

# Melancholy of the Horizon



Macedonian plains range from river valleys to hilly plateaus and mountain pastures. A typical summer scene is a pastoral idyll: a flock of sheep, running dogs, summer breeze and a shepherd. The busy sounds of bees, wind, sheep and dogs are transformed into a long, warm, crying melody creeping over the horizon and slowly changing its rhythm and colour. In the wide open space one cannot easily ascertain where the sound comes from. It is the sound of the *kaval*, one of the most typical, almost mythical, instrument played by the shepherds. Once their tunes could be heard on every plain and hillside. Nowadays it is a preserve of the few patient

virtuoso players of folk instruments and ethno music stars, such as the Bulgarian performer, Theodosii Spassov. By playing this mystical instrument, the *kaval*, Spassov became known globally, received prestigious awards, such as the Grammy, and was even described as the best musician from the East. As a tradition, playing the *kaval* is primarily associated with mountain shepherds throughout the Balkans and Anatolia. Researchers point to the origin among the Turkish Yurok tribes spread all over the former territories of the Ottoman Empire. This single-origin theory is, however, hard to accept for the many cultures that have the sound of the *kaval* running in their archetypal veins.

*Kaval* is typically made of wood. A wide

variety of fruit trees, such as cornel, cherry, apricot and plum, can be used for it. Although, as its popularity among amateurs and tourists has grown, metal and plastic replicas are now also available. *Kaval* is fully open at both ends and is played by blowing on the sharpened edge of one end. There are eight playing holes: seven on the front, and one on the back to be played by the thumb.



There are four more intonation holes, which are not covered with fingers, near the bottom of the instrument. They determine the lowest tone's pitch and timbre and improve the tone and intonation. In Macedonia, they are known as *glasnici*, or "giving voice", and in Bulgaria as "devil's holes". According to a folk tale, by drilling these holes while the shepherd was sleeping, the devil wanted to ruin the instrument, so that the devil could then outplay the shepherd in a musical duel. But instead of destroying the tonality of the instrument, the holes enhanced the playing of the shepherd. Thus the shepherd thwarted the devil.

The player holds the *kaval* with both hands at a sharp angle to the body with the four fingers of one hand covering the lower holes, three fingers of the other hand covering the three upper holes, and the thumb – the back hole. The sound is produced by blowing the air into the instrument. The *kaval* performance can have an incredible diversity of sound shades and techniques. The registers are managed by the position of the mouth and the lips on the tip of the instrument. The most characteristic sound of the *kaval* is achieved in the lowest register. It could

sound very mild and gentle if blown lightly, while with a more powerful air stream a deeper sound is achieved. This sound is so outstanding that it has a special name - *kaval*. It is also interesting to notice that the technique of circular breathing is successfully utilized while playing the *kaval*. This technique lets the performer play without interrupting the air flow, while taking a breath through the nose. In the past it was considered an extraordinary skill, while nowadays it is used by more and more young performers. *kaval* is often played in pairs, which is called *ezgija*. The *ezgija* usually consists of a leading player and one who follows. The players position themselves in such a way that they can see each other while playing.

Macedonian *kavals* are typically made of a single piece of ash wood, have very thin walls, and are very light. Bulgarian *kavals* are larger, they are usually made of hardwood in three pieces, which fit together using tenon joints. This allows for some tuning of the instrument by pulling the top joint out a bit. The real, wooden, *kaval* needs maintenance. In order to keep the interior of the wood greased and to avoid distortion it has a special wooden dock (*arbija*).