

SHEDDING LIGHT ON BULGARIAN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRAS */PIANO or FORTE/*

Brief historic notes

Orchestral music-making in Bulgaria goes back to mid-nineteenth century when in the Northeastern, multilingual town of Shumen the first ensemble was founded. It had entertainment and promotional purposes rather than serious concert activities. The significance of the ensemble though is mainly in the first establishment of a repertoire (Bulgarian and foreign) which was suitable for performance, as well as bringing together professionally educated national musicians and music-makers.

Over WW2 orchestras developed in Bulgaria in lows and peaks. Those days gave rise to the **Guards Orchestra** (1892) conducted by Joseph Hohola; the **Academic Symphony Orchestra** (1928) and the **Royal Military Symphony Orchestra** (1936) both founded in Sofia by Prof. Sasha Popov; the **State Philharmonic Orchestra at the National Opera** (1935). At concerts in Bulgaria and abroad they perform major works by national and international musical classics. These ensembles invited outstanding guest conductors and soloists – Fausto Magnani, Karl Bohm, Bruno Walter, Edmondo de Vecchi, Emil Kupper, Carlo Zecchi, Henry Marteau, Paul Wittgenstein, Dinu Lipatti etc.

After the end of the war the dynamic history of Bulgarian orchestras included both the above listed and numerous new ensembles founded all over the country.

The Sofia Philharmonic Orchestra continued the tradition of the Sofia-based ensembles. The Philharmonic has performed with conductors Konstantin Iliev, Dobrin Petkov, Vassil Stefanov, Vladi Simeonov, Dimitar Manolov, Yordan Dafov, Emil Tabakov etc.

At approximately the same time the capital saw the rise and establishment of yet another outstanding ensemble – the **Symphony Orchestra of the Bulgarian National Radio** (1948). Its achievements over the years are closely related to the work of V. Stefanov, Vl. Simeonov, Michail Angelov, Vassil Kazandjiev, Alexander Vladigerov, Milen Nachev, Rossen Milanov. Sofia's active concert scene includes also the **Symphonieta Orchestra**, founded by the National Radio in 1950, with conductors Emil Karamanov, Dragomir Nenov, Kamen Goleminov, V. Kazandjiev, D. Manolov and others.

In the aftermath of WWII the orchestras in many of the country's towns became state funded to replace the longstanding earlier tradition of amateur musical and opera companies. **The Plovdiv Philharmonic Orchestra** was the first state orchestra established outside the capital (1945). Its founder was Vl. Simeonov, and music-makers like Ruslan Rauchev, Dobrin Petkov, Mesru Mehmedov, D. Manolov, Ivan Spassov, Georgi Dimitrov among others contributed to its specific style.

In 1946 the **Varna Philharmonic Orchestra** was founded, with conductors R. Raichev, V. Stefanov, Yosko Yossifov and especially K. Iliev and Emil Glavanakov. Later Y. Dafov also

worked in Varna, as well as Ivan Marinov, Andrey Andreev, Hristo Ignatov and others.

Two orchestras appeared in 1947 – the **Burgas Philharmonic** with conductors D. Karadjov (founder), Arseni Lechev, Vassil Lolov, Ivan Vulpe, Y. Dafov, Ivan Kojuharov, M. Angelov; and the **Razgrad Philharmonic** where S. Vachev (founder) worked along with Ivan Bakalov, Georgi Cheshmirov, Dimitar Karagiozov and others.

The **Russe State Symphony Orchestra** was founded in 1948. Conductors K. Iliev, Em. Karamanov, D. Petkov, R. Raichev, Iv. Vulpe, Ilia Temkov were among its first leaders, with Al. Vladigerov, K. Goleminov, Alipi Naidenov, Rumen Bairakov, E. Tabakov, Alexei Izmirliiev and G. Dimitrov joining over the following decades.

Then in 1949 two more state ensembles were established – the **Vidin Symphony Orchestra** with founder and conductor B. Mihailov, and conductors G. Notev, A. Andreev, Asparuh Lisov, Tzanko Delibozov; and the **Tolbuhin Symphony Orchestra** conducted among others by T. Dimitrov and Vesselin Nenov. The **Pernik Symphony Orchestra** was founded in 1950, conductors L. Piperov (founder), V. Nenov, R. Raichev, Em. Karamanov, Raicho Hristov.

The **Pleven Symphony Orchestra** was founded in 1953 with the support of Prof. S. Popov. It owes much of its glory to the work of conductors N. Kazasov, Dr. Nenov, Vl. Atanassov, M. Angelov, D. Manolov, Plamen Djurov, G. Notev, Geogri Chaprazov. A year later, in 1954 the **Shumen Symphony Orchestra** was founded with conductors Iv. Vulpe, I. Temov, Ph. Lambev, A. Lissov, D. Karaminkov, G. Chaprazov. Despite its longstanding tradition **Vratsa** organised its state orchestra considerably later – not until 1973. Among others its conductors were Petar Ganey, Radosveta Boyadjieva, Tz. Delibozov, Dimitar Panov, Vesselin Baichev, Valeri Vachev.

This chronological listing is far from a comprehensive panorama of orchestra formations in Bulgaria. Early deceased Emil Chakurov had a substantial role in the development of orchestras in the country, as did the **Festival Orchestra** he founded. Some of the **opera orchestras** and other ensembles are also quite active in the field – the **Pazardjik Symphony Orchestra, „Sofia Soloists“** (1962), conductor V. Kazandjiev, E. Tabakov and Pl. Djurov; the chamber orchestras in **Dobrich** with Y. Dafov (1972), in **Yambol** with Nikolai Sultanov, **Haskovo** with Krassimir Zahariev, **Gabrovo** with Milko Kolarov and Ivan Stoyanov, the **female chamber orchestras**, and after 1990 some private orchestras as well (**New Symphony Orchestra, Classic FM, SIF-309**) add to the current modern practice of performance. The current picture can be seen in Table 1 (*credit Emilia Kolarova*).

DEMOCRACY AND REFORM AFTER 1999 SMILES WRYLY BACK

It was almost immediately post-1990 that the first restrictive measures were passed out to the state budget funded and municipal music organisations. Companies had to reduce their staff and face decreasing production budgets, cope with limited maintenance and overheads means etc. But the **first spring bird of restructuring** in the inherited socialist state-funded network of Bulgarian orchestras landed on the shoulder of music-makers merely five years after the democratic changes had started, and that came in as Council of Ministers Act 128/1994 which announced the first closure of an opera theatre (the one in Pleven though its orchestra continued

to exist). The same Act made an attempt at encouraging municipal authorities to contribute to the funding of the musical ensembles.

By 1998 the system was choking. And that was when another major „musical reform“ took place – **the introduction of contractual relations between the Ministry of Culture and the municipalities towards mixed funding of the ensembles and the merge of the opera and symphony structures in Burgas, Varna, Plovdiv and Russe** (append. Council of Ministers Act 36/27.01.1999, the Law for Protection and Development of Culture, the State Budget Law and other legal acts/.

Led by the will to preserve the values so industriously built upon by generations of Bulgarian musicians, a team at the Ministry of Culture developed a Programme for the Development of Music and Dance which focussed with special care on the organisation and management of state music institutions. Based on the logic of the government policy at the time, the major aims of the programme were as follows:

- œ *Actual decentralisation of funding provided for cultural activities (incl. Music institutions), to be implemented in coordination between the Ministry of Culture and the municipalities based on the „mixed funding“ method.* Established over several decades, the principal of centralised funding could now be changed and what was formerly a passive lever mainly in support of payroll funding for the companies, gradually could become an active element of cultural policy. The funds that were set free of this structure could now be redirected to support institutions in accordance with their artistic achievement and national significance.
- œ *Introduction of competitive application for state subsidies for projects and grants, stimulating the professional potential and development.*
The evaluation of results achieved so far encourage refocussing the attention and efforts towards developing more efficient structures which is the next step of the programme.

The Ministry of Cultural did advance to the implementation of this next stage based on the analysis which revealed that:

- œ there is a growth of inefficiency in the structure and management of state music institutions – duplicating roles, inadequate staffing, unethical competition etc
- œ lack of any professional or public peer review which inevitably leads to complacency and drop in delivery of professional standards – which in turn is one of the major reasons for the audience's withdrawal from concert halls and opera theatres.
- œ lack of motivation for proliferation of cultural values on regional and local levels resulting in frequent fluctuations and professional „drain“ abroad
- œ substantial venues but growingly ageing, the centralised model of maintenance of which has been proved completely inefficient
- œ lack of clarity on the legal status and no legal independence in some institutes

In the effort to nurture adequate conditions towards solving the above problems the Ministry of Culture drafted and entered a Resolution on the transformation of the opera theatres and philharmonic orchestras of Burgas, Varna, Plovdiv and Russe into cultural institutes named Operatic and Philharmonic Associations. The new structure corresponded to the traditions of Bulgarian music-making, and are also in keeping with organisational models in contemporary

European musical culture.

The aims of the Resolution were:

1. Create an opportunity for the development of unified criteria for updating and improving the quality of art production
2. Create a common administrative and artistic management team and an optimal structure which would deliver shared artistic, organisational and managerial policies, while maintaining opportunities for independent performance by the structures separate artistic departments
3. Provide a balanced programme for the respective company locally, regionally and abroad
4. Establish the newly transformed institutes as independent legal entities, automatically resolving the problem arising from the lack of constitutional and other documentation
5. Decentralise the ownership over the material assets by handing over the state buildings (maintained per date by the Ministry of Culture) to the care and responsibilities of the municipality, while sustaining the function of the building

It is essential to emphasise that the expanded staff of the philharmonic orchestras (which by effect now combine both the operatic and the philharmonic staff members) will provide opportunities for new artistic developments in a larger professional team, and subsequently lead to a broader repertoire. Maintaining a choir, soloists and with the opportunities for the formation of a number of chamber ensembles in effect protects the actual status of the philharmonic.

The new Operatic and Philharmonic Associations created under the Resolution will establish themselves by the end of the period of reform as institutions completely independent of the state, socially active and artistically dynamic structures following the European model of the independent musical societies. In and through them the State, the Municipality and interested local musical and financial players, as well as the art- community will contribute to the development of our musical culture." /*Kultura weekly, issue. 7/1999*/

It was all very well said, but as far as implementation goes... The legal provisions were altered in anything but synk, and indeed at times in complete contradiction to actions taken. Sentiments often overruled considerations for the future. Some local authorities regarded musical culture on their territories a disposable burden. And alas – set against this background, soon enough the reform became also the battlefield of personalities and syndicates, a spring-board for the power-minded and a „socially“ secure refuge for rather worn out employees. **And so many of the longterm, rational ideas and perspectives incorporated in the Programme gradually withered and then disappeared altogether.**

WHAT'S NEXT THEN?

But even after a shock like that Bulgarian orchestras still have some of irrevocable features which guarantee chances for a brighter future despite the current economic hardships that our cultural arena suffers. And above all to be mentioned is the undeniably **HIGH QUALITY OF THE STAFF.**

Obviously fluctuation is a problem in orchestras because as early as music school the best musicians start eyeing the West – it would be either a competition or a masterclass at first, and

then they end up looking into opportunities for auditioning with the best European and American orchestras. The high quality tuition they get from early childhood becomes an excellent foundation for a career, and many young people of talent, fortune and stamina are far from hiding in the shadows abroad.

Good musicians here are still not a rarity so I am quite reluctant in accepting popular views that our orchestras seem to be featuring mainly young performers of dubious quality, i.e. those who cannot make it abroad.

And still, **training in orchestra performance is totally insufficient at university level, which is an old sin of our educational system – we train soloists, not the orchestra musicians.** It makes no sense now to start arguing how small the percent is of those lucky few who do make it to soloist careers. By underestimating the need for collective musical training we are depriving the young performers' development – hence the indispensable compensating role of New Symphony Orchestra. We are now facing a new problem which will affect us in the near future – children are no longer interested in certain instruments – oboe, bassoon, corn, trumpet. The result being that there will be incomplete wind sections in the future – and indeed two already are even now!

And besides, one cannot even claim that as soon as they sign up to an orchestra the young performers immediately tap into the habits. For in Bulgaria **THE ENSEMBLE WORKING HOURS /DUTIES-DIENSTS/ IN REHEARSAL AND PERFORMANCE** by far differ from those colleagues to the East and West do. Group and double rehearsals are almost completely out by now. Usually our good old chap's response to this is that „yeah, but their pay is much higher“. Speaking of which, I might as well say it for the record, **in Bulgaria there is no way you can live off an orchestra performer's salary.** That is why touring and recording are considered as an essential source for additional income (though, just as much for the record, obviously our orchestras are far from the really prestigious halls and besides, **they work with second class impresarios and at non-competitive wages**).

And so we get to the various **FINANCIAL SOURCES** /Table 2/. The salaries are the main amount of funding of the orchestras, a sort of „financial backbone“ of their budget. Naturally their budgets are supplemented by **box office, broadcasting rights, touring income, recording, sponsorship and charity, advertising, rent of venue, sporadic cases of merchandise sales etc.**

And you may only expect that with the difference is orchestras vary the balance of each of these resources – e.g., among the private ensembles the percentage of budget or project subsidy is very small, sponsorship and recordings are what balances the books. In fact there is no private orchestra with a resident company – the orchestra practically is a **producer** who gathers the performers for a concert or recording and pays by the job. On the other hand, these orchestras always work with a **core set-up** of musicians „on call“, but this maintains their recognisable own image and a high standard of quality, appreciated by both audience and international producers.

Issues of funding are closely related to the next set of problems – let's take **REPERTOIRE** for instance. No doubt the audience has its favourite composers and they can listen to them forever and ever – Beethoven and Tchaikovsky are first in the list, and then a step down but almost equally so are the scores of composers till the 1970s. But the mission of the good manager is to

bring as much variety to the playbill as possible, not forgetting of course the serious commitment to Bulgarian music. And it is at this point that the issue arises, and it is a financial rather than artistic issue – **COPYRIGHTS** and **RENT OF SCORES**. In the face of the paradoxical situation of having to pay enormous amounts to rent and perform music **their audience doesn't even like**, Bulgarian orchestras often merely turn their back on the repertoire after Shostakovich and Stravinsky, not to even mention how rarely one can listen to works from the New Vienna school, Messiaen or Boulez. At least some private ensemble's playbills can impress with their variety. Quite often one might see performance of photocopied scores or any random combination of violation of copyrights, but there is no way this can go on forever. Of course none of this is really unique of us.

Another obvious shortcoming is the **isolation of our artistic production**. Tours in the country are almost an exception (unlike tours abroad), there is hardly any sharing of conductors or soloists, and there can be no excuse for the lack of interest or contacts among the managers, or even exchange of information between the ensembles in the country – in days like these any adversity may be fatal for the entire guild. There are only but sporadic quests into the realms of marginal genres and arts combinations, multimedia projects etc.

When it comes to the selection of **CONDUCTORS AND SOLOISTS** the artistic criteria often come last. Bizarre as it may sound, **there is a shortage of Bulgarian conductors in Bulgaria** – despite the fact that there are over 120 living conductors of different generations who have graduated just over the past several decades and just the Theoretical Faculty of the Academy of Music. It is not simply a shortage of exceptionally talented conductors, but of conductors who would work relatively continuously with a single ensemble and *together* they would work on a certain sound, nuance or interpretation. Fluctuations with conductors is by far worse than fluctuations with performers, because there are still musicians at the Plovdiv and at the Sofia Philharmonic who remember the sound and interpretations of Dobrin Petkov or Konstantin Iliev, and how demanding they were to orchestra performers. And should there indeed be some vocalised demand by the conductor, then that is taken for „the whims of a conceited bandmaster“.

Unfortunately quite a few of our best conductors have left for abroad which has left many a musicians to **start living out their big-and-mighty dreams** at the sake of the musicians. Though this also has a bright side to it – there is a proliferation of demand and offering, including financial benefits in the niche of „conducting masterclasses“. The level of the **visiting conductors and soloists** (it's all about funding again) is about average. On the one hand there are next to no big names visiting (not even to mention world class stars), on the other – there are quite a few „tourists“ who sometimes even pay their own way just so they might add to their CVs the scalp of yet another philharmonic. Celebrities will bring more audiences to the halls and box office revenue will be larger, but even those would be insufficient to cover the stars' substantial fees. And so the „vicious financial circle“ closes but the passive leaders vegetate just fine in it.

Generally speaking **VENUES AND INSTRUMENTS** are in a hideous state, there are „homeless“ orchestras (Varna, Stara Zagora and the private ensembles who don't even have a rehearsal space of their own), with the exception of Bulgaria Hall none of the concert halls have good acoustics, the buildings themselves are on the verge of collapsing and their maintenance

costs a fortune. Purchase of new instruments is but sporadic, and as a whole **the „armoury“ is quite obsolete** – it should have been sent into oblivion ages ago. There are a few well equipped little recording studios which might provide an opportunity to increase income.

All the above is no excuse for the poor standard of **MANAGEMENT**. Not that the situation here is brilliant, but the good examples – in Varna, Vidin, Sofia and the orchestra at the National Radio, as well as the private ensembles – are living proof that it is quite feasible to make the best of what is available - unfortunately such examples are still rare. What with the lack of criteria or control by the Ministry of Culture, ultimately well managed orchestras receive just as much in terms of salaries and other important support as the ones where performers have worked several times less than the first.

It is high time that the **contracts with the selected by competition** directing managers of orchestras got contractual terms for 5 to 7 years which would allow for the development of a complete longterm programme. The same programme should contain the principles of **teamwork** and provide for clear control mechanisms (which in fact are both possible even under the current **confused legal provisions** but that would subject to further thorough analysis) which would prevent from using the orchestra's as instruments for private purposes.

And so finally – is it *piano or forte*? My personal opinion is that it is the one thing nobody wants but instead continuously - *decrescendo*.

Momchil Georgiev