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IZ STRUKE ZA STRUKU

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## Lyric Theatre in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

### Economic crisis and aesthetic confusion: In search of viable strategic policies

Coming from a land as much devastated by its public deficit crisis as also by its reluctance to apply a thoroughly considered structural reformation program, it seems very easy to err on the path of introvert ruminations regarding policies, especially concerning culture, nowadays considered internationally as a priority of secondary importance. In this respect tendency to confine issues to a peripheral national frame, as the contemporary Hellenic one indisputably still is, might prove something of a major miscalculation, if one considers phenomena common to very different national and social levels of global experience.

### Greek “specialties”

Despite the fact that lyric theatre, better known under the Italian collective term of “opera”, emerged from the Florentine Camerata society’s noble goal of enhancing the declamatory power of ancient Greek tragedy, persons holding leading positions in Greek governments and / or as directors of the Country’s leading institutions have long perpetrated the axiomatic but erroneous supposition that opera is foreign to Greek musical heritage, the latter presumably assigned more to Asian influence than to the European one. In fact this misconception is mainly due to the Greek civil war’s (1946 – 1949) consequences, that created a politically biased confrontation between the bourgeois aesthetic, linguistic and general values as opposed to so called “popular” ones, indelibly linked in a broad percentage of public opinion with Near East aesthetic influences having been implanted to the Greek mainland by the 1,500,000 refugees from Asia minor after the military defeat of 1922 and the exchange of populations that was agreed through the Lausanne pact between Greece and Turkey in 1924. It is a field of strong theoretical and everyday struggle this one, and the recent prize accorded by the Hellenic Drama and Music Critics Association to an important book about modern Greek “mythology” on musical matters<sup>[2]</sup> renews interestingly the scientific and social dialogue about a cultural identity greatly influenced by a geographical position as threshold of Europe.

In any case, this dispute of the last decades has led to an already established enforcement of populist cultural views that have gradually alienated the traditional middle class citizens from the humanistic and artistic educational and cultural references that once formed an essential part of this social stand’s self esteem. While culture seems to have evaporated from school educational program, the dominance of private radio, television and other media of mass communication has practically eschewed even the limited appeal of the public media cultural propositions to an ever decreasing audience. This applies also to the so called “3<sup>rd</sup> Program” radio channel, functioning ultimately as a ghetto for the still remaining erudite citizens, without any support in the last years from the other public radio and television channels that in other times provided the first taste of performing arts to the general public.

Although prose theatre and dance universally remain the most easily accessible forms of performing arts to a general public, owing mainly to the directness of their expressive means, i.e. national and body language, more complicated forms like opera, combining many arts with an artificial way of emission, as undeniably lyrical singing is, tend to become less and less part of the people’s awareness.

It is not irrelevant that words like “art” and “artist” are increasingly applied by mass media to indicate “entertainers” and “entertainment”, even of the most humble artistic aspirations. One can realize why, considering, for example, that even the so – called “Orchestra of Contemporary Music” of the meanwhile extinct former GRERT public Radio and TV organization, was not referring to serious music repertoire of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but merely accompanied singers of the so called light muse in songs indicated in everyday language as “art” ones, the term surprisingly also not corresponding, as

should be expected, to the so called "Lied" domain. Especially in Greece "art song" ( *entechno tragoudi*) is an invented euphemism for songs of a contemplative or ballad style as opposed to east orientated and meanwhile world known "rebetico" and its offspring the so called "popular" (laiko), last also having incidentally nothing to do with "folksong" tradition. This "confusion" in terminology, while reflecting a social evolution and, as such, should be taken into account in every social and / or scientific evaluation of the phenomenon, should not prevent, nevertheless, from taking sides against vulgarization of public cultural life with a technologically supported rush cadence as opposed to analogue gradual historical evolutions of older times, i.e. the one that led to the formation of national European linguistic and cultural identities out of their common Latin provenance.

### **Prose and lyric theatre: Victims of a similar pathology?**

Such a varied landscape and the ever increasing uncertainty of formal borders among performing arts notwithstanding, one is remunerated by the accessibility that technology provides to artistic events from the major provenances even to the most remote of places on the planet. Although one has to take into account the fact that certain aspects of viewing via satellite and / or internet do not provide clues regarding crucial points of theatrical events, such as projection of declamation and television direction interference, the fact itself of "live" communication with an indeterminate and potentially vast public marks an outstanding aspect of so called globalization. Production values, artistry and standard of handwork can at last be appreciated by a range of recipients that defy any precedent, establishing an equally unprecedented shared experience not only of means but also of artistic intentions. Performances from London National Theatre and the Metropolitan Opera of New York enrich as valuable references the spectrum of evaluation that ought to apply for both prose and lyric theatre, at least regarding the standard repertoire. And while prose theatre is unlikely to resuscitate "traditional" stagings from the past, this occurs increasingly regarding operatic fare at such prestigious provenances as the aforementioned Met, the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, or the Vienna State Opera, under the pressure of popular demand, the latter being further reinforced through the widespread positive reception of such revivals.

In this context, the almost too obvious dilemma between "progressive" and "conservative" productions emerges more and more as false, its content rather applying to the much more vital distinction between informed and inspired revivals of the work performed as opposed to merely sloppy ones. One might argue about the unjust juxtaposition of a luxury Met production coinciding with a relatively humble Greek National Opera revival, as it occurred last season with such fiendishly difficult works like Rossini's *La Cenerentola* and Massenet's *Werther*, the latter, rather amusingly, featuring in the title role the excellent cover of the Met for star tenor Jonas Kaufmann. But even with respect to self evident proportional discrepancies, certain production principles emerge clearly from the otherwise possibly unfair comparison and might be of assistance to both critics and public for their assessment on the merits of a certain presentation of an already well known work.

In other words, as much as a traditional revival should not fall prey to an academic or museum *sécheresse*, similar prerequisites should apply for an "updated" or "modern" production, in order that the superimposed action and / or other ideas of the director do not betray the intelligibility of the main lines that form the core in the original work. Decades of conceptual dominance, often with an unwanted cerebral touch, over other aspects of a production, especially ones concerning staging and costumes handwork, have resulted to a wide dissent of the public towards such production principles, expressed vociferously via internet and already reflected on production orientation of the aforementioned relayed performances, which in any case serve as an indicative model for "public opinion". It is a factor that many long standing critics have repeatedly stressed in reviews over the years, proffering a simple truth: that theatre, especially lyric one, relies also on decorative aspects of a performance that contribute vitally to the aesthetic impact of the whole. In any case, the widespread economic crisis that has already led theatres to closure, like the much lamented New York City Opera, long famous for its modernistic productions as opposed to the conservative nearby Met, is a reality that theatre managers should and in many cases do already take into serious account.

### **The only sustainable way out**

All above, as already insinuated, does not necessarily imply the urge for a new conservatism. On the contrary, it underlines the multi – faceted and complex traces of every reality! What democracy of communication signifies, via the unimpeded accessibility of quasi first hand material, i.e. actual viewing of events, even in the most remote spot on earth, is an unprecedented emancipation of the spectator himself. Criticism's and cultural journalism's credibility are put under the severe but invaluable test of evaluation from anyone interested with reference to the original, even allowing for the reservations about technology interference already mentioned. That leads unavoidably to a de facto reassessment of reasoning priorities of the *genres* with regard for the public taste as well as the economic factors of a market economy, a

procedure which, despite preconceptions, may prove valuable for a healthier artistic attitude as well. An attitude that while not deifying public appeal, should nevertheless keep distance from the almost autistic seclusion of creators witnessed annoyingly in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A seclusion that led, at least in Europe, to the abuse of public financing, unduly directed to marginal events with limited or no public appeal whatsoever. And that often invoking theoretical references that, although unappealing to a public as addressor of the final product, were imposed with fanatical zeal and for long exercised a forbidding influence on other aesthetic views, not necessarily unimportant.

So, lastly, what counts for the evaluation of a production is its intelligence and aesthetic integrity as qualities detectable not only by critics but also by average connoisseurs of the *genre*. Modernist or traditionalist, a production should invest in its consistency, relevance and invention, without neglect of well informed and accordingly presented spectacle elements. Elements which form part of the composite product that an opera production has always been and which should be exploited as means of enhancement of the work's detailed meaning without alienating it from its own primeval essence. Such respect of the work can also prove profitable to the theatres that will increasingly have to be inventive and competitive promoters of their products in a boundless field of commercial opportunities.

In the end, we must be aware that any effort to keep performing arts under a protectionist dome is prone to fail. Human and institutional resourcefulness are thereupon called upon to make the best of this new freedom, bringing with it not only dangers, but benefits and opportunities as well. Foremost among them is the fresh air that it is likely to induce in dark rooms that have very often pursued cultural policies lacking transparency and public accountability, with favoritism and exclusions. In this respect new realities could be of assistance in reestablishing a really sustainable way of self regulation as regards artistic expression, one that, without compromising personal beliefs and aspirations, should also maintain a minimum of social reference to a certain public. Amen!

#### Works cited

1. Stelios, Koukounaras "Populism and Music, blues, rock, rebetico, 3 mythologies. 1 true, 2 false", Athens 2009.

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[1]Kyriakos Loukakos is considered to be a leading vocal connoisseur in Greece. From 1994 to 2010 he has commented and presented almost every opera feature for Greek Radio 3, including innumerable EBU direct relays and deferred transmissions, as well as an extensive series of vocal artists' and conductors' portraits. In 1997, commemorating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her passing, he presented a 27- hour step-by-step biographical radio homage to Maria Callas as well as the total amount of her recorded roles, for the first time in radio chronicles. Since 1998 he is the music critic of the Sunday edition of the Athens journal "I AVGI". He has contributed texts for practically every major musical institution of his country (Athens Concert Hall, Athens Festival, Thessaloniki Concert Hall, Greek Parliament Foundation, Athenaeum International Cultural Center, *European Cultural Centre of Delphi, etc.*) and has supervised a 7 - set CD edition of operas in rare archival recordings featuring distinguished soprano Vasso Papantoniou. In 2011 he contributed the extensive texts and overall supervision to a 4-cd set, published by "The Friends of Music Society" of the Athens Megaron Concert Hall and devoted to hitherto unpublished recordings from the archive of the late (mezzo) soprano Arda Mandikian, a close collaborator of Benjamin Britten and Sir Peter Pears as well as the Dido in both the first ever complete performance of Berlioz's "Les Troyens", in Oxford (1950), and the subsequent first complete recording of its first part under the baton of Hermann Scherchen. The set has been favourably reviewed by such prestigious international periodicals as International Record Review, Opera magazine, The Record Collector and Classical Recordings Quarterly and was accorded the 2012 "Gina Bachauer International Foundation" Record Prize. In 2005, 2009 and 2012 Dr. Loukakos has been elected Chairman of the Greek Drama and Music Critics' Association. Since 2013 he is Secretary General of the "The Maria Callas Scholarships Society".

[2]Stelios Koukounaras, "Populism and Music, blues, rock, rebetico, 3 mythologies. 1 true, 2 false", Athens 2009.



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