

OPINION

by

Assoc. Prof Ermila Schweitzer – NMA „Prof Pancho Vladigerov"

on the dissertation of

Li Minhui – full-time doctoral student at

at the Department of Classical and Pop and Jazz Performing Arts

at AMDFA, “Prof Asen Diamandiev” - Plovdiv,

with academic supervisor: Prof Toni Shekerjjeva – Novak

on topic

COMPARISON OF THE SINGING STYLES OF COUNTERTENOR AND
NANDAN OF THE PEKING OPERA”

for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"

field 8.3. Music and Dance Art

Li Minhui's educational background chronologically includes a Bachelor's degree in Vocal Music and Singing from the Tianjin Conservatory, China (2012-2016), an Master's degree in Opera Singing from the Conservatory of Music Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, Fermo, Italy (2016-2018) and a doctoral program in Classical Singing at Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts Plovdiv, which started in 2018, the result of which is the presented dissertation work. The short biographical reference lists numerous participations of the candidate during her studies in concerts and performances, as well as several prestigious awards from competitions in Bulgaria, Russia, England and Germany. These facts of her artistic work testify to Li Minhui's desire and ambition to develop and improve in the field of classical singing, and this, in my opinion, combined with her background, leads to the logical choice of the topic of the dissertation - a comparative study of the styles of singing in the Western European opera tradition and the Peking Opera, within the specifics of two types of opera voices – countertenor and nandan, respectively, which turn out to be very similar, as examined in different perspectives by the author.

The dissertation *Comparison of the singing styles of Countertenor and Nandan of the Peking Opera* is structured in an introduction, five chapters, a conclusion, bibliography including 43 titles, foreign and Bulgarian, 4 Internet sources, appendices and four publications on the subject. The total volume is 173 pages.

The introduction states the main purpose, reasons for choosing the topic, methods, structure and expected results of the research - "*The comparison of the singing styles of the countertenor and the nandan, will allow both types of singers to overcome the barriers associated with the performance and singing techniques, and will promote learning and communication between the European opera*

and the Chinese Peking Opera, and indirectly contribute to the cultural exchange between the two cultures"(p.12).

The first chapter is dedicated to the predecessor of the countertenor – the castrato singer. The author examines historical, religious, cultural and economic reasons for the appearance of this type of singers in the musical practice. She has collected numerous descriptions of the voice characteristics of Castrati singers provided by their contemporaries, which prove the exceptional level of virtuosity of the singing technique reached by the most famous of them - Senesino, Farinelli, Ferri. Special attention is paid to the importance of the Castrati in the development of the Italian Baroque opera and its flowering in the works of Alessandro Scarlatti and Georg Friedrich Handel.

The second chapter gathers information from multiple sources about the emergence of countertenor singers, after the profoundly inhumane method of castration was abolished by decree in 1861. The various types of countertenor voices and their use in the further development of musical history are described. Special attention is paid to the countertenor parts in the operas of Antonio Vivaldi, with a focus on the performances of the famous Italian countertenor Angelo Manzotti in his two albums with arias of the composer. The author, referring to her studies in Italy and the collection of impressions from lectures and exercises for countertenors, also offers some concrete ways to overcome vocal-technical difficulties in the performance of the virtuoso aria *Agitata da due venti* from the opera *Griselda* by Vivaldi, illustrated with score examples. In a few paragraphs, the emergence and development of countertenor singing in China at the end of the 20th century is presented.

The third chapter presents the Nandan singer from the Peking Opera, following the logic of the previous two chapters - historical prerequisites for the emergence of this kind of singing and acting character - political, cultural, economic factors. The heyday of this art, according to the doctoral student, was reached in the 1920s and 1930s, which was also the time of the "Four Great Dan". The author gives detailed information about each of these four famous Chinese Nandan singers, each of whom created their own direction in the development of the art of singing. In her reasoning, the author reaches the present day and the need to preserve and continue this centuries-old tradition. I consider the information collected by the doctoral student in this chapter to be particularly valuable, as it presents summarized facts, which for the most part are unknown to the European public.

The fourth chapter is central to the study as it provides an in-depth comparison between countertenor and nandan singers. The author establishes a similar historical context, a similar vocal apparatus - based on a quoted study by the Voice Research Centre of the Central Chinese Conservatory, in which it can be seen that the two types of voices have "*close values of both the length and thickness of the vocal folds, as well as the resonance peak, which means that from a physiological point of view, the setting of their vocal folds is very similar and they have similar vocal registers*" (p.93). According to Li Minhui, their vocal technique is also similar, and she argues her point with comparisons of breathing technique, use of resonators, natural voice and falsetto, articulation, pronunciation of vowels and consonants in Chinese and Italian. For me, particularly interesting are the

author's observations and reflections on the musical similarities between the Peking and the European Opera – a comparison of the rhythmic structures in the European music with the Chinese *banqiang*, which corresponds to strong-weak time, the similar recitatives/ speech and even the similarities in the arias, which in both cases are "*a long fragment with solo singing in which the characters analyze their inner world and express their feelings*" (p.105).

The fifth chapter examines the differences between countertenor and nandan. First of all, the author logically presents the language differences and the difficulties that arise from this. Further on she discusses the vocal technique with some differences in the breathing, the use of natural voice and falsetto, of different resonator cavities, of different notions of a beautiful tone in the one case and the other. Li Minhui finds the greatest differences in the stage performance and the acting and concludes that "*it will be almost overwhelming for a countertenor to master the many stage skills required in the Peking Opera*" (p.133). She even discusses the question – how and whether the countertenor's body language could be enriched, borrowing certain techniques from the acting skills of the Nandan singers.

In the conclusion, the author draws conclusions in support of the thesis that the similarities between the two vocal schools could be a basis for exchanging valuable ideas and building a bridge between them.

Five contributions of the dissertation are listed that I fully support. Like the author, I also hope that this research could not only promote academic exchange between the European and the Peking Opera, but also indirectly contribute to cultural exchange in general, something we are actually already seeing happening.

Li Minhui's dissertation is an in-depth scientific study, both in terms of the researched topic, and in terms of its analysis and the conclusions drawn. I congratulate the author and her academic supervisor - Prof Toni Shekerdzhieva-Novak, and I confidently propose to the esteemed Scientific Jury to award Li Minhui the scientific educational degree "Doctor" in professional field 8.3. Music and Dance Art.

Sofia, 26.08.2022

Assoc. Prof Ermila Schweitzer, PhD