

INTRODUCTION

Whoever hears *zurnaci* music from Bulgaria for the first time is left bewildered. The powerful, shrill sound of the *zurnas* and *tapans*, their unique timbre, the skill of the performers, the surprising quantity and variety of the repertoire cannot leave the listener indifferent. There is something hypnotic in this ancient instrument and in its exceptional sound. And when the maze of contradictory connotations and images of the *zurna* is added to the energy of the initial sensual perception, it is obvious why this is one of the “problematic” musical instruments in Bulgaria and on the Balkans. It is an instrument to love deeply and hate strongly.

We had the same experience at our first encounters with *zurnaci* music. We were hit by the energy, the trance, the problematization – those were the milestones on our road to this music. It is not that certain whether we managed to reach its heart. Probably we are still on the way. Our emotional-rational journey would be impossible without guides and mediators. We discovered them amongst the local *zurna* players from Southwest Bulgaria. The first of them was Demko Kurtov from the village of Kavrakirovo. His generosity, devotion and openness as a player and provider of information seemed to be the sign of an intuitive revelation that the meetings are important both for us and for the music that brought us together. After Demko, the other *zurnacies* also treated us like colleagues, including us in their communication as musicians. The cooperation of the players allowed us to find the best investigative approaches: we could be both outsiders looking in and processing the information objectively and ethically, and at the same time be insiders participating intimately in the communication. As a result of this journey to the heart of the living *zurnaci* tradition, shared with our musician guides, the idea of the study could become visible.

Our initial intentions were to investigate one of the authentic forms of Roma music in Bulgaria. It is well known that there are instruments played predominantly by Roma. These are the cymbal, tambourine, *tapan* and *zurna*. There are also typical Roma band formations. Amongst Bulgarian Roma, these are *zurnaci-tapanci* formations, brass bands, modern wedding bands with acoustic and amplifying instruments. While some of the instruments might be played by non-Roma musicians and the formations can be ethnically mixed, the *zurna* and the group of *zurnacies* are entirely Roma (there are very few Non-Roma *zurna* players in Bulgaria).

The initial idea was the headstone of the research project on ***Zurnaci Music – A Contribution to the Study of the Authentic Roma Music in Bulgaria*** which was supported by the Open Society Institute in Budapest and its Centre for Roma Culture. It should be pointed out that the authors have been interested in researching the *zurnaci* tradition in Southwest Bulgaria for a decade. Thanks to this project, we could carry out concentrated, intensive and versatile investigations on local *zurnaci* practice. The active field research and that done in libraries and archives corrected the parameters and focuses of the initial idea. It turned out that the *zurnaci* music produced by Roma is not simply the “authentic folklore” of an ethnic group. *Zurnaci* music is a tradition of various ethnic and confessional groups in Bulgaria. It is one of the emblems of Balkan music. Therefore the present book is not a study on the Roma musician and on one of his “authentic” instruments but an anthropology of *zurnaci* music in Southwest Bulgaria, the main characters