose control of a horse. It is a pure kyuchek – only music, no lyrics, and the


118 Parkinson, “It’s a Bird!”

music video’s image is largely in sepia tones. Although I could not find a date for the song, I gathered from the video style and the improvisatory, soloistic playing that included minimal electronic manipulation that it must be a very early song, likely from the early 1990s. However, I wasn’t entirely sure what was being depicted in the images, which, at their most basic level, show two men riding a car into a Roma village where they speak to a crowd and are entertained by them for the night. When they drive away later, their car breaks down and has to be towed by a Roma passerby who is riding on a horse-pulled cart. The horse, however, breaks free and leaves the car in its dust. I ran the video by my husband for an explanation.

“Well, the men are politicians, and it is quite common in Bulgaria for politicians to go into the villages to get the ‘Gypsy Vote.’ They speak to the crowd, are entertained by the musicians and dancers, and then they go home.”

“This is an early, song, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Well, I thought so, too, at first,” he replied. “But watch the roundabout street sign at the end.”

I watched the video again, more closely this time, and, sure enough, the roundabout sign changes at the end of the video to the sign of the European Union. This song is, in fact, a quite unique example of recent chalga. It is also a proper song and image with which to conclude this analysis of chalga as it relates to the changing Bulgarian identity. For here, in the more traditionally styled music and in the images of the Roma community, is a symbol of Bulgaria’s Ottoman past. In the European Union sign and image of the preaching politicians is a symbol of Bulgaria’s western future. However, is the future leading the past or is the past leading the future? Progress is
parodied on the way home as the horse is called upon to tow the broken down car. The viewer is led to believe that the concept of progress itself is breaking down in the modern Bulgarian consciousness with concepts such as the East, the West, the past, and the future being points on a roundabout circle rather than a directional line. Such an abstract self conception is not productive in modern life, which demands decisions, actions, and clear cut political choices, and in this practical sense, Bulgaria seems to have chosen democracy and capitalism. However, in the arena of communal fantasy and expression, a more contradictory and fluid identity is allowed, and *chalga* has been a medium through which this identity has been harnessed and preserved during Bulgaria’s recent “transitional” times.
Bibliography


Videos Cited


