

## **REVIEW**

by Prof. Dr. ANDA PALIEVA

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of the dissertation thesis of

**TSVETANKA GUEORGUIEVA POTCHEKANSKA**

entitled

**IGOR STRAVINSKY AND THE EUROPEAN MUSICAL THEATRE BETWEEN THE TWO  
WORLD WARS**

**(RENARD AND OEDIPUS REX)**

thesis advisor: Prof. Dr. Albena Kehlibareva for the award of Doctor’s Degree

in professional field 8. 3. Music and Dance Arts

The examination of one of the colossi of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, widely discussed in global musical history and aesthetic literature and the attempt to reach new interpretations of two of his most popular works which have already undergone immense scrutiny from various angles in the course of almost a hundred years, pose a huge and risky challenge.

Tsvetanka Potchekanska embarks bravely on this task, drawing from her own practical and creative experience resulting from numerous specializations and theatrical productions in Italy and Bulgaria. The candidate has had the opportunity to specialize theatre studies at the Iuav University of Venice, to work in various laboratories – the J. Roca lab with the Video Sound Art Festival in San Colombano, the Meyerhold’s Biomechanics lab with Prof. M. Moneta at the Silvio D’Amico Academy in Rome; with Monique Arnaud at the Noh Theatre in Milan; with the Comedy Del’Arte Class at Teatro Atlante in Palermo; with the Dramaturgy Lab of Prof. F. Brambilla at Teatro Paolo Grassi, Milan.

In the course of 14 years (2007 - 2001) Tsvetanka Potchekanska has produced various theatre plays in Sofia (The Thief by P. Hadzhiev at the National Academy of Music) and in Italy –

in Reggio Emilia (Anna, Finland), Solofra (Three Colours of Silence) and, more specifically, The Soldier's Tale in Teatro Malibran in Venice and in Parma. She has acted as assistant-director to John La Bouchardiere on the Operosa project – Don Giovanni by V. A. Mozart; to M. E. Mexia – Spain, for La bohème; to Associate Professor Nina Naydenova for L'elisir d'amore, Don Carlos, The Wizard of Oz and Henzel and Gretel. She has scripted and directed the shorts Sangria, Double Reflection and Eva and has authored a feature film project entitled A Beautiful Day.

Having such rich experience and practical tools in her hands, the candidate is fully equipped to undertake a theoretical reinterpretation of the Stravinsky's musical theatre works created in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In her own words, the motivation behind this choice arises from her work on The Soldier's Tale by Igor Stravinsky (Abstract, page 4). Nevertheless, the object of her study are two other works created, as per the candidate's definition, "between the two world wars" (ibid). By analyzing their dramaturgical specifics, she aims to identify a unifying feature, building on the hypothesis for a common trait applicable to other musical theatre works by Stravinsky as well. (I must note that Bayka, although staged in 1922, was written as early as 1916, during the war, which the composer spent in Switzerland, while the interwar period per se actually coincides with his so-called „Parisian period“, 1920 - 1939).

At a first glance, the two works used as main examples in the study appear difficult to compare/unify. Created in different periods („Swiss period“, „Paris period“), within a different social, cultural and political framework (the mid-war year of 1916, the post-war year of 1927); widely regarded as text-book examples of turning points in the diametrically opposed stylistics of this most versatile of composers – Bayka, based on fairy tales from Afanasiev's collection and described by the composer as a „burlesque to be sung and acted“, is a loud reverberation of the folk fervor of the „Russian“ period; Oedipus Rex, on the other hand, is the emanation of neoclassical stylization of the greatest tragedy of antiquity; the two works use radically different linguistic bases (the original Russian text is translated in French by Charles Ferdinand Ramuz which is why the abbreviated title of Renard has taken hold; in Oedipus Rex, Cocteau's French libretto based on Sophocles is translated into Latin); a vastly different type of stage action (lively dynamics against almost absolute immobility); a different arsenal of tools, of musical and intonational language, etc.

In effect, Tsvetanka Potchekanska has selected two polar opposites in Stravinsky's musical history heritage, on the basis of which she attempts to elaborate her main hypothesis – the assumption for a common trait applicable not only to these two works but also to the highly peculiar and original musical theatre works of the Russian composer beyond the ballet genre, created in the provisional period between the two wars (Abstract, page 4). Undeniably, she has succeeded in removing these works from the familiar theoretic and analytical frame and elevating them onto a higher interdisciplinary plane with a focus on how their novel features are projected and their effect on the development of West European musical theatre /.../. The main supporting argument are the structural changes found at dramaturgical level in the comparison of the two main works (ibid).

The study is divided into two large sections comprising a total of seven chapters, an Introduction and Conclusion and has a total volume of 250 pages – 239 pages of text, 4 pages of appendices and 7 pages of bibliography – 104 titles in Bulgarian, Russian, Italian, English and German.

Section One, which introduces the topic under review, examines the reasons behind the shifts in European musical theatre (Chapter One), the transformation of existing models in musical theatre (Chapter Two) and the impact of modernity on the European musical theatre (Chapter Three). In Chapter One the candidate attempts to justify the relative departure from adopted historical periodization, citing her desire to reach an in-depth, multiplane exposition, in which /.../ the interaction between artistic ideas and concepts will be examined in detail (page 8). In outlining her understanding of periods and boundaries, the candidate defines the boundary between the first two decades as the beginning of a new central period, the end of which she places in the mid-30s, arguing that the two artistic trends – of expressionism and neoclassicism – are gradually exhausted which determines a new border zone in the development of 20<sup>th</sup> century music (page 12). I would like to note that it is precisely in the mid-30s that the masterpieces of the century's „classicists“ are created (Hindemith, Mathias the Painter; Honegger, Joan of Arc at the Stake; Berg, Lulu; Bartók, Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta; Martinů, Juliet; Shostakovich, Katerina Izmailova; Pipkov, Yana's Nine Brothers, etc.), with explicit expressionist or neoclassical features, sometimes both. Expressionistic tragedy is especially prominent in the war years, post- or neo-expressionism

emerges once again in the 60s (Penderecki and others), while the neoclassical concept for the stylization of archaic forms and types of writing stretches over the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century. Periodization is one of the key problems facing music historians, finding ambiguous answers from leading world-class researchers due to the specific stylistic pluralism of the epoch in which polar trends easily cohabit (1912, for example, sees the birth of both Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire* and Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*; while the middle of the second „neoclassical decade“ sees the emergence of Berg's *Wozzeck* – a culmination of expressionist opera) and even interblend. However, this issue is somewhat marginal to the main topic of the study.

In Chapters Two and Three Tsvetanka Potchekanska exhaustively traces the transformation processes in aesthetic thought and art philosophy and the impact of modernity (taking into account the different interpretations of this concept) on European musical theatre, drawing from a wide variety of publications by prominent authorities on the subject. It is in these chapters that the main trends, key to the thesis, are elaborated: the pursuit of autonomy, the collapse of the humanistic ideal in the arts and a strong trend towards the epic in theatre, as well as the concept of game in its various aspects and the issue of the loss of unity.

Chapter Four, dedicated to *Bayka*, offers a comprehensive review of avant-garde aspirations in Russian culture as the creative context in which Stravinsky's innovative views emerged. The new phenomena in various art fields are examined from multiple sides with a focus on the montage principle, the revival of the *blagan* model, the specifics of the Russian avant-garde.

The in-depth analysis of Stravinsky's works along several planes – text, structure (with attached tables), dramaturgical action, music, performance specifics – is especially impressive. The commentary on the different elements of *Bayka* outlines several elements, making reference to the dramaturgical peculiarities of other Stravinsky works and more particularly *Oedipus Rex* – i.e., non-realism, the role of the mediator (narrator/reader) in ensuring distance, the montage of the separate scenes instead of continuity, the phonic interpretation of the text with its fluctuating emphasis, the connectedness to the epic type of theatricality.

In Chapter Six, dedicated to *Oedipus Rex*, the candidate examines the concept of myth in the innovative art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the establishment of conditional theatre and the alienation effect

as principles of epic dramaturgy defining the specifics of Stravinsky's opera-oratorio. She then proceeds to examine the specifics of each element of the work (the changes in the libretto compared to Sophocles' original, the role of the Speaker as a framing element and factor for de-dramatization, the Latin language interpretation, the immobility of the action, the type of décor, the depersonalization of characters through the introduction of masks, the numerical structure, the stylization of musical forms from previous centuries, the neoclassical „work by model“, the symbolism of the musical characteristics of the individual characters, the role of the Choir, timbre dramaturgy), with each element being interpreted through the prism of the presence and manifestation of a new epic dramaturgy (page 136). What is more, Ms. Potchekanska makes an interesting attempt at deciphering, at a higher ethical and moral level, the original tragedy by Sophocles and its musical reading by Stravinsky, once again drawing from a wide, interdisciplinary circle of aesthetic, philosophic, historiographic, philologic, literature and musicological interpretations.

Chapter Six, once again using examples from *Oedipus Rex*, provides a theoretic clarification and summary of the specifics of the epic musical theatre of Stravinsky (as opposed to Brechtian principles) and identifies a marker for the epic type of theatricality (page 189). Its definition allows the identification of a uniform perspective on Stravinsky's musical theatre works (page 191), opening the path to *The Soldier's Tale*, the detailed examination of which, in Chapter Seven, supports the theory for the epic essence of Stravinsky's hybrid opuses. In terms of evidence, this chapter presents, although more briefly, the parodic stylization of the opera-buffa *Mavra* and the melodrama *Perséphone*.

In conclusion, despite some minor notes, I would like to underscore the significant professional value of Tsvetanka Potchekanska's study. She has presented her theories clearly and convincingly, has defended them in an intriguing and absorbing presentation using rich, expressive language and demonstrating thorough knowledge and free, independent interpretation of specific musical material along with competent theoretical understanding. The extensive, multifaceted literature used flexibly and actively within the text also commands respect. The thesis has evident contributions and I believe that its publication (following careful editing) would be interesting and

useful for a wide circle of experts in the field of theatrical dramaturgy, musicology and among performers.

I strongly recommend to the honorable members of the scientific jury to confer a doctor's degree to TSVETANKA GUEORGUIEVA POTCHEKANSKA

9 May 2020

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