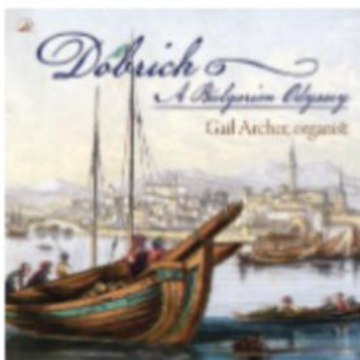


THE DIAPASON

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New Recordings



Dobrich: A Bulgarian Odyssey

Dobrich: A Bulgarian Odyssey. Gail Archer plays the Schuke organ of the Organ Hall, Dobrich, Bulgaria. Meyer Media/Swan Studios, MM25060, \$10. Available from swanstudios.nyc/gail-archer; also available on Tidal, Spotify, and Apple Music.

Erendira, Sabin Levi; *Es kommt ein Schiff, geladen*, Velislav Zaimov; *Two Frescoes*, Evgeny Cheshmedjiev; *Victimae Paschali Laudes*, Neva Krysteva; *Eucharistia*, Radosveta Hurkova; *Prelude for Organ*, Bozhidar Abrashev; *Variations on the Song "Polegnala e Tudora,"* Hurkova; *Prelude and Toccata*, Kiril Lambov; *O Heiland, reiss die Himmel auf*, Velislav Zaimov.

Gail Archer's *Bulgarian Odyssey* began in the spring of 2021 when the staff member of THE DIAPASON, Jerome Butera, asked her to review Pavel Madzharov's book on Bulgarian organs and organ music (see "Book Reviews," July 2021, page 9). One thing led to another as Madzharov sent Dr. Archer fourteen volumes of organ music published by the Union of Bulgarian Composers and arranged through Sabin Levi for her to undertake a two-day recording session at the Organ Hall in Dobrich. Most organs in Bulgaria are in performing arts centers, and very few are in churches. The reason for this is not hard to find, since seventy percent of Bulgarians are Bulgarian Orthodox and do not use the organ in their worship, and most of the rest are Muslims. Curiously, despite Bulgaria's history of Communist rule, only five percent of its people are non-believers.

The German firm of Alexander Schuke Orgelbau in Potsdam dates from 1820 but was nationalized under East German Communist rule as VEB Potsdam Schuke-Orgelbau. The two-manual organ in the Organ Hall in Dobrich, Bulgaria, was one of the last Schuke organs built before the firm was denationalized under the management of Matthias Schuke in 1990. The instrument, built in 1988, has thirty-six speaking stops drawn from forty-nine ranks. The key action is mechanical, and the stop action electric.

Gail Archer grew up in Paterson, New Jersey, and attended Montclair State University, Montclair, New Jersey, where she graduated *magna cum laude* in music education in 1973. She obtained her master's degree in piano from Hartt College, University of Hartford, Connecticut, in 1977, before joining Yale University as a research fellow in the same year. In 1987 she received her Master of Music degree in choral conducting from Mannes College of Music, and her Doctor of Musical

Arts degree in organ performance from Manhattan School of Music in 1995. In 2002 she earned an artist diploma for organ performance from the Boston Conservatory. She was appointed director of Barnard-Columbia Chorus and Chamber Choir in 1988 and director of the music program at Barnard College in 1994. She founded Musforum, a network for women organists to affirm and promote their work. She is a faculty member of the Harriman Institute for Russian, Eurasian, and East European Studies, Columbia University, reflecting her musical interest in this area. She serves as college organist at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York, and is artistic director of the artist and young artist recital series at historic Central Synagogue in New York City.

The compact disc begins with one of Sabin Levi's more than sixty compositions for organ. Levi has a Bachelor of Music degree from the Rubin Academy of Music and Dance in Jerusalem, a Master of Music degree from Brigham Young University, and a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Kansas. He is also a Fellow of the American Guild of Organists. His composition teachers were Mark Kopytman in Jerusalem, David Sargent and Murray Boren at Brigham Young, and Charles Hoag at Kansas. Levi is professor of music theory and organ at the National Music Academy in Sofia, Bulgaria. He was recipient of the Union of Bulgarian Composers' Book of the Year Prize in 2023. The work Gail Archer plays here is *Erendira* (1990), a highly chromatic, five-section composition in alternating *andantino* and *alla breve* tempi. It reminds me somewhat of Hindemith's organ sonatas. I am a little puzzled by the title, *Erendira*. Was it perhaps inspired by Ruy Guerra's 1983 movie of that name?

The disc includes two compositions by Velislav Zaimov (born 1951), both based on German Lutheran chorales. Zaimov, who heads the Union of Bulgarian Composers, graduated from the Faculty of Theory and Composition of the National Academy of Music in Sofia, where he studied composition under Dimitar Tapkourand and Alexander Tanev. Both works mirror the meaning of the words at the same time as including the melody: *Es kommt ein Schiff, geladen* is an Advent hymn comparing the coming of God's Son to a heavily laden ship. There is a vigorous pedal part, and the chorale melody moves back and forth between pedal, soprano, and alto. The dynamics alternate between loud and soft, and there are occasional loud crashing chords. Zaimov's second composition occupies the last track on the compact disc. *O Heiland, reiss die Himmel auf* is also an Advent hymn and begins, "O Savior, tear open the heavens." Dramatic chordal statements divide it into three sections, which alternate between duple and triple time. There is a striking dialog between the hands and feet, and the melody is soloed out on the Hinterwerk Nassat and Terz. The final section ends on full organ. Some of the chordal passages remind me of Messiaen's "Transports de joie" from *L'Ascension*.

Evgeny Cheshmedjiev (1930–2009), the son of Bulgarian composer Yossif Cheshmedjiev (1890–1964), graduated in 1958 from the National Academy of Music in Sofia, where he studied composition under Pancho Vladigerov, orchestral conducting under Assen Dimitrov and choral conducting under Georgi Dimitrov. His numerous compositions include two oratorios, orchestral and instrumental works, and more than 200 choral works, but only two works for solo organ, *Too Short Is the Night—little poem* (1999) and the one included here, *Two Frescoes* (1999). Sabin Levi wrote:

[The] Two Frescoes demonstrate [Cheshmedjiev's] intellectually novel approach toward form building. The motive in the soprano . . . is basically the same; harmonization is subtly different. The motive appears again and again, being the spinal column of both pieces. The two pieces appear to be quite different, yet their complex, tonal melodic-harmonic language is shared, as is most of the thematic material. . . . Those two miniatures have a somewhat minimalistic, laconic quality about them.

It would be interesting to know if Cheshmedjiev had any specific frescoes in mind when he wrote these two pieces. The chromatic harmonies and irregular rhythms again remind me of Hindemith.

Born in Sofia, Bulgaria, in 1946, Neva Krystiva studied organ under Leonid Roizman and musicology under Yuri Kholopov at the prestigious Moscow Conservatory. She continued her studies in organ and musicology in Prague and Zurich with Jifi Reinberger. On her return to Bulgaria, she taught at the National Academy of Music in Sofia and founded the organ program at New Bulgarian University, a private university established in 1991 in Sofia following the collapse of the Communist government. *Victimae Paschali Laudes* (2009) is a technically demanding improvisation based on the Gregorian chant of that name. In my opinion it is a masterpiece, combining a majestic pedal part with joyfully brilliant arpeggios on the manuals, alternating with mysterious chordal passages on the flutes, rising to a climax in the middle, and falling away to silence at the end, the whole producing a remarkably poignant effect.

The other Bulgarian woman composer on this compact disc is Radosveta Hurkova (born 1965), an organ student of Neva Krystiva who also studied music theory and composition at the National Academy of Music in Sofia. She works at the "Bezisten (Bazaar)" Interactive Museum at Yambol in southeastern Bulgaria, where Nenninger Orgelbau of Munich built an organ in 2018. The compact disc includes two of Hurkova's three organ compositions, *Eucharistia* (Eucharist) and *Variations on the Song "Polegnara e Tudora."* Both works have complex rhythmic structures. The first has a medieval splendor in its open octaves and fifths. The second uses the irregular dancelike rhythms of a traditional Bulgarian folksong. It reminds me somewhat of the traditional folk dances of nomadic Turks as portrayed by Borodin in his *Polovtsian Dances*.

Kiril Minko Lambov (1955–2019), a sixth-generation member of the Lambov dynasty of musicians, was a graduate of the National Academy of Music in Sofia where he majored in piano under Dora Lazarova and composition under Alexander Tanev, and of the Academy of Music, Dance, and Fine Arts in Plovdiv, where he majored in conducting under Emil Yanev. *Prelude and Toccata* is his only organ work. The harmonies and rhythms of "Prelude" remind me yet again of Hindemith. "Prelude" leads into the joyous and fast-paced "Toccata."

The last composer who features is Bozhidar Abrashev (1936–2006) who, like many of the Bulgarians on this album, studied composition at the National Academy of Music in Sofia, where his teacher was Pancho Vladigerov. Among his more than 300 compositions, there is only one organ work, *Prelude for Organ*, which he wrote in 2003 for the celebration of the ninety-fifth anniversary of the oldest surviving pipe organ in Bulgaria, the H. Voit & Söhne organ at the Catholic Cathedral

of Saint Paul of the Cross (not the Concert Hall as stated in the leaflet) in Rousse on the River Danube. It is a charming piece in a conservative Romantic style that makes use of warm harmonies. The style fits well with the date of the organ (1908) and is reminiscent of composers of that period, such as Louis Vierne.

In her albums featuring Eastern European composers and organs, Gail Archer achieves many of the same goals as James Hicks's *Nordic Journey* series, bringing greater recognition to interesting but little-known instruments, composers, and repertoire. I am most grateful to Dr. Archer for introducing me to the world of Bulgarian organs and organ music on this compact disc and have much pleasure in recommending it.

As the organ's specification is not provided in the leaflet, it is included here:

HAUPTWERK (Manual I)

16'	Gedäckt
8'	Principal
8'	Rohrflöte
8'	Quintadena
4'	Oktave
4'	Spitzflöte
2½'	Quinte
2'	Oktave
2'	Waldflöte
	Mixtur IV–V
	Cimbel III
8'	Trompete
	II/I

SCHWELLWERK (Manual II, enclosed)

8'	Geigenprincipal
8'	Holzgedäckt
8'	Salicional
4'	Oktave
4'	Nachthorn
4'	Fugara
2½'	Nassat
2'	Gemshorn
1½'	Terz
1½'	Quinte
1'	Sifflöte
	Scharff IV
8'	Oboe
8'	Vox Humana
	Tremulant

Pedal

16'	Principal
16'	Subbass
8'	Oktave
8'	Gedäcktbas
4'	Oktave
4'	Flachflöte
2'	Bauernpfeife
	Hintersatz IV
16'	Posaune
8'	Trompete
	I/P
	II/P