

# OPINION

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On **Kalina Tomova’s** dissertation

## **The English Carol in the Context of the Fifteenth-century Vocal Repertoire: Genre, Characteristics, Techniques, Interactions**

(supervisor: **Assoc. Prof. Yavor Genov PhD**)

In her dissertation, Kalina Tomova directs her research interest to a relatively underdeveloped topic in musicology, which has provoked the interest of contemporary musicologists in recent decades - the subject of genre features, distinctive immanently musical characteristics and the specific place in the polyphonic vocal repertoire of Renaissance-era English carol. The studied in detail genre is defined quite definitely by the PhD student as a “*a specific phenomenon in Western European musical practice*” (p. 191) in the period in question (specifically the 15<sup>th</sup> century). Kalina Tomova derives this statement as a general summary based on the objectives of the dissertation, methodically explored in the text and stated by the author in the introductory section: “*to delineate the place of fifteenth-century carols in the context of the polyphonic song repertoire of the period, not only in England, but in Western Europe as a whole; to demonstrate the uniqueness of the genre as a distinctive musical phenomenon by outlining the interactions between carols and other similar genres; to revise the fragmentary knowledge of the musical features of these songs by adding new findings concerning their notational and compositional techniques*” (p. 5). Along with the objectives thus set, in the introductory section of her work Kalina Tomova clearly defines the subject and object of her research and introduces the main scientific statements on the issues related to the genre, citing both the most recent specialized musicological literature on related issues to the topic under study and the fundamental works of prominent scholars from the older generations of 20<sup>th</sup> century musicologists. Here it is also worth mentioning the respectable number of titles (mostly in English) of the literature used, which functions quite adequately as a scholarly apparatus in the dissertation, gradually introduced not only in the introductory section of the text, but also in each subsequent chapter with regard to the thematic aspects discussed, in order to

serve as a solid foundation for the overall conception of the genre constructed by the dissertator.

In the first chapter of her study, Kalina Tomova places the genre under study in a broad musical-historical context so as to highlight the specific place the genre occupied among the Western European repertoire of the fifteenth century. The main tasks of the sections in this chapter are the discussion of the typological characteristics that distinguish the carol from similar genres as an “*indigenous English phenomenon that has no exact counterpart on the Continent*” (p. 18), and the detailed discussion of the genre's heterogeneous social functions, making the establishment of unambiguous genre boundaries for the carol a particularly problematic research endeavor. I find the research procedure undertaken by Kalina Tomova in this endeavor ingenious and fruitful - turning to the immanent-musical characteristics of the genre. In the chapter in question (in section 1.3.) she approaches the problem initially from the compositional features characterizing the English musical idiom in the historical period in question (such as the so-called English discord and the typical English improvisatory technique of the *faburden*), finding that all of these can be noted in examples of the carol genre from the period under study. On the basis of this observation, the author defines the genre as “*embodying all the features of English polyphonic practice that distinguish it from that on the Continent in the fifteenth century*” (p. 31).

Kalina Tomova defends this assertion with detailed argumentation in the third chapter of her study, in which she comments extensively and with acute research insight on the typological compositional features of examples in the fifteenth-century genre - from the melodic language and rhythmic profile (with a particular focus on meter-rhythmic issues in relation to syncopation in multiple examples) to the specifics of contrapuntal texture and the peculiar solutions in the treatment of dissonances. With this detailed and multifaceted exposition of the characteristics of the genre musical idiom, accomplished on such a scale of comprehensiveness for the first time in the specialized literature, the chapter emerges as one of the most contributory in the study.

I also find the second chapter of the dissertation to be particularly rewarding, in which Kalina Tomova focuses on the notational features of the examples in the genre repertoire and the difficulties in deciphering them, mostly related to the interpretation of notational points and the compositional techniques of syncopation that are symptomatic of the genre's solutions. The dissertator considers the uncovering of notational issues in carols as a necessary foundation for insight into the specificities of the repertoire, especially in addressing issues

not previously discussed in the specialized literature concerning rhythmic irregularities in solutions in the genre. Kalina Tomova's detailed analytical discussion of the syncopated rhythm that characterizes the genre repertoire is also set in the context of the theoretical thought of the period (the 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries) in order to illuminate the unresolved issues in contemporary musicology on this subject. In addition, the dissertation convincingly demonstrates the inaccurate use of the term *punctus syncopationis* in the writings of Willi Apel, which had a profound influence on generations of twentieth-century researchers. With scholarly courage, she also arguably questions the previous scholarly acceptance of methods for notating syncopated rhythm.

Kalina Tomova conducts all her observations on the basis of an enormous amount of analytical work with the primary sources of the samples in the repertoire. Moreover, the dissertator offers her own transcriptions of all 119 examples from the fifteenth century that have been preserved and recorded as music - transcriptions that have been made on the basis not only of a subtle knowledge of the peculiarities of mensural notation, but also of a thorough reading of a number of music-theoretical treatises of the period (all 119 transcriptions are presented as an appendix to the dissertation).

It is also important to note that in her text the author tries to adhere to the relevant authentic for the music theoretical thought of the Renaissance era terminological apparatus, as well as to respect the conceptual framework of the development set by herself.

In addition to the qualities and important contributions of the dissertation thus listed, it is necessary to note some shortcomings of the study, which should be corrected upon its eventual publication (which I strongly recommend). Prevalent among them concern the correct use of language and the mastery of the scholarly style required for the genre of the dissertation.

In the text, the use of a number of irrelevant foreign words (with their established literary analogues), which entered the Bulgarian speech through the mass media and especially from the advertising industry, is forced. Examples of this are the words used by the dissertator, such as: "*innovative*" (p. 25) and "*innovation*" (p. 34), "*dissemination*" (p. 33), "*compounded*" (p. 38), "*indicate*" (p. 64), "*inspired*" (p. 69).

There are also inaccurate and even distorting translations of the meaning of words from quotations from English-language sources, such as the translations of *purging* as *clearing* (p. 34), *resolution* as *conclusion* (p. 40), *bizarre* as *absurd* (p.

49), etc. In the eventual publication of the work in Bulgarian, I recommend that a thorough editing of all translation fragments included in the text be carried out.

Both the imprecise use of certain terms and the introduction of neologisms with unclear meaning are puzzling in the study. I assume that this is the result of the strong linguistic influence on the dissertation of the English scientific literature used and the inability of the author to find the right concepts in Bulgarian to correctly convey the ideas introduced in the dissertation from the cited scientific studies. Examples of this are expressions such as “*manifestation* [the emphasis here and in the following quotations is by me] *of the English manner*” (p. 38) instead of *expression*; “*self-recognition* [себеприпознаване in Bulgarian - such a word is impossible in Bulgarian] *in English society*” (p. 50) instead of *self-awareness*. There are also word combinations where (again due to influence from English) prepositions are omitted, which leads to a change of meaning. An example of this is found in the following quotation, “*the French fixed forms... that dominate the Western European vocal tradition*” (p. 57).

I find the substitution of well-established, accurately translated music-theoretical concepts in the Bulgarian language, such as *not consummate consonants*, with the phonetic transcription of their English analogues (“*imperfect consonants - thirds and sixths*” - p. 27) absolutely unjustified and untenable.

From a linguistic point of view, I also consider the repeated use of the phrase *carol repertoire* in the dissertation to be extremely problematic, revealing not a very good knowledge of the grammatical specifics of the Bulgarian language, as well as (again!) a bad influence from English. In Bulgarian, phrases such as *song repertoire, motet repertoire or chorus repertoire* instead of *the song repertoire* etc. are unthinkable. Of this order is the grammatically incorrect phrase *carol repertoire* used in the text.

It is irrelevant and absolutely unnecessary in a musicological dissertation to explain basic concepts and genre definitions (such as *isorhythm* - on p. 24, *mensural notation* - on p. 71, *conductus* - on p. 26, *balata/ballad* - on p. 57, *lauda* - on p. 59, etc.) that are taught in general courses in the discipline of music history at educational institutions such as the National Academy of Music.

The study is also notable for the presence of a nagging methodological contradiction in view of Kathleen Palti's position, introduced in the text and adopted as a formulation by Kalina Tomova, which makes a valid criticism of earlier studies (by Green, Robbins, Harrison), which in turn propose essentially progressivist theories “*to establish a straightforward history of the genre's*

*origins*”, driven by an aspiration “*to discover a single ancestor of the carol*” (p. 14). However, in the following sections of the text, this perceived critical stance towards progressivist views is continually suspended by statements revealing Kalina Tomova's progressivist-influenced thinking. Such statements are: “*the chronology of **general developments** in the musical context of this [the fifteenth - b.m.] century*” (p. 17); “*the **progress** of musicological understanding*” (p. 17); “***the development** of the musical idiom in England*” (p. 21); “*the last stage of **the development** of the English polyphonic school*” (p. 21); “***the development of the compositional idiom** on the island over the course of the century*” (p. 22); “*the very name 'English discordant' passes through many **stages of development***”; and much more.

I also find particularly puzzling the repeatedly stressed differentiation of the Bulgarian musicological community from the international one, as well as the irrelevant, unethical and inaccurate (from a professional point of view) statements such as “*the introduction of the principles and rules of mensural notation is of key importance for ensuring wider accessibility to the musical sources from these centuries for Bulgarian musicologists, who until now have been working with edited editions when studying the works from these centuries. This approach further hampers even the few studies in Bulgarian on Western European music of the period*” (p. 70). I will take the liberty of reminding the honorable dissertator that Bulgarian musicologists use English (and often other foreign languages) and that those among their colleagues who are interested in the relevant thematic area and issues today have free access to a number of specialized resources (including a vast amount of digitized primary and secondary sources) with which to develop their research.

Also - the insistence on “*private contributions to Bulgarian-language science*” (p. 193) is untenable. The dissertation (in view of its genre definition) is supposed to make contributions to the world, not simply to popularize knowledge already introduced into scientific circulation among a specific local specialized audience, which anyway has access to modern scientific discoveries and innovations. In this respect, the claim that the dissertation “*reveals for the first time in Bulgarian-language literature the ways in which the uniqueness of the genre is manifested*” (p. 191) is irrelevant.

But in spite of the criticisms thus made, taking into account the undeniable qualities and the available proven scientific contributions (in the international context) of the dissertation, and also in view of the successes already achieved by the PhD student (international publications and national awards), I express my

opinion with firmness that Kalina Tomova deserves to be awarded the educational and scientific degree of Doctor.

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Signature:

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