

Shepherd Express – May 14, 2009

Exotic Mysteries

Classical Review

By [Rick Walters](#)



Two Early Music Now concerts this season diverted into folk music, a broader definition of what comprises "early music." And why not? Last fall Trio Mediaeval presented a program of Nordic folk songs. Music from the opposite end of Europe was featured in a concert Saturday night by Kitka at the Basilica of St. Josaphat.

Kitka, a women's vocal ensemble based in San Francisco, specializes in music from southeastern Europe, particularly from Bulgaria. Music of this Balkan region for women's voices has a distinctive style and sound, at first startling to those unaccustomed to it. A chest voice belt has been cultivated to high art. The sound is both rambunctious and subtle. Kitka's tone is pure, and tuning is impeccable. Its ensemble and phrasing is highly evolved.

There is strange wonder in the stunning arrangements of richly asymmetrical folk music Kitka performed. Slowly emerging

harmonies seldom headed into expected territory. The seven-voice ensemble performed primarily in what I assumed to be Bulgarian. Even with brief paraphrases in the program about the meaning of the lyrics for each piece, this music evoked exotic mysteries.

A soloist, Tzvetanka Varimezova, joined the ensemble on several numbers. Her voice is both sweet and forthright. American ears are not accustomed to the agile, complex ornamentation of this style, which at its best organically creates stirring emotion. Periodically Ivan Varimezov played bravura solos on the *gajda*, a Balkan bagpipe, and also accompanied some of the singing. It was immediately clear that the ornamented singing style is closely related to the similar musical lines heard on the *gajda*. Milwaukee Choral Artists, a women's chorus, joined Kitka on a few pieces.

The Basilica's tricky acoustics are flattering to unaccompanied small vocal ensembles such as this. My only complaint about the program was that there was too much of a good thing. The 24 pieces could have been cut down by a few to create a better paced concert. Was I the only one who got confused following along in the program and figuring out which piece was being sung in the second half?

REVIEW

Women's group clings to exotic, tonal center

Some of Kitka singers' efforts clash; some tunes hang in air

By **TOM STRINI**

Journal Sentinel music critic

If we didn't know that the music Kitka sang Saturday night was so old and so traditional, we might have taken it for avant-garde.

The eight singers, including leader Tzvetanka Varimezova, specialize in women's vocal music from Eastern Europe. The group's repertoire encompassed Bulgaria, Georgia, Russia, Corsica, Croatia and Armenia. Just one number, a Georgian hymn, was harmonized in the familiar major-minor way. Exotic scales yielded exotic chords in the rest of the 26 songs. In many of them, solo melisma wrapped around and sometimes clashed with drones held by one or more voices. This music never budges from its original tonal center, but some of the tunes ended hanging in the air, unresolved.

Dance tunes, in the minority on this program, turned on propulsive rhythms couched in meters just irregular enough to throw you off if you don't know they're coming. "Reche Mama da Me Zheni," in which a daughter sasses her mother about mom's choices for prospective husbands, bounces along merrily in threes until the singer yips and, oops, we hit a toe-stubbing bar in two.

Most of the songs were based on prose speech rhythm and sounded metrically free and unbarred. The texts are laments, musings about men, declarations of intent of various kinds and accounts of village life — a feud between a daughter and her sister-in-law, for example. In the Croatian "Rlichko Kolo," the women declare their intent to sing as they please whenever they please. It plays out in topping antiphonal phrases between sub-groups of three and four voices, with the occasional solo exclamation. The sad songs tended to focus on a solo voice, usually Varimezova's highly focused, penetrating alto, ornamenting gorgeously and conveying feeling in throbbing dissonance.

The Milwaukee Choral Artists joined Kitka in a set of more elaborately arranged songs. Ivan Varimezov came on at intervals to play the *gajda*, a wonderfully raucous Bulgarian bagpipe.

Early Music Now presented this concert in the ideal location, the Basilica of St. Josaphat. The wildly colorful walls suited this colorful music, and the brilliant acoustic turned suddenly hair-raising when the singers hit certain pitches and chords certain ways. If you didn't know better, you'd think some post-modern composer was behind it.

A Note from Kitka:

Thank you so much for your kind follow-up emails and for treating Kitka so well in Milwaukee. We loved working with you and MCA, meeting our gracious hosts, singing in the splendid St. Josephat's Basilica to such a receptive and enthusiastic audience, and partying down Balkan-style post-concert at the Serbian restaurant. It is performances and human exchanges like those we experienced in Milwaukee that make the craziness of a musical life so unquestionably worthwhile.

I am also so happy to hear that the Early Music Now community responded so positively to our performances and workshops. We'd love to spend more time in Milwaukee and to see more of the beautiful city!

In harmony –
Kitka