



Mandolin Quartet Seasons: the mandolin in Bulgaria... and abroad

It is by reading a feedback about the "International Festival of Plucked Music" of A Coruña, that I got to know the "Mandolin Quartet Seasons". I contacted them straight away and asked whether they would be interested in presenting their ensemble to Le Plectre's readers. The group has a website (www.qseasons.com), on which we can find their current activity. Also in the Discography section, you can listen to some samples of albums. However I did want to know more about the musicians, their history, their motivation and their future creations..... Evdokia has kindly, patiently and extensively responded to my questions.

Your quartet is composed of two mandolins (Joanna, yourself), a mandola (Nikolay) and a guitar (Slavcho). Could you tell me more about each of you? How have you come to learn the mandolin/mandola? Then, how have you met?

All quartet's members have begun their musical education in their childhoods.

The primary instrument for Joanna was the mandolin (she began at the age of 11). For me Evdokia, the first instrument was the violin, which she began at the age of 7, before starting the mandolin 8 years later. For Nikolay the mandolist, the primary instrument was the guitar when he was 13 years old and one year later he started studying the mandolin. Finally for the guitarist in the group, Slavcho, it was the guitar - he took it at the age of 13.

The mandolin background for Joanna, Nikolay and myself is private education, under the mandolin/mandola teaching from the maestro Assen Dimitrov (1913-2000), who was a follower of the Italian school of mandolin techniques (style) and founded the mandolin school in Bulgaria. I also had a first mandolin teacher Lyubomir Kalchev.

Slavcho Nikolov was a student of the well-known guitar professor Dimitar Doychinov - a

graduate and follower of the German classical guitar, a doyen of the guitar art in Bulgaria and the teacher of many famous Bulgarian guitarists all over the world.

Both mandolinists in the group, Joanna and myself, have also participated in master classes from the German professor Caterina Lichtenberg.

From our early ages all of us have played in the mandolin orchestra “Sofia” – the first Bulgarian mandolin orchestra with a more than 40-year history, conducted by its founder and our maestro Dimitrov, who also formed the Seasons quartet in 1996.

Together with the classical music, Joanna loves the opera and the Bulgarian folklore music. My own favorites are the Beatles, and especially Paul McCartney. Nikolay was influenced by the virtuoso guitarists from the 80s and 90s like Joe Satriani, Steve Vai, Yngwie Malmsteen, Paco de Lucia and others; some of his favorite groups are the Beatles, Pink Floyd, Queen.

The guitarist Slavcho loves many musical styles and has played classical music, flamenco, blues, rock and hard-rock. One of the most interesting and curious facts is that Slavcho is the leading guitar in the most popular and legendary rock band in Bulgaria – B.T.R. He is the composer of most of the B.T.R. hits. He has played together with popular rock musicians such as Glen Hughes, John Lawton etc. The B.T.R. opened the concerts for Deep Purple, White Snake, Iron Maiden, Nazareth, Scorpions and gathered over 100 000 people – a unprecedented in the Bulgarian music life.

All of us are big musical lovers, but also lovers of the good friendships, travels, the sea and the good red wines !

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In Bulgaria, is it so common to learn and play the mandolin? Is it common for a guitarist playing in a plucked instruments orchestra?

In the beginning of the last century the mandolin was very popular in Bulgaria. Many mandolin orchestras were formed by enthusiastic lovers of this music in many towns of the country. Few of them have kept this tradition and still continue their activities. But generally and unfortunately in the latest years the mandolin traditions have lost their strength; the mandolin has become more and more rare instrument in Bulgaria and nowadays it sounds more as an exotic than a typical instrument for the country; it is not common to learn this instrument. The mandolin is not a taught instrument in the musical schools and the musical academies here. With its activity the quartet Seasons is proud to renovate and to continue the mandolin tradition in our country! In Bulgaria there is another similar plucked instrument, but with much longer fret board and with single strings (not doubles as in the mandolin) – the tambura (pandore). It is a folklore instrument which is very typical and used only in the folklore music. Different than the mandolin, the guitar has become much more popular instrument in Bulgaria, with a very good school of guitar teachers and it is taught in the musical schools and academies.

It is common for a guitarist to play in an orchestra of plucked instruments. The bass parts in the Bulgarian mandolin orchestras are performed mainly by guitars. Also, in some orchestras there are contrabass players as well.

Before the guitarist joined, what kind of bass did you have?

Before Slavcho joined, we played with other guitarists. We have performed also with a contrabass – as a guest-musician – looking for some diversity for some pieces.

Speaking about other instruments, we have worked and performed with other guests musicians in order to have an oboe, a xylophone or a voice to perform opera arias and canzonets.

What instruments do you play on?

The mandolins we play on are from the Italian maker "Calace". We also use a Russian luthier's mandolin (with a very deep beautiful bass sound), and a mandolin made by the Bulgarian luthier Lazar Minev (who lived in the last century), characterized by its very rich and colourful sound with many overtones.

The mandola is made by the Bulgarian luthier Danail Danailov.

The guitarist plays on different guitars: "Ramirez", "Musima" and "Adolf Meinel".

What does a small ensemble of 4 musicians bring to each of you, what's your motivation? The greatest pleasure of playing our favorite instruments and favorite music, the inspiring exchange of the musical energy between us when performing – this cannot compare with anything else! The playing and performing in the quartet Seasons is our fulfilled dream and the biggest award for us is to see the smiles and the happiness of the audience in our concerts!!!

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How do you build your repertoire?

Nowadays in Bulgaria there are only few mandolin ensembles and the Seasons Quartet is one

of the few chamber mandolin ensembles with ample musical activities.

Together with the classical musical background of the quartet's members all of us have very wide musical preferences and all of us have influenced from different musical genres for forming our musical taste.

The style in which the Seasons Quartet would define its music is the modern classic, enriched by the ethno elements.

The quartet has performed, and still performs, baroque and classical music, but the latest tendency in its musical direction, since the joining of the guitarist Slavcho Nikolov in the end of 2006, is adding author's music as well as pieces composed especially for the ensemble. As a composer of works embracing a large variety of genres (classical music for solo guitar, mandolin, chamber formations, pop and rock music, film music), the Slavcho Nikolov's music shows all the possibilities of the mandolin and the guitar and contributes to the diversity of the Seasons' repertoire and brings new unique elements.

Another musical direction is also the performing of Bulgarian music created by the great classical Bulgarian composers such as Dobri Hristov, Petko Stainov, Marin Goleminov and others.

The latest CD of the quartet "The Story about the Balkan mountains" shows the new creative line of the quartet. The title work "The Story about the Balkan mountains" was composed by Slavcho Nikolov for the duo mandolins Joanna and Evdokia, and its premiere was at the mandolin and guitar workshop of the German professors Caterina Lichtenberg and Dieter Kreidler in Austria in 2007. The piece had a great success and was highly estimated not only then, but in the following concerts in Bulgaria, Spain, Japan, Hungary, USA and others. Now the quartet works on its third CD. The title work is again composed by Slavcho and is called "Tears and Smiles".

The quartet has won many national projects for developing the "plectro music".

We have cooperated with famous mandolin and plectro musicians such as the Spanish Trio Assai (two joint concerts in Madrid and in Sofia), Avi Avital (a joint concert in Sofia), the Tokyo Mandolin quartet (the Seasons performed a concert at Takanawa Hall in Tokyo upon the Japanese quartet's invitation), and the USA's Kalamazoo Mandolin and Guitar Orchestra, who hosted the Seasons quartet in 2011 and organized two concerts for our ensemble.

Parallel to the quartet, Joanna and Evdokia have performed as soloists the Vivaldi's concert in G dur for two mandolins with the Bulgarian string orchestra "Studio Primo". Afterwards, the piece was arranged by the quartet's guitarist for a quartet and was included in the Seasons' repertoire.

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It seems to me that we should never establish borders to music. We should at most identify particularities, qualities, to an instrumental school, an orchestra, a composer, a music school etc, and encourage curiosity towards what is being done elsewhere. So I see in your ensemble quite a chance for schools or west European orchestras to put this curiosity in practice. On your side, it seems almost obvious that you would be interested. What would you expect from such an exchange?

We have always been interested in the musical heritage in the specific countries and regions and would love to hear new music and music from these regions! One of the things we most value is the musical exchange between the different nations and cultures which could only enrich us! And as mandolinists, we have been also very interested in learning the different technics and styles in playing in the other countries and we have always taken "something" from the all of the places we have been and from all the musicians we have cooperated with!

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The first album recorded by the quartet is from 2001. This album proposed well known pieces of which the ensemble created a refreshing and enthusiast interpretation!

The second album mentioned above, "A story about the Balkan mountains" (2009), is being reviewed by Mathieu Sarthe Mouréou.