


*Tri Mi Zvezdi* (My Three Stars) is a harvest song sung on breaks from field-work during the hottest part of the day. This recording is from the village of Dyakovo in the Shop region of Bulgaria, sung by Ruska Bozhilova and Anka Balabanova for *The Columbia World Library of Folk and Primitive Music* in 1954. This song is part of the diaphonic singing tradition found in Western Bulgaria, referred to by singers as “songs with bellowing” (*pesni na buchene*: песни на бучене) or “songs with trailing” (*pesni na vlachene*: песни на влачене) (Rice 1980:53). The bellowing or trailing most likely refers to the drone voice, as the singers themselves refer to the role of this voice as to bellow (*buchat*: бучат) and follow (*vlachat*: влачат) (53).<sup>1</sup> The transcription below is only for the purposes of showing approximate pitch in relation to the text, and does not show a time-proportional comparison of the cycles.



The musical notation is a single staff in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It consists of a series of notes and rests, with some notes marked with fermatas. The notes are mostly quarter and eighth notes, with some half notes. The melody is simple and repetitive, reflecting the drone-like nature of the song.

Tri mi zve- di	nai ra- no	gre - yat (yat)
Pur-va gre- ye	do- le pod	se - lo - to
Vto-ra gre- ye	nas- et na	se - lo - to
Tre-ta gre- ye	go - re nad	se - lo - to

This version of *Tri Mi Zvezdi* has four verses, the first verse containing nine syllables, and the rest containing ten. The first four syllables (for example *tri mi zvezdi*, in the first verse) and the next three syllables (*nai rano*), are performed at a loose rate of 74 BPM. The longest durations (the notes marked with fermatas), are said by performers to “ring like a bell” (*zvunyat kato zvuntsi*: звънят като звънци) and as described by Timothy Rice “slide slightly until the desired “ringing” is achieved” (Rice 1980:57). The first of these longer notes (from the first fermata to the first breathmark) has an average length of 4.971 seconds, while the second (the third fermata to the last note of the cycle) has an average length of 12.132 seconds.<sup>2</sup>

The cycles would be considered non-metric by Justin London’s standards (2012) as there is no underlying pulse. Despite this, the durations of complete individual cycles are remarkably consistent and range within 0.918 seconds of each other ([example #1](#) - all verses played simultaneously).<sup>3</sup> This precision raises the question of how the singers coordinate the total durations of each cycle, and within this, the syllables with a long durational value? The answer is probably a combination of syllabic accentuation, shared expectations of the syllabic structure of Bulgarian folk poetry, familiarity with their partner’s singing style, and perhaps breath length.

The stressed to unstressed pattern in the text and the high then low pitch pattern in the melodic line are correlated as shown in the transcription below. The red boxes show the correlation

<sup>1</sup> Songs without bellowing (*pesni bez buchene*: песни без бучене) do not have a drone, supporting the hypothesis that these designations relate to the presence of a drone voice.

<sup>2</sup> The range of the data for the first long duration is 0.393 seconds, and the second being 0.915 seconds.

<sup>3</sup> The durations (in seconds) of the four cycles in sequential order are 30.298, 30.344, 29.380, and 29.578.

between the higher pitch and the stressed syllable within each word, with the blue box indicating the only exception to this pattern.

The image shows a musical score for a song. The melody is written on a single staff in treble clef. Below the staff, the lyrics are written in four lines. Red boxes highlight the syllables 'mi', 'zve', 'di', 'gre', 'ye', 'gre', 'ye', 'gre', 'ye', 'gre', 'ye' in the first line. A blue box highlights the syllable 'ra' in the second line. The lyrics are:

Tri	mi	zve	-di	nai	ra	-no	-	gre	-	yat	(yat)
Pur	-va	gre	-ye	do	-	le	pod	se	-	lo	- to
Vto	-ra	gre	-ye	nas	-	et	na	se	-	lo	- to
Tre	-ta	gre	-ye	go	-	re	nad	se	-	lo	- to

In *The Singer of Tales* (1960), Albert Lord describes a ten syllable pattern of Yugoslav epic poetry as divided into groups of four and six (21). The same syllabic structure is found in *Tri Mi Zvezdi*, and according to Martha Forsyth (an expert in the Shop diaphonic singing style) could be related to the poetry traditions of Yugoslavia (2021). This pattern correlates with the relative durations of each syllable. The longer durational values of *Tri Mi Zvezdi* are found between the fourth and fifth syllables and between verses, emphasizing the four-six syllabic division.<sup>4</sup>

In speaking with Forsyth, she describes how it is very difficult for singers from different villages to sing together. Therefore, familiarity with the singing style of a partner is an essential feature of this tradition, and may contribute to the singers' ability to coordinate the length of the longer notes. One attribute that may relate to this familiarity is breath length. Each singer would know their partner's approximate breath capacity, and could then anticipate the duration of certain syllables. However, this explanation is largely speculative and has no basis in ethnographic research or analysis.

#### Works Cited

Forsyth, Martha. April 21, 2021. Personal Communication.

London, Justin. 2012. *Hearing in Time: Psychological Aspects of Musical Meter*. 2nd Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lord, Albert. 1960. *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Rice, Timothy. 1980. Bulgarian Musical Thought. *Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council*, Vol. 12, pp. 43-66.

<sup>4</sup> These observations take the first verse as an exception, as it only has nine syllables.