

POETS - GENRE CONQUERED

ABOUT THE BARD ANOMALY IN BULGARIAN ESTRADA

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When in 1965 the song contest with the unnecessarily long name "Songs for the Bulgarian Black Sea Coastline" came into being in Sunny Beach, hardly anyone imagined that in just a few years it would, firstly, change its name, eliminating any signs of national fixation, and secondly, become one of the most popular music festivals in Eastern Europe with an annual audience of nearly 200 million. With the new name "**The Golden Orpheus**", proposed by the popular artist Dechko Uzunov (Gadzhev, 2011: 63; Statelova, 2019: 73), also removes the thematic restriction; nonetheless, gulls, ships and Marinistic subjects never completely disappear from the texts. Beyond this, however "The Golden Orpheus" acquires the status of not just a fun event on the seashore¹ - it is conceptualized as the **supreme norm that prescribes the musical dimensions of good Bulgarian music during the communist regime**.

That is why the story of the Golden Orpheus is the story of Bulgarian music - official and institutionalized in the totalitarian period. The scandals or sensation² (both terms are fluid during the period I focus on) that invariably accompany the festival are interesting in themselves, but for this text it is more constructive to stress the personalistic character of the festival. The personalities involved in the 34-year history of the competition are the most prominent artists of the respective times in *this style of music* - probably not because there were no others, but because the officially recommended and approved artists stifled knowledge and comments about the qualitatively different-from-them artists. The names of Lili Ivanova, Emil Dimitrov and Toncho Rusev alone are probably communicative enough for both the Bulgarian reader and the foreign lover of Bulgarian culture, a significant part of which is the style in which the latter (and many others *like* them) create.

And what is *this* style and why is it so closely tied to the politics in Bulgaria? The most common name for the style has a Latin etymology - "**estrada**"³ : concert music intended for the masses. This is the reason why "estrada" is the official type of music in the republic - it is popular music in the literal sense, music of the people, of the masses. However, the foreign etymology and abstractness of the term make it more or less opaque to today's (and past's) interpreter. In this sense, attempts to interpret "estrada" through the definition of "entertaining music one can dance to" are still commendable. But breaking down the features of this type of music is not quite successful: it definitely *is* music, but if it involves "fun and dance", then which music involves "not-fun" and "not-dance"?

¹ VI. Gadzhev, for example, deconstructs The Golden Orpheus into seven "s" - summer, sea, sun, sex, song, sand and stage, and then explores how, united, these prerequisites determine the social, psychological, cognitive, aesthetic and ideological function of the contest (see Gadzhev, 2011: 9).

² I borrow the definitions from Marin Petrov's intriguing yellow book Bulgarian Estrada - Scandals and Sensations (see Petrov, 2009).

³ A more detailed etymology of the term is associated with Romance languages, for example Spanish, where "estrada" means two things: a "street", a "road", but also a low raised wooden platform ("estrado") on which skits are performed or public speeches are made.

It seems that both term and interpretation are not accurate enough, but though vague, they somehow imply exactness and this allows them to function as law.

The prominent dyad, for example, linking and at the same time differentiating between the fun and the dance, has one contribution of its own - splitting the final product into (at least) two initial sublevels: music and text. While music acts as the physical beginning, the occurrence of the dance, the text (or text and music together) is engaged in providing the mental satisfaction during the dance. This is probably why there are no instrumental music pieces, nor acappella, qualifying as "estrada". The canon of the genre insists on a third sublevel: a performer to embody and translate the ideas of the composer and the lyricist. It could not be otherwise: the "estrada" song insists on its multiplicative function - to be easily sung and memorized. Of course, a fourth substrate must be noted: the orchestrator who arranges the music for the various instruments used in the performance, so that it is pleasing to the unprofessional but discerning ear of the general public. The role of the orchestrator is often assumed by the composer.

It is this trinity or quaternity - the symbiosis between solo or duet performance, composition, arrangement and lyrics - that is at the heart of the mass appeal of estrada. The incipient struggle, characteristic of all Eastern Bloc countries, of communist power with the pop music as an extension of the jazz wave in bourgeois Western European cultures proves **that the people chose the "estrada" as representative of themselves not *because of* but *in spite of* the repressive totalitarian regime.** The genre's "aspiration (...) to freedom and spontaneity" (Statelova, 2019: 178), originally embodied in the genre, is evident even in Toncho Rusev's simple but unwavering argument in defence of the freedom of choice: "I like it, and the audience accepts it" (Grozeva, 1980: 79). It is no coincidence that by the mid-1960s the regime took a step back, partially assimilating the genre. Therefore, "estrada" must be studied both before and after its institutionalization, respectively in the context of *displays of* and *refusals of* free musical expression.

In these studies, if they existed, the central place would be occupied by the deviations, the scandals - especially with regard to the celebrated quaternity. The first transgression of this rule in Bulgaria happened as early as 1967, when a rock group won the Third Prize at the Golden Orpheus - Shturcite [The Crickets]⁴, whose name is a spoof of The Beatles, popular all over the world. It is highly likely that the prize had an ideological purpose beyond aesthetic appreciation: taming the western rock sound, controlling 'the magic of something ubiquitous that binds us all' (Popov, 2010: 261). However, since the main goal of this text is not to reflect on the overall history of Bulgarian music, I will focus on a different phenomenon - an offshoot of the pop culture of quaternity: **the Bulgarian bard culture.** The existence of this type of work has been justly recognized by the musicologist R. Statelova as "alternatively", and the expert points out several names of Bulgarian bards: **Mihail Belchev, Grisha Trifonov, Nedyalko Yordanov** (Statelova, 2019: 156-158). Undoubtedly, each of them have contributed to the development of the subgenre, especially N. Yordanov and M. Belchev (G. Trifonov is a more special case because he wrote songs for other singers and did not perform his own.)

The contribution of M. Belchev is extraordinary in terms of compositions, performances, and texts. The composer Panayot Slavchev says that "in most cases Mihail

⁴ Award data here and below are quoted from G. Genov "The Secrets of Estrada..." (see Genov, 2007).

Belchev is the author of the lyrics to the songs he sang⁵, but even if this is indeed true of the bard's first recordings, subsequently, although he never stopped singing his original songs, he seemed to exercise the "opposite" (according to P. Slavchev) case much more. His recognizable voice made his duet performances with Maria Neykova and Emilia Lazarova extremely popular, with the latter having also released a short-playing record, Mikhail Belchev and Emilia Lazarova (BTM 6523). These are his most successful duet performances in "The Orpheus" - First Prize for "Late Meetings" with M. Neykova (music by P. Stupel, lyrics by P. Karangov, arranged by D. Taralezhkov) in 1969 and Second Prize for "With Mama's Flame" with E. Lazarova (music and arrangement by P. Stupel, lyrics by K. Maslarski) in 1972. As a solo performer he won Second Prize in 1979 with "Furrow in the Sky" (music and arrangement by B. Karadimchev, t. G. Konstantinov). His bigger accomplishments were as a songwriter, but came later - only in 1980 with the brilliant performance of Vasil Naydenov "At First Light" (music and arrangement St. Dimitrov) won the Second Prize at "The Orpheus". It is noteworthy that the two 'roles' of the bard, if musicians can be the subject of categorization, too rarely, almost unnoticeable for the history of Bulgarian music, coincide; the evaluation in the chronology plane is implicit, punctuated with the prizes won at "The Golden Orpheus". In the case of M. Belchev, the voice of the singer and the voice of the poet never achieve unity, unable to speak as one and therefore forced to exist separately, each for himself and equally powerful.

N. Yordanov, on the other hand, is the most representative of the "alternative" bard-culture in the Bulgarian cultural and political environment from the middle of the last century onwards. His debut as a poet, of course, preceded the moment when "I felt in myself a strange ability" (Yordanov, 2023: 136) - the ability to think of melodies and transfer them into notes. The strange ability which inspired N. Yordanov's music will be the subject of the second part of this talk, so here we will omit this distinctive feature in favour of an imperative historical-theoretical clarification.

Noting the relation between the poet, the musician and the actor is the first step towards making sense of the bard phenomenon. The integration of these three creative fields generates a fourth concept - **a bard who can make music and perform his poems in front of an audience**. The phenomenon traces its origins to antiquity, when ancient reciters (such as Celtic bards, for example) drew on prescribed ethnocentric mythologemes and plots to create their semi-authored, semi-legendary poems. They were not national poets, because in antiquity there were no nations in the full sense of the term. Nations are a construct of the new age (late 18th century) when bards abandon authenticity and no longer wander around with a lyre like Homer to recite *before* an audience, but instead they sing *before* that audience and hence *before* the whole nation. This shift from the ancient sense is the reason the phrase "the bard of [whichever nation]" emerged, which is synonymous with a national poet; for Scotland this is Robert Burns, for the USA - Walt Whitman, for Bulgaria - Ivan Vazov, and so on. In the words of E. Whitley, the modern bard's work is a reflection of the "geopolitical boundaries (...) and the ideological mission" of the nation, following the nationalist principle of "one nation, one state" (Whitley, 2010: 9). **The music sense of the term 'bard'** has a connection with the general cultural sense, but in its more archaic dimension: part poet, singer, and actor, not necessarily committed to the cause of the nation or ideology to which he belongs.

Perhaps exactly the relative ideological void is the reason why bard-culture in Bulgaria and other socialist countries is conceptualized as "alternative" and semi-official.

⁵ Quoted on the cover of the plate "Mikhail Belchev" (VTM 6224).

On the one hand, bard-culture speaks to the masses as part of the pop genre, but on the other hand, it does not fully respect either the compositional or thematic rules of the genre! Even more curiously, the singer-poets are not always on their own: in fact, quite often they participate by the rules in the quaternity, sometimes as performers, other times as songwriters. A brilliant example of this is an evergreen from 1987, which presents the rare collaboration between two bards: one sings and the other writes the lyrics. The piece is called "Don't Grow Old, Love" (music and arrangement H. Agasyan), with Nedyalko Yordanov as the poet and Mihail Belchev as the performer:

*Love, do not grow old in our bodies, warm and meld.
Oh, uncertain tenderness still glimmers in our eyes
and the swords of past passions glistens suspiciously,
the clinging of a determined battle for an impossible happiness*
(Yordanov, 2002: 84).

The themes and motifs in the song assert R. Statelova's thesis that the sentimental "might be" the only national feature of Bulgarian estrada (Statelova, 2019: 171).

While the socialist cultural project did not officially condemn bard-culture for its ambivalence, it tacitly discredited it as **artistically defective**. In other words, the Bulgarian bards do not have much to show the world, and the closed society is paradoxically mostly directed towards showmanship (in the face of the class enemy). **"It was not at all accepted in our country then for poets to sing their songs,"** N. Yordanov confesses his "sin" in his autobiography "Life and Passion..." (Yordanov, 2023: 137). Contrary to the situation in Bulgaria, Western singer-songwriters are some of the most recognizable artists of their time: the French *chansonnières*, led by Charles Aznavour; or the 2016 Nobel Prize for Literature winner Bob Dylan. Even the USSR, to the immense displeasure of its leaders, emanated a powerful bard-culture in the face of Bulat Okudzhava, the legendary Vladimir Vysotsky and others. Compared to the above, *Bulgaria* does indeed occupy a losing position for a number of reasons - inferiority to the great nations, or fear of the emergence of dissidents - but in any case, the apparent decline of bard-culture in our country is noticeable.

But is this fair? From a musician's point of view: somewhat yes. The song-poems are as text-centric as possible, the word is the key, not the music. The musical composition has few chords, in a minor key, and the internal alternations are not particularly effective because they are functionally subordinate to the text. In this context, the point of the musical composition is the background and serves as a supplement to the text rather than as an expressive device in its own right: it emphasizes the primarily dramatic content of the text without calling attention to itself. The emphasis placed by the bards on the logos⁶ is **in conflict with the estrada axiom that "words (...) are empty"** (qtd. on the song "An order" - music and arrangement by T. Rusev, lyrics by N. Zaharieva, performed by M. Neykova). Bulgarian estrada insists not so much on the word as on the performance, feelings and sensations⁷. A great illustration of the principle is the confession of the poet P. Matev, transformed into a song (music by T. Rusev, arrangement by P. Velinov, sung by V. Marinov):

⁶ "Sometimes I think the lyrics get lost in the melody," admits N. Yordanov at his last big one-man-show in March 2024.

⁷ To explore the reasons for this would take up too much space, so the reader will have to be content with some evidence in the lyrics: "Fire of Love" (music by T. Rusev and "LZ", V. Vulchev, arrangement by M. Katsarov, performed by S. Katsarova, V. Naydenov and "LZ"); "The Girl with the Freckles" (music by M. Neykova, arrangement by D. Simeonov); "Repentance" (music by M. Aladjem, lyrics by Kr. Stanishev, arrangement by R. Boyadzhiev, performed by Y. Hristova); "Comparsita" (lyrics - E. Gesheva, arrangement by D. Getov, performed by Y. Hristova); "Shchurche" (music and arrangement by Naiden Andreev, lyrics by Damyan Damyanov, performed by L. Ivanova); "Your Hands" (music M. Aladjem, lyrics by D. Tsenov, arrangement by Iv. Peev, performed by L. Ivanova);

*I'm supposedly an adept in the Bulgarian word,
but I can't feel myself
how this strange speech of a man
full of happiness is born...
("Home-coming").*

No matter how adept you are at the spoken word, happiness is somewhere beyond it. This is why the text-centric songs of Bulgarian bards violate the principled concept of happiness in the People's Republic. That said, however, it does not negate the fact that their songs are undeniably noteworthy in their function as (sub)optimal pieces of socialist art. I find evidence in the songs of N. Yordanov which will be commented on in the second part of the current talk.

*Nikolay Maglov,
Plovdiv, 01.07.2024, 15:16*

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