

→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

# LE MYSTÈRE DES VOIX BULGARES

First grabbing world attention in the mid-80s, the mysterious Bulgarian voices are still a force to be reckoned with. Kim Burton reports

For many people the astonishing, spine-tingling sound of the Bulgarian women's choirs was their first encounter with music beyond their everyday experience of radio, record player or concert-hall. Even those who were able to obtain the original LP, as opposed to a third or fourth generation cassette tape, were given very few clues about what this music actually was. Often the only information they had was the name of the recording itself, *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares* (Mystery of Bulgarian Voices), which indicates to us, the listeners, what we are about to hear and suggests how we should experience it. We are implicitly promised a mystical, otherworldly revelation of primal wisdoms, an almost shamanic vision, with the voices themselves the path to the revelation.

The voices are indeed wonderful, and strange. Their powerful, penetrating and resonant sound, produced by an open but carefully focused vocal projection, free of vibrato but amenable to embellishments such as trills, glottal ornaments and falsetto, fits the unfamiliar modes, rhythms and harmonies of the songs. The singers sometimes break into wild slides, whoops, and sudden bursts of speech or showers of nonsense syllables, creating a sound-world which is at once alien yet strangely familiar.

'Piltentze Pee', the opening song on the first volume, is a microcosm of what is to come. The piercing, strident voices singing a highly decorated melody above a drone, a single vocal line splitting apart and flowering into three harmonised melodies, the sense of echoing space, chains of increasingly harsh dissonance

collapsing into unison – in consort they make a dramatic process of development and dynamic variation. Some of this – the drone, the ornamentation, the delight in shivering dissonance – truly is the promised sound of tradition. Much of it is not.

This female vocal choir is the descendant of one of the first large-scale folk ensembles in Bulgaria. Founded in 1952, it was part of the newly established Communist government's desire to underpin national cohesion and present itself as a patriotic and national undertaking by creating a musical language based on Bulgarian folk styles and a cultural mechanism to support it. The large ensembles created a new class of state-employed singers and instrumentalists who performed arrangements of folk songs or original compositions in a style pioneered by Filip Kutev, a former military bandmaster and

The choir pictured in Cleveland (right) and Wroclaw, Poland (below)



composer of symphonic music. Kutev's approach was to take elements of traditional music and elaborate them, drawing on techniques from 'serious' music: drones, clashing close harmonies, the complex irregular rhythms of Bulgarian dance fused with gently moving counterpoints, changes in tempo, intensity and texture, chromatic side-slips and modulations.

The first recording bearing the *Le Mystère...* title was released in 1975, and was a collection of recordings of the Ensemble, among other groups. The man responsible, Marcel Cellier, was himself slightly mysterious: a Swiss music lover and organist who had encountered the music during trips to the Balkans, and released it on his own label, Disques Cellier – also responsible for the remarkable success of Romanian pan-piper Gheorghe Zamfir. Although it received



good reviews, Cellier's release remained known only to an enthusiastic minority, often passed around on cassette recordings. Eventually one of that minority, English singer Peter Murphy, introduced it to founder of pop label 4AD who licensed and re-released the material in 1986. Unexpectedly, this labour of love became a major success, selling hundreds of thousands of copies worldwide, and introducing Bulgarian music to millions.

Back home, as economic conditions worsened at the end of the 80s, the subsidies that had sustained the state groups started to shrink, and with the ideological shift that followed the eventual collapse of the socialist system, they disappeared altogether. Thrown back on their own resources, Bulgarian musicians began to chase private sponsorship and sought to take advantage of their music's new profile abroad. *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares* had become a brand, and other Bulgarian choirs smelt opportunity. So a number of competing choirs all trading under the same name made their appearance. Things began to get a little tense, until it was determined that the holder of the rights to the

name was Cellier himself, who in 1997 finally awarded the Women's Choir of Bulgarian Radio-Television (BRT) the right to use the title. This caused a sudden flurry of name changes, and a flock of competing Angelite, Bulgarian, Cosmic and other Mysterious voices took the stage, while Kutev's successor in the Ensemble, Stefan Dragostinov, branched out on his own with a series of six CDs under the title *The Key to the Mystery*.

The BRT women's group, now officially the *Mystère*, has continued to record and tour under the baton of Dora Hristova, who became conductor in 1987. They are often accompanied by a small band of virtuoso folk musicians playing bagpipe, shepherd's flute, bowed *gadulka* and strummed *tambura*. Cellier still meets the choir at one of their concerts every year. The choir has broadened its repertoire from folklore to include Orthodox sacred music, and has also introduced music from the Balkan Sephardic Jewish tradition, arranged by composer Nikolai Kaufman, who himself has Sephardic roots.

That these strange, distant, unfamiliar, sometimes chilling sounds had such an immediate effect on listeners, leading them to explore musical languages from many lands, is no mystery. Strangest of all, perhaps, is the growth of amateur choirs worldwide, in London, Los Angeles, Tokyo, sometimes with Bulgarian conductors and members, who do the hard work needed to learn how to perform this startling music. Their dedication is perhaps the most striking testimony to the urgent, elemental power of the voices of Bulgaria. ●

**DATES** See *Gig Guide* for UK tour dates



Dora Hristova who became the choir's conductor in 1987



# BEST...

## ...ALBUMS



### *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares Volume 1* (reissued on 4AD)

There are four volumes in total, but for many people, this remains the favourite, perhaps because it was their very first encounter with Bulgarian singing. Despite the somewhat antique sound, by today's standards, the performances are committed and deeply moving.



### *Ritual* (Elektra Nonesuch Explorer Series/Gega New)

This is a gorgeous and varied collection of songs connected with seasonal religious and agricultural rituals, and features one of Kaufman's arrangements of Bulgarian Sephardic music.



### *Eva Quartet, Harmonies* (Kuker Music)

The members of the Eva Quartet (who also appear on Volume 4 of Cellier's series) present a chamber version of the larger choirs, with a less monumental and more intimate style. Poised and elegant, their music has a more contemporary approach, but remains steeped in tradition. Reviewed in #15.



### *The Bistritsa Grannies and their Grand-Daughters, Authentic Bulgarian Folk Songs* (Gega New)

Elderly traditional singers, and some members of the younger generation, project a wall of sound with all the power and precision that inspired Kutev. No comforting Western harmonies and phrasing here – this is raw, uncompromising music.

## ...AVOIDED



### *The Bulgarian Voices Angelite, From Bulgaria with Love* (Jaro)

Not simply because it is a cack-handed attempt to merge Phat Beats with samples of the choir slotted in as exotic colouring, but because it is in fact another choir altogether. Angelite are an offshoot of the Bulgarian Radio-Television Choir.

## IF YOU LIKE LE MYSTÈRE DES VOIX BULGARES, THEN TRY...

### THE RUSTAVI CHOIR



### *Georgian Voices* (Nonesuch)

One of Georgia's most celebrated male vocal groups performs music from an unrelated but comparable tradition of unaccompanied choral singing. At one moment virile and confident



and by others hushed and worshipping, the songs usher you into a tradition in every way as old and rich as that of Bulgaria.