

# MUSIC, MUSICAL PERFORMANCE AND THE BULGARIAN RECEPTION OF ATTIC DRAMA

Cleo Protokhristova

This project is the next undertaking in a long-term research sequence, which has been in the process of being carried out since 1997 and the ultimate goal of which is finding, systematising and analysing the facts of the Bulgarian reception of Attic drama. It will be presented later by my colleague Dr Vitana Kostadinova. The object of research is now shifted to the musical interpretations and musical performances of leitmotifs and plots borrowed from the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes. The research team is heading towards a specific phase of the research programme, motivated by facts that are at once interesting and promising, facts which have come as a result of the preceding line of investigation. For the time being we have documented over 20 original compositions and opera and ballet performances carried out in the time since 1937. Among them worth mentioning are ballet versions of *Lisistrata* (Fred Luis, music and conductor Boris Leviev, libretto and director – Boyan Danovski, choreography – Asen Manolov) and *Prometheus* (Beethoven, libretto Salvatore Vagano, choreography Atanas Petrov), the first staged in 1937, the second in 1945, with original Bulgarian choreography.

At this stage we are aware that classical reception in terms of music and musical performances is impressive, especially at the backdrop of other types of reception of Attic drama in Bulgaria.

It is also justified to say that in a number of instances, the cases of this reception are top achievements of the Bulgarian national culture and even they do add a stroke or two to the general picture of the European classical reception in music. A pertinent example is Lazar Nikolov's oratorical opera *Prometheus Bound* (1969) which is considered one of the most significant facts of the Bulgarian musical vanguard. Written in a dodecaphonic key, it was already a strong antiestablishment gesture in its musical nature, since at the moment of its creation dodecaphonism was considered by the

authorities along with different versions of formalism as ideologically unacceptable. Therefore this work was persistently ignored by the official critics but nevertheless gained significant popularity among professionals. The opera was performed occasionally in 1974 in Sofia, Russe and Plovdiv to become the event of the season.

Another point that emerges from the preliminary survey is that there is a number of Bulgarian composers whose engagement with classical drama is permanent. Such are the cases with Lasar Nikolov, who before composing his opera *Prometheus Bound* wrote the music for the staging of *Antigone* at the National Theatre (visiting director Takis Muzenidis) in 1958 and later, in 1973, for the staging of Euripides' *Electra*.

Another similar example is the composer Rumiana Marton, author of three mini-mono-opera versions of *Medea* (*Medea*, 1997, *Medea II*, 1998, and "The Dreams of *Medea*", 1998), who earlier had written the music for the renowned Lyuben Groys' staging of Euripides' "Medea" (1979).

Specific emphasis should be given to the devotion to musical works interpreting themes from classical tragedy shown by Dobrin Petkov, since he was one of the most outstanding Bulgarian conductors from the second half of the twentieth century. Another fact that deserves to be mentioned in the same connection is the *Arabesque* studio of ballet with its permanent interest in the re-interpretation of Greek drama. Their performances include *Medea* (1970, music Samuel Barber, choreography Ralu Manu), *Clitemnestra's Repentance* (1970, music T. Andonio, choreography Ralu Manu), *A' propos Medea* (10.04. 2001, music Boris Dinev and Iliya Alexandrov, choreography Margarita Gradechlieva), *The Birds* (04.06. 2001, music Rumen Toskov, choreography Boryana Sechanova).

Another conclusion that it is possible to make at this stage of the project is that the classical reception in Bulgarian music has a complicated and multifaceted role in the processes of the recipient culture and it is worth mentioning that often it has the functions of an ideological corrective or compensatory reflex. Thus the reception of the classical tragic plots in music appears interesting both in the perspective of its own developments, and in the context of the ideological grounds for the selection of the

theatrical repertoire for the larger part of the studied period of reception (especially from the mid 1940s to the end of the 1980s). It offers intriguing narratives of culture-and-history. Specifically illuminating is the peculiar juxtaposing of the two super-ideologised narratives on *Prometheus* and *Antigone*.

For all the period in question there was a well expressed, almost exclusive preference for these two titles. *Antigone* was staged 9 times. Four of the productions presented Jean Anouilh's adaptation. The preference for this tragedy is easily recognizable if we take into consideration the performances of Jean Anouilh's version of the theme - by far the most numerous in comparison to the productions of other notorious modern paraphrases of classical tragedy (such as Sartre's *The Flies* or Jean Giraudoux's *The Trojan War Will Not Take Place*). This attitude was in agreement with the educational programs in which *Antigone* was included as a mandatory work.

The tendency appears more telling in the light of a possible comparison between the reception of *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex* during the decades of the totalitarian regime. It is apparent that *Oedipus* would be permanently disregarded. The fact is more striking if interpreted in the context of the unprecedented interest in *Oedipus* in the period between 1937 and 1947 when 24 editions of the tragedy were published, based on 10 different translations. An easy explanation for the asymmetry observed here is that in its Bulgarian concretization *Antigone* proved to be open to emphatically political interpretations and was therefore most welcomed.

Similarly, and even to a larger extent, another tragic text - *Prometheus Bound* was subjected to political misappropriation. *Prometheus* was also stabilized as mandatory texts in the National curriculum for high schools. Consequently its plot was subjected to one-track Marxist interpretations overemphasizing the issues of struggle and revolt. Prometheus was considered the uninterrogated "noblest saint and martyr of the philosophical calendar" in agreement with Marx' notorious qualification of Aeschylus' character.

Paradoxically enough the two over-ideologised plays were received in Bulgarian music in drastically different ways. A sort of culmination in the process of ideological adaptation of Sophocles's tragedy to the cliches of communist ideology was an opera

composed by Lyubomir Pipkov and performed under the title *Antigone 43*. In the libretto written by the renowned poets Vladimir Bashev and Pancho Panchev the dramatic conflict was transposed into an episode of the Bulgarian anti-fascist movement.

The production of *Antigone 43* was the result of overarching ambition, supported by the establishment. The facts that testify to this specific intentionality are that the text was commissioned to Bashev and the opera sets were designed by one of the most outstanding artists at the time Ioan Leviev. It was staged simultaneously in the three leading opera theaters. The opening performance in Rousse was on December 23rd 1963 г. (conductor Boris Khinchev, director – Stefan Trifinov). The second one, in Plovdiv, was only a fortnight later – on January 9<sup>th</sup> 1964 (conductor Ivan Marinov, director Khristo Khristov). And it was literally just overnight – on January 11<sup>th</sup> when the opening at the National opera house took place (conductor Vassil Kazandzhiev and director Nikolai Nikolov). In the programs of the three performances we can find the names of leading singers, conductors and directors. In spite of the ambition involved, in all three theaters the response of the public was far from enthusiastic and as a result an anecdotal explanation of the title *Antigone 43* emerged and circulated especially in Plovdiv, namely it was deciphered as “40 rehearsals and 3 performances”.

At the same time, at the other end of the spectrum, the other tragedy that was favored on ideological grounds - *Prometheus Bound* happened to provide one of the most unconventional and anti-establishment forms of reception – namely two musical versions of the paradigmatic plot – Alexander Raichev’s Second symphony entitled *The New Prometheus* (written in 1954) and the Lazar Nikolov’s opera *Prometheus Bound* mentioned previously. The opera was performed occasionally in 1974 in Russe, Plovdiv and Sofia (on March 24<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup>), very much in a portentous parallel with the precedent of Antigone 43. In this case though the performances resulted exclusively from of the personal devotion of a small group of professionals: the composer himself, the conductor Dobrin Petkov, the director Leon Daniel, the actors (among them Naum

Shopov) and the singers (Resa Koleva is to be mentioned here) who had to overcome significant hindrances.

The other composer, Alexander Raichev, used to be much better accepted by the authorities, since he was the author of some of the most popular mass songs propagating the regime. Although he composed his Second symphony in a relatively conformist manner, his work was also officially neglected because it wouldn't fit into the mainstream apologetic tone.

It is not a coincidence that both pieces were conducted by Dobrin Petkov, a musician of strong ethical discipline and artistic independence.

These two cases illustrate how the Prometheus theme that was, along with *Antigone* most determinately misappropriated by the official ideological conventions, evolved into formulas of artistic dissent. Their further contextualization provides also an opportunity for promising comparative procedures which might show that for the period in question – from the late 50' to the 70s' - classical heritage was generally identified as an opportunity for dissent – in one case in terms of unconventional musical compositions, in others, in terms of focusing academic research on classical literature and culture as a form of intellectual escapism.

Considering the possibility of seeing the Bulgarian musical reception of Attic drama in the framework of the European classical reception in music, there is the pertinent example of Andre Bukureshtliev's hymnal mono-opera *Oedipus's Name*. Bukureshtliev composed it in Paris. The libretto was written by Helene Cixous. The opera had its opening performance at the Avignon Festival in 1978 with great success. A concert version was broadcasted by Radio France the same year on May 31<sup>st</sup>. *Oedipus's Name* is among the first opera works that emerged during the revival of the French opera theater of the 1970s. The context in which it was composed is very significant, since it appeared after a long period of time in which no operas were created. Bukureshtliev himself rationalizes the situation in his fundamental study *The Language of Music* in terms of the exhaustion of the genre, the predilection for a more abstract musical language and a new syntax, directing in a different way the instruments

and the voice, as well as the invasion of electronic music. The case is specifically interesting also because this work was created at a moment when in Bulgaria it seemed that *Oedipus* was doomed to oblivion.

Apparently, there is a lot of work more to be done, but the results we have at the moment are promising, they provide a couple of intriguing stories and it is rewarding to find out that the Bulgarian reception of Attic tragedy reconfirms with a considerable number of works a generally expressed tendency of turning Greek tragic themes into music representative of the classical reception during the 1960s and the 1970s.