

# **POETS - GENRES CONQUERED**

## **THE BARD NEDYALKO YORDANOV IN THE CONTEXT OF BULGARIAN ESTRADA**

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The present text is the second and final part of the study of the Bard anomaly coded semi-legitimately in the socialist cultural project (in its Bulgarian version) since the middle of the last century. The preceding text established the musical dimensions of the term bard, as distinct from both the ancient sense of a wandering poet and the modern notion of a national poet; significant to the distinction was the ideological void by which bards were condemned to reside in the periphery of the so-called legitimate socialist music, called estrada. In Bulgaria the song contest festival "The Golden Orpheus" is conceptualized as the official estrada institution responsible for the proper development - aesthetic and ideological - of musical taste in the country. Fundamental to the monolithic nature of the estrada style is the trinity or quaternity of composition, text, arrangement (often the work of the composer) and performance. This system functions as a law, and any deviations from it inevitably become "sensations" or "scandals" (see Petrov, 2009). Bulgarian bards, whose isolation is motivated by the hypothetical artistic defectiveness and unprofessionalism of their songs, are as such considered a deviation. However, although "alliterative" (Statelova, 2019: 156-158), some of them gained popularity by passing through the demanding song filter that denied them access to awards but not the right to exist. Of note here are the names of Mihail Belchev, Grisha Trifonov, but especially the most significant Bulgarian bard, Nedyalko Yordanov, who is the subject of the current talk. Before I proceed to the review of the poet's songwriting, let me focus on the music part of N. Yordanov's biography.

Nedyalko Asenov Yordanov was born in 1940 in the Black Sea port city of Burgas, which is located twenty kilometers from Sunny Beach - the place where The Golden Orpheus originated. The proximity of the Black Sea influenced the development not only of the festival<sup>1</sup>, but also of the future author. N. Yordanov reveals to us in one of his poems, turned into a popular song with the voice of Panayot Panayotov (music by K. Tashev, arrangement by A. Dragnev), that the lyrical self is:

*the boy who talks to the sea in  
some strange language  
("The Boy Who Talked to the Sea")*.<sup>2</sup>

Reconstructing the autobiographical grounds behind one of the most popular seaside estrada hits is a particularly productive venture, because, it turns out, the sea is actually the reason the boy became a poet. In his autobiography, *Life and Passion...*, the N. Yordanov tells the story of his first encounter with death - an accident, that "turned my life around, changed

<sup>1</sup> Keep in mind that one of the seven "s", which according to Vl. Gadzhev defines the phenomenon of "The Golden Orpheus" is precisely sea (Gadzhev, 2011: 9).

<sup>2</sup> All the quoted songs of N. Yordanov are based on the publication **Yordanov, Nedyalko. All my songs. Sofia: Labour and Right, 2002.**

my character, and made me a poet." This metamorphosis was caused by a risky childhood adventure; risky, of course, in the words of the 83-year-old writer. Looking back to his childhood, N. Yordanov takes us a full 70 years in the past to show us the then-Nedyalko, a 13-year-old who enters the Black Sea with his adventurer friends during a deadly storm. The expected happens: one of the children starts to drown, Nedyalko rushes down to rescue him, but in his panic the other child grabs the future poet by the throat, and thus both slowly start sinking. The small boys win the battle with nature by a landslide, with the help of the local fishermen, but the scar of the near-death experience remains forever: "the mad boy" becomes sad and melancholic, and "there is only one step from sadness to poetry" (Yordanov, 2023: 38).

The incident is an etiological account of the poet's birth. However, the general "strange language" adopted inspires an extraordinary number of creative spaces outside poetry. The diversity of N. Yordanov necessitates a classification, through which it becomes obvious that he is popular first of all as a **poet and singer, and only then as a playwright, documentarist, memoirist, etc.** It is not to say that literary contribution is measured by the pound, based on the amount of separate literary products a given genre or subgenre has put forward, but I am obliged to note that his poetry collections are now approaching their 50th anniversary - far more than his plays, for example, which are barely 23. Not every collection is filled with new poems, but the sheer frequency of publication - 49 in the last 60 years - tells us that N. Yordanov feels comfortable in the poetic craft. His confession that "the stage is my home", from the song-poem of the same name, is more than an explanation of his love for the theatre, where he worked for more than 30 years (in Burgas, and later in Sofia). It is also an acknowledgement of the pleasure of performing in front of an audience. The simultaneous affinity for the poetic word and for the mass audience is reflected in N. Yordanov's the lyrics.

The musician's creative process differs from that of the poet's. If the latter is somehow inherent, coming from within, unleashed by the baptism in the Black Sea, then the emergence of the musician is completely unprovoked. The mysterious genesis brings us again to N. Yordanov's childhood, when he recalls how on his way home from school he heard, through an open window, a melody on the radio which he later realized he could not only remember to perfection, but he could also reproduce it in notes. "And it turns out I can listen with notes. This is how I later began to compose my songs" (Yordanov, 2023: 136). Notes are a second-order sign system designed to decipher the source code, transferring primary auditory perception into secondary visual perception (cf. Barth, 1991: 48-49). The simultaneous overlay of the two disparate systems suggests the "I see music" metaphor - a phenomenon known as synesthesia.

Counter to the synaesthetic thesis is the suspicion with which N. Yordanov referred to own "songs", which he himself puts in quotation marks because he does not think "they are songs in the true, professional sense of the word" (Yordanov, 2023: 136). Perhaps it would be interesting to know, which the poet never does, what the 'real' songs are for him, and why his songs turn out to be different from the real ones. Naturally, I have a theory. Is it modesty alone that leads N. Yordanov. In fact, **the problem is not so much aesthetic, as the bard claims, as socio-cultural.** For example, "Once Upon a Time" is, according to the author's memory, his first "more serious" appearance in the field of music. It dates back to 1966 and is organically linked to N. Yordanov - the actress Ivana Djedjeva, who became his wife three years later, and still is to this day. The song is dedicated to her and as such it is wonderful:

*Cheerful autumn chestnuts  
glistened drizzling bright specs.  
Golden, square and fair -  
shining stars everywhere.*

The undeniable poetic qualities of this first "song", however, can hardly rival the mystical charm of "Dolphins" (music - D. Valchev, lyrics - D. Kerelezov, arrangement - D. Taralezhkov, performed by Y. Hristova), which won First Prize at the second edition of "The Golden Orpheus" in the same year<sup>3</sup>. Here is a song in the supposed "professional manner", with whose parameters the self-taught N. Yordanov, writing notes with their alphabetic transcriptions on pages from a notebook whose lines serve him as a pentoline, refuses to compare. **The rise of the singer N. Yordanov coincides with the rise and formalization of estrada in Bulgaria**, which gave birth to unprecedented and powerful works at that time; the comparison is really pointless - four professionals beat the self-taught dilettante.

Later, after the democratic changes in Bulgaria from 10 November 1989, when estrada began to disintegrate, and perished, N. Yordanov still decided to give his songwriting a chance. In 2010 he released five CDs of 89 original songs, accompanied by a songbook with the lyrics included. (There are actually six CDs, but the last one includes songs based on Hristo Fotev's poems.) This is the poet's greatest gesture to those of his works that had the (mis)fortune to be considered alternative during the socialist regime. But the compilation is not the only such gesture - back in 1998 N. Yordanov collected his songs, lyrical and satirical (according to the logic of the author's bipartition), under the title "118 songs" (published by "Labor and Rights")<sup>4</sup>. In the preface to the book N. Yordanov reports only two songs missing from his "collection": those written specifically for the theatre, but also **"without a few songs whose artistic value does not satisfy me"** (Yordanov, 1998: 5). One of the missing songs is 'Late Serenade' (music and arrangement N. Andreev, lyrics - N. Yordanov, performed by B. Kirov), which won First Prize at the "The Golden Orpheus" in 1975, arguably the competition's strongest year:

*You and I already know each other well,  
we live together in the smallest sacred union.  
Even if I'm bad, to me you don't yell,  
beloved wife, almost a sister.*

Valuable or not, the song was awarded by the official institution of "good" Bulgarian music with the First Prize. Only twice more N. Yordanov won "The Golden Orpheus" - Third Prize in 1973 with "Nadezhda" (m. At. Kosev, t. N. Yordanov, ar. R. Popov, s. B. Gudzhunov) and Grand Prize in 1993 with "Dedication" (music - H. Agasyan, lyrics - N. Yordanov, arrangement - Kr. Gyulmezov, performed by D. Nedelchev). It is hardly a coincidence that the bard's first success at the song contest, "Hope", was not included in his collection of songs. Both cases show that N. Yordanov does not trust the socialist song filter and prioritizes his personal aesthetics. It takes a lot of nerve to make such a move; all the more so when it is done by an absolute layman. And so N. Yordanov has been honored three times at "The Golden Orpheus", but in the selection process only the last text was truly his own; it is no

<sup>3</sup> Award data here and below is quoted from G. Genov "The Secrets of Estrada..." (see Genov, 2007: 274).

<sup>4</sup> The book has been reprinted several times since then (2002, 2005), but with a new title, covers and no preface.

coincidence that the text in question ("Dedication") was written in 1993, when both the political and the creative situation were very different.

**In 1997 N. Yordanov won the Lifetime Achievement Award of the "The Golden Orpheus".** The Lifetime Achievement Award was introduced in 1995 and is presented alongside the Song Awards. Its function is identification: to count "their own", the surviving "pieces" of the scattered socialist musical heritage; another signal of the looming death, which eventually befell the mighty forum in 1999. In 1997 the statuette was won by Nedyalko Yordanov, the singer Margarita Hranova and the composer Boris Karadimchev. Naturally, N. Yordanov won only as a lyricist - because according to the official Bulgarian estrada music, he was never a composer nor a performer. In 1997, however, after accepting his statuette from M. Belchev, the bard had a grand performance at prestigious Orpheus stage that was subsequently invariant to tours around the country (Yordanov, 2023: 345). I will pay special attention to one of the songs heard then, because it also explicates the bard's compositional talent, combined, as always, with strong lyrics.

"Colonel Stoyanov" is the most famous of the so-called satirical songs of Burgas, and perhaps his most popular song in general<sup>5</sup>. It hides quite a bit of lyricism despite its crude plot and cynical play on Shakespeare. Colonel Stoyanov is a "post-retirement reserve officer", a prestigious position in the context of the socialist regime. Democracy since November 10 has taken everything away from the colonel - he is not respected, he has no financial security and - above all - the love of his life has left him. His wife Juliet, unlike her husband, managed to adapt to the new order of the times because she "works with a computer" and "knows English"; Juliet is "able" to go every night to her "Romeo" (a climax in the inversion of Shakespeare's model), whom Colonel Stoyanov decides to punish in his own way after conducting an unsuccessful physical altercation with the guards at "Romeo's" villa in the wealthy Sofia district of Boyana:

*True, life laughed at me with its brutal grimace!  
I do not care for this life I crooned.  
And from the pub I took Captain Dimitrov from  
the reserve - a former sapper and a friend from  
the mining platoon.*

*In the evening drunk on all fours we crawled  
We loaded up with TNT - a kilo's worth of force  
destroyed the hated Boyana villa he could afford  
together with three Mercedes, two jeeps and a white Porsche.*

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that the song is not entirely original, but rather a Bulgarian version of the Russian song "Lieutenant Galitsyn", first recorded in 1977 by A. Severni; the most popular performance belongs to Al. Malinin (1995). The oral history of the song is much older than its recordings, and is associated with the historical military romance created by Major Georgi Goncharenko based on real-life White Guard officers he met in 1919 (Marianska, 2019). The comparative analysis between the Russian version and the Bulgarian version, without claiming to be exhaustive, shows that the innovations (alternations) introduced into the plot of the song by N. Yordanov are more significant than the borrowings, of which only one deserves to be singled out: the direct imperative address of the lyric speaker to his heroes, Lieutenant Galitsyn (Colonel Stoyanov) and Cornet Obolensky (Captain Dimitrov). Musically, the two versions correspond more closely, but the arrangement in N. Yordanov's orchestration is richer, especially in regards to the brass band.

The destruction of the topos of sin is a demiurgic act with an eschatological foundation known from the Old Testament tales of the Universal Flood and Lot. The temporal and spatial transposition of the ancient demonic spaces on the map of contemporary Bulgaria, on the one hand, parodies the famous cliché that describes the country as a "Garden of Eden"<sup>6</sup>, but on the other - hints at the indestructibility of sin. The signs of evil are concealed in images of exuberant material wealth: why does Romeo have *six* expensive cars? The decay of freedom into moral and social injustice makes the satiric songs of the bard bitter. And the most terrible thing is that **the smallest man**, such as Colonel Stoyanov and Captain Dimitrov, **suffers the most**. The righteous man (in the biblical sense of Noah and Lot) is dragged involuntarily into the criminal world, is forced out of righteous living, and every attempt to restore the lost order is invariably unsuccessful. Here, too, Colonel Stoyanov finds himself imprisoned along with his accomplice, Captain Dimitrov, but endures his sentence with an almost masochistic willingness. For prison actually turns out to be a more liberal heterotopia than the "free" world; paradox is indicative of Yordanov's assessment of the Bulgarian period known as Transition<sup>7</sup>, with the emphasis falling on the wrongful axiological substitution and the problem of guilt:

*so it is in today's world -  
one pulls the strings and walks free,  
while another pays the fee  
("Confession of a Thief").*

"Colonel Stoyanov" has its own charm: that of self sufficiency. This time, however, creative autarky has given birth to a brilliant composition and a wonderful arrangement - especially as far as the percussion and brass section are concerned, parodying the military code of honour, inappropriate for the time; mourning the absence of the Bulgarian "bushido".

The song is not inferior to the "official" hits and yet it is not one of them. Although it has a special status, "Colonel Stoyanov" is a favourite of the public and that is why N. Yordanov sings it as the closing song of his concerts. The exception is the last concert - in March 2024 - at which the bard presents the audience with an updated repertoire, drawn primarily from his new book of poems "I don't Feel Like Leaving..." (2024). The artist is completely alone on the wide stage of the Tears and Laughter Theatre, surrounded only by his books and pages full of memories. The intimate and private mise-en-scene adds to the overall melancholic message of the one-man show.

At the March recital, even N.Yordanov's constant accompanist was absent. Yordanov and his long-time partner in music and theatre - the **virtuoso composer Haigashod Agasyan**. To the talent of Heigo, as friends call him, N. Yordanov owes the success of some of the greatest hits based on his lyrics, such as "Do not grow old, love" and "Dedication", which have already been mentioned. Speaking of partners<sup>8</sup>, I can not overlook the **composer Konstantin Tashev**, who collaborated with N. Yordanov in the recording of the bard's only

<sup>6</sup> Not only in "Colonel Stoyanov" N. Yordanov allows himself irony towards the postulate of the utopian Bulgarian country. In "Miss Love!" he parodies the poem "Bulgaria" by his teacher - the communist poet G. Dzhagarov (see Yordanov, 2023: 61-63, 145), - beginning with praise of that "land like a human palm". In the bard's verse, the displacement is aimed at the defacement of beauty, at moral prostitution: 'a land like a cot'.

<sup>7</sup> According to the online Dictionary of the Bulgarian Language, "Transition" (in this sense) means "a period of radical socio-political and economic changes in this country and other Eastern European countries since 1989, associated with the establishment of a new, different from the previous, form of state-political organization of society, associated with democratic governance and market economy" (<https://ibl.bas.bg/rbe/lang/bg/%D0%9F%D1%80%D0%B5%D1%85%D0%BE%D0%B4/>).

<sup>8</sup> N. Yordanov jokes about his assistants that "I'm not a poet with a guitar either. I am still there, I am still alive" (2015).

two long-playing records. Both recordings date back to 1986, but while all the songs on "Do Not Grow Old, Love!" Poetry and Music by Nedyalko Yordanov" (BTA 11801) were written and performed by the author, "The Stage is My Home" (BTA 11802) N. Yordanov were performed in duets, among which one with his wife Yv. Djadjeva, one with his long-time friend Todor Kolev, Sava Piperov and others.

Nedyalko Yordanov today (2024) is 84 years old and very active on Facebook. Every day he posts something: a parable, a memory, a reflection; what he says in prose is almost always accompanied by a poem. Sometimes he sings, recording himself on a video. His publications are reserved for the small hours of the night: after or around midnight, when "you can't fall asleep anymore" and instead think "about the small man in the big universe"<sup>9</sup>. His address to the audience is beautiful and poetic - "dear friends" - betraying the professional language of the artist; proving that "the old thrill still creeps". The quote is from the poem "I don't Feel Like Leaving...", published in the poetry collection of the same name. I don't know where the "distant lands" are (quoted from the bard's latest song "Take my Soul"), where he does not feel like leaving for, nor do I know to whom he sent this prayer: "I will try... I will sing... More... But only here". But I wish the bard's promises had come true. Death and old age, expressed in a multitude of silent ellipses, linger in N. Yordanov's latest collection of poems, but a wise acknowledgement of the inevitable blocks out the heavy melancholy in favour of a still hopeful look to the future. A future in which, I hope, we will be reading, listening and watching the great artist Nedyalko Yordanov on stage (or on Facebook) for a long time to come.

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<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/EgsxEdnS3fa58iEE/> (Last accessed: 17.04.2024).