

REVIEW

On the dissertation of Kalina Nikolaeva Tomova on the subject
**ENGLISH CAROL IN THE CONTEXT OF THE FIFTEENTH-CENTURY
VOCAL REPERTOIRE: GENRE SPECIFICS, TECHNIQUES,
INTERACTIONS**

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Kalina Tomova's dissertation is dedicated to a not that well known and not much studied subject: the *carol* song genre. This name was introduced into Bulgarian language by the author of the dissertation with a well-considered and appropriate choice - a phonetic transcription according to its English pronunciation. The carol, this specific English musical phenomenon, is subject to the most comprehensive possible study in the thesis in terms of music history, music theory, special notation, genre-specificity, etc. The fact that a number of these aspects have not been developed in the musicological literature worldwide imposes its own requirements: the selection of questions and topics, the clarification of methods and of the general theoretical framework must always be subjected to an important professional measure. They need to be in line with what is known on the one hand to narrow specialists, on the other to music theorists working in different subject areas, but often also to be consistent with what is well known in the musicological community. These requirements are also reflected in the structure of the dissertation, in the logical sequence of the problems treated, in following the principle of contextualization and recontextualization of the phenomenon under consideration.

The basic text of the dissertation is organized in an Introduction, three chapters and a Conclusion (194 pages), to which is added a Bibliography with 194 titles in English, Latin, German and Bulgarian, as well as 29 manuscripts and 10 CDs. At the end there is an Appendix of 198 pages. I mention the appendix separately to highlight its value from the outset. Far from being merely illustrative material, it is even more than a necessary reference for a musicological text to the analyzed music examples. In content, these are new transcriptions, made by the author, of all(!) the 119 songs under consideration. It is, therefore, a process of interpretation that can only take place once serious results concerning compositional techniques have already been reached, a process that thus reflects and authenticates those results.

After introducing the most general characteristics of the *carol* and with the awareness that this genre has been underdeveloped theoretically, the Introduction makes important clarifications about the terminology used in the work. These are extremely important and have a contributory character in their own right, insofar as they create a system that allows the study to gain the necessary clarity and intelligibility. First, the definition "English" used in the work "for the purpose of naming the geographical

origin of the songs and as such is used for the entire corpus of carols, which includes the macaronic exemplars (those that mix English with Latin) as well as those entirely in Latin" (p. 4) is stipulated. Also important is the specification of the time frame on which the study focuses: it is the fifteenth century because of the "monolithic homogeneous musical expression and form that characterize the repertoire" of that century (pp. 4-5). The aims and objectives of the dissertation are not only listed, but the rationale for each is also presented.

The existing literature on issues more closely or more generally related to the subject is conscientiously analyzed. The quantitative completeness of the titles is remarkable, but even more so is the substantive aspect of the analysis related to the precise formulation and summary of the main theses advocated by the authors. Moreover, the commentary is made from a prominent and well-argued scientific position, built up by the dissertator herself in the course of her work.

Of all the aims set, I will mention only one, insofar as its successful realization is very indicative of the scope of the work: "to revise the fragmentary knowledge of the genre features of these songs (in the *carol* genre - b.m.) by adding new findings concerning notational and compositional techniques in them" (p. 5)

Chapter I - *The carol and its place in the music of Western Europe in the*

fifteenth century (pp. 18-69) - places the object under study in different contexts (cultural, geographical, historical, repertoire), each of which allows its distinctive features to be revealed in turn. The construction of a sound material foundation, i.e. consisting of manuscript sources, is a prerequisite, fulfilled by Kalina Tomova in a manner both laconic and responsibly consistent with the representativeness of the sources (pp. 18 - 22). Among the main contextual frameworks is that of genre, in which questions are raised about the place of the *carol* among vocal genres in fifteenth-century England, about the church-secular ratio and the predominance of the former. I have one minor problem with the use of the opposition 'spiritual' - 'secular' genres (p. 25). In the context of music from Christian Europe, it would be more accurate to speak of 'ecclesiastical' - 'secular' genres, since the more general definition of 'spiritual' applies to any religious tradition.

Following the line of specification of the problematic in the direction from historical to theoretical, in the subchapter *The Musical Idiom in England in the Fifteenth Century and the Place of the Characteristics of the Carol in the Music of the Island at the Time* (pp. 26-38) Kalina Tomova introduces the fundamental question of the "musical idiom", which also becomes the next context of consideration of the *carol*. I found this sub-chapter extremely interesting and filled with several contributory moments. Prominent among these is the precise delineation of the specific compositional characteristics of English music of the period in relation to that of the Continent (English discord, for example, or the distinction between the techniques of *faburden* and *fauxbourdon*).

I would point to the laying of genre in a functional framework as a further contribution (pp. 39-46). Starting from the well-known position, common in fact to

several phenomena in the music of different countries and confessions, in which 'spiritual songs' are present, namely the combination/mixing of the ecclesiastical and the secular, the dissertation goes on to trace the migration of the genre along the liturgical-paraliturgical axis. Always drawing on many literary texts on a given issue, she here again advances research theses in support of one side or the other of the opposition in question. In expanding concentric circles towards the domain of the secular, the author considers *carols* of a moralistic nature, table *carols* or those of a political nature, thus reaching conclusions concerning the specificity of English music in general. I will cite just one quotation indicative of the degrees of generalization: cautioning that it is "extremely difficult to formulate a definitive definition of what exactly constituted the motet in the fifteenth century, due to the fact that, like the carol, both secular and spiritual themes were present, and hence the social functions of the genre became wide-ranging," K. Tomova concludes that the fixed form and the set of "almost standardized means of expression in the *carol* is the phenomenon that dramatically distinguishes it from the motet" (p. 55).

The dissertation proceeds to one of the most specialised scholarly problems in chapter two of the thesis, *The Notation in the Carol Repertoire* (p. 70) From the outset of the chapter she raises expectations, noting that the features of mensural notation in *carols* 'have not been the subject of in-depth musicological study worldwide' (p. 70). To meet these expectations is the task of the study in this central chapter. Necessary preparation for it is an introduction to the basic principles and rules of mensural notation, with examples again drawn from the examples of the *carol* repertoire. One of the important problems to be solved concerns the notation of the complicated rhythm in the repertoire. The presence of syncopation in songs, the study of which is given a special place, necessitates an analysis of the most important musical treatises in the period from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, which essentially arrives at an outline of a comprehensive vision of the problem and proposes a new theory of the way syncopation as rhythm was treated in these centuries.

I accept the reasons for introducing the perfect-imperfect opposition in Bulgarian language (from p. 7 onwards), which are mainly the desire to preserve the Latin terms and the adjectives formed from them. The continuation in this direction, however, with the creation of derived verbs and verbal nouns (imperfect and imperfecting, pp. 80ff.) causes me to object. The same applies to the use of the verb "indicate" (and hence the participle "indicated"), which should be replaced by the Bulgarian "indicate/show" (p. 43, p. 188 and others).

Such important features of notation as single signs, ligatures, even the conversion of imperfect signs into perfect ones, dots in mensural notation, etc. are systematically discussed (pp. 90-104). The presentation of several notational examples as an inseparable part of the analytical method is also valuable done in a convincing way, it also becomes a necessary basis for further generalizations. Here I will point to the work with the carol *Alma redemptoris mater* with which K. Tomova manages to introduce several possible interpretations. No less eloquent is the example of *Abide, I*

hope it be the best, where the original manuscript, the editor's transcription of the *Mediaeval Carols* and the dissertator's own interpretation are given. Along with other similar examples, it testifies to a thorough knowledge of the material, allowing for an adequate reading of the musical texts. The subchapter *Notation of choral fragments in the stanzas of the carols* (pp. 136-140) is also notable for its originality. The multiplicity of notational signs, for example, is a specificity that allows for inferences in different ways.

Chapter 3 - *Compositional features of the fifteenth-century carol* (p. 141) - discusses the issues raised in the title in three aspects: of melodic language (pp. 142-150), of rhythmic profile (pp. 150-169), and of contrapuntal texture in *carols* (pp. 169-190). The rationale for going to the limit and discussing the issues at length is clearly stated: "Although the repertoire as a whole demonstrates homogeneity in expressive means, it is necessary to look into its compositional features at a micro level, thus revealing the multiplicity of the genre" (p. 141). Also significant is the task set: to bring out the general characteristics and trends in the development of the genre in the fifteenth century (p. 142).

Indeed, the observations, analyses, and conclusions in this chapter are especially contributory in their systematic and consistent exploration of melodic language, intervallic structure, the relationship of vocal-instrumental purpose, and gradualness-jump as a hallmark of the genre, temporal organization, cadential structure, the process from absence to melismatic development, features of metrical organization, contrapuntal texture, the role of the countertenor in the triplet, and more. All these important methods of compositional construction make it possible to sketch the shape of the chosen genre and, more broadly, of compositional technique in the fifteenth century, as well as the specific character of English music. I will not omit the new observations and interpretations in the voice structure of the specimen *O blessed Lord* made by C. Tomova, bringing clarifications to the general framework of the dating of the specimen before the middle of the fifteenth century (p. 177), as well as the extremely interesting case of *Nowell, nowell: Out of your sleep*, in the examination of which the author demonstrates her talented research eye, capable of penetrating into the smallest details and deriving significant results from them. Moreover, even those unfamiliar with the repertoire itself and the scientific literature on the subject are provided with a convincing justification for the significance of these results. And what we can see for ourselves in a careful reading of the text is clearly summarized: "In this way, for the first time in the research literature, the musical idiom of carols has been extensively examined, in contrast to previous works where only some of its characteristic features have come into focus. It was thus possible to highlight the compositional details of the repertoire at a micro-level without losing sight of the overall homogeneity in expressive means that is demonstrated in the carols and that separates them from other vocal music of the period" (p. 190).

The *Conclusion* of the work presents the results reached in the exposition in a synthesized way and at a new level and brings forward the claim that "the English carol of the fifteenth century stands out as a special phenomenon of its kind in

Western European musical practice” in the period under consideration” (p. 191). This conclusion, which is consistently affirmed throughout the dissertation, has been reached by meticulous and methodical handling of the musical material, by summarizing the compositional techniques, principles, and rules inherent in the song genre of the *carol*, and, most importantly, by addressing the very complex notational problems that this genre confronts the researcher.

The contributions listed at the end of the Abstract correspond exactly to the impression the text leaves on those who have read it carefully enough. Undoubtedly, these contributions place the dissertation among the most recent and up-to-date research in the field in general, but among them there are also those of particular importance for Bulgarian musicology, in which new fields are introduced, on the one hand of musical sources, samples and their transcriptions, and on the other - of theoretical treatises of the period.

With the presented work Kalina Tomova exceeds the expectations for a PhD. I would not like to overlook the merits of her supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Yavor Genov, who with his tireless and dedicated guidance over the years helped her to grow up quickly. The author of the dissertation has been accepted as an equal partner by her Western European colleagues, her publications have been printed in prestigious international journals, and in two consecutive years she received the Young Scientist Award of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences for 2022 and the Best Young Scientist Publication Award for 2023, respectively.

Based on all the above, as well as on my personal impressions of the PhD student, I strongly recommend that Kalina Tomova be awarded the educational and academic degree of Doctor.

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