

THE KEF TIMES

FROM THE EEFC BOARD

Undergoing its annual rite of autumn, the EEFC has changed leadership positions. Three members of the board of directors of the organization retired after serving their three year terms: Judy Newland, George Long, and Belle Birchfield, who had been serving as president of the EEFC. Of special note, Belle did much of the legwork required to bring Esma Redzepova and the Ensemble Teodosievski to the United States, and her energetic presence will be missed. George will continue as Membership Coordinator.

To replace them the board has added three new members: Laura Blumenthal, Yves Moreau, and yours truly, Matthew Smith. Laura lives in Salt Lake City, and is the board liaison with the EEFC community. She can be contacted by e-mail by writing to board@eefc.com, or by sending a letter to EEFC, PO Box 12488, Berkeley, CA 94712-3488. Yves Moreau is from Montreal, is much loved as a dance teacher, and is a very silly man when he wants to be. As for me, I'm known as a rather sober and serious individual among the East Coasters who go to Balkan Camp, and I hail from New Jersey. The four members staying on as board members are Michael Gage, Melanie Goldberg, Lynette Garlan, and Dennis Godfrey (the four G's). Melanie Goldberg is the new president of the board of directors.

We have also changed the roster of administrative staff. Rachel MacFarlane is now General Manager, Managing Director, and Lord High Executioner of the EEFC—this is now her full-time job, merging the part-time positions of Program Director and Business Manager into one

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AJDE NA POI BALLS!

(Extracted from an article written for the August 1998 Footnotes, published by the International Folkdancers of Hawaii. Thanks to author Alina Niemi and Footnotes editor Dick Burson for permission to adapt and reprint the article.)

One of the events of the week at Mendocino is an auction to raise money for the EEFC. Everyone is encouraged to donate an item or service to be auctioned off. This year, almost as an afterthought, I threw a pair of poi balls in my bag and decided I would donate them and a lesson on how to use them. Poi balls are a tennis-sized ball at the end of a length of braided cord, about one arm's length long and are used in dances by the Maori people of New Zealand. One cord is held in each hand and swung so that the balls and cords create graceful and intricate patterns through the air around the dancer.

I had learned to do them in physical education class in high school, and for some unknown reason, am still able to do them years later. They're actually a lot of fun to do, and beautiful to watch. Every now and then I get to see dancers from the Polynesian Cultural Center perform with them in full costume, which includes skirts made out of some sort of beads that clatter and clink together musically as the dancers move. But they are professionals. I just had my shorts and t-shirt on, and tried not to screw up too badly as I went up front to do a demonstration at the auction.

At one point the cords got tangled, and the balls hit me, and a collective gasp arose from the audience. So I said, "Oh, no, they are soft..." and squeezed a ball (made of paper inside a plastic wrapper) to show them, "so it doesn't hurt me." I did various combinations with the poi balls, including swinging them on both sides of my body and behind my head. Then I took both cords in one hand and swung them so they looked like propellers on the tail of a helicopter. I told the auctioneer, Michael Ginsburg, to go

ahead and talk while I continued, and I squatted as I raised the "propeller" over my head. I kept the demo going as Michael tried to raise more money.

Suddenly Lise Liepman bid for me to teach Esma Redzepova, who returned this year to Balkan camp with her ensemble by popular demand. If you are not familiar with her, Esma is about four feet, ten inches tall, plump, and commanding, and she sure knows how to work an audience. She would come out in a new costume, a blaze of red and orange satin, elaborately embroidered in gold, with a fiery wrap around her head; or a luscious emerald-green, sequined gown of velvet, with her red hair in a neat bun on top. She would spread her arms wide, smile contentedly, and cast her gaze across the room, surveying all in her domain before launching into ascending and descending wails with her low voice full of body and soul and heartache and years of experience. Then she would clap her hands and shake her hips in a very refined, very composed manner as a joyous smile spread across her face and a tease sparkled in her feline eyes. After each song, when the applause would start to die down, she would say "Thank you" in Macedonian, then "TANK you so much" before turning to

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DRAWING BY ALINA NIEMI

THE KEF TIMES

is published by the East European Folklife Center, P.O. Box 12488, Berkeley, CA 94712-3488.

For information about the East European Folklife Center, the Balkan Music & Dance Workshops, or to be included on our mailing list, contact us at the address above, call 510/524-2124, or send e-mail to: office@eefc.org, or visit our website at: www.eefc.org. Address all comments or submissions to this newsletter to Rachel MacFarlane, Editor, *The Kef Times*.

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EEFC Mission Statement:

"The East European Folklife Center (EEFC) is a non-profit organization whose mission is to educate the general public about the folk music, folk dance and folklore of the Balkans through promoting and sponsoring activities which honor and celebrate the richness of these cultures; and to foster understanding and respect of all peoples through shared experiences of Balkan cultures."

FROM THE EDITOR

Dearest Friends and Honorable Colleagues,

After serving for (Whoa!) five years as EEFC's Program Director, I have taken a huge step and perhaps an even bigger leap of faith this fall by accepting the new, expanded administrative position of General Manager. As time went by, it was proving more and more difficult to perform my duties for EEFC—the ebb and flow of the yearly cycle makes it almost impossible to take on other "normal" work. Thankfully, the organization has reached a level of maturity whereby taking on a full-time salaried employee has become feasible.

I remember way back when I first started programming the Mendocino and Buffalo Gap workshops. I worked hourly, in the bits of free time I had when I wasn't engaged in my full-time job as a Slavic cataloger at the University of Chicago's Regenstein Library. I was part of a large team of "paid administrative staff" (PAS), which was closely managed by a nine-member board of directors. My first year, 1993, was indeed a challenge—it was our last summer at Buffalo Gap, and among other interesting things, the slate of teachers there went through wild transformations all the way up to the first day of the workshop. Somehow, I convinced myself to do it a second year, for the pleasures transcended the hassles.

From that time, through the efforts of several key people, I witnessed and participated in the transformation of EEFC into an ever more efficient and refined non-profit corporation. At the risk of leaving many names unmentioned, a few of these folks have been: David Bilides, who, as president of the board in 1994, encouraged the increased independence of the PAS and under

whose tenure the idea of an executive director was explored; Sandie Merrill, who established our bookkeeping system and "office"; Martie Ripson, who volunteered her valuable professional expertise to bring us an excellent shared database system and who continues to joyfully techno-innovate for us; the EEFC board of directors, who collectively and individually has been encouraging and supportive of administrative changes (indeed, to its advantage—as it is no longer minutely involved in the running of the workshops, the board at last has room to contemplate the broader picture of EEFC's mission). No matter what, we would not be in this position today without the vision and effort of Nancy Leeper, who, among many other innovations, thought up the idea of co-directorship and implemented a steadily improving organizational structure which has served us well for four years. Her introduction of local workshop site managers last year paved the way for a single EEFC general director. I am proud of our organization's continued will to grow and develop and be ever more worthy of its mission.

So here I am, at your service! I have been spending this fall setting up an office, which consists of a post office box in downtown Berkeley and a sunny lace-curtained alcove off my kitchen with computer, printer, fax and assorted telephones and blessedly easy access to caffeine. I've been getting up to speed on mailing services, graphic designers and print shops, and am continuing my old, familiar programming and bookkeeping duties, and overall, just looking forward to another year of hearing from, learning from, working with and playing with all of you.

Rachel MacFarlane

EEFC SEEKING GRANTWRITERS

The EEFC is seeking grants to support its efforts in bringing East European song, music, and dance to the American public. The EEFC board is interested in working with anyone who is willing to help us locate and obtain such grants or anyone who is aware of grants which might support our efforts in this regard. Please contact Mike Gage, chair of the EEFC Development Committee, at 716/271-0633, or gage@math.rochester.edu for further information about EEFC's needs.

BALKANALIA! BLAST

"W hoa! Check it out—c'm'ere, ya gotta see this!" I dropped my bags at the door of the cabin and hurried down the shady, wooded path at the end of which was a clearing with a jaw-dropping picture-frame view of Mt. Hood. It was here that the lucky drum students whiled away their lessons at the 2nd annual balkanalia! workshop at Camp Howard, OR.

Disappointed that we could not secure the idyllic Silver Falls State Park a second year, our intrepid b! Site Manager, Lanita Hyatt, embarked on an intense search throughout the State of Oregon for a site. We settled on the Catholic youth camp with some apprehension—though in a gorgeous setting near the Sandy River, convenient to Portland, the site has a strict no-liquor charter policy. 1998 balkanalia! proved that you can have a caffeine-powered Kafana and still have a major blast.

A phenomenal turnout—including more than 25 delightful and energetic kids—kept everything rocking. But how could we lose with the master musicians of Ziyiá and Slavej, with Joe (Mr. Greek Dance) Graziosi, Michael Lawson and his mighty accordion, doumbek doyenene

Polly Tapia Ferber, ansamblmajstor David Bilides, *bate* Vasko Bebelev and the Gajda Mafia, with the quick-footed John Gibson and Tom Deering, halay queen Lise Liepman—and the ever-passionate Steve Kotansky showing us where to put our feet (and hips!). How could we lose with the manic energy of Kultur Shock, led by Gino Yevdjovich of the banana rattle and gnarly threads, with Mary Sherhart of the velvet voice and snappy skirts? And this is just the official staff, mind you. Combinations and recombinations of staff and reg'l'r folk produced some unforgettable musical moments—a mesmerizing Pontic set by Bob Beer, wailin' with the Goat Boys in the Kafana, 'cross the border tunes from Grupa Dunbarov, an unbelievable ad hoc Transylvanian mélange led by Beth Cohen, sazifying at 5:00 a.m.—it goes on and on.

If I could only do justice to the myriad experiences all packed into this three-day weekend. Better that you should come see for yourself. We have secured Camp Howard again for August 26–29, 1999, and will be expecting you there at b! number three!

Rachel MacFarlane



Our fall meeting was generously hosted by Melanie, Mike, Anna and Felicia Goldberg in their gracious Huntington Woods, MI, house. After our hard work was over, we made good use of the Goldbergs' back yard, where we ate, drank, joked, danced and played music. Back row, L-R: Matt Smith, Laura Blumenthal, Melanie Goldberg, Yves Moreau. Front row, L-R: Dennis Godfrey, Lynette Garlan, Mike Gage. Not shown: Rachel MacFarlane.

FROM THE BOARD

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position. We did this in the belief that one full-time position would work better than two part-time positions, since the administrative staff would not have to balance their EEFC jobs with their "real" jobs. On the down side, this means we lose the services of Steve Ramsey, our Business Manager. We wish Steve well.

But with all these comings and goings, the organization remains fundamentally the same. 1998 was perhaps the best year ever for our three camps, Mendocino, Ramblewood, and balkanalia. Oops, make that balkanalia!, can't forget that exclamation point! In 1999, we will again make great music, have wonderful parties, learn songs and instruments, and generally deprive ourselves of sleep with smiles on our faces. And that's just the board—I don't know what all you campers will be doing. We'll be expanding our membership program to help keep us on a sound financial footing. We will (gradually) be expanding our internet presence. We will be studying your suggestions for other improvements we can make. And we hope to continue to hear from you, and to see you at camp!

Matt Smith



MENDOCINO HIGHLIGHTS



PHOTO BY MARCIA KEMBLE

Mendocino 1998: L-R: Lyuben Dossev, Svetla Angelova and Milen Slavov

Mendocino '98 was all good, eight days of highlights. Mass quantities of excellent teaching, amazing performances, intense joy, dropped jaws, communication across language barriers, old and new friendships, improvements over already-great administration, revelations and revelries... Esma was brilliant, Lyuben was expressive and funny, Mirjana was loud and wise, Nikolay was elegant, Donka was precise, Svetla was resonant, and so on and so marvelously forth. But if I tell you how fine any single performer was, you might think the next one wasn't as good, and that would be wrong.

The true spirit of the week turned out to be teamwork, in one superb band after another: Esma & Ensemble Teodosievski, who earn every superlative in the book; the miraculous and gorgeous Bulgarian pickup band of Lyuben, Nikolay, Donka, Svetla, community guest Milen Slavov, good ol' Bill, stalwart bassist Paul Brown, and drummers Dan and Petur; our very dear friends in Ziyiá, right on the money and good as gold; Mark Forry's idea of a good time, with so many people making the music that there was hardly anyone left to dance; and the joyful reunion of The Artists Formerly Known As Lole, playing till dawn like any self-respecting tamburica band.

Just a few short scenes from the many that crowd my memory: the amphitheater filled one day with sectionals under Ensemble Teodosievski and the next day with the whole camp

singing "Ibraim" to Esma's enormous grin; the Bosnian Mirjana Lausevic and the Macedonian Simeon Atanasov, making up a table of former Yugoslavs and friends, singing and drinking, hearts on sleeves as Mark F. played old favorites to them; midnight zurnas and Dan's undeniable beat raising my feet from the dead; first Donka and then Milen pouring cascades of ornaments over the lamb as we lifted our glasses to their beautiful voices and the sweet comments of Nikolay's gudulka and Lyuben's kaval; excellent shopping for costumes, instruments, beaded bracelets, sheet music, recordings of campers and teachers and experts known and unknown; second Saturday in the sweaty, jumping kafana with Esma's boys playing till they dropped, and Esma taking the microphone and then passing it to Svetla and Donka; Petur working his magic on the kids, youngest and oldest alike.

What an incredible thing we have created out of our obsession with these wonderful musics and dances, and our self-made community. How much happiness can a body hold, every day?

And to wind up on a philosophical note, I'm realizing lately that Balkan camp has become even more than a unique musical education for North Americans, even more than the hottest parties anywhere. As Balkan camp-nurtured musicians begin to provide music for Balkan-American communities, we have also found a place in the hearts of our native-born teachers from the Balkans, who made up more than half the Mendocino faculty this year. For this one week, they can count on special time with skilled colleagues (would Esma and Svetla have had such a chance to bond anywhere else?), and an open-hearted welcome from friendly folks who appreciate the music and the expertise of "source" practitioners. Especially when they can't go home—because of money, paperwork, or war—Balkan camp can be a second home for them, as it is for all of us. And we encourage their work and the extension of Balkan Camp Values beyond camp time: national tours, recordings, and even camps in Bulgaria that are patterned after Balkan camp. Our beloved founders could not have predicted this result in the beginning, but it's a wonderful thing to be able to give back a little when the Balkans have given us so much.

Suzanne Leonora

RAMBLEWOOD IMPRESSIONS

A short, sweet ride from Philadelphia got us to camp at 4:30 on Saturday. We checked in then began reunions right at the registration gazebo. Then a dropoff at a night owl's cabin across from the pink flamingoes, to a greeting by wasps floating above my bed. Still city-hyper, I rallied my cabinmates to help report the creatures, which were removed, only to return with some pals a few relaxed days later, settling in as additional comfortable roomies.

After dinner I worked late registration while listening to instructors' class previews. So much to choose from! Decided to get "Esmalized" through singing and catching performances and to delight in Vlado Mahovlich's musical/experiential sharings in clarinet class. Clarinet happened in the pool shed, where Marlis taught the many wonderful children. Translation: berance was taught amid homemade instruments, colorful hanging objects, baubles and bangles and the pleasantest of spirits, punctuated by intermittent visits from kids who had left things behind. Further translation: hard work was accomplished "somewhere over the rainbow." Singing happened in the breezeway by the canteen and coupled with clarinet grandly opened my lungs. Besides becoming wide awake and completely joyful while singing with Esma, our joining with Pero's hillside accordion class, along with playful visits by The Ansambl, added icing to the cake.

Open-air dance parties, kafana, the student concert, the pools and all those scrumptious, laughter-filled mealtimes provided opportunities

to find out what others were up to. So many children that there was a Kids' Kafana—so what went on in there, guys?! Priceless goings-on I witnessed were Raif playing "slide" accordion with one, then two, empty beer bottles; Esma, poolside, distributing chocolates to kids of all ages; Vassil's gaida-filled arrival stroll; pre-auction visits to Margaret's costume box; Ramblewood's duck and two geese, which, like a gaggle of zurlas, heckled Pero's accordion class while it obliviously played on; and unavoidable (honest!) eavesdropping on the auction-purchased Rhodope serenade that wafted around my sweet companions and me during dessert under a tree at the lamb roast.

OK, does the West Coast really suck eggs?!—The auction, with 60's theme and sea of tie-dye (did anybody really dress differently than normal?) was conducted with appeal to flower children of varied means—from \$5 each for the telling of a dirty Bulgarian tale to a most generous four-figure bid for a stunning Macedonian Rom costume. Kafana Night memories include being pampered by strolling musicians while eating chocolate and drinking wine with fine folks and being astounded by the remarkable transformation of the dining hall into an electrifying dance club.

It all had to end eventually, thankfully with reminders of the forced human struggles of our friends and teachers from the Balkans and of the substantial collective effort put into the making of a sensational week. But did it really end? Ask the orange plastic squeaky crab I acquired at Kafana. It sits on my kitchen windowsill, a glint in each beady eye, anticipating its next squeak, keeping the spirit alive!

Kathleen Smith



PHOTO BY MARGARET LOONIS

Above: Ramblewood 1998, Kafana Night: L-R: George Caba, Alan Zemel & Charlie Pilzer. Below: Ramblewood 1998: Iliana Bozhanova and Nikolay Kolev lead an underwater ruchenitsa



PHOTO BY MARGARET LOONIS

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DEMYSTIFYING THE BALKAN VOICE

Caveat: There are wide variations in vocal production throughout the Balkans. However, there is a common image that many people maintain about "Balkan singing," that it is strong, bright, and has powerful harmonic qualities. The generalities implied here are not meant to belittle or overlook important variations in the musically rich societies which make up the Balkans. For this article, my mental/auditory image is derived from the female Bulgarian singers whom I have known. My heartfelt thanks to Tatiana Sarbinska and Petrana Koutcheva, both of whom have discussed this information with me in great detail, and provided themselves as models and guinea pigs for my observation.

Last year (Fall '97 *Kef Times*) we explored the nether regions of the larynx and related anatomy, as well as some basic physiology. This year is your chance to take what you know, and learn more specific aspects of physiology. My goal is to take Balkan voice production out of the realm of myth, and to define it rather as a lovely sum of a finite number of mechanical parts. I hope that one and all can find it to be more accessible. Furthermore, I hope to convince the skeptics that Balkan singing is far from damaging to the female voice.

Voice Production. A quick review of the most important facts: The voice is produced through a rapid vibration of the vocal folds. The arytenoid cartilages swing the folds in to the midline, so that they touch lightly; the column of air pushing up from the nicely filled lungs sets them into motion. The vibrating waves follow a complex pattern, moving through the folds both along their horizontal dimensions as well as the vertical ones. The Bernoulli effect, the same law of physics that keeps airplanes aloft, is responsible for maintaining the rapid vibration of the vocal folds. Air is key.

Think of the vocal folds as folded comforters, rather than guitar strings. If you place two folded comforters next to each other, so that they are touching, they touch at many different points. They can touch each other along a thin line, or a thick one, depending on how you place them. They can touch more at the top than the bottom, or vice versa, depending on how you fold them and place them.

One can similarly place one's vocal folds, and use different parts of them; one can also hold them a bit more tightly, or more lightly. *This leads to the crucial notion that there are many voices within each one of us.* As adults, we tend to be set in "our voice." We are used to using a certain voice for speaking, and a certain voice for singing, and are therefore unaware of the vast potential that our voices actually have.

As Americans, we tend to speak very close to the bottom of our speaking range, resulting in a classic roughness which is heard all too frequently in our culture. Bill Clinton is a good example of this, with his chronic vocal pathology from speaking long and loud in a place that's rock bottom in his range. If you wander through other cultures, and listen carefully, you will find that many people speak at a different point in their range, and that this is culturally driven. The general rule of thumb, from the voice scientists, is that one's "optimal" speaking pitch, is about one third of the way up in one's total range. As a good starting activity, pay attention to your natural speaking voice, and then (if you are an American speaker) try to use a slightly higher one. Play with your voice...you'll be surprised at what you can do with it.

The wide-ranging possibilities available to your speaking voice,

are also available to your singing voice, which is not surprising, since they are one and the same mechanism. The bugaboo called "register" by the professional musicians tends to make many singers, especially women, unaware of these possibilities. The topic is further complicated by terminology that bears little relationship to actual physiological events. First and foremost of these is "head" voice, also known as "falsetto". These terms are both misleading, since they are neither false nor made in the head. From a mechanical perspective, this voice is produced by holding much of the bulk of the vocal folds still, and vibrating only the innermost margins. We can all do this. It is not a sex-based vocal skill. Women in our culture tend to use it for singing, and men generally don't. Some people use it for speaking (Julia Child, constantly), though most of us don't. Many women think that they can ONLY sing in this voice. This is the first and biggest pitfall in learning Balkan singing.

The "other" voice is generally known as the "chest" voice, though I prefer to call it our "regular" or "natural" voice, since it is, physiologically, the same voice that we use for speaking and almost all other vocal activity. It is used quite naturally for singing by women in many places, though it is unfamiliar in the west. Men use this voice for singing almost all the time. Think about the "three tenors"—they have made beautiful music singing in this voice, the very same voices which many women are afraid to use.

The only *real* differences between the sexes, voice-wise, is the size of the larynx and the size and shape of the resonating cavities. Women are as able to sing beautifully in their chest voices as any man. The myriads of strong-voiced village women across the Balkans are proof of this. And alternatively, men can sing delightfully in their head voices (the castrati tenors do this).



Having established where we place the Balkan voice, our next issue is air. Certain vocal dynamics are colored by what I will call here the “voice to air ratio.” We are all familiar with very breathy voices, such as that of Marilyn Monroe. The opposite of that is the strained/strangled voice of certain vocal pathologies, caused by holding the vocal folds too tightly together and allowing too little air through. If you have too high a voice to air ratio, you will be likely to have a sore throat whenever you sing. This often happens when you try to sing louder than usual on un-exercised vocal folds.

Between these two extremes, one can use more or less air, with varying results. Balkan voices use a higher voice to air ratio than Western classical singing, though never to the point of stress, strain, fatigue, laryngitis, or vocal pathology. A well trained Balkan singer has a solid, non-breathly sound. Plus, she has benefited from regular exercise of her voice, that strengthens her vocal folds, which, like all other muscles, enjoy exercise.

Resonance. Remember that resonance is what happens in the spaces above the larynx. For western singers of Balkan music, this appears to me to be the most neglected aspect in our study of Balkan singing. As a result, non-native singers of Balkan music don’t approximate the quality of resonance that is produced naturally by a Balkan singer. Americans have a couple of hurdles to climb here. First of all, Balkan voice production is highly focused, while spoken American English is not. Second, our American resonance resides in the back of the resonating chambers, roughly divided more

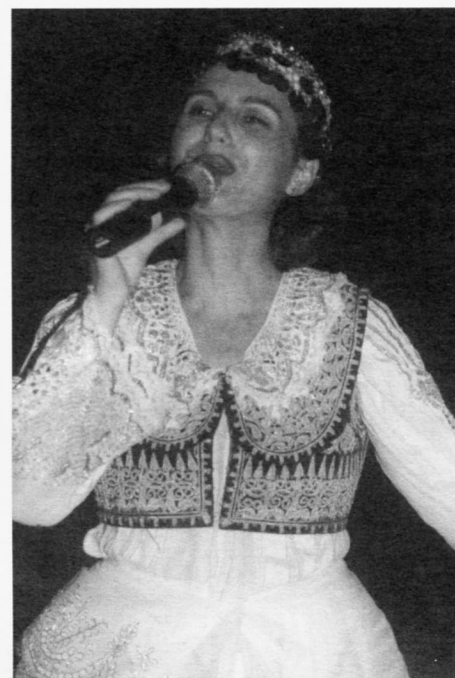
between the mouth and the naso-pharynx.

Resonance for most Balkan singers and speakers is put forth strongly towards the front of the oral cavity. For contrast, listen to the nasal quality of French singing and speaking. Balkan is oral. The airstream is quite focused, and pointed at the front areas of the mouth, often just onto the ridge that’s behind the front teeth. Some people speak of their teeth resonating when they start achieving good oral resonance. Interestingly, this is the same way that good actors project their voice. Good Balkan singers do this better than almost everyone else. Their perfectly focused resonance, on top of their strong and perfectly placed voices, are the mystifying components of the Balkan voice.

Ornamentation. Our final concern is ornaments. These are the things that our teachers seem to concentrate on, maybe because voice production and focus come naturally to them. We should look at learning ornaments as part of the picture rather than the whole picture. How does one do it? There is no single answer to this, but I have observed the following general patterns.

Many kinds of ornaments are made through rapid changes from note to note, at the level of the vocal cords, e.g. inside the larynx. This is true for trills, turns, and runs. This is also true for the wonderful yodeling “glottals,” which are really just controlled breaks from chest into head voice (for want of better terms again).

Some ornaments, though, tend to be made outside of the larynx. Most notably, the rhythmic vibrato that is used as an ornament by many singers, is generally made by muscles above the larynx.



Ramblewood 1998: Albanian singing star Merita Halili

Referring back to your anatomy, remember the small but not-to-be-overlooked hyoid bone sitting below the base of the tongue. This is a key structure, as the muscles that attach the larynx to the hyoid, can work very hard when need be. By contracting them rapidly, a clear, precise, and rhythmic vibrato is created. Our singer role models frequently appear to be wagging their jaws rapidly in order to make vibrato; actually, the jaw movement is just overflow from the bouncing of the larynx up and down.

Here ends today’s lesson. Please contact me at jan.williams@valley.net with your questions and comments.

Jan Williams

AJDE NA POI BALLS!

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her “boys” and belting out the name of the next song she wanted them to do.

It was to this woman I was supposed to teach poi balls. The bidding got quite heated. Apparently not only did people pay to have me teach Esma, but then some of them also paid to watch me give Esma her lesson. In fact, I found out later that almost everyone who knew me at camp had paid to watch my lesson, to watch me sweat in a foreign language,

the punks! Not that I knew a lot of people, but still, knowing that your friends will be there to watch you struggle is not exactly a comforting thought.

I happened to be sitting two seats away from Esma, with Carol Silverman, who had been interpreting for Esma, between us. After the bidding was over, I returned to my seat and passed the poi balls over to Esma, who animatedly said something to Carol, who then whispered to me that Esma wanted me to give her a private lesson before the real lesson so that she would not make a fool of herself. That was to be

kept a secret. I could understand that. She is, after all, this incredibly famous person, used to being in the public eye, and it would not serve her dignified image to come across as inept. So I was instructed to show up one morning at Esma’s room.

After the auction, Esma took the poi balls outside and tried to swing them around a bit. I was told that she knocked her hat off. So I knew I had my work cut out for me, and I asked someone how to say “good!” in Macedonian. I figured I’d

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1999

BALKAN MUSIC & DANCE WORKSHOPS



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rely on body language and tone of voice to try to teach her, but knowing something in her language could only help matters, and what better word to know than “good!”

For the next two days, people told me they couldn’t wait to see the lesson, that they had paid good money to watch me teach Esma, and on and on, adding to my anxiety. We planned to do it during the after-dinner lounging-around time on the last Saturday of camp. On that morning, I ventured up the stairs up the hill to find Esma in her room. As I got there, Carol was just leaving, so she was able to tell Esma that I had come to teach her. I had just 10 minutes before my class started, so I would have to work fast. It was 10:45 am and Esma had apparently just woken up. Her red hair was a medusa-like tangle around her head, and she was groggy-eyed and rumped. I thought, “Wow, I don’t think too many people have seen the famous Esma looking like this. What have I gotten myself into?”

So I quickly showed her one of the movements and handed the poi balls over to her. As she struggled to copy me, I tried to coach her on which way to swing the balls for various tricks. I had trouble explaining that she should just cross her arms for one swing and then uncross them again right away. She kept holding her arms across her body and whacking herself with the balls. So I tried to count, “one, two, THREE, four,” showing her to cross on three. She counted along with me in Macedonian, and managed to get a few good swings in. So I animatedly said, “dobro!” which means “good!” That one word was quite inadequate, unfortunately. It was apparent that she had no idea what I was saying during most of the quick lesson, but she kept saying, “ajde!” which I found out later means, “come on,” “let’s do it,” or “go!”

We whipped through several tricks, and she had some success with each of them. I encouraged her to practice, and told her that I had to go to class, and she nodded emphatically and heartily said something incomprehensible to me—so I did what usually works when I don’t understand the language the person is speaking. I smiled and nodded. Then I left to go to class.

After that secret lesson, I knew I needed

more language, because I knew she would be able to do better if she could only understand my explanations. So I asked Rachel MacFarlane, who speaks Macedonian, to teach me how to say a few things. She was kind enough to write them down for me as we stood in line for dinner. I asked how to say “left,” “right,” “up,” “down,” “now,” and “hands only.” Some people who knew I was practicing tried to reassure me that I wouldn’t need to learn any Macedonian, as Esma understood some English. But I couldn’t tell them that it seemed to me that she had not understood what I was saying during her secret lesson. At any rate, I enjoy learning new languages, and I also felt it would be ethnocentric to expect someone else to learn to use English without my even trying to learn any of their language. So even though I was stressing out about it, I was also looking forward to the challenge of teaching something with very little common language between us. I thought that would be quite a challenge to any teacher, and if I could pull it off, I’d feel a real sense of accomplishment.

The big day arrived. After dinner, while people were sitting around at the picnic tables outside, I went up to Esma and gestured, swinging my arms, then pointing to my watch, and shrugging my shoulders. She bellowed, “Now!” in Macedonian. Then I pointed to the amphitheater, where I thought the lesson might take place, and she belted out something else, which someone told me meant, “Here, where everyone can watch.”

About ten minutes later, without warning, she suddenly began her own poi ball performance, swinging the poi balls madly at breakneck speed above her head. She was wearing a mustard-yellow turban on her head, into which she had tucked two grapefruit-sized water lilies that some kids had fished from the pond. And she had on her cute black Keds, with their half-moon white section at the toes. She reminded me of Ernie on Sesame Street.

She then moved toward her “boys” and proceeded to whack them with the balls. By this time people had noticed and jumped up to watch. She let the balls fly in random circles beside her, and went around deliberately whacking other musicians with them, to the delight of her adoring audience.

Meanwhile, Marcia Kemble, not known for her meekness, was pushing me towards Esma, urging me: “Now’s your time. Get

over there and teach her!” I held my arms crossed in front of my face to protect myself and pulled back, arguing with Marcia, “No, Marsh, I don’t think she needs my help. I think she’s doing just fine.” Moments later, Esma finished, threw her hands up to enthusiastic applause, and then sat back down at the picnic table. Marcia kept prodding me, so I asked Michael, who was standing nearby, if I had to actually teach her, since people had paid to be able to witness the lesson. He said something to Esma, who answered with a curt, evidently negative reply. Hey, when the Aretha Franklin of Macedonia says, “I don’t want to,” you don’t press the issue. So that was that.

Afterwards, people asked me if I had taught her what she had been doing, and I vehemently denied it. But until now, nobody has known about that secret lesson we had. Don’t tell Esma I let the secret slip, because I wouldn’t like to have her come after me, poi balls swinging, when she finds out I told. That would be one situation where nodding my head and smiling would not work.

Since I had no budget to buy anything at the auction, I had felt a little bad that I couldn’t give any money to a good cause. However, as it turned out, my contribution, and Esma’s being a good sport, ended up raising quite a bit after all, which just goes to show you—you don’t need a lot of money to make a difference. Dobro!

Alina Niemi

CALL FOR NEW RECORDINGS

You may have noticed the absence of our regular “Noteworthy Balkan Recordings” feature. Due to the change in editorship, the present editor was unable to collect information for this publication. We would like to continue listing new recordings in future issues, and for that we must rely on your submissions. The main criterion for listing are that the recordings must feature musicians and/or compilers who’ve made a direct contribution to the workshops, either by teaching or attending. Send discographical and ordering information, and if possible, camera-ready artwork of covers, to the Editor.

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