

# DREAMING OF CHAMBER MUSIC IN THE RODOPE MOUNTAINS

By Lora Tchekoratoва

Music has been the center of my life for as long as I can remember. One of my very first memories is that of my four year old self, walking up the stairs of the music school in Sofia where I was to meet my first piano teacher. I was about to embark on a life of adventure, mystery and inspiration.

Fast forward fourteen years and I find myself in New York, waiting anxiously to audition for the piano jury at the Juilliard School, another important step of my musical life. I was young, ambitious and determined to "make it" in one of the greatest cities in the world, a place, which

became my home and where I have been living for more than twenty five years.

I married a Bulgarian guy, I co-founded a Bulgarian music organization in New York and my closest friends are all Bulgarians. We celebrate all the major holidays, read the latest Bulgarian books and keep connected with the developments in our country, often feeling delighted when reading about all the attractive destinations, the beauty of the mountains and the charming ancient villages.

After the birth of my first child in 2007, I started spending more

and more time traveling around Bulgaria.

And so, I started thinking of making myself useful. I volunteered for a couple of organizations, went to seminars about funding for the arts, asked many questions, got in touch with many musicians, artists, and writers. I was amazed at the achievements of many Bulgarians who chose not to leave the country, but instead embarked on daring projects: working hard to preserve the mountains, the seaside, the local food industry, education, and the arts. I wanted to join them and so, I started looking for a suitable place



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to start a chamber music festival.

Two years ago while traveling in the Rodope mountains with my husband, violinist Georgy Valtchev, our children, and close friends from Plovdiv, we came upon the ancient village of Kovachevitsa in the Western Rodope Mountains. This part of Bulgaria is simply magnificent: picturesque villages, great local food, spectacular views of the mountains and easy access to mountain adventures, mineral water and spas. The Greek beaches are only a little over an hour away. This area has preserved its authenticity and has been declared a national historical site. Many artists, writers and intellectuals have summer homes there. Others are investing in the old houses, rejuvenating them and making them suitable for eco tourism. Yoga and Pilates weekends, galleries, charming restaurants ...the place is perfect. And, most importantly, it has a beautiful cultural center with a nice concert Salon! While parts of the building still need to be renovated, the concert hall has recently been redone thanks to a grant from the European Union. The acoustics are great and it can fit about 120 people, which is just right for an intimate chamber music festival.

And so, inspired by the spirit of the place, its magnificent views of the mountains, rivers and sunsets and fascinated by the people there, I decided to embark on an adventure and bring along my husband and our best friend Nikola Takov as well as many colleagues and partners from the United States and from Bulgaria. Just like me, a number of Bulgarians who live abroad, are eager and happy to return and share their gifts and expertise.

We called the festival "The Unbeaten Path" after brain-

storming with the great composer Dobrinka Tabakova. The name refers not only to our connection to the area, but also to the experience of putting together something so new for this part of the country. For example, there has never been a grand piano anywhere in the vicinity of this village! Thanks to our partnership with Feurich pianos from Vienna, this summer we are bringing two grand pianos: one for Kovachevitsa and one for the nearby town of Gotze Delchev. The piano company embraced the idea and was eager to partner with us and help us solve the logistics of bringing grand pianos to the mountains of Bulgaria.

Another very important step on "The Unbeaten Path" was finding our first sponsor. Last fall I met with the team of Postbank and "pitched" the idea to them. Even though I had a lot of partners offering to donate free services: graphic design, guest house for the artists, rent-free performance spaces... I was missing an important and essential part of the puzzle: funding! The bank generously committed to covering about half of the expenses of the festival, which gave us a great boost and made it possible for us to announce the first edition of the festival and to seek other sponsors: private individuals, local businesses and government grants.

After living in the US for so long and having funded many projects privately, I am used to approaching individuals and foundations for support, which are aware that the arts in the States are almost entirely funded privately. I find that in order for Bulgaria to preserve its great cultural traditions, we need to have a similar approach: the arts can't rely entirely on the government for financial support. We have to take things in our own hands and support each other. If the arts are thriving, the whole society benefits.

As I write this I am sitting in a cafe overseeing the statue of Christopher Columbus in New York City. Around me there are many different people from various parts of the world: two Spanish businessmen talking loudly, three Catholic nuns having breakfast, a Chinese family, and a lonely-looking woman with a small dog. I feel inspired by the energy and diversity of this city and all that it has given me over the years. One of the great things about living in New York is the fact that one can preserve one's own cultural identity, find common traits and traditions with others and celebrate it as an important part of the whole of humanity. And so, I am dreaming of taking the next step on the unbeaten path towards my festival in the picturesque village of Kovachevitsa.

Lora Tchekoratova is a pianist, teacher and concert presenter. She serves on the faculty of Mannes Prep at the New School in New York. She is the Co-Chair of the concert series Bulgarian Concert Evenings in New York and Artistic Director of the nonprofit organization Salon de Virtuosi, dedicated to the presentation and support of classical musicians from around the world. The first edition of the Unbeaten Path Chamber Music Festival will take place between August 3-6, 2018 in the village of Kovachevitsa and the town of Gotze Delchev in the South Western Rodope Mountains. For more information about the festival, the exact program, performers, information about the area, and to support this initiative, please visit [www.neo-path.com](http://www.neo-path.com)