

Methodological Approaches for the Reconstruction of the Development of Macedonian Music Artist

Danka Firfova – the First Macedonian Opera Singer

During the past several decades Macedonian musicology has approached the reconstruction of the deeds of music institutions as well as specific individuals who have greatly contributed to the development of Macedonian music culture within the second half of the 20th century. Thus, we have attempted to define a methodology which will enable a complete reconstruction of the work of Macedonian music artist, with particular emphasis to their life and professional activities.

This methodological approach will be used in this paper in order to provide deeper insight into the life and work of one of the most remarkable opera singers in the history of Macedonian music – Danka Firfova.

Danka Firfova was among the first dramatic sopranos in Macedonia. She is an artist that belongs to the first generation of educated Macedonian musicians who received their education in the music school of the Kingdom of Serbian, Croatians and Slovenians and she is also one of the founders of Macedonian music culture after the Second World War. Thus, from a historical aspect, Danka Firfova is the first Macedonian opera singer. In the beginning, upon completing her education she contributed to the development of music by teaching, and further on by taking role in social and cultural events of the then socialist system of Macedonia. Such an extraordinary fact is that after the opening of the Macedonian National Theatre, Firfova became one of the founders of the Macedonian Opera. As an artist she took part in the first professional opera in 1947, the opera *Cavaleria Rusticana* by Pietro Mascagni. As she was the only educated performer in the field, within the following years Danka Firfova took the main roles in the repertoire of the operas *Aida*, *Norma*, *Othello*, *Turandot*. In her development as an artist her biography notes specializations in Italy and Bulgaria, several guest performances in neighboring countries and Italy, Belgium and Poland, a Grand Prix at an International Competition in Belgium and a life-time achievement award in 1976. The audiences still speak highly of her roles in the past, while the reviews state the following:



Danka Firfova in *Cavaleria Rusticana*

“... A great surprise in the performance was the prima donna of the Skopje Opera Danka Firfova in the role of Desdemona. She presented herself as a great artist with a wonderful dramatic soprano, with great endurance and warmth. The Zagreb scene has not heard such a beautifully sung image of the opera Othello. The sounding “kopf” tones and her unusually long breath contributed even more strongly for Firfova to receive great ovations...” (Hrestak Sinisha, 1959).

After deciding upon the artist for the application of this methodology, we approached towards conducting research. As main sources we used printed materials, concert leaflets, posters, journal articles, documentation, as well as audio and video materials.

Research was carried out in the Archive of the Macedonian National Theatre in Skopje, Danka Firfova’s personal archives, the archives of the Serbian National Theatre in Novi Sad (Firfova was part of this opera from 1956 until 1959), and the archives of the Macedonian Radio Television in Skopje.

Research was conducted during the years of 2005 and 2006.

The sources yielded sufficient materials and an empirical corpus which were later processed by entering the data in a digital catalogue. The intention in creating the methodology developed into analyzing the interaction between the artists and their environment (sociological, political, cultural, institutional, aesthetic) in order to define the cause and effect relationship of the historical period and the artist, or the artist in history.

Thus, we formed a database with the following parameters:

1. Number – number in catalogue
2. Title – of the materials
3. Type of artifacts – texts, graphic materials, audio and video materials
4. Name of event – soloist, teacher, music school, opera, opera house
5. Type of event – professional engagement at the Macedonian Theatre, in Novi Sad, opera performance, vocal concert
6. Origin of artifact – domestic or foreign
7. Place of origin of the artifact – institution, town and country
8. Language
9. Author – institution or the artists themselves, author of article or TV show
10. Date – of issue
11. Publisher – newspaper, magazine, institution
12. Participants – orchestra, conductor, singers
13. Material – printed or not
14. Texts – documents, reviews, announcements, information, concert leaflets

15. Graphic materials – posters and photographs. This field may also include scores, if existing
16. Sound carriers – tape, vinyl or compact disk
17. Type of video material – television shows, portraits, documentaries
18. Archive – where the artifacts are held
19. Comment – a field clarifying an artifact

After recording the materials into the catalogue the following results were received:

The database contains a total of 509 entries. Out of these:

Types of Artifacts	Number	%
Texts	344	67.58%
Graphic materials	158	31.04%
Video materials	5	0.98%
Sound carriers	2	0.40%
Total	509	100%

The field showing the largest percentage of texts indicates that most of the artifacts belong to Firfova's personal archives, where most of the documentation regarding her work has been preserved. On the other hand, as an opera singer performing at home and abroad, Firfova's legacy abounds with printed materials, such as reviews and similar texts published in newspapers and articles in Macedonia and in foreign countries. These articles always present her as an opera singer who was very much esteemed by the audiences. The smaller amount of graphic materials, on the other hand, is due to the incomplete archives of the music institutions in the early years of their existence, mostly because of the earthquake that destroyed Skopje in 1963.

Distribution according to types of artifacts

Texts	Number	%
Documents	188	54.65%
Reviews	33	9.59%
Concert programmes	32	9.30%
Greeting cards	19	5.52%
Letters	18	5.24%
Others	54	15.70%
Total	344	100%

Due to Firfova's well-preserved personal archives the largest percentage of texts are documents. These usually refer to her employment at the Opera, her status there, various reports and requests, contracts for guest performances abroad, concert agencies etc. The concerts abroad were noted by the positive reviews in the printed media. Particularly well documented are the premieres and all

her performances abroad. In addition to all the cards she received after the performances, the letters, the concert leaflets and the reviews, there are also announcements and information for the shows, articles, discussions, telegrams and interviews.

Graphic materials	Number	%
Photographs	128	81.01%
Posters	30	18.99%
Total	158	100%

Another important detail is that the Archives of the Macedonian National Theatre own most of the photographs from the operas in which Firfova performed, considering them historical artifacts of Macedonian music history.



Danka Firfova in *Toska*

Firfova's legacy also includes sound carriers, one of which is a vinyl with opera arias and solo songs. There are also five video materials: one portrait of the singer and four documentaries in which she had been interviewed.

Distribution according to type of events

Type of events	Number	%
Opera performances	256	50.30%
Macedonian National Theatre	139	27.31%
Vocal concerts	30	5.89%
Others	84	16.50%
Total	509	100%

This distribution in fact presented Firfova's work. Most of the artifacts concern the realization of the operas and her performances on stage. The artifacts marked with "MNT" (Macedonian National Theatre) refer to documents related to her job.

In addition, the percentage of artifacts regarding vocal concerts are of great importance, since they prove that Firfova performed in solo concerts as well as operas. These concerts, together with the vocal concerts of the other opera singers, are the first solo concerts of Macedonian artists in Macedonia, mainly due to the fact that the generation of professional instrumental soloists began performing after 1960 because of lack of education in this field. As a result of the existence of such soloists, the Macedonian composers were stimulated to write vocal pieces. Thus, in addition to the regular program of the old masters of music and solo songs from the more contemporary periods of music history, Firfova's concerts regularly included solo songs by Yugoslavian and Macedonian composers.

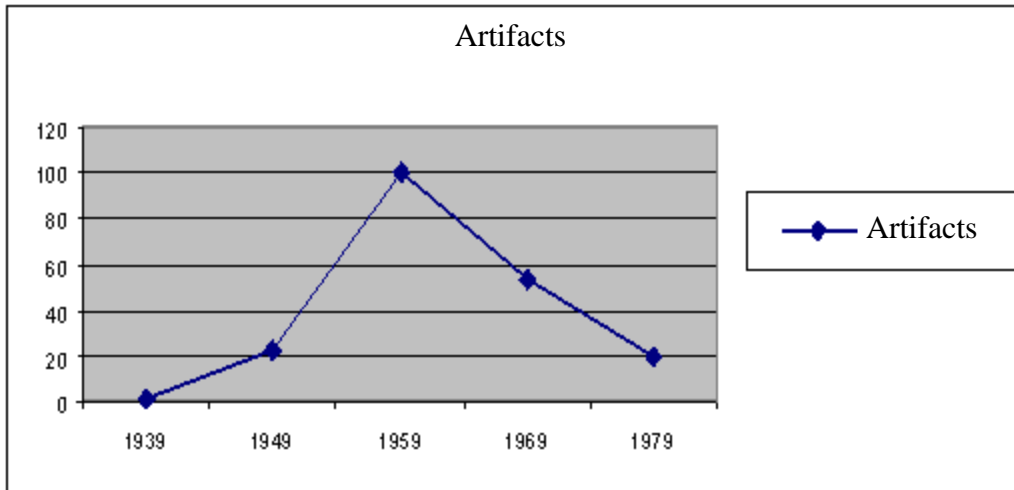
Distribution according to name of event

Name of event	Number	%
Soloist	125	24.56%
Aida	43	8.45%
Troubadour	19	3.73%
Turandot	16	3.15%
Toska	13	2.55%
Othello	13	2.55%
Others	280	55.01%
Total	509	100%

This distribution indicates that the largest percentage of the artefacts concern Danka Firfova's work at various opera houses, including performance contracts, as well. To understand this one must consider the political system and the cultural policy of the former Socialist Federation of Yugoslavia, where every event, guest performance, opera or concert had to be approved by several committees and institutions.

In addition to providing the names of events, this field also presents Danka Firfova's repertoire, such as *Aida*, *Toska*, *Norma*, *Troubadour*, *Turandot*, *Othello*, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *Un Ballo in Maschera*. Nevertheless, the distribution of names of events shows that most of them refer to the operas *Aida*, *Troubadour*, *Turandot*, *Toska* and *Othello*. Incredibly, for the latter performance in 1959 in Zagreb Firfova was called back on the stage for encores 17 times.

Distribution according to date



The analysis of the field “Date” show that the artifacts range between the period of 1919 and 2005. On the other hand, the frequent distribution displays the number of artifacts according to years. This indicates that Danka Firfova’s professional engagements were at their highest between the years of 1949 and 1969, when she was also in her mature years (she was thirty in 1949). Another reason why Firfova’s work increased from 1949 onwards was the establishment of the Macedonian Opera in 1948 where Firfova worked as a full-time soloist, but also because she was the prima donna of the Opera of the Serbian National Theatre in Novi Sad. During this period Firfova received the Grand Prix at an international competition in Belgium, and she also had several successful guest performances abroad.

The period between 1939 and 1949 largely concerns Firfova’s work as a teacher in several music schools and high schools in the country.



Danka Firfova in *Aida*

Distribution of printed and non-printed materials

Material	Number	%
Printed	145	28.49%
Non - printed	364	71.51%
Total	509	100%

As previously mentioned, most of the artifacts concern Firfova's position at the MNT, the contracts and permissions for performances, as well as personal correspondence and cards from individuals and institutions. This explains the large percentage – 71.51% – of non-printed materials.

Distribution according to the origin of the artifacts

Origin of artifact	Number	%
Foreign	141	27.70%
Domestic	368	72.30%
Total	509	100%

The large number of Macedonian artifacts is not surprising, bearing in mind that Danka Firfova worked at the Opera on a regular basis.

Distribution according to the place of origin of the artifacts

Place of origin	Number	%
Macedonia	317	62.28%
Serbia	83	16.30%
Belgium	10	1.97%
Others	99	19.45%
Total	509	100%

Further analysis includes the origin of artifacts. Most of them originate from Macedonia, followed by Serbia, since Firfova mostly performed in these two republics.

Distribution according to authors of artifacts

Authors of artifacts	Number	%
Macedonian National Theatre	171	40.23%
Danka Firfova	64	15.06%
Serbian National Theatre	26	6.12%
Others	164	38.59%
Total	425	100%

Because of the geographical region of Firfova's performances and the institutions where she was employed, this distribution should have largest percentage of artifacts by the Macedonian National Theatre and the Serbian National Theatre from Novi Sad, usually in the form of documents, concert leaflets and photographs. The other artifacts are by music institutions, schools, newspapers, and writers of articles and reviews.

During her professional career Firfova performed with many musicians. According to the distribution of the data she most frequently performed with the conductors Gaetano Cila, Ino Perishic, Todor Skalovski and Davorin Zhupanic. Other artists she worked with are Pavlina Apostolova, Ana Lipsha Tofovic, Mario Gjuranc, Artur Surmejan, Enzo Serini, Metodija Ilievski, Jordan Todorovski, Mirko Hadnakjev, Ozren Bingulac, Vlada Popovic, Tea Lovrencic and Biserka Cvejic.

The use of this methodology resulted in:

- a complete survey of the life and career of Danka Firfova
- the ability to extract the most important moments of her career
- the ability to determine the factors that influenced her development
- the ability to determine the factors that influenced the development of the vocal tradition in Macedonia
- determining the position and role of Danka Firfova in Macedonian music culture
- determining a way to present the development of music artist for future studies

This initial survey of the distribution of the catalogue from Danka Firfova's legacy is undoubtedly sufficient proof of its value in the complete reconstruction of the life and career of this renowned artist. Further statistical processing and distribution according to the initial categories from the fields will certainly lead to an even more in-depth study of the field of our research.