Balkanalia: An Academic Year in Review

During the week of November 13-16, 2014, “Balkanalia,” the University of Illinois Balkan Music Ensemble was invited to attend and play music for the Society for Ethnomusicology’s 59th Annual Meeting in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I recently interviewed the Director of Balkanalia, Professor Donna Buchanan on this topic and other performances the Balkan Ensemble played this past academic year of 2014-2015.

Balkanalia, established in the Spring of 1998, performs traditional village, urban, and popular music styles of Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Turkey on indigenous, orchestral, and electronic instruments. Professor Buchanan explained that participants of Balkanalia include musically gifted graduate and undergraduate students majoring in a variety of disciplines. Buchanan stated that while students majoring in Music are generally considered first, due to the ability to use the class as ensemble credit, students from all backgrounds of study are welcome to take the class and perform with the ensemble. However, Professor Buchanan does ask that students commit to Balkanalia for an entire year, meeting once a week for three hours or longer. Balkanalia also invites community members to perform, for example, at this year’s spring concert three guest artists were featured including one graduate student and two alumni of UIUC. Professor Buchanan mentioned that her current students are especially talented and rose to the challenges that they faced this year in performances.

One such challenge presented itself in the form of an invitation to the aforementioned conference: the Society for Ethnomusicology’s 59th Annual Meeting. Professor Buchanan described feeling extremely honored to be invited to such a prestigious event. Not only was Balkanalia invited to attend the conference, but they were invited to play during two separate events. During the welcome reception Balkanalia performed together with the Oberlin Conservatory Balkan Ensemble, directed by Ian MacMillan, and the University of Pittsburgh Carpathian Ensemble, directed by Ariana Hobig. The second event Balkanalia performed for during the conference was the evening East European Dance Party. Balkanalia performed for half of this event.

Professor Buchanan mentioned that this dance party is exactly the event that helped her choose the theme for the music Balkanalia performed this year. She stated that each year Balkanalia tries to pick a different focus or theme to guide the music choices of their performances. She said that since the invitation to play at the dance party for the conference came months in advance of the event, she molded this year’s theme to Balkan dance music.

Professor Buchanan stated that the pinnacle of each year is the spring concert. This year’s concert, entitled “At the Wedding, On the Square: Selections from the Balkan Dance Floor and More,” was an extraordinary event performed at the Smith Recital hall on UIUC’s campus. As a first year in the REEES Masters program this was my first experience in attending the spring Balkanalia concert. Never have I heard such rich and complex music before. I heard sounds I have never experienced which gave me physical goose
Fourteen selections were played in all including music from Greece, Turkey, Asia Minor, Armenia, the eastern Aegean island of Samothrace, Arab music from Lebanon, the western Balkans, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Albania. Performers dressed in beautiful traditional costumes of the region, played instruments and sung lyrics hailing from the homelands of the Balkan people. Smith Recital Hall reverberated in loud applause at the end of each song.

This year’s concert was dedicated to the memory of Professor Ralph T. Fisher, founder of the Russian, East European and Eurasian Center and the UIUC Slavic Library collection, and Professor of History. He was respected and loved by many in our community and will be greatly missed by all who study the REEE region.

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