

In memoriam:
Vassil Kazandjiev
(1934 – 2026)

We have lost Academician Vassil Kazandjiev – composer and conductor, the last of the artists we regard as founders and consolidators of New Music in Bulgaria.

Vassil Kazandjiev belonged to the generation (yes, the generation) that experienced the blows of the storm of the 1950s, brought by the Zhdanov decree, but established its own positions and, to a significant extent, made sense of the relatively brighter decades after the April Plenum. He was from the generation (yes, the generation – even if it is only the two of them with Ivan Spasov) that unfolded in our country the idea of New Music from the area of twelve-tone technique to modality, sonorism, and open forms; the emblem of his work from these active years of establishment became his extremely individual approach to the idea of folklore and the Middle Ages, to the old Bulgarian church music as compositional material¹. "Divertimento" (1957), "Complexi sonori" (1965), "Symphony of Timbres" (1968), "The Living Icons" (1970), "Pictures from Bulgaria" (1970), "Triumph of the Bells" (1972), "Festive Music" (1972) – all of them and many others of his works remain iconic for Bulgarian music from the dark times of socialism. All of them build the social weight of the figure of Vassil Kazandjiev.

And together with them – his conducting presence, which passed through the Sofia Opera (1957 – 1964), the Sofia Soloists (1962 – 1977), and the Symphony Orchestra of the Bulgarian National Radio (1979 – 1993). The reasons for a conductor to acquire such serious social significance are (instinctively) clear to the audience and difficult to analyse by research-

¹All of them – together with his own reflection on them – are brilliantly examined in Milena Bozhikova's monograph (**Bozhikova**, Milena. Vassil Kazandjiev. Sofia: IAS, 1999).

ers (it is a complex combination of charisma, conducting technique, rehearsal strategies, knowledge of music, repertoire behaviour, and many other qualities). Ivan Drenikov defines Vassil Kazandjiev as an “effective conductor”, taking into account his behaviour on stage – achieving the greatest possible energy emission with an extremely collected and specific manual technique and preventing emotional and physical excess; he even compares him to Pierre Boulez. Vassil Kazandjiev himself – speaking of the *techne* behind this effectiveness – often talks about the long and punctual rehearsals (the excerpt with the Sofia Soloists on YouTube is only a tiny illustration of the efforts in the constantly necessary building of an ensemble? style? culture? in our country), straining and unnerving the orchestral players as he felt it; he accepts the attention to detail as inherited from Konstantin Iliev and – more – from Dobrin Petkov. And then, in reflections on the essence of conducting, he defines his own interpretations as close to the romantic line². This combination leads to many memorable performances – “Mathis der Maler” by Hindemith, Symphony No. 5 and the oratorio “King David” by Honegger, Missa Brevis in D by Britten, Concerto for Piano and Orchestra by Georgi Minchev, Prokofiev’s Third Piano Concerto with Anton Dikov are just some of them; Kazandjiev’s recording of “Sinfoniae Sacrae” by Giovanni Gabrieli with the Sofia Soloists in his transcription remains amazing to this day, even with the serious changes in our auditory attitudes from the sheer volume of period-performance recordings! Not to mention the fantastic recordings of “Divertimento Concertante” and “Symphonies for 13 Strings” by Lazar Nikolov and how many Bulgarian works have been inspired and brought to life by this ensemble.

The teaching of conducting at the Academy of Music actually came late, in 1985³. Or on time; when experience and authority were already indisputable. His ability to teach his students, and not to format them in his own image and likeness, is clearly demonstrated by the figures and their performances today – Rossen Milanov, Pavel Baleff, Hristo Hristov, Dian Tchobanov, Grigor Palikarov, Guerguan Tsenov, Yordan Kamdzhali.

In recent decades, the reverence of his later students for the teacher-conductor has turned into piety for the composer Vassil Kazandjiev. The association of their names with his was a statement of seriousness in their involvement with music, a declaration of responsibility towards Bulgarian creativity. The living contact with a person who drank deeply of the brilliance of Konstantin Iliev, of the strict radiance of Dobrin Petkov, of the depth and contemplation of Lazar Nikolov, of the immediate invention of Pancho Vladigerov; with a person who worked and was

² Again, in Milena Bozhikova’s book.

³ Until then, he was only allowed to teach the subject “Reading and Playing Scores”; I am not aware of any teaching of composition.

friends with Boyan Lechev, Petko Radev, and Milcho Leviev and was able to talk about all this for a long time and in a captivating way, was an indispensable bridge through the times for the young musicians. And in him, this contact activated the teaching instinct, and he turned his work into a means of introducing them to the New (the serious? the real? music). Thus, in the new millennium, five new symphonies⁴, concert pieces for chamber ensemble⁵, seven string quartets⁶, an impressive number of sonatas (at least 15 for piano, one for two grand pianos, and 9 for an instrument and piano)⁷, and a difficult-to-grasp number of pieces for various instruments and chamber ensembles appeared⁸. Almost all of them were intended and dedicated to specific young performers.

⁴ Symphony No. 4 "Nirvana" (2000), Symphony No. 5 "Lux Aeterna" (2006), Symphony No. 6 "Cascades" (2017), Symphony No. 7 (2018), Symphony No. 8 (2021).

⁵ Konzertstück for ten instruments (2009), "Virtuoso movements" for piano and string orchestra (2022), Konzertstück for violin and string orchestra (2023).

⁶ String Quartet No. 3 (2002); No. 4 (2010); No. 5 (2013); No. 6 (2014); No. 7 (2017); No. 8 (2019); No. 9 (2020).

⁷ The enumerations below are incomplete and with uncertain dating – I present them only as a general picture. For the works until 2012, the information is based on the appendix in the monograph of Georgita Boyadzhieva-Nikolova (**Boyadzhieva-Nikolova**, Georgita. *The Chamber Works of Vassil Kazandjiev for an Ensemble of Strings, Wind Instruments, and Piano* (1968 – 2007). Sofia: NMA "Prof. Pancho Vladigerov", 2019), and for the later ones – on my unsystematic following of concert life in recent years: Sonata concertante for flute/piccolo and piano (2001); Sonata for bassoon and piano (2007); Sonata for oboe and piano (2007); Sonata for violin and piano (2008); Piano Sonata No. 2 (2009); Piano Sonata No. 3 (2010); Sonata for trombone and piano (2010); Piano Sonata No. 4 (2010/2011); Piano Sonata No. 5 (2011); Sonata for tuba and piano (2010/2011); Sonata for viola and piano (2011); Piano Sonata No. 6 (2012); Piano Sonata No. 7 (2012); Sonata for double bass and piano (2012); Piano Sonata No. 8 (2013); Piano Sonata No. 9 (2013); Sonata for two grand pianos (2016); Piano Sonata No. 13 (2019); Piano Sonata No. 14 (2019); Piano Sonata No. 16 (2022); Sonata "The Magic Forest" for alto saxophone and piano (2025), etc.

⁸ "Kaleidoscope" for clarinet, cello, and piano (1999); "Esoteric Variations" for piano (2000); "The Song of the Dolphin" for cello and vibraphone (2001); "Moments" for violin, viola, and cello (2005); Trio Sonata for clarinet, cello, and piano (2007); "Sequences" for guitar and cello (2008); "Lyrical Intermezzo" for vibraphone and harp (2008); "Duo Concertante" for viola and cello (2009); "Duo Concertante" for violin and viola (2010); "Monologues" for solo cello (2010); "Aphorisms" for flute/piccolo and tuba (2011); "Dialogues" for flute and horn (2011); "Concert Fantasy" for flute/piccolo, horn, marimba, and cello (2011); "The Four Temperaments" (2021); "Hope for Ballet" for piano and three ballerinas (2022); "Concert Piece" (Konzertstück) for horn and piano (2023); "Elegy" for three violins, viola, and double bass (2023); "Impromptu" for clarinet, bassoon, trumpet, and viola (2024); Piano Trio (2024); Poem for clarinet, cello, and piano (2024); Nocturne and Scherzo for cello and piano (2024); Quartet for cor anglais, piccolo, bass clarinet, and contrabassoon (2024); Concert Piece for wind quintet (2025/2026), etc.

He had wisely accepted his fully deserved position as a living legend and did not hesitate to uphold firm positions (for example, his demonstrative departure from the Union of Bulgarian Composers in 2013 was significant). He was aware that even the mere presence of his name was a guarantee of the meaningfulness and viability of any endeavour, and he provided it willingly and with care. Such was his constant support for the musicologists at the Institute of Art Studies.

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We bow our heads to his work and memory!

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