

## **OPINION**

By Assoc. Prof Rositsa Dimitrova Becheva,

New Bulgarian University,

on dissertation work for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"

in Professional direction 8.3. Music and Dance Art

Doctoral program Music Studies and Music Art

to **Xiangfei Zhou**

doctoral student at the Department of Classical and Pop and Jazz Performing Arts,

the Faculty of Music Pedagogy of AMDFA "Prof Asen Diamandiev"

on the topic:

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

Academic supervisor: Prof Toni Shekerdzhieva-Novak

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

The provided documents and materials under the procedure for review and defense of educational and scientific degree Doctor by Xiangfei Zhou, are complete and correct and meet the requirements of the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act and the Regulations for its implementation and the regulations for the terms and conditions for acquiring scientific degrees and holding academic positions in AMDFA "Prof Asen Diamandiev", Plovdiv.

The doctoral student has presented the following materials: CV, dissertation, abstract, list of publications on the topic of the dissertation, reference for contributions, enrollment order, discharging order.

#### **Brief biographical data for the candidate:**

Xiangfei Zhou, tenor, vocal teacher at the Sichuan Conservatory of Music, China.

For four years, from 2002 to 2006, he studied classical singing at the Sichuan Conservatory of Music in China, where he was named one of the top students in his class. From 2006 to 2009, he was a vocal teacher at the Sichuan Multinational Institute, where he taught classical singing and participated in concerts. From 2009 to 2012, he completed a Master's program at the Sichuan Conservatory in Classical Singing and defended his thesis. He subsequently remained at the Sichuan Conservatory, now as a teacher in classical singing.

During his studies and teaching activities, he repeatedly participated in opera performances. He won awards in various vocal competitions: a gold medal in the professional group of the Italian European Vocal Music Competition during his studies and work; a silver medal in the Chengdu Vocal Music Competition in China and participated in the operas La Traviata, Carmen, Wither, the Chinese operas of Wang Guangqi and other opera roles.

From 2022 - 2025. he is a doctoral student at AMDFA "Prof Asen Diamandiev", Plovdiv, in the program Music Studies and Music Art, with the academic supervisor Prof Toni Shekerdzhieva-Novak, and from November 2024 he was discharged with the right to defend.

### **Characterization and evaluation of the dissertation work and contributions**

The dissertation is 164 pages long, and its structure includes: introduction, six chapters, conclusion, contributions, bibliography (a total of 78 sources, of which 78 are foreign language titles), a list of scientific publications on the topic of the dissertation.

The topic of the presented research is relevant, directly related to the performing and pedagogical experience of the doctoral student.

The Introduction introduces the chosen thematic field, presents the reasons for choosing the topic, general information about the doctoral student, and outlines the goals and objectives of the research.

Emphasizing his enduring interest and special attachment to the classical vocal singing and opera, the author of the thesis defines the purpose of the work as: preparing a comparative study of the Chinese and the Western opera, analysis and "*a more in-depth study of the artistic characteristics and expressiveness of the Chinese and the Western opera*", deeper "*insight into the essence of the two opera schools, each of which is representative of its cultural horizon and possesses corresponding distinctive features*" (p. 2), defining the term "Chinese opera" in the dissertation, tracing the path of formation of new artistic forms, new opera techniques.

The author points out: "*we are not aware of the existence of a scientific work with an emphasis on the detailed and in-depth comparative study of contemporary Chinese and Western opera art*" (p.2), and in this regard he hopes that "*the dissertation work will contribute to a deeper understanding of the artistic characteristics and expressiveness of Chinese and Western opera art, to help reveal the rich traditions of the two opera schools and to stimulate the exchange and interaction between Chinese and Western stage music culture*"; while at the same time expecting "*thanks to the analysis, opera art will reveal new nuances of the multi-layered aesthetic concepts and the powerful humanistic spirit that breathes life into the magnificent and glorious civilizations of the East and the West*". (p.1).

The research methods include a review of the scientific literature on the topic, a study of articles in academic journals and newspapers, conference proceedings. Through the historical method used, comparative analysis and synthesis, generalizations and conclusions have been drawn.

**Chapter one, *Economic Foundations of the Origin and Development of the Chinese and the Western Opera***, offers an overview in the historical context of the initial state of the European economy at the time of the emergence of opera – the influence of ancient Italian economic traditions, the rapid development of the industrial and commercial economy in the Italian cities. In this regard, the author emphasizes that: "*the modern democratic political system lays the economic foundation, and also provides a favourable economic environment for the birth of the Italian opera art.*" (p.32).

Regarding the initial state of the Chinese economy during the period of the emergence of opera, the author of the study explains that the development of the Chinese capitalist industry and trade created economic prerequisites for the emergence and the birth of the New Culture Movement and the conception of the modern Chinese opera at the beginning of the 20th century.

In **chapter two, *The Political Origin and Development of the Chinese Opera and the Western Opera***, the research focus is on the initial state of the European politics during the period of the emergence of opera, the initial state of the Chinese politics during the period of the emergence of opera.

In **chapter three. *The Cultural Origin and Development of the Chinese Opera and the Western Opera***, the subject of analysis is the initial state of the European culture during the period of the emergence of opera and the initial state of the Chinese culture during the period of the emergence of opera.

The author of the study emphasizes that: "*The late 19th century and the early 20th century was a key period for China's transition from traditional to modern.*" (p.59). "*In the 1920s, the Chinese music began to truly enter the historical period of professional music creation. Contemporary Sino-European cultural exchange brought new musical theories and creative techniques for the birth of the Chinese opera.*" (p.61).

In **chapter four, "*Cultural Genes*" and *Ways of Thinking in the Chinese and the Western Opera Culture***, attention is drawn to the Chinese and the Western opera – the different stereotypes of thinking, the characteristic "cultural genes" of Chinese traditional culture. It is pointed out that "*the essence of the concept of harmony between people is the Chinese social, ethical and political system.*" (cited p.66).

**Chapter five, *Artistic Aesthetics and Artistic Expressiveness in the Chinese and the Western Opera***, traces various cultural phenomena and aesthetic traditions, aesthetic ideals: the beauty of goodness and true beauty, artistic style: neutralization and enthusiasm.

The author emphasizes that "the aesthetics of Chinese art regards "good" as beauty," "*in artistic creation, the works of Chinese opera integrate "goodness" and "beauty"* (p.78). In comparison – "*the Western opera focuses on the beauty of "truth."*" (p.79)

Conclusions are presented: "*Due to the differences in the aesthetic ideals - "unity between beauty and goodness" and "unity between beauty and truth", the Chinese prefer "beauty and goodness" - "aesthetics in emotion". The Western people prefer "beauty and truth" - "aesthetics in form", which leads to different characteristics in the art of the East and the West, with the Chinese art being an expressive and visual art, while the Western art is realistic and reproductive.*" (p.82)

**Chapter six, *Comparison between Chinese and Western Literature***, offers a comparative analysis between: the literary characteristics of the Chinese and the Western opera and drama, typical group portraits and unique personalities: group identity and individual orientation, characteristics of Chinese and Western tragedies: the beauty of harmony and the spirit of tragedy. The author of the

study emphasizes that: "*The Chinese opera inherits the traditions of ideological expressiveness of the Chinese art and is also an ideological expressive art*" (Abstract, p.32)

**Chapter seven, *The Integration and Development of Chinese and Western Opera Culture through Exchange***, examines the processes of interaction between the Western opera music culture and the opera culture in China, the interaction and interpenetration of elements between musical cultures - in the two-way cultural exchange.

In this regard, this chapter pays special attention to the work of musicians – artists such as: *Li Jinhui, who "from 1920 to 1929 created twelve children's musicals such as "The Sparrow and the Child" and "The Grape Fairy", which were performed many times,...which are considered embryonic works of Chinese opera."*, *Yen Shushi, who "created original operas such as "High Mountains and Flowing Waters" (1927), "Paradise in Dreams" (1928), "Tears of a Madman" (1929) and "The Bell Ringing of a Lonely Island" (1930). He used a freer folk singing style instead of the classical opera technique of the West, bel canto, while at the same time developing the vocal possibilities of opera such as solos, duets, choirs, and others, combining the traditions of the Eastern and the Western opera art."* (p.136). The importance of the opera "The White-Haired Woman" created in 1945 is highlighted, in which "*Chinese and Western music are coordinated and developed in a balanced way. The successful creation and performance of "The White-Haired Woman" marks the official formation of the Chinese opera genre with Chinese characteristics, which officially takes root in China and begins to develop independently.*" (p.137)

The **Conclusion** summarizes the main conclusions and recommendations.

#### **Contributions and significance of the scientific work and publications on its topic**

I agree with the contributions of the work listed by the doctoral student, including:

1. "The dissertation combines multidisciplinary theories and methods, such as cultural studies, musicology, and aesthetics, by conducting a systematic and in-depth study of the Chinese and the Western opera music culture. It achieves a series of innovative research results."
2. "This dissertation overcomes the limitations of previous studies that only focus on opera music culture in a single cultural environment, by placing the opera music culture of China and the Western world within the framework of cross-cultural comparison, revealing the differences and similarities in the historical roots, artistic characteristics, aesthetic concepts and other aspects of the opera music culture in the East and the West. The study provides new perspectives and methods for the study of opera music culture."

The three publications presented on the topic of the dissertation meet the requirements in terms of content.

The abstract consists of 64 pages and conveys the nature of the doctoral work.

The reviewed dissertation is an in-depth theoretical study, with a contribution value, with possibilities for practical applicability.

In conclusion:

**I give my positive assessment** to Xiangfei Zhou's dissertation work *Comparative Study of the Chinese and the Western Opera Art* in relation to its contributions of scientific and applied qualities. I believe that the dissertation work of the doctoral student fully meets the requirements for obtaining the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in professional field 8.3."Music and Dance Art under the Development of the Academic Staff of the Republic of Bulgaria Act and I propose to the respected scientific jury that it be awarded to him.

9.01.2025, Sofia

Assoc. Prof Rositsa Becheva