

CONTEMPORARY MACEDONIAN PROFESSIONAL MUSIC IN MUSIC EDUCATION: CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING, REPERTOIRE DEVELOPMENT AND INTERPRETATIVE PRACTICE

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Abstract: Music education has an important role in forming technically prepared and artistically independent musicians who are able to understand music within its cultural context. Alongside the study of established European and international repertoire, students need systematic contact with professionally composed music from their own cultural environment. This article examines contemporary Macedonian professional music as a significant educational and artistic field through which cultural understanding, repertoire development and interpretative practice can be strengthened. For the purposes of this article, the term contemporary Macedonian professional music refers to Macedonian art music, mainly developed in the post-war period and still relevant for present-day education, performance and research. The study is based on a qualitative, descriptive-analytical and interpretative approach. It considers relevant musicological and pedagogical literature, selected repertoire categories and the possible application of this repertoire at different levels of music education. The results indicate that contemporary Macedonian professional music has significant educational value as well as in the formation of artistic identity. A separate section discusses the oeuvre of composer and academician Vlastimir Nikolovski as a representative example, showing its application in elementary, secondary and higher music education. The article argues that Macedonian professional music can support listening, analysis, performance, ensemble work and cultural interpretation, while also encouraging students to approach domestic repertoire as a living artistic field rather than as a marginal addition to standard programmes.

Keywords: Macedonian professional music, music education, cultural understanding, repertoire, interpretation

1. INTRODUCTION

Music education participates in the formation of musicians who combine technical preparation with artistic independence, cultural understanding and an active relationship toward the repertoire they perform. It develops instrumental and theoretical knowledge, but also shapes aesthetic judgment, listening habits and the professional relationship of students toward the musical heritage of their own environment. The study of established European and international repertoire remains essential for developing students' understanding of form, harmony, style, genre and performance practice. At the same time, contemporary educational thought increasingly recognizes the value of repertoire diversity and culturally grounded learning, especially when music education aims to connect artistic knowledge with the lived cultural experience of students (Campbell, 2018).

In this context, students also need systematic contact with professionally composed music from their own cultural environment. Such repertoire allows them to understand how folkloric traditions, spiritual elements, regional idioms and collective cultural memory may be transformed into professional artistic language. This does not reduce national music to folklore; rather, it enables students to observe the creative process through which inherited cultural materials become part of contemporary compositional and interpretative practice (Elliott & Silverman, 2015).

The educational value of domestic repertoire is also visible in public performance practice. In international concert contexts, familiar repertoire often provides a frame through which audiences evaluate technical mastery, musicality and artistic individuality. Yet programmes that include a carefully selected composition from the performer's own cultural background may create an additional level of communication. Such works introduce the audience to a less familiar sound idiom and, when they contain transformed folkloric, spiritual or regional elements, they function as artistic statements of cultural identity rather than as simple national illustration. This aspect is especially important for performers from smaller musical cultures, whose repertoire can enrich international concert programmes and broaden audience experience (Westerlund & Gaunt, 2021).

For the purposes of this article, the term contemporary Macedonian professional music is used for professionally composed Macedonian art music, mainly developed from the post-war period onward and still relevant for present-day education, performance and research. The article examines this repertoire as an educational and artistic field, with particular attention to cultural understanding, repertoire development and interpretative practice. The oeuvre of composer and academician Vlastimir Nikolovski is discussed as a representative example of a broad Macedonian compositional output with application across different educational levels.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research is based on a qualitative, descriptive-analytical and interpretative approach. The analysis is document-based and repertoire-oriented: it considers published musicological and pedagogical literature, available data on selected Macedonian works and repertoire categories, and the pedagogical possibilities that arise from their musical, cultural and performative characteristics. The approach is not statistical; its purpose is to identify educational potentials through systematic textual, contextual and interpretative reading (Rink, 2002).

The repertoire was considered according to four criteria: genre and performing medium, suitability for different educational levels, presence of cultural or stylistic references, and potential for developing listening, analytical and performance-related abilities. These criteria make it possible to connect general arguments about national repertoire with concrete pedagogical applications. The article therefore moves from the general educational value of contemporary Macedonian professional music to a more focused discussion of Nikolovski's oeuvre as a representative case.

The discussion is guided by three questions: what educational value does contemporary national repertoire have in music education; how can Macedonian professional music contribute to cultural and interpretative development; and how can the creative output of a representative Macedonian composer be used across elementary, secondary and higher levels of music education. Recent discussions of diversity, inclusion and expanded professionalism in music education are used to support the argument that curricula should open space for a wider range of artistic traditions (Association Européenne des Conservatoires, 2023; Kallio, 2021).

3. CONTEMPORARY MACEDONIAN PROFESSIONAL MUSIC AS EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

The inclusion of contemporary national repertoire in music education is important for both artistic and pedagogical reasons. From an artistic perspective, it expands the repertoire available to students and introduces them to musical languages that may differ from the most frequently studied international works. From a pedagogical perspective, it connects technical training with cultural understanding, interpretative responsibility and a more personal relationship to musical heritage (Holmgren, 2022).

Macedonian professional music developed from a rich cultural background in which folk tradition, church singing and amateur performance preceded the full establishment of professional musical institutions. After the Second World War, the development of music schools, orchestral ensembles, opera, ballet, professional associations and higher music education created the conditions for a modern Macedonian musical culture (Golabovski, 1999). This historical trajectory is important because it shows that Macedonian professional music did not emerge in isolation, but through a gradual interaction between tradition, institutional development and individual artistic creation.

The first generations of Macedonian composers created the foundations of professional music-making, while later generations expanded the repertoire toward orchestral, chamber, vocal-instrumental and contemporary forms. In this process, folklore was not simply preserved as ethnographic material. It was transformed through rhythm, melodic contour, modal thinking, dance impulse, timbre, texture and individual compositional technique. Historical contextualization may therefore connect a work with social memory, spiritual tradition, institutional development or the changing role of the performer in Macedonian musical culture (Ortakov, 1982).

Contemporary Macedonian professional music has additional educational value because it often introduces students to expanded notation, unconventional sound production, complex rhythm, open interpretative choices and new relationships between performer, instrument and sound. These elements are particularly relevant at advanced levels of education, where students are expected to develop independent artistic judgment. At the same time, carefully selected examples can be adapted for younger learners through guided listening, narrative association and discussion. For students, this historical and artistic trajectory has clear educational value. By studying Macedonian professional music, they gain insight into the formation of Macedonian musical culture and the development of the Macedonian national school of composition. They also learn to recognize how inherited musical materials are transformed into contemporary artistic expression, and how the national repertoire can function within both local and international artistic contexts.

National repertoire should not be treated as a symbolic addition to the curriculum. It requires the same seriousness as international repertoire: score analysis, stylistic study, historical contextualization, technical preparation and public performance. For example, score analysis can reveal modal thinking or rhythmic asymmetry; stylistic study can clarify the difference between quotation and transformation of folk idioms; and performance preparation can show how timbre, articulation and tempo shape cultural meaning.

4. THE OEUVRE OF COMPOSER AND ACADEMICIAN VLASTIMIR NIKOLOVSKI AS A PEDAGOGICAL EXAMPLE

The oeuvre of composer and academician Vlastimir Nikolovski is characterized by exceptional thematic and genre diversity. It includes social and historical themes, folklore, humour and satire, lament and funeral-march idioms, the idiom and movement energy of the traditional dance Teshkoto, spiritual tradition, children's music and musical cryptograms. His output also covers different performing media: orchestral, vocal-instrumental, choral, chamber, piano, accordion, children's and stage music (Gerasimovska-Dimitrovska, 2019). This makes his music suitable for pedagogical use from introductory listening activities to advanced interpretation and research.

4.1. POTENTIAL FOR ELEMENTARY AND GENERAL MUSIC EDUCATION

At the level of elementary and general music education, selected shorter works by Nikolovski, such as Mladinski album, may be used to develop listening habits, rhythmic sensitivity and first awareness of Macedonian instrumental music. Their pedagogical value lies in the combination of clear character, programmatic suggestion and accessible musical language. Through titles, teacher guidance and attentive listening, pupils can create their own story or image of the music they hear, which is especially important when introducing them to instrumental music.

In primary education, pupils need more frequent and carefully guided contact with this type of music, especially with works by Macedonian composers. Such contact can help them experience Macedonian professional music as part of their cultural environment, not as distant concert repertoire. Children's choral works and shorter piano pieces may also support the connection between rhythm, text, movement and imagination, preparing pupils for a more conscious relationship with national music later in their education.

4.2. POTENTIAL FOR SECONDARY MUSIC EDUCATION

In secondary music education, Nikolovski's piano, chamber and choral works can develop technical discipline, stylistic awareness and basic analytical thinking. Pieces such as Toccata, Folklore Sonata, Three Dances, Contrasts, as well as chamber works for violin, clarinet, violoncello and piano, provide material for studying rhythm, articulation, modal thinking, thematic transformation and ensemble communication.

At this level, the educational task is not only to teach students how to perform a work technically, but also to cultivate responsibility toward national professional music. Students should be encouraged to feel pride in this repertoire, to experience it as their own, and to analyse and perform it with genuine interest rather than as an imposed obligation. Such an attitude requires time, continuity and persistence. Teachers have a decisive role in this process: the enthusiasm and conviction with which they present Macedonian works can shape the students' long-term relationship with domestic repertoire.

Through regular inclusion of at least one work by a Macedonian composer in student programmes, secondary music education can create a habit of repertoire balance. In this way, students gradually learn that the Macedonian repertoire belongs naturally beside the European and international repertoire, and that it deserves serious interpretative attention.

4.3. POTENTIAL FOR HIGHER MUSIC EDUCATION

At the level of higher music education, Nikolovski's works offer possibilities for advanced analysis and interpretation. His orchestral and vocal-instrumental works, including Symphony No. 3 Rustica, Folklorophonia, the oratorios Klimentu and Kirilu, the cantata Serdarot and the Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, can be studied in relation to form, orchestration, national style, folkloric transformation, spiritual tradition and contemporary compositional language. They are suitable for different study programmes because they connect performance, composition, conducting, theory, musicology and pedagogy.

Through such works, students can perceive Macedonian professional music as an integral part of the wider European and international artistic landscape. In this way, the Macedonian repertoire is approached not as a peripheral addition, but as a valuable field of study, performance and interpretation within the educational process. This is important because Macedonia has a strong compositional tradition and a repertoire that deserves sustained attention during professional musical training.

4.4. FOLKLORE TRANSFORMATION

In Nikolovski's oeuvre, folklore functions not as a simple repository of melodies, but as a creative source from which short motifs, idioms and characteristic melodic-rhythmic features are transformed into an individual and refined professional musical language. Particularly important is his treatment of folk instrumental colour. The oboes may suggest the sound world of the zurlas, the flute may evoke the kaval, while timpani or other percussion may recall the tapan. At other moments, drone-like textures evoke the bagpipe, and tambura-like resonance is suggested through classical instrumental means. Nikolovski also occasionally introduces folk instruments into classical ensembles, creating a moment of timbral surprise and raising an important interpretative question: how can non-tempered folk instruments and tempered classical instruments coexist within the same sound space? This question is

valuable for teaching because it connects orchestration, timbre, tuning, texture and cultural meaning (Karakash, 1970).

The idea and movement energy of Teshkoto, the traditional Macedonian folk dance, form another important educational field. In Nikolovski's oeuvre, Teshkoto does not appear as a repeated picture or external folkloric label. Its formal impulse, collective energy and dramaturgical movement are reimagined in different genres and performing media, including works for clarinet and piano, violoncello and piano, accordion, mixed choir, and larger orchestral or vocal-instrumental compositions such as Symphony No. 2 Barbara, Symphony No. 3 Rustica, Folklorophonia, Trio Sonoro, Piano Sonata and the Concerto for Piano and Orchestra (Kolovski, 1996). Each treatment is original, shaped according to the medium, texture and expressive aim of the composition. For students, these works offer valuable material for analysing form, timbre, orchestration, rhythm and the transformation of dance movement into musical structure.

The educational significance of Teshkoto is further strengthened by the idea that Nikolovski wanted to give this Macedonian dance a place in art music comparable to the role that Chopin gave to the mazurka and polonaise. This view, discussed in musicological interpretations of Nikolovski's work, allows teachers to present Teshkoto not only as a folkloric reference, but as a structural and expressive principle (Kolarovska-Gmirja, 2000). Students can compare how the same cultural impulse appears differently in chamber, choral, orchestral and concert works, and can observe how a traditional dance becomes a source of form, dramaturgy and national artistic identity.

4.5. SPIRITUAL ELEMENTS

Another important pedagogical field is Nikolovski's use of spiritual and church-related elements. Works such as Klimentu, Kirilu, Antiliturgy, Poronchenija and the second movement of the Concerto for Piano and Orchestra show how church singing and Byzantine-Slavic spiritual tradition can be transformed into contemporary professional music. This aspect is valuable because it connects musical interpretation with text, vocal tradition, spirituality and cultural memory. Nikolovski himself wrote about Byzantine spiritual music as an inspiration in contemporary Macedonian musical creation, linking this influence with his experience in church choirs and with modal and folkloric elements in his compositional language (Nikolovski, 1976).

Nikolovski's oeuvre can therefore be used as a vertically structured educational example. In elementary education, it can support listening, imagination and first contact with Macedonian instrumental music. In secondary music education, it can develop technical skills, stylistic awareness and responsibility toward national repertoire. In higher education, it can support advanced interpretation, analysis, orchestration, conducting, composition and musicological research. Such a pedagogical approach places Macedonian professional music within the regular educational process and contributes to the formation of musicians who understand domestic repertoire as an active artistic and cultural field.

5. CONCLUSION

Contemporary Macedonian professional music has significant potential in music education because it connects artistic training with cultural understanding, repertoire diversity and interpretative maturity. Its educational value lies in the possibility to develop concrete musical abilities: active listening, analytical thinking, stylistic recognition, technical preparation, ensemble sensitivity, awareness of timbre and the ability to connect performance with cultural meaning.

The discussion of Vlastimir Nikolovski's oeuvre shows how the work of one representative Macedonian composer can be applied across different educational levels, since his output brings together creative, performative, analytical and pedagogical dimensions of music education. Through such works, students can perceive Macedonian professional music as an integral part of the wider European and international artistic landscape. In this way, the Macedonian repertoire is approached not as a peripheral addition, but as a valuable field of study, performance and interpretation within the educational process. This is important because Macedonia has a strong compositional tradition and a repertoire that deserves sustained attention during professional musical training.

The most important recommendation is not merely to include Macedonian professional music more often, but to include it with clear educational purpose. Teachers may use it to develop listening, interpretation, analysis, orchestration, ensemble communication and cultural understanding. Student programmes can gradually establish the habit of including at least one Macedonian work each school year, while public and international performances can present domestic repertoire as a meaningful artistic contribution. In this way, contemporary Macedonian professional music becomes part of living educational and concert practice, not only a subject of historical knowledge.

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