

Bulgarians to bring folk music here

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Music Critic

The coming of Pirin, The Bulgarian National Folk Ensemble, reminds me of the fact that there are a number of interesting issues involved with the fragility of the contemporary concept of folk music, especially in this country, and reminds me also that the perception of the nature of folk music is a politically dependent one.

It is ironic that this country, which in its own holocaust effectively erased almost all traces of the indigenous cultures from its public consciousness, has a seemingly insatiable fascination for the folk culture of other nations. The Taiwanese and the Chinese ensembles play to packed houses, as I am sure will the Bulgarians; and deservedly so, for these are all extraordinarily skillful performers. But to my knowledge, which may as so often is the case be founded on ignorance, there is no national, nor indeed informal, group of truly American, that is Indian, folk dancers and singers who represent any aspect of the indigenous musical culture of this nation either to itself or to others.

The notion that the mish-mash of white Appalachian, southern and eastern midwest music somehow constitutes the folk music of this nation is, as so often is the case, a political, rather than an artistic, judgment. Perhaps this state of affairs must always be so; it is certainly true that judgments concerning serious music are economic and political rather than artistic. As a Welshman who was brought up in the heart of a rich folk culture, it has been a sad yet



Pirin, The Bulgarian National Folk Ensemble

enlightening experience to witness the transformation of a genuine folk music into a socially and economically acceptable lie. The recent visit of Da Danaan was an illustration of the same phenomenon with regard to another branch of Celtic folk music.

Like the Indian music of this country, Bulgarian folk music is based on functional social activities. Thus Bulgarian folksongs fall into groups of songs that, for example, accompany work — such as harvesting, grape-picking and sheep herding; or are calendar ritual songs (Christmas, Easter, saints feasts, etc.); or are banquet and dance songs, or other ritual songs (such as wedding and, yes, rain songs).

There are, it seems, songs for almost every important event in a

peasant's life (though it should be remembered that folk songs are far from being the provenance of rural folk only, there are plenty of city folksongs to be had also). The songs can be classified as mythological or religious songs, or songs concerning nature or everyday life, and there are songs that deal with love and the family, historical songs, children's and humorous songs. Each genre has its own distinctive musical and poetic features.

Most Bulgarian folksongs are sung antiphonally by two groups of singers or by two soloists, and the women are traditionally the most active, singing all types of songs while the men apparently tended to be more limited in the range of song types which they sang.

Bulgarian music has in it preserved many of the characteristics of musical forms and instruments that derive from the diverse origins of its people, whose backgrounds are

variously European and Asian — the Bulgarian state was formed in 681 AD (at precisely the time, to hark back to the opening paragraphs of this preview, that the Pueblo Indians in this country were beginning their long and spectacular development towards the zenith of their cultural and architectural achievements) from a people who included descendents of Thraco-Illyrian tribes, Bulgars from central Asia, and Slavs. Amongst the more interesting instruments are the *kaval*, a long rim-blown flute, *ovcharska svirka*, a shepherd's flute, *gayda*, a form of bagpipe, and the *gadulka*, a fiddle played upright.

Pirin also includes a troupe of spectacular folk dancers who have captivated audiences wherever it has performed. The folk dances of Bulgaria are usually performed by a group of dancers who join hands in closed or open circle to form the round dance. Some of the dances are named after a prominent feature of the main step, such as "the limp", and "pounding red pepper", while others imitate the movement of animals, as in "the rabbit dance" and "the goat dance".

The Pirin Bulgarian National Folk Ensemble has won several prizes in folk competitions and festivals and is the showcase for the spectacular singing and dancing of a country rich in folk traditions. The *Washington Post* critic wrote of their performance that it was "a constant surge of kinetic excitement", while in Germany their performance was hailed for the "fantastic lines of dancing and singing, the dazzling beauty of their national costumes".

The Bulgarian National Folk Ensemble, Pirin, brings its vivacious and colorful singing and dancing to McCain Auditorium at 8 on Friday evening.