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The Clarinet in Bulgarian Wedding Music: An Introduction (Abstract)

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Svatbarska muzika, or "wedding music," is the term applied to a musical style that has generated intense interest among Bulgarians since the late 1960s, and now commands a loyal following across Europe and in North America as well. The meteoric rise in popularity of the wedding music style in Bulgaria in the 1970s and 1980s has been likened to the revolutionary social impact of rock music in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. The frenetic energy of wedding music's dances emerged as a popular expression of rebellion against the more staid, state-sanctioned folk music program of Bulgaria's socialist government. While the government promoted an ideal of "authentic" Bulgarian folk music, wedding music was performed at a variety of private events and functions, of which weddings were the most elaborate and festive.

Many urban Bulgarian instrumentalists had begun to use Western instruments, such as clarinet and accordion, to perform Bulgaria's traditional songs and dances as early as the turn of the twentieth century. In the 1970s and 1980s, many of Bulgaria's "modern-instrument" ensembles, contrary to the government's wishes, began to incorporate elements of Western jazz and rock music into their performances, including the use of the clarinet and saxophone as lead instruments, backed by a rhythm section of electric guitar, electric bass, and drum set. Their performances also focused increasingly on the music of Bulgaria's ethnic minorities, especially its Turkish and Rom (i.e., Gypsy) populations, as well as the music of other Balkan countries. Bulgarian clarinetists were at the heart of the wedding music phenomenon, often serving as bandleaders for wedding ensembles and using the technical facility and extreme registers of their Western instruments as emblems of modernity and rebellion.

The first part of my presentation will demonstrate the techniques that wedding musicians have used to adapt traditional Bulgarian song and dance styles to performance on the clarinet. As part of my study of this music, I learned to play in the wedding style by studying with one of its performers who has immigrated to America. Yuri Yunakov, a saxophonist who also plays clarinet. From my studies with Yunakov, I can comment on the equipment wedding-style performers use, and demonstrate their method of rapid-fire articulation and their adaptation of traditional practices of melodic ornamentation. Using recordings of Bulgarian master performers, I will then illustrate how these specific techniques contribute to the spectacularly virtuosic performances of wedding music clarinetists as they perform highly ornamented slow melodies and devise dizzying, often jazz-inflected solos over the uneven meters of Bulgarian dances, which are often in 5/8, 7/8, or 11/16.

The wedding style has continued to be popular since the fall of Communism in Bulgaria in 1989, and it has also continued to attract controversy. Perhaps the biggest "star" of the wedding music world is clarinetist Ivo Papazov, the leader of the ensemble of which Yunakov was a member. Papazov, who like Yunakov is himself of Turkish and Rom descent, was imprisoned for his performances of Turkish music during Bulgaria's Communist era, and his performances continue to generate controversy among Bulgarians for their incorporation of Turkish and Rom elements. In an effort to understand the popular reception of wedding music, I interviewed a variety of Bulgarian émigrés, both musicians and non-musicians, to ascertain their opinions of the wedding music phenomenon. The second part of my presentation will compare a few examples from Papazov's recordings with examples drawn from the recordings of his Bulgarian colleagues. These comparisons will show how choice of repertoire, inclusion of foreign and minority musical influences, and even such specific considerations as musical phrasing and clarinet timbre have been interpreted as political considerations by listeners. These comparisons will also demonstrate how the clarinetists of the Bulgarian wedding style have aimed to attract a variety of different audiences, both at home and abroad.

