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Педагогически факултет



**LEADING PRODUCTION PRINCIPLES AND
APPROACHES IN PUBLICATIONS BY BULGARIAN
OPERA DIRECTORS**

AUTHOR'S ABSTRACT
OF A DISSERTATION
FOR OBTAINING THE ACADEMIC DEGREE
“DOCTOR OF SCIENCES”

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Field of Higher Education: 8. ARTS
Professional Field: 8.3.MUSICAL AND DANCE ARTS
Musicology and Musical Art

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INTRODUCTION

Relevance of the Topic

Contemporary opera directing is increasingly asserting its key position in the interpretative chain of the musical stage art: composer – work – staging/performance team – rehearsal process – stage realization. After a long historical period in the development of opera as an independent musical and theatrical genre, during which the figure of the singer—and later the conductor—predominated, today the director is unequivocally recognized as an equal creative force. The director brings a specific artistic vision to each opera production, along with conceptual staging ideas for its stage realization. Within this general historical and situational context, the Bulgarian opera stage is no exception. From its inception to the present day, it has been a space of diverse aesthetic influences, combined with local compositional, stylistic, and performance traditions, but also marked by persistent methodological conflicts concerning the leading element in opera—the musical or the dramatic.

At the same time, there is a notable lack of in-depth research that considers directorial thinking as a subject of scholarly interest in its own right. What is more, the written legacy of Bulgarian opera directors—in the form of articles, critical essays, memoirs, or journalistic texts—remains insufficiently explored in the field of contemporary music theory, and is often entirely unfamiliar to the broader academic community.

This study aims to fill precisely this significant gap by identifying the fundamental aesthetic and methodological views of prominent Bulgarian opera directors from the beginning of the 20th century to the present day—based on a specific approach. More precisely, it does so through analytical tracing and comparison of their representative works relevant to the subject: books, monographs, and critical essays published in various formats and time periods. The rationale for focusing on this category of original printed documents lies in the intent to examine the directorial mindset of a representative group of opera directors (from all creative generations) from their subjective perspectives—thus gaining deeper insight into the world of their artistic ideas and pursuits.

Through the deliberate "filtering" of a wide and chronologically diverse body of published material, it is indeed possible to extract—either directly or indirectly—the semantic and aesthetic trajectories of individual directorial work, trace the evolution of directors' views, and ultimately construct a

relatively comprehensive picture of the trends in the development of opera directing in Bulgaria. This process can also highlight relevant, forward-looking research conclusions.

It is also worth recalling that the profession of opera director emerged relatively late in the more than four-hundred-year history of opera theatre. However, in Bulgaria—despite the fact that opera as an art form appeared only in the first decade of the 20th century—the figure of the opera director was established from the very beginning as an equal component within the interpretative engine: singer–conductor–director.

The relevance of the topic is further underscored by the fact that, in the early decades of the 21st century, Bulgarian opera theatre has increasingly distanced itself from in-depth exploration of the operatic work—not so much from the perspective of traditional formal-stylistic musicological analysis, but rather in terms of its contemporary stage interpretation and realization. At the same time, the aesthetic paradigm of the operatic canon in today's opera world—particularly the duality of the musical and the theatrical—has increasingly become a site of irreconcilable aesthetic conflicts.

It is precisely the tracing of the historical development—and, more importantly, the professionalization—of opera directing in Bulgaria (alongside a parallel analysis of style and directorial creative concepts within the context of the evolution of stage means for artistic interpretation) that helps shape an understanding of the contemporary paradigms in interpreting the operatic repertoire. This includes the methodological principles and the broad, multidirectional nature of directorial work involved in conceptualizing and translating musical dramaturgy for the stage. This is especially important given that, in contemporary opera, the opposition between the musical and the theatrical—stemming from the inherent artistic specifics of opera as a genre—has reached a particularly sharp and critical point.

Based on my personal observations, the transformations in the aesthetics of opera productions from the late 20th to the early 21st century have largely been carried out by directors who transitioned from dramatic theatre to opera. This has significantly influenced their creative thinking: they generally understand their work as a maximal expansion of the dramatic-theatrical dimension. It is therefore reasonable to assume that this phenomenon represents an attempt at staging reform within opera aesthetics, driven by the ideals of drama. However, opera—as a musical-theatrical form whose

aesthetics are ontologically shaped by the primacy of the musical element—requires a specific kind of theatricalization, one that is fundamentally different from that of drama and its stage presentation.

A priori, I must emphasize that in the analytical examination of the work of a representative group of Bulgarian opera directors—and the retrospective evaluation of their staging innovations within the development of Bulgarian opera directing—it becomes inevitable to conclude that the Bulgarian opera theatre, as a cultural institution, is primarily engaged in the rethinking of the classical repertoire. It is precisely this repertoire—both in the national and global context—that remains the object of directorial experimentation, involving a series of successful and less successful attempts to update the content of operatic works from different eras and styles, aiming to transform them into socially relevant events.

The individual directorial signature—in the context of its time and the development of European opera theatre—has made a meaningful contribution to the evolution of staging principles and approaches. These are based on the director's methodology in interpreting the synthetic nature of musical stage art.

Degree of Scholarly Research

The comprehensive topic of the professional qualifications (with biographical references), significance, and repertoire-directorial contributions of opera directors in the historical development of Bulgarian opera theatre (spanning the period 1890–2010) has been thoroughly studied primarily in the musicological works—both individual and collective—of Prof. Dr. of Arts Rozalia Bix and the “Musical Theatre” Research Group, which she led for several decades at the Institute of Art Studies / Institute of Arts Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS). These multivolume academic publications—duly cited in the bibliography of the present dissertation—serve as the foundational point of reference for the still unexplored specialized topic of opera direction, approached here through a focused analysis of directorial publications, treated as documentary theoretical sources.

In this sense, the specifically profiled theme of the dissertation offers a new, text-centered and comparative approach to Bulgarian opera directing, in which the theoretical views of the directors themselves are treated as a primary lens for reconstructing their directorial methodology and stage aesthetics.

Problem Argumentation

The subject of this research logically continues and deepens the exploration of directorial issues previously addressed in my dissertation work titled “*The Specificity of Directorial Work in the Construction of the Opera Performance and the Musical-Stage Image.*” That work examined the methodological features of directing within the operatic theatre, derived from the traditional specifics of the musical-stage genre itself.

Again, I must emphasize that in contemporary staging practice, there is a pronounced conflict between the composer’s score (or libretto) and the director’s interpretation—specifically, between the logic of the musical dramaturgy and the structural concept of the staging. This kind of discrepancy often leads to significant issues in the coherent and meaningful construction of the stage performance. From this same perspective, the presence of directors in our opera theatre who lack academic musical training further exacerbates these contradictions. Hence, there arises the need for an in-depth study of the traditional staging principles formed throughout the 20th century—principles that are, in fact, encoded in the original texts of established opera directors who are simultaneously artists and thinkers.

Based on thorough archival research and a historical review of theoretical works and various publications by Bulgarian opera directors, the present study outlines the leading principles and approaches of their interpretive-directorial toolkit. The analytical aim is to compare and summarize not only specific creative-staging components of the methodological process but also to offer forward-looking insights into the key role and current position of Bulgarian directors within the repertoire-driven opera theatre.

This work purposefully emphasizes the fundamental features of the methodology and directorial approaches of selected key figures, tracing processes in their genre-stylistic choices, the development of stage and staging tools, with reflections on how operatic specificity influences their stage solutions. The study also synthesizes key issues concerning directorial interpretation.

Object of Study

Bulgarian opera directing as an interpretive practice and aesthetic system.

Subject of Study

The methodological and genre-stylistic principles formulated in theoretical publications by a representative group of Bulgarian opera directors from the early 20th century to the early 21st century. This group includes: Dragomir Kazakov, Konstantin Mihaylov-Stoyan, Petar Raychev, Hristo (Khityo) Popov, Iliya Arnaudov, Khrisan Tsankov, Dragan Kardzhiev, Evgeni Nemirov, Petar Shturbanov, Mihail Hadzhimishev, Stefan Trifonov, Emil Boshnakov, Svetozar Donev, Pavel Gerdzhikov, Rumen Neykov, Plamen Kartaloff, Vanya Bachvarova.

Research Aims

To thoroughly trace and systematize the aesthetic and methodological views of leading Bulgarian opera directors from the early 20th century to the present, through analysis of their theoretical publications. The goal is to extract a consistent staging paradigm and to define the current problems and perspectives of national opera directing—thus outlining a potential new domain of scholarly research: the methodological and practical issues of directing in the Bulgarian opera theatre.

Research Hypothesis

A systematic analysis of the theoretical publications by Bulgarian opera directors from the early 20th century to the present allows the identification of a stable directorial methodology that reflects the specific synthesis of the musical and theatrical elements of the genre and offers a model for the contemporary interpretation of the operatic repertoire in both national and European contexts.

Research Tasks

- To locate, systematize, and analyze the original publications (books, studies, articles) by the representative group of prominent Bulgarian opera directors.

Based on these directorial publications:

- To investigate and outline the main stages in the creative development of the representative group of opera directors.
- To analyze the influence of the socio-cultural and political context on directorial concepts across different historical periods.

- To identify the core features in the methodology and directorial approach of the representative group of directors.
- To trace the stages in the evolution of directorial thinking and in the genre-stylistic approaches reflected in the texts of the selected directors.
- To explore how directors conceptualize the musical–theatrical duality in the opera performance.
- To identify recurring aesthetic principles, methodological strategies, and stage-interpretative models.
- To define the possible contributions of these “writing directors” to the theorization of Bulgarian opera directing.
- To summarize key issues in the process of operatic directorial interpretation.
- To propose a scholarly model for analyzing the methodology of staging in opera.

Research Methodology

The scientific methods employed in the dissertation include general research methods of cognition, historical, comparative, logical, and systematic analysis. These are implemented through:

- **Text-centered analysis** – of published and archival materials;
- **Historical-genetic approach** – to trace stylistic evolution;
- **Interdisciplinary synthesis** – integrating concepts from musicology, theatre studies, and cultural studies.

Empirical Basis of the Study

The empirical foundation of the study is grounded in the author’s own operatic directorial practice, as well as their experience as an opera director, performer, and educator.

Theoretical Basis

The theoretical framework includes publications, monographs, archival materials, sources from musicology and theatre studies, and musical scores.

Structure of the Study

Introduction

Chapter One: *The Professionalization of Opera Directing in Bulgaria. The Pre-directorial Period.*

Chapter Two: *Musical-Theatrical Aesthetics and Methodology in the Work of Bulgarian Opera Directors. The Early Period.*

Chapter Three: *Contemporary Paradigms and Leading Staging Principles in the Interpretation of Repertoire Opera Classics. The Mature Period.*

Appendices

- Supporting materials – scanned copies of original documents, publications, archival sources, photographs, etc.
- A scholarly model for analyzing and describing the methodology of staging in opera.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF OPERA DIRECTING IN BULGARIA. THE PRE-DIRECTORIAL PERIOD

This chapter, based on established historical sources and specific published materials, presents arguments in support of the founding of the *Bulgarian Opera Society* in the capital in 1908—the first stable structure in the country dedicated to opera performances. At the time, this act was perceived as both a cultural and revolutionary milestone, driven by the need to “catch up” with the broader European cultural values within the realm of national art. This formative period was marked by both disputes and enthusiasm, with the main credit going to a group of selfless musicians trained abroad.

Understandably, alongside the pioneers’ enthusiasm, the early Bulgarian opera productions were characterized by a lack of established criteria for aesthetic staging styles, as directing was still an emerging profession. Equally strong influences from both Russian and Western European traditions were evident—not only in vocal expressiveness but also in acting techniques. The main focus was inevitably placed on discovering talented singers and addressing practical concerns such as securing suitable venues, financial resources, and organizing regular performances.

These early years were largely shaped by guest appearances of foreign performers (mainly Czech and Russian), as well as Bulgarian artists with foreign training. This inevitably led to cultural tensions. However, over time, the company integrated highly qualified Bulgarian singers and conductors—educated in Russia and Italy—who laid the foundations of a professional operatic art in Bulgaria and created the conditions necessary for the development of specialized directing and a national artistic and performance style.

Dragomir Kazakov

The Visionary of the Bulgarian National Opera

Dragomir Kazakov’s name is inextricably linked with the beginnings of the Bulgarian operatic tradition—not simply as an artistic endeavor, but as a cultural mission with profound national significance. He went far beyond the bounds of the traditional stage presence to become a founder, organizer, and spiritual catalyst in the formation of the first national opera ensemble. In the context of

post-liberation Bulgaria, striving for cultural emancipation, his work can be seen as a continuation of the National Revival ideal of establishing a distinct spiritual identity.

The absence of a formal school of directing did not hinder Kazakov—instead, he intuitively developed an approach rooted in the synthesis of music, dramaturgy, and acting. His work marked the beginning of opera directing as a profession in Bulgaria. His collaborations with Czech, Italian, and Russian musicians underscore the importance of international exchange in the creation of a local tradition. His work with the *Bulgarian Opera Society* (1908–1922) affirmed the possibility of an opera initiative created by domestic forces but with a global perspective.

Particularly indicative of his social awareness was his criticism of the public’s apathy toward living artists—a moral reproach and a plea for genuine, rather than posthumous, recognition. In this spirit, Kazakov not only laid the institutional foundations of Bulgarian opera, but also documented the process in his book *Materials on the History of the National Theatre and Opera*, preserving the memory of the early struggles of art against material and spiritual poverty.

Stage improvisations with crates and tables, emotional declarations such as “Perseverance realizes the idea,” and his unwavering belief in the necessity of a national opera make Kazakov a figure of cultural idealism. For him, art was not a luxury but a tool for national preservation. The founding of the *National Opera* in 1922 was thus not merely an institutional achievement but the culmination of a deeply humanistic and culturally meaningful cause.

Konstantin Mihaylov-Stoyan

Architect of National Operatic Identity

Konstantin Mihaylov-Stoyan became one of the most emblematic figures in the early history of Bulgarian opera—a bridge between the rich Russian musical tradition and the nascent Bulgarian operatic practice. He not only took the first practical steps toward the professionalization of opera directing in Bulgaria but also developed a conceptual framework in which opera was perceived as an integral part of national cultural consciousness.

Mihaylov-Stoyan left a lasting legacy not only as an artist and organizer, but also as a vocal pedagogue and publicist. His methodological contributions to vocal training, as well as his theoretical reflections on the role of opera in Bulgaria’s cultural system, established him as a reflective artist with

a visionary outlook. Through his articles, he actively participated in the cultural debates of his time, defending opera from neglect and misunderstanding and affirming its status as an art form with deep social and spiritual significance.

The creation of the *Bulgarian Opera Society* became a pillar of Bulgarian musical culture, a platform for the development of local repertoire, vocal style, and stage aesthetics. Thanks to the combined efforts of Kazakov and Mihaylov-Stoyan, opera in Bulgaria ceased to be viewed as an exotic experiment and became a recognized cultural institution. His appeals for both private and public patronage laid the groundwork for a sustainable cultural development model that remains relevant today.

Mihaylov-Stoyan was not merely a founder, but a cultural strategist—a figure who experienced, conceptualized, and realized the idea of opera as a national cause.

Petar Raichev

A Synthesis of Voice, Thought, and Stage

Petar Raichev was not only the first Bulgarian opera singer to achieve an international career—he was a cultural visionary whose work marked the beginnings of professional opera directing in Bulgaria. At a time when the country was still shaping its cultural identity, Raichev acted as a mediator between Western European stage traditions and the Bulgarian scene, bringing with him a synthesis of Italian *bel canto*, Stanislavsky’s psychological theatre, and the structural rigor of German dramaturgy.

His concept of the “true director” rejected superficial spectacle and formalism, affirming directing as an art of inner experience, dramaturgical precision, and vocal-dramatic unity. Every production staged by Raichev was the result of analytical work on the musical and literary structure of the piece—on characters’ motivations, psychology, and the tempo-rhythmic logic of their development.

In addition to being a stage artist, Raichev was a visionary educator—building soloist ensembles, laying the foundations for integrated stage training, and inspiring new generations of performers. His friendships with prominent intellectuals such as Gorky, Stanislavsky, and Rachmaninoff attest to his broad cultural outlook and his socially engaged view of art.

As a director and founder of regional opera institutions, Raichev expanded Bulgaria's cultural landscape, transforming opera from an isolated artistic phenomenon into a symbol of national dignity and cultural maturity. In his work, we witness a key value shift—from individual artistic drive to the social mission of art, in the spirit of the finest humanistic traditions.

Summary and Conclusion of Chapter One

Dragomir Kazakov

- Played a key role in the establishment of the first Bulgarian opera ensemble and was among the first to work with visionary clarity toward the creation of a national opera.
- One of the pioneers in opera directing in Bulgaria, despite the lack of an established methodology. His approach was based on intuition, vocal expressiveness, and the pursuit of harmony between music, dramaturgy, and acting.
- Among the first to initiate international collaboration in the field of opera.
- Embraced the idea of a “people’s opera” as both a cultural mission and a national cause.
- First to criticize the societal indifference toward artists.
- A founding member of the Opera Association — a key bridge toward the institutionalization of opera in Bulgaria.
- Collected primary documents, correspondence, programs, and memoirs that preserve invaluable information about the early years of theatre and opera in Bulgaria.
- Embodied the spirit of the National Revival and cultural idealism.
- Viewed art as a factor for resilience and national dignity. The creation of the National Opera in 1922 was the logical culmination of this cause.

Konstantin Mihailov–Stoyan

- A bridge between Russian musical tradition and Bulgarian operatic practice.

- Took the first practical steps toward shaping Bulgarian opera directing.
- Contributed a methodological approach to vocal mastery and had a significant role in Bulgarian music pedagogy.
- Emphasized historical documentation and cultural journalism — interpreting the role of opera in shaping national identity.
- Engaged in cultural polemics and ideologically defended operatic art.
- The Opera Association under his leadership became a cornerstone of Bulgarian musical culture — establishing a sustainable platform for artists, repertoire, and a dedicated stage. This effort was fundamental for the later creation of the National Opera.
- Advocated for public and private patronage — highlighting the need for private support of public culture.
- Thanks to him, opera in Bulgaria stopped being viewed as an "exotic" phenomenon and was established as a national cultural institution.

Petar Raychev

- The first Bulgarian opera singer with an international career — bringing fame to Bulgaria at a time when the country was still building its cultural identity after Liberation.
- Founder of professional opera directing in Bulgaria — championed the concept of a “true director” who not only manages stage movement but thoroughly analyzes the musical and dramatic structure of the piece.
- Represented professionalism, culture, and academic training — synthesizing vocal, theatrical, and musical knowledge. His operatic vision blended the teachings of Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko with Italian bel canto and the traditions of German theaters.
- A devoted educator and cultural mentor — worked on building a solid soloist ensemble within the national opera institutions. He emphasized vocal technique, facial expression, and dramatic behavior, advocating for comprehensive stage training.

- Developed a theoretical and practical aesthetic of directing — viewing directing as an art of interpretation and inner experience. He opposed superficial effects and stylized decorations, insisting on contextual coherence, psychological motivation, and artistic authenticity.
- Influenced and was influenced by intellectual and cultural circles — his meetings with figures like Maxim Gorky, Stanislavski, Ilya Repin, Rachmaninoff, and Romain Rolland reflected both his international stature and intellectual breadth, enriching his artistic philosophy and understanding of the social function of art.
- Contrasted sharply with mere "stage managers" — criticized formalism in directing and distinguished between mechanical staging and true artistic direction, emphasizing maturity, musical competence, and psychological depth.
- Carrier of operatic tradition and cultural continuity — considered himself a student of Mihailov–Stoyan, symbolizing the generational transmission of ideals.
- Central figure in the professionalization of Bulgarian opera — as director at the Sofia Opera, founder of the Varna National Opera, and guest director in Ruse, Plovdiv, Stara Zagora, etc., Raychev built a national model for regional opera culture with high standards.
- Witness and bearer of a value shift in the arts — in his later autobiography, Raychev reflected on how the social changes after September 9, 1944, prompted him to rethink his "individualistic" approach and dedicate art to serving the people. Despite rhetorical tone, this shows his maturity and flexibility as an artist.

Findings and Conclusion of Chapter One

The three figures — Kazakov, Mihailov–Stoyan, and Raychev — represent three distinct but deeply interconnected dimensions of Bulgarian opera's development:

- Kazakov – the beginning: the dream and the effort to establish a stage;
- Mihailov–Stoyan – the foundation: structure, organization, and methodology;
- Raychev – the recognition: interpretation and professionalism.

Their collective contribution forms not just an institution but a value system, in which opera is seen as an elevated cultural act, a national achievement, and a personal mission.

Dragomir Kazakov – The Ideologue and Founder

Kazakov embodies the Revival-era idealism and the foundational momentum of Bulgarian opera. He sets the course, lays the groundwork, and with unwavering will, realizes the vision of a national opera. He combines artistic and administrative roles, forms the first opera troupe, builds a repertoire, and begins archiving the memory of the Bulgarian stage. In him, we see a cultural fighter who believes in art as a national honor.

Konstantin Mihailov–Stoyan – The Builder and Inspirer

Mihailov–Stoyan builds on Kazakov's work. With intercultural experience and a Russian school background, he introduces structure, pedagogy, and theoretical grounding to Bulgarian opera. He provides institutional stability by founding and leading the Bulgarian Opera Association. Like Kazakov, he links art with ideals — not only as a mission but also as a reality that requires support, patronage, and state engagement.

Petar Raychev – European-Scale Professionalism

Raychev elevates Bulgarian opera to the international stage — and brings world standards back home. He introduces new aesthetic norms and defines modern opera directing. He is the living link between Bulgarian tradition and the major European schools — Italian, German, and Russian. Under Raychev, opera becomes a professionally recognized art with high artistic and academic value. He also critiques shallow directorial approaches, promoting a psychological and interpretative understanding of the director's role.

Nevertheless, the early productions did not reflect a consistent aesthetic school. This is due to the lack of a fully formed directing tradition in Europe itself at the time, and also to the pragmatic needs of the emerging Bulgarian opera scene — finding soloists, choristers, venues, props, musicians, and audiences. In this context, "directing" was mostly an administrative-coordinative activity rather than an interpretative artistic function.

In the early stages, the focus was on vocal expressiveness — the main carrier of emotional impact, since the visual and dramatic language had not yet been structurally conceptualized. Stage directions consisted mainly of movement assignments, *mise-en-scène*, scenic decoration, costume directives, and adaptation to space and budget limitations.

Analysis of early productions shows that the Bulgarian stage adopted the model of Russian and Italian touring troupes — marked by emotional stylization and melodramatic expression. However, this was not due to a conceptual weakness but was rather consistent with the general state of European opera at the time.

Over time, with the return of well-trained Bulgarian performers from Russia and Italy (e.g., Zlatka Kurteva, Bogdana Gyuzeleva-Vulpe, Panayot Dimitrov), as well as the involvement of professional conductors and chorus masters, conditions were created for the development of an operatic school, where aesthetic coherence could emerge. This was a turning point — when opera transitioned from a heroic, enthusiastic organizational endeavor to a professionally articulated cultural institution.

CHAPTER TWO

MUSICAL-THEATRICAL AESTHETICS AND METHODOLOGY IN THE WORK OF BULGARIAN OPERA DIRECTORS. EARLY PERIOD.

From the second half of the 1970s and especially throughout the 1980s, the Bulgarian opera theater experienced a clear creative stagnation—repetitive productions, a thoroughly exhausted model of stage realism, and a series of unsuccessful attempts to modernize the classics. This situation led to critical debate regarding the role of the opera director in our repertory theater. Despite the pressure of circumstantial insinuations—bordering on dilettantism—director Stefan Trifonov consistently defended the need for professional directing.

The period between 1944 and 1989 marks a fundamental transformation in Bulgarian opera—from a cosmopolitan and conventional theater to ideologically driven realism. Although politically imposed from outside, the Soviet model ultimately provided a serious professional school and a high level of theatrical and performance culture. However, over time, this aesthetic became limiting and led to an insurmountable creative crisis. Nevertheless, directors from this generation left a significant mark through their professionalism and pursuit of stylistic unity, despite the restrictive ideological and administrative frameworks.

Hristo Popov

The first professional director in Bulgarian opera

In Hristo (Khityo) Popov, Bulgarian opera directing found its first methodologically grounded and artistically consistent architect. At a time when opera in Bulgaria was still seeking institutional and aesthetic legitimacy, Popov emerged as a visionary whose contribution to the professionalization and cultural articulation of directing practice is not only historically significant but remains relevant today.

Popov was the first Bulgarian director to systematize directing practice through a scientifically grounded and psychologically motivated staging methodology. This approach marked an important transition in national stage culture—from intuitive and often

fragmented work to intellectually structured and dramaturgically justified interpretation. His work with the score and libretto went beyond the external organization of the action, delving into the internal logic of the musical-dramatic text, extracting inner motivation, rhythm, and psychological credibility of the stage character.

A distinctive feature of Popov's style was his attitude toward realism—not as an end in itself, but as a means of artistic insight. Understood this way, realism served stage truth, built upon an accurate reading of the composer's intent and the dramatic structure of the work. This aligned him with the best examples of European directorial thought from the early 20th century and positioned him among cultural reformers capable of adapting global experience to the national stage.

Popov's contribution extended beyond specific productions, taking on institutional and long-term significance. As chief director of the National Opera during a key period in its development, he established a new directing ethic and aesthetic standards that would influence future generations. Under his leadership, new repertoire and stylistic lines were solidified, along with a new cultural philosophy in which opera is seen as a complex stage art form requiring synthesis between music, theater, and directorial concept.

Popov's historical importance lies in his ability to transform directing from a function into an art, from technical support into the creative center of the opera performance. In this sense, his work remains an enduring part of Bulgaria's cultural memory—a model of intellectually inspired, artistically reasoned, and aesthetically consistent creativity.

Iliya Arnaudov

Philosopher-director and visionary of the Bulgarian opera stage

Iliya Arnaudov stands out as one of the most unconventional and forward-thinking figures in the early history of Bulgarian opera directing. In a cultural climate dominated by performance-oriented approaches and pragmatic adaptations of foreign models, Arnaudov introduced a new perspective—that of the philosopher-director, guided not merely by stage instinct but by conceptual clarity, cultural reflection, and deep musical knowledge.

His creative model was founded on the belief that directing is not merely a technical profession but a form of cultural thinking—a space where history, ideas, music, and theatrical language converge. Arnaudov thus transcended the limitations of his time, positioning the opera production within a context of social influence and educational mission. His repertoire strategy emphasized stylistic diversity, enrichment of the audience's musical culture, and establishing opera as a vital part of the intellectual fabric of society—a vision, unfortunately, undervalued by contemporary critics.

Arnaudov was also a pioneer of cultural decentralization—an idea that would gain traction decades later. For him, the opera stage should not be concentrated solely in the capital but should function as a network of autonomous institutions capable of developing local aesthetics and stage identity. This concept, in line with Western European cultural policy models, demonstrates his strategic thinking and long-term vision for the national development of the genre.

Historically, Arnaudov stood at the crossroads of two poles—the modernist drive for artistic innovation and the institutional pressure for conformity. This tension gave his figure particular cultural value—as someone who did not merely stage productions but formulated ideas about the role and place of art in society. In this sense, Arnaudov was not only a theater practitioner but a cultural strategist and aesthetic thinker whose legacy still awaits full reassessment.

Khrisan Tsankov

Modernist and transformer of Bulgarian stage art

Khrisan Tsankov established himself as one of the most significant names in the history of Bulgarian theater, known not only for his contributions to dramatic theater but also for his transformative role in musical theater. Recognized as a founder of modernism in Bulgarian directing, he introduced aesthetic impulses derived from Western European theatrical thought, which later strongly influenced the stylistic evolution of opera and operetta in the country.

Educated in Germany and Austria under Max Reinhardt, Tsankov embraced an aesthetic rooted in theatrical convention, expressiveness, and formal experimentation. This approach, radically different from the dominant *mise-en-scène* and naturalistic directing of the time, made him a proponent of a new stage language. His productions of authors such as Strindberg, Bernard Shaw, and Eugene O'Neill showcased his adoption of modernist and post-expressionist trends, while the influence of Brecht's epic theater further deepened his commitment to social reflection in stage expression.

His work in musical theater was not only innovative but revolutionary for its time—Tsankov brought the aesthetic charge of modern dramatic directing into an environment dominated by routine staging solutions. His pursuit of cultural finesse, emotional depth, and stylistic unity in acting set new standards for staging musical genres. Opposing simplistic stage direction, he insisted on elegance, sophistication, and conscious artistic presence.

In addition to directing, Tsankov was also a critic, pedagogue, film director, and playwright—a multifaceted profile that reinforced his role as a cultural visionary. He was not only an artist but a thinker who remains in the history of Bulgarian stage art as a figure capable of uniting tradition and modernity, professionalism and artistic freedom.

Tsankov embodied the possibility of cultural synthesis in Bulgarian theater—between national context and European trends, between drama and music, between experimentation and stylistic rigor. It is no coincidence that his creative legacy continues to serve as a guide for contemporary directors striving for theater that combines intellectual depth with aesthetic excellence.

Dragan Kurdzhiev

Builder of modern Bulgarian opera directing

Dragan Kurdzhiev occupies a central place in the history of Bulgarian opera directing as a systematizer, conceptualist, and reformer. He not only practiced the art of stage construction but reconceptualized it, creating a stable paradigm for its methodological, aesthetic, and institutional development. At a time when opera in Bulgaria was moving away from

improvised stage practices, Kurdzhiev laid the foundation for a new, professional, and intellectually conscious school of directing.

His vision of opera as a synthetic art—combining visual, musical, and dramaturgical elements—elevated directing to a conceptual and analytical art form. Kurdzhiev established directing as an independent creative discipline requiring unique competencies—not only in theater technique but also in deep understanding of the musical score, historical context, and the philosophical essence of the work. Thus, opera ceased to be merely a platform for vocal art and became a multifaceted artistic act with a complex aesthetic structure.

Kurdzhiev's key innovation was the concept of the “singing actor.” The performer had to master stage culture, possess psychological depth, musical sensitivity, and dramaturgical thinking. This marked the beginning of a new type of stage performer—one who not only sings but also thinks, experiences, and expresses through movement, voice, and behavior. In this regard, he introduced the notion of the “stage score”—a model of internally structured stage action aligned with the musical and dramatic logic of the work.

His methodology also included clearly structured relationships between director, conductor, and set designer—built on shared concepts and mutual aesthetic responsibility. Thus, he cultivated not only performances but also an institutional culture of creative collaboration. Even within the ideological constraints of socialist realism, Kurdzhiev managed to preserve the intellectual autonomy of his productions, embedding them within a framework of aesthetic analysis, symbolic structure, and artistic synthesis.

As a publicist and theorist, Kurdzhiev left a rich legacy that not only documented the history of Bulgarian opera but also provided methodological guidance for future generations. His role as teacher, mentor, and ideologist of stage art is indisputable. He became a cultural architect whose vision shaped the identity of the national opera theater, moving it from its embryonic stage to a conscious and mature artistic form.

Evgeni Nemirov

Architect of the modern operatic vision in Bulgaria

Evgeni Nemirov stands out as one of the most innovative figures in the history of Bulgarian opera directing. Against the backdrop of dominant socialist realism, his approach represented a radical departure from normative staging frameworks, paving the way for a new aesthetic paradigm. Nemirov not only offered a visual and conceptual alternative to ideological templates but also transformed opera into a stage organism with high artistic autonomy.

His vision of the opera production as an integral art form—in which music, scenography, dance, and *mise-en-scène* coexist in an equal aesthetic dialogue—opened new horizons for the national stage. This was not directing in the traditional sense but a conceptual creation of stage reality, where each component carried meaning and generated artistic tension. For Nemirov, stage design was not a backdrop but a co-author in building the dramaturgical logic of the production.

A central feature of his aesthetic was his attitude toward style and fidelity to the composer. This fidelity was not understood as literal adherence to the score, but as a search for semantic resonance through creative synthesis—an interpretation both emotionally and intellectually grounded. Thus, Nemirov developed a directorial language in which stylistic coherence was achieved through cultural resonance rather than dogmatic adherence to a “correct” interpretation.

Nemirov also made a significant contribution in the field of critical and methodological thought. His publications laid the foundation for modern directorial thinking in Bulgaria, where opera is understood as a visual-psychological and musical structure—not a series of spectacular scenes. In them, we find the idea of the director as an aesthetic leader—one responsible for the philosophical, artistic, and cultural depth of the stage process.

Evgeni Nemirov was not just a pioneer of modern directing—he was a thinker whose work transcended staging practice and laid the foundation for the aesthetic emancipation of Bulgarian opera. His conceptual courage, aesthetic consistency, and intellectual insight make him a cultural reference point for generations of directors, artists, and researchers.

Findings and Conclusion of Chapter Two

Chapter Two presents the five pioneers of Bulgarian opera directing in the first half of the 20th century – Hristo (Hitio) Popov, Iliya Arnaudov, Khrisan Tsankov, Dragan Kardzhiev, and Evgeniy Nemirov – highlighting their individual and collective contributions to the establishment of professional staging practices in Bulgaria.

Hristo Popov laid the foundations of a scientifically grounded, psychologically motivated, and dramaturgically structured directing methodology, giving realism artistic depth and emphasizing the director's role as the organizer of the stage image.

Iliya Arnaudov introduced the concept of the “director-philosopher” and a repertoire vision focused on cultural education. Although often underrated, he anticipated ideas such as decentralization and theatrical autonomy, which gained significance decades later.

Khrisan Tsankov modernized Bulgarian theatre by introducing a synthetic stage language, emphasizing the equal importance of music, visual composition, and rhythm. His role as a pedagogue and theorist significantly contributed to the intellectual profile of directing.

Dragan Kardzhiev is a central figure in the creation of modern Bulgarian opera directing. His staging methodology, based on dramaturgical analysis of the score, the concept of a “stage score,” and the interaction between director, conductor, and scenographer, established standards that remain valid today.

Evgeniy Nemirov expanded the scope of directing by introducing expressive visuality, stylistic convention, and an integrative approach to the production. He advocated for the director's autonomy and viewed opera as a conceptual art form with a strong visual-psychological dimension.

Summary:

The work of these five directors builds the foundational paradigm of Bulgarian opera directing—not just as a profession but as a cultural phenomenon. Each contributed with a unique aesthetic and methodology:

- **Popov** – scientific and psychological realism
- **Arnaudov** – visionary and repertoire modernism
- **Tsankov** – visual-dramaturgical expression
- **Kardzhiev** – musical-dramaturgical synthesis
- **Nemirov** – conceptual and visual directing

Together, they chart the transition from illustrative to conscious, analytical directing, where opera is perceived as a complex synthetic form demanding cultural maturity and creative experimentation. This early development laid the foundation of the Bulgarian directing school and remains a source of inspiration and guidance for future generations.

CHAPTER THREE

CONTEMPORARY PARADIGMS AND LEADING PRODUCTION PRINCIPLES IN THE INTERPRETATION OF REPERTOIRE OPERA CLASSICS. MATURE PERIOD

Chapter Three, which historically refers to the period following the political changes after 1989, marks a significant turning point in Bulgarian opera directing. Practically, directors gained creative freedom, but this posed a complex methodological dilemma: whether to continue and renew the inherited tradition as much as possible or to embark on previously untested modernist experiments. A new, feverish borrowing began—directly from the postmodern European stage—which, however, carries serious risks—especially when directors enter the opera theatre neglecting fundamental operatic-dramaturgical principles.

In the early stages of Bulgarian opera directing, the first directors—trained abroad—adopted the realistic model of the theatrical-musical stage. They categorically rejected the archaic nature of the "costumed concert," striving instead for stage organicity close to human behavior in everyday reality—a revolutionary approach for its time.

Nevertheless, the application of realism in opera often leads to deep contradictions. By its very nature, the opera genre has never aimed at realistic depiction of the world—it employs specific allegories, symbolism, and conventions, creating its own stage reality since its Baroque prototype. In this sense, realism in opera conflicts with its very aesthetic nature.

Even today, opera directors face a fundamental choice: to follow dramatic or musical logic. Production experience decisively shows that when drama is prioritized at the expense of music, productions become monotonous and lose their stylistic musical poetics. Instead of utilizing the full potential of musical dramaturgy encoded in the score, directors focus mainly on psychological analysis of characters and their conflicts, inevitably leading to banal stage results and the emergence of directorial clichés.

Petar Shturbanov

Builder of the Musical-Philosophical Paradigm in Contemporary Opera Directing

Petar Shturbanov stands out as one of the most significant figures in the history of Bulgarian opera directing, marking a new stage in the aesthetic and methodological evolution of the genre. His approach to production transcends the limits of traditional theatrical formalism and elevates music not merely as a dramaturgical carrier but as a philosophical impulse structuring the stage action.

The central idea in Shturbanov's concept relates to the notion of musical-stage integrity. For him, opera is a synthetic art where every element—from *mise-en-scène* to acting and visual aesthetics—must be subordinated to an honest reading of the author's intent. This reading does not exclude modernity but insists it be organically derived from the musical dramaturgy without forced interpretative interventions. This builds a specific balanced stage space where the stylistic characteristics of the era and the context of contemporary times coexist in synergy, not conflict.

Shturbanov's directing methodology is marked by a high degree of analytical rigor and cultural reflection. He does not merely construct performances but unfolds a dialogue with music, genre, and tradition, turning the stage into a field of thought. This brings him close to the figure of the director-philosopher—a creator who does not serve aesthetic conventions but creates aesthetic knowledge through staging. Such practice remains relevant today when the concept of operatic success is increasingly associated not only with vocal excellence but also with directorial depth and synthetic integrity.

A significant contribution of Shturbanov is the formulation of a production system where genre, plot, and theme are seen as interrelated constants. This outlines a contemporary paradigm of opera directing—not just as a technique of stage expression but as synthetic and conceptual art, where each work carries its own inner *logos* deciphered through the prism of music.

Shturbanov's influence goes beyond his individual creative biography. He laid the foundations of contemporary directing discourse in Bulgaria—a discourse aiming for artistic truth, production integrity, and intellectual responsibility toward tradition and modernity.

Mikhail Hadzhimishev

Music as Truth on Stage

Mikhail Hadzhimishev establishes himself as an exceptional example of a director who defends the principles of musical-dramatic consistency and profound interpretation of the operatic genre. In the context of contemporary opera theatre, often dominated by arbitrary directorial interpretations and external effects, his approach stands out with categorical fidelity to the composer's intent and analytical rigor.

Hadzhimishev insists that directorial interpretation must organically arise from the musical text and not be imposed externally as an independent concept. In this sense, music is not merely an accompanying element but the structural and semantic center that defines character, conflict, and rhythm of the stage action. The analysis of musical dramaturgy occupies a central place in his work, decoding codes of behavior, psychological motivation of characters, and theatrical logic of the work.

Opposed to formalism and directorial showmanship, Hadzhimishev bets on conceptual clarity and depth. For him, innovation in opera directing is not achieved through external effects or scandalous reinterpretations but through insightful penetration into the composer's logic and historical contexts of the work. This requires not only interpretative intuition but also high professionalism and cultural awareness.

Hadzhimishev insists that directorial preparation must necessarily include knowledge of the era, aesthetics, and stylistic language of the composer. Only then can authenticity in stage realization be ensured and distortion of the artistic message avoided. The director must be simultaneously a researcher, artist, and pedagogue, capable of teaching cultural and musical literacy on stage.

Particularly impressive is Hadzhimishev's concern about new generations of creators who often demonstrate insufficient stage preparation and a superficial approach to opera

directing. His pedagogical work aims not just at imparting knowledge but at building critical thinking and respect for the art. Thus, his work acquires a clearly future-oriented dimension—an effort to preserve the genre through educated and conscious successors.

Hadzhimishev's directing practice expresses a lofty aesthetic and professional ethic that rejects superficial spectacle and places music and its dramaturgical meaning at the center of the stage action. His contribution is not limited to his individual style but sets standards and methodology for the entire field.

Stefan Trifonov

The Formation of Contemporary Bulgarian Opera Directing: Between Tradition and Reform

Stefan Trifonov represents a critical generation of creators who not only inherit theatrical and musical traditions but actively participate in the building of professional opera directing in Bulgaria. Educated abroad and influenced by leading Soviet theatrical schools, Trifonov develops a specific production aesthetic combining academic discipline with individual artistic signature.

Trifonov categorically opposes the so-called “costumed concert”—a form of stage realization dominated by vocal performance but deprived of dramaturgical and stage unity. In this context, he strives to build an organic synthesis between music, drama, and stage action. This new paradigm presupposes priority of dramaturgical logic without negating the leading role of the musical text.

His methodology is based on theatrical principles adapted to the requirements of the opera genre. This includes stage discipline, actor psychology, and structural analysis of actions—techniques inherent to the Stanislavski and Pokrovski schools. At the same time, Trifonov avoids the formal extremes of Meyerhold's avant-garde school, maintaining aesthetic moderation and focus on accessibility and dramaturgical consistency in his productions.

Despite the influence of dramatic directing, Trifonov is fully aware that opera is a specific synthetic genre in which music dictates rhythm, structure, and dramaturgical logic. He

rejects mechanical theatricalization and emphasizes deep experience of the musical structure. This approach reveals his aspiration to conceive opera not merely as theatre with music but as an integral form where all elements subordinate themselves to a common dramaturgical and emotional impact.

Of particular interest is Trifonov's effort to find a balance between historical accuracy and the need for updating operatic works. While a supporter of stylistic precision according to the era and composer, he allows careful editorial intervention to adapt to the expectations and cultural attitudes of the contemporary audience. This approach positions him as a director of the transitional generation, balancing between the dogma of Soviet academic tradition and the freedom of contemporary theatrical invention.

Trifonov's production language combines narrativity with imagery, often moving between rational realism and poetic metaphorical expression. Although not relying on visual radicalism, his productions stand out for psychological depth and emotional richness. This moderation is not a sign of creative limitation but rather a purposeful search for stage clarity, dramaturgical integrity, and musical-psychological sincerity.

Stefan Trifonov is a key figure in the transitional stage of Bulgarian opera directing—between institutionalized Soviet aesthetics and the formation of an independent national theatrical identity. Through his sensitive and analytical approach to music, through moderation in directorial expression, and through commitment to dramaturgical wholeness, he creates a directing model that simultaneously preserves tradition and opens horizons to the future of the genre.

Emil Boshnakov

The Model of Intelligent Realism in Bulgarian Opera Directing

Emil Boshnakov establishes himself as one of the leading figures in the history of Bulgarian opera directing, combining traditions inherited from the Soviet school with a pursuit of originality and artistic synthesis. His approach marks an important transition — from a stage dominated by vocal expression and formalist directing practices to an intelligently integrated opera production where the director assumes a leading creative role.

As a successor of the Moscow-Leningrad school and the traditions of Boris Pokrovski, Boshnakov develops a theater-oriented directing style that combines psychological realism with conditional stage poetics. This approach follows the foundational principles of Soviet theatrical thought — vital truth, stage discipline, actor psychology — while avoiding the schematism typical of strictly ideological productions. It is through the integration of the Russian methodological model with local aesthetic priorities that Boshnakov creates a specific Bulgarian variant of opera synthesis.

In his directing philosophy, Emil Boshnakov elevates the director as the primary creative and organizational force in building an opera production. Similar to Pokrovski, he argues that the lack of a clear directorial vision leads to fragmentation and absence of stage unity. His aesthetic formula — realism plus convention — represents an intelligent compromise between visual metaphor and psychological authenticity. This forms a unique artistic language in which the stage impression is compatible with the logic of human behavior and emotional continuity.

Boshnakov does not confine himself to aesthetics alone — he issues systematic criticism of the administrative subordination of the director and the lack of a long-term strategy for training qualified personnel. For him, the successes and failures of opera art are directly connected to the capacity of directing and its institutional recognition. Therefore, he insists on expanding the director's role not only as an artist but also as a teacher, analyst, and strategic voice in cultural policy.

One of Boshnakov's main tenets is ensemble work — both as an organizational and artistic principle. For him, a production is a combination of music, text, movement, vision, and vocal performance united into a homogeneous stage whole. This distinguishes him from vocally dominated models where music and stage language exist in parallel but not always in integrity.

Boshnakov does not reject tradition but sees it as a platform rather than a dogma. He warns against both uncritical reproduction of canons and aesthetic formalism that isolates a work from its musical-dramaturgical context. According to him, true renewal of the opera stage must be based on the author's territory, not by destroying its structure.

With over 50 productions and tours in key European and Latin American theaters, Boshnakov establishes his model internationally. His international success validates his creative strategy — founded on respect for music, dramaturgical instinct, and visual imagination.

Emil Boshnakov is among the most significant reformers of the Bulgarian opera scene, creating a bridge between the rigor of the Soviet school and the need for creative flexibility and modern stage thought. His model of intelligent realism offers not only an aesthetic but also pedagogical and institutional vision for the future of opera directing. In Boshnakov, we see a director who does not merely stage productions but creates a cultural system — based on respect for the author, knowledge of music, and responsibility to the audience.

Svetozar Donev

Between Genre Reform and Cultural Mission

In the cultural landscape of Bulgarian musical theater, Svetozar Donev stands out as a reformer and defender of operetta — a genre often underestimated or treated as “second-rate” art at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century. Donev opposes this attitude with a consistent directing and theoretical position in which operetta is not a museum relic but a living stage art — open to dialogue with contemporary reality and capable of artistic renewal.

At the core of Donev’s views is the understanding that operetta should not be seen as a fossilized form but as a dynamic and synthetic genre capable of integrating elements from other stage and musical practices. He rejects both mechanical eclecticism and decorative approaches to genre mixing. For Donev, the problem is not stylistic plurality but the lack of internal logic and coherence of expressive means. This logical and emotional integrity is key to creating a stage-effective operetta production.

In Donev’s directing concept, the updating of operetta passes through substantive and stylistic reform. This does not mean destroying classical works but reinterpreting them through the prism of contemporary social, cultural, and aesthetic realities. The director is seen not merely as a technical coordinator but as a co-author of the production whose role is

to discover new meanings and emotional horizons in familiar works. For Donev, living theater breathes with its time — speaks the language of the audience and creates emotional engagement.

A particularly significant aspect of Donev's views is his critique of cultural snobbery, which often marginalizes operetta and classifies it as "light" or "frivolous." For him, this attitude functions as a cultural marker that reveals hierarchies and prejudices within the arts system. Donev rehabilitates operetta as a genre with potential for artistic depth and social impact, including in the context of socialist cultural policy, where it can fulfill ideological and educational functions.

For Donev, the sustainable development of Bulgarian musical theater passes through the establishment of a national aesthetic and original content. He emphasizes the need to develop Bulgarian operetta dramaturgy expressing local themes, language, and cultural codes. Only thus can the genre be sustainably vital and artistically valid — through its connection to the national cultural fabric.

Donev sharply criticizes the trend toward guest directors aiming for short-term success, often achieved through spectacle rather than depth. Instead, he insists on the director-teacher — a creator who works long-term with the company, builds an internal aesthetic environment, and cultivates artistic taste. This understanding is not merely organizational but also aesthetic and ideological — connected to the vision of theater as an educational, cultural, and social institution.

Svetozar Donev represents critical and constructive thinking about the future of operetta — not as a nostalgic relic but as a living stage art with development potential. His approach combines aesthetic realism, social engagement, genre adaptability, and pedagogical responsibility. Through his directing and conceptual work, Donev establishes operetta as an artistically legitimate and culturally significant form capable of enriching the contemporary theatrical landscape.

Pavel Gerdjikov

Between Stage Mastery and Cultural Mission

Pavel Gerdjikov is an exceptional figure in Bulgarian and European musical-stage tradition — a creator with a multifaceted profile combining performance mastery, directing vision, and pedagogical consistency. His contribution to the development of opera culture in Bulgaria extends beyond the stage — he builds a theoretical and practical model in which music, theater, and national identity form a unified cultural organism.

Gerdjikov possesses rare stage versatility — as a high-class singer, director with an original stage language, and pedagogue leaving a lasting mark in training several generations of Bulgarian opera artists. This multidimensionality allows him to understand the opera production as a synthetic form requiring not only technical command but also cultural engagement. His analytical approach demands deep knowledge of musical dramaturgy and historical context of each work, shaping stylistically precise and aesthetically faithful directing.

The creation of the “Opera Directing” department at the State Music Academy is one of Gerdjikov’s strategic achievements. This academic project not only institutionalizes the directing profession in musical theater but also introduces a new paradigm of ensemble thinking, intrinsic motivation, and artistic responsibility. For Gerdjikov, the director is not an external observer but an active mediator between composer, performer, and audience — a figure working in service of synthetic art.

Gerdjikov’s aesthetic model combines respect for classical heritage with openness to new theatrical means. This is not a contradiction but a conscious strategy — innovations are legitimate only when they arise from the logic of the work and serve its artistic impact. This position distinguishes him from trends of superficial updating and visual formalism that risk tearing apart the inner unity of classical operatic texts.

Gerdjikov is a consistent defender and interpreter of Bulgarian musical culture, insisting on an organic connection between performer and national tradition. For him, opera is not a cultural import but contextually embedded art that must carry local aesthetic and spiritual

codes. Thus, the artistic responsibility of performer and director becomes a cultural mission oriented toward creating significant national stage art.

Gerdjikov speaks clearly against commercialization trends in opera where productions become visual shows or artistic competitions detached from dramaturgical logic and musical structure. For him, opera is an art of depth, integrity, and cultural engagement, requiring not spectacle but consistent interpretation and stylistic precision.

Pavel Gerdjikov is an exceptional figure in building modern Bulgarian opera directing, whose contribution surpasses individual creativity. His working model combines analysis, cultural engagement, stage intuition, and academic rigor. As an artist, teacher, and thinker, Gerdjikov sets ethical and aesthetic standards that continue to shape the value framework of contemporary opera practice in Bulgaria.

Rumen Neykov

Integrator of Musical Dramaturgy and Stage Aesthetics

Rumen Neykov establishes himself as one of the iconic figures in contemporary Bulgarian opera directing — a creator with deep culture, impressive stage sensitivity, and significant contribution to theoretical understanding of the genre. A protégé of the schools of Harry Kupfer and Walter Felsenstein, Neykov is a natural heir to the German expressionist tradition, while also actively adapting it to the specifics of Bulgarian musical-stage practice. His work represents a synthesis of intellectual insight, precise directing methodology, and a striving for expressive completeness.

Neykov advocates the idea of opera as synthetic art, where music, text, plasticity, and visual image must obey a coherent dramaturgical construction. In his directing, he starts from the musical dramaturgy of the work, allowing no compromise with the score, while seeking active communication with contemporary stage aesthetics. His work is inspired by Brechtian ideas but also carries the marks of Wagnerian conceptualism — a striving for uniting different arts into a single stage directorial expression.

The combination of practice and theory is emblematic of Neykov's figure. His writings demonstrate an analytical approach to the dramaturgical fabric of musical works and offer

original solutions for stage realization. Particularly notable is his analysis of *The Nine Brothers of Yani* by Lyubomir Pipkov, where the director integrates expressionist aesthetics with archetypal Bulgarian mythology.

According to Neykov, opera directing is not a routine profession but a spiritual calling. He views rehearsal not just as a technical process but as a celebration — an event cultivating creative energy. One of his essential ideas is that true directing is the ability to transform — text, music, performer, and audience. The director, in his words, must be a mediator between the work and the audience, creating a contemporary resonance for classical and new works.

As a pedagogue, Neykov defends the view that directing can be taught, but talent is irreplaceable. The creative process, according to him, results from accumulated experience, professional discipline, intellectual reflex, and also an inner necessity to impact through the stage.

Rumen Neykov leaves a vivid imprint on Bulgarian musical theater not only with his works but with the way he thinks and formulates its contemporary aesthetics. Combining passion for music, an analytical research approach, and visionary stage artistry, he establishes opera as a place of intellectual impact and artistic elevation, where directing becomes an art of synthesis and insight.

Plamen Kartalov

Opera as Scenic Scoring: From Musical Form to Cultural Prophecy

Plamen Kartalov holds a special place in contemporary Bulgarian and European opera directing. His aesthetic philosophy and practical methodology transcend the boundaries of classical stage thinking, combining musical rigor, dramaturgical depth, and a visionary cultural perspective. At the core of his concept lies the understanding of the score as the starting point and structural center of the opera performance – not the libretto, nor the stage adaptation, but the musical dramaturgy as the architecture of the entire production.

For Kartalov, opera is, above all, a musically constructed reality. This means that all scenic elements – movement, imagery, color, even tempo and pause – derive from the tempo-rhythmic logic of the musical form. This idea forms the basis of his directorial

methodology, which can be defined as “scenic scoring” – the directing process as musical analysis, where stage time is conceived as musical time. In this context, each production becomes an interpretation of the score as a dramaturgical text, where the visual and theatrical do not illustrate but internalize the musical energy.

In his work “*Yanin’s Nine Brothers – Opera by Lyubomir Pipkov. Directorial Projections*”, Kartalov demonstrates an extremely analytical approach to constructing the scenic concept. Through genre interpretation (dramatic ballad, musical mystery, psychological parable), he reconstructs the historical, philosophical, and cultural context of the work. The symbolic disintegration of the Yanin family is interpreted as an operatic apocalypse – a metaphor for national trauma and historical fragmentation. Thus, Kartalov establishes the director as a cultural interpreter who uncovers layers of collective memory and identity in the stage text.

The concept of “scenic truth” occupies a key place in Kartalov’s directorial philosophy. This truth is neither naturalistic nor abstract – it emerges from the internal logic of the dramaturgical conflict, which must be emotionally experienced rather than formally presented. His directing work is distinguished by psychological precision and visual conceptuality – the use of color, light, and textures as semantic signs. Thus, the visual design becomes not a mere décor but a carrier of dramaturgical content.

Kartalov perceives opera as an integrative art form, where music, acting, visual imagery, and text intertwine into a unified system. He speaks of the director as an archaeologist of musical time, who not only organizes stage action but reconstructs and brings to the surface the structural energy of the music. This understanding leads to polyphonic scenic thinking, where no element is self-sufficient, but all are subordinated to the principle of overall dramaturgical cohesion.

The deepest layers of Kartalov’s directorial aesthetics reveal a striving toward opera as a cultural and spiritual message. His productions are not merely musical or theatrical achievements – they raise questions about the nation, historical memory, and cultural identity. Thus, opera becomes a scenic prophecy that does not predict the future but diagnoses the present through artistic means, provoking reflection and emotional engagement.

Plamen Kartalov is among those rare theatrical visionaries who conceive opera not only as a stage practice but as a form of cultural expression. Through his approach, based on score rigor, philosophical depth, and visual conceptuality, he creates a directing model in which opera is simultaneously a musical work, scenic art, and cultural act. In this sense, Kartalov does not simply stage performances – he interprets national myths and activates spiritual spaces in contemporary Bulgarian cultural consciousness.

Vanya Bachvarova

Between Dramaturgical Analysis and Actor's Psychophysics

Vanya Bachvarova is one of the brightest figures in contemporary Bulgarian musical culture – a director-researcher, educator, and reformer who reconsiders opera not merely as scenic art but as a structural cultural phenomenon. Her contribution to the development of operatic dramaturgy, methodology for training opera performers, and the institutional framework of directing in Bulgaria is multifaceted and deeply influenced by concepts related to contemporary stage psychology, cultural theory, and practical musical knowledge.

Bachvarova's fundamental work *"Acting Skills for Opera Singers"* offers a new training model that rejects the mechanical application of dramatic theater methods in opera. In her analysis, she clearly delineates the essential difference between opera and dramatic actors – based on the interaction between the nature of sound and physical presence on stage. Bachvarova develops a holistic model of stage training, in which the singer's imagination, sensitivity to the score, and ability to integrate sound, body, and meaning into a single scenic action play a central role.

The monograph *"Operatic Dramaturgy"* is Bachvarova's supreme academic work and a foundational study in Bulgarian musical-stage theory. In it, she examines opera through its genre evolution, sociocultural function, and the role of the director and composer as co-authors in the scenic process. This approach establishes Bachvarova as a thinker who not only describes theatrical phenomena but rearranges them into a new analytical framework where musical and dramaturgical logic function synchronously rather than hierarchically.

Bachvarova is a pioneer in academic training for opera directors in Bulgaria, having created the first specialized program in opera directing at the New Bulgarian University. In doing so, she fills a longstanding institutional gap by providing methodologically structured training oriented toward the contemporary needs of musical theater. Her work at the National Music Academy and Çukurova University in Turkey confirms her as a cross-border figure whose influence exceeds local boundaries and contributes to establishing new professional standards in the region.

Vanya Bachvarova regards opera as a living and impactful scenic art that must be comprehended, experienced, and reworked to become a contemporary cultural event. For her, the score is not a final form but a potential for scenic “sacrament,” in which the signs of the musical text become a psychophysical act of cultural communication. This conviction positions her not just as a theoretician or practitioner but as a director-reformer who changes the very understanding of the contemporary opera stage.

Vanya Bachvarova leaves a profound mark on contemporary thinking about opera – as a genre form, cultural practice, and pedagogical territory. Through her works, productions, and educational projects, she builds a bridge between musical aesthetics, scenic psychophysics, and cultural theory. In a time of accelerated theatrical change and stylistic eclecticism, Bachvarova reminds us that opera is above all an art of depth – of connections between sound and meaning, body and idea, tradition and contemporaneity.

Findings and Conclusion – Chapter Three

Petar Shturbanov

- Establishes a new aesthetic model where music is not only the foundation but also the driving force of stage interpretation.
- The stage form gains philosophical depth, moving beyond formalism.
- Shturbanov’s directing methodology demonstrates analytical rigor, conscious dialogue with contemporary times, and cultural reflection on tradition.

- Advocates a production ethic centered on the idea of an "honest reading of the author's intent" — does not oppose modernity but insists it must be organically derived from musical dramaturgy.
- The stylistic hallmark of the opera work's era and contemporary aesthetics should exist in balance. Overemphasis on one leads either to a "museum-like interpretation" or a modern production alienated from musical logic.
- Subordination of all components to a central directorial vision.
- His ideas remain valid in contemporary opera directing, where striving for wholeness and musical-stage synergy remains a key criterion for artistic success.
- Shturbanov formulates a contemporary methodological model in which genre, plot, and theme function as interrelated production constants.

Mihail Hadzhimishev

- Rejects any form of directorial arbitrariness expressed through interpretations that do not stem from the musical text.
- Analyzes musical dramaturgy to decode characters, conflict, and theatrical rhythm.
- Innovation can be achieved through in-depth analysis rather than external effects.
- Concerned about the lack of real stage preparation in the new generation of creators.
- In-depth analysis is part of production preparation — the director must know the era, aesthetics, and language of the composer.
- Hadzhimishev's directing practice expresses high aesthetic and professional consciousness, placing music as the main vector in building the opera performance.
- Opposes formalism, naturalism, and directorial showmanship, emphasizing deep understanding of compositional dramaturgy.
- His work adds practical perspective based on rich stage experience and pedagogical responsibility aimed at the future of the genre.

Stefan Trifonov

- Part of the generation laying foundations of professional opera directing in Bulgaria, formed in foreign theatrical and musical institutions, placing him in a reformist line opposing the "costumed concert" to synthetic musical-stage spectacle.

- Replaces performer-centered (vocally dominant) paradigm with one in which stage unity and dramaturgical logic take central place.
- His personal methodology rests on theatrical principles adapted to musical dramaturgy — without replacing music's leading role.
- Influenced by the Moscow and Leningrad schools: between dogma and invention.
- Product of mid-20th-century Soviet theatrical school aesthetic dogmas — focus on life truth, psychological realism, stage discipline, and action analysis, strongly influenced by Stanislavski and Pokrovski.
- Known conservatism and hesitation towards more fanciful or experimental solutions — refrains from extremes and conventions typical of the Meyerhold school.
- Despite influence from dramatic directing, he realizes opera is a specific synthetic genre where music dictates rhythm and dramaturgical logic.
- Rejects mechanical theatricalization of musical scenes, seeking deep experience of musical structure as dramaturgical organism.
- Seeks balance between stylistic fidelity and contemporary updating.
- Follows principles of faithfulness to the style of the era and composer, allowing minor editorial intervention in meaning to make works more understandable and impactful for contemporary audiences.
- Directorial language between narrativity and imagery.
- Hesitates between rational realism and metaphorical poeticism. His style is characterized by descriptive dramaturgy where emotionality often outweighs abstract theatrical imagery.
- Moderate spectacle — his productions are readable, logical, but not radically innovative; more psychologically rich than visually revolutionary.
- Personal artistic hallmark: sensitivity to music and human character.
- Creative signature: emotional sensitivity, inner musicality, and psychological sincerity of stage images.
- Important mediator between Soviet academic school and emerging Bulgarian directing tradition, where an independent aesthetic identity begins to form.
- Director of the "transitional generation" — between dogma and freedom, between musical canon and theatrical invention.

Emil Boshnakov

- Heir of the Moscow-Leningrad school with deep roots in B. Pokrovski's tradition.
- Theater-oriented directing combining psychological realism with conditional stage poetics, within strict adherence to musical dramaturgy.
- Integrates Russian methodological model with local aesthetic priorities, leading to a specific Bulgarian variant of operatic synthesis.
- Views directing as the leading creative and structural force in opera.
- Elevates the director to a central figure in the opera process — creatively, ideologically, and organizationally. Like Pokrovski, he insists there is no full-fledged production without a directorial concept.
- Formulates an original aesthetic formula: realism + conditionality — applying an aesthetic "compromise" where psychological realism of acting and conditional scenography and mise-en-scène coexist organically.
- Creative formula — intelligent balance between visual metaphor and psychological authenticity.
- Successes and failures of opera art are directly linked to the state of directing — its capacity, recognition, and autonomy opportunities.
- Condemns administrative subordination of the director and lack of strategic system for staff training.
- Ensemble principle as an aesthetic and organizational principle — defines the ensemble production as the supreme value of socialist realism — unity of all components: music, text, movement, vision, and vocals.
- Balanced understanding of tradition and innovation — tradition is a platform, not a dogma. Warns against mechanical reproduction of "canons" and aesthetic formalism neglecting the composer's intent.
- Creative renewal must happen within the author's territory, not by destroying meaning and structure.
- Clearly insists that not only the creative, but also the analytical and pedagogical voice of the director must be heard in cultural and institutional context.
- International recognition and impact — with over 50 productions and tours in key European and Latin American opera theaters, Boshnakov establishes the Bulgarian

school as competitive and innovative, especially regarding "psychological precision and conditionality."

- His international success validates the model of intelligent realism built on profound knowledge of music and respect for text.
- Creative credo demands the director respect the author, know the music, lead with imagination, and work in service of synthetic stage art.
- Bridge between the strict production school of Soviet tradition and the critical need for flexibility, musical intuition, and theatrical metaphor.

Svetozar Donev

- Operetta should not be treated as a museum form of art but as a living genre with development potential — a dynamic form capable of absorbing and synthesizing elements from other theatrical and musical forms.
- Criticism of mechanical eclecticism and the danger of bad taste — the essential problem is not genre mixing but lack of internal logic and unity of expression means.
- Updating the genre through substantive and stylistic reform — "living theater" is one that breathes with its time and engages emotionally and socially with its audience.
- Criticism of snobbery and prejudice against the genre — sees attitudes toward operetta as a cultural marker often used with a disparaging undertone.
- Ideological function of operetta in the socialist context — for him, operetta is not just an entertainment genre but a possible carrier of socialist values.
- Director's role as key to contemporary resonance — the director is not just a technical executor but co-author of the production tasked with refracting classical works through the prism of the new era.
- Emphasizes the need for national dramaturgy — sustainable development of Bulgarian musical theater requires a native aesthetic foundation and original content.
- Professionalism, ensemble approach, and artistic culture as criteria for good directing — emphasis on deep dramaturgical analysis, attention to acting, and creating a coherent artistic environment.
- Criticism of contemporary production practices — disagreement with the trend of directors as "tourists" more concerned with short-term success than building

long-term artistic process. Advocates for director-pedagogues working long-term with the troupe to create deeply impactful stage art.

Pavel Gerdzhikov

- Multifaceted creative profile and high professional culture — simultaneously a top-class singer, director with an original stage language, and pedagogue with deep influence on generations of opera artists.
- Defender and interpreter of Bulgarian musical culture — theoretically argues the need for a deep connection between performer and national cultural tradition.
- Aesthetic views based on realism and intellectual depth — develops directing combining high artistic taste, realism, and rich cultural erudition.
- Contribution to building a modern directing school in Bulgaria — founder of the "Opera Directing" department at the National Music Academy. His approach is based on ensemble thinking, internal motivation, and stylistic precision.
- Directing open to the new but respectful to the classical — seeks stage form without disrupting the organic unity of classical works, introducing new theatrical means when serving artistic truth.
- Criticism of superficial commercialization of the opera stage — critical of trends turning opera theater into mechanical show or artistic competition without aesthetic coherence.
- Methodology of interpretation based on in-depth knowledge — analytical approach to role-building; studies entire composer's oeuvre, stylistic and historical contexts.
- Conceptualization of performative responsibility as a cultural mission.

Rumen Neykov

- Heir and adapter of the German expressionist directing school — musical-dramaturgical analysis, expressive minimalism, and integrated stage action.
- Creator with strong intellectual and research profile — fundamental genre questions: director's role, conflict structures, expressionist aesthetics, interaction between text, music, and stage image.

- Proponent of synthetic theater and multilayered directing aimed at building stage truth despite musical genre conventions.
- Aesthetic rehabilitation of Bulgarian classical and modern opera titles.
- Active supporter of Brechtian epic model in opera directing — promotes the idea that Brecht’s approach can be used not only for contemporary but also classical works through critical distance, irony, and breaking stage illusion.
- Emphasizes the role of the director as a cultural critic and theorist — his works and writings are often theoretical manifestos and guides for the new generation.
- Supporter of avant-garde aesthetics and interdisciplinary collaboration — believes in theater as a living laboratory for new artistic syntheses.
- Critical of institutional inertia and artistic conservatism — calls for ongoing artistic renewal and director’s autonomy.

Plamen Kartalov

- Main ideas and methods: The stage begins from the score — musical dramaturgy is the architecture of the performance, its internal logic, and stylistic unity.
- Theory and practice: The director as researcher — in his work *“Yanin’s Nine Brothers – opera by Lyubomir Pipkov. Directorial projections”*, he traces the genealogy of the libretto, examines genre blending — “dramatic ballad,” “musical mystery,” “psychological parable”; he proposes a philosophical interpretation in which the disintegration of Yanin’s family symbolizes the historical doom of the Bulgarian people — a kind of operatic apocalypse.
- Search for stage truth: from “Yana” to “Turandot” — in analyzing his productions, Kartalov develops the concept of stage truth. For him, “the tempo-rhythm of the performance” originates from the musical form, and the visual concept — from the dramaturgical conflict, which must not only be illustrated but experienced.
- The director is psychologically precise, visually conceptual — using colors, textures, and light as semantic means and genre-unconventional.
- Integrativity: opera as a polyphony of the arts — Kartalov perceives opera as a synthetic art in which music, dance, speech, acting, and visual elements must be

homogeneously fused, and the performance is the result of “stage scoring,” where the director acts as an archaeologist of musical time.

- Opera as synthetic art combining music, philosophy, and visual dramaturgy, inspired by the aesthetics of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Kartalov establishes his directing vision as a cultural mission — to make Wagner accessible and meaningful on the contemporary Bulgarian stage.
- Political and spiritual: opera as prophecy — in the deepest layers of Kartalov’s concepts is a striving to transform opera into a contemporary message. His productions raise questions not only about music and stage but also about nation, memory, and culture.

Vanya Bachvarova

- Theory and practice: from “Acting” to “Opera dramaturgy” — “*Acting for Opera Singers*” is a foundational bilingual work structured as a psychophysical handbook for opera performers. Bachvarova outlines the fundamental difference between dramatic and opera actors — in the nature of sound and physical presence it generates.
- Critiques the widespread practice of applying theatrical methodologies to opera training, highlighting their inadequacy for the “unnatural” relationship between voice and body in opera.
- Builds a holistic, practically applicable model of stage training, where the singer’s imagination and sensitivity to the musical score play a central role.
- “*Opera Dramaturgy*”: her most significant academic work — a monograph representing the highest scholarly achievement in Bachvarova’s career.
- Examines genre metamorphosis in opera history, explores opera through sociocultural optics, and analyzes the composer-director relationship as a bilateral process of artistic co-authorship.
- International perspective and cultural sensitivity — her visit to the Bayreuth Festival in 1976 inspired a highly analytical text comparing Patrice Chéreau’s directing of *The Ring* with Pierre Boulez’s conducting, demonstrating fine sensitivity to the balance between musical and theatrical elements.

- Bachvarova's critique of the mismatch between text and music in Chéreau's production underscores her belief that directing should not violate the "internal score logic" but emphasize it.
- Educator and institutional innovator — Bachvarova was the first to create an opera directing program in Bulgaria — at New Bulgarian University. She thus fills a long-standing institutional gap, opening a "new chance" for Bulgarian opera theater.
- Her pedagogical work at the National Music Academy and Çukurova University (Turkey) positions her as a figure with cross-border influence in contemporary musical education.
- Method and aesthetics: understanding and transformation — the sign in the score is not the art itself but a path toward its actualization, its "sacred act" in the living performance.
- Director-reformer — conceives and conceptualizes opera as a whole art — art that, as she believes, must be alive, impactful, and contemporary without losing its spiritual essence.

In conclusion, the contemporary world of opera directing witnesses a dynamic transformation — from performance practice toward conceptual and interpretive thinking, where the director is not merely a mediator between composer and audience but a co-author in the artistic creation process. The Bulgarian opera stage, despite a long tradition in vocal art, begins to form its independent directing aesthetic only in the second half of the 20th century. It is then that key figures emerge, whose work, productions, and pedagogical activities elevate directing to an equal element of synthetic stage art.

The central role of musical dramaturgy as the foundation of stage action is shared by all leading directors — from Petar Shturbanov to Plamen Kartalov. They insist that music is not merely accompaniment to stage action but the architecture of dramaturgical construction itself. Shturbanov sees music as the driving force of the directorial concept, while Kartalov defines it as "the starting point of stage scoring." Similar is the view of Mihail Hadzhimishev, who warns that innovation should not be sought through external effects but through deep understanding of the composer's logic.

Theatrical truth as an artistic value is strongly present in the staging philosophy of Rumen Neykov, who brings expressionist aesthetics, ironic distance, and the Brechtian model of stage construction. For him, the stage is not only a place for emotions but a field for social dialogue and cultural reflection. A similar approach is observed in Vanya Bachvarova, who emphasizes that the director's true task is to translate what is encoded in the score into a living stage image, subordinated to dramaturgical logic and psychological credibility.

The directing work of Stefan Trifonov and Emil Boshnakov unfolds a bridge between tradition and reform. While Trifonov follows the line of psychological realism typical of the Soviet school but with nuances of poetic metaphor, Boshnakov offers an organic synthesis between visual conventionality and psychological concreteness, defining the director as a central figure in building the ensemble stage unity. Precisely ensemble thinking — not only as an organizational but also an aesthetic principle — is strongly present in the concepts of Emil Boshnakov, Pavel Gerdzhikov, and Svetozar Donev.

Education and institutional development of directing are considered not a secondary topic but a strategic question for the future of the genre. Bachvarova, Gerdzhikov, and Donev emphasize the need for systematic training integrating vocal, dramatic, and visual culture into a unified educational model. Bachvarova, in particular, formulates a new pedagogical canon based on the psychophysics of the singer and the necessity of an adequate stage technique distinct from theatrical.

In Kartalov's directing concepts, opera acquires prophetic, spiritual, and cultural charge. For him, the performance is not only an aesthetic experience but a message to the nation, cultural memory, and ethical responsibility, an allegory of our historical existence, reaching philosophical interpretations that impart to the production dimensions of a national epic.

Modern paradigms in Bulgarian opera directing result from a deep synthesis of musical analysis, stage ethics, and cultural mission. They do not reject tradition but transform it through methodological clarity and artistic inspiration. The striving for an integrated performance — based on the score, enriched by the director's vision, and realized through ensemble thinking — remains valid today as a universal criterion for artistic success.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

Analytical Overview of the Study

The establishment of the operatic art in Bulgaria was directly provoked by the urgent historical necessity following the Liberation—a swift effort to "catch up" on what had been missed for centuries in our national culture, and should essentially be regarded as a pivotal revolutionary act. However, the heated debates "for" or "against" the founding of a permanent opera theater in Bulgaria—publicly conducted among our most prominent musicians and cultural figures, progressive intellectuals, and publicists—undoubtedly had their grounds on both sides. It is no coincidence that the prolonged and widely publicized public polemic in the contemporary press remains in our musical history under the metaphorical title "the opera war." At the same time, the success of the very idea of laying the foundations of Bulgarian opera theater became a reality thanks to a few devoted creative personalities, whose immense efforts went beyond the usual artistic good and took on the character of a socially significant cultural mission.

In the difficult foundational years, the opera productions by the pioneers—Dragomir Kazakov, Konstantin Mihaylov-Stoyan, and a little later Hristo (Hityo) Popov—clearly do not bear the marks of a defined aesthetic style, mainly due to the fact that the directing profession itself in Central Europe and Russia was still new to dramatic theater and almost "illegitimate" for the opera stage. Therefore, during the initial, pre-directorial period, their primary concern was to find worthy performers in the country and gather them in the capital; to secure a permanent venue for performances and find funds to maintain it; and last but not least—to "assemble" an opera performance (initially and most often from separate opera scenes).

Subsequently, in the stage realization of the first complete operatic works, understandably the emphasis was placed on the vocal mastery of the performers and their ability to captivate the audience with the complex effect of the new art, which was seeking its admirers. In this sense, directing activity mainly supported the singers in following the sequence of a series of tableaux—specifying (according to the libretto) the place of action and the relationships of the opera characters, rehearsing the parts with them, recruiting choristers and positioning them appropriately according to the course of the action, giving instructions for the making

of sets, costumes, and props. Overall, it can reasonably be assumed that the first opera performances on the Bulgarian stage transferred the model of Russian productions from secondary theaters—originating from European (mostly Italian) traveling private opera troupes. The staging model itself is characterized by high emotionality and expressiveness in singing, the effort to reveal dramatic conflicts between the main characters, and as a final result—a strong impact on the audience.

However, undoubtedly more significant for foreign influence during the foundational period of opera in Bulgaria was the performer factor, related to the integration of qualified opera singers mainly from abroad: primarily Czechs—invited by Dr. Kazakov; although of Bulgarian origin, Konstantin Mihaylov-Stoyan, who arrived from Russia, was perceived more as a Russian, since he was born and worked there for a long time; Ivan Vulpe, the third co-founder of the capital's Opera Society, was Russian as well. Such circumstances inevitably created some tension within our cultural circles, which were not always inclined to warmly accept the "bearers" of foreign influence.

The founding of the Bulgarian Opera Society in 1908 was the first decisive push toward the purposeful development of opera art in the country. From that moment on, alongside the founders and invited foreign soloists, a sufficient number of qualified Bulgarian opera artists joined the performing troupe, including singers Zlatka Kurteva, Bogdana Gyuzeleva-Vulpe, Mara Vasileva, Olga Orlova, Doichinka Kolarova, Zhelyu Minchev, Panayot Dimitrov—some trained in Russia and Italy, with well-trained voices; conductors Heinrich Wisner, Alois Matzak, Todor Hadzhiev; choirmasters Dobri Hristov and Konstantin Ramadanov. This ensured favorable opportunities for further directing experiments—already aimed at the professional construction of opera performances.

With the nationalization of the capital's Opera Society in 1922, renamed the National Opera, a necessary radical change was made for the definitive consolidation of opera art in Bulgaria. The status of a national institution effectively equated our opera with the level of major European opera theaters and paved the way for the next stage of professionalization of the opera art, which was unconventional for Bulgaria.

The National Opera practically engaged and directly involved our best performers, conductors, and composers. In 1929, director Iliya Arnaudov—returned from training in opera directing in Vienna and specializing at the Berlin University of Music—came to work here. In 1934, the highly authoritative director Dragan Kurdzhiev also joined the troupe—another German-trained graduate of the Darmstadt Music Academy, the one-year course at the private film school "Orlando-Film" in Frankfurt am Main, and participant in the Wagner festivals in Bayreuth as assistant to A. Spring and H. Titién. Three years later, in 1937, the legendary Bulgarian singer and now established opera director Petar Raychev returned from abroad and was appointed at the National Opera (graduated from an accelerated course at the Moscow Conservatory, 1908–1911; worked at Stanislavski's theater and the Bolshoi Theater; specialized in Italy; sang for over 20 years on nearly all prestigious stages in Central Europe and Russia).

During this very successful period for the national consolidation of our opera theater, the chief director of the National Opera was Hristo (Hityo) Popov. It should be specially noted that during the years (1935–1937) when he held this responsible leadership position, two opposing aesthetic staging directions coexisted tolerantly under the roof of the same theatrical institution: the realistic, represented by the Russian-trained Popov and Raychev; and the conventional, embodied by the German-trained Arnaudov and Kurdzhiev (who introduced to Bulgaria the late Romantic staging practice of Wagner's reformist concept of the opera work as an Integral Musical Drama—with the absolute conventionality of an avant-garde aesthetic principle, highly talentfully and consistently represented by these two directors).

However, the political changes of 1944 unequivocally imposed general normative (for all national cultural institutions) aesthetic changes, directly expressed in censorship of repertoire choices and ruthless ideological staffing in our opera art. A signal of this was the immediate removal of both first-class German-trained directors from the Sofia National Opera (Arnaudov's last production on this stage was in 1944, while Kurdzhiev was "sent to contribute" to the professionalization of the Stara Zagora and later the Ruse operas under a plausible pretext). The cosmopolitan Raychev also left the Sofia Opera and in the following years worked mostly in provincial opera theaters, some of which he himself founded.

The new regime, fully aligned with the political dictate of Soviet Russia, imposed its own aesthetic doctrine—the so-called Method of Socialist Realism. In the years 1948–1950, the Russian opera director Evgeny Sokovnin was appointed chief director of the Sofia National Opera; Pavel Rumyantsev and Boris Pokrovski also appeared as guest directors. The model of the Soviet Realistic Musical Theater was proclaimed the "only correct" one. Meanwhile, the artistic line of the conventional theater was categorically interrupted.

However, the harmful consequences of the domination of socialist realism manifested practically in later years (the '70s and '80s). While in the '50s—based also on concrete staging results—the introduction of the Russian opera school, represented by P. Rumyantsev, E. Sokovnin, and especially B. Pokrovski, had a rather favorable effect. Bulgarian opera directors became directly acquainted with a very deep musical and theatrical tradition that broadened their knowledge of the possibilities of opera art: for the director's work with singers, especially in the detailed construction of the role with its hidden psychological characteristics and movements, as well as in portraying the external portrait of the hero; for highlighting the conflict and the functional structure of the performance from the musical score; for the synthesis between the arts incorporated in the production; for the purity of genre in the opera performance; for the ensemble and harmony among singer-actors, chorus, ballet, and orchestra—respectively among instrumental, vocal, and plastic fragments.

At the same time, alongside the new "Russian" wave in our opera art, the knowledge and skills of talented Bulgarian directors who received their education in Soviet Russia are added. Among them are: Petar Shturbanov, Emil Boshnakov, Mihail Hadzhimishev, and Stefan Trifonov.

In our opera art, realism aesthetics begin to dominate overall. The normative aesthetic formula imposed in Bulgarian opera theater—arising from the ideological tendencies of the Russian opera directing school, coupled with strict guidelines on the limits of directorial imagination and the avoidance of extreme theatrical imagery—forcedly maintains an "aesthetic deficit" in the entire generation of prominent Bulgarian opera directors (M. Hadzhimishev, N. Nikolov, P. Shturbanov, Sv. Donev, Em. Boshnakov, St. Trifonov). Undoubtedly well-prepared methodologically, theoretically, musically, and theatrically—necessary for creating an opera production—they are not particularly daring in

freely unfolding their imagination and visual thinking, fearing to fall into dilettantism or crude directorial self-promotion.

Despite these contextual circumstances, the period from the 1950s to the 1970s marks sustainable development and rise for Bulgarian opera directing, stability, and deepening in the director's laboratory, searching for new stage forms and experimenting within the accepted aesthetic-methodological structure (formula).

The opening of several state opera theaters outside the capital—in Stara Zagora, Ruse, Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas—de facto decentralizes opera art in our country, providing potential opportunities for various opera directors to create performing ensembles with a unified artistic image—based on the established model of opera theaters in Russia and Germany. However, in practice, this fruitful idea is realized with great difficulty, mainly due to the hierarchical model of the administrative structure of the Bulgarian opera theater—with official positions such as chief artistic directors (respectively—chief directors, chief conductors, chief designers, chief choreographers), upon whom the creative and organizational process entirely depends, but ultimately under the decisive authority of the administrative director, not the creative word of the director-producer.

In the 1970s and 1980s, our opera art definitely enters a period of crisis: directing craftsmanship, oriented toward realism and psychological depth, loses the energy of its initial impetus and lowers the level of its visual expression. New clichés emerge, stemming from the “suffocating” realism in its own chains; stage solutions are repeated from theater to theater, and the so-called updating of opera content often repels audiences, who instead of a celebration of operatic creativity receive direct references to their contemporary reality. Due to the growing “concern about the genre's decline,” even a Conference on opera art issues was held at our State Conservatory in Sofia. In heated debates, the necessity of an opera director was even questioned—then-rector Dimitar Ruskov unequivocally stated: “Opera does not need directors.”

The political changes of 1989 brought a radical turn in the development of Bulgarian opera directing. Freed from any state-government norms and left to choose their aesthetic identity independently, directors suddenly found themselves at a crossroads: between preserving the

already established staging opera tradition and its natural methodological and aesthetic renewal, and entering the territory of belated but extremely attractive modern thinking. There was a renewed borrowing from the artistic arsenal of European opera theater (which had meanwhile entered the postmodern era!)—whose highest achievements are no less problematic to reach than creating the classical (already) realistic opera production. And in this sense, the ambitions of directors who moved from dramatic theater—hungry for a new field and stage experimentation—manifested most irrepressibly; they sometimes blatantly violated musical laws (because most of them simply did not know them!), and thus the opera production once again fell into the realm of dilettantism.

It is important to emphasize, however, that the orientation of Bulgarian opera art overall toward realism is not solely the result of the destructive influence of the so-called socialist realism—which ruined not just one or two but dozens of opera productions with its unconditional demands based on Marxist-Leninist aesthetics. The reasons lie in a much more distant historical past and are connected to the emergence of the so-called realistic drama, known as New Drama or psychological drama, due to the radical changes in dramaturgical writing. The New Drama is generally united by the concept of realism, following the principles of the same style in literature. Simultaneously, it was influenced by naturalism. The aesthetics of New Drama contain a sharp inclination toward authenticity, which inevitably necessitated a new theatrical way of staging this type of drama.

And precisely at this moment arose the need for the directing profession (i.e., the first directors appeared), because for the first time the stage characters were united in a group—family or part of society; they are constantly present on stage and there must be someone outside it to organize this group of many characters acting simultaneously, unlike classical dramaturgy (from Antiquity to Romanticism—where characters stand opposite each other with clearly expressed external conflict, and where the function of organizer of the performance was taken by one of the leading actors—according to unchanging and clear rules set by the playwright). Emblematic directing figures of the New Realistic Drama, creating realistic theater—exceptionally unusual and modern for their time—are A. Antoine in France, O. Bram in Germany, and K. Stanislavski in Russia.

Stanislavski's "system" is designed for acting according to the laws of psychological theater and is unsuitable (even obstructive) for staging the entire dramaturgy before the New Drama. By conquering European stages at the end of the 19th century and spreading widely in the early 20th century, the realistic directing style naturally entered opera as well. In fact, opera productions staged in the aesthetics of scenic realism were already predominant in European opera theater during the first half and mid-20th century. This type of musical theater (narrative, realistic) reached its highest point with Walter Felsenstein in Germany, traditionally regarded as the founder of opera directing, whose methodology is based on strictly following the musical score in such a way that singing is always motivated and natural—a law in realistic theater.

Therefore, the first Bulgarian directors trained abroad—whether in Russia, Germany, Italy, France, or Czechoslovakia—already formed an artistic mindset connected to the dominant realistic theatrical-opera school. All of them, without exception, opposed the so-called costume concert form in which our opera art existed during the pre-director period. Practically, their first aesthetic transformation (as well as that of contemporary European and Russian opera directors) was through a radically new approach: depicting life's concreteness on stage in accordance with the proportions of human behavior in life, or in other words—introducing the realistic staging model into opera.

At the same time, however, linking realism with opera has a paradoxical effect. The aesthetics of the opera genre as a phenomenon—for four whole centuries and until the early 20th century—never aimed to depict reality; it filtered it on stage in a specific way using allegories and allusions. Originating as a precursor to the Baroque style—with its pronounced theatricality—opera established conditionality as an absolute genre rule, creating its own reality and preserving it for centuries. Consequently, realism enters into absolute dissonance with the very ontological essence and aprioristically encoded aesthetic canon of the opera genre.

It is well known that depending on the director's choice—to lean away from either dramatic or musical laws—determines the orientation of the opera production's imagery system: toward life correspondence or toward conventionality. In the first case, following the drama at the expense of the music, in poor variants (which unfortunately are more common),

directing decisions become schematic and monotonous because the focus is entirely on psychological plot. The musical possibilities of the score are not used, as only psychological moments serving as support for action analysis are sought there. This, in turn, leads to the degradation of musical dramaturgy and ultimately to the fact that it is not realized on stage as a series of poetic images, conflicting situations, and philosophical summaries. Singers begin to be required to perform like dramatic actors. Thus, staging practice of various classical operas, updated as “realistic,” starts to abound in clichés, transferring stage solutions from one production to another, becoming no less uninteresting than the “costumed concerts” of the pre-director theater.

Naturally, talented directors (and the selected representative group of Bulgarian opera directors who are the subject of this study are exactly such!) feel that the realistic style in opera is insufficient and seek, advocate, and write about the need for a staging with a striking form. Psychological conviction combined with a striking form definitely becomes the stage aesthetic ideal. Moreover, all directors profess that they rely on musical dramaturgy (not on the libretto). But it is known that the notion of striking form is far from identical to the stylistic concept of conventionality, just as relying on the musical score, each director can extract completely different things from it.

And in summary: what is the difference between the vivid form and convention?

In the first case, it is about an interesting visual solution — an unexpected approach to set design and costumes, a special selection of movement and divertissements. The performers act “according to Stanislavski,” sing with motivation, create fully developed roles as in a dramatic play, move on stage as in real life, with pauses during choreographic numbers, while above them, beneath them, and around them the decor is stylized in a certain way, sometimes moving, falling, “playing” along with them.

Whereas convention — as opposed to realism — has a completely different semantic meaning. Here, the visual solution, for example, must enter into artistic resonance with the music — on the principle of associative, emotionally metaphorical connections. This is a complex combination of reality and imagination; historical specificity is dismantled, and a universal, non-specific image is sought. In a conventional opera production, the key is the rejection of the linear logic of events and the personification of dramatic conflicts. There are

no connecting “transitions” between the tableaux; they are sharply distinguished from one another, their connection is associative and suggested by the very construction of the tableau — similar, contrasting, or neighboring. The director’s thinking goes in a different direction — towards enlargement, metaphorization, intellectualization of the content, rather than detailing it or making it everyday recognizable. Ambiguity, associations, and simultaneous meanings are sought, not lifelike resemblance. Using various theatrical means, generalized motifs (encoded in the music) are recreated as metaphors. Or simply put — the production is constructed according to the laws of musical polyphony. In the aesthetics of stage convention, the behavior of the opera performer corresponds to the convention — here, the actor’s physicality and the interaction of gesture with music play a key role, rather than, as in Stanislavski, requiring “active singing” and natural stage behavior.

The same applies to the director’s interpretation of the musical score. The director may look for and find signs of psychological play and active factuality in it, or may explore the music from the viewpoint of the encoded intonations in it (according to B. Asafiev), “hearing” the images embedded in the music, and then try to find their stage equivalent.

From all this, it becomes clear that there are two different directing systems — the realistic and the conventional — united by common musical-aesthetic and structural principles. What differs between them are the principles of directorial thinking and the models of production logic.

And if in European theater already at the beginning of the 20th century (with further development later), as well as in Russia, there were directors who upheld the principles of conventional theater (G. Craig in England, V. Meyerhold and A. Tairov in Russia), and over time these principles also entered opera, then in Bulgaria this process was strongly hindered for objective historical reasons. But we can explain exactly why. To form such (conventional) directorial thinking, a tradition and cultural sources from which to draw these ideas are necessary. European culture experienced the epochs of the Renaissance, Classicism, Enlightenment, during which all theatrical practice was subordinated to the laws of convention arising from the dramaturgical model dominating from Antiquity through Romanticism. The poetic form of tragedies written at that time, the plots borrowed from mythology, and later also from history (but not from reality!), the structuring of characters

on the principles of archetypes (not lifelike resemblance!) conditioned the conventional nature of the performance. The return in Europe to the convention of the classical spectacle — by the new avant-garde directors of the 20th century — is based on a centuries-old culture from which they draw ideas, are inspired, and transfer them to the new era.

Naturally, the situation was different in Bulgaria, which was liberated from Ottoman rule only in 1878, and whose first Bulgarian performance is considered the comedy *Mihal Mishkoed* by Sava Dobroplodni (1856, Shumen), while in France for two centuries plays by Racine, Corneille, etc. were already being performed. Also worth noting is that when opera first emerged in Bulgaria, the proportion of literate people in Bulgaria (circa 1900) was only 23.87% of the total population — statistically. We can imagine how many of them could read music notes and engage in music. From detailed biographies of the presented directors and founders of opera in Bulgaria — all singers — it is evident that many were influenced by “home” singing from their mothers and grandmothers, and later as students participated in local church choirs, where their inclination towards vocal art was cultivated. In this sense, we can speak of enormous efforts and tremendous will on the part of the first Bulgarian opera directors to lay the foundations of opera theater in Bulgaria. And to continue further — generation after generation, consistently and unwaveringly: climbing the steps of building and professionalizing this non-traditional art form in our country, enduring every production and stage success, going through crises and declines... And despite everything, managing to bring our opera theater to a world level — all within the span of a century.

Systematization of the main conclusions

Based on a thorough study of texts written by a representative group of Bulgarian directors, a consistent theoretical-practical line has been reconstructed in the understanding of opera directing as an independent art form. Regardless of ideological and stylistic differences between generations, several recurring methodological and aesthetic principles clearly stand out in the directors’ texts from the representative group:

- The central importance of music as the leading structuring factor;
- The pursuit of synthetic stage unity between vocal, visual, and dramaturgical levels;
- Attention to the historical and stylistic specificity of each work;
- Effort to combine tradition with contemporary stage expressiveness.

The conducted analysis also showed that despite the subjective character of many directorial texts, tracking the processes in genre-stylistic production terms allows the identification of **stable elements of the directorial toolkit, reflecting opera specificity in stage decisions, which in turn enables summarizing the main issues of directorial interpretation.**

The empirical basis and interdisciplinary analysis of the study unequivocally confirm that **directorial publications constitute an independent and reliable research base for studying opera production methodology and contribute to shaping a model for contemporary interpretation of the opera repertoire in a national and European context.**

The figure of the “writing director” acts as a **key mediator between stage practice and theoretical reflection**, articulating through texts the processes of artistic decision-making, interpretive searches, and stylistic transformations, enabling the extraction of a **stable production paradigm and the definition of contemporary problems and prospects for national opera directing.**

Analysis of recent directorial publications (after 1990) reveals a clear **aesthetic dilemma**: between directors with specialized musical training and those with a dramatic background — despite the contemporary theatrical context questioning the stability of genre specificity. In this sense, the results confirm that transformations in directorial thinking from the beginning of the 21st century lead to tension between musical logic and theatrical interpretation, which is essential for future research in the outlined **new field of art studies** — **methodological-practical problems of directing art in Bulgarian opera theater.**

The production methodology derived from theoretical texts offers a **valid framework for applied and pedagogical development** — both in directing education and contemporary production practice.

Contributions

This study presents significant contributions in three main areas: methodological, applied, and academic. They reflect the importance of the work both for the production practice in contemporary opera theater and for the development of Bulgarian music-theatrical theory.

Methodological Contributions

1. A scientific model for analyzing the methodology of stage realization in opera has been developed. (see Appendix)
2. An innovative methodology for analyzing director's texts has been introduced, combining aesthetic, stylistic, historical, and genre approaches, applicable also to other performing arts forms.
3. A model for comparative analysis of directorial interpretations, based on textual and production sources, has been created.
4. A model for reconstructing stage thinking based on published (and partly subjective) texts has been constructed by identifying dominant aesthetic lines and practices.
5. An interdisciplinary approach combining elements from theater studies, musicology, and cultural studies has been realized, which can also be adapted to other synthetic arts.

Applied Contributions

1. An informational and analytical database classifying main directorial strategies and approaches has been created—applicable in opera directing education and stage interpretation.
2. Criteria for evaluating directorial interpretation have been derived, which can be used for repertoire programming and artistic policy in opera theaters.
3. The study offers guidance for contemporary directors in interpreting classic opera titles through historical and stylistic context.

4. The production principles outlined can be applied in the creation of educational programs, directing workshops, and critical journalism oriented toward music-theatrical arts.
5. Through analysis of specific cases and published texts, the study encourages reflexivity among creators themselves, mediating between theory and directing practice.

Academic Contributions

1. A new field within art studies has been outlined—Methodological and Practical Problems of Directing Art in Bulgarian Opera Theater.
2. For the first time in Bulgarian theater and musicology, a comprehensive systematization and analysis of original theoretical publications by leading Bulgarian opera directors from the early 20th century to the early 21st century has been accomplished.
3. The evolution of directing thought through different cultural, political, and aesthetic phases has been traced—from the formation of the directing school to its contemporary transformations.
4. A new periodization of Bulgarian opera directing has been proposed based on genre-stylistic and methodological criteria, rather than solely historical-chronological or ideological principles.
5. The existence of a stable national directing school, characterized by an integrated approach to musical and stage elements, has been proven.
6. The role of the “writing director” as a figure contributing to the theoretical understanding and documentary archiving of Bulgarian stage interpretative tradition has been examined and argued.

Scientific Novelty of the Study

The study possesses several levels of scientific novelty that distinguish it within Bulgarian theater and musicological traditions:

1. For the first time, a large quantity of primary sources—publications, studies, critiques, theoretical notes written by Bulgarian opera directors themselves—has

been introduced into academic analysis as a basis for reconstructing their stage thinking.

2. It offers a new, text-centered approach to studying opera directing, relying not on external critical interpretation but on the internal theoretical positions and observations of the directors themselves.
3. It outlines the stylistic evolution of Bulgarian opera directing through an original typology of production concepts in the context of historical, genre, and ideological transformations.
4. For the first time in Bulgaria, a constructive analysis of the figure of the “writing director” has been conducted, viewing them not only as stage interpreters but also as participants in shaping the theoretical field of music-theatrical art.
5. The study builds a methodological framework applicable to other national or genre-specific directing practices (e.g., operetta, musical, dramatic theater).

Perspectives for Future Research

1. Conducting empirical studies (interviews, surveys, review analysis) related to the reception of specific directorial interpretations by different audiences and generations.
2. Expanding the methodology through the analysis of stage artifacts—video archives, director’s notes, stage scores, and other materials from theater collections.
3. Comparative studies of the Bulgarian directing school with other national schools—e.g., Russian, Czech, Italian, French, German—to identify transnational influences and specifics.
4. Development of the research towards digital platforms and databases where directorial texts, production materials, and analyses can be accessible to future researchers and practitioners.

Conclusion

This study offers a **comprehensive and in-depth view of the development of Bulgarian opera directing through the prism of authorial publications by leading directors from the early 20th century to the early 21st century.** Through analysis of their books, studies,

critical, and theoretical texts, the **evolution of methodological principles, aesthetic views, and stage approaches has been traced.**

The dissertation hypothesis—*that systematic analysis of theoretical publications by Bulgarian opera directors from the early 20th century to the present allows for identifying a stable directing methodology reflecting the specific synthesis of musical and stage elements in the genre and offers a model for contemporary interpretation of the opera repertoire in national and European contexts*—**has been fully confirmed.**

The research convincingly revealed that even in their often essayistic and fragmentary form, directing texts represent a **valuable source of stage thinking, interpretative strategies, and professional positions that build a bridge between theory and practice.**

The conclusions and contributions underline that Bulgarian opera directing is characterized by a **striving for a balanced combination of musical logic and stage-dramaturgical integrity, consistency in developing aesthetic principles oriented toward respect for the author's text and stylistic authenticity, and a dialogue between tradition and modernity, which remains a leading criterion in assessing successful contemporary interpretation.**

Particularly important is the finding that in the contemporary cultural context, the Bulgarian opera scene experiences a need for a **conscious return to professional directing based on knowledge of musical dramaturgy and its stage realization**—something that most of the authors discussed firmly advocate in their texts.

The study offers not only a retrospective analysis but also a forward-looking framework for future developments aimed at enriching educational programs, repertoire policies, and contemporary directing practices in Bulgarian opera theater. In this summarizing sense, the contribution of the work lies not only in the field of scholarly genre knowledge but also in supporting the necessary creative dialogue both among different generations of directors and between their methodological views and real stage experience.