

## **REVIEW**

by Prof Stela Miteva-Dinkova, PhD  
lecturer at AMDFA "Prof Asen Diamandiev" – Plovdiv,  
in professional direction 8.3 Music and Dance Art,  
scientific specialty Music Studies and Music Art

on dissertation work titled:

### ***COMPARISON OF THE SINGING STYLES OF COUNTERTENOR AND NANDAN OF THE PEKING OPERA***

author: **Li Minhui**,

doctoral student at Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts "Prof Asen Diamandiev" - Plovdiv,  
Faculty of Music Pedagogy, Department of Classical and Pop and Jazz Performing Arts,  
presented for the awarding of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"  
in professional field 8.3 Music and Dance Art, scientific specialty Music Studies and Music Art  
with academic supervisor Prof Shekerdzhieva-Novak

By decision of a meeting of the Department of Classical and Pop and Jazz Performing Arts of the Faculty of Musical Pedagogy of AMDFA "Prof Asen Diamandiev" – Plovdiv, held on 7 July 2022, and based on order No RD 27-059 of the Rector of AMDFA dated 13 July 2022, I have been appointed as a member of a scientific jury in a procedure for defense of dissertation work on the topic *Comparison of the singing styles of Countertenor and Nandan of the Peking Opera* for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in a professional field 8.3. Music and Dance Art, scientific specialty Music Studies and Music Art. The author of the dissertation is Li Minhui, a full-time doctoral student, paid tuition at the Department of Classical and Pop and Jazz Performing Arts of AMDFA "Prof Asen Diamandiev" – Plovdiv.

The candidate has presented the following required materials: curriculum vitae, dissertation, abstract, list of publications on the topic, and list of dissertation contributions **Academic Reference for Li Minhui:**

In 2012, Li Minhui began her professional studies at Tianjin Conservatory, China majoring in vocal music and singing. Along with the standard music-theoretical disciplines, she studied specific subjects, such as "imitation of folk art and singing". In the period 2016-2018, after obtaining a Bachelor's degree in China, Li Minhui, driven by her desire to deepen her knowledge of opera art, continued to study opera singing and musical theatre at the Conservatory of Music Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, Fermo, Italy. Since 2018, she has been a full-time doctoral student at AMDFA "Prof Asen Diamandiev" - Plovdiv with scientific supervisor Prof Toni Shekerdzhieva-Novak.

During her studies, Li Minhui works as teacher. In the academic year 2020/ 2021, she is a part-time teacher of classical singing for students in a preparatory course at AMDFA "Prof Asen Diamandiev". She successfully adapted to the multicultural environment of Europe, as a teacher of Chinese and English at the "Young'en" Chinese School in Italy.

Li Minhui's professional career passes through her participation in opera productions in Italy and Bulgaria. Worth mentioning are her roles in *Madame Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini (2017, Italy); *Ba-ta-clan* by Jacques Offenbach (2020, Plovdiv and Sofia) and the comedy *Rita* by G. Donizetti (2021 with five performances in Plovdiv and one in Sofia).

She has won numerous and impressive prestigious awards, such as: First Prize at the Golden Voice Music Competition and in the Eighth National Academic Competition "Y. S. Bach and his contemporaries" (2022); First Prizes at the IMKA Music Competition, and the International Vocal Competition in Moscow, and at the First Competition of Music and Art, London (2021), etc.

Li Minhui's artistic work is complemented by her participation in a number of concerts: the Orel and Concordia theatres, the San Filippo Neri church (Italy), but also in prestigious music forums, such as the 56<sup>th</sup> International Chamber Music Festival and the festival Made at the Academy - Plovdiv.

Everything said so far presents Li Minhui as a performer with rich experience and a personality with a broad creative horizon, extraordinary activity and multifaceted interests.

#### **Publications on the topic of the dissertation:**

Li Minhui has four publications on the topic of her dissertation, which I consider more than enough:

1. Minhui Li., 2020. *Significance of Castrati Singers for Italian Opera: Yearbook 2020 - AMDFA "Prof Asen Diamandiev" - Plovdiv: 2020, pp. 112 – 119.*
2. Minhui Li., 2020. *Nandan performance style of Peking Opera - based on the work of the "four greats": Yearbook 2020 of AMDFA "Prof Asen Diamandiev" – Plovdiv: 2021, pp. 194 – 203.*
3. Minhui Li., 2021. *The interpretation of baroque music by countertenors - on examples of works by Antonio Vivaldi. Spring scientific readings 2021 - AMDFA "Prof Asen Diamandiev" - Plovdiv: 2021, pp. 158-165.*
4. Minhui Li., 2021. *The new rise of countertenors nowadays. Spring scientific readings 2021 - AMDFA "Prof Asen Diamandiev" - Plovdiv: 2021, pp. 166-172.*

The list of publications of Li Minhui also includes translation and editing of *Introductory Course in Solfege in Bulgarian for Chinese* (ISMN: 979-0-9021225-0-4). This tutorial is not related to the topic of the dissertation, but it is certainly an additional activity that is valuable, meaningful and will find use in the pedagogical practice.

The **dissertation** work *Comparison of the singing styles of Countertenor and Nandan of the Peking Opera* has a total of 173 pages, of which 156 are main text. It is structured in: introduction, five chapters (including several subchapters), conclusion, acknowledgments, bibliography, two appendices with sheet music and a list of publications on the subject of the work. The text is illustrated

sparingly, but relevantly and meaningfully with musical examples, graphic images, tables and photographic material.

The **topic of the research** is very suitable for doctoral dissertation and has an undeniable contribution character. The author focuses on one of the phenomena in the opera art of Europe and Asia, namely the performance of female roles by male singers. Nowadays, this practice is not so popular. The author methodically and in depth covers the issue with its historical sequence and through comparative analysis and synthesis reaches the main idea, which is to overcome the deficit and to practically support the return of this type of singers to the stage of modern opera art. The interdisciplinary and multicultural aspects give a specific and clear significance to the work.

In the introduction, Li Minhui clarifies the determining factors for choosing the topic and the purpose of the study: "*a systematic comparison of the countertenor and the nandan of Peking Opera*", with a broader framework indicating the promotion of "*academic exchanges between the European and Peking Opera*". (p. 7). Analyzing the state of the problem, the author comes to the conclusion that the countertenor and nandan "*have a persistent contribution to the progress of the respective singing types and still play a very important role to this day*" (p.10), as well as that "*between them there is a great a dose of academic overlap that requires only a little more knowledge to complement*" (p.11). The main research methods are the study of written sources, observation and comparative analysis. The expected results are expressed in the achievement of a form of cultural exchange that will stimulate the opening of the world's cultural markets, which in turn will lead to an economic contribution.

The **first chapter** entitled **The Castrato Singer - Predecessor of the Countertenor** (pp. 14-28) explains the religious, cultural and economic reasons behind the practice of men being the only possible musicians and performers in church choirs. From the beginning of the 4th century to the end of the 16th century, the castrati were not officially recognized by the church. Their status radically changed during the Renaissance, and they became highly respected and well paid for their performances in the operas of Monteverdi, Handel, A. Scarlatti, etc. Li Minhui presents valuable information on the vocal characteristics, qualities and achievements of the castrati singers: Senesino, Farinelli, Moreschi, etc., who contributed to the flourishing of the Italian opera by establishing a new breathing technique (mixing falsetto and natural timbre) and the musical form of *Da capo aria*.

The **second chapter** (pp. 29-55) examines the political and cultural reasons for the appearance of the **Countertenor**. This type of singers gave way to castrati from the 17th to the middle of the 19th century, but they were extremely sought after in the 20th century for several reasons: 1) a revival of interest in the music of the Renaissance and the Baroque; 2) the creation of works for this type of voice by prominent composers such as Britten, Edgar, Reimann and others; 3) their exceptional vocal abilities, such as wide range, excellent technique and rich timbre. The author pays special attention to the peculiarities of interpreting music from the Baroque era (arias by Antonio Vivaldi) by the famous contemporary countertenor A. Manzotti, describing the main performance parameters: conveying the

affect, control over vibrato, interpretation of fast scales, etc. Thus, she reaches the essence of the study, in which she reveals what is special and characteristic in the singing style of the countertenors. Contributing elements of this chapter are the explanation of the importance of the countertenors today and an examination of the countertenor singing in China (which was only established in the early 21st century).

**The Nan-dan actor in the Peking Opera** is undoubtedly a topic that is probably discussed for the first time in a dissertation work in our country. The **third chapter** (p.56-88) explains how the Peking Opera was born and changed according to the political, cultural and economic conditions in the Republic of China. The performance style, creative biography and contribution of the “Four Great Dan” - Mei Lanfang, Chen Yenqiu, Xun Huisheng and Shang Xiaoyun - are presented in depth and with extreme precision. After analyzing the modern development of nandan singers and the need for them, the author reaches the conclusion that "*nandan and countertenors have a lot to learn from each other, to interact and even to be one whole*" (p.88).

This conclusion "opens the door" and substantiates the next **fourth chapter Prerequisites for the exchange of ideas between countertenors and nandan** (pp. 89-109). It establishes the similar historical context between the two types of voices, as well as the proximity of staging and voice registers from a physiological point of view (illustrated beautifully in the table on p.92). The methodology of the different types of breathing, as well as the relationship between the specificity of the language/ text and vocal mastery, are comprehensively examined. By pointing out rhythmic similarities, uniformity of musical structure, and analysis of the European and the Chinese music industries, the candidate proves that the exchange between Nandan singers and countertenors has scientific and practical grounds.

**Chapter five** (p.110-154) presents in detail the **Differences between countertenors and Chinese Nandan performers** and offers scientifically based "*ways to overcome them*". This is a kind of culmination of work, which is determined by the professionally studied: elocution, breathing, resonance, timbre and articulation in the Peking and the European operas (respectively, nandan and countertenors). Of particular interest is the sub-chapter called Differences in Stage Performance, which describes the four main actions of nandan. Among them, the "expression" and the "stage play" stand out with specificity and uniqueness, which are strictly regulated and worked out in advance. Most valuable is the last sub-chapter on the mutual exchange and synthesis during preparation and musical performance between the two types of voices, which I appreciate as a special contribution of the research, because it realizes the practically set goal of the dissertation work.

The **conclusion** summarizes the results and emphasizes the most essential "*substantiated teaching methodology to overcome the differences between the singing, the stage performance, the language and the cultural code of the two genres*" (p.155). In a broader aspect, the research builds a bridge between two vocal arts, cultural traditions, different worlds and paves new paths in the field of art.

The **abstract** corresponds to the dissertation and correctly conveys the character of the scientific text of the doctoral work.

Li Minhui mentions five contributions of the dissertation, of which I highlight the following:

1. The first comprehensive and systematic presentation of a comparison of the singing styles of countertenor and nandan of the Peking Opera, which summarizes the similarities and differences in the historical origins, role classification, vocal techniques, linguistic features, musical characteristics, and stage presence of the Nan-dan performers in Peking Opera and the countertenors in European opera.

2. For the first time, due to the differences in the singing styles of countertenor and Nandan, a scientifically substantiated teaching methodology to overcome the differences between the singing, the stage performance, the language and the cultural code of the two genres.

4. For the first time, a table is created regarding the differences between countertenor and Nandan. With the help of the renowned medical professor Han Li-yen, I compared and analyzed the video data from the internal view of the larynx in 27 basses, 35 baritones, 40 tenors, 30 countertenors, and 28 Nandan performers.

Considering the contributing scientific and applied scientific qualities of the dissertation *Comparison of the singing styles of Countertenor and Nandan of the Peking Opera*, and noting the diligence, personal attitude and activity of the author, as well as the magnificent work of the supervisor Prof Tony Shekerdzhieva-Novak, I confidently give my positive assessment and propose to the respected scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree *Doctor* in professional field 8.3 Music and dance art, scientific specialty Music studies and music art, to Li Minhui, according to the requirements of Law for the development of the academic staff and the relevant regulations of AMDFA "Prof Asen Diamandiev".

30.07.2022

Plovdiv

Reviewer: .....

/Prof Stela Miteva-Dinkova /