

Vladigerov and *Vardar* in historiographic and political context

Eastern composers often studied abroad to gain experience in the established classical idiom. They were very cosmopolitan, folk-influenced and enormously skilled as national representatives. Bartok, Szymanowski and Enescu were in roughly analogous situations, being criticized for being exotic. Vladigerov was writing tonal music with many influences. Mahler, Sibelius, Strauss and Elgar were described as modern around 1900 but around 1910 Schoenberg and Stravinsky were creating a new kind of modernism. Suddenly what had been conceived as modernistic was old-fashioned. By 1920, many composers found themselves out-of-date and tonality was being questioned. For example, Strauss had composed his almost atonal operas ‘Salome’ (1905) and ‘Elektra’ (1906-1908) and later come back to tonality in the 1910s. So Bartok, Schoenberg, Berg and Stravinsky were considered avant garde and composers like Elgar and Sibelius were left behind. Generations born around 1880-1900 (Enescu, Vladigerov) became mature in the 1910s-1920s as technical composers with enormous skills with tonal idioms. They were unlikely to be praised because historically critics tend to favour progress. If Vladigerov had been writing in the 1860s like Dvorak, Grieg or Mussorgsky, tonality would have been quite normal. But it was a bit late for nationalism post-1920s in Western Europe and his position in this context was problematic, which probably prevented him becoming popular in countries with major music traditions like Great Britain, France and Italy. After Vladigerov’s concert in Zagreb, the *Morgenblatt* critic in 1935 noted: “His style is similar to the young Schoenberg, but to a certain extent it stays romantic”.¹ On the one hand it was an honour to be compared with such a figure, but on the other hand an acknowledgement of his problematic historic position. However, for the Socialist realism in communist USSR and the Eastern Block after the 1940s, pretty much controlled by Moscow, he fitted quite well

¹ Pavlov-Klosterman, E., *Pancho Vladigerov*, p 134 (translated Todorov, S.)

and was significantly celebrated by his Slavic brother-Russians, using folk motifs and being a bit, but not too modern.

In order to explain how and why *Vardar* was used for political occasions, I need to describe briefly the intense historic events in the Balkans from the 1880s to the 1980s. The Treaty of Berlin, just after Bulgaria's liberation from the Ottomans, caused major conflicts for territories and peoples. According to the Treaty, Macedonia and Eastern Thrace, with mainly Bulgarian inhabitants, remained under occupancy. After Eastern Thrace joined Bulgaria in 1885, Bulgarian and Macedonian elites started planning the entire Unification of Bulgaria. Having big designs on Macedonia as Greece had, Serbia feared a strong neighbouring Bulgarian power and as a result declared a war. Bulgaria won within a week, which triggered and settled a stronger desire for Unification. With the first Balkan war in 1912 Bulgaria, supported by the military forces of Serbia and Greece, routed the Turkish empire, liberating more lands of Eastern Thrace and some in Macedonia. The dispute about Macedonia between the allies, however, led to the second Balkan war in 1913 with all, including Romania and Turkey, against Bulgaria. That was a big defeat for Bulgaria, which lost territories like Dobrudja, Macedonia and Edirne. Even more territories were lost after the First World War's Treaty of Neuilly (Paris), which led to the second national catastrophe.² All these events seemed significant enough for the patriot Vladigerov (in Germany at the time), who was worrying about his homeland, to express his empathy by composing and dedicating his 'Bulgarian Rhapsody *Vardar* to the struggling peoples of his mother country.

Between 1918 and 1941, Macedonia was under the wing of Yugoslavia. Serbs then began spreading their national ideas by sending tutors and priests: "They have been brought up as Bulgars: now, they have been told by the

² Fol, A., *Bulgaria: History Retold in Brief*, pp142-146

peacemakers at Paris they are Serbs”.³ These events might have been certain stir up controversy, yet would make many people think that this was a peaceful thought enforced ‘Serbianisation’ (primarily proved by the surname ending changes from the Bulgarian –ov to the Serbian –ich and by the ban on the Bulgarian language at the expense of the Serbian). The author Bernard Newman visited a village near Skopije in 1933, where he interviewed the children of one of two brothers (the one calling himself Bulgarian and the other Serbian):

“And are you a Bulgar or a Serb?” I asked his son.

“Neither. I am a Yugoslav,” he replied.

“And you?” I turned to the man’s daughter.

“I am a Yugoslav too,” she said, “if you include Bulgaria as well.”⁴

Due to this repression, many Macedonians with Bulgarian allegiance decided to move to Bulgaria and to keep fighting from there for the glorious Unification.

In 1933, there was an exhibition of Bulgarian artist organized in Athens, supported by notable Bulgarian composers. In front of the attending Greek prime-minister and diplomats, Vladigerov performed ‘*Vardar*’, which was received very successfully by the critics and the audience.⁵ It is very likely that the name Bulgarian Rhapsody was avoided because the concert was under a strong political patronage, and it was important to avoid triggering the conflict about the Greek ambitions in Macedonia.

In 1936, Pancho Vladigerov and the Romanian violinist Isidor Koganov gave a recital in Dobrich (the capital town of the Dobrudja area, which was given to Romania by the Treaty of Bucharest, finally confirmed after World War I). Later

³ Newman, B., *Balkan Background*, p 61

⁴ *Ibid.* p 62

⁵ Pavlov-Klosterman, E., *Pancho Vladigerov*, p 146

an audience member reflected its tragic ending in a Bulgarian newspaper saying that the audience was crying after the performance of ‘*Bulgarian Rhapsody Vardar*’, and that “Pancho Vladigerov’s *Vardar* was sounding like a hymn to the people’s liberty”⁶. What makes sense here is that Vladigerov consciously chose *Vardar* for the event, bringing the message to the people that he and the Bulgarians supported their brothers in these lands. After 1937, *Vardar* was performed in Bulgaria as ‘*Bulgarian Rhapsody*’ due to political influence repressing the title *Vardar*. From 1934 to 1940 the pro-totalitarian regime came into power with the idea of centralisation and annulment of democratic freedom. The tragic events of the wars and the catastrophes of the 1910s were still remembered. So Bulgaria had to be careful in expressing ‘Great-Bulgarian’ patriotic feelings on public occasions or in art, especially those affecting the former allies, but now rivals – Serbia, Greece and Romania. Serbia and Macedonia were part of Yugoslavia, which explains why the name of *Rhapsody Vardar* was ‘tactfully’ changed. In 1937, the orchestral ‘*Rhapsody Vardar*’ was performed in Bucharest. A month later, Vladigerov and the child prodigy violinist Dobrin Petkov performed the Bulgarian Rhapsody (without the title *Vardar*) in Beograd. The Yugoslavian *Vreme* newspaper’s critic Zhivkovic simply stated: “*Bulgarian Rhapsody* is a greatful virtuosic piece for violinists in terms of technique and interpretation, revealing the instrument’s capabilities”⁷ – again, the original name and the Macedonian question are consciously avoided or censored. From 1940, Vladigerov stopped touring Western Europe because of the war and focused on the Balkans – mainly Yugoslavia. The same year, the orchestral *Vardar* was premiered in Yugoslavia (Ljubljana) successfully with shouts from the audience as “Viva” and “Hurray”.⁸ This was a certain evidence of the Balkan character of the piece, which made it a favourite with the Slavic ethnos, despite political repressions of the title.

⁶ Ibid. p 135 (translated Todorov, S.)

⁷ Ibid. p 136 (translated Todorov, S.)

⁸ Ibid. p 145 (translated Todorov, S.)

In the beginning of World War II, Bulgaria decided to join the Nazis, who promised to give them back territories they considered Bulgarian. In May 1941, 22 years their previous union, the Bulgarian army entered and liberated Macedonia, being excitedly welcomed by the populace. Considered the Bulgarian Jerusalem, Ohrid was celebrating the long-awaited Unification with Bulgaria. Especially for that occasion, the Tsar Military Symphony Orchestra, led by Vladigerov's friend Sasha Popov, came from Sofia to perform a joyful concert on the Lake square. Michail Ognyanov shares these events and his own experience in his book: "The *Bulgarian Rhapsody Vardar* opened the concert and the older people started singing along 'We are Bulgarians' by Dobri Hristov", possibly the apogee of Bulgarian and Macedonian expression of National brotherhood – the *Rhapsody's* virtue bringing long-expected freedom.⁹ As a quarter Jew, Vladigerov could not attend this major event, most probably because he was staying hidden, composing in Bulgarian villages, although not chased by the Nazis. At the same time, Radio Sofia was daily replaying the *Rhapsody's* recording, which was also broadcast in Macedonia.¹⁰ This mood of celebration continued until 1944, when the Nazis (alongside Bulgaria) lost the war. Southern Dobrudja was returned to Bulgaria, but the Macedonian dream had to be forgotten.

After the war, the Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP) took over power, headed by Stalin's puppet Georgi Dimitrov. Vladigerov was then required to become a (nominal) member of the Fatherland Front as were many other public figures. His interest was only in the political attitude to culture. Composers were encouraged write profoundly folk-based music dedicated to the workers. In response Vladigerov wrote many transcriptions of folksongs and pieces such as *May Sinfonietta* (1949) – dedicated "to the working Bulgarian youth in honour

⁹ Ognyanov, M., *Macedonia: A Lived Destiny*, p 189 (translated Todorov, S.)

¹⁰ 'Valtava and Vardar' <https://melomem.wordpress.com/2011/02/16/vardar/>

of Labour Day”¹¹. As a favourite of the authorities, the composer was honoured with the three highest Socialist prizes (one of which is for *Rhapsody Vardar*). Despite this, the Communists kept suppressing the name as ‘*Rhapsody Vardar*’, because of their close relationship with ‘Red’ Yugoslavia. According to the Comintern, there were no real Bulgarians, but people from Dobrudja, Shopsko, Thrace, Macedonia etc. So ‘Bulgarian’ became a slightly dangerous word and meaningless for the Communists, whose main task was to serve Soviet rules. This defined *Bulgarian Rhapsody Vardar* as ‘Great-Bulgarian chauvinism’ and led to dropping the name Bulgarian. The partnership with ‘Big Brother’, opened up cultural exchanges with Russia, which also made Vladigerov admired and successful there. As a result, Moscow Radio and the Musgis edition started producing recordings, and the score of *Bulgarian Rhapsody* (without *Vardar*, although the full name was used for concerts) was published. Moreover, a short documentary film was made about Vladigerov in Russia, with the composer conducting *Vardar* himself. At the same time, Vladigerov was criticized by the Union of Bulgarian Composers (UBC) for bringing “German impressionism, eroticism and foreign tone” into some of his work, despite his “faithful orientation towards folklore” in *Rhapsody Vardar*.¹² Even Shostakovich and Prokofiev were described as foreign. Not all composers had been criticized by UBC, which might suggest that these reports were made under political duress. However, the idea of the new music becoming more and more based on folklore in order to develop a better national cultural consciousness seemed well-founded. As a matter of fact, “many orchestras of folk instruments were created”, offering educational activities throughout Bulgaria.¹³

But even though Vladigerov was classified as a folk composer, why didn’t he move further into the atonality as Bartók did? Vladigerov did use some of the

¹¹ Pavlov-Klosterman, E., *Pancho Vladigerov*, p 173 (translated Todorov, S.)

¹² Ibid. p 181 (translated Todorov, S.)

¹³ Prashanov, T., *The Bulgarian Orchestra of Folk Instruments*, p 2 (translated Todorov, S.)

principles of Debussy, Ravel and Strauss, but he consciously avoided those of Schoenberg and Bartók, as he was interested in the melody of Bulgarian folksong. Another reason could be his education in Berlin, which had helped him to clarify his own style. The real answers found in the previous paragraph, which underlines the encouragements of the UBC and the Communist Party to continue writing clear folk-based music with as limited modern Western influence as possible. Moreover, he seemed to be feeling responsible towards the Bulgarian people for enriching their own National development.

Vladigerov had a similar piece to *Vardar* as a ‘successor’ with the same patriotic intent, having the official Bulgarian hymn-tune worked into it. However, this was not perceived as controversial because it did not affect other Balkan cultures. The official national anthem between 1886 - 1944 *Shumi Maritsa* [*Maritsa* river sparkles] was one of the three tunes which Vladigerov wove into his concert overture *Zemya* [Earth] in 1933, premiered in Sofia (1934) after the warm welcome to his homeland. The Bulgarian magazine ‘Nation and Earth’ reviewed this concert stating that the piece represented “the sad memories of the Ottoman occupancy, the festivities of peasant life and the voice of victory”.¹⁴ Yet in 1919, Vladigerov had published his own harmonization of the anthem for piano, which distinguished it from the official version. In 1926, the official anthem *Shumi Maritsa* opened the first event of the Varna Summer Music Festival. As part of it, the twin brothers played the ‘*Bulgarian Rhapsody Vardar*’ in a special concert. In 1929 the orchestral version was performed for first time and since 1957 it has been the opening hymn-tune of the Festival. *Vardar* is the most suitable opening for such occasions for several reasons. It plays the role of a hymn-tune, representing the Bulgarian folk tradition and spirit yet being longer and larger than the official hymns. Most importantly, it represents a fight for freedom and peace in a particular area (Macedonia) but is

¹⁴ Pavlov-Klosterman, E., *Pancho Vladigerov*, p 120 (translated Todorov, S.)

also known as a universal symbol of all the fights, struggles and victories of the Bulgarians, especially against the Ottomans. The Belgrade Philharmonic closed the UBC's concert in Belgrade in 1938 with *Zemya* with no evidence of disturbance. However, its reception was cool probably due to anti-Bulgarian propaganda, especially among the Serbs.

In Vladigerov's biography there is evidence that *Bulgarian Rhapsody Vardar* was performed in concerts under varied names abroad in Berlin (1923), New York, Berlin (1925), Vienna (1926), Paris (1927), Prague (1928), Berlin, Salzburg, Tel Aviv (1929), Dresden, Rome, Warsaw, Bucharest (1930), Milwaukee (1931), Utrecht, London, Philadelphia, Berlin (1932), Athens, Riga, Torino, Vienna (1933), Milwaukee, Vienna (1934), Vienna, Budapest (1935), Paris, Vienna, Stockholm (1936), Bucharest, Belgrade, Dresden, Prague, Salzburg, London, New York (1937), Budapest, New York, Leipzig, Goteborg, Helsinki, Copenhagen (1938), Venice, Florence (1939), Breslau (1940), Oslo (1941), Berlin, Waldenburg, Vienna, Bucharest (1943), Moscow (1948), Prague (1950), Berlin (1951), Buenos Aires (1954). Performances were more frequent especially between 1980 and 1995, and too numerous to list. To summarize, *Vardar* was performed more than 50 times in different arrangements by 2000 mainly in Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia, even more frequently than in Bulgaria.

In recent years, an unknown author has also given *Vardar* the name Balkan Anthem. I can offer some hypothesis about this renaming. It is logical that such an anthem after all the historically-patriotic events of the past 90 years should be renamed. What makes sense from my research so far is that *Vardar* and Vladigerov's music in general have been favourite not only in Bulgarian, but also in all the other Balkan lands. For example, the Croatian composer Boris Papandopolou writes for the journal *Novelties* after the premiere of *Zemya* in Zagreb 1935: "The success was big... The audience praised Vladigerov not only

as a world artist, but also as one of the greatest representatives of Eastern Slavonic [Yugoslavian] music”.¹⁵ All politicians did not favour it because its name and dedication could have inflamed territorial and ethnic conflicts. Moreover, its message was encouraging the mass to fight for freedom, which consequence authorities would seek to avoid. So a Balkan anthem would satisfy and unify all the disputed territories inhabited by Bulgarian people under a neutral name, without recalling the *Bulgarian-Vardar* controversy. Also, it is true that people moved a lot throughout this horrific period in the small but unstable area and some of their traditions could have become more Balkan than national. It could also have been called an anthem because of the march-like beginning and ending of *Vardar*, supported brass and percussion, which in combination with 4/4 time make military associations. In addition, the use of medleys in the middle section was common to all Balkan.

It seems that Vladigerov’s music was very nationalist and political, yet I was told by one of his students Georgi Kostov, that he was trying to stay apart from politics. What is certainly true is that he insisted on calling his piece with its full name – ‘*Bulgarian Rhapsody Vardar*’. For Vladigerov, the word patriot meant admirer and supporter of the Bulgarian people in a spiritual encouraging way. Not only *Vardar* but a large number of his pieces are evidence of his moral stand. Apart from the already mentioned *Zemya* and *May Sinfonietta*, Vladigerov wrote the Heroic overture *September 1944* (1949) for the 5th anniversary of the end of WWII; *Bulgarian Suite* (1927) – dedicated “to the Bulgarian people for one century since the birth of the Bulgarian Tsar Simeon and 50 years since the Bulgarian liberation”.¹⁶ Several folksong transcriptions and *Autumn Elegy* op. 15 (1922) were dedicated to those friends, who suffered from the political regime through the years. Patriotism for Vladigerov really meant expressing his views by his art without being politically active.

¹⁵ Ibid. p 133 (translated Todorov, S.)

¹⁶ Ibid. p 75 (translated Todorov, S.)

During the political changes across Europe in 1989, it was an interesting fact that the first thing Germans performed was Beethoven's 9th Symphony, Czechs played *Vltava* and *Ma Vlast* by Smetana, but Bulgarians astonishingly "sung *Let It Be* by the Beatles".¹⁷ There could be a few reasons for this. Under Communism in Bulgaria, there was a ban on distributing and Western Popular decadent music, although many people found ways of accessing it secretly. The breakdown of the regime meant freedom of access and *Let It Be* itself celebrated liberal a spirit. *Vardar* might have stayed isolated at this time because of its forgotten patriotic meaning and its more recent Communistic variant. Gradually, during the so-called Bulgarian Transition since 1990, *Bulgarian Rhapsody Vardar* started retaining its full and ancient power, being transformed into a prime symbol of Bulgarian Nationalism. It is being used mainly for concert purposes, but politicians dare to use it for election campaigns, rousing the national spirit of voters. However, the Macedonian Question and the memory of the unrealized national ideal are still current for Bulgaria and there is silence and no evidence of recent performances or appreciation of '*Bulgarian Rhapsody Vardar*' in Macedonia. Now that Macedonia is independent and some of its national ideals have altered, the piece might be considered chauvinistic by the Skopije's authorities and therefore banned. Suppose we dream that one day musicians from the two countries could unite and perform the '*Bulgarian Rhapsody Vardar*' for the sake of the music alone, setting aside political propaganda? Could that happen someday? Who knows ... Perhaps '*Bulgarian Rhapsody Vardar*' might be the real key to more peaceful Balkans.

Conclusion

It could be said that the first full meeting of the idealistic ambition of a Bulgarian national musical style, and the maturity of an individual artist is

¹⁷ 'Vltava and Vardar' <https://melomem.wordpress.com/2011/02/16/vardar/>

realized in the *Bulgarian Rhapsody*. By creating it, Vladigerov achieves something even more meaningful – a musical description of a revived people, much as “Chopin’s A-major Polonaise op. 40 is a representation of greatness and glory for the Polish people”.¹⁸ Since Dobri Hristov’s melody ‘A single cry is heard’, which frames the opening and the closing of the middle dancing-rhythm section, is also dance-based, one might suggest that the work’s conclusion forms an apotheosis of Bulgarian folkdance, bringing a national pride in its musical achievement and respect to its inventor. Moreover, Vladigerov deals with his work’s drama by developing the Bulgarian symphonic tradition. The existence of folkloric elements in *Vardar* can also be seen as following the ‘first generation’ composers their so-called ‘mannered’. “We, old musicians grew up in tonal thinking and utterance with classical compositional techniques. Young musicians are lucky to have on hand limitless modern compositional techniques, which were unknown to us”, said Dobri Hristov in an interview just before he died.¹⁹ The fact that Vladigerov took the opportunity to use subjects of folk songs allows us to add the word ‘folklore’ to his type of symphonism. Even more, the composer’s skill in instrumental writing far exceeds that of his predecessors, standing out through a colourful, rich and grand orchestration.

It has been 93 years now since the birth of *Bulgarian Rhapsody Vardar*. Yet it remains the most popular and performed Bulgarian classical piece ever, certain evidence of its eternal artistic value. The *Rhapsody* is one of the very first Vladigerovian compositions, in which the use of authentic Bulgarian voices and rhythms heralded his future unique style. The *Bulgarian Rhapsody Vardar* is a piece that stimulates feelings of love and respect in the peoples of the homeland it depicts. Irrespective of what can be analysed within a musico-historical account such as this. As a work it has been digested instinctively by the Bulgarian people with their hearts and souls, becoming deeply rooted in their

¹⁸ Krastev, V., *Profiles: Essays for 11 Bulgarian Composers Book 1*, p 133 (translated Todorov, S.)

¹⁹ Avramov, E., *Vladigerov’s Harmony*, p 23 (translated Todorov, S.)

unique spiritual and cultural heritage.