



May Opera Evenings

Each May, the usually invisible opera admirers appear *en masse* in the small square on the left bank of the Vardar in front of Skopje's most famous modernist building, the white "bunker" of the Macedonian Opera and Ballet. They gather for the May Opera Evenings. This festival has become an unmissable event of the very warm Macedonian month of May. An extra ticket is often sought, but usually the late comers' disappointment is the only result. The tickets for the majority of performances are sold out long in advance. Foreign guest stars, the restoration of legendary historic productions and international collaborative projects as well

as improved marketing, have significantly raised the quality and popularity of May Opera Evenings (MOV, in Macedonian) making them one of the most prestigious cultural events in the country.

MOV was established in 1972. Vasil Kjordoshev was the mastermind of its original concept and design. The first performance was the Macedonian opera *Tzar Samoil* (ninth-century ruler and a major inspiration behind the modern idea of Macedonian statehood), written by the composer Kiril Makedonski. The programme concept included opera and ballet performances as well as concerts with operatic arias and symphonic music. Each year the festival starts and ends on the

same dates, the 9th and the 31st of May. Half a dozen performances scheduled between these dates command the attention of opera lovers. In its heyday, the Festival included up to fifteen plays representing the best achievements of world opera at the time and featuring international opera stars including Nicholae Herlea, Vladislav Pyavko, Radmila Bakochevic, Zhuzha Misura and Miora Cortez-David. *MOV* established its reputation as an event engaging the national companies of the Opera and Ballet and the Philharmonic Orchestra as well as the most renowned artists from the neighbouring countries.

During the Festival's 40 years more than 280 performances with over 1200 participants from more than 20 countries have been staged. Although the Italian opera and its classical interpretation, especially the most popular operas such as *Aida*, *La Traviata* or *Tosca*, prevail, operatic traditions of other nations are also well represented. May Opera Evenings have always fostered original productions by Macedonian artists. Many Macedonian composers have shared the festival stage with international masters to a great acclaim.

During the economic upheavals of the 1990s the festival came under severe economic pressure. *MOV* had to scale down its international program. Since then almost all the shows of the festival have been produced by the Macedonian Opera and Ballet. Up until the present day *MOV* can only afford to engage a few internationally renowned artists per production. But such practice has increased the capacities of the domestic institution and has led to genuine cross-border and cross-cultural cooperation. It has resulted in a festival program with few guest performances by foreign companies but at the same time has pushed the management team to search for alternative strategies to secure international presence and forced them to hone their fundraising and organizational skills.

And, of course, the warmth of the Macedonian people and the attractiveness of Macedonia and its culture contribute to the festival's success. As *MOV* management explains, many international guests accept their invitations to take part in the festival productions with honoraria far below their usual earnings. And some of them keep coming back.



"The Bat" - Johann Strauss JR