

# Chalga is Not Part of our National Identity!

Chalga is not subculture, or counter-culture, not even low culture - it is absolutely deprived of all culture. And I would not waste time to write a word about it, if it was clear to every foreigner that it has nothing to do with our national identity. Perhaps it does sound somehow exotic to non-natives, so one cannot blame them for going to chalga night clubs upon arriving in Sofia. But the problem is that this anticultural phenomenon has some influence on the way Bulgarians are perceived by some other nations. I came across an article (unfor-

this lies both in the intensity with which it is advertised and in the amount of money invested there. One could even get paranoid and start thinking that chalga is some sort of propaganda since it is occasionally broadcasted on a state TV channel during the peak viewing hours, or since a mega chalga concert is allowed in front of the main cathedral in the capital (free entrance yet little audience). On the other hand, there have been a number of ironic (rather satirical than sarcastic) reactions to all this, e.g. the "chalga generator", created just

The Severnyashki Ensemble  
(Pleven)  
at the 19th Varna Summer  
Folk Festival  
(© Photo: Rosen Donev)



tunately not the sole example of its kind) in German by *Cafebabel.com*, which conveyed the message that the Bulgarians listened to chalga "with awe" everywhere, that 87% of the Bulgarian pupils knew some particular chalga song but just 63% could quote a particular masterpiece of classical Bulgarian poetry - needless to say, no source was referred to here by the author of the report.

If chalga has gained some popularity among the not well-educated people, the reason for

for fun by some smart programmers and made available online - it could generate a "great chalga hit" in seconds, after you checked a couple of boxes on a screen.

Chalga is not a Bulgarian word, nor a mere Bulgarian phenomenon. In the narrowest sense it is a Balkan occurrence (no matter its several names in the different Balkan states). In the broadest sense it is a global tendency and not just in the (pseudo) music industry - vulgarity and bad taste may well be found



Bulgarian music has a long and elevated tradition. In its various genres and periods it has been rather stretched between the Bulgarian folklore, experience and history, on the one hand, and certain foreign influences and movements on the other.

everywhere and, perhaps it has always been like that.

To make it absolutely clear, *chalga* and *Bulgarian music* are different things and the second one definitely excludes the first. Bulgarian music has a long and elevated tradition, more ancient than our earliest famous composer - known in scholarship as St John Kukuzelis (ca. 1280-1360) - as our oldest preserved notated musical monument is dated back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Bulgarian Orthodox music is not just cultural

known, however, is the fact that there are numerous annual folk festivals in various Bulgarian towns - Veliko Tarnovo, Koprivshtitsa, Gela, Beglika, Zlatograd, Rozhen, Predela and many others - and that this continues to be the strongest point of the regional cultures<sup>1</sup>. Besides, lots of talented Bulgarian children are eager to study in the folk art schools in the country. Our folk music is loved also abroad and has inspired many foreigners to an extent that they have not only learned to perform it, but also decided to move

Hristo Yotsov and Stoyan Yankulov playing at the 19th Varna Summer Jazz Festival  
(© Photo: Rosen Donev)



heritage to us; lots of our best composers made their contribution to it and it is still vital in the churches. The most recent social event in this regard was the Seventh International Festival of Orthodox Music (Pomorie, 9-13 June 2010).

Another treasure of ours is folklore. It is well-known that a Bulgarian folk song (sung by Valya Balkanska) was included in the Voyager Golden Record selection of music which was sent into outer space. Perhaps not so well-

to Bulgaria in spite of all the troubles one may encounter there (the last examples known to me are of a Japanese family and of an American lady).

Folklore is inseparable part - like a layer - of almost all our culture. To put it more accurately, our culture is stretched between the Bulgarian past (traditions, experience, history) on the one hand, and the foreign movements and influences (modern or classical) on the other. A most vivid example of this is a strain

in our jazz music, where the names speak for themselves: Milcho Leviev, Teodosi Spasov, Yildiz Ibrahimova. Bulgarian Jazz also has active live in the several annual festivals, in the hundreds of jazz clubs in the country and the numerous talented musicians among the younger generation.

Our classical music continues to have traditionally strong opera singers, composers<sup>2</sup>, violin players and piano players who, like the previous generation, also bring fame to our

terms of Bulgarian music and, also, to compensate to some extent for the lack of information on music in the last manual of the Bulgarian National Statistical Institute<sup>3</sup>.

This statistical manual reflects the publishing activity and the TV and radio production, on the one hand, and the number of cultural institutions, on the other. According to it, there is growth of the number of the published titles, whilst the total printing is

The Sofia Philharmonic Orchestra in one of their concerts at Bulgaria Hall.



country. Most recently honored are Krasimira Stoyanova (soprano) and Vesselina Kasarova (mezzo-soprano) they were granted the coveted title of Kammersängerin by the Vienna State Opera.

It is not the purpose of this paper to name all our famous and virtuoso musicians, composers and singers; nor is possible to prepare a full list of them (partly because some live abroad at present). My intention has been rather to show what is really significant in

lower than in previous years (with the exception of newspapers whose total print circulation has grown since 2005). The highest percentage of the books published in 2009 are fictional, scientific and applied scientific (including educational), the lowest percentage is related to politics and industry<sup>4</sup>. Since 2003, the number of radio stations has gradually grown with more than 22% and of TV stations - with about 17%. The number of educational radio programmes has increased by 8% while news decreased by 7% on the radio; art





programs have become fewer on the TV with 10%. As far as libraries are concerned, the situation is relatively stable there; just the number of readers visiting them is lower (from 321,000 people in 2004 to 253,000 in 2008). An opposite tendency is reflected in museums, since, for the same period, the number of visitors grew with 30%. There is a slight growth of the audience in the theatres.

re and not because there are no masterpieces at present, but rather because current cultural achievements and events are not known to the general public. In fact there is nothing wrong with the culture itself and stratification of culture is a normal process - rather, what is wrong is the lack of information, the lack of state cultural policy and of wise investments in culture, the cultural reform which plans to reduce the number of national operas and other cultural institutions. What keeps the ball rolling for culture is, before all, the enthusiasm

The St Paraskeva Church Choir (Sofia), conducted by Neli Trosheva and Svetla Tihova, was granted 2 awards at the 2010 Pomorie Festival of Orthodox Music.

Even though this statistical manual does not reflect the quality of cultural production, the



numbers give some idea of the state of culture in Bulgaria. Nevertheless some of our intellectuals appealed that there was crisis in our cultu-

of separate men of culture, of artists and ordinary people and this, it seems to me, is the strongest point of our culture at present.

1. In our information and communications era music can already be preserved, stored and made available as both image and sound. *WebFolk Bulgaria* is a digital collection of more than 1,500 authentic Bulgarian folk songs, sorted by regions, topics as well as alphabetically and is comprised of texts (lyrics and metadata), images, audio and video records. This is one of the Bulgarian collections that have already been ingested in ATHENA.
2. See the database of Bulgarian composers at [www.ubc-bg.com/en/composer/57](http://www.ubc-bg.com/en/composer/57).
3. This lack does not mean lack of music, of musical production and of musicians in Bulgaria and this is proven by other information on the internet, e.g. a calendar of folk music festivals [www.forum.chanove.com/index.php?topic=309.0;wap2](http://www.forum.chanove.com/index.php?topic=309.0;wap2) refers to more than 200 events in 2010; some data on classical music concerts, unfortunately just for the first half of the year, can be found on another Website but it does not give full information as some of the annual international festivals, like the Sofia Music Weeks or the March Music days in Ruse, are not reflected there. I did not succeed in finding a similar list of jazz but everybody knows about the two annual festivals in Sofia and the one in Bansko. In addition, there are a number of annual cultural festivals not just of music but also of performing and visual arts - in Varna, Plovdiv and Sozopol.
4. Apart from the publishing activity, all other statistics on culture are up to 2008 in the manual.