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The opera repertoire in Bulgaria during the time of socialism

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Abstract. The text examines the changes in the opera repertoire that occurred as a result of political shifts in the state after 1944 and throughout the second half of the 20th century. It traces the alterations in the ideology itself, the attitude towards opera and its creators, as well as in the repertoire. It also examines the nationalization of some troupes, the declaration of others as "amateur", and the formation of opera houses, without the government being aware of what exactly such institutions needed and what problems were associated with all this.

Keywords: opera, art, people's power, socialism, ideology

9 September 1944 found Bulgaria's sole professional opera theatre - the Sofia National Opera - with an extensive repertoire portfolio, which included practically "almost the entire backbone repertoire of the seven Bulgarian theatres after the Ninth of September" (Biks 1983). These titles subsequently continued to shape the habits of performers and the tastes of audiences not only in the capital, but also in the newly established theatres[1]. Gradually, works by

[1] Few new operatic titles were added to the Bulgarian repertoire after 9 September 1944. Among them were Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* (1962 and 1980 in Stara Zagora; 1963 in Varna); works by Verdi, including *Nabucco* (1967, Stara Zagora and Sofia, and later on all other opera stages), *Attila* (1976, Burgas; 1983, Sofia), *Ernani* (1960, Varna; 1983, Sofia), *Macbeth* (1974, Sofia and Ruse; 1985, Varna), and *The Sicilian Vespers* (1982, Sofia; 1990, Plovdiv); Bellini's *Norma* (1972, Varna; 1983, Sofia; 1989, Stara Zagora); Boito's *Mefistofele* (1982, Sofia), Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (1978, Sofia), Tchaikovsky's *Iolanta* (1952, Sofia; 1967, Stara Zagora; 1976, Burgas; 1982, Pleven; 1983, Plovdiv), and also his comic-fantasy opera *Cherevichki* (1950, Sofia; 1977, Plovdiv); Donizetti's *Viva la Mamma* (1982, Sofia; 1988, Ruse). There was a significantly increased presence of works by Rossini, who had previously been known almost exclusively for *The Barber of Seville*: *The Bill of Marriage* (1977, Varna; 1987, Plovdiv; 1988, Sliven), *The Italian Girl in Algiers* (1980, Sofia; 1987, Plovdiv; 1988, Burgas), *The Thieving Magpie* (1980, Blagoevgrad; 1983, Ruse), *Cinderella* (1968, Sofia), and *The Turk in Italy* (1988, Varna).

German composers disappeared from opera house playbills with the exception of Mozart's two comic operas, *The Abduction from the Seraglio* and *The Marriage of Figaro*, primarily due to the humorous nature of their plots. The share of works by Western European and American authors from the 20th century was also relatively small[2]. As Rozalia Biks noted, the new would usually appear farther from the capital, and only after the onset of the so-called "thaw". However, works from the classic repertoire - despite the differences in the productions, or precisely because of them - continued to arouse the interest of connoisseurs and specialists.

In fact, classical Russian operas were equally represented and featured on the playbill long before 1944. The novelty there was the Soviet repertoire[3]. The repertoire of provincial theatres included a number of Soviet operettas such as *Arshin Mal Alan*[4], *Mutual Love*[5], and *The Wind of Liberty*[6], which achieved a good

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[2] *Albert Herring* by Britten first appeared on the stage of the Varna Opera in 1964, and in 1966 it was performed in Sofia, the same year as the première of *Peter Grimes*. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was staged in 1976 in Stara Zagora and in 1982 in Sofia. *The Beggar's Opera* was performed in 1982 in Varna and in 1984 in Sofia. *The Four Ruffians* by Wolf-Ferrari was staged in 1959 in Sofia and in 1982 in Plovdiv. *Porgy and Bess* by Gershwin was performed in 1984 in Burgas. Gian Carlo Menotti was also featured with *The Consul* (1963, Plovdiv; 1987, Sofia), *The Medium* (1980, Blagoevgrad), *Help, Help, the Globolinks!* (1985, Plovdiv), and *The Telephone* (1968, Sofia; 1985, Blagoevgrad). Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* was performed in 1988 in Plovdiv, preceded by *Die Kluge* in 1967. Maurice Ravel was represented with *L'enfant et les sortilèges* (1964, Plovdiv; 1973, Varna) and *L'heure espagnole* (1963, Plovdiv). Richard Strauss appeared on stage with *Der Rosenkavalier* (1969, Sofia) and *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1975, Varna). Leoš Janáček's operas included *Káťa Kabanová* (1973, Plovdiv) and *Jenůfa* (1977, Sofia).

[3] These are works such as: *The Station Master* (1947, Sofia) by Vladimir Kryukov; *War and Peace* (1957, Sofia), *Betrothal in a Monastery* (1962, Varna; 1972, Ruse and Sofia), *The Story of a Real Man* (1962, Ruse; 1967, Stara Zagora), *Semyon Kotko* (1965, Sofia; 1976, Plovdiv; 1977, Varna and Ruse) by Sergei Prokofiev; *Quiet Flows the Don* (1959, Varna) by Ivan Dzerzhinsky; *Dawn* (1961, Plovdiv), *The Brest Fortress* (1967, Varna), *Romeo, Juliet and Darkness* (1967, Plovdiv), and *The Dawns Here Are Quiet* (1975, Ruse; 1976, Sofia) by Kirill Molchanov; *The Gadfly* (1960, Stara Zagora), *The Good Soldier Švejk* (1964, Stara Zagora), and *Aladdin's Magic Lamp* (1984, Stara Zagora) by Antonio Spadavecchia; *Into the Storm* (1959, Ruse) and *Mother* (1967, Ruse) by Tikhon Khrennikov; *Katerina Izmailova* (1965, Ruse) by Dmitri Shostakovich; *The Family of Taras* (1952, Sofia) and *Colas Breugnon* (1977, Stara Zagora) by Dmitry Kabalevsky; *The Young Guard* (1964, Burgas) by Yuliy Meitus; *Peter the First* (1984 and 1997, Plovdiv) by Andrey Petrov.

[4] Operetta in 3 acts by Uzeyir Hajibeyov. Premièred in 1913 in Baku. Bulgarian première in 1953, at the State Musical Theatre in Sofia. This was followed by productions in Stara Zagora, Kazanlak, Yambol, Burgas, Lom, in 1960 in Plovdiv, 1964 in Ruse, and in 1982/1983 in Kardzhali.

[5] Operetta in 3 acts by Sigizmund Kats. Premièred in 1940 in Leningrad. Bulgarian première on 12 March 1950, at the State Musical Theatre in Sofia. Subsequently, productions were staged in Stara Zagora that same year, in 1951 in Kazanlak and Varna, and in 1952 in Lom. Moreover, that was the first operetta staged in Stara Zagora.

[6] Operetta in 3 acts by Isaak Dunayevsky. Premièred in 1947 in Moscow. The Bulgarian première was at the State Musical Theatre in Sofia. This was followed by productions in Lom, Kazanlak (2 productions), Stara Zagora, Rousse, Yambol (2 productions), Varna, Kardzhali (2 productions), and Plovdiv.

success and helped the ensembles master various expressive means. Though performed for a number of seasons in our theatres, these operettas today are almost forgotten.

According to the ideologists of the cultural shift, "Today we can speak of classical achievements in the field of the Soviet mass songs, oratorios, cantatas, and ballet. However, the Soviet opera creation [...] is seriously lagging behind" (Redaktsionna 1951). The lagging of operatic creativity even in the USSR came to demonstrate that issuing decrees alone was not enough to produce an opera - particularly one that was required to meet the Party's expectations and ideological requirements, such as the inclusion of contemporary subject matter and the promotion of re-education in the socialist spirit, and so on. The assessment continued: "For our Bulgarian composers and writers, the issue of the operatic libretto is even more pressing than for Soviet composers" (Redaktsionna 1951). Although operas successfully performed in the past such as *Gergana* and *Tsveta* were mentioned, their "gross ideological and dramaturgical errors, which lead to distortions of Bulgarian life, of relations between Bulgarians and Turks, etc.", were immediately highlighted. Operas like *Kosara* and *Altsek* were evaluated as "obviously formalistic operatic works [...] in which even superficial depictions of daily life are absent" (Redaktsionna 1951, 3). The following were mentioned by name: "...Veselin Stoyanov (*Kingdom of Women* and *Salambo*), P. Vladigerov (*Tsar Kaloyan*), L. Pipkov (*Yana's Nine Brothers*)", with the remaining productions falling under the label "some absolutely insignificant operatic attempts of some other Bulgarian composers"[7]. The problem was the opera libretto, "which must give historical righteousness for the particular moment, reveal the fundamental driving forces and class contradictions". Instead, the librettos focused on "not the real relationships between people, but separate palace intrigues, family ties, anecdotal episodes mixed with a considerable dose of mysticism and **pornography**" (Redaktsionna 1951).

The creation of an opera, operetta, or ballet libretto was commissioned by the Repertoire Bureau at the Committee for Science, Art and Culture (Komitet za nauka, izkustvo i kultura - KNIK) to a librettist, but only after they had submitted a completed application. Then at a meeting of the Bureau - but without the participation of representatives from any opera theatre such as a director, dramaturge, or composer - the proposed text was discussed. If the Bureau approved it, the process proceeded to selecting a composer who would be commissioned to write the new musical stage work. The author himself noted that "the usefulness of such discussions, without experts in opera, is not particularly great", since it became necessary to subsequently hold "new meetings with specialists from the opera theatre, composers, etc., and make new

[7] There is a deeply troubling impression left by the constant rejection of the past and the achievements of previous generations - both Bulgarian and foreign composers are neglected, thus severing the connection, continuity, and respect for those who came before. It is later acknowledged that many seem to work solely for their own self-expression, "as if everything begins with them". It is safe to say that such behaviour is a consequence of belittling and underestimation the accomplishments of their predecessors.

changes to the dramaturgy of the libretto". The result was endless revisions, without ever arriving at librettos that were ready and suitable for production: "Neither the libretto for *Ivaylo*[8], nor that for *Indzhe*[9], after almost two years of revisions, are suitable for musical adaptation. Not because of anyone's ill will - on the contrary, there was a desire to create operatic librettos - but the methods likely need to be changed". It was concluded that "the opera theatres themselves must take a more direct role in the creation of the new Bulgarian opera" (Redaktsionna 1951, 4-5). All the more that this should occur after the theme had been approved by the Bureau (naturally, by the clerks working in the Bureau (!), but now with the participation of various specialists who understood the stage realization of a work: "the librettist, together with the future author of the music, and in the closest cooperation with professionals such as directors, conductors, and vocalists from the opera theatre, as well as composers and musicologists from the Union, should begin work on the creation of the new opera" (Redaktsionna 1951, 5). It was acknowledged that our, the Bulgarian, creative organization was still far from standing on its own feet, both ideologically and organizationally. While some discussions had yielded positive results, the participation of "musicologists in the discussions of new musical works, in the specific and principled articulation of the pressing issues of new Bulgarian music" was insufficient. Their persistence was inexplicable, as well as that of some composers. However, the most "uninterested and undemanding" towards its members was the section of performing artists, which was unable to convene "more than half of its members for even a single meeting". "The extremely low criterion for admission to this section", the lack of educational and ideological-political work, and of creative life in general in this section, necessitated its radical restructuring. Even the "attempts of the section's leadership to start concerts combined with discussions among its members turned into laudatory "jubilee celebrations" from the very beginning" (Redaktsionna 1951, 4-5). It was noted that critique had not yet been established as a serious, authoritative factor, that "our critique professionals are young, ideologically far from being firmly established" and they "need help to grow" (Redaktsionna 1951, 4-5).

That the young critique professionals in 1951 were "ideologically far from being firmly established" is beyond doubt, especially given the constant shifts in the Party line, and mainly because of the fear of making mistakes: a trait that Bulgarians would continue to cultivate throughout the entire period of

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[8] The first stage performance of *Ivaylo* was almost a decade later, on 13 February 1959, at the Sofia Opera, conducted by Asen Naydenov and directed by Dragan Kardzhiev. Marin Goleminov made a statement: "*Against the background of a historical reality, I have also aspired to a purely psychological human drama, which originates from the clash of two different worlds, the Bulgarian and the Byzantine...*" (Biks, Yaneva, Karakostova 1999, 59).

[9] The statement was made in 1951. *Indzhe Voyvoda*, an opera in five scenes and a prologue by Boyan Ikonomov on a libretto by Pavel Spasov, was not staged until 9 October 1969, at the Stara Zagora Opera House - nearly two decades later. And that happened to be its only staging (Biks, Yaneva, Karakostova 1999, 82).

totalitarian rule. Criticism, however - well-established and serious - existed even before 9 September 1944. Not only did it exist, but every work or performance was subject to discussion, and within a far broader circle of intellectuals: architects, engineers, doctors, lawyers, writers, artists, actors, and even officers and priests (Stanilov, Vatova (sast.) 2005). The pages of the periodical press also featured reviews of various performances on stages in Western Europe - often published just days after the event itself.

The article concludes with calls for an accelerated pace of creative restructuring, based on the broad application of Soviet experience and Party directives, in order to create "real creative conditions for the comprehensive rise of the new realistic Bulgarian music", just as in the Soviet Union they were "clearing the way for the creation of classical Soviet operatic works" (Redaktsionna 1951).

Since the beginning of the 1950s, however, both in Stara Zagora and in other theatres, despite the imposed plans and Party directives, Bulgarian operatic creation had been increasingly seen as a burden, except for some of the musical stage works by Parashkev Hadjiev and *Bulgarians of Olden Times* by Asen Karastoyanov. Artistic and directorial councils would hold their meetings, figuring out what their specific theatre had the capacity to stage, what they might possibly put on, how and with whom - but first, they had to receive approval from the Ministry[10]. It was not uncommon for a production that had not appeared among the plans and projects submitted for approval, nor in the minutes of the discussions, to be staged in the following season. It simply appeared. Moreover, no documents can be found explaining how the decision to stage it was reached[11], and we are not even talking about the approval of a production concept or realized stage achievements.

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[10] Unfortunately, only a very small portion of the minutes from the meetings of directorial and artistic councils has survived. When such documents have been deposited in the State Archives, they are mostly from the late 1960s to shortly after the mid-1970s. They were processed in the form in which they were submitted - that is, with pages from both directorial and artistic councils intermixed and mechanically following the pagination of the archival units. Moreover, individual pages and entire periods are missing. Among the surviving documents, there are also illegible pages - carbon copies, but often fifth or sixth duplicates.

[11] Some years ago, studying the Stara Zagora Opera House, I came across data concerning the première of the opera entitled *Batak*, dated 3 July 1976. The listed credits were: conductor Dimitrov, chorus master B. Popova, and set designer P. Ruskov. I began asking questions. No one had heard of such a title. And we were still working with colleagues whose entire lives had been spent in that theatre. A few days later, the music librarian, Nikolay Mihaylov (may he rest in peace! - he was a hereditary artist; his father had sung in the opera chorus even before the theatre was nationalized and had taken on small roles as well; Nikolay Mihaylov himself had spent his entire working life as a violinist in the orchestra and, now retired, continued to work as a copyist and music librarian), called me over and, quite sternly, explained to me that he remembered, but the title was not *Batak*, it was *Legend of Batak*, and the composer was Mihail Pekov. Alright, but why was a set designer listed? Well, there was one because it was a "staged oratorio"! They prepared it, sang it once in Stara Zagora, then went to Veliko Tarnovo, and presented it

It should be noted and it would be fair to say that back in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, quite a few Bulgarian titles were staged in our opera theatres - significantly more than after 1989[12]. "But how many operas by Bulgarian composers were rejected? How many opera houses sought out their author, worked with them, and how many authors took into account the capabilities of a given theatre and together looked for a way forward, towards modernity?" (Biks et al. 2015, 123).

The slogan reading "**art to the people**"[13], also borrowed from the USSR (Ivanov 2009), explains the development of music in Bulgaria after World War II, when it became clear that many new orchestras and opera theatres would be created and maintained in order to cover the territory of the country with professional ensembles. And all of this was justified in the name of the "**cultural needs of the people**".

What are the **cultural needs of the people**? Despite the care shown by the people's government, already in the early 1950s the problem of half-empty halls began to emerge. The poor attendance was "the result of a reshaping of the socialist intelligentsia"[14], because in the traditional opera repertoire, "the music is not at the musical level of our general audience, but is music for

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there too. It was apparently a joint effort with the Tarnovo company, in connection with some commemorative event - most likely the 100th anniversary of the April Uprising: Batak, 1876-1976. And that was that. An order from above - since the composer was a member of the Bulgarian Communist Party... Had this document been discovered only yesterday or the day before, hardly anyone would have been able to say anything about a title that was not even fully written out. The title in question is included solely in the list of premières printed in the commemorative album *80 godini Starozagorska opera* (*80 Years of the Stara Zagora Opera*).

[12] Over the reference period, works by Bulgarian composers such as *Nestinarka*, *Momchil*, *Ivaylo*, and *Yana's Nine Brothers* were staged, while *The Night before Midsummer Day* and *Khan Krum Yuvigi* received their first performances outside the capital. The Ruse Opera House was the first to stage *The Deer Kingdom* by Konstantin Iliev, *The Spotted Bird* by Simeon Pironkov, and *The Year 893* by Parashkev Hadjiev. It also mounted memorable and thrilling first productions outside Sofia of *Tsar Kaloyan* by Pancho Vladigerov, *The Painter Zahari* by Marin Goleminov, as well as *Khan Asparuh* and *Alarm* by Alexander Raichev.

[13] "'*Art closer to the people*'. *That was the Party's command. Accopanying the Sofia Philharmonic, we went to perform a concert with Konstantin Iliev at the Kremikovtsi Steel Complex, in the cold rolling mill. Ghiuselev was the soloist. We played Beethoven - I don't remember which symphony it was. Inside, the noise from the machines was monstrous. We couldn't even hear ourselves playing, and Kotseto was furious. The audience consisted of maybe twenty people. When Ghiuselev started singing, a window slammed open and a worker shouted: 'Pesho, come see how that bloke's singing! F*cking hell!' We collapsed over our stands laughing, and after the concert Ghiuselev said: 'That was the greatest recognition I've ever received'*" (Comment by Nanko Dimitrov on Andrey Avramov Andreev's Facebook post, 12.03.2024).

[14] A formulation by Simeon Fetvadzhiev, conductor, recorded in the performance logs of the Stara Zagora Opera House.

people with higher musical culture"[15, 16]. The rulers flattered themselves (with this being constantly pointed out) that they had done far more for the cultural development of the people than all previous governments. Indeed, they opened theatres, founded orchestras, built cinemas, and organized lecture series - "people's universities"... Yet they themselves only entered the opera house when absolutely necessary[17]. Not a few of them had completed only a second or third grade of schooling, yet they were fully aware that "the Communist Party[18] demands of artists [...] to create deeply moving, understandable for the people, ideologically clear works that would support the victorious march towards communism" (Melamed 1963, 70), and, quite brutally - taking advantage of the "right of the powerful of the day" - they issued various demands in an ultimatum-like fashion. However, with demands and orders alone, the halls do not fill.

The consequences of the "extremely poor condition of music education in general schools" (Biks-Dyakova 1960, 12-13) in the 1960s did not take long to manifest themselves: "audiences in opera houses and concert halls diminished. After all, where was such an audience supposed to come from? No one was preparing it, no one was teaching it taste or cultivating an attitude toward musical art" (Biks-Dyakova 1960, 12-13).

A new initiative was emerging - pre-performance or pre-concert lectures designed to introduce the audience to the music, plot, and other aspects of the work being presented. According to Rozalia Biks, the role of these lectures as popular musical universities was significant for the overall education of the people, and especially of the youth. She also shares her surprise: her expectations were that musical interests would rise where there was a vibrant concert and theatrical life, i.e., in the largest cities, but "the sincere, undisguised interest with which the audience in some very remote towns" responded provoked respect and inspired the lecturer to do everything in their power to involve the audience in the purpose for which they were sent. She also recounts the experiments she conducted among high school students - regarding operatic arias, in which the text is of particular importance, as well as the instrumental works and the explanations she provided. Her conclusion is that "the people need musical

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[15] Central State Archives of the Republic of Bulgaria, f. 354, inv. 1, a.u. 314, ff. 65, 69, 70, 71; cited in: Dimitrova 2004.

[16] Mass taste can also be gauged from the performances presented on stage during the first district amateur arts review in 1948, which included: "...*symbolist exercises such as beating caterpillars, whitewashing tree trunks, hoeing and fighting the cutworm...*", etc. (cited in: Elenkov 2018, 81). The very fact that someone conceived and staged it, someone else approved it, and a third person documented it is telling enough.

[17] The review published in a local official newspaper, signed by the Party leader Ivan Mechev, sounds almost anecdotal. Following a première of *Eugene Onegin*, he listed the official guests, the performers, and noted that he presented them with flowers on stage - but what he liked the most was the 'Nanny'. The 'Nanny', however, is not one of the protagonists in *Eugene Onegin*, and does not even have a single aria...

[18] Until the 9 September 1944, the Bulgarian Workers' Party (Communists) counted with 13,700 members and just 40 days thereafter, the list of members was 4 times longer, and by 15 February1945, their number was 251,591 (cited in: Isusov 1978, 39, 42).

education; that music in its initial stage of acquaintance with the listener, requires explanations. Even if those explanations contain some "self-conscious writing", i.e., an attempt through words to evoke specific associations in the listeners" (Biks-Dyakova 1960, 12-13). And more: "What is necessary is a link or a bridge. And this bridge [...] is just the lecturer's high-level, comprehensive and encyclopaedic culture. The lecturer is supposed to deal with the whole art, with literature, in general with the entire spiritual culture of the people, who has created one or another of the musical works performed" (Biks-Dyakova 1960, 12-13). Rozalia Biks dares to reject as a poor option the inclusion of different types of music (Biks-Dyakova 1960, 13) within the same concert (after the Soviet model[19]), and that was as early as in 1960![20]

According to the assessments made, the overall state of the genre is ultimately "not good [...] notwithstanding some very good, even bright achievements in various Bulgarian opera houses. This has not been the case just since yesterday or the day before. In my view, today we are seeing the projection of causes going back 20-30 years... roughly the length of time that the one-sided direction of the repertoire has been repeating itself" (Biks 1983, 64).

Throughout the entire period under review, problems were also reported with the material resources of the theatres (buildings, equipment - stage, sound, lighting, etc. - as well as musical instruments and sheet music, workshops, and so on) and with staffing (an insufficient number of directors, choreographers, set designers, and dramaturgs), as well as with the completion of ensembles (singers, ballet dancers, choirs). Vacant positions in orchestras and one-sided and/or inadequate training of singers were repeatedly mentioned. The situation led to contracts being signed with the Conservatoire[21], with the theatre's management monitoring the development of the students, offering contracts to selected ones, and providing them the opportunity to prepare their first roles in collaboration with their teachers. However, it should be noted that this could serve as an incentive only for a few - for those born and raised in the smallest and most remote settlements. The reason was that contracts with a respective theatre for recent graduates of the Bulgarian State Conservatoire were also linked to obtaining residency rights[22]. Naturally, the aspiration of all was toward the

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[19] *Aesthetic omnivorousness* is a term found in Rozmari Statelova (Statelova 2016, 134-135), where it refers to the blending of serious and entertaining performances, i.e., Soviet-style variety shows with the inclusion of ballet numbers, operatic arias, literary recitations, humour, popular and folk songs, and even sports displays, as well as the cohabitation of amateur and professional variety-satirical performers and bands on the same evening, on the same stage (cited in: Zhunich 2020, 59-60).

[20] Hardly anyone in the upper echelons of power, on whom this truly depended, had ever given it any thought! The matter is that at the end of the 1960s, the programme of the December Music Days - 1969 was constructed in a similar way (see Zhunich 2020, 90-91).

[21] The Stara Zagora Opera House made such an attempt in the late 1970s (Nenov 1977).

[22] During the totalitarian regime in our country, many people would even get married just to secure a right of residence in another city. In the later years of that period, a new fashion emerged: marrying a foreigner - for similar reasons.

larger cities and the more prestigious stages. After the expiration of the relevant contractual periods (for the theatre's scholarship holders) and state assignments, the artists would leave the respective city and seek for jobs in the other Bulgarian theatres, and from about the 1970s and afterwards - even abroad.

To go abroad, a number of documents were required - character references from the Trade Union Committee, approvals from the management, and so on. The directives of the Ministry stipulated that permission to go abroad should be granted only to artists of advanced age[23]. Yet Bulgarians had already become skilled at circumventing laws and regulations. A number of folders of personal files contain, first, a refusal for travel abroad for work, then papers arranged for a trip with a group of amateur artists or with Balkantourist (the Bulgarian state travel agency) somewhere in the Eastern Bloc, and immediately thereafter a request to resign from the theatre. In fact, Bulgaria had a financial interest in such tours, since a high share of the payment to Bulgarian performers abroad was withheld for the benefit of the state[24].

Tours used to involve composers, critics and entire ensembles, though less often. Yet the reviews arising from the comparisons of Bulgarian productions quality and those abroad were not in favour of the former[25]. There is another noteworthy fact: in the West, the technical level of any production is consistently high, even Japan is proud of productions staged several decades ago, which have endured for hundreds of performances. Conversely, in our country, despite a significantly longer rehearsal period, at the second or at the third show at most, the level starts to fall (Biks 1983, 71-72).

A problem (and not the only one!) for the Bulgarian opera theatre proved to be the frequent turnover of management. New directors did not feel in any way obliged to keep promises and arrangements of their predecessors occupying previously the same positions[26].

Against the backdrop of all these problems, it became clear in the 1970s that Bulgaria's economy was not doing well. The slogan launched by the Party "An

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[23] State Archives - Stara Zagora, f. 47, inv. 2, a.u. 5, all folios (126 in total); also, in: Donev 2012.

[24] Tours were arranged by the Bulgarian impresario agency "Sofiaconcert", which used to have "*monopoly right to conclude international contracts in the fields of music and theatre. [...] Profits, if any, would go to "Sofiaconcert", which meant to the State Budget, respectively...*" (cited in: Donev 2012, 50).

[25] "*...in the West, a production can be mounted in just two weeks. The conditions there are completely different - financial, organizational, and so on - and above all, they involve engaging personnel, who know their parts perfectly, who have been all across Europe and worldwide with those roles and may easily adapt to any new production ideas. By contrast, the process in our country usually starts from scratch - especially when staging new works, though not only then*" (Biks 1983, 68-69).

[26] Maria Kostakeva provides an example thereof: "*...'Bustle' by Vladimir Panchev had got to the pre-rehearsal period at the Blagoevgrad Opera House. It sank somewhere after the change of the management. And what happened to the production of 'The Little Prince' by Rumen Balyozov on the TV? Not to mention the 'Prometheus Bound' or 'Chatterers' by Lazar Nikolov. And how many more...*" (see Biks 1983, 71-72).

Economy That Is Frugal: A Duty for All" began to have its impact even on our theatres, despite Lyudmila Zhivkova's patronage to the arts and culture. There was a visible decline following her death and by mid-1980s, in particular. "The valuable benefits, i.e., the secured positions of theatre artists turned into an almost insurmountable obstacle. Troupes were worn down by the irremovable ballast that had been accumulated under the mighty protection of the Labour Code. Unequal ensembles and productions cooled interest in the performances and the genre itself" (Biks et al. 2005, 372). Widespread crises in the genre were also occurring beyond Bulgaria. Yet in the West, opera was an element of social prestige for the wealthy and middle classes, whereas in Bulgaria it was not. Initiative existed and was tolerated in the West; here, it had been killed. Generations had changed, Bulgarians from the 1980s had been taught that "the state must take care of everything". Meanwhile, the state increasingly withdrew from the obligations, which, after 1944, had been all seized, obsessed and focused entirely in Sofia. The successive attempts to merge theatres and orchestras to economize by reducing staff only served to create further divisions and pit people against each other. With the fall of the regime in 1989 and the formation of dozens of political parties, the political "performances" would prove to be far more attractive than the already scarce-grown opera productions.

Results of the totalitarian rule

1. A multitude of symphonic orchestras and a network of opera houses were established outside the capital city aimed at re-educating the masses. However, troupes and orchestras already existed before the September 9th coup, even though it was later instilled that the "people's power" had created everything.

2. Nationalization of the already existing formations, including symphonic orchestras, opera troupes, etc., also brought the renaming thereof and the time of their existence was reset to zero. But it is common knowledge that "a large tree grows from a root. On a small root, only weeds grow" (Vedar 2021, cited in: Ivanov 2023, 302).

3. State funding and the constantly imposed changes had largely annihilated initiative and entrepreneurship of the artists as "there is a state, there is someone to make decisions".

4. The idea of charity was stamped out. Yet it was precisely thanks to charity that "the spirit of the nation" had been elevated already during the National Revival period. By the end of the 1980s, when the topic of patrons was raised, the artists themselves considered it unserious and did not believe it could happen in Bulgaria, let alone they could set off for seeking and convincing businessmen to become patrons.

5. Criticism and self-criticism, elevated to a cult, degenerated into fault-finding and, above all, mutual deception, led only to a loss of respect - toward the qualities of others, toward their work, their achievements. This mutual deceit - whether about the fulfilment of the "five-year plan", the number of tickets sold or performances staged, the amount of materials used or visitors counted, even the number of seats in the hall (!) - became an established social norm, a model of behaviour. Just as writers close to the authorities began to withdraw the print

runs of their own works from the market and send them for pulping, only to release a new edition months later in order to earn a state distinction, so too in the theatres decent productions were "scrapped" so that, with minor and mostly "cosmetic" changes, new ones could be mounted - thus fulfilling the required number of premières per season on the one hand, and "absorbing funds" on the other.

6. Under the category of "cunning" also fall the dedications - a newly written work could be dedicated to a congress or an anniversary of a party event in hopes of having it staged, or this could be the case of an interesting and valuable work from the world art treasury. Over time, our descendants will be quite bewildered as to what connection *Manon Lescaut* or *Thaïs* could possibly have with the Bulgarian Communist Party's April Plenum or with the next in line party congress.

7. The attitude toward Bulgarian music-theatrical creativity as a whole also changed. While at the beginning of the 20th century the entire community would gather to welcome Maestro Georgi Atanasov to their town, after the political changes the "life" of a Bulgarian work on stage (with negligible exceptions) became very short, mostly because of the "lack of interest".

8. Opera is an elitist art form which for many years had carried rather negative nuances (the very word "elitist" was used as an insult), and the "people's power" never truly embraced it - though it did "listen" to artists who spread Bulgaria's vocal fame, albeit outside Bulgaria[27]. The impossibility for people to travel and study freely abroad led to the "loss" of many Bulgarian talents, declared "non-returnees" by the regime - such as Boris Christoff, Anton Diakov, Michail Svetlev, to mention a few, who, fortunately, despite everything, continued to spread Bulgaria's singing glory around the world, and their dignified conduct deserves admiration. Thinking also changed, even at the highest levels: any singer who had settled abroad was deemed "more valuable" than the one who chose to return. This, in turn, influenced public opinion and audiences.

9. Very favourable conditions were created for the development of amateur artistic activity: hundreds of musical, music-theatrical, and dance groups and schools engaged thousands of children and workers; cultural centres (chitalishta) were built, often better equipped and outfitted than the professional institutes of musical stage arts. However, in the conditions of the imposed regime for travelling abroad, preference was given to the amateurs, as many party functionaries were among them - mainly because of the benefits of these participations, such as the longed-for foreign tours. Instead of involving amateurs in the art of professional ensembles, this placed them in opposition. In order to travel abroad, professionals in turn joined the amateurs' tours. Thus, the artificial division of "professionals versus amateurs" was created.

10. The enforced total centralization led to the concentration of the intellectual elite in the capital. This caused another division: Sofia versus the province, meaning that anyone who was not a "citizen of the capital" was ranked as a lower category (whether artist, lawyer, doctor, or simply a person).

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[27] Like Boris Christoff, Nicolai Ghiaurov, Nicola Ghiuselev, and many others.

Despite upheavals of every kind, despite the rejection of artists and their works, despite the bans and the neglect of our professional opera ensembles (in favour of amateur, popular, and variety performances), opera nevertheless survived. The immortal masterpieces outlived dictators and revolutions, coups and ideologies. That is precisely why they are immortal.

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