

## **OPINION**

by Prof. Dr. Angelina Petrova,

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of the thesis submitted by Tsvetanka Potchekanska,

doctoral student at New Bulgarian University

entitled: Igor Stravinsky and the European Musical Theatre between the Two World Wars - (Renard and Oedipus Rex)

for the award of Doctor's Degree

under Professional field 8.3. Music and Dance Arts

The title selected by the doctoral candidate – Igor Stravinsky and the European Musical Theatre between the Two World wars (Renard and Oedipus Rex) reveals that the study attempts to theorise on musical theatre issues beyond the traditional classifications adopted in 20th century music: her aim is to define the specific role of Stravinsky and his two opuses Renard and Oedipus Rex. I believe that it is not only the desire to formulate a specific theory – namely, that Stravinsky belongs to a certain type of „epic musical theatre“, but also the candidate's own artistic experience in the production of Stravinsky's works that have served as an impetus for the present research (I allude to the staging of Stravinsky's The Soldier's Tale).

The thesis seeks the widest possible philosophical, theoretical, aesthetic and musicological basis and outlines its main theory in two main directions: theoretical and analytical, which are clearly delineated in the study's structure. The thesis comprises an introduction, two sections containing 7 chapters with the respective subchapters and a conclusion – a total of 250 pages, of which 240 pages of text and 5 pages of appendices. The first section (shorter in length) is entitled: Theoretical Foundations and Analysis of Prerequisites for the Creation of Igor Stravinsky's Musical Theatre Works between the Two World Wars and contains three chapters dedicated to general theoretical issues (Chapter One: Presentation of the issues studied. Description of methodology and framework setting. Examination of the reasons behind the changes in European musical theatre; Chapter Two: Transformation and rejection of the existing models in the field of musical theatre between the two world wars; Chapter three: Modernity and its impact on the European musical theatre);while Section Two contains the main analysis of the works, the definition of the epic theatre theory and

the conclusions on Stravinsky's musical theatre works beyond the ballet genre. The respective titles are as follows: SECTION II. The Musical Theatre Works of Igor Stravinsky between the Two World Wars, comprising: Chapter Four: Renard (Bayka) by Igor Stravinsky and the poetics of the montage technique as part of the experimental aspirations of the Russian avant-garde at the beginning of the 20th century. Application of epic principles in Bayka; Chapter five: Evolution and establishment of the epic form in the opera-oratorio Oedipus Rex; Chapter Six: Igor Stravinsky and the European musical theatre between the two world wars. Specifics in manifestation of the epic type of theatricality in the works of the Russian composer; Chapter Seven: The epic essence of the hybrid musical theatre works of Igor Stravinsky The Soldier's Tale, Mavra, Perséphone. Next comes a brief conclusion and bibliography. The latter contains 67 titles in Bulgarian and Russian and 35 titles in German, French, Italian and English. The thesis is accompanied by an Appendix which contains sketches of masks and stage props from The Soldier's Tale production; sketches of costumes for The Soldier's Tale and sketches of stage elements for the same production.

Tsvetanka Potchekanska aims to place the examined Stravinsky works in the widest possible context: from Adorno and the philosophical issues of 20th century music through the interpretation of 20th century theatre concepts, for example those of Shklovsky and Bertolt Brecht, to the examination of these issues in various musicological theses – from Druskin to Carl Dahlhaus. Section One is the result of this pursuit for the widest possible theoretic and aesthetic basis: in its three chapters the candidate examines the parallel processes in music and theatre at the beginning of the 20th century and formulates her theory for the „trend towards the epic“ in musical theatre: “As a process, the trend towards the epic emerges as early as the end of the preceding period and culminates in a series of changes. In short, the trend is related to the onset of general changes in the organization of life provoked by various factors and related to the collapse of the humanistic ideal in art”. (page 7, Abstract). The presence of the epic and various aesthetic concepts from the beginning of the 20th century – those of Baudelaire, Artaud, Meyerhold – are interpreted through the perspective of musicological and aesthetic philosophy theories such as those of Ortega y Gasset, Adorno, Dahlhaus, and, from familiar Russian literature – Druskin.

The second part of the thesis is dedicated to a detailed analysis of Renard and the opera-oratorio Oedipus Rex. In this section the candidate searches for a „theoretic instrument“ to link the

similarities between these two works belonging to different periods of Stravinsky's output, by avoiding and deliberately evading the specific differences in idiom types and musical language – the candidate attempts to unite them through of their inherent dramaturgical features. It is on this basis that she outlines her theory, namely that the examined Stravinsky works are defined by a „marker for an epic type of theatricality' (page 18, Abstract). In Chapter Seven she applies this interpretation of the epic on some of Stravinsky later works – *The Soldier's Tale*, *Mavra* and *Perséphone*.

In the light of the above, the conclusions reached by Tsvetanka Potchekanska in Chapter Four appear most specific and consistent. Starting from the figure of Meyerhold and the balagan view of life – the source concept for the creation of Stravinsky's *Renard* (page 9, Abstract), – she interprets the relation between epic theatre, the dramaturgical principle of montage and distance or irony as the main components of Stravinsky's poetics. In her view: „In *Renard* for the first time Stravinsky embraces the trend towards the epic in the wider sense and applies them to modern dramaturgy and theatre by introducing them, as an experiment, in his musical theatre work: the impact of this unusual, striking dramaturgical structure consists in distancing the audience from the process which prevents its empathy and identification, as the German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus will note in his commentary on the occurring changes (Dahlhaus, 1981: 170) (page 13, Abstract). Regarding the montage principle, the candidate formulates the following opinion: „The use of various approaches, the central among them being montage, can affect all levels of the work. Fragmenting of the roles into vocal and mimic is a clear example in this direction” (page 14, Abstract).

Chapter Five of the second section examines the epic type of theatre as an approach in the interpretation of the opera-oratorio *Oedipus Rex*. The candidate points out the different structure of *Oedipus Rex* as compared to that of *Renard*: „With *Oedipus Rex* Stravinsky rejects the principles of musical drama and reverts to the vocal line, the fragmented structure, the ensembles and choirs with a purely musical architecture and expression, intrinsic to the opera form. At the same time, he combines the opera structure with that of the oratorio in a mixed, hybrid genre which manifests features typical of both forms” (page 15, Abstract). A significant element of the candidate's theory is her interpretation of the „alienation effect” – a term borrowed from Brecht, the interpretation of which is sought in parallel to Brecht's theory but within a wider frame.

Chapter Six introduces important elements of the candidate's theory; from the very first lines she underscores the evident difficulty and uncertainty in identifying a characteristic feature, inherent to Stravinsky's musical theatre works beyond the ballet genre (page 18, Abstract), but, on the other hand, she believes that these musical theatre works can be examined in the light of a wider interpretation of the 'epic theatre' term. The candidate points out that: the loss of the strict determination of the term borrowed from Brecht has been taken into account (page 18, Abstract). This chapter also formulates the concept for an 'epic theatre marker' in the comparison between Brecht and Stravinsky.

In keeping with the wide basis for her theory for the epic type of theatricality, Tsvetanka Potchekanska also examines *The Soldier's Tale*, *Mavra* and *Perséphone*. For *The Soldier's Tale* as an example of musical theatre, she notes: „The unity of montage links transforms the various components into a powerful antipode to the opera concept and, despite the fact that not a single word is sung, there is a strong impression for immersive musical theatre imagery” (page 20, Abstract). The theory for the epic essence of Stravinsky's musical theatre works is also tested on *Mavra* and *Perséphone*, despite the significant differences in genre, contents, writing method and stylistics compared to *The Soldier's Tale*. The candidate's conclusions are as follows: „It has evident that the musical theatre works of the Russian composer Igor Stravinsky can be examined as part of the epic type of theatricality and are indicative of the changes in the author's thinking (page 24, Abstract).

In short, the candidate's theory regarding Stravinsky's musical theatre works combines a theoretical and practical focus related to her director's concept for Stravinsky. In this sense, her contribution is based on the theory that the musical theatre works of the Russian composer Igor Stravinsky can be viewed as belonging to the epic type of theatricality and that: “...they follow the aesthetic principles inherent to the historic avant-garde which the Russian composer ... has chosen and the propagation and manifestation of which is evident in European musical theatre”(page 24, Abstract). The candidate has undertaken this examination with the ambition of examining in detail a great volume of literature and sources and has identified the various types of „fabric“ involved in Stravinsky's musical theatre model. Her work merits recognition, all the more so because very few Bulgarian authors turn to Stravinsky and attempt to study his musical theatre heritage.

Her contribution arises not only from the fact that Stravinsky is relatively rarely staged and discussed in Bulgaria, but also from the introduction of a comprehensive interpretation of the epic in his theatricality as well as the reference and analogy with Brechtian theatre. Her observations and the richness of her analysis provide not only a valuable theoretic premise but may also find practical application in the field of musical theatre, for both directors, in terms of instruments applied in similar works, and for actors.

Of course, every study would benefit from further detailing and expansion: in this sense I would note that perhaps a clearer definition of terms would be beneficial. For example, terms such as „modernism“ have a multifaceted presence in musicological interpretations but also in the interpretations of 20th century theatre and the main aesthetic and philosophical theories of the 20th century. It seems to me that the candidate handles this term very general, while several historiographic studies from the end of the 20th century (e.g., Hermann Danuser, *Die Musik des XX-sten Jahrhunderts*, 1984) make a distinction between „modernism“, „avant- garde“, etc. These are all established musicological classifications from the end of the 20th century. A heightened linguistic accuracy and clearer expression of some the candidate’s concepts would also be a positive development, from which this innovative work would only benefit. The link with Brechtian theatre could also be highlighted, from a practical point of view, by differentiating how it can be applied in practice when working with the complex and composite subject matter of Stravinsky’s musical theatre opuses.

Conclusion: The thesis entitled „Igor Stravinsky and the European Musical Theatre between the Two World Wars“ (Renard and Oedipus Rex) by Tsvetanka Potchekanska meets the requirements to dissertations submitted for Doctor’s degrees: the candidate has achieved an in-depth overview of 20th century art literature and, more specifically, music philosophy and musicological literature. She has formulated a novel concept – for the epic theatricality in Stravinsky’s works – which offers a novel perspective into this emblematic 20th century writer who has served as catalyst for almost all of the multidirectional processes in that century’s tumultuous history. In this light, I recommend to the honorable scientific jury to award a doctor’s degree to Tsvetanka Potchekanska.

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Prof. Dr. Angelina Petrova

