Remembering Gencho Gaytandjiev (1935-2010): On the impact of popular music studies in Bulgarian schools

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ABSTRACT
Gencho Gaytandjiev, a pioneer in Bulgarian popular music studies, innovator in musical pedagogy, scholar, journalist, university teacher, and the author of numerous scholarly books and music text books, was among those revolutionary individuals who back in the 1970s began to challenge the conservative realm of traditional musicology that dominated Bulgarian music scholarship. This paper focuses on his pedagogical concept developed in the specific socio-cultural context within Bulgarian society and applied over the last four decades through multifaceted activities, including in the series of music text books designed for all grades of the Bulgarian general school. Aside from the fact that Gaytandjiev contributed a great deal to breaking the mainstream musicology in order to meet actual social demands, his pedagogical views stimulated the advanced humanitarian understanding that education, especially in the field of arts, must contribute to the development of thinking individuals able to appreciate various artistic values. By taking a closer look at the way such democratic, pluralistic and dialogical attitudes were introduced in the mass Bulgarian school, attention will be drawn also to the specific impact of popular music studies on Bulgarian society.

Keywords: music; pedagogy; democracy; pluralism; Bulgarian school.
This paper is intended to be a tribute to influential IASPM member Gencho Gaytandjieva, a pioneer in popular music studies in Bulgaria who was among those revolutionary individuals who back in the 1970s began to challenge the conservative realm of traditional musicology which dominated Bulgarian music scholarship. It is no coincidence that his motives to develop knowledge about popular music were prompted by the growing demand in music education, which stimulated as well the foundation of IASPM. An innovator in the practice of musical pedagogy as well as the author of numerous books, including the first academic book on popular music in Bulgaria (Gaytandjieva 1990), Gencho Gaytandjieva was the leading figure in the creation of a series of music text books, designed for all grades of the Bulgarian general school.

The concept of these text books was developed and applied over the last few decades. Not surprisingly, they reflected, in a way, some of the issues discussed in popular music studies (Gaytandjieva 1997). Aside from the fact that Gaytandjieva helped a great deal in breaking the dominance of mainstream traditional musicology in order to meet actual socio-cultural demands, his pedagogical views stimulated advanced humanitarian understanding that education, especially in the field of arts, must serve and contribute to the development of thinking individuals able to appreciate various artistic and cultural values. This basic understanding, which clearly embraces pluralism and democratic attitudes, lies at the bottom of his inno-
Music textbooks for whom?
Our textbooks for any grade cover all mandatory points concerning the official educational requirements [...] Relying on our multilayered professional competence and solid professional experience, we keep using the right to offer our own original and up-to-date interpretation of the program requirements and our own methodical solutions – in regard to the most effective realization of those requirements.
Not for a moment do we forget three especially important things:
a) The most important aspect in a music textbook is the very music in it;
b) We create textbooks not for any “elite” children or for specialized classes but for the mass general school;
c) Children and teenagers who will use our textbooks and listen to the music of our CDs will realize themselves as individuals not in the time of our past childhood but tomorrow, in the twenty first century.

Educating thinking individuals
The most important task of the teacher is to activate and develop constantly not any skills for reproducing facts and definitions, but rather thinking, free of prejudices and taboos; thinking whose best partners, especially in childhood, are the fantasy and imagination.

Pluralism in music – pluralism in modern civic society
We try to open pupils’ ears for the whole variety of musics in the hope that musical pluralism may become a platform for pluralistic society

Understanding kids – avoiding childishness
We keep considering the fact that today’s forms of music functioning depend on a variety of new factors in the development of cultural processes. Perhaps the most important among them refer to the capital changes in cultural communication – first of all, the expansion of the electronic media in contemporary social life. Modern school must keep attention to this factor, especially when it comes to disciplines which deal with art and culture. This is why, while selecting music material for our textbooks, we do not limit our choice within the field of so-called ‘children’s music’, used in the practice of traditional music pedagogy. This approach lies on serious enough arguments which, we hope, do not need additional explanation.

Questioning aesthetic hierarchy as a reflection of the high – low debate
We gradually draw the pupils’ attention to three axioms of contemporary pluralistic cultural communication and their significant reflections in the field of education:
a) The right of anybody, including those of the rising generation, to own a personal taste and personal preferences in music, arts and culture;
b) While standing up for particular music preferences, anybody must be tolerant to the choice of others;
c) Nobody, even the best expert, has the right to define what pupils should like or should not like.

PLEASURE (PLAYFULNESS AND ATTRACTIVENESS OF MUSIC AND OF THE LEARNING PROCESS)
Communicativeness, attractiveness and originality of our textbooks have particular value for us. This is why we try to realize these qualities in the broadest sense: from the visual design to the language and style used for presenting the lessons and even the formulations of the educational tasks. We believe that curiosity and discovery during childhood are the main motivation factors. If we fail to provoke curiosity and the children’s interests, we fail to achieve any educational results.

THE ROLE OF HUMOUR AND IRONY
Jokes, irony and humour do not only make people laugh but point to understanding the metaphor, the second meaning in art and life. This is why we try to make children laugh. And hope that our colleagues share the understanding that such an approach is not ‘harmful’, ‘unserious’ or ‘non-pedagogical.

INTEGRAL APPROACH (DEVELOPING ARTISTIC POTENTIAL OF THE CHILDREN IN A COMPLEX MANNER)
We give particular attention to the integral approach in the process of tuition. This is why we create in the textbooks a large web of multi-aspect-links with the tuition in other disciplines and with the general educational mission of the teacher and the school.

LISTENING, DISCUSSION AND PERFORMING MUSIC IN THE CLASS ROOM

VISUAL DESIGN (AS A PLAYFUL TOOL IN MOBILIZING MEANING)

I would point out that even though meeting mandatory requirements, approved by the Bulgarian Ministry of Education, Gaytandjiev takes the responsibility to offer an original and up-to-date interpretation of the program requirements. Of significant importance here is certainly the address. He points out (Gaytandjiev et al. 2008, p. 5) that “we create textbooks not for any ‘élite’ children but for the mass general school”, and for children “who will realize themselves as individuals not in the time of our past childhood but tomorrow, in the twenty first century”. Long before pluralism became a fashionable concept within the Bulgarian cultural context after the democratic changes in 1989, he was looking for adequate forms to open pupils’ ears literally to the whole variety of musics. Also, he was looking for effective forms to stimulate the development of thinking individuals, able to develop not any
particular skills for the blank reproducing of historical facts or definitions, but free of prejudices and clichés, with independent attitudes towards different phenomena in music and culture. He understood children’s nature but avoided childishness. He relied on the good traditions of mass musical education but definitely rejected the damaging shadow of conservatism. He was looking for the breadth of knowledge but at the same time insisted on reducing the detailed study of musical notation, unnecessary for the mass general school.

As a popular music scholar Gaytandjiev was particularly keen on giving “the right of anybody, including those of the young generation, to develop a personal taste and personal preferences in music, arts and culture”. He was pleading for *playfulness and attractiveness* of the learning process, considering the changes of today’s mentality and sensitivity. He was also arguing for the need of an *integral approach* which may develop the natural inner artistic potential of the children through references concerning connections between different arts. At the same time, he particularly appreciated the sense of humour implied in music and also in the way musical material must be presented – a quality which certainly requires particular inventiveness in terms of the verbal style of lesson delivery. As one of his PhD students stated,

> Following Gencho in the last years of his life, I saw how bravely he defended his pedagogical mission: making musical pluralism a platform for pluralistic society. Not by chance, he particularly believed in the power of musical irony to promote pluralist thinking. Irony, he used to tell me, was the greatest enemy of totalitarianism. Totalitarianism dictated that each symbol had only one fixed meaning; irony undermined this imposition by highlighting the playfulness and multiple meanings of cultural symbols [...] This is why he appreciated so much the language of humour and irony at any musical and not only musical level. (Livni 2010, p. 221)

Behind these general points, Gaytandjiev never stopped undertaking polemics on a variety of educational questions. He asked: should music education today, in the twenty first century, keep following literally those traditional boundaries established under the European ethnocentric influence decades ago? Should the music knowledge of today’s teenagers be limited to the conservative barriers of only those canons in music which have been historically established? Or should students be exposed to a knowledge of everything which is blooming today in the field of music? Should teenagers, whose everyday lives are exposed to a huge variety of music disseminated by a variety of media, and who browse tirelessly on the Internet, be familiar with questions of how music functions today? And after all, should we, the adult experts, impose our personal “yes” or “no” as the only truthful criteria for “good” and “bad” in music? Wouldn’t such an imposition contradict the flags of pluralism and liberal attitudes in art which otherwise we eagerly embrace? Wouldn’t such an educational policy freeze people’s curiosity and desire to make aesthetic choices for themselves, emphasising, under the flag of a predominant cultural prestige, the
stereotyped, traditionally established aesthetic canons, elaborated in the dogmatic musical pedagogy?

To illustrate how these and other rhetorical questions are applied in practice, I would point to one of the music text books designed for the ninth grade in Bulgarian mass high school (Gaytandjiev et al. 2001). Its content is thematically organized under the theme Music / Culture / Society, which clearly shows educational priorities, elaborated according to the well advanced educational program, approved in 2000 by the Bulgarian Ministry of Education. By saying “well advanced”, I mean its potential in terms of understanding music not just as a pleasant and purely emotional thing but also as a cultural thing, as an artistic form which may inform more on the richness and flexibility of music as a cultural activity, along with an awareness of those fundamental psychological changes and new paradigms prompted by the modern media age. Main chapters here include issues devoted to music and media, music industry, audiences, folk culture, popular music in the twentieth century, globalization and local differences, among others.

I am not going into detail about this educational set. I would only briefly point to the basic concept implied in the whole educational set which includes (as all other sets for different grades) a text book, a guide for the teachers, plus three CDs with music for performing and music for listening and discussion (more than one hundred pieces). Again, the concept here is based on the idea of pluralism seen not just as a hot cliché in the modern cultural vocabulary, but as a matter of creative attitude concerning cultural understandings at a more general level. Second, the book is based on the understanding of music as communication. In general, it shows how cultures function, how they express themselves, how they travel, how they mix and grow. It offers students a complex understanding of the cultural, social, economic and political world they inhabit. The large music panorama recommended for performing and discussing draws from the classical repertoire, popular musics, and a wide vista of folk musics from different parts of the world.

None of the “recommended for discussion” musical examples are studied out of their context. All examples are intended to be commented upon in the context of one or more of the sixteen educational units. Besides, both teachers and pupils are encouraged to offer additional material in interpreting the main educational topics. What is worthy to mention is that none of these examples are deliberately labelled as necessarily “good” or “bad” music. Instead, students are encouraged to discuss and argue their own likes and dislikes, and also to discover by themselves the wisdom of intercultural tolerance, the wisdom to understand those who share different tastes and different opinions. To make my point clear, I will quote a short paragraph from the book’s introduction, which reads:

On the following pages you will hear about lots of different musics. Many kinds of musics. Ones that you may like and ones that you may not like. What matters here refers to the fact that all of them live (or have lived) around us. It means they function, they communicate something to somebody. Sometimes among
large groups of people. And this is a good enough reason for why we shouldn’t be silent of them. (Gaytandjiev et al. 2001, p. 3)

One of the main challenges the authors refer to is the style of delivering such themes. How does one talk to teenagers about “difficult” questions and without simplifying issues like cultural globalization, music and media, music and industry, music and cultural identity, subcultures, or, say, hybridity in music? Indeed, the authors’ approach puts emphasis on the students’ positive motivation and on stimulating their desire for a live dialogue on both the basic educational themes and the recommended for discussion music examples. The two sides of this dialogue – teachers and students – are thought of as equally important participants in a conversation which is supposed to be mutually useful. Thus, stylistically, the presentation of the educational material relies on the tools of one rather dialogical and friendly form. I should point out as well that this style relies significantly on the sense of humour – of the authors, of the teachers, and, certainly first of all, of the pupils.

However, while the pedagogical style here was apparently well accepted and well understood by students, teachers sometime met difficulties in getting the educational point. More than once, during my meetings with music teachers, I’ve been asked: “Okay, Ms. Levy, everything is fine – but what, finally, are we supposed to impose on the pupils? What, after all, are the real values our pupils must learn and remember?”

This brings me to the fact that musical pedagogy, as a university discipline, is taught at present in many Bulgarian universities, even though it turns out to be far behind the program already in high schools. In most cases, music teachers, who graduated from universities, turn out to be not quite prepared to teach music as culture. Paradoxically enough, unlike their teachers, students seem to be much more open and prepared as well as much more curious to pose and discuss such “difficult” questions. Apparently, music pedagogy, as taught at university level, still re-produces some out-of-date concepts which – even though being useful in past cultural realities – do not quite care about the developments of modern culture.

One can ask: why is there this contradiction? Who has the guts to face the social demands of education in art and undertake adequate changes?

It is perhaps not by chance that a popular music colleague (Barber-Kersovan 2002), while looking at the 9th grade textbook, apparently had no problem in getting the textbook message. She said:

I love it, every page, though I cannot really understand the text. But I can probably understand the message via pictures: We live in a rich, fantastic and pluralistic world of different musical styles and traditions, all of them are available to us via media. Is that correct?... And if yes, what a difference to our music education which still thinks that its basic aim is, how to pin down the kids for three hours in order to force down their throats an opera they do not like! Very well done and very courageous!!!
Indeed, Gencho Gaytandjieiev had the guts and the courage to break conservative pedagogical canons and clichés, and to introduce and stand up for new democratic concepts in a fascinating, appealing way. He understood that living in the modern world (or, if you prefer, in the “global village”), where nothing is far anymore, requires adequate educational strategies, including in the field of music and culture. He looked at the future as a humanist and knew how to educate through the power of music citizens who would realize well enough that the world is a small place and we should all live together in it, appreciating each other’s differences. His contribution to music education left meaningful traces. The question that remains open is whether his heritage finds broad-minded successors today.

ENDNOTES

1. Developed and applied over the last two decades, this pedagogical concept was only published in Gaytandjieiev et al. 2008.

REFERENCES