

HISTORIC RECORDING EVENT IN COPENHAGEN

An Albanian Musical Treasure Revived

by Feride Istogu Gillesberg

Jan. 3—In December, a delegation of outstanding Albanian artists from Tirana, Albania, joined forces with a Swiss-Albanian pianist and Danish musicians in Copenhagen, to record forty-nine Albanian traditional songs, arranged by the pre-eminent Albanian pianist, Lola Gjoka Alekski (1910-1985). The pieces are a fusion of authentic Albanian folk songs and classical music—a cultural treasure that will now see the light of day after seven decades!

Lola Gjoka Alekski played a critical role in bringing classical music to Albania. An international concert pianist, she composed classical piano accompaniment to fifty-one Albanian songs that were based on authentic Albanian folk music that was still alive and sung by the local people all over Albania at the time. This meant transcribing the notes faithfully, and creating an accompaniment as true to the authenticity of the songs as possible. These songs would become part of the programs at the classical concerts she gave in collaboration with some of the first Bel Canto opera singers in Albania.

In 1912, Albania finally won its independence, after 500 years of brutal occupation by the Ottoman Empire—an independence achieved against all odds. When finally, the Turkish domination was over, the neighboring countries tried everything they could do, to divide up Albania amongst themselves. This partly succeeded. But when we finally had a nation, our desire to rise up out of extreme backwardness—politically, economically, and culturally—was strong in both the spirit and soul of the Albanian people. This comes through in our music.

How Classical Music Made Its Way to Albania

Lola Alekski was born in Sevastopol, Crimea. Her parents were Albanian immigrants and her father, in particular, loved singing the Albanian folk songs, and was a passionate mandolin player. He wanted his daughter to have the opportunity to play the piano, so he bought one for her when she was nine years old. She was able to have piano lessons at school, and her piano teacher was very excited about her musical talent.



Alban Dhamo

A delegation of outstanding Albanian artists joined forces with a Swiss-Albanian pianist and Danish musicians to record, for the first time, Albanian traditional songs, arranged by the late Lola Gjoka Alekski. Left to right: Feride Gillesberg, Gerald Murrja, Ermira Lefort, Stig Fogh Andersen, Rudina Ciko, Erinda Agolli, Chan Ciko, Mariana Leka and Antonio Zefi, December 2021.

Lola Alekski was in her final year of study at the Conservatory of Music in Sevastopol when in 1932, a law was implemented by the Soviet Union forcing immigrants to either become Soviet citizens, or leave the country. The Alekski family was too patriotic to give up their Albanian identity, and so, left Sevastopol to return to their homeland.

When the family departed from Crimea, they took their piano with them as they knew there were no pianos in Albania. Tragically, the younger son of the family



Alban Dhamo

Feride Gillesberg and tenor Stig Fogh Andersen, accompanied by pianist Ermira Lefort, performing at the Albanian Folksong Concert near Copenhagen, December 31, 2021.

died on the journey. As they settled in in Korçë, Albania, old friends helped the family to begin again.

Lola Aleksí, at age 21 when she arrived, began giving piano lessons to the girls and boys of wealthier families to help her own family make ends meet. After placing highly in an international piano competition in Vienna, she found that doors opened for her to finish her studies, and she received a diploma with honors from the Conservatory of Athens in 1936.

Before this time, a seed had already been planted for a cultural renaissance in Albania, by the first Albanian lyric opera singer, Mihal Ciko, who had come back from abroad in the 1920s. He was the first Albanian to have studied in Milan at the Giuseppe Verdi Conservatory. In 1924, Ciko took part in the international folk song competition in “Fiera di Milano,” in which he performed Albanian folk songs, music that had never before been sung outside of Albania. Ciko’s interpretation and performance were so moving that he won the competition.

Lola Aleksí and Mihal Ciko joined forces and more opera singers came back to Albania. These included the sopranos, Jorgjia Filçe-Truja, Tefta Tashko Koço,

and Maria Kraja; the tenor Kristaq Antoniu; and baritone, Kristaq Koço. As the seed for a cultural renaissance took root and grew, Lola Gjoka Aleksí was at the center, making it flourish.

The great pianist accompanied all of the singers in Verdi and Puccini arias, German *Lieder*, and much more. Albanian folk songs were an important part of the concerts. In the dozens of traditional songs she wrote down and arranged, she would carefully preserve the integrity of the music. Tefta Tashko Koço and the other singers would come to her with songs from different parts of Albania, so Lola could preserve these old treasures. Lola Gjoka Aleksí and Maria Kraja were described as the bees that collected the honey from all the different flowers in the Albanian garden.

In the 1970s, Lola reworked her songs once again. Her last wish before she died in 1985, was to have these songs available for the new generation. Lola’s only child, Juki, first published a book of her mother’s 51 songs in 2007, but because of health problems, only a handful were able to be recorded.

This author was first introduced



Courtesy of Feride Gillesberg

The poster for the Albanian Folksong Concert, featuring the music of composer and pianist Lola Gjoka Aleksí.



Alban Dhano

Soprano Feride Gillesberg and tenor Stig Fogh Andersen perform at the Albanian Folksong Concert near Copenhagen, December 31, 2021.

to some of the songs set by Lola Gjoka Alekski by the Swiss-Albanian pianist Ermira Lefort, who came to Denmark in 2019 to perform two of Lola Gjoka Alekski's songs with me at the concert, "A Musical Dialogue of Cultures," co-sponsored by the Schiller Institute, Russian-Danish Dialogue, and the Chinese Cultural Center. Lefort and I were invited by the Danish Consul in Tirana to give a concert with a Danish-Albanian program, but due to COVID-19, the concert was postponed to June 5, 2021. As destiny played out, Lefort was not able to come to Tirana at that time, and a replacement was found. The replacement, pianist Rudina Ciko, was a blessing in disguise, for what would happen next.

After meeting Rudina Ciko in May in Tirana, some weeks before our concert, I received from her the book with the collected songs set by Lola Gjoka Alekski. I had the time to look through the collection, and discovered how each of them was very special and beautiful. After the 2021 concert in Tirana, travelling back to Denmark, I felt resolutely, that these songs ought to be recorded. Each song is like a pearl in the string of a treasured necklace, and people should have access to this treasure.

The Spark that Waited To Be Transformed into Fire

I vowed to do my part to get these songs recorded. Through Rudina Ciko, I met her husband, Zhani Ciko,

Two Albanian Folk Songs

These two folk songs are from central Albania. The first, "Why Don't You Lift Your Veil?" is a love song from the region of Elbasan. The second, "Little Halit," from the region of Dibra, is a sad song of loss. Translations by Feride Istogu Gillesberg.

Why Don't You Lift Your Veil?

Why don't you lift your veil?
So I can see your features.
Since you have Berat, O girl,
What do you want with Elbasan?

You have such long hair,
The scarf can't cover it.
The mountain's wind is blowing, O girl,
And it is blowing up my mind.

Little Halit

When she heard the rifle that went "boom,"
Halit's mother went to the window,
To the window, and sat on the sofa.
They say Halit was killed last night.
Weep, O mother, weep.

When little Halit was killed,
The news went as far as Shkodra
And from Shkodra to Tirana,
So much wept the unfortunate mother.
Weep, O mother, weep.

When Halit Gerccani was killed
"O dear" said all Pojani.
I swear that
I didn't do it on purpose,
But the wretched rifle slipped.
Weep, O mother, weep.

the son of the famous Bel Canto singer Mihal Ciko, Lola Gjoka Alekski's friend. Zhani Ciko is a child of the Albanian cultural renaissance, and carries it in his heart and mind as a living heritage. He organized the very first performance of Beethoven's 9th Symphony in Albania in the 1970s.

When I spoke to Zhani about the idea of recording all of Lola Gjoka Alekski's song settings, he became very excited. He immediately began working on realizing this idea. Zhani organized a group of great singers including the very well-known soprano Mariana Leka, soprano Erlinda Agolli, tenor Gerald Murraj, and baritone Antonia Zefi, along with Rudina Ciko as pianist. A larger group was formed that included the great pianist Ermira Lefort, the well-known Danish tenor Stig Fogh Andersen, and myself, an Albanian-Danish soprano. Here were the people to transform the recording idea into reality, and we all met in Denmark to carry out the project.

Thanks to Knud Rasmussen, the organist at Virum Church, near Copenhagen, the doors were opened to use the church for our recording venue. Thanks to Stig Fogh Andersen, his son Ask, and his good friend, Heid-

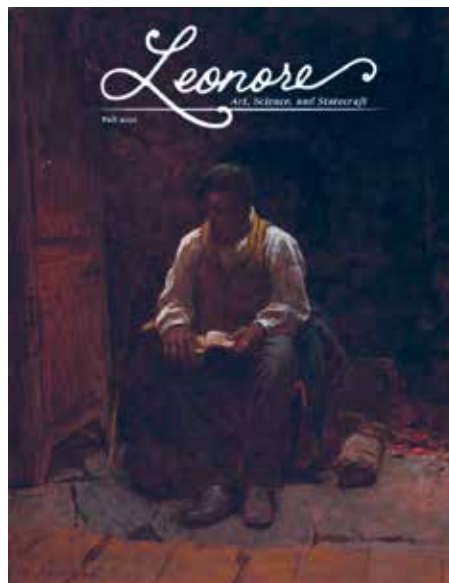
run Beer, we had the assistance needed in making the recordings. With deep thanks to all of the musicians, we succeeded in recording 49 of the songs in less than four days, December 27-30, 2021. The project concluded with our group performing a short concert available [here](#).

This new recording is an historical event, as these arrangements have never before been recorded of Lola Gjoka Alekski's collected songs. A double CD will be available in spring 2022. This will be a treasure given back to the heritage of Albania, but it is also a gift, adding a pearl to the cultural diadem of Europe.

May the CDs be an inspiration for many concerts and cultural exchanges between Albania and nations the world over.

To order CDs, contact Feride Gillesberg at feridegillesberg@gmail.com

The Schiller Institute has just released the second issue of its new quarterly journal dedicated to the creation of a classical culture. The 95-page issue, described below, is yours as a monthly contributing member. Memberships start at \$5/month. Give more if you can. This beautiful journal, written for audiences from 12 to 102, is a map to winning a beautiful future. Failure is not an option.



In this special issue, we take on the question of “What is an Aesthetical Education?” This is an incredibly important and challenging question, but one that must be taken up. We want to examine different people and nations who have either attempted or successfully created this type of educational system.

We have a very wonderful composition for you to work through. Here are a few highlights:

Preview the fall issue [here](#)

Restore Classical Education to the Secondary Classroom
by Lyndon LaRouche

The Cult of Ugliness, Or Beauty As A Necessary Condition of Mankind
by Helga Zepp-LaRouche

Foundation for the Future
by Leni Rubenstein

The Current Transformation of Education in China: Shaping a More Beautiful Mind
by Richard A. Black

A Taste of the Sublime Comes from the Most Unexpected of Places

An Interview with Heartbeat Opera's Ethan Heard

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Have fun! *Anastasia Battle*, Editor-in-Chief, *Leonore*