

Practices in Bulgarian ethno-pop music

Abstract. The study focuses on contemporary practices in Bulgarian ethno-pop music, examining compositional strategies for adapting traditional folklore to the global musical context. The relevance of the topic stems from the growing need to integrate cultural heritage into the dynamic landscape of the contemporary music scene without compromising its authenticity. The novelty of this research lies in the analysis of six previously unexplored examples: “Ah, Kade e Mojto Libe” (2004), “Djore” (2016), “DOS” (2018), “Slanchitse” (2018), “Omile Mi” (2019), and “Pusta Mladost” (2022)—performances and recordings in which I was directly involved as a singer, arranger, or co-writer. These works showcase innovations such as the transformation of asymmetric rhythms (e.g., 9/8 into 4/4), the blending of traditional and electronic instruments (e.g., oud, tapan, synthesizers), the preservation of local dialects, transferring a folk tune to a new genre, and the integration of genres such as pop, jazz, rock, and electronic music. The methodological framework employs the analysis and synthesis of musical structures, comparative analysis between authentic and adapted forms, as well as empirical work grounded in the author’s practical experience as a composer, performer, and producer. This holistic approach illuminates the intricate interactions between tradition and modernity in the creation of musical works that preserve cultural memory while transforming it for contemporary audiences. The findings demonstrate that the adaptation of Bulgarian folklore within ethno-pop music harmonizes authenticity with innovation, rendering it a universal expression of cultural identity. The thesis posits that these adaptations not only preserve but also reconstruct cultural memory, embedding traditions as a vital component of the globalized world. Ethno-pop music emerges as a dynamic and sustainable phenomenon that strengthens Bulgaria’s cultural identity while bridging the divide between the local and the global.

Keywords: Bulgarian ethno-pop music, folklore preservation, innovation, cultural memory, global-local synthesis, compositional strategies, interpretation, contemporary practices.

1. Introduction

“The Local as the New Global”¹ is a thesis that has generated significant research interest. Initiatives to preserve the world’s tangible and intangible heritage have become a priority for the academic community today,² with the goal of safeguarding it from the ravages of time, systematizing it, making it widely accessible, and fostering a sense of community and identity.

Folklore can be sustained and made resonant in the present through multiple, complementary strategies. Foremost are recontextualization and adaptation—deliberate practices that rethink and relocate the folkloric idiom within new media, performance, and distribution environments. These practices can preserve the international inventory, modal organization, idiomatic ornamentation, and characteristic accentual profiles while relocating them within a frame that is perceptually familiar to the wide audiences of today.

For the local cultures of small nations with distinctive and recognizable features, such as Bulgarian folk music, this is particularly important as a factor of identity and community. Bulgarian folklore, alongside Bulgarian Orthodox music, continues to play a vital role not only as archival documentation but also as living symbolism in contemporary music. Most contemporary Bulgarian compositions revive the symbolism of Bulgarian cultural heritage,³ achieving not only continuity but also identification. In the art-music domain, composers such as Dobrinka Tabakova and Vasil Kazandjiev exemplify nationally legible idioms without relying on direct folk quotation. In jazz/crossover, Milcho Leviev and Theodosii Spassov translate *aksak*⁴ rhythm and modal thinking into improvisational and harmonic languages. In film/stage media, Penka Kouneva, Petar Dundakov, and Assen Avramov mobilize choral textures and folk timbres within global production frameworks. The popular/world sphere (e.g., Ku-Ku Band, Oratnitza, Ivan Shopov & Avigeya) renders these codes overt for mass audiences.

This article is dedicated to the ways and forms in which identity is expressed through folk music, asserting “local” belonging in a “global” musical world. This phenomenon is driven by many factors, primarily social: folk

¹ See the Project Local in the New Global (Kreislau-Initiative, n.d.).

² The UNESCO Memory of the World program in 1992.

³ By “contemporary Bulgarian compositions” I am referring to a broad cross-genre field in which Bulgarian cultural codes are mobilized either explicitly—through folkloric or Orthodox references, asymmetric meters, and characteristic timbral features—or implicitly, via modal tendencies, phraseological patterns, dramaturgical structures, and the institutional frameworks of creation and reception.

⁴ *Aksak* (Turk., “limping”) refers to asymmetrical metric patterns of Balkan and Middle Eastern music, built from unequal 2- and 3-unit groupings (e.g., 5/8, 7/8, 9/8). Introduced by Constantin Brăiloiu, the term describes both rhythmic structure and associated dance accents.

music has a large audience, is widely preferred in many places, is rich, original, and strongly identifying. We focus on one particular area where folk music has a prominent symbolic presence—popular music.

The theoretical foundation for this study draws upon Jonathan Friedmann's⁵ observation that "folk music is a type of pop music, and vice versa" (Friedmann 2015, 58). This perspective challenges traditional distinctions between folk and popular music, highlighting their shared capacity to reflect collective identities and adapt to changing societal contexts. Friedmann's insights are particularly relevant to the Bulgarian ethno-pop scene, where folklore functions not only as a cultural artifact but as a dynamic, evolving practice. By examining this interplay, the study addresses the critical question of how tradition and modernity coexist, mutually enriching each other in a globalized world.

Through analysis of six case studies from the Bulgarian ethno-pop stage—performances and recordings in which I was directly involved as a singer, arranger, or co-writer—this article examines the mechanisms through which Bulgarian folklore is adapted into contemporary ethno-pop music and asks:

1. How can traditional folk elements be mediated in globalized musical forms?
2. What compositional strategies enable the retention of cultural specificity while ensuring accessibility to wide audiences?

To explore these themes, this research employs a comprehensive methodology, combining analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction, and comparative frameworks. Both scholarly and creative processes intersect in this work: analysis and synthesis guide the artistic deconstruction and integration of folkloric elements, while induction and deduction shape the theoretical generalizations derived from specific adaptations. Comparative analysis highlights the transformations between original folklore and its contemporary reinterpretations, revealing how these adaptations navigate the tension between authenticity and innovation. Practical experience as a composer, songwriter, performer, and producer further enriches the study, offering empirical insights into the creative process and its cultural implications.

The relevance of this study is underscored by the challenges of globalization, which simultaneously threaten and invigorate traditional forms. On one hand, commercialization and cultural homogenization risk diluting folklore's unique characteristics (Timothy Taylor 1997); on the other, globalization provides a platform for its revitalization and dissemination (Connell and Gibson 2004, 349–351). One way to conceptualize a response to this risk is through what Roland Robertson (1995, 25–44) terms "glocalization," a process that combines global trends with local characteristics, emphasizing the unique features of cultural heritage. On the other hand, ethnomusicologist Martin Stokes (1994, 1–27) emphasizes that globalization reshapes musical spaces, detaching local traditions from their geographic origins and embedding them into transnational networks of production and consumption.

This paradoxical process—innovation intertwined with risk—frames the research orientation of this study. Using the transformation of Bulgarian folk music into ethno-pop as a focal point, folklore is conceptualized as a negotiated space: one that sustains cultural distinctiveness while dialoguing with global currents. From early innovators like Bartók and Kodály to contemporary Bulgarian acts such as Oratnitsa, Ivan Shopov & Avigeya, and DJ Fabrizio Parisi, folklore emerges as both heritage and experiment. The guiding premise of this study is that folklore's survival depends on the process of its adaptation or hybridization, transcending the dichotomy of local and global. This position will inform the subsequent analysis of six Bulgarian ethno-pop compositions demonstrating how innovation, hybridization, and reinterpretation reaffirm folklore's dynamic cultural force in the global age.

2. Distinctive features of Bulgarian ethno-pop music

In recent years, Bulgarian folklore has been the subject of extensive academic and cultural research, particularly focusing on its adaptation and integration into the contemporary cultural context. This trend builds on a long-standing tradition of folklore studies in Bulgaria, initiated in the 19th century by scholars such as Petar Dinekov and Mihail Arnaudov, who laid the groundwork for understanding folklore as both a cultural and historical phenomenon (Dinekov 1980; Arnaudov 1968).

Contemporary studies on Bulgarian folklore adaptations encompass music, dance, and other forms of cultural expression, examining how these elements preserve cultural heritage while remaining relevant to

⁵ Jonathan L. Friedmann (b. 1980), musicologist and cantor; Professor of Jewish Music History (AJR–California); author/editor of 30+ books on music, Judaism, and culture.

modern audiences. Researchers like Ventsislav Dimov and Claire Levy explore the interaction between traditional folklore and its reinterpretation in urban and global contexts. Their work emphasizes the transformative power of folklore in connecting the past with the present. For example, Dimov notes that “commercial recordings of folk music represent a new subject in ethnomusicology, shedding light on the interaction between traditional practices and modern media” (Dimov 2006, 176–194). Claire Levy has made significant contributions to the study of ethnojazz—a genre that fuses traditional folk idioms with jazz improvisation. She characterizes ethnojazz as “an innovative form of interaction between Bulgarian/Balkan folk and global jazz vocabulary,” suggesting it represents both “a new development in music” and “a new horizon in mixing of musical languages”. This synthesis, she argues, creates a bridge between the past and the present, a dynamic she evocatively terms “back to the future!” (Levy 2015, 159).

On an international level, Martin Stokes has provided valuable insights into the role of folklore in shaping identity across the Balkans. He observes that the folk music of the Balkans plays a key role in constructing national identity while simultaneously reflecting the complex historical and cultural interactions within the region (Stokes 1994, 1–27).

By integrating these perspectives, the study of Bulgarian folklore not only illuminates its historical roots but also highlights its dynamic role in contemporary culture, where tradition and innovation coexist. The current paper draws attention to the integration of folk elements into pop music, so it will be referred to as Bulgarian ethno-pop music. It denotes commercially produced music that foregrounds recognizable markers of Bulgarian folk idioms—such as modal inflections, timbral colorings, ornamentation, and additive accentual patterns—within pop, rock, or electronic frameworks aimed at mass, dance-oriented, and digitally mediated audiences. This working definition aligns with, yet expands on, earlier scholarly usages. Dimov (1996, 45–56) first introduced “ethnopop” as a media label for 1990s fusions, which quickly crystallized around pop-folk/*chalga*⁶. Buchanan (2007, 201–239) traced its genealogy to late Ottoman urban ensembles and 1990s Balkan industry circuits, positioning “Bulgarian ethnopop” as a locally branded node within transregional markets. Rice (2002, 25–46) analyzed *chalga* as a mass-mediated post-1989 genre negotiating nationalism, taste, and morality, while Statelova (2005) examined ethnopop cultures anthropologically, mapping their cultural politics and market structures. Building on these contributions, this study adopts a broader scope, extending beyond *chalga* to emphasize the programmatic integration of folk signifiers into pop production regimes—recording, staging, and distribution—as the defining feature of Bulgarian ethno-pop, rather than adherence to any single stylistic template.

Instruments and production. Ethno-pop mobilizes iconic Bulgarian timbres—*kaval* (wooden flute), *gaida* (bagpipe), *tüpan* (drum), *gadulka* (fiddle), *tambura* (string instrument)—alongside the wedding-band palette of accordion, clarinet, trumpet, and saxophone. These sounds are embedded within studio-based arrangements of synthesizers, drum machines, electric bass, and guitar, merging folklore with global pop sonics. Production alternates between sampled or quoted melodies and newly composed hooks voiced in folk timbre, framed by contemporary mixing practices (compressed low-end, widened stereo fields) designed for clubs and streaming platforms.

Vocal style. Two main schools define vocal practice: (1) preserving of the guttural, open-throated timbre of traditional Bulgarian singing; and (2) pop-oriented delivery softened by melismas and ornaments drawn from village style. Lead vocals stylize folk techniques—sharp turns, tight ornaments, microtonal inflections—within close-miked pop production. Layered textures evoke Shop⁷ diaphony⁸ or heterophonic doubling, while call-and-response refrains and melismatic codas adapt communal participation to radio-ready formats. UNESCO’s dossier on Bistritsa Babi (Santova 2008) highlights the diaphonic sonority that many producers reference, even when recontextualized in studio mixes.

⁶ *Chalga* is a Bulgarian pop-folk genre blending Balkan, Turkish, Romani, and Middle Eastern styles; popular post-1989, tied to nightlife and media, and culturally polarizing.

⁷ *Shop* (*Shopluk*) is an ethnographic region in western Bulgaria, known for its open-throated diaphony, asymmetrical dances, distinct white-wool costumes, and a characteristic dialect.

⁸ *Diaphony* is a traditional Bulgarian polyphonic style where a sustained drone supports a solo melody, often featuring sharp dissonances (seconds, sevenths).

Rhythm and meter. Additive meters remain a hallmark: for examples *rachenitsa*⁹ in 7/8 (2+2+3), *daichovo*¹⁰ in 9/8 (2+2+2+3), *kopanitsa*¹¹ in 11/16. Producers either retain these meters outright or project their accentual logic within a 4/4 substrate (e.g., 3+3+2 phrasing across quadruple bars), often with polyrhythmic layering. This strategy maximizes danceability while preserving idiomatic asymmetry. Buchanan (2007, 201–239) documents the prevalence of *kyuchek/çiftetelli*¹² grooves and Middle Eastern rhythmic cycles in pop-folk, while Rice (2002, 25–46) shows how additive meters circulate into mass-mediated styles after 1989. Together, they demonstrate how asymmetry and commercial form cohabit in post-socialist Bulgarian popular music.

Harmony. Ethno-pop harmony spans a continuum from modal-drone textures to jazz-inflected color and global pop loops. At one pole, village pitch practices persist through drone pedals, open fifths, and secundal clusters,¹³ sustaining Dorian, Aeolian, or Phrygian centers without functional cadences, echoing Shop diaphony and the Kutev/Kyurkchiyski choral lineage. A middle stratum introduces jazz-derived voicings—quartal/quintal stacks, add-9/11/13 chords, modal mixture—associated with Milcho Leviev and Theodosii Spassov. At the pop end, globally legible loops (i–VII–VI–VII; i–VI–VII; I–V–vi–IV) dominate, foregrounding melody and groove while drones or synth pads maintain modal centers.

3. Creative approaches and compositional methods

This section presents a set of analytical case studies to demonstrate how Bulgarian folklore is adapted into modern ethno-pop compositions. The six examples analyzed below are songs in which I have participated directly as a singer, arranger, or co-writer. Each case highlights specific compositional techniques, structural transformations, and stylistic negotiations that serve the broader paradigm of ethno-informed mediation.

3.1. “Ah, Kade e Mojto Libe” (Ah, where is my beloved) (2004)¹⁴

Arranged by Ku-Ku Band, with whom I collaborated as an author and solo vocalist

The arrangement takes a folk melody that, prior to this treatment, circulated primarily among professional folk singers and regional ensembles. The Ku-Ku Band’s version re-situates it for mass media consumption while safeguarding its core identity. The aim is not ornamental “crossover,” but an affective deepening of the source through pop-era form, harmony, and production. This combination of stylistic fidelity and pop addresses catalyzed mass uptake: the track moved from niche repertory to nationwide sing-along status, becoming a signature number for Ku-Ku Band and, vocally, for me.¹⁵

Key compositional features:

1. Folk tune as a pop ballad: Compact verse–chorus structure with a hook-oriented interlude, steady backbeat, and modern production sheen.
2. Pop/Rock orchestration: Drum kit, percussions, electric bass, keys/guitars, brass section (flugelhorn leads the melody, while saxophone and clarinet add contrapuntal color).
3. 7/8 phrasing against 4/4 feel: The melody retains its original *aksak* (3+2+2) phrasing, while percussion implies 4/4 (hi-hat accenting weak beats).
4. Vocal framing: Lead vocals adopt pop delivery while preserving folk ornaments and modal inflections. Layered backing vocals thicken the texture toward the refrains, suturing folkloric timbre to contemporary ensemble writing.
5. Harmony influence: Harmonic language evokes bands like Toto or Earth, Wind & Fire, using extended chords and pop-era “lift” dynamics.

⁹ *Rachenitsa* is an emblematic Bulgarian dance/tune-type in asymmetrical 7/8 (2+2+3) with quickstep footwork and accent on the final (long) beat; widespread with regional variants (esp. Thrace).

¹⁰ *Dàichovo* is a Bulgarian chain dance/tune-type in asymmetrical 9/8 (2+2+2+3); widespread (notably in Thrace and Shopluk) and typically performed at a lively tempo.

¹¹ *Kopanitsa* is a Bulgarian chain dance/tune-type in asymmetrical 11/16, characteristically 2+2+3+2+2; brisk tempo with sharp off-beat accents, widely danced (notably in Shopluk) with intricate, syncopated footwork.

¹² *Kyuchek* (Turk. *Çiftetelli*) is a duple-metre Balkan dance with off-beat accents and melismatic improvisation, rooted in Ottoman-Romani traditions and now central to Bulgarian pop-folk (*chalga*).

¹³ Secundal cluster is a chord from stacked seconds, creating dense and often shimmering texture.

¹⁴ You can listen to the song on YouTube (Trifonov and Ku-Ku Band 2020).

¹⁵ The 2015 performance by Ku-Ku Band with Desi Dobreva, Neli Petkova, and Cvetelina Grahich has 9.3M+ views (Desi, Petkova, Grahich, Ballet Magadance 2016).

Cultural effect: Widely popular as a wedding song¹⁶ and sing-along anthem,¹⁷ the piece shows how stylistically faithful adaptation within pop structures can reintroduce folk repertoire to mass audiences. This arrangement operates as a gateway adaptation: it translates an insider's item of the folk canon into a broadly recognized emblem of Bulgarian musical identity and everyday ritual use, thereby expanding the tradition's expressive field without sacrificing its core codes.

3.2. "Djore" (2016)¹⁸

Based on the Shop folk song "Djore Dos"—arranged by Desi Dobрева and Julian Janev

This re-imagining transforms a traditional two-voice a cappella folk song into a full-scale pop-rock arrangement with elements of musical theatre and dance grooves. The adaptation preserves the core melody and text while transforming performance practice, harmony, vocal technique, and instrumentation.

Key compositional features:

1. A cappella to full ensemble: Expansion from two-voice a cappella (iso-drone) to full ensemble with rhythm section, brass, layered vocals, and electronics.
2. Contrasting textures: Sparse folk verses vs. lush, layered interludes evoking jazz-band energy and *horo*¹⁹ dance motifs.
3. Two interludes: Interludes alternate between brass-band fanfare and festive dance rhetoric.
4. Symbolic percussion: *Tüpan* ostinato mimics horse gallop (a folkloric metaphor of cosmic travel).²⁰
5. Vocal delivery: Pop vocal delivery enriched by humorous ornaments such as the "hiccup" glottal catch, associated with village practice.
6. Harmony twist: Same chord progression in verses and interludes, but with a minor/major modal twist to evoke contrasting moods, i.e. "local" and "global."

Cultural effect: The rendition demonstrates playful hybridity, where folk is transformed rather than quoted. "Djore" exemplifies *ethno-informed mediation*: a calibrated translation of village a cappella song into a contemporary concert idiom that broadens reception while preserving identity.

3.3. "DOS" (2018)²¹

Based on two Shop folk songs (noted below)—arranged by Yavor Rusinov (Roussinoff)

The title itself plays on a linguistic pun: "dos" (a folkloric vocative) and DOS (early computer system), suggesting a bridge between rural heritage and the digital era. The song is arranged in a pure dance idiom, with electronic textures, risers, uplifters and an EDM-style form, and stands among the most popular pieces in the artist's repertoire.²²

Key compositional techniques:

1. Merging two folk songs: Combines two folk sources—"Nakladoshe Sedenkutu" (Evening gatherings) and "Dos, Done Le" (Dona)—into a composite narrative, intertwining different aspects of folklore.
2. Meter adaptation: Reshapes 9/8 meter (2+2+2+3) into 4/4 for danceability, aligning with global EDM logics.
3. Oriental timbre: Incorporates *oud* timbre, signaling cross-cultural dialogue.
4. Authentic dialect: Preserves Shopluk dialect, adding exotic coloration, often misperceived as Turkish.
5. Vocal design: Verses retain the folkloric bourdon; choruses expand with four-part vocal textures, following EDM-style "drop"²³ logic.
6. Pop minimalism: Harmonic repetition echoes both folk statics and dance-music hypnosis.

¹⁶ See Songs for the First Wedding Dance on YouTube.

¹⁷ Cover versions by mainstream and independent artists (e.g., Gloria; Nevena Tsoneva, Nikolina Chakardukova, etc.) further consolidated its status, indicating canonization through popular circulation.

¹⁸ You can listen to the song on YouTube (Dobрева 2021).

¹⁹ *Horo* is a Bulgarian folk dance in circular or linear formations, marked by irregular rhythms and communal celebration.

²⁰ In Bulgarian folk belief, the horse symbolizes a link between earthly and celestial realms, rooted in the Thracian tradition and preserved in ritual and epic songs.

²¹ You can listen to the song on YouTube (Dobрева 2018).

²² "DOS" has attracted significant public attention, exceeding one million views on YouTube.

²³ In dance and electronic music, the "drop" is the climactic re-entry of rhythm and texture following a build-up, intensifying energy and audience response.

Cultural effect: Irony, symbolism, and EDM energy coexist with high fidelity to Bulgarian phonetic, modal, and textual codes. “DOS” exemplifies folklore as dynamic material, its identity intact even as form and production recast it in a globally legible dance idiom.

3.4. “Slānchitse” (Little sun) (2018)²⁴

Based on the Thracian folk melody “Slānchitse, milo mamino”—arranged by Desi Dobreva and Alex Nushev

This version draws on the rock-opera tradition, incorporating gospel, jazz, hard-rock riffs, and wedding-band gestures into a grand, dramatic arrangement. The result preserves the tune’s recognizability while relocating it in a contemporary, theatrically scaled medium.

Key compositional features:

1. Monumental sonority: Layering of gospel choir,²⁵ Hammond organ, hard-rock riffs, accordion, and folk voices.
2. Thematic development: Structural development recalls classical techniques (sonata form with an extended recapitulation).
3. Antiphonal idiom: Call-and-response rhetoric links sacred gospel and Bulgarian village traditions.
4. Meter transformation: Metrical shifts (7/8 → 6/8 → 4/4) broaden accessibility while retaining idiomatic accents.
5. Modal change: Aeolian to Dorian heightens affective impact.
6. Intertextual references: Allusions to “House of the Rising Sun” and “Vecherà, Rado” (Have supper, Rada) stage dialogue between local and global.

Cultural effect: An epic ballad of national reflection. Its layering of local and global idioms exemplifies that authenticity is continually renegotiated. “Slānchitse” shows how rock-opera scale and intertextual layering can revitalize folklore for contemporary cultural reflection. The case thus substantiates structural translation as a viable method for renewing folklore without eroding its semiotic core.

3.5. “Omile Mi” (I long for you) (2019)²⁶

Based on the *Trūn*²⁷ folk song “Domile mi, Yagodo”—arranged by Desi Dobreva and Mihail Yossifov

This work translates a folk tune into a 1930s foxtrot aesthetic, drawing on the idioms of Benny Goodman and The Andrews Sisters. The piece proceeds from a conceptual premise: the folk song functions as ground material for a complete, concise form that does not merely add jazz touches but translates the source into a new genre.

Key compositional features:

1. Genre translation: The piece employs American energetic foxtrot rhetoric, matching groove, phrasing, and timbre to swing conventions.
2. Jazz harmony: Progressions with extended tertian color.
3. Big-band feel: Instrumental riffs, walking bass, “wah-wah” brass and tambourine create vintage theatricality.
4. Authentic dialect: Preserves *Trūn* dialect, juxtaposed with jazz phrasing.
5. Andrew Sisters’ style: Tight three-part vocal harmonies adapt the folk melodic contour.
6. Antiphonal idiom: Call-and-response between brass and vocals, while the clarinet plays a central role, providing soloistic commentary throughout the piece.

Cultural effect: The arrangement demonstrates glocalization—folklore migrates into global idioms while retaining identity even in completely foreign rhythmic-harmonic frames. “Omile Mi” shows a bridging strategy: how folklore can traverse genre boundaries and preserve its core, thereby expanding the expressive reach of both traditions.

²⁴ You can listen to the song on YouTube (Dobreva 2019).

²⁵ The studio version includes a gospel choir, though not yet officially released; the analysis here refers to a live performance where a folk choir replaces the gospel ensemble.

²⁶ You can listen to the song on YouTube (Dobreva 2020).

²⁷ *Trūn* is a folklore region in western Bulgaria near the Serbian border, known for its archaic dialect, asymmetric rhythms, and richly ornamented vocal style within the broader Shopluk area.

3.6. “Pusta Mladost” (Cursed youth) (2022)²⁸

Inspired by the legend of “Pusta Mladost” as a healing song²⁹—arranged by Desi Dobrev

This composition pursues a crossover-with-return strategy, integrating film scoring aesthetics: modern in sound, yet haunted by archaic modal lament and historical trauma. The goal is not stylistic collage but an affective deepening of the folk source.

Key compositional features:

1. Contrast-driven form: A cappella proem, followed by a massive percussive layering, orchestral “explosion” and a choral catharsis ending.
2. Drum and voice: Low-register drums and vocals are the protagonists. The ensemble of *tŭpani*, toms, taiko, timpani, double drum set, and auxiliary percussion forms a dark, weight-bearing foundation, while the layered vocals function as a parallel ensemble.
3. Vocal design: Shifting between solo, three or four-parts and a mixed choir at the end.
4. Cinematic orchestration: Swells, sub-bass, ambient risers, and spatial reverberation intensify affect.
5. Rhythmic Symbolism: Galloping patterns reference Proto-Bulgarian martial archetypes and cosmological cycles.
6. Intertextual references: Hollywood rhetoric, Native American vocables, Balkan wedding idioms, and 1990s dance cues situate folklore in a global soundscape while preserving its modal and textual depth.
7. Semantic turn: Final “male” (mother) functions as catharsis—a return to origin, memory, and self-recognition.

Cultural effect: “Pusta Mladost” resonates with Stokes’s (1994) argument that music mediates cultural memory. It shows how crossovers can reassert folk essence within a transnational frame.

The following table synthesizes the main case studies analyzed in this paper, highlighting how each adapts traditional elements within modern frameworks:

Composition	Traditional Source(s)	Modern Adaptation Techniques	Meter	Vocal Style	Function / Cultural Effect
“Ah, Kade e Mojto Libe”	Folk melody	Pop ballad, studio sheen, brass & pop vocals, flugelhorn	7/8 phrasing in 4/4	Pop vocal with ornaments	Broadcast-ready folk anthem
“Djore”	“Djore Dos”	Pop/rock ensemble, dual interludes, harmony twist	7/8 + 4/4	Pop with humorous ornaments	Folk-modern hybrid
“DOS”	“Nakladoshe” + “Dos Done Le”	Meter adaptation, EDM genre, oud, dialect	9/8 → 4/4	Shopluk dialect, bourdon + layered vocals	Local-global synthesis
“Slānchitse”	“Slānchitse, milo mamino”	Rock opera, meter adaptation, accordion, gospel & folk, modal change	7/8 → 6/8 → 4/4	Antiphony, gospel + folk, improvisations	Epic ballad symbolic renewal
“Omile Mi”	“Domile mi, Yagodo”	Big-band swing orchestration, clarinet, jazz harmony, Andrew sisters’ idiom, dialect	Swing 4/4	Close-harmony swing, <i>Trŭn</i> dialect	Genre translation
“Pusta Mladost”	Traditional lament	Cinematic scoring, percussion/vocal layering, contrasts, references	Free → groove → 4/4	A cappella to layered mixed ensemble	Cathartic affective depth

4. Conclusion

This study examined the key compositional strategies and aesthetic mechanisms through which Bulgarian folklore is adapted into contemporary ethno-pop, with a focus on sustaining cultural specificity while enabling broader accessibility through globalized musical forms.

Across all analytical cases, a central principle emerges: adaptational procedures function as ethno-informed mediation—a form of cultural and musical translation that preserves the idiomatic core of the source material (e.g., modal organization, vocal timbre, additive meter), even as it is reframed within mass-mediated,

²⁸ You can listen to the song on YouTube (Dobrev 2025).

²⁹ In Bulgarian folklore, “Pusta Mladost” is known both as a lament and a healing incantation, believed to ease suffering through ritual performance; its legend was later adapted in Igljka Trifonova’s film *A Letter to America* (2001).

dance-oriented, or hybridized production regimes. This approach avoids both extremes of musealization (freezing tradition in time) and commodification (stripping tradition of context and depth for market appeal). Instead, it affirms folklore as a living process—a site of identity negotiation, stylistic innovation, and cultural continuity.

The case studies analyzed in Section 4—ranging from the dance-pop hybrid “DOS” to the rock-operatic “Slānchitse” and the cinematic lament “Pusta Mladost”—demonstrate a spectrum of techniques for bridging the local and the global, including:

- Meter transformation (e.g., reframing 9/8 as 4/4);
- Dialect and ornament preservation in pop vocal idioms;
- Cross-genre orchestration: jazz, gospel, rock, EDM;
- Structural layering (call-and-response, climax building);
- Intertextual references to canonical folk and pop works;
- Semantic and sonic metaphors (e.g., equine *tūpan* rhythm, “mother” as the final utterance).

These adaptations not only preserve cultural memory but also generate new aesthetic possibilities. They allow for a dialogue between past and present, rural and urban, national and transnational.

Drawing on theoretical insights from Roland Robertson (1995, 25–44), who views “glocalization” as a process that combines global trends with local characteristics, and Martin Stokes (1994), who discusses the spatial detachment and reembedding of musical identities under globalization, I argue that authenticity is not a static essence but an emergent quality—produced through stylistic competence, community recognition, and meaningful mediation.

The findings also support Jonathan Friedmann’s proposition that “folk music is a form of pop music, and vice versa” (Friedmann 2015, 58). In Bulgaria’s case, the ethno-pop movement challenges genre hierarchies by demonstrating that folk codes can thrive in modern formats without sacrificing complexity, dignity, or cultural weight.

This research has aimed to contribute not only to the field of ethnomusicology and cultural studies, but also to ongoing debates about heritage, authenticity, globalization, and innovation. Bulgarian ethno-pop offers a compelling model for how small cultures can assert identity in a global marketplace—not through nostalgic retreat, but through stylistically informed, emotionally resonant, and technically skilled musical creation.

Rather than asking whether adaptation “dilutes” folklore, the more productive question is: What kind of future do we want folklore to have? The evidence presented here suggests that a future of creative hybridity, cultural rootedness, and global relevance is not only possible—but already underway.

References

- Arnaudov, Mihail. 1968. *Ocherci po bŭlgarskiia folklor* [Essays on Bulgarian Folklore]. 2nd ed. Bŭlgarski pisatel.
- Buchanan, Donna A. 2007. “Bulgarian Ethnopop along the Old *Via Militaris*.” In *Balkan Popular Culture and the Ottoman Ecumene: Music, Image, and Regional Political Discourse*, edited by Donna A. Buchanan, 201–239. Scarecrow Press.
- Connell, John, and Chris Gibson. 2004. “World Music: Deterritorializing Place and Identity.” *Progress in Human Geography* 28 (3): 342–361.
- Dimov, Ventsislav. 1996. “In the Press of the Press: A Look upon “Folk” of Mass media and Its Audience.” *Bŭlgarski folklor* 22 (5–6): 45–56.
- Dimov, Ventsislav. 2006. “Commercial Recordings of Folk Music – A New Subject in Ethnomusicology.” In *Music and Politics in the Balkans*, edited by Sokol Shupo and Sokol Tole, 176–194. Faculty of Music in Belgrade.
- Dinekov, Petŭr. 1980. *Bŭlgarski folklor* [Bulgarian Folklore]. Bŭlgarski pisatel. (1st ed. 1959).
- Dobreva, Desi, Neli Petkova, Cvetelina Grahich, Ballet Magadance. 2016. “Ah, Kade e Mojto Libe.” March 02, 2016. Music video, 5:56. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-2QEITS9mI>.
- Dobreva, Desi. 2018. “DOS”. October 22, 2018. Music video, 3:40. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ggR9Pm8Fh1s>.
- Dobreva, Desi. 2019. “Slānchitse”. February 14, 2019. Music video, 4:54. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZachSOVFz20>.
- Dobreva, Desi. 2020. “Omile Mi”. March 27, 2020. Music video, 2:42. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-TqCzcP86tY>.
- Dobreva, Desi. 2021. “Djore”. September 21, 2021. Music video, 3:11. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cR6BIsh2DVM>.
- Dobreva, Desi. 2025. “Pusta Mladost”. January 22, 2025. Music video, 4:32. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q0sYAnBgPPQ>.
- Friedmann, Jonathan L. 2015. *Music in Our Lives: Why We Listen, How It Works*. McFarland.
- Levy, Claire. 2015. *Ethnojazz: Local and Global Aspects*. Institute of Art Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.
- Kreislaui-Initiative. n.d. *Local in Global. 2015–2024 Kreisau-Initiative e. V.* <https://www.kreisau.de/en/education/social-ecological-transformation/local-in-global/>.

- Rice, Timothy. 2002. "Bulgaria or Chalgaria? The Attenuation of Bulgarian Nationalism in a Mass-Mediated Popular Music," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 34: 25–46.
- Robertson, Roland. 1995. "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity." In *Global Modernities*. Edited by Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash and Roland Robertson, 25–44. Sage Publications.
- Santova, Mila. 2008. "Bistritsa Babi, archaic polyphony, dances and rituals from the Shoplounk region." UNESCO: Intangible Cultural Heritage. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/bistritsa-babi-archaic-polyphony-dances-and-rituals-from-the-shoplounk-region-00095>.
- Songs for the First Wedding Dance. *МоятаСватбаПрепоръкиотБулки*. <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLFZVqdbU1Vfx5GEhyV07xW0N79MUyp0xB>.
- Statelova, Rosemary. 2005. *The Seven Sins of Chalga: Toward an Anthropology of Ethnopop Music*. Prosveta.
- Stokes, Martin. 1994. "Introduction: Ethnicity, Identity and Music." In *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*, 1–27. Berg.
- Taylor, Timothy D. 1997. *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets*. Routledge.
- Trifonov, Slavi, and Ku-Ku Band. 2020. "Ah, Kade e Mojto Libe." April 28, 2020. Music video, 3:59. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rb4d_Ia18iw.

Bulgarų etnopolulariosios muzikos praktikos

Santrauka

Straipsnyje analizuojamos šiuolaikinės bulgarų etnopolulariosios muzikos praktikos, nagrinėjami iki šiol mažai tyrinėti pavyzdžiai, iliustruojantys kompozicines strategijas, pritaikančias folklorinę medžiagą globaliam muzikiniam kontekstui. Tema yra ypač aktuali globalizacijos ir skaitmenizacijos sąlygomis, kurios skatina ieškoti naujų kultūros išsaugojimo ir transformavimo būdų. Etnopolularioji muzika šiame kontekste atsiskleidžia kaip kultūrinio tvarumo modelis, jungiantis autentiškumą ir inovaciją bei reaguojantis į kultūrinės homogenizacijos ir technologijų tarpininkaujamos kūrybos iššūkius.

Tyrimo tikslas yra atskleisti, kaip bulgarų folkloro adaptacijos etnopolulariojoje muzikoje išsaugo kultūrinę atmintį ir kartu transformuoja ją į naujas, šiuolaikinei auditorijai aktualias formas. Straipsnyje teigiama, kad folkloro adaptavimas etnopolulariojoje muzikoje ne tik padeda išsaugoti, bet ir rekonstruoti kultūrinę tapatybę, paversdamas ją universalia kultūrinio dialogo priemone globalizuotame pasaulyje.

Analizė grindžiama šešiais reprezentatyviais pavyzdžiais, kurių kūrybiniame procese dalyvavo ir pati straipsnio autorė: *Ab, Kade e Mojto Libe* (2004), *Djore* (2016), *DOS* (2018), *Slanchitse* (2018), *Omile Mi* (2019) ir *Pusta Mladost* (2022). Šie kūriniai atskleidžia įvairias novatoriškas strategijas: asimetrinių ritmų transformaciją (pavyzdžiui, iš 9/8 į 4/4), tradicinių ir elektroninių muzikos instrumentų integraciją (tokių kaip ūdas, tupanas ir sintezatoriai), folklorinės melodikos perkėlimą į naujus žanrinius kontekstus, vietinių dialektų išsaugojimą bei popmuzikos, džiazo, roko ir elektroninės muzikos elementų jungimą. Kiekvienas iš analizuojamų pavyzdžių atskleidžia skirtingus būdus, kuriais tradicinė medžiaga transformuojama siekiant atliepti šiuolaikinės muzikos poreikius.

Metodologinį tyrimo pagrindą sudaro muzikos struktūrinė analizė, autentiškų ir adaptuotų formų lyginamoji analizė, taip pat indukcinis ir deduktinis metodai. Svarbi tyrimo dalis – autorės kaip kompozitorės, atlikėjos ir prodiuserės asmeninė praktinė patirtis, suteikianti teorinėms išvaidoms empirinį pagrindą. Toks kompleksinis metodologinis požiūris leidžia nuosekliai atskleisti sudėtingą tradicijos ir šiuolaikinių populariosios muzikos žanrų sąveiką.

Tyrimo rezultatai rodo, kad šiuolaikinės folkloro adaptacijos sėkmingai išsaugo jo kultūrinę esmę ir kartu daro jį aktualų šiuolaikinei auditorijai. Analizuoti pavyzdžiai patvirtina, kad bulgarų etnopolularioji muzika peržengia geografines ir kultūrinės ribas, jungia skirtingas kartas ir stiprina nacionalinę tapatybę globaliame kontekste. Tyrimas prisideda prie etnopolulariosios muzikos kaip dinamiško reiškinio, jungiančio tradiciją ir inovaciją, sampratos plėtos. Analizuojant iki šiol mažai tyrinėtus pavyzdžius, pabrėžiamas folkloro, kaip universalios kultūrinės komunikacijos kalbės, vaidmuo, atskleidžiama jo reikšmė šiuolaikiniame muzikiniame disкурse.