

# OPINION

On the competition for acquiring the academic position *Associate Professor* in music studies and music art (history of popular music), professional direction 8.3 *Music and Dance Art*, published in State Gazette issue 65/12.08.2022

With candidate Senior Assistant Dr Mihail Todorov Lukanov

by Prof. DSc Kristina Yapova

Mihail Todorov Lukanov has dedicated his academic activities to a field in Bulgarian musical culture that falls in the wide sphere of “popular music”. A serious and thorough researcher, with interests that go beyond his chosen field, he holds several professional qualifications - those of musicologist, composer, and philologist. Fluent in English, he is also a lecturer in that language, as well as a certified translator-editor, something that makes him an extremely valuable contributor to the Institute, especially to its publications, foremost among them the journal *Bulgarian Musicology* mainly due to the need for English-language texts and translations.

In the title of his monograph *Music at the Bulgarian Circuses: Historical and Theoretical Aspects*<sup>1</sup>, the key habilitation work in the competition provides a clear indication of the importance of this work, which will be defended unequivocally as its exposition unfolds. Among the distinctive qualities of the text, I will first draw attention to the topicality of the subject, which has not been the focus of Bulgarian studies of music history. I will then highlight the *approach* that presupposes the in-depth study of the topic, placing it on the levels of history and theory with the irrevocable interaction between what has been achieved on these levels, allowing its full consideration. And third, but not least, comes circus as a multifaceted phenomenon, a synthesis of so many different practices and techniques that even resist divisions as artistic/sporting (acrobatic), manifesting a wide range of characteristics in human nature.

This is the reason why music in the circus plays a much more important role than it may seem at first glance. It not only accompanies, illustrates, or enhances visual perception, but itself anticipates, guides, directs, expresses meaning. And if these capacities refer to music, or to music as an object, even greater is the role of that music of live action created by musical *subjects* - the creators and performers, the musical artists. As Mikhail Lukanov notes in the Introduction to the monograph, during the period from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the late 1980s, the "circus practice existed in a creative 'symbiosis' with musical performances, providing the artistic setting to the performances" (p. 12); this was "also the period in which the circus

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<sup>1</sup> Lukanov, M. *Music at the Bulgarian Circus. De Artibus Monographiae № II*, Institute of Art Studies, BAS, 2020, ISBN 978-954-8594-80-6, 200.

projected itself as an essential means of mediating music in social space" (ibid.). Thus, it also becomes clear 'why the circus' - as the title of this Introduction puts it: because the significance of musical practice and musical practitioners in several areas of Bulgarian musical culture has for about a century been higher than academic musicology's interest in them.

Hence, the author's goals are more distant than those related to the chosen phenomenon: "The text aims to highlight the general picture of musical performances on the circus "scene" in Bulgaria in terms of history, key figures, and ensembles and to seek generalizations about their place in Bulgarian culture. Although the circus arena stimulates manifestations mainly from the sphere of popular music, the research interest is not limited to them due to the breadth and uniqueness of genres that found a place in the circus" (ibid.). These aims are specified in six responsibly selected and precisely defined tasks: "a theoretical examination of the nature and specificities of music in the circus"; "tracing the emergence and development of some circuses in Bulgaria through the prism of the musical presence in them"; "searching for data and deriving generalizations about various musicians, musical formations and their performances at home and abroad"; "offering reflections on the intersections between circus, music and the comic"; "making sense of essential aspects of circus art with respect to virtuosic performances in the arena through examples of foreign and Bulgarian musicians"; "analyzing the ways in which music functions in the context of circus performance and influences Bulgarian culture" (p. 12 - 13). I would like to draw attention to one of them, which seems to get lost among the others, insofar as it is considered implicit in any academic work: it is the third one, concerning the collection of factual material. Every researcher of Bulgarian musical culture has encountered the typical phenomenon, which can be expressed in three key words: inertia, disinterest, or complete absence of cultural memory. Therefore, to search out, systematize and summarize what has been searched out with great effort is an enormous contribution both to science and to our culture in general.

The methods adopted in the study are just as precisely chosen. To the main ones - diachronic and synchronic, music theoretical and historical, localized in the Bulgarian context - are added other, less traditional but quite necessary ones, such as para-music approaches, close to cultural studies, semantic analysis, historiography, and anthropology (p. 13). The well-established practice of interviewing various musicians is also present. The text possesses a logical structure, such as characterizes all of Mikhail Lukanov's articles and studies, a distinct algorithm in researching and bringing the results to knowledge, and a rigorous syntax of exposition that makes it eminently readable. Moreover, the appendices, the photographic material, and the collected sound- and video-recordings add to this readability and attractiveness adequate to the subject itself.

Moving on to the contributions, I would first of all highlight the novelty of the research, consisting above all in the creation of a vivid and multi-colored picture of the phenomenon of "circus music"/"music in the circus" with the fullest possible disclosure of its both objective and creatively subjective aspects (here I am referring,

for example, to the "musical idiomatic" during the so-called "circus parade" or "musical clowning", a variety of clowning in the circus).

The richness of the genre spectrum of music in the circus is too great and cannot be traced briefly, more so because it is presented in an exhaustive manner, as the subsections of the first chapter "Circus Music or Music in the Circus" (pp. 20-29) and "The Bulgarian Context" (pp. 29-31) show. And those in Chapter Two, which have a distinctly historical focus on the Bulgarian situation, and which start from the beginning, i.e., from the time of the circus's emergence in this country, to focus on the first and subsequent circuses (pp. 34, 36, 39), have a contributory character in the context of Bulgarian music and musical culture, but also on general musicological issues of creativity, performance and the interaction between the two. The same historical focus distinguishes the subsections on the upward development of circus music from the late 1930s (pp. 44-47) and the mid-1940s (pp. 47-56). A serious consideration of the subjective side of the problem of "music in the circus" is demonstrated in Chapter Three with the eponymous title, which focuses on various formations and ensembles, as well as on the personality and role of the conductor. After outlining the development in the composition of formations, mirrored both globally and in Bulgaria - a 'minimalist' composition at first, represented by a single instrumentalist, and gradually growing to include brass and woodwinds as well as percussion instruments - the author moves on to consider two important themes. The first of these is 'jazz in the Bulgarian circus' (p. 62), a topic of particular gravity as it allows rays to be drawn from the circus to the broader issue of the reception of jazz in our musical culture in general. By outlining the music-theoretical, historical, and cultural context, the author has prepared us for the presentation of significant leaders of musical ensembles who have devoted their professional lives to music in the Bulgarian circus. Here the names of Bozhidar Sakelarov, Stefan Kovanov and Georgi Bakardzhiev stand out.

Of course, the issue of repertoire is central to the study of any musical formation. Mikhail Lukanov develops it with precision, and I would even say meticulously, if that word did not have a slight negative note creeping into it. On the contrary, I consider the study of repertoire to be one of the greatest contributions of the author's work. More so given that it is in the repertoire that trends, musical vocabulary, and stylistic features from a variety of genres and types of music are combined, mixed and fused. Among the monograph's concentrically expanding thematic circles is the one devoted to the topic of "Touring Abroad" (chapter 4, pp. 73-86), further evidence that circus music was one of the hot spots in musical culture during the period under review. Chapter 5, "Musical Clowning" (pp. 87-102), is itself the attractive point in the development. It is about the "musical analogue of circus clowning", which "involves comic sketches (so-called interludes or reprises) with an increased presence of the musical component, i.e., singing or playing instruments. The musical performances in this case are an integral part of the construction of the comic character, which also determines the particularities of music-making" (p. 87). Lukanov's historical and geographical excursions paint before us an impressive picture of this genre with its genealogy, modifications, and exemplars. The video

archival materials retrieved by the author make anyone who has seen and heard them gasp at the stunning virtuosity and mastery of our musicians. That is why it is worth mentioning the names of the Bulgarian musical clowns Kosta Kertikov (Kertika), Cesar Imbrosh (Lolo), Penka Ivanova-Silagi, Todor Kozarov and Hristo Yanakiev, Kiril Dimitrov (Koko), as well as the "Bufosynchronisti" formation, the musical eccentrics "Harizanovi" and "Kulpetetisti" (pp. 87-101). And the chapter "Virtuosity and the Circus" (pp. 113-123) is distinguished by a proper virtuosity in its exposition and an enviable ability to approach in words the fundamentally ineffable impression of the performance of virtuoso musicians.

The conclusion presents clearly and concisely the main conclusions, systematizes and summarizes the results, lists the different functions of music in the circus, outlines its main characteristics, draws connections to a number of other forms of performing arts, and opens a new direction - the direction of what is about to happen in Bulgarian musical culture, especially with the entry of electronic technologies, but which is not able to destroy "the dynamic relationship between the *circus, live music and theatrical arts*" (p. 128).

Mihail Lukanov continues to research, develop, and deepen his knowledge of the problems related to his chosen field in the science of music. All the accompanying publications in the competition show that these complex problems allow the musicologist, possessed of a keen eye and mind, to extract and process the valuable deposits they hold. I would divide the publications themselves most conventionally into those that put the lens on personalities - Miljo Bassan and Assen Ovcharov - and those that develop theoretical issues such as those of musical creativity, virtuosity, and the circus arena. A specialized topic concerns the source publication "Gramophone Records in the archive of the Institute of Art Studies. I will also highlight the author's latest article, "Schlager Music in Bulgaria and Romania in the 1920s and 1930s: Comparative Analysis" which will be published soon in the Almanac of the National Academy of Music "Prof. Pancho Vladigerov", year 14 (2022). This article, which I had the pleasure to read, confirmed my conviction of the research character of its author, searching for and entering new thematic niches, but also remaining faithful to his chosen problem space in the science of musicology. Lukanov actively participates in scientific forums with papers that arouse strong interest in the audience (the titles are listed in the relevant reference).

Based on my assessment of the merits of the main habilitation thesis and the accompanying publications, as well as my personal impressions of the candidate's professional qualities, I recommend the Honorable Scientific Council of the Institute of Art Studies to elect Senior Ass. Dr. Mihail Todorov Lukanov to the academic position of *Associate Professor*.

Prof. DSc Kristina Yapova

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