

# The Fifth Annual Ralph Rinzler Memorial Concert

## *Traditional Music for the Wedding*

**M**artin Koenig founded the Balkan Arts Center in 1966; Ethel Raim joined in 1975. In 1981, Balkan Arts became the Ethnic Folk Arts Center (EFAC). In 1998, EFAC became the Center for Traditional Music and Dance. Although its name has changed, the center continues to strengthen traditional music and dance indigenous to ethnic communities in New York.

The 1999 Ralph Rinzler Memorial Concert, featuring the Yuri Yunakov Ensemble and Ensemble Tereza, reflects the history of the center and its range of programs. Yuri Yunakov hails from Bulgaria — one of the first regions in which the Balkan Arts Center conducted research. Ensemble Tereza came to the attention of the center through the Soviet Jewish Community Cultural Initiative, a multiyear project begun in 1997 that encourages communities to participate in the conservation of their own heritage and artistic traditions.

### YURI YUNAKOV ENSEMBLE Carol Silverman

“**W**edding music” has become the most widely listened-to form of folk/popular music in Bulgaria, Macedonia, and their diaspora communities. Most often played for dancing at life-cycle celebrations — as its name suggests — wedding music expands upon traditional melodies while displaying virtuosic technique, improvisation, fast speeds, daring key changes, and influences from jazz, rock, Turkish, and Indian musics, as well as Balkan village



folk music. Yuri Yunakov was one of the founders of this energetic, contemporary musical form.

As professional instrumentalists, Roma (Gypsies) have played an important role in wedding music and other Balkan folk music. Yuri Yunakov was born of Turkish Rom ancestry in Haskovo, Bulgaria. He began playing the *kaval* (end-blown wooden flute) at age eight but switched to the *tapan* (two-headed drum) to accompany his father and brother at weddings. After a professional career in boxing, he took up the clarinet and joined his brother's wedding band. Yuri is a self-taught musician; he says, “The neighborhood was my school.”

In the early 1980s, Yuri switched to saxophone and later joined Ivo Papazov's acclaimed band, Trakija. In Bulgaria, Yuri and Ivo achieved the fame enjoyed

Yuri Yunakov Ensemble.

Photo © Linda Vartogian

by rock stars in the West. Nevertheless, Yuri was repeatedly harassed, fined, and twice sent to prison, all for playing Rom and Turkish music, which were prohibited as part of the socialist government's program to eliminate “foreign” elements in Bulgarian music. Wedding music itself was suppressed by that government but nevertheless thrived in unofficial settings as a countercultural expression. In post-socialist Eastern Europe, Roma have become the targets of numerous violent mob attacks.

Since arriving in the United States in 1994, Yuri has become one of the most sought-after musicians in the Macedonian Rom community in New York City, which is now more than 7,000 strong and predominately Bronx-based. A

Bronx resident himself, Yuri is also in great demand among New York's Bulgarian and Turkish communities. The Yuri Yunakov Ensemble includes Yuri Yunakov (saxophone), accordionist Ivan Milev, Lauren Brody (synthesizer and vocals), Catherine Foster (clarinet and vocals), Jerry Kisslinger (*tapan*), and Carol Silverman (vocals).

### Suggested Listening

Ivo Papazov. *Balkanology*. Hannibal Records.

Ivo Papazov and His Bulgarian Wedding Band. *Orpheus Ascending*. Hannibal/Ryko.

Yuri Yunakov. *Balada* — *Bulgarian Wedding Music*. Traditional Crossroads 4291.

Yuri Yunakov. *New Colors in Bulgarian Wedding Music*. Traditional Crossroads 4283.

*Professor of cultural anthropology and folklore at the University of Oregon in Eugene, Carol Silverman has done field research in Bulgaria and has worked with Roma in Bulgaria, Macedonia, Hungary, and New York. She is completing a book on Balkan Rom culture and identity. She was a member of the vocal trio Ženska Pesna for over 15 years and now performs with various groups on the West Coast, including Slavej.*

### ENSEMBLE TEREZA

#### Michael Alpert

The recent arrival of over 4,000 Mountain Jews from the Eastern Caucasus, in particular Azerbaijan and Dagestan, marks an exciting development in New York's cultural scene. Speaking Djuhuri (from the Hebrew *Yehudi*, "Jewish"), an Iranian language related to Persian, many members of New York's Mountain Jewish community trace their ancestry to Kuba in northern Azerbaijan. Divided by a river and linked by bridges ("similar to Manhattan and Brooklyn," jokes one community member), Kuba's two distinct halves are home to Muslims and Jews, respectively. Over the past century, many Mountain Jews moved to Baku, capital of Azerbaijan, joining the city's educated class and becoming participants in commerce and trade. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1990, many Mountain Jews have emigrated, some 35,000 to Israel and approximately 7,000 to the United States. In New York, the community maintains an active traditional life, with a synagogue on Ocean Parkway in Brooklyn, where most of the community lives.

Ensemble Tereza's music features traditional south Caucasian instruments like the *tar* (a long-necked lute), the *daf* (a large tambourine), the *nakara* (a two-headed drum, played with sticks), the *zarb* (an hourglass-shaped metal drum), and the *garmon* (the diatonic accordion popular throughout the Caucasus), as



Ensemble Tereza. Photo by Dan Rest

well as more modern instruments like the clarinet, keyboard/synthesizer, and electric bass. Typical of their multiethnic milieu, Mountain Jewish singers like Tereza Elizarova sing in a variety of languages including Djuhuri, Azeri, Turkish, Persian, Hebrew, and Arabic.

Ensemble Tereza consists of five musicians from Brooklyn: Tereza Elizarova (vocals and accordion); her nephew, Ruslan Agababayev (keyboard, *garmon*); her two brothers, Robson Yefraimov (guitar) and Mark Elizarov (percussion); Alex Hafizov (clarinet); Rashad Mamedov (*garmon*); and dancers Salamon Ryvinov and Victoria Minayev. The Elizarov and Yefraimov families are from Baku and come from a long line of musicians, in

*Typical of their multiethnic milieu, Mountain Jewish singers like Tereza Elizarova sing in a variety of languages....*

particular of women performers. Elizarova's grandmother was one of the first Mountain Jewish women to play the accordion publicly. When Elizarova sings at weddings in New York, frequently the bridal family knows her family and its musical reputation from Azerbaijan. Her father (accordionist Khanuko Elizarov) may well have performed at the wedding of the parents of the bride or groom, and her grandmother, also an accordionist, at the wedding of the grandparents.

*Michael Alpert is a leading expert in Eastern European Jewish music and dance. Adept in 20 languages, Alpert has extensive experience programming and presenting Jewish culture, and has collaborated with the Center for Traditional Music and Dance for more than 16 years. Renowned as a Yiddish singer, Alpert plays violin, accordion, and drum, and performs internationally with the new Jewish music ensemble, Brave Old World.*