

## **REVIEW**

Prof Lyudmil Borisov Petkov, PhD

of dissertation work for

awarding educational and scientific degree Doctor

Professional field **8.3. Music and Dance Art**

Doctoral program **Music Studies and Music Art**

Department of Classical and Pop and Jazz Performing Arts

Faculty of Music Pedagogy

AMDFA "Prof Asen Diamandiev" – Plovdiv

Titled:

### **COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE CHINESE AND THE WESTERN OPERA ART**

Author: **Zhou Xiangfei**

Academic supervisor: Prof Toni Shekerdzhieva-Novak

#### **1. General presentation of the procedure and the materials presented for review**

The documentation of the procedure for the defense before a scientific jury of a dissertation work with author Zhou Xiangfei is completely in order. The following statutory mandatory documents are presented:

1. Order No RD-27-171/27.11.2024 for the appointment of a scientific jury by the Rector of AMDFA "Prof Asen Diamandiev" - Plovdiv.

2. Order No RD-27-165/05.11.2024 for discharge, based on the decision taken by the faculty council at the Faculty of Music Pedagogy - Protocol No 19/ 09.02.2022.

3. Dissertation work consisting of 162 pages. The structure of the work is Introduction, seven chapters, Conclusion, Contributions, Bibliography. List of scientific publications, Appendix. The cited bibliography includes 78 titles, 59 from Chinese and 19 from foreign sources.

4. The abstract is 65 pages long, including an introduction, seven chapters, conclusion, contributions, and bibliography.

5. List of the author's publications related to the dissertation work – 3 in total.

6. CV

#### **2. Brief biographical data**

Zhou Xiangfei is a tenor and a classical singing teacher at the Sichuan Conservatory of Music, China. He studied classical singing at the Sichuan Conservatory from 2002 to 2006. From 2009 to 2012, he completed a Master's degree with a thesis defense at the Sichuan Conservatory with a major in classical singing. He was named one of the top students in his class.

During his studies and teaching activities, he repeatedly participated in opera performances and won awards in various vocal competitions (gold medal from the European Vocal Music Competition - Italy; silver medal from the Chengdu Vocal Music Competition - China). He has

performed roles in the operas La Traviata, Carmen, Wang Guangqi and others. He is currently a doctoral student at the Academy of Music and Dance Art "Prof Asen Diamandiev" - Plovdiv with academic supervisor Prof Toni Dimitrova Shekerdzhieva-Novak.

### **3. Relevance of the topic and expediency of the research methods used to achieve the set goals, evaluation of the dissertation, recommendations and critical notes**

Zhou Xiangfei has a strong and enduring interest in and special attachment to the classical vocal singing and opera.

Zhou Xiangfei's dissertation is an ambitious and timely study, providing answers but also raising questions - a valuable territory for the researcher's critical thought. Here, the approach of the author, a representative of the new hegemon in the world politics and economics, to establish the Chinese art, in particular opera, as a subject of accelerated exchange in its integration with world culture is clearly revealed.

The rich information value of the study is dictated by the author's knowledge of the subtleties of the Chinese traditional culture, its features and internal mechanism of creation. The author uses clear, logical and well explained concepts. The national spirit and the national characteristics of the Chinese opera are paramount for the author and, having passed through the sieve of national culture, provide an understanding of the modern attitudes in the integration and mutual development of the Eastern and the Western cultures.

One of the merits of the work is the setting of boundaries in determining the content of the concept of Chinese opera. A huge amount of research work has been carried out, with all the scientific publications on the topic examined exceeding 195. The refinement of the historical context in such a complex musical genre as opera is set as a model of research, which successfully reflects the rich artistic meaning and aesthetic projection of this cultural phenomenon. The economic foundations for the emergence of the Chinese and the Western opera are analyzed in detail in their social system and political environment. In presenting the stereotypes of thinking that underlie the concepts behind the creation of Chinese and Western opera, the author thoroughly introduces us to the great Chinese thinkers Confucius, Lao Tzu, and Zhuangzi. Thus, the principles of impartiality, harmony, humility, modesty, neutrality, and generalization coordinately standardize the national direction of thinking. They create the picture of a global in scope and high in level spiritual existence. Against this background, the presentation of the Western culture as following expansionism is, to put it mildly, drowning in ideological shallows.

The aesthetic ideal reflected in both cultures in the direction of opera art is well reflected. The theses of the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius are used in emphasizing truth, goodness and beauty in the aesthetic ideal of opera. Regardless of the different trajectory of development, the reforms of Kr. V. Guk in this art, follow the similar ones – truth, simplicity and natural harmony. The author has outlined the characteristics of the Chinese art as ideologically expressive with its presentation through the "Book of Songs" with its specific images expressing the aspirations of the

subject's spirit as an artistic concept. The aestheticization of the image when recreating imaginary objects in their specificity, mental perspective and stylization is also well described. In the comparison of the artistic styles, figurative expressionism and a free, moderate and elegant style in Chinese art are noted against an exciting and unbridled one for the West.

Controlling the measure without deviations and without adopting an extreme position, as well as the balance as an important feature of the Chinese Taoism, are opposed to the unambiguous strength and struggle that promote their “unbridled national character”. I consider this a weak moment in relation to the problematic of comparison embedded in the work.

On the other hand, the author presents well the vocal technology and the strict requirements for the transition in the articulation of words, the parameters of the use of sound and techniques for opera singing, both in the Chinese opera and in the methodology of bel canto singing. In the process of research, the doctoral student does not lose sight of the comparison between the Chinese and the Western literature, approaching it with attention and punctual accuracy in the details.

An interesting section in the doctoral thesis is entitled “Typical Group Portraits and Unique Personalities”. Here the author’s ability to follow his own regulative principles is manifested, extracting the maximum from the premises preceding the conclusions. The characteristics of Chinese and Western tragedy are analyzed and arranged in balanced proportions with high cognitive use. In general, throughout the work, the author’s effort to clarify to the maximum extent the ideological aspects and the professional techniques used for the inclusion of the two operas in an architectural model of evaluation and knowledge is evident. The parallel study of the two operas develops into an organic whole, and in this movement the presence of the author's aesthetic sensitivity is palpable. In all elements of the dissertation, the individual presence and personal position, drawn from the depth of the researcher's creative and scientific essence, are visible.

Zhou Xiangfei actively dialogues with his subject, avoiding simple descriptions and easy solutions. His adherence to the historical accuracy of the research method, successfully combined with the methodology of comparative research, is admirable. The appeal to national self-consciousness is not isolated, but transformed in the direction of new realities in life and art.

The influence of the ancient Greek culture and its historical landmarks is fundamental to Zhou Xiangfei's work. Therefore, I would like to point out some inaccuracies that may have been made, which should be avoided in the future.

In summary:

- A. The story of Medea is not told in Macbeth (p. 100).
- B. The poet Homer was not born in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC (p. 107)
- C. It was not Heracles who brought the Trojan War to a victorious end (p. 108)
- D. Exupery did not exile Odysseus anywhere (p. 108)
- E. Jason did not kill Odysseus, his own son did it (p. 107)

F. Homer is the father of the ancient Greek epic from the period of the developed oral tradition, not of drama. According to ancient tradition, the poet Thespis is considered to be the father of drama (in particular, tragedy).

I would also note that in terms of interpretations related to the Christian religion, authentic and solid reliable sources should be used (e.g., *Summa Theologica* by Thomas Aquinas) in order to avoid the feeling of being schematic and superficial.

#### **4. Abstract**

The abstract truthfully presents the content of the main work and gives visibility to the characteristics of its semantic context.

### **CONCLUSION**

Doctoral candidate Zhou Xiangfei has found the right niche to apply his skills, knowledge and spirit. His view of the researched issues is realistic and his competence is unquestionable. I fully accept the contribution of the scientific work, including:

1. Expanding the horizons of the research on the opera music culture
2. Deepening the understanding of the cultural characteristics of the Chinese and the Western opera music.
3. Introducing new perspectives and methods for studying opera music culture.
4. Encourages the exchange and the mutual study of Chinese and Western opera.
5. Provides for the first time a scientific work with an emphasis on the comparative study of contemporary Chinese and Western opera art.

**Therefore, I propose to the esteemed scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree "DOCTOR" in professional field 8.3. Music and Dance Art, doctoral program Music Studies and Music Art to Zhou Xiangfei.**

I congratulate the doctoral candidate Zhou Xiangfei and his scientific supervisor Prof Toni Dimitrova Shekerdzhieva-Novak on the result of their joint work.

09.01.2025

Plovdiv

Reviewer

Prof Lyudmil Petkov