TEFTA TASHKO KOÇO (1910‒2020)

ON THE 110th ANNIVERSARY OF HER BIRTH

**by Dr. Pandi Bello**



***In memoriam***

T

he year 2020 marks the 110th anniversary of the birth of Albanian soprano Tefta Tashko Koço. Albanians share happy moments when listening to her voice. Her crystal singing and pure tones resonate with the Albanian cosmogony. People continue to listen Tefta’s repertoire, where she so perfectly captures the spirit of the pieces.

Feeling interested and excited, people ask themselves: How could she reach such great heights?

Tefta reached the heights of her profession because since an early age she was captivated by the art of singing. ‘For Tefta, singing was like a chemical element which was part of the fabric of her essential physical and spiritual make-up’. Singing was her favourite activity by which she encouraged the emancipation of Albanian society during the time she lived.

As a soprano Tefta started singing in public in 1927, during one of the most prosperous periods of musical life in Korçë, first as a soloist at St. George’s Cathedral, then in a concert of *École* *Normale* and later in another concert in the *Lux* Cinema. Towards the end of nine years (1927‒1936) of concentrated studies in Montpellier and Paris, France (where she had numerous successes in various concerts and competitions), in November 1935 Tefta continued her concert tours, however this time not in France, but in Korçë, Albania. Meanwhile, she undertook additional vocal training in Milan and Rome with the aim of enriching her Italian repertoire. Consequently, she became acquainted with two main schools of singing, French and Italian, trying to absorb the most effective ways of improving vocal techniques that were applied in both schools.

Tefta put in a colossal amount of work in order to climb the temple of lyrical singing, and to reach its zenith —that of operatic stage. Fate brought her to live her dream, singing at the Belgrade Opera in November 1945. The roles of Rosina from Rossini’s *Barber of Seville* and Mimi from Puccini’s *La Bohème*, sung by Tefta, were received with much applause from the audience and musicians of Belgrade.

All Tefta’s recitals in Albania were transformed into events of aesthetic catharsis and boosting her audience’s morale. ‘With a merry sparkle in my eyes’—writes in his memories one of the singer's true friends, the writer Mitrush Kuteli—‘ it was as if I saw the pink tinges of the rising sun that rose further up the coast. For this sparkle and my spiritual goose bumps, I am still grateful to Tefta Tashko, and I will be to her ‘til the end of time … Then, there were newspaper titles for several years in a row: “Tefta Tashko’s concert for the Red Cross”; “Tefta Tashko’s concert for the earthquake and flood victims”; “Tefta Tashko’s concert to help the sick”. The country’s landlords and merchants possessed gold treasures and other treasures to give, but gave nothing. Ministers, deputies and senior officials received two or three large salaries, but had nothing to offer. Entrepreneurs and usurers accumulated, but gave nothing. Tefta had only her voice which she kindly donated to everyone, and she poured it out on all four sides, in the midst of darkness …’.

This is how this soprano galvanised the Albanian local communities in the mid-1930s.

Tefta could have had a good career in Europe and America. She was even offered concrete commitments. Yet, although today’s young people may find it difficult to comprehend, in those days, for most who were pursuing higher studies abroad, patriotism was an utterly natural sentiment. For Tefta's father, love and work for the homeland was an inner sense of life and this sense was naturally conveyed to his children. Athanas Tashko Korçari was truly a man of the Albanian national renaissance. Tefta inherited many of her father’s traits such as strength of character, courage, generosity and a sense of freedom (inalienable liberties).

Nurtured with a sense of initiative, Tefta did not mind singing in the most difficult conditions. She, along with her colleagues, performed a repertoire of classical and national music, accompanied by an orchestra or a choral accompaniment. She even sang, like no other, after being diagnosed with a serious illness that would rob her of life as soon as she turned 37 years old.

Characterised by intrinsic motivation, she carved her own path of noble mission, just like her friends in the arts: painter Vangjush Mio, poet Lasgush Poradeci, prose writer Mitrush Kuteli, sculptor Odhise Paskali, and also her colleagues of the lyric singer’s world such as Jorgjia Filçe-Truja, Lola Aleksi-Gjoka, Maria Paluca-Kraja, Kristaq Koço, Mihal Ciko, Kristaq Antoniu and others.

The vocal technique and virtuosity that Tefta possessed were deeply embodied in Rosina’s cavatina full of ornaments, trills and cadenzas (*Barber of Seville*). A full-bodied lyricism and pattern of phrase-lengths are demonstrated in Leila’s cavatina from the opera *The Pearl Fishers* by the French composer Bizet. Tefta’s emotive portrayal of Violetta in ‘Follie! ... follie!’ and ‘Sempre libera’ from Verdi’s *La Traviata*, show her abilities as a coloratura soprano with many virtuoso runs and high notes with many virtuoso runs and high notes. She conveys to the listener Violetta’s fragile emotional state, who is torn between love, tragedy (illness) and *joie de vivre*. These and some other pieces that she recorded for the Columbia Recording Company in Italy, in 1937, continue to the present day to make lasting impressions on the listener.

The inclusion of Albanian urban songs for the first recitals given by her in Korça, Tirana and Shkodra (a few months before graduating from the *Conservatoire National de Paris*), is evidence of the soprano’s patriotic devotion. This was the way Tefta aimed at bringing different social classes closer to the lyrical singer’s stage. Her interpretation of the urban songs was conceived in the style of the romance genre, and the embellishment of the melody based on a phonological acquisition of the Albanian language, expanded vocal and aesthetic horizons by creating a professional agogic style of rendering urban song.

Songs such as ‘Nightingale, You Poor Nightingale’ (*Bilbil o i mjeri bilbil*), ‘The Stream of Our Village’(*Kroj*’*i fshatit tonë*), ‘The North Wind’(*Fryn veriu*),‘I Am Your Lover’(*Dashtnuer t*’*u bana*)and about sixty others from several areas of Albania, Tefta recorded in Milan in 1937 and 1942. The refinement of song types (of an urban stylised nature) can be easily ascertained today thanks to the artistic finesse and poetic expression conveyed by Tefta.

Tefta was actually born in Egypt (Fayum) and when she arrived with her family in Korçë in 1921 following the death of her father, she was only ten years old. Intuition in capturing new qualities of the urban songs of Korçë or of other provinces, and the enrichment of their musical setting with brilliant undertones and overtones, are evidence of her talent, determination and future perspective. All these elements speak of the greatness of Tefta’s vision. In the meantime, Tefta skilfully switched from Albanian urban songs to foreign operetta pieces or large operatic arias, while convincingly maintaining the authentic style of each genre.

After graduating from the Paris Conservatoire, she brought such breadth of skill and depth of feeling to the Albanian art of singing that, for the music practitioners of her country, her musical performance proved to be an entirely new experience. Through her soprano voice, perfected by her schooling, she appeared before the public with all the delicacy of a great artist. What people felt when hearing her graceful and elegant voice, was something they had never before encountered. ‘The apogee of Albanian singing’—this is how the conductor Mustafa Krantja portrayed Tefta, whose music flowed through her veins.

As a master of her work, she entered the modest Albanian musical and cultural circles of the time with her consolidated vocal technique and highly refinedstyle that represented worthy achievements and true foundations of a major and accomplished culture.

Tefta created a new reality in the field of vocal interpretation, and when it came to urban song, this reality could be defined as superior, as sublime.

This was the life Tefta led and the legacy she left for those who came after her. The social impact of her participation in artistic activities is as historic as it is present. For this reason, she represents a rare artistic and socio-human phenomenon of national culture identity.

Tefta Tashko Koço was adored by many professionals and amateurs who lived between 1927 and 2020. The other singer with a golden voice, Nexhmije Pagarusha, called Tefta ‘immortal’. As time goes by, I believe that music lovers will always truly admire her.

It is worth noting that her most ardent fan was her husband, the ‘luxury baritone’ (to use an expression of the Russian musician Yuri Arbatsky), Kristaq Koço. To understand this, it is sufficient to read something about their lives. People have known them as an ideal couple, but, for Kristaq, Tefta's death brought an end to everything on earth. According to the memoires of Mrs. Mynever Shuteriqi, after Tefta's death, at a certain time each day (usually at 11am), Kristaq prayed at home in front of her portrait as though before an icon. He prayed as if he wanted her to return, to reverse the misfortune that had befallen him. Tragedy had happened…

Although at a young age Tefta experienced the bitter cup of suffering, the gods had predestined another fate for her: to bring joy and to spread happiness around to others! And her captivating voice will surely always bring joy and spread happiness. It will suffice for people to hear her again.