Mel Bay Presents

Balkan Dreams Suite

Music of Albania, Romania, Hungary, Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Macedonia for Fingerstyle Guitar

by Tim Sparks

INCLUDES COMPACT DISC DIGITAL AUDIO

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## PERFORMANCE NOTES

At the beginning, the most daunting aspect of this music for me was the so-called “odd-meter” rhythms that are as natural in the Balkans as the two-step and waltz are in western Europe or North America. When I first heard these exotic rhythms in what was at that time Yugoslavia, I went crazy trying to figure out where the downbeat was. The principle of getting the rhythm is simple: subdivide the components into groups of two and three. For example, with 7/8 think: 2+2+3/8.

The best way to familiarize oneself with the pattern is to count it or tap it out while being mindful that it’s not like 7/4. There’s an extra half beat in the triplet figure that gives a slight hesitation when it occurs. This is sometimes known as an Aksak, or limping meter. Take some time to get comfortable with the pattern by counting along with the recording.

Balkan-style ornamentation evolved as a way of evoking quarter tones, and the trilling styles have a special character. In these selections a simple triplet figure is most often employed (indicated by a mordant).
INTRODUCTION TO BALKAN DREAMS

The mountainous region of Southeastern Europe, known as the Balkans, encompasses the republics of the former Yugoslavia: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia as well as Albania, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, and parts of Hungary and Turkey. Balkan is a Turkish word meaning wooded mountains, and this rugged terrain has been a cultural crossroads for thousands of years.

In recent centuries, the Catholic Hapsburgs, the Eastern Orthodox Romanovs, and the Muslim Ottoman Empire have collided like great cultural tectonic plates in the Balkans. One legacy of this conflict and cross-fertilization is a rich and exotic musical vocabulary. Gypsy, Viennese, Jewish, and Turkish — the popular music of recent epochs — overlay older Slavic, Celtic and Central Asian traditions. Indeed, some song and dance forms hearken back to the era when Alexander’s empire stretched from these mountains, across Persia, and all the way to the northern borders of India.

The Hungarian composers Bela Bartok and Zoltan Kodaly traveled through the region at the turn of the century. They recorded folk music on Edison wax cylinders, which was later notated and incorporated into their celebrated compositions. In the early Sixties, composers like Manos Hadjidakis gained a wide hearing through popular films; the movies Never on Sunday and Zorba the Greek spawned hits with their theme songs.

Jazz artists such as Dave Brubeck and Don Ellis have worked in complex Balkan meters and, in recent years, a new generation of world music enthusiasts have tuned on to the Balkan Sound through The Mystery of Bulgarian Voices, Ivo Papasov, and 3 Mustaphas 3.

Balkan instrumentation includes a variety of flutes, violins, framedrums, bagpipes, panpipes, an oboe-like horn called the zurna, and the cymbalam (a hammered dulcimer). More recent introductions are brass band instruments and the accordion. String music in the Balkans has heretofore been largely of the spectrum variety with long-necked lutes such as the Prima and Bouzouki predominating. There is a wonderful tradition of plucked-string ensembles that sound a bit like Balkanized bluegrass.

With few notable exceptions, such as the work of Dusan Bogdanovich, there is little in the way of fingerstyle guitar tradition in the Balkans. Flamenco and Latin American guitar forms have provided a model for these arrangements. Southern Spain and Portugal have had a cultural link with the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East at least since Phoenician times. A large community of Spanish Jews were offered a haven in the Ottoman lands by the sultan Suleiman after their expulsion from Spain in the 16th Century and their music brought the flavor of Andalusia. Starting with a flamenco key has, in some cases, eased the way in the process of adapting this material to the guitar.

My own personal introduction to music in the Balkans was about 10 years ago. My wife, Chyrill, and I drove down from Budapest into Yugoslavia and across Croatia and Slovenia. Later, we ferried across the Adriatic to the Croatian port of Split and traveled into the Bosnian highlands. Sadly, the towns of Mostar and Banja Luka, where we heard some of the best musicians, have become the scene of horrific physical and cultural destruction. It is to the victims of ethnic cleansing and in the hope that the madness of the last four years is coming to an end that this work is dedicated.

The music of the Balkans presents a treasure trove of possibilities to a fingerstyle guitarist. The pieces presented here are a small representation of the songs and dances to be encountered: just a scratch of the surface. It is my hope that this collection will inspire your own investigations, adaptations and compositions.
TIM SPARKS

Tim Sparks’ long journey to the 1994 National Fingerstyle Guitar Championship, and beyond, began modestly in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, when he started picking out tunes by ear on an old Stella flat top. He was given his first guitar when a bout of encephalitis kept him out of school for a year. The music he heard around him was traditional country blues and the gospel his grandmother played on piano in a small church in the Blue Ridge mountains; that’s what he taught himself to play.

A musically astute uncle heard him one day, and amazed that he had come so far on his own, nominated him for a scholarship at the prestigious North Carolina School of the Arts. There he studied the classics with Segovia protegee Jesus Silva while continuing to play all kinds of music: increasingly turning to classic jazz for inspiration. He adapted compositions by Jelly Roll Morton, Scott Joplin, and Fats Waller to the guitar, frequently reducing piano arrangements to their bare essence.

After a stint on the road with a Chicago-based rhythm and blues band, Sparks arrived in Minnesota, where he soon established himself as a journeyman guitarist. While recording three albums with the seminal vocal jazz ensemble Rio Nido, Sparks also became proficient in jazz styles from Brazilian to Be Bop, earning him several regional music awards including Best Acoustic Guitarist, Best Latin Jazz Guitarist, and Best Jazz Guitarist.

He also found the time to revive his interest in the classics, adapting Tchaikovsky’s Nutcracker Suite to the guitar — a work that has been cited as a significant contribution to solo guitar literature. For Sparks it was a labor of love, which earned him the fingerstyle guitar championship in Winfield, Kansas.

A trip to Yugoslavia inspired an interest in the music of the Balkans, culminating in the recording of Sparks’ Balkan Dreams Suite, a remarkable collection of odd-meter guitar arrangements. Many of the Balkan Dreams compositions were recorded on Tim’s debut solo guitar CD, The Nutcracker. The recording was cited by Guitar Player Magazine as, “An exhilarating, odd-meter minefield inspired by Near Eastern music. An important recording from a gifted composer, arranger and performer.”

In 1995 Tim recorded a CD of original compositions titled Guitar Bazaar: synthesizing odd-meter rhythms with jazz, blues, Latin, and traditional music styles. Guitar Bazaar was also released on Peter Finger’s Acoustic Music Records (a label that specializes in cutting-edge acoustic guitar music).
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