

Luca Turchet

Folk

Soul



A journey into European
folk music and dances
between the past, the
present and the
future

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between the past, the present and the future

Translation by Jacqueline Derrick

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Cover realised by Luca Turchet and Francesco Amici. Photographs by Nicola Boschetti. The book's author is portrayed intent on dancing a mazurka during a nocturnal "mazurka clandestina" in Padua, Italy in November 2012.

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Translation by Jacqueline Derrick.

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*Music is a moral law:
It gives a soul to the Universe,
wings to the mind,
flight to the imagination,
a charm to sadness,
and life to everything.
It is the essence of order,
and leads to all that is good,
just and beautiful,
of which it is the invisible,
but nevertheless dazzling,
passionate, and eternal form.*

- Plato -

*I praise the dance,
for it frees people from the heaviness of matter
and binds the isolated to community.
I praise the dance, which demands everything:
health and a clear spirit and a buoyant soul.
Dance is a transformation of space, of time, of people,
who are in constant danger of becoming all brain, will, or feeling.
Dancing demands a whole person,
one who is firmly anchored in the center of his life,
who is not obsessed by lust for people and things
and the demon of isolation in his own ego.
Dancing demands a freed person,
one who vibrates with the equipoise of all his powers.
I praise the dance!
O man, learn to dance,
or else the angels in heaven will not know what to do with you.*

- Saint Augustine -

To all the folk souls from everywhere and everywhen

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Note

Everything described in this book is not fruit of the imagination. Any reference to real persons or things is to be considered as absolutely non-coincidental.

Prologue

Dance is the hidden language of the soul.

- Martha Graham -

Gran Bal de l'Europe, Gennetines, 21st July 2010

So dawn is now breaking and the first rays of sun shine timidly onto the dance floor, lightly touching the faces of the musicians and the dancers. The notes and the sounds of their steps intertwine with the chirping of the birds which seem to be heralding the reawakening of nature itself. I glance at the large clock placed up high at the end of the hall: it's gone seven o'clock. We'd been playing music and dancing all night long. I hadn't even noticed. The perception of time changes at balfolk festivals. We'd easily had more than ten straight hours of music and dancing, and the dance floor is still not empty. The last die-hards won't give up and go off somewhere to sleep. I, as always, am one of them. I find myself in the middle of the dance floor playing a Circassian Circle together with nine other musicians from every corner of Europe while the dancers circle around us. As far as I can remember, of the groups of musicians which often form randomly after the festivals' official concerts, this is one of the most successfully assorted I've played in. It's a "boeuf", as we say in folk jargon in French. There's a kind of chemistry between us, it feels as if we've been playing together for a lifetime. I'd only met three of the musicians this very evening, while the others are well known faces I'd come across from time to time on the dance floors of folk festivals around half of Europe.

It's such a thrill to play in these festival boeuf, the magical relationship which establishes itself between musicians and dancers has always fascinated me. As I play, I stop to observe the extraordinary synchrony of movements created between the dancers. I'm sure that any outsider to the balfolk world would ask themselves how they still have the energy for a Circassian circle at seven o'clock in

the morning after such a long night steeped in dancing. It's all a matter of passion, the symptom of the enormous pleasure of dancing, enjoying yourself, of sharing and, at the heart of it, of the will to live. Between one note and another, I enjoy the spectacle which unfolds beneath my eyes. I am overcome by a tremendous urge to dance. After all, I've done my duty tonight, again, as a folk musician at the service of the "trad community". At the end of this piece, I place the hurdy-gurdy carefully in its case and I get up from the chair. But no! The other musicians from the boeuf also want to leave. There's no way the music can end, just when I want to dance. Discontent spreads through the dancers, too, as the musicians' seats are gradually vacated.

Fortunately, a diatonic accordion player decides to stay on. Fantastic! The party's not over yet. He calls out the next dance, a waltz in triple time. I have to hurry to find a partner. I want to dance. Where did that French girl with curly hair go to, whom I danced with earlier? I saw her dancing a few minutes ago while I was playing, but I can't see her any more. I hope she hasn't already gone off to sleep. I look for her, go to see if by any chance she's left by one of the hall doors. In the meanwhile, couples of dancers, men and women, have already formed and the first notes of the waltz flow out of the accordion. In the distance, the crow of a solitary cockerel announces the dawn. As I stop for a moment to savour the mellow sensation which the sunrise never fails to instil in me, I feel a finger tapping on my shoulder. I turn around slowly. It's her! She's inviting me to dance, with her splendid smile and her words uttered in French, which seem so romantic. Who would ever have the courage to say no to those green eyes and those golden curls? I nod with a smile without saying a word. There was no need.

We begin to dance, her hands are warm and her breath is soft and imperceptible. I wonder how she can still have such a delightful fragrance after a whole night's dancing. It's easy to lead her, her body seems as light as a feather and as agile as a butterfly. We understand each other, there's the most incredible harmony between us. It's simply the pleasure of dancing together. With her, I can turn as quickly and continuously as I like, without having to stop every ten seconds. I can see everything whirling around me and, as a thin ray of light delicately enfolds our souls, I catch a glimpse of her long, brightly coloured skirt billowing in twirls, one after the other. The soft sound of our steps which slide rhythmically over the floor, the marvellous music and those twirls lead me into an almost hypnotic state where there's no time for thinking, just for completely letting go. I'd like to ask the wind to take this atmosphere far away, to allow everyone who hasn't yet experienced the beauty of these emotions to feel and enjoy this wonderful folk world. And I wish this waltz would last forever. Play accordion, play, please don't stop.

There are sounds which are able to take us on journeys into dimensions which are situated beyond the logic of comprehending time and space; able, with their energy, to penetrate into the depths of one's being without being enmeshed in the tight net of mental elaboration. Folk music possesses this power. It is born from what exists deep down in mankind, it takes its strength from the rhythms which keep it alive. And, thus, every note and every musical phrase hold within them the secret and the strength of breathing, of a heartbeat and of the bloodstream. Folk music expresses itself in one's body in the form of a dance, but at the same time, it is born precisely from that body's dance, from its natural rhythms and processes. In folk dances, human nature is revealed in its purest essence: energy which pulsates, lives and reconnects each person to another in a primary harmony, rediscovered through the most sincere movements of one's body. These dances belong to every person and speak of every person because they preserve the universal secrets of all emotions. The essence of every emotion expresses itself in its most immediate and true form, and the body, feeling what it's like to be real, rediscovers itself and, in this rediscovery, recognises the other at such a profound level that it is impossible to explain through the logic of words.

Between one step and the next, I happen to glimpse a photographer who immortalises us in his pictures. The waltz comes to an end. Everyone applauds the deserving accordion player. The two of us thank each other for the marvellous moments we have just shared. Meanwhile, my heartbeat slows down and I start to get my breath back. My legs no longer feel tired and a new kind of energy permeates my body. What we need now is one of those wonderful, candlelit mazurkas. The gold of the sun is now colouring the distant clouds pink, and more and more people are leaving the dance floor to go and sleep. The accordion player says he'll play the last dance and that it will, indeed, be a mazurka. Let's hope that she'll want to dance it with me. There's no need to ask her, our eyes, meeting in the flash of a moment, have already decided for us.

We take up our positions, close to one other. She rests her head lightly on my right shoulder, her soft hair separating our warm faces. The magic and the ancient ritual of couple dancing is about to take place once again. Everything is ready now. We and the other few remaining couples of dancers are just waiting for the music to start. And now, the accordion weaves the first notes which timidly begin to make themselves heard through the dancers' chatter. We begin to dance, slowly, on the same spot, with movements which are little more than a simple swaying. Then tiny steps follow and, little by little, moving faster and faster. We follow the music instinctively, using ancient step patterns, but adapting them to our own style. For a moment, this also means consciously stepping out of time, only to then effortlessly step back into the rhythm. I slowly lift her right hand onto my left shoulder to move her closer to me, while my left hand rests

delicately on her hips. Our dance has now been transformed into poetry. Intense and passionate movements, although discreet in their intimacy, fully respecting the space and the integrity of the other.

In my life, I must have danced goodness knows how many mazurkas, but each time, it's always a new adventure, a surprise and a discovery. Even when you're dancing it with someone you've already danced with many times before. I can't see whether she has closed her eyes, her thick head of hair covers her face. But I am sure that she has. She can't be dancing like this with her eyes open, I feel that she's totally abandoned herself to me. I'd love to close them myself, but I may not. The leading partner is always entrusted with the great responsibility of leading. I must say that I envy women for their being able to abandon themselves totally into the hands of their dance partner during a mazurka. Theirs, however, is not merely following passively. Quite the contrary, it is supporting their partner's choices. It is precisely here that a dancer's skilfulness can be discerned.

From the centre of the hall, the perfect sweetness of the solitary accordion's melodies reaches our ears and penetrates like Cupid's arrow into our souls which, step after step, seem to blend more completely into one another. The notes are like drops of love. They tenderly caress our bodies which are no longer two separate entities but two cells of a single organism which move in perfect synchrony and complicity. It's as if time has stopped. It's a triumph of sounds, movements, breaths, heartbeats. An enchanted atmosphere, magic and almost unreal, a dimension which I would dare to define as dreamlike. This is one of those situations to commit to the diary of my emotions.

Little by little, the music slows down and fades, you can almost hear only the sound of the dancers' steps. We also slow down, slower and slower, until we are still. Now the music has finished, but neither I nor she want to detach ourselves from the embrace. As the applause finishes, as the last dancers, tiptoe away, we continue to sway, locked in our embrace, in silence. Finally, I can close my eyes and calmly enjoy all the sensations of that warm, long embrace. Interminable minutes of infinite beauty. Just the two of us are left. Now the dance floor is ours, all ours. We kiss passionately, without uttering a word.

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Thank you to my grandparents and to the older people of my mountains for

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And many thanks to you, dear reader, who by reading this book ensure that my work can be said to be really finished.

This is a book which talks about men's souls. A special type of soul, a "folk" soul. Folk souls find each other. Luca is convinced of this, the twenty-nine year old author and protagonist of this book which lies somewhere between a romance and an autobiography, a manual and an essay. Through the careful and curious eyes of a tireless traveller, encounters, anecdotes, and fortuitous coincidences present the European folk world in all its beauty and authenticity. A world made of music and musicians, dances and dancers, instruments and luthiers, festivals and enjoyment. But also of a heritage of culture and values which the centennial wisdom of the traditions has entrusted to a modern man ever more separated from the community, from nature, and from himself. In the age of internet, of technological progress, and of globalization, talking about traditions, proverbs, dialects, ancient instruments and popular dances might seem anachronistic. However, the messages within these pages will cause you to reflect on how these timeworn practices are alive and how they can lead man towards a path of enlightenment.



Luca Turchet, sound designer, musician and composer, was born in Verona in 1982. After humanities studies at high school, he first achieved a degree in computer science and subsequently a PhD in Media Technology. Parallel to his academic studies, he attended music conservatory classes, graduating in classical guitar and in composition. He currently works as a university researcher in the field of virtual reality and at the same time he has an active concert life as a folk musician.

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