

# EAST EUROPEAN FOLKLIFE CENTER KEFTIMES

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## Tzvetanka Varimezova

Interview by  
Julie Lancaster

Tzvetanka Varimezova has been teaching Bulgarian singing at EEFC Balkan Music & Dance Workshops since 2002. This year will be her ninth at Mendocino; she has also taught twice at East Coast camp.

Tzvetanka at the 2011 Seattle Folklife Festival, where she and her family were special guests (PHOTO BY EVGENIA ANGELOVA).

Tzvetanka Varimezova was born in Pazardžik, Bulgaria, into a musical family—her father played the kaval and her mother was a good singer—but there was not much music making in the household as she was growing up. Her parents divorced when she was two years old. It was her grandmother who recognized her talent and helped her.

“I was around 4 years old when my grandmother took me to see the operetta *The Merry Widow*—that’s what she told me; of course I don’t remember anything about it,” Tzvetanka says. “About five or six months later, she and my aunts and uncles were all together cooking, preparing for Christmas. We had a very old radio and the radio was playing music—again, I don’t remember this—we were making *banitsi* [layered cheese pies], cooking, talking, laughing. The voices were very noisy.

“I was a very little girl, 3, 4, 5 years old, and I said: ‘Hey, stop it! Stop talking so loudly! Because there is music! And I know that music—I was with my grandma!’ And finally, after three or four times, my grandmother said to the others, ‘Hey, stop it. Let’s see if that’s true.’ And when the music finished, the person on the radio said, ‘You have just heard music from *The Merry Widow*. And my grandmother said, ‘Oh, my goodness.’”

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### EEFC MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the East European Folklife Center (EEFC) is to promote, celebrate and educate the public about traditional and traditionally based music, dance and cultures of the Balkans.



*Tzvetanka has always been a charismatic performer. Here solo and with her husband Ivan in 1995 (PHOTOS BY MIKE HARKIN). With Ivan and daughters Radka and Tanya (PHOTO PROVIDED BY TZVETANKA). With longtime friend and fellow musician Ivanka Paunova on *gudulka* (PHOTO BY CB STEVENSON).*

## LEARNING TO SHARE THE MUSIC

Within a few years, her grandmother brought her to the local children's ensemble and the director, Alexander Nachev, allowed Tzvetanka to join.

"He was my first teacher," she says. "He couldn't sing, but he taught me so many things about singing and conducting. Of course, I was a little girl, but I was so thirsty for music. Thirsty, like I really needed not only water and food but something spiritual, too."

She started singing in the ensemble, and began learning accordion. By age 11, she was also playing tambura and piano. It was easy to learn and get into the music with this talented group of children; they attended concerts and performed in Pazardžik and elsewhere in Bulgaria. "We were living like we were in one family, we were so close," she says.

When the children wondered about their futures, Alexander Nachev told them about the folk music high schools in Kotel and Široka Lūka, where they could continue to share the music and go on to be great performers and directors of ensembles. Tzvetanka and her friends thought, "That would be great, let's try."

In 1974 she applied for and was accepted to the Kotel High School for Folk Music. It was far from home but had an excellent program and had schooled many excellent

musicians. Once she got there, it was just as her teacher had said: besides learning and studying, she and her friends met many "talented, incredible musicians who later became great performers and directors."

After high school, Tzvetanka went on to attend the Academy of Music and Dance in Plovdiv. There she got to know Ivan Varimezov, a *gajda* player. They had met at Kotel, where he was two years ahead of her class, but there they were just colleagues. After he finished his army service and she finished high school, they met again and discovered what a great match they were for one another. (Ivan's family, rich in musical tradition, is described in Timothy Rice's 1994 book, *May It Fill Your Soul: Experiencing Bulgarian Music*.)

## PROFESSIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

When Tzvetanka and Ivan enrolled at the academy in 1979, they were also accepted into the National Folk Ensemble "Trakia" in Plovdiv, one of the largest professional ensembles in Bulgaria—a highly disciplined, elite group. Being able to learn in this professional setting, having a job as a performer while also being a student, was a huge opportunity for them.

Tzvetanka and Ivan married in 1981 and their first daughter, Radka, was born in 1982. They finished the



*Tzvetanka is very busy at the EEFC workshops. At top, teaching a singing class (PHOTO BY ARLENE IMAGAWA) and below, performing with Ivan Milev (PHOTO BY MARGARET LOOMIS). But there's always a little time to relax and dig the scene, here with husband Ivan (PHOTO BY GEORGE CHITTENDEN).*

academy in 1983 with bachelor's degrees: Tzvetanka's in choral conducting and folk instrument pedagogy and Ivan's in folk instrument performance and ensemble conducting. As a couple, they were offered the position of directing a regional professional folk ensemble in Pazardžik: Tzvetanka would direct the choir and Ivan the orchestra. They hesitated, not knowing how it would be to work with this smaller, less professional group.

"We were so happy to be going back to our town, but at the same time we were a little unhappy, wondering how it would be," Tzvetanka says.

For the first few weeks it was difficult. On the first day, the ensemble's singers were knitting, laughing and talking. "It was like a *sedjanka* [work party]," Tzvetanka says, rather than a professional rehearsal. But she didn't push them. Instead, step by step, over time, she showed them how "the magic" could flow and become normal when the group worked together in a focused way.

"We really worked at a very high level, with intonation, precisely joining and matching voices. It was really hard but it was really great," she says. "That was the best time in our career, working with that ensemble."

## IN SOFIA

For years Tzvetanka and Ivan had dreamed about applying to join one of the large national ensembles in Sofia. That

wasn't possible under the communist regime—only citizens of Sofia could live there; others had to stay in the towns where they were born. But after communism fell in 1989, things changed. In 1991 Ivan was accepted at Filip Kutev National Folklore Ensemble in Sofia. But the couple's second child, Tanya, was a baby. Tzvetanka felt she couldn't go. Then the director of Filip Kutev, Stefan Dragostinov, called and urged her to come. Soloist Nadka Karadžova was retiring and he needed Tzvetanka's voice. Ivan said, "Let's try."

The family had been living with Tzvetanka's grandmother in Pazardžik and didn't want to leave her, but she told them she was determined to come and help, and see their musical careers develop. So in 1991 the family, including Grandmother with her two suitcases, left for Sofia. Ivan's mother offered to take care of Tanya until she was ready for first grade, so Tanya went to live with her paternal grandparents in Sredec for a few years; Tzvetanka and family visited her on the weekends.

During the 1990s Tzvetanka worked with the Kutev Ensemble and also other choirs, including Cosmic Voices from Bulgaria, Les Grandes Voix Bulgares, the Bulgarian Radio Choir and Trio Bojura. With these ensembles and others, she toured throughout Europe, Russia, Japan, Latin America and the U.S., and began working with Bulgarian choirs in Western Europe.



*Tzvetanka chilling with Kalin Kirilov, Vassil Bebelev and Nikolay Doctorov (PHOTO BY BILL LANPHIER). Stepping out on the dance floor (PHOTO BY MARGARET LOOMIS). Quality time with Radka (PHOTO BY BIZ HERTZBERG). Cracking up the band with Nikolay Kolev, Stoyan Kostov and Kalin (PHOTO BY MARGARET LOOMIS).*

## COMING TO THE U.S.

In 2001 Professor Timothy Rice invited the Varimezovs to come for a one-year residency at University of California-Los Angeles. Tanya was 9 and Radka 20. The family came at the end of September, after 9/11; friends in Bulgaria asked why they were going to that crazy country.

Tzvetanka and Ivan became master artists in residence in the ethnomusicology department at UCLA, and the residency continues. Now an adjunct associate professor, Tzvetanka teaches Bulgarian singing technique and conducts two choirs, the UCLA Bulgarian Women's Choir Superdevoiche and a mixed choir.

Soon after they arrived in the U.S., they started meeting American singers and musicians. They were impressed that Americans were so interested in the Bulgarian sound and already knew a lot about it, having made many contacts with Bulgarian teachers and musicians.

In 2002 Tzvetanka was invited to teach at her first EEFC Balkan Music & Dance Workshop, in Mendocino. (Ivan has taught at Mendocino twice, in 2004 and 2005.) She brought Radka with her that first year. Radka and Tanya have both attended many times since; the girls are themselves accomplished singers and instrumentalists.

"I was totally impressed and shocked how people were acting like a big family at camp," Tzvetanka says. "And I found another piece of my land; it felt like my country here.

We opened our hearts, of course, to help people produce a better sound and learn Bulgarian music, especially ornamentation. And we had such a nice time. Seeing happy faces, happy hearts, sharing the music.

"On the first evening, when we introduced ourselves as teachers, I was so impressed with the other teachers from the Balkans," she continues. "I realized that they really want not only to teach the students, not only to meet people and have fun, but to share their culture, share their emotions, their hearts, their memories. It seemed that all of us wanted to build our small Balkan community, to continue. We really appreciate you [people who come to camp], coming to study something from us.

"Because life is so short. I'm happy to give as much I can to people, because, after us, they can continue—you know, our kids, our friends, our grandkids, our friends' grandkids, the next generation. They can continue to share our culture, and other cultures in the world in the future, and to appreciate each other, which is the best thing. That evening when everybody announced, 'OK, I'm going to teach you Macedonian music.' 'OK, I'm going to teach you Greek music.' 'I'm going to teach you Albanian,' and so on. That made me so happy."

Tzvetanka has gone on to work with numerous American choirs and bands, presenting workshops and collaborating. In 2010, to celebrate her 50th birthday, she invited choirs



Asked to front a world-class band like *Grupa Maistori—nyama problem!* Nedyalko Nedyalkov, Vassil Bebelev, Georgi Petrov, Nikolay Georgiev and Ivaylo Koutchev (PHOTO BY MARGARET LOOMIS).

she has worked with to join her in presenting concerts in Sofia, Pazardžik and Koprivštica. More than 150 singers representing two professional Bulgarian ensembles; groups from France, Denmark and Greece; and Kitka and Superdevoiche from the United States; traveled together in three buses to deliver these concerts with her.

## GETTING PHILOSOPHICAL

On the deeper meaning of Balkan camp, Tzvetanka says, “I think each one of us living on the earth has something like empty space in our hearts. I mean empty space that we really want to use, not just to have fun but to discover ourselves. People want to challenge themselves with something. The community that we’re in at Balkan camp, we want to challenge ourselves with music. And some of us discover, ‘Oh, that kind of music I missed, probably I don’t have it in my heart. Let’s put that piece in our picture, in our spirit.’ They say, ‘Aha! This is the last piece (or the third piece or the sixth piece, you know) of the puzzle.’ They’re happy that they found something that they have missed before.

“For me, as a musician living right now in your country, my puzzle is not exactly the music, but to meet people, to have conversations, to share the culture, and not only through one-on-one lesson teaching or learning music; I want to see where the puzzle is and how to finish the puzzle. To learn what I’ve missed and what I need more of.

“That’s what I see for Balkan camp; everybody wants to do the best with their puzzle,” she continues. “To find themselves in the world, not only to make themselves happy but also to help each other live better. Everything is about that. To help each other, to try to find a better world, a better time.”

END

## A Peak Experience from Mendocino Camp 2002

For me and many others lucky enough to be there, the undisputed highlight was Tzvetanka and Goce [Dimovski]’s set in the kafana on the last night at camp. I should say two sets, as first Tzvetanka sang several beautiful slow songs in a voice as crystalline and effortless as it was the first day of camp. Then Goce tore the roof off with several smoking dance numbers. Things were so high energy at that point that two things happened: first Raif [Hyseni] got out of bed and came down and danced **in his pajamas**, and Tzvetanka came back and started singing again. This time she dialogued (some will say it was a duel, but regardless it was in good spirit) with Goce in a manner that would be familiar to anyone who has attended an Indian music concert. This went on, remarkably, for quite a while. We asked her daughter if Tzvetanka had ever done scat singing before; her daughter said, “Only at home!” So it was a first for her, too. Finally it finished. It was one of the peak camp experiences I certainly have ever had, and I think that holds true for others as well.

From a post by  
**David Bilides**  
to the EEFC listserv, July 9, 2002