

## Diversifying the Groove: Bulgarian Folk Meets the Jazz Idiom

*'Groove'u Çeşitlendirmek: Bulgar Halk Müziği Caz Değişiyile Buluşuyor*

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**Abstract.** During the 1960s, the decade before his immigration to the U.S., the Bulgarian-born musician Milcho Leviev – composer, arranger, piano player, and jazz innovator, – played a key role in Bulgarian jazz and paved the way for what is defined nowadays as “ethnojazz.” Swinging, for Leviev, was an approach that is compatible with diverse aspects of folk music, especially the ones which give rise to a particular cult of improvisation and virtuosity in local vernacular instrumental musics. The genesis of these folk styles, developed in the context of the transition from rural to urban life, indicates basic typological parallels with jazz as a specific socio-musical practice. Experimenting in this direction, Leviev began a new chapter in the innovation of jazz, inspired by the idea of non-traditional forms of fusion, in this case between the jazz idiom and the vocabulary of Bulgarian folk music. Based on conversations with Leviev held in July 2006 (Sofia), this article explores the artist’s vision of jazz and analyzes some of his earliest recordings from the 1960’s which defined the field known as folk-jazz at the time.

**Keywords:** Folk-jazz, ethnojazz, swinging, odd rhythms, exotic rhythms, asymmetric meters, non-Western, fusion, Bulgarian folk, groove, Balkan groove

**Özet.** Bulgaristan doğumlu besteci, aranjör, pianist ve caza yenilikler getirmiş olan Milcho Leviev ABD’ye göç etmeden on yıl önce 1960’larda Bulgaristan cazı için anahtar bir rol oynamış ve bugünlerde “etnocaz” olarak tanımlanan şeye giden yolu açmıştır. Cazın temel öğelerinden biri olan “swing”, Milcho Leviev için özellikle yerel çalgısal müzikteki doğaçlama ve ustalığı özel bir kült haline getiren halk müziğinin çeşitli öğeleriyle uyumlu bir yaklaşıma dönüşmüştür. Kırdan kente geçiş bağlamında gelişen bu halk müziği biçimlerinin kökeni, belirli bir sosyo-müziksel pratik olarak cazla temel tipolojik paralellikler gösterir. Bu anlamda geleneksel olmayan biçimler düşüncesinden esinlenerek caz deyişi ile Bulgar halk müziği dağarcığı arasında bir füzyon doğrultusunda deneyler yapan M. Leviev cazın yenilenmesinde yeni bir sayfa açmıştır. Sofya’da Temmuz 2006 tarihinde yapılan kişisel görüşmelere dayanan bu makale sanatçının caza bakışını ve o dönemde *folk-jazz* olarak adlandırılan alanı tanımlamış olan 1960’lardaki bazı ilk dönem kayıtlarını inceler.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** *Folk-jazz*, etnocaz, aksak ritimler, egzotik ritimler, asimetrik ölçüler, batıdışı, füzyon, Bulgar halk müziği, halk müziği, *groove*, Balkan *groove*

## 1 Milcho Leviev on the Open Nature of Jazz

At the beginning of the 1960's, long before he met his American collaborator Don Ellis<sup>1</sup>, Milcho Leviev had already recorded some of his early jazz compositions, such as "Studia" and "Blues in 9" (1962), works that employ elements of Bulgarian folk vocabulary. This approach to a large extent defined the experimental outlook that was also evident in his work with the Jazz Focus '65 quartet (1965-1970).<sup>2</sup> The quartet boldly broke canons and rules, especially from the point of view of Bulgarian jazz, which until at least the beginning of the 1960's had imitated traditional jazz models, primarily from the era of swing. Even at that time, Leviev's experiments in terms of involving and interpreting layers of "ethnic" and "classical" music were part of a much wider and liberating tendency, most probably connected with general processes of social, psychological and cultural renewal during that period. In music as well as in other arts, this process gave birth to non-traditional forms of human and artistic awareness, which in some way brought innovations in jazz, rock and the musical avant-garde closer together. As Leviev noted: "...The 1960s were the most creative years of the century – in art, even in politics...there was progress even in our society [the Eastern Bloc]" (Leviev, quoted in Fadel 2001: 6).

This tendency was by no means isolated, nor was it strictly "Bulgarian." In addition to the already established style known as "Latin American Jazz," the 1960's added new dimensions to the interest in hybrids spiced with regional folk coloring. It was as if a new wave of migration and intersection of musical languages was being unleashed. In this sense, we cannot ignore the prism of cultural globalization, including in music, especially if understood also as a new way of thinking that abandoned conventional manners of relating to the world. This way of thinking causes the *perspective on difference* to take on particular value. Thus, under the conditions of a global culture that at first glance appears homogenizing, the specific potential of "community" musics, with their multifarious local characters, turns out to be a means for creating new modes of identification.

In fact, as Leviev himself points out:

...music has always been an international and cosmopolitan art, especially jazz, and not just in recent times. If you take the time of Bach, and after that – they all learned from one another, mixing the Italian, French and English schools. For example, Bach borrowed from Vivaldi, Vivaldi from Purcell in England, and so on. Those are completely different cultures. Or in more recent times, when all cultures are already intertwined: Indian, Asian, European, American, African and so on. This shows that in a certain sense there has always been globalization. Just not on the same scale as it is today (Leviev, quoted in Nikolova 1999: 5).

The collaboration between Leviev and Ellis, which began as a long-standing correspondence between friends (and, as it later became apparent, like-minded

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<sup>1</sup> A trumpet player and fellow jazz innovator who was highly attracted to the challenge of non-Western "exotic rhythms".

<sup>2</sup> Jazz Focus '65 (1965 – 1970) was the first Bulgarian jazz group to earn international recognition. The quartet won the critics' award at the first Montreux Jazz Festival in 1967.

musical thinkers), created opportunities not only for a liberated attitude towards the world, but also possibilities for full creative fulfillment, regardless of geographical barriers. As Leviev recalls:

One day, in 1968, I sent some recordings of Bulgarian folk tunes to Don Ellis. There were different kinds of odd meters in these records and among them a *Sadovsko Horo*<sup>3</sup> in 33/16. I knew that this meter would excite Don's curiosity, but what happened was beyond my wildest expectations.... Several months later, I heard [the horo] under the title of *Bulgarian Bulge* which is on the *Underground* album. My friends and I in Bulgaria couldn't believe our ears. Here were musicians, thousands of miles from Bulgaria, playing this music as if it were native to them! (Leviev, quoted in Ellis 1972: 92).

Not surprising! The mastery of a “foreign” vocabulary and turning it into a part of one's own expressive arsenal is a process that in a certain way recalls the eternal interplay between self and the other. “The other in myself” or “myself in the other,” whatever we choose to call this connection, it has from time immemorial indicated that music is not a possession that one can lock away in one's own safe. On the other hand, it is hardly possible to appropriate in details someone else's individual style. To play *like* someone does not mean to sound like that person. Regarding asymmetrical meters, Leviev notes: “...That is terminology, a problem for theoreticians...In any case, in practice, in playing, asymmetrical meters are a question of feeling, of figuring out the trick” (Leviev, personal communication, July 2006, Sofia)

Three years later, in 1971, this time including Leviev and the added attraction of his improvised keyboard part, Don Ellis's orchestra again recorded “live” a new, expanded and even more flamboyant, almost five-minute-long version of the dance tune, which was released on the double album *Tears of Joy*. This variant of “Bulgarian Bulge” once again combined stylistic features inherited from the Big Band tradition of the 1930's with instrumental playing in the spirit of Bulgarian folk music,. The keyboard solo is notable for its lavish inventiveness, its virtuosic interpretation of the main folk theme in 33/16, its playful hints at “Baroque styling,” as well as for that artistic and ingenious sense of swing that can be found in much of Leviev's music. Playing and composing with such like-minded musicians turned out to be especially inspiring for him:

The biggest impression a jazz musician had on me between 1955 (the year I started listening to jazz) and 1970, was Don Ellis. His orchestra was the first jazz group I saw in America, not only saw, but had the pleasure to occupy its keyboard chair for 7 years. I'll say one thing about Don: he could play New Orleans jazz as good as Wynton, (if not better), but his musicality led him to new, unexplored things with the time elements in music. He studied the folk music of India, Turkey, Bulgaria, and achieved highest results in terms of swinging, and grooving on odd meters. So, imagine what this was for me: a dream come true. I not only played, I wrote for the band. We recorded a double disk LP, “Tears of Joy”, live in 1971... - a lot of our highest quality music was played then. (Leviev, quoted in Gilbert, 2007).

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<sup>3</sup> *Horo* – an open circle or line dance, performed by dancers holding hands.

Playing around with “odd rhythms”<sup>4</sup> was most likely stimulated by jazz’s traditional flight from “square” thinking, from angular symmetry and strictly regimented organization. As one unwritten motto among jazzmen goes, “the world does not beat in 4/4!” Judging from such interpretations, the interest in asymmetrical meters is not necessarily focused on the discovery of a new musical layer recognized as the “trademark” of a given geographical region of the world or as an identifying marker that has crystallized solely in the context of one specific ethnic experience:

...Before [Don Ellis], Dave Brubeck had done some similar things, despite the fact that he wasn’t so interested in ‘the ethnic’... His ‘Blue Rondo a la Turk,’<sup>5</sup> for example, doesn’t sound Turkish or Bulgarian, there’s nothing Balkan in it at all; it sounds completely Western, even though it is in an asymmetrical meter... That is actually interesting, too! (Leviev, personal communication, July 2006, Sofia).

For Don Ellis and Milcho Leviev, however, asymmetrical meters are to a large extent a means of exploring other horizons as well, for incorporating patterns that point to specifically characteristic regional musical sign. In this sense, ideas about a “Bulgarian,” “Balkan” or even more general “non-Western” sound construct the contours of a “new eclecticism” which years later has evolved into a series of local manifestations in Bulgarian jazz.

In this respect, one can hardly speak of any kind of direct influence. Leviev’s albums (recorded abroad after he had emigrated to America in 1970), including his collaborations with Don Ellis, never reached any wide distribution among the public or musicians in Bulgaria. It is more likely that the logic of general processes in contemporary music, as well as the internal intuition of highly gifted artists such as Ivo Papasov, Georgi Yanev, Petur Ralchev, Martin Lyubenov, Vassil Parmakov or Yuldiz Ibrahimova has led to the actualization of the idea of *ethnic fusion*, based not on schematic expectations connected to institutionalized or commercial genre labels, but rather on free movement that has somehow become inscribed in the metamorphoses of that ubiquitous “returning to ethnicity” that has seized the modern world. Nevertheless, the credit to Leviev as a notable, internationally recognized artist, has played a significant role in what I would characterize as the particular shattering of orthodox attitudes among Bulgarian jazz musicians. During the 1980’s, and especially during the 1990’s, Leviev not only encouraged, but also collaborated with Bulgarian musicians with different artistic backgrounds who dared to blend heterogeneous genres and ethnically derived traditions in a shared stylistic space. Among Leviev’s collaborators was the *kaval* player Teodosii Spasov, whom folk musicians initially considered anathema, and jazzmen only accepted with deep reservations (see Rupchev 1999: 81). Folk musicians like Ateshhan Yuseinov (guitar), Darinka Tsekova (*gadulka*), and Angel Tichalev (trumpet), or the jazz vocalist of

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<sup>4</sup> As a matter of fact, the expression “odd rhythms” refers not so much to rhythm but rather to meter (or measure). Even though the expression is not correct theoretically, it is in a large circulation among musicians.

<sup>5</sup> The tunes “Blue Rondo a la Turk” (in 9/8) by Dave Brubeck (piano) and “Take Five” (in 5/4) by Paul Desmond (saxophone), released in 1959, opened up an important new direction in the music of the Dave Brubeck Jazz Quartet.

Greek origins Vicky Almazidu, among others, have also worked in close collaboration with Leviev. However, whether Leviev succeeded in dispelling once-and-for-all the public's doubts about the potential of nontraditional viewpoints on jazz as well as on the "acceptable limits" of interpretation of Bulgarian folk is another question entirely:

...Some Bulgarian colleagues of mine have told me: "You are responsible that 'the likes of Ibryama [Ivo Papasov]' are considered jazzmen." And they ask me: "That, what he plays, what is it? Is it jazz?"... "It's music!!!" I tell them. There's jazz and folk and pop in that music... And then they start to teach me what is music about... Snobbery! I remember one country musician who played the banjo terrifically. I'm sure he has never considered himself a jazzman, but...he created music! And our folk musicians? Look at what they're doing! In Turnovo there is one great group, Reporterite [The Reporters], I don't think that anybody here has ever heard of them... Or the Gypsy musicians from Nova Zagora, Zlatina Russeva made a documentary about them...the film was called "Virtuozite" [Virtuosos], and they really are virtuosos, despite the fact that they've never studied music and can barely read notation (Leviev, personal communication, July 2006, Sofia).

As I understand it, Milcho had not resisted the temptation of playing with the "virtuosos," or – as happened during another jam session – with the musicians of the Karandila Gypsy brass band. The informal nature of this type of music making, however, does not reflect the opposite, orthodox pole of the public's conceptions about the understanding of jazz. For example, commentary on the occasion of jazz's specialized classification indicated that international critics prefer to "...defend ideas about jazz in their *essential being* [my emphasis]," that is, that "...all variations of the improvisational art that do not use the jazz idiom are either excluded or very weakly represented...The commercial category of 'smooth jazz,' as well as the folkloric genre of 'world music' are practically absent in the classification, let alone regional concepts such as 'Balkan jazz' or 'ethnojazz,' among others... This rigidity of criteria is just another sign that the art of jazz has already distanced itself from its long-standing close relationship to pop music..." (Gadzhev 2006: 17). And, as is stated later in this commentary: "This tendency is useful for us Bulgarians."

I would suspect that the shade of conservatism in this commentary can in fact be attributed to "international critics." But why then a similar rigidity of criteria, as well as the sneakily sanctioning tone of elitist opinions, is considered to be promising and even "useful for us Bulgarians?"

Not wishing to enter into polemics with such ideas as much as to express his misgivings about the effects of such a rigid idea about the future of jazz, Leviev confided:

...One hundred years of jazz, and now we are already running up against the appearance of traditionalism, elitism, snobbism,...and what's even more troubling: academism. I think that it is precisely academism that destroyed classical music! And nowadays I think jazz is suffering from the same problem...I'm not talking about a tendency towards complexity; complexity

and academism are two different things! (Leviev, personal communication, July 2006, Sofia).

Elsewhere, Leviev even speaks of a crisis in jazz:

At the moment, I don't see the crisis in jazz so much in the sense that there aren't jazz musicians or jazz performances. On the contrary, there are more than ever before. But for two decades now one can observe a certain conservatism, a return to the old, to the exploitation of already well-traveled paths... Besides, the separation of jazz as an elite art form is not quite good. It is a bit shameful, since it comes from the rank and file (Fadel 2001: 6).

Such phenomena are not merely projections of abstract situations:

...Things took a turn toward academism somewhere around 1975 – 76, when Wynton Marsalis – an excellent musician, trumpet player and composer, who nevertheless lacks a sense of originality – assumed an important position...He is the musical director of Lincoln Center in New York, where he deals with jazz...That institution supports groups that repeat traditional things... On the other hand, Wynton is a good popularizer, he created an educational series that is very reminiscent of the successful series created by Bernstein years ago... But the troubling thing is that young people have begun to play – how shall I say it? – mostly imitations, and mostly up to bebop (Leviev, personal communication, July 2006, Sofia).

This attitude toward tradition – a key issue in every educational policy – obviously runs the risk of ignoring the dynamics of a viewpoint that looks without concern not only backward but also forward in time. In this sense, a point of view that recognizes jazz as the “classical music of the twentieth century” introduces curious nuances. The “classical” status of jazz is not based so much on some defining quality, but rather precisely on its relationship to the past as a source of given models in certain musical spheres. The cultivation of this attitude toward the history of jazz is reflected in the creation of pedagogical institutions specializing in jazz. The fact that jazz has long since ceased to be a myth and instead is a range of well-documented musical texts is an argument in support of this view. However, when the pedagogical process turns into a source of formalized recipes or mere mechanized reverence to the past, then one can clearly see what Leviev was referring to. A similar tendency dominated, for example, following Beethoven, when sonata form was roughly formalized. The study of models as canonized directions rather than inspiration for one's own development to a certain degree undermines the goals of education.

As to the claim in terms of recognizing jazz as “classical music,” Leviev notes:

“The very concept ‘classical’ is quite dubious, because...what does ‘classical’ mean? In my opinion, a ‘classic’ means a model. Can a whole trend in music or even an entire historical period really be a model? How so? In school they used to teach us on the history of music that there was classical and pre-classical music, and that Bach was a ‘pre-classical’ composer. But wait a minute, what does that really mean? Is there a greater classic than Bach!? Music can not be forced into such convenient clichés! What does ‘serious’ music mean, or a ‘serious’ musician? What musician can be considered

‘unserious?’ Who defines that?’ (Leviev, personal communication, July 2006, Sofia).

From this viewpoint, perhaps there are some advantages to the fact that ethnojazz in Bulgaria does not yet recognize the limiting barriers of any single canon and does not enjoy the comfort of belonging to a particular institution. As far as the functioning of this music is concerned, the demand for groups featuring musicians such as Teodosii Spasov, Ivo Papasov, Ateshhan Yuseinov, Stoyan Yankulov or Petur Ralchev (with respect to concerts abroad rather than at home, at least) is surely a sign not only of a local artistic consciousness, but also of a certain insufficiency within the field of “orthodox jazz,” an insufficiency that at the same time hints that jazz, perhaps, has gone off “somewhere else.” The very idea of jazz as a labyrinth of narratives in unwritten music assumes such a mobility – not only in thinking, but also in relation to “loci,” to that never-ending tossing of the ball back and forth which now, more than ever, attacks frozen notions concerning the understanding of center and periphery in musical developments.

On the other hand, Leviev notes, “...as far as the future is concerned, I’m not a prophet, I don’t know what will happen” (Fadel 2001: 6). The extraordinary multiplication of tendencies in jazz seems to make the insistence on the label jazz somehow pointless to a certain extent. Not that it’s so important what we call a given music; labels for various kinds of contemporary art are often a job of managers and producers. For some jazz musicians, still during the time of Miles Davis, the word “jazz” had already even lost its meaning. Reflecting on this matter, one begins to wonder: wasn’t Duke Ellington right, after all, when he predicted that at a certain moment we would abandon our niggling ideas of narrowly defined categories in order to open our eyes to *music*?!<sup>6</sup>

## 2 Con Mucho Gusto: Browsing the Aesthetics of Pleasure

Translated from Spanish, the phrase *con mucho gusto* means *with pleasure, with enjoyment, in good mood*. Leviev used this as the title for an instrumental piece recorded at a club in California in 1983.<sup>7</sup> The piece does not make a direct allusion to any “ethnic” musical patterns. It also does not make direct reference to Glenn Miller’s famed hit “In the Mood.” The title does not hint at a narrative plot, but rather a specific emotional attitude projected by Leviev’s aesthetic outlook, most probably dating back as far as the time when he matured as an artist.

At that time, during the mid-1950’s, Leviev (b. 1937) was in his teen years, and “the joy of music” was likely not emphasized as the primary goal for a musician who had been brought up in the world of “serious” art. In the dominant professional circles of that period, at least, the prestige of art was judged according to different

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<sup>6</sup> See Megill and Demory 1984: 293.

<sup>7</sup> This piece was included on a CD with the same name that was part of a double album recorded by a trio consisting of Milcho Leviev (piano), Kevin Brandon (bass), and Michel Lambert (percussion). The disk was released by N’House Records in 2006. The other CD in the set is entitled “A Voyage Again.”

categories.<sup>8</sup> Pleasure derived from music was looked at condescendingly, even suspiciously. This was a reflection of the already long-standing, value-laden attitudes towards expressivity observed in the field of popular music genres, including vernacular forms of music-making, popular songs from the early days of recorded music (known in Bulgarian by the German term “*schlageri*”) and the wide sphere of dance music. This could also be seen, for example, in the attitudes towards displays of mastery of the musical vocabulary typical of jazz. At the same time, the growing stagnation under the conditions of the Bulgarian totalitarian regime, which was shrouded by a vague fear of “ideological subversion,” combined with an emphasis on the principles of normative aesthetics (which was by no means only a “Bulgarian” tendency!), gave rise to a rather sterile concept of “artistry.” Connected to the pompous as well as sanctioning gestures of official culture, this concept often emphasized a particular negativism toward frivolous hints of open joyfulness in music, which were understood however fragmentarily, as an expression of shallow amusement.

Leviev’s maturation as an artist was nevertheless affected by a series of subjective circumstances, which somehow allowed him to overcome the rigid ideologism of the time and encouraged his approach to music precisely “as a mood” and a joyful thrill, as a mischievous humor and fascinating emotionalism, called forth by the vast non-verbal provocations of associative thought. For example, one such circumstance was his contacts with the famed Bulgarian composer Pancho Vladigerov at the Sofia Conservatory, who taught Leviev composition. Vladigerov, who was the author of numerous essential works in the realm of Bulgarian symphonic music as well as instrumental pieces (for example, “Oriental March” or “Cakewalk”), was not himself indifferent to the “pleasure of music,” nor to humor as an artistic and everyday behavior, nor did he discount live impulses heard in the raw, unsophisticated “folk” vocabulary. The origin of that vocabulary has connections with the musical patterns of Balkan urban folklore and with the characteristic sound of jazz during the 1920’s and 30’s. We can catch humorous casts at Vladigerov’s intonational inclinations years later in Leviev’s music; this can be seen as a sign of an unfinished conversation that is taken up again, sometimes unexpectedly and sometimes with forewarning, as if Leviev recalls his affection for the Teacher and the impact of that emotional-psychological attitude, shared during the years of his artistic maturity.

The dominant mentality among the artistic bohemian circle in Leviev’s native city of Plovdiv seemed to be equally important in encouraging his development in this direction. Having acquired the reputation of a particular underground within the context of the overall stagnation of that period, the bohemian scene in Filibeto<sup>9</sup> was standing up for “the taste for life,” as if trying to compensate to some degree for the deficit of freedom in the imposed socialist order. The feeling of informal social belonging brought a degree of relative comfort, while the orientation toward

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<sup>8</sup> The institutions that had the most dominating influence over the development of professional musicians in Bulgaria at that time were primarily the Musical Academy and the Union of Bulgarian Composers. Due to the conditions of highly centralized cultural politics, which was also reflected in strategies of creation and distribution of music, the opportunities for more dynamic approaches to music were severely limited.

<sup>9</sup> Filibeto – the shortened old name of Plovdiv, the native town of Milcho Leviev.



alternative values stimulated curiosity about “forbidden things,” especially in terms of the contemporary artistic world behind the Iron Curtain. It is not a coincidence that it was precisely this circle, standing for independent human and artistic thinking, that gave rise to emblematic artists in arts other than music as well. During the 1960’s, artists such as Georgi Bozhilov, Yoan Leviev (Milcho’s brother), and Dimitar Kirov, for example, represented the “new wave” of the visual arts within Bulgaria. Following its own unique paths, this circle created channels for another, informal school of thought, which opened the senses of the maturing musician to the attractiveness of expressivity, marked by the exoticism of the “broken rhythms” of jazz and its intriguing twists in musical thinking that at that time were in no way accepted as part of the “ideology” and dictates of the official concepts regarding “good”, “trustworthy” music.

Not without irony, Leviev notes: “No one held a gun to my head and forced me to become a jazz musician. A person decides for himself...I’ve always played jazz, even as a child. I loved it, even though I wasn’t always sure what I was doing. After World War Two, until around 1946-47, before the situation to be frozen by dictatorship, American films were shown, American music was played, and you could hear jazz” (Manoleva 2001: 4).

In another interview, Leviev speaks again about his early interest in jazz:

It was proper...for middle class family kids...to have music lessons, so my brother started first. We had an old upright on which I started picking out tunes from that time, you know, from the big band era, but of course I didn't know, for example, that "In The Mood" was a 12 bar blues. My awareness of jazz, as an art form, came much later in my teens. A violinist friend of mine, who played jazz piano on the side, was actually one of my first teachers. I started listening every midnight to the 2 hours program "Voice of America" - Willis Conover's jazz radio show. What turned me on to jazz first, was not the big bands, or bebop, (I couldn't hear at first what Bird<sup>10</sup> was doing) but the later, cool stuff - Miles & Gil, Bill Evans, and especially M. J. Q. (Leviev, quoted in Gilbert, 2007).

M. J. Q., that is the Modern Jazz Quartet, set a trend (symptomatic, however, in terms of the changing situation in art behind the Iron Curtain during the 1950s) that inspired the idea of a synthesis between jazz and Baroque music. This idea, defined by some authors as “the third stream,”<sup>11</sup> was very appealing and underwent many modifications in Leviev’s artistic journey, including the turn toward the wide incorporation of a diverse vocabulary, using elements from the arsenal of “classical” as well as “ethnic” music! Employing his experience as a brilliant pianist with a tendency toward improvisation based on an active intuition and original, boundless inventiveness, Leviev did not merely synthesize elements cultivated in various genres

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<sup>10</sup> Obviously, Leviev is referring here to the legendary saxophonist Charlie Parker, who was also famously known by his artistic nickname “Bird.”

<sup>11</sup> The American musicologist Gunther Schuller introduced the concept of “the third stream” in 1957 in order to designate a new genre related to appearances of a synthesis between classical music and jazz. Without assigning an absolute validity to the concept, the author speaks of “the classical” as the “first stream” and jazz as the “second stream” (see Schuller 1986).

and traditions. Rather, for him the free, unprejudiced combination of lessons from “formal” and “informal” schools amounted to an orientation toward a *different* awareness of music. One characteristic of this type of thinking is connected to the rejection of the premeditated ideological confrontation between the world of “classical music” and the world of jazz. Furthermore, such thinking also motivates the cultivation of new strategies for the creation of music.

Examined in the specific context of the 1960’s (the decade in which Leviev was a particularly active figure in Bulgarian music), such thinking has far more radical consequences. On one hand, Leviev overturned normative ideas and destroyed the status quo reflected in narrow and isolated concepts of “art” music, connected primarily with the sphere of “serious” music. It is as if his aesthetic approach tried to reestablish the fading connection to naturalness in emotional experience; furthermore, his approach continually undermined stereotypes implied in concepts like “light” and “serious” music, usually understood as mutually exclusive categories. On the other hand, the complex profile of his artistic activities challenged the traditional boundary between “composer” and “performer,” which in the realm of jazz, as in the larger sphere of popular music, allows for different kinds of interrelationships. As a composer, arranger, pianist, conductor, and leader of various musical ensembles, Leviev legitimized within Bulgarian cultural space the contours of a creative behavior inspired not only by a natural drive toward the emancipation of jazz as a symbol of the “forbidden fruit” in the context of a harsh ideological dictatorship, but also by the idea of *aesthetic and social nonconformity*, which was realized as a particular rejection of fakeness in life and in art.

## 2.1 Anti-Waltz

In the mid-1960’s, Leviev wrote the piece “Anti-Waltz” for the Big Band of Bulgarian Radio.<sup>12</sup> The composition threw the composers’ guild into confusion. Why “anti”? What was meant by “anti”? Was this a scandalous provocation? Was it possible that the waltz, that mainstay of trustworthy ideas of “light music,” could be subverted in this way? Of course, the composition’s message employs Aesopian encoding and thus has a far more complex intention. Not given to shallow or pompous declarations in either his artistic or everyday behavior, Leviev preferred allegorical hints and ambiguity, an approach that from the very beginning made up an organic part of his manner of expression. The idea of the waltz as a specific dance form, interpreted as if through the deforming prism of a bizarre “distorting mirror,” here is used not abstractly, but rather is employed as an extremely topical, very concretely determined connotation that would be difficult to grasp outside of the specific tensions within the context of Bulgarian culture at that time: “I wanted to express my disdain for conformity in society, using the waltz as a symbol” (Leviev 2004b).

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<sup>12</sup> The foundation of the Big Band of Bulgarian Radio and TV in 1961 was considered a liberating cultural step that indicated, to a certain extent, a changing political climate in the state.

For the majority of “Antiwaltz’s” contemporaries, surrounded by the dissident tone in, for example, Radoj Ralin’s biting verses,<sup>13</sup> the allegorical nature of the piece did not remain hidden. On one hand, the piece can be read as a provocation, called forth by continuing ideological dictates and by the fact that then-current directions in music continued to be opposed in an authoritarian manner that preferred “trustworthy” and “historically accepted” ideas about “democratic” musical form such as the waltz. A broader intellectual mindset, however, could immediately sense the conscious notion of civil dissatisfaction. Despite having been affected by something of an ideological thaw, the dominant climate in Bulgarian culture at the time continued to foment suspicion toward freer actions and gestures, which included the accelerated pace and new self-confidence then appearing in jazz, rock, and the musical vanguard.

A similar type of liberated artistic activity formed the basis of the group Jazz Focus Quartet, founded in 1965. It is no coincidence that well-known free-thinker Radoj Ralin was the group’s godfather and intellectual adherent. Having met keen enthusiasts with a similar level of musical potential in the persons of Simeon Shterev (flute), Lyubomir Mitsov (contrabass), and Petur Slavov (percussion), Leviev founded the quartet with the goal of recording music for a series of short satirical films entitled “Focus.”<sup>14</sup> Production of the series was soon halted due to “political inappropriateness” (Leviev 2004a: 12). However, the musical group did not give up on its bold idea to experiment within the field of jazz and to prepare a series of new compositions, which were performed for the first time at a memorable concert in the Sofia “Zala Bulgaria” (concert hall in the city of Sofia) in 1967. Given the conditions of highly-centralized cultural politics, relics of dogmatic thinking turned out to be very firmly entrenched, and personalities like Leviev were very disturbing to the authoritarian orientation of the dominant professional environment. As noted by music critic Jordan Rupchev, Leviev “resigned from the Union of Bulgarian Composers in protest of their methods of governance. For almost 20 years [after his defection from Bulgaria in 1970], his music was banned from public performance or broadcast within Bulgaria... His name became legendary, while he himself became an invisible mentor to a large part of the musical community in his home country, where musical and verbal messages were relayed via unknown paths” (Rupchev 1999:106).

During its relatively short existence (1965 – 1970), Jazz Focus Quartet represented a notable, albeit somehow isolated Bulgarian break-through into the international jazz world. Applied also to Leviev’s work with the Bulgarian Radio Big Band (1962 – 1966), this new artistic approach to the concept of jazz provided the outlines for an original aesthetic conception. During the 1960’s, and especially nowadays, given our historical distance, this conception, subsequently unfolded in a series of “musical texts,” forms the basis that allow us to recognize Leviev as an innovator who first started to experiment with Bulgarian folk in the jazz idiom.

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<sup>13</sup> Radoj Ralin (1923 – 2004) – the most popular satirist in contemporary Bulgarian poetry, famous for his dissident activities during the totalitarian regime. A close friend of Milcho Leviev, Ralin encouraged him to create the Jazz Focus Quartet (1965).

<sup>14</sup> Among the musicians who were involved in Jazz Focus ’65 at different times were Theodosi Stojkov (double bass) in 1970, as well as Lyuben Borisov (double bass) and Krum Kalchev (percussion), both in 1965.

## 2.2 Studia

The early compositions “Studia” and “Blues in 9,” created immediately after Leviev assumed leadership of the Bulgarian Radio Big Band in 1962, already revealed his intention to play with non-traditional creative approaches under the banner of “conventional, yet different!” which freed up new space for musical innovation. Thus, by emphasizing unusual intonational schemes and metro-rhythmic combinations, both pieces explore the potential for an attractive yet surprisingly effective symbiosis and blending, in an entirely new way, of conventions rooted in at least several different instrumental musical traditions.

In “Studia,” for example, on one hand we sense the echo of a generalized dance formula in the spirit of the then-current global “Latin” trend, which was adopted (to a certain extent) in the Bulgarian context mainly via films shown in the 1950’s, as well as via visiting Latin American musicians and radio programs. On the other hand, there is also a very tangible echo of the vocabulary that directly corresponds to the characteristics of classic American swing from “the Golden Age of Jazz,” an indication of the renewal of ties to a style that had been to a large extent characterized negatively by the ideological dictates of the 1950’s, but which in any case had still continually appeared and been accepted in Bulgaria during the 1930’s via the music of orchestras such as “Jazz Ovcharov” and “The Optimists.” From a third point of view, in its general thematic profile, the piece is unambiguously dominated by specific Bulgarian melodic patterns *v naroden ton* (in the folk spirit). Projected illustratively in a more general way, as a sound collage, the character of this kind of thematic material is a particular reflection of a standardized melodic concept that represented established attitudes in the works of a number of Bulgarian composers from the so-called “second generation” who were tangibly engaged in creating a “national musical style” within the world of “high” art.<sup>15</sup> Here, however, the interpretation of the thematic material is employed in the formation of another style. Bound most closely to the approach of swing, it encourages the flow of improvisational episodes (represented by relatively short keyboard, guitar, bass and percussion solos) that follow one another in succession, as well as featuring clearly-defined contrapuntal lines assigned to instruments in the brass section (which, by the way, illustrates an aspect of dialogism in music via the call-and-response technique).

By introducing Bulgarian folk motifs, “Studia” starts a new trend not only in terms of creative compositional approaches to traditional Bulgarian music, but also in interpretations of swing as a specific stylistic tendency. However, here the reference to folklore as a building material is not motivated by the Romantic idea held by Bulgarian composers in terms of creating a “national musical style,” unfolding in the process of the “Europeanization” of Bulgarian musical culture. Leviev himself has more than once stated that he is not interested in national boundaries. According to him, the individual self-identification of a person – whether expressed through music

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<sup>15</sup> The idea of creating “Bulgarian national musical style” and the relationship of the composer to folklore stand at the center of a debate among Bulgarian composers in the 1930s. (See *Bulgarskite muzikalni dejtsi i problemut za natsionalnia muzikalen sili* [Bulgarian Musicians and the Problem of a National Musical Style], Ed. by A. Balareva. Sofia: Institute for Music, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 1968).

or through other identifying markers – is far too intimate a process and is too much a question of free personal space to be mechanically reproduced, let alone sanctioned by formalized external boundaries that are forced on the individual. Such an attitude is, in fact, a sign of the ethical orientation of the generation that witnessed the failure of nationalism and felt the potential for the dynamic between the concepts of “self” and the “other”, taken not so much as oppositional categories, but rather as complementary aspects of human identity.

Along with his artistic imagination and ingenuity in combining diverse musical codes, Leviev also revealed in his first big band composition the contours of inventive individual style, distinguished by a particular emotionality, the radiation of a particular elegance and sophisticated humor, a taste for detail, and a dynamic flair for playful techniques. Somehow refined, yet frank and unpretentious, this attractive expressivity was reflected as well in the subtle sense for dramaturgical logic, performed even within the confines of a four-minute piece.

Why would such an original conception seek the cooperation of otherwise conventional musical structures widely established in subjectively constructed niches of a given musical consciousness? And what is the relationship between the conventional musical mainstay and the aesthetic credo, elaborated under the concept of *pleasure*, of that crucial *con mucho gusto*, which is woven into Leviev’s aesthetic outlook?

Pleasure, of course, is not unambiguous, nor is it a purely musical category. Leviev himself reasons in the following way:

Mozart said something that most people consider ridiculous but I think he was right. They asked him: “Maestro, what is the point of music?” And he answered: “To give pleasure to the ear.” Whose ear, though? Well, one has to be able to judge for himself what his ear can and can’t put up with; my ear takes pleasure in certain sounds, while yours most likely prefers others. Thus I have to create something that your ears enjoy, as well as mine. This is what the “pleasure of the ear” means, this is what an artist needs to do (Leviev 2004a: 19).

Such an understanding of *the joy of music* points to psychological motivations, which look for the role of “the conventional” within given musical traditions and within a certain socio-musical experience, which for the ear plays the role of a specific emotional psychological mainstay. Certainly, the issue in question cannot be reduced to a premeditated matrix that operates by using the means of musical populism, nor to any interpretation that suggests deliberately catering to certain aesthetical orientations. For an open-minded musician like Leviev, trained in communicating with various audiences, the close-up shot from the point of view of one’s own musical tower is as valuable as the point of view of the opposing tower. In other words, both *my* and *your* joy, if they are not shared, will not be real. It is a question (again!) of dialogical thinking, as well as of a vital attitude towards the range of historically-determined codes articulated in “musical texts,” as well as in the framework of a given wider socio-musical consciousness.

### 2.3 Blues in 9

In jazz and popular music “the joy of music” is a condition often described by the slang word “groove” (to enjoy, experience pleasure). Also understood in the sense of the feeling of a particular motoric experience (steady pulse),<sup>16</sup> this condition energizes all levels of music-making, from the backbeat to intonation, from harmonic lines to the kinetics of performance. This kind of pulsation is connected with an element of psychological and even “physical” involvement which can be observed in genres not limited to dance musics. As Richard Middleton points out, it is telling that the current connotations of “groove,” “groovy,” and “grooving” suggest something both pleasant and exciting (similar semantics can be found in the Bulgarian slang word *gotino* meaning “cool,” for example). Incidentally, the etymology of the word “groove” is related to the connection of man to the earth, understood in terms of the latter’s fertility as well as its productive sense (Middleton 2006: 145). Regarding the sphere of music, it is as if such connotations bring to life the understanding that music relies on the relation to time and is rooted in corporal movement. But the affinity for metro-rhythmically broken-up musical signs – in jazz as well as in a number of different developments mostly in the field of popular genres in various historical periods – does not suggest some previous stage in the evolution of music bearing the marks of a genetically-based atavism. Rather it suggests a natural connection between the “musical” and constantly flowing energies via complicated paths of culturally, socially and psychologically determined interactions. In other words, representations of the body, the psychologically grounded forms of desire and the socio-musical action are in constant contact.

It appears, then, that the adherence to this aspect of music making, which can also be conceptualized as an aesthetic category, stimulated Leviev’s interest in metro-rhythmic innovations. Looking for new frontiers in this direction, he wrote “Blues in 9,” once again for the Bulgarian Radio Big Band. This cross between the vocabulary of blues and Bulgarian models “in the folk spirit” introduces elements of a swing flavor, which is layered over the asymmetrical meters from a widely-varying regional repertoire. Elsewhere, I have referred to this metro-rhythmic variety as *Balkan groove* (see Levy 2005: 190; 2003: 75-83). Cultivated in Bulgarian folk traditions since time immemorial and understood also from the point of view of its essential closeness to various layers of vernacular musical traditions all over the Balkans, this type of variety synthesizes in its own way the colors of unusual and concretely-localized life poetics.

Swinging in asymmetrical meters is an extreme challenge, at least when seen through the prism of a rationally-oriented point of view. We know very well that swinging, that internally syncopated rhythm connected with blues intonation, actually follows the logic of pulsation of the completely symmetrical *4/4 meter*. On the other hand, “swinging” is not entirely unknown among metro-rhythmic patterns in Bulgarian folk music. However, it is as if the typological similarity between Bulgarian folk music and blues, visible at least from the points of view of their relationship with the flow of musical time and their emphasis on the particularities of

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<sup>16</sup> Certainly, the steady pulse does not refer exclusively to the repetition of a single metrorhythmic configuration.

cyclical musical dramaturgical structure, further stimulates the possible forms of interaction between them.<sup>17</sup>

It surely is not a coincidence that Leviev begins his experiments in this direction with an emphasis on none other than 9/8 (in this case, 2+2+2+3), which is one of the most characteristic Balkan meters. Having a particularly vigorous “groove” potential, this meter defines key varieties of widely-popular dances, beginning with *tezhko makedonsko horo* (“heavy Macedonian dance”) and *dajchovo horo* from Northern Bulgarian, and ending with everyday dance forms with a decidedly Oriental flavor. In other words, Leviev approaches such meters not as an end in themselves, nor as a “laboratory experiment,” but rather intends to awaken definite associations based on the semantics of widely-functioning metrical models. Unlike Dave Brubeck, who previously had experimented with “counting in five” (in *Take Five*),<sup>18</sup> Leviev introduces meters not conventional in the sphere of jazz with the intention of exploring creatively interpreted local projections of a specifically Bulgarian musical vocabulary.

The very beginning of the piece, as if fully in the spirit of the village tradition, alludes to elements widely established in the folk song tradition (in this case, the ascending leap to the seventh, known as *provikvane* or “whooping” in Bulgarian). However, the expectation of some kind of development in this direction turns out to be misleading. A second introduction follows, which is associated with a quite different situation – a distant and seemingly slightly grandiose hint of opening chords reminiscent of stylistic features of piano repertoire from the Romantic period of Western art music, which, however, meets (as if unexpectedly) the vigorous swinging sounds of the big band brass section. No doubt the symbiosis in this emphatically danceable piece, in which we can hear a little something of the twist that was so popular at the beginning of the 1960’s, lays its bets on humor, combining an inimitable range of surprisingly diverse stylistic techniques. Even the main musical motifs are based on ostensibly incompatible modal orientations, connected with modal aspects of Bulgarian folk tunes (in the “question” motif) and with elements of pentatonic blues (in the “answer” motif). The original vision in this particular “poly-stylistics” was concerned with the subtleties of working out the musical joke, which is reflected in the very way the theme is “twisted around,” in the mood-inducing manner of sound approaching, in the ingenious layering of tone and timbre colors, in the quite blues-like keyboard solo episodes, as well as in the moves within the metro-rhythmic play, which make good use of the ever so slightly clumsy 9/8 – not so much as an expression of somewhat coarse local antithesis, but rather as an expressive breakthrough into a new musical space with unexpected musical potential.

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<sup>17</sup> On the opposition between cyclical and linear musical logic, see Middleton (1998: 209) and Levy (2005: 62-63).

<sup>18</sup> I would note that “counting in five” does not always imply an asymmetrical meter, understood as a combination of two-beat and three-beat sections. The five-beat meter in Dave Brubeck’s “Take Five,” while it is certainly unusual from the point of view of dominant metrical ideas in Western music, in fact consists of five equal metrical beats.

## 2.4 Blues in 10

“The joy of the ear” has different and, to a certain extent, more dramatic emotional dimensions in the next crucial piece (created in the mid-1960’s), in which Leviev continues his innovative attempts at unusual forms of symbiosis between “odd” meters and blues intonation. As the very name of the piece indicates, “Blues in 10” experiments with “counting in ten” which flows according to the movement of the leading intonational motif. Such an organic attitude to musical time undoubtedly breaks up prevailing metrical ideas connected with Western as well as non-Western music. Inspired by the logic of free and natural music making, the invention here does not keep within the bounds of established models, but rather creates an original metro-rhythmic matrix with the following structure as shown in Figure 1, below:



Figure 1. Metro-rhythmic matrix structure

The “ten-beat bar” can also be interpreted as a combination of two variants of 5+5. The allusion to asymmetry here is, in fact, only superficial, since in this case the five-beat measure contains an odd number of metrical *beats*, but cannot be identified with any asymmetrical meters known in the Balkan folk vocabulary, where the asymmetry rises from the combination of *two-beat* and *three-beat* sections.

Subjected to multiple repetitions, as well as to intriguing versifications within the general musical development, it is as if the key motif is personalized and takes on the role of a mysterious, haunting, but endlessly attractive figure, made into the leading dramaturgical factor. The use of repetition is the prevailing approach to creating emotional tension, and as a source of particular pleasure is to a certain extent reminiscent of the dramaturgy at play in Ravel’s famed “Bolero.” On the other hand, “Blues in 10” is one of the first documented compositions within Bulgarian jazz that tangibly depends on free improvisation, and thus to a large degree also depends on equal partnership in the collective music-making, with an emphasis on the inventiveness and individual style of each of the musicians. Both versions of “Blues in 10” recorded during the second half of the 1960’s (the first by the Radio Big Band, and the second by the quartet Focus ’65)<sup>19</sup> uncover in their own ways, as well as according to the specific instrumentations of each of the two ensembles, the potential of a new kind of professionalism (in Bulgarian terms), which masters the vocabulary of jazz as well the freedom to break out of conventional schemes. This can be observed even in the nonstandard take on swinging, approached here on “low flame”, that is from the viewpoint of stylistic conceptions that interpret swing more broadly, not only in its traditional sense as primarily dance music.

<sup>19</sup> A version of “Blues in 10”, performed by the quartet Focus ’65, was recorded live during the first jazz festival in Montreux in 1967.



### 3 Conclusion

Leviev's merit as a composer-inventor, as well as a leader who has succeeded in engaging and stimulating the individual improvisational potentials of the musicians that he has worked with, is reflected in the new level of professional and artistic awareness of jazz as a distinct type of music making. His innovative approach undoubtedly pushed the potential of jazz fusion, which further inspired and deepened exploration of unknown aspects of the otherwise traditional interest in "root" musics, and the modernized being of local folk styles met new forms of interactions that blend types of tunes and rhythms with different communal origins.

The significance of this tendency in Leviev's music can be also be seen in a number of his later compositions. Some of them, for example "Women's Dance," "Kaval Melody" or "On My Grandpa," which are included on the album "Bulgarian Blues for Piano" (Leviev 1990), unambiguously call forth associations with formulas and characteristics typical of folklore, continue to interpret modally-oriented melodic nuances, which can also be seen as a particular commentary by the composer on the so-called "orientalisms" in Bulgarian folk tunes. "Lydian Riff," a song from the album "Quiet Love," is an emphatic example of this individualized view of modal structures, and demonstrates in a particularly successful way the collaboration between Leviev and Vicky Almazidu, a well-known Bulgarian-born jazz singer of Greek descent (Leviev and Almazidu 2004).

Leviev's unabated interest in the "study" of metro-rhythmics as a creative factor in groove aesthetics is evident even if one looks only at his album "Man From Plovdiv." The album includes pieces for solo piano, such as "Polymetric Study #3" or the famed "Sadovsko Horo", in 33/16 which has acquired fame as an emblematic sign of Bulgarian contributions not only to the world of ethnojazz, but also to the field of (neo)folk music worldwide (Leviev 1991). This example reminds us, however, that even if "musical texts" might be specific reflections of the history and the changes in the thinking and feeling of the composer, their messages can nevertheless not be reduced solely to personal artistic biography. Questions of aesthetic values are intimately connected to intellectual explorations of a given individual, but they are also tied to historically-determined modifications and shifts in terms of the prestige of various codes that are articulated in the context of a given socio-musical consciousness.

As far as the dominating characteristics of Bulgarian socio-musical consciousness are concerned, the idea grasped by Leviev in the 1960's seems to have been before its time. Attempts to mix folk and jazz have for a long time remained a sporadic phenomenon at best. Nearly thirty years later ethnically-derived music, understood already as a concept uniting the regional variety found in the sphere of locally shared vernacular traditions within the music of the Balkans, has come into its own in a far more palpable manner in Bulgarian jazz, as well as in the wider realm of popular music in Bulgaria. Recognized aesthetically in a new way – from the point of view of an urban mentality distanced from its rural roots, as well as from the point of view of those who immediately carry on and rejuvenate the folk tradition – the ethnically-derived musical language has gained prestige and attractiveness as the "old new thing," and is involved in unpredictable combinations of diverse forms that outline the emergence of a flexible range of fusions. Musicians with a taste for experimental

playing set into motion a new wave in the sphere of improvisation and *non-fixed* music. As for Leviev himself, he apparently continues to be an active figure in performing and developing the perspective that earned him the honored title of the “Godfather of Balkan Jazz.”

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