

OPINION

by Prof. Elisaveta Borisova Valchinova-Chendova, DSc (New Bulgarian University), Professional

field 8.3. Music and Dance Arts

of the dissertation thesis submitted by

TSVETANKA GUEORGUIEVA POTCHEKANSKA

Independent doctoral student at New Bulgarian University Doctoral Programme: Music,

for the award of Doctor's Degree

in professional field 8.3. Music and Dance arts

entitled

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

Thesis Adviser: Prof. Dr. Albena Kehlibareva, New Bulgarian University

PRESENTATION OF THE CANDIDATE

The dissertation thesis of Tsvetanka Gueorguieva Potchekanska is the final result of her longstanding research and creative interests in musical theatre directing. The candidate holds a Master's degree in Instrumental Arts (contrabass), Musical Pedagogy and Musical Theatre Directing from Prof. „Pancho Vladigerov” National Academy of Music, a degree in Cultural Studies from the „Neofit Rilski” Southwest University in Blagoevgrad and the Iuav University in Venice (Italy), Master's programme – Theatre (Class T). She has participated in numerous professional directing laboratories and specializations. Her artistic biography lists nine independent projects as director and six as assistant director. Also she has rich professional experience as a soloist musician with the National Opera and Ballet.

THESIS REVIEW

The topic of Tsvetanka Potchekanska's thesis – Igor Stravinsky and the European Musical Theatre between the Two World Wars (*Renard and Oedipus Rex*) is interesting and holds significance for a wide range of professionals – musical historians, directors, performers... The candidate convincingly argues its significance and outlines its research field and methods.

The two selected works by Stravinsky – *Renard* (1916 – 1917) and *Oedipus Rex* (1926 – 1927) demonstrate compositional features characteristic to the musical theatre explorations of the second decade of the 20th century and the period between the two world wars. For Stravinsky, these years fall within two different periods: the first, which saw the birth of *Renard* along with Stravinsky's ballet works *The Firebird* (first staged in 1910), *Petrushka* (1911) and *The Rite of Spring* (1913), is closely linked to folklore and to Russian traditions from which it borrows its musical language. The work is scored for four vocals and seventeen musicians and is based on the popular Russian folktale of the fox and the rooster (its full title is *Tale of the Fox, the Rooster and the Ram*, the French title is abbreviated to *Renard – the Fox*). The composer edited the text on the basis of Alexander Afanasiev's collection *Russian Folktales*, while the French text is the work of Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz. Regarding *Renard's* premiere, the composer notes in his *Chronicle of My Life* that the chamber ballet *Renard* is part of the Ballets Russes and was staged as a double bill with the opera *Mavra*, on 3rd of June 1922 at the Théâtre de l'Opéra in Paris. In other words, although it debuted in the next decade, from a stylistic point of view *Renard* is linked to the 'Russian period' of Stravinsky's music. For this reason, in terms of musical history, I need further argumentation for its inclusion in the composer's explorations between the two world wars which demonstrate very different musical styles.

The thesis is structured into two sections (comprising a total of seven chapters), an introduction, conclusion and three appendices – sketches of masks and stage props, of costumes and stage elements for another of Stravinsky's works, *The Soldier's Tale*, staged in the Italian Malibran Teatro (Venice) and Due Teatro (Parma) by and with the participation of students from the T Class theatre programme, of which Tsvetanka Potchekanska is also a member, together with performers from Teatro La Fenice. Total volume – 250 pages.

Drawing on a huge volume of literature – a total of 104 titles in Bulgarian, English, Russian, French and Italian are listed – Tsvetanka Potchekanska embarks on the ambitious task of performing a multifaceted analysis by tracing the continuity between and innovative creative thinking of composers, poets, directors and philosophers in order to reveal the main trends of the epoch. Albeit debatable at times, her observations make for an original text, presenting a comprehensive opinion, calling on her creative experience as a director.

Such is the overall spirit of the first section of the thesis – Theoretical Foundations and Analysis of Prerequisites for the Creation of Igor Stravinsky's Musical Theatre Works between the Two World Wars with its three chapters: Presentation of the issues studied. Description of methodology and framework setting. Examination of the reasons behind the changes in European musical theatre (Chapter One), Transformation and rejection of the existing models in the field of musical theatre between the two world wars (Chapter Two) and Modernity and its impact on the European musical theatre (Chapter Three).

The Second part – the Musical Theatre works of Igor Stravinsky between the Two World Wars – is central to the thesis. The main premise in the analysis of the two works is that they belong to the 'epic theatre' – Tsvetanka Potchekanska defines them with a 'marker for the epic type of theatre, while differentiating from the existing epic theatre concept outlined in Brecht's theoretic works.' This is in fact one of the main contributions of the text.

As a reminder, the Brechtian 'epic method' is characteristic to the German theatre between the First and Second World Wars (debuting in the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm in Berlin) and is based on the 'alienation effect'. In Stravinsky, as the candidate underlines, the sharp focus on the socio-critical aspect of involvement, typical of Brecht, is absent; other identified differences are the 'epic structure' and 'degree of detachment' in Brecht as opposed to the 'fragmented artistic structure' and 'the topic being revealed as a past moment' in Stravinsky.

The innovativeness and ingenious compositional approach are the 'red threads' allowing an in-depth analysis of the composer's output by identifying the various stylistic characteristics of his works. In this aspect, once again, I remain unconvinced of the extent to which, from a musical point of view and despite the musical and staging approaches employed in its presentation, *Renard* may

be connected to the epic in music – the folktale is a narrative genre while the epos is not simply a story, but a heroic story. As for musical theatre solutions, these can vary. Let us not forget that in his *Chronicle of My Life*, Stravinsky notes the following with regards to the second staging of *Renard*, provoked by Diaghilev's productions (the latter passing in 1929) and his aspirations to be 'more modern': *My last cooperation with Diaghilev was on the revival of Renard for the spring season of Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt. Without passing judgement on the new production, I will only say that I missed the original version, created in 1922 by Bronislava Nijinska...*

Naturally, I followed the candidate's analyses with great interest. As mentioned, *Renard* is analyzed as an experiment of Stravinsky's with 'epic imagery'. As opposed to the 'hybridity' of *Renard* (and *The Soldier's Tale*), the genre of *Oedipus Rex* is 'opera-oratorio'. Its examination is a key element of the thesis. In this case the analysis is convincing – from a historical, substantive, philosophical and theatrical point of view. The synthesis between the opera and oratorio which – and this is no coincidence – has been widely examined and has become a 'genre model' for other musical authors, is used to demonstrate the innovativeness of the composer as the basis for the musical and dramaturgical analysis.

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 serves as a summary of the analyses and observations made, with detailed comments on other works by the composer. In this sense, the chapter acts as both an introduction and a summary which is why I would recommend that its placement be reconsidered in a future publication of the thesis – the definition of the 'epic structure' and the description genre specifics, the analysis of *The Soldier's Tale* and *Mavra* can be presented as the first, theoretical chapter, with the analysis of the two works following as a logical extension, and the summary chapter coming at the end.

The thesis demonstrates the professional precision and independent reasoning of Tsvetanka Potchekanska.

The quoted literature has been introduced and commented accurately and meaningfully.

Tsvetanka Potchekanska has formulated 10 main contributions of the thesis comprising her novel concepts and ideas.

I must note the need for certain modifications in text of the thesis and the Abstract which require some technical editing. In the thesis, the contents could include the titles of the subchapters with the relevant pages and I recommend that these be added.

CONCLUSION

Taking into account the contributions of the thesis, the professional interest and the original opinions of the author, as well as the overall creative experience of the candidate, **I recommend to the honorable scientific jury to confer the degree of Doctor under professional field 8.3 Music and Dance Arts to Tsvetanka Gueorguieva Potchekanska for her thesis Igor Stravinsky and the European Musical Theatre between the Two World**

Wars (Renard and u Oedipus Rex).

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Prof. Elisaveta Valchinova-Chendova, DSc