

## THE SYN(es)THESIS PROJECT – A MULTI-PURPOSE EXPERIMENT IN INTERDISCIPLINARY ARTS

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In the spring of 2021, the “Pancho Vladigerov” House Museum in Sofia brought to life a new creative initiative that aimed to simultaneously enlarge the scope of the museum’s activities, open up new artistic paths, and allow for an innovative approach to the cultivation of a wider audience base given the ongoing pandemic at the time. In April of the same year, the SYN(es)THESIS Project was officially introduced to the public through its inaugural concert exhibition; since then, it has involved the partnership and support of no less than twelve institutions in Bulgaria and has culminated in three complete annual editions with multiple events and components. Three years later, with a remarkable array of creative results in several artistic fields, the project presents the intriguing tale of an original interdisciplinary experiment. This paper invites a closer look into its structure and organization, its participants’ compelling and inspired productions, and its potential for further expansion into new creative territories following its main established principles.

In its essence, the SYN(es)THESIS Project aims to explore the multitude of possibilities for synthesis, interactions, and interconnections between the various arts through inspired individual and group-coordinated creative work. As such, it is meant to build bridges, often in unexpected ways, between artists, artistic disciplines, and institutions at multiple levels, even between the educational and professional spheres and their respective audiences. To foster the above goals, the project employs an array of creative approaches that, as its very name suggests, allow for manifold combinations and artistic interpretations. In practice, the root words “SYN” (Greek, “together”), “THESIS” (“statement”), “aesthesh” (“feeling”), and “SYNTHESIS” all have a certain relationship to its main guiding principles; and, while the number

of these morphemes is fixed, the project does provide an open framework in which the potential directions for artistic work can, at least in theory, be limited only by one's imagination and the specific relationships between the various creative mediums. In this regard, the project encompasses a rather open general format; concurrently, with every new session, all possibilities are narrowed down to specific combinations of artistic activities. This consequently allows for a clear, yet ever-evolving structure to be re-established as the basis for creative work.

#### HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS AND INSPIRATION FOR THE PROJECT

Before describing the history, procedures, and results of the project in detail, it would be appropriate to begin this segment with a few remarks regarding the legacy of artistic works which can, in one way or another, be related to its main conceptual framework. Upon looking at historical examples and various developments in the arts, it becomes evident that there is a natural relationship between the project's primary goal – the intertwining of various arts – and certain well-known genres, practices, and other artistic forms. This becomes especially relevant when one looks at the field of Classical music, which, to some degree, is the art most central to the project's organization.

To commence: it's difficult to imagine a more natural form of synthesis than the combination of music and dance... To quote Plato, "Rhythm and harmony find their way into the secret places of the soul"<sup>1</sup>; and as William Stanford has put it: "Kids: they dance before they learn there isn't anything that isn't music"<sup>2</sup>. In addition to the apparent "symbiosis" of these two arts, tied together in a "primal" link of sorts, examples of other, more cultivated forms of artistic integration also come to mind. Here, one would be quick to think of the genre of the opera; its centuries-old history serves as evidence of how the "multi-genre pedigree" of a certain artistic form can lead to a long and complex evolution. Throughout this process, artists (in this instance, composers) of profound abilities have revealed entirely "new worlds" of potential. Significantly, one composer named Richard Wagner found it of the utmost necessity to formulate a separate term ("Gesamtkunstwerk") that would precisely capture his notion of "synthesis of the arts", all within a musical genre that inherently encompasses the integration of multiple art forms, constituting a veritable "universe in itself". This fact alone speaks to

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<sup>1</sup> Plato. Republic, Book 3, section 399e. In: Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vols. 5 & 6 translated by Paul Shorey. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1969

<sup>2</sup> William Staffor. "The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems", Graywolf Press, 1988.

the multi-layered possibilities and the complex nature of relationships that can be created when the topic of artistic interconnections is concerned.

About the above examples, two important observations must be made regarding the SYN(es)THESIS Project. First, it was always the intention of its creators to avoid any direct and simple repetition of well-established and popular forms of synthesis between various arts. In the case of incorporation and interconnection of selected elements (for example, dance/pantomime and music, the composition of music to a film scene, etc.), this would always be done with an original (less common) goal in mind. Second, the project's design has always presupposed an innovative approach to its multi-genre nature to make its results particularly relevant and relatable to a modern audience; the project would thus establish a clear role within the context of present-day artistic discourse, which also includes topics on new art forms, hybrid genres, and less explored contents.

Admittedly, there is one concrete, small group of artistic precedents that can be claimed to have been the true and primary source of inspiration for the project; these precedents include Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" – a musical cycle of pieces inspired by a set of paintings – and a few other similar works. With this in mind, it was clear, right from the beginning, that the project would initially focus on the connection between musical and visual perception – a relationship which, in fact, additionally justified the choice for its name. "Synaesthesia", a relatively unusual and uncommon phenomenon, is a condition, or disposition, which allows certain people to experience two different and yet simultaneous perceptions. For example, one could hear a tone and immediately associate it with a specific color. More unusual associations can also be observed: associations of sound (possibly, an entire chord) and smell, of certain colors for each letter of the alphabet, and so on. In this regard, the world of Classical music has been well endowed with its own historical "synaesthetes". To refer to a curious, well-known case: once, a fierce dispute took place between Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Scriabin on the question of the colors corresponding to specific tones; apparently, they could agree on the colors corresponding to most scale degrees, though their opinions strongly differed on one particular tone. The dispute was not resolved in the end, and the two allegedly parted ways for the day in defense of their strong artistic and "synaesthetic" perceptions!

Curiously, while it was clear from the onset of the SYN(es)THESIS Project that the relatively uncommon phenomenon of synaesthesia would not be emphasized in any way within the conceptual or procedural structure of the project, nor would it be directly related to its stated objectives, a small number of the participants shared in retrospect that they had achieved "synaesthetic" experiences of their own. In a few of these cases, more detailed

explanations were given for the artistic decisions that these individuals had taken in the course of their work. As a result, their creative choices could, in various aspects, present an interesting point for further exploration and investigation.

With this in mind and before delving deeper into the timeline of the project's development, it is important to state the following: the project was purposefully designed in such a way as to allow potential future scientific or artistic (musicological, performance-oriented, aesthetical, and so on) studies based on the results that have been achieved. Moreover, its structure made it possible for these results to be recorded and collected in an "archive" of sorts, detailing the narrative of the various interactions between the participating artists within their creative fields as their work progressed through time. This also provided a certain model and a cultivated "database" that can be used for future developments or studies in the field of interdisciplinary arts in general.

#### THE SYN(ES)THESIS PROJECT – THE BEGINNING

The SYN(es)THESIS Project was initially conceived in the fall of 2020, at a time when the pandemic had just cast a looming shadow over the prospects of immediate concert attendance, live performances, and direct interaction with the audience. Paradoxically, this difficult moment for the arts on both a global and local scale turned out to be a productive catalyst for the somewhat quiet planning of the first steps of the project, which included the first institutional partnership and a creative invitation centered on the connection between Classical music and visual arts. In the beginning, the "Pancho Vladigerov" House Museum – the project's titular institution – invited students of the National Academy of Art in Sofia to create paintings inspired by chamber musical compositions of renowned Bulgarian Classical composers. The response from the Academy was very enthusiastic: the students' dedicated work over the next few months, organized by Prof. Dr. Zdravka Vassileva (the project's consultant at the Academy of Art), allowed for the spring semester of 2021 to be used towards creative efforts unhindered by the unusual circumstances of the time. Following the initial partnership, a second collaboration was introduced to the students of the "Prof. P. Vladigerov" National Academy of Music. This involved another group of student-composers who, in turn, were tasked with creating compositions inspired by paintings.

As a result of the first invitation, 25 new paintings were created by the students of the National Academy of Art within three months; this period marked the very first session of the project. Due to certain pre-planned activities at the composition department of the National Academy of Music for

the same period, the invitation to composers was postponed to a later stage.

In due course, a temporary change of the pandemic measures soon allowed for the planning of an appropriate inaugural event – the project's first concert exhibition. With the partnership of a third institution, the Sofia Philharmonic, the concert took place in the “Bulgaria” Chamber Hall in April 2021. During the performance of each chamber work at the concert, images of the corresponding paintings were simultaneously broadcast; at the same time, the original paintings were showcased separately at an exhibition in the foyer of the “Bulgaria” Hall Complex. The success and efficiency of this format cemented it as the basis for all three sessions of the 2021 edition of the SYN(es)THESIS Project (as described below, two more sessions were conducted by the end of the year) and as a recurring component in the following annual editions.

This first concert set the tone for the future development of the project in several important aspects:

- 1) It unequivocally placed Classical music as the central base of the project, given the fact that the latter was initiated by an institution dedicated to the memory of Bulgaria's pre-eminent 20th-century composer (P. Vladigerov) and that the team members involved are mostly Classical musicians. In this regard, the concert also emphasized the role of the newly formed SYN(es)THESIS chamber ensemble, which included musicians from the Sofia Philharmonic, the Sofia Opera, faculty members of the “Prof. P. Vladigerov” National Academy of Music, and other professionals. Later, more musicians joined the larger ensemble pool, from which the specific ensemble for each following event would be chosen.
- 2) The selected program of chamber music masterpieces by well-known Bulgarian composers of the 20th century – with the added selection of works by faculty members of the National Academy of Music – highlighted the emphasis that the project would place on Bulgarian Classical and contemporary instrumental music. As it would turn out, this approach allowed the presentation of both popular and lesser-known, yet masterfully composed, pieces. A pleasant addition to the concert program was the inclusion of the project's very first original composition, “Among Forests,” by the Ph.D. student (at the time), composer, and pianist Svetlin Hristov. This piece was an early response to the invitation prepared for all student-composers.
- 3) The successful and warm reception of the performances, paintings, and the overall concept of the concert convinced the organizers that the creation of new artworks by students of the National Academy of Art could become a staple of the project for its following sessions. As

a result, to this day the students of the Art Academy have been the most actively involved group for the longest time, with their input currently totaling almost 80 paintings.

Regarding the art students' approach to the task of creating paintings inspired by music, it's essential to note that a principle of free interpretation was implemented from the outset of the project. After being given the initial selection of musical works for each session, each artist was able to choose one or more compositions that they would then listen to and use as inspiration for their artwork. Recordings were utilized for this purpose, allowing the artists to work continuously. As initially discussed with the faculty of the National Academy of Art, it was important that this choice was made freely, and that each student was then given full freedom to interpret the details of the composition just as they see them which, in turn, would reveal their perception of the music.

#### THE NEXT STEP – THE SYN(es)THESIS COMPETITION

Following the creation of the 25 paintings, the SYN(es)THESIS administrative team decided to proceed with the second planned component for the year 2021, which was to involve the writing of musical works inspired by visual art. At this point, two crucial decisions that shaped the future of the project were made: the decision to forward the call for new compositions to the international online community of composers and the decision to put this invitation towards the organization of an international musical contest. In addition, it was decided that the 25 new student paintings would be used as the basis for all new compositions in this contest. As a result, the SYN(es)THESIS International Competition for Composition was born!

Notably, the choices described above had been, to some extent, pre-conceived as early as the planning stages of the project. The idea of using the newly created artworks in one discipline for further artistic endeavors in the next discipline (in this case, the use of paintings for the creation of new music) in a potential “cycle of influences” was discussed right at the beginning, as it fell directly in line with the project's premise of finding multiple directions for interconnections between the arts. This premise led to the idea of a “living” and continuous dialogue between the corresponding artistic disciplines – an important goal and feature of the project which continued to be developed over the next sessions and editions, with the winning musical works from each new composition contest later being used as inspiration for more paintings, and the resulting paintings being added back to the pool of materials for the competition.

The competition was advertised on various online composer forums where those interested in participating could contact the organizers (the

administrative team of the “P. Vladigerov” House Museum), upon which they would be given access to images of all the paintings created for the project up to that point. Each composer could then reserve one or two paintings to serve as the basis for their composition; once a painting had been reserved twice, it would be taken out of the pool, and only the remaining paintings would be available for reservation.

After reserving the painting(s) of their choice, the composers would then have the remaining time to write their compositions. Once again, the principle of freedom of interpretation was emphasized. Composers were given the option to write for any combination of the instruments in the SYN(es) THESIS ensemble, which included a piano, a clarinet, and a string quartet (two violins, a viola, and a cello). They would then submit their works by the deadline, three months after the initial announcement of the competition.

The contestants would compete for a pool of three prizes determined by the jury and for an additional Special Prize of the Audience, which would be voted at the Concert of the Finalists. The jury of the first edition included five respected composers: Prof. Krassimir Taskov (chairman), Prof. Atanas Atanasov, and Prof. Velislav Zaimov who were all faculty members at the National Academy of Music, as well as Alexandra Karastoyanova-Hermentin (guest-composer, Austria-Bulgaria) and Dobrinka Tabakova (guest-composer and resident composer of the BBC orchestra at the time). The jury had the task of choosing the winners of the three prizes, as well as five additional finalists whose works would be performed and recorded by the SYN(es) THESIS ensemble at the Concert of the Finalists.

It was a pleasant surprise for the organizers to note that the competition attracted very strong international participation in the subsequent months. A total of 22 works were composed for this first edition, with participants from 14 different countries on four different continents. The jury of the competition also noted the very high overall quality of the submitted works. As confirmation of this assessment, the awarded composers and finalists continued to win prizes in other international competitions over the following years; in addition, the prizewinning work of 2021 written by Luis Trillo is presently in the process of being published in the composer's native country of Mexico.

The Concert of the Finalists of this first edition of the International SYN(es)THESIS Composition Competition took place once again in “Bulgaria” Chamber Hall in July 2021, following the format of the first concert (accompanied by a projection and an exhibition of the paintings). The program featured the performance of the eight finalists' compositions which were initially presented anonymously. Afterward, all listeners were invited to vote for the Special Prize, precisely before the closing part of the program which

included works by selected jury members and the announcement of all awards and finalists. The addition of the Special Prize allowed for the active involvement of the audience, among which were professionals and lovers of both the musical and visual arts. Thus, the Competition achieved two of the stated objectives of the project – attracting a broader audience and engaging them to participate in the event.

This very first edition of the Competition truly set the standards to which the next editions would adhere; right at the beginning, it became clear that the Concert of the Finalists would feature a vibrant combination (and, in some respects, a “clash”) of styles and approaches to the task of interpreting visual arts through musical compositional means. The originality of the presented solutions amazed the audience, ranging from more traditional compositional language through minimalism to complex harmonic/sonoristic language to aleatorics with elements of prepared piano. In this regard, the competition showed an incredibly wide range of creativity which, at the same time, was focused on a singular task – the task of achieving a truthful musical representation of the initial visual material. This trend of a “multitude of techniques and creative approaches being unified through artistic dialogue” would also mark the next two editions of the competition, allowing this forum to bring together the musical complexity of our time uniquely and originally in the process.

Many of the composers, in their written communication with the organizers, had noted that they had found the task at hand particularly inspiring and creative. Some of them also wanted to establish contact with the original authors of the corresponding paintings. In general, feedback from both groups – composers and artists – provided many insights throughout the development of the project, and the idea for direct communication and even joined work sessions between the various groups of participants was a common thread in the discussions. To the organizers, the formulated interest in such possibilities was further proof of the great potential of an interdisciplinary project such as SYN(es)THESIS to inspire new creative impulses among its participants.

Before proceeding with an exploration of the next stages of the development of the SYN(es)THESIS Project, it is necessary to note the third session of the project for 2021, which once again resulted in a concert with solo and chamber compositions by well-known Bulgarian composers. The event took place in October 2021 in the “Bulgaria” Chamber Hall, following the already established format of a concert exhibition with simultaneous projections and performances. However, this time the students of the Art Academy were also provided with some of the winning entries from the Composition Competition as potential musical selections for their work.

Thus, the third session of 2021 initiated the implementation of the idea of dialogue between the two arts while also enriching the repertoire that would be used, right before the events of 2022 would considerably expand upon the project and the artistic realms that it would cover.

All three sessions of the SYN(es)THESIS Project in 2021 were made possible with the support of the Sofia Municipality, which also provided financial assistance in the following year of 2022.

### NEW DIRECTIONS – SYN(es)THESIS IN 2022

The new annual edition of the SYN(es)THESIS Project in 2022 was carried out with the combined goal of expanding the range of activities within the project towards new artistic fields and new possibilities for interconnections while maintaining all the successful components that had already been established in 2021. This edition was marked by two major sessions of work, which culminated in a total of three separate events.

First, a concert with new works by Bulgarian composers was prepared for June. This time, the program would include an even larger amount of works by contemporary Bulgarian composers, alongside several well-established names of the 20th century. Over the preceding summer semester, students of the National Academy of Art were once again invited to create new paintings inspired by the works in the program; this time, they were also given several choices outside of the planned program. These included two choral works, a piece by John Cage that uses actual objects to produce the intended sounds, and a few electronic musical pieces (still related to the Classical – albeit the Classical “avant-garde” – tradition). This way, the project tested how the artists would react to new musical styles and mediums of sound, utilizing a principle of controlled variation for selected tasks.

At the beginning of the 2022 spring semester, the organizational team of the project decided to extend another invitation for creative work, this time in an entirely new discipline. This invitation would be directed towards Prof. Velimir Velev's class in pantomime (or “theater of movement”) at the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts in Sofia (“НАТФУИЗ”) and would form the basis for one of several new partnerships. The students in Prof. Velev's theater of movement class were asked to prepare pantomime performances based on the musical program for the planned concert. In this format, their work would reflect a long history of trends, practices, and methodologies intended to connect musical elements to specific positions and movements of the human body. Regarding similar precedents – such as the developmental approach of eurhythmics of Emile-Jacques Dalcroze, the eurhythmics of Rudolf Steiner, and others – it must be noted that Prof. Velev has developed his own, independent system. As this methodology also

involves to a considerable degree the possibility for free choice between certain movements, as well as the prospect of improvised performances, it fits directly into the main conceptualization of the SYN(es)THESIS Project. Thus, emphasis was placed once again on free creative expression and the possibility of the consequent appreciation and observation of the artists' intuitive decisions.

At the end of this first session for 2022, the planned concert took place on June 25 at the National Palace of Culture in Sofia. In addition to the projection and simultaneous exhibition of the paintings, all musical performances were also accompanied by pantomime skits. Some of these skits were pre-choreographed by the students in Prof. Velev's class; others were improvised during the event. These decisions were dictated by the goal of achieving a wider variety of potential results – a principle that has been followed throughout all of the project's annual editions.

After this first successful concert in 2022, all efforts were directed towards the preparation of the second edition of the SYN(es)THESIS International Composition Competition. In the structure of this edition, the already established component involving musical works inspired by paintings was kept as the First Category of the competition; at the same time, a Second Category – “music for a film scene” – was added. In this new category, all participants were given the choice to write music for one of two movie scenes.

For the second edition of the competition, the following new partnerships were formed:

- 1) A partnership was established with the Film department of the National Academy of Theatre and Film Arts. The department provided a scene from a film that had recently been produced at the Academy (“Fracture”/“Пукнамуна”, directed by Dimana Pastrakova).
- 2) A similar partnership was formed with “Focus Screendance” (“Фокс Куно Танц”), who provided a dance film short (“Return to the Womb”, starring and directed by Marina Marinova).
- 3) A third partnership was formed with the Film Scoring Academy of Europe. Students from the film scoring class of Prof. Andy Hill, who also joined the jury of the competition, were invited to participate in the Second Category of the competition; consequently, it was decided that participation in this category would be limited only to the students of this class and to interested students of the National Academy of Music and the National Academy of Theatre and Film Arts. Participation in the First Category remained open to composers of all ages and nationalities; this approach was once again meant to lead to greater variety in the expected results.

One more instrument (a choice between the marimba and the vibraphone) was added to the SYN(es)THESIS ensemble, to be used as possible instrumentation by the composers.

The Concert of the Finalists took place at the Hall of the “Prof. P. Vladigerov” National Academy of Music on December 11, 2022, featuring a total of 10 finalists for both categories. Following the well-known format of Category 1, the selected musical entries (two for each film scene) in Category 2 were also played simultaneously with the projection of the respective film scene. As expected, the compositions in both categories were marked by a variety of styles and original creative choices; three awards per category, as well as the Special Award of the Audience (voted at the concert) were distributed to the winners.

The Concert of the Finalists on December 11, 2022, was also marked by a final performance that had significance for the development of the SYN(es)THESIS Project. This was the rendition of Alexander Scriabin's piano sonata No.10 by Prof. Dr. Athanas Kurtev – a pianist whose long legacy of performances of this composer's works is well known and very highly regarded among specialists in the field of Classical music. This last component in the program was meant to acquaint the audience with yet another, new competition category within the project and, in the meantime, serve as an invitation to the final event in the calendar for 2022.

The new category in question was, in fact, an entirely new competition in and of itself – a competition for the best painting inspired by Scriabin's 10th piano sonata. The participants in this competition were students at the National Academy of Art; they had started their work as early as October 2022, when they were given an earlier recording of the work (again, performed by Prof. Kurtev, who also joined selected faculty members of the Art department as a jury member in this competition). The paintings were then presented in a final exhibition which took place at the “Boris Christoff” Museum in Sofia on December 16. More music by Scriabin was performed at the opening of the exhibition by the project director, and the recording of the piano sonata was played in the second half of the evening.

Overall, the events of 2022 featured in the SYN(es)THESIS Project calendar further assured its organizers of the multitude of possibilities for expansion into various new artistic directions and fields, as well as of the manifold ways in which new creative activities can be employed, both individually and in groups. Significant new results were added to the project's archive – which by then included a total of 44 musical entries, more than 60 paintings, and five fully recorded concert events with the inclusion of pantomime scenes in one of them. The year also marked the first time when questionnaires were forwarded to the participants (specifically, to the

student artists), asking them to describe their thoughts, perceptions, and ideas at the time of their contribution to the project. With the addition of several submitted textual explanations by composers participating in the musical competition, all of these results formed the basis for a true “archive library” of the project, a collection that exhibits both variety and consistency in its grouping and which could, therefore, become the subject of further musicological, aesthetic, philosophical, or scientific studies.

The events of the second annual edition of the SYN(es)THESIS Project (2022) were sponsored by both the Sofia Municipality and the National Culture Fund of the Ministry of Culture of Bulgaria.

### THE THIRD EDITION

For the year 2023, the organizing team decided to prepare one session that would be centered on the composition competition. As certain other tasks and projects at the “P. Vladigerov” House Museum demanded attention at the beginning of the year, the session was planned to take place in the second half of 2023. A new partnership was established with the Sofia Opera and Ballet. In line with the previous developments and tendencies within the project, it was agreed that the third edition of the competition would have two categories, as follows:

1) The First Category would once again involve the well-established task of writing music inspired by paintings. This time, a total of 50 paintings from the previous sessions of the project were selected and made available to all interested composers.

2) The Second Category would involve the participation of a new organization, the Unseen Theater artistic troupe. For this category, composers were asked to write music to a shadow theater scene performed by the troupe (a video recording was used for this purpose).

A few details should be noted regarding this unique theatrical troupe. The troupe, founded by Prof. Velimir Velev, is comprised solely of actors with visual impairment. Prof. Velev has trained the actors to perform scenes in several theatrical disciplines, including shadow theatre, pantomime, and others, using a special system that he has personally developed. According to many theater critics who have seen the troupe in action – both domestically and abroad – it deserves to be thought of as a special group of artists, not only in Bulgaria but on the international stage.

The involvement of the Unseen Theater in the SYN(es)THESIS Project was, therefore, a great opportunity for new creative work. In this regard, many of the composers who participated in the competition later noted in their correspondence that the materials presented in both two categories had been particularly inspiring and engaging.

As far as the conditions for participation in either one of the categories are concerned, there were twice as many requirements as in the previous edition. The instrumentation choices this time would include piano, clarinet, violin, viola, cello, and soprano because of the newly established partnership with the Sofia Opera and Ballet. Two prizes were allotted for each category – winner and runner-up – as well as a Special Prize presented by “Classic FM” Radio (another partner for the 2023 edition), a Special Mention of the Jury, and a Special Mention of the Ensemble.

The third edition of the SYN(es)THESIS International Composition Competition registered record participation in the two categories that were offered. Altogether, 49 different musical entries were submitted by composers from 19 countries. This significant interest in the competition once again assured the organizing team of the potential of the project to attract attention at various levels with the ideas that it presented.

As the vast majority of the entries came from international contestants, a decision was made to stream the Concert of the Finalists online. The event took place at the Chamber Hall of the Sofia Opera and Ballet on December 9. The procedures related to the performances of the eight selected finalists' works were similar to the ones in previous editions; at the same time, an exhibition of a selection of the paintings was presented in the foyer. In principle, all accompanying exhibitions would stay at the host institution for an additional seven to ten days; this had been the case with all concert exhibition events throughout all three editions of the project. The same exhibition was then presented for another week in December in the exhibition hall of the National Academy of Art in Sofia.

The third edition of the SYN(es)THESIS International Composition Competition was the last event of the project to have taken place up to the present moment. This edition was made possible once again through the support of the Ministry of Culture of Bulgaria.

## IN RETROSPECT: LESSONS LEARNED AND AFTERTHOUGHTS

Through its complex and original structure, the SYN(es)THESIS Project allows analyses from a variety of perspectives. In this regard, one important point that must be emphasized is the multitude of functions that this project overtakes.

To begin, it should be noted that the SYN(es)THESIS Project aims to build new connections between the audiences of several arts. It presents, as a result, a new forum, or stage, on which visual artists, musicians, actors, and many others can showcase their abilities and creative work. In this regard, it not only builds bridges between the various artistic fields, but also aims to explore new opportunities to connect listeners and viewers to the artists

themselves, while at the same time proposing new event formats, multi-genre presentations, and even new forms of creative activities altogether.

In all of these various forms of “symbiosis” between the different arts, the important question of the balance between them gradually came to light. As many of the events showed in retrospect, it was always important to consider the emphasis that would be placed on one art in comparison to another one. The complexity and depth of solo and chamber musical works demand the attention of the listeners; hence, it was discovered that there is a certain limit to the amount of detail that can be shown in any accompanying forms of art during their performances (for example, with pantomime). On the other hand, music composed for film and other scenes must not only preserve but even enhance the immersive nature of the visual content presented. Hence, an important lesson of the project involved the need for dynamic and realistic aesthetics – not only in terms of each separate art but rather aesthetics that would correctly unify the arts themselves and which would, paradoxically, need to be developed just as the work on each new component would unfold.

An important aspect of the project is its educational value. In this respect, SYN(es)THESIS occupies a special niche that builds a bridge between professionals and students – or, conversely, between the cultural sphere and that of education. To this day, the project has involved the collaboration of a total of 12 institutions (the “P. Vladigerov” House Museum, NAA, NAM, the Sofia Philharmonic, the National Palace of Culture, NATFA, Film Scoring Academy of Europe, FOCUS Screendance, Sofia Opera and Ballet, Unseen Theatre, “Classic FM” Radio, and TV1) and the support of the Sofia Municipality and the Ministry of Culture of Bulgaria.

A third critical aspect of the SYN(es)THESIS Project is its ability to continuously supersede potential limits in terms of geography or group of people involved. The extremely high interest that the International Composition Competition provoked among composers worldwide speaks to the capability of the project to unite artists from various fields and countries, an observation reminiscent of what has been described as the “unifying power of art”.

Within this “unifying power”, the project is also able to provide a rare opportunity for audiences and participants alike to enjoy a complex series of dialogues between music and visual arts; dialogues which unfold continuously in time, with certain “lines of inspiration” starting with the very first created paintings and ending with the very last musical works to have been created. Some of these “inspiration lines” presently comprise as many as six subsequent artistic interpretations, each work going back to the previous one that has inspired it (musical works following the paintings, and

vice-versa). To the knowledge of the project's organizational team, this is the first initiative that has taken the idea of communication between artistic disciplines in such a direction, with group efforts resulting in several cycles of repeated creative responses of this kind.

Some particularly interesting reactions could be noted here... For example, in the very first session of the project, one of the student artists created a painting depicting a young woman in traditional Bulgarian attire. The painting was called "Dance for a Harvest" and was inspired by one of the movements in "Five Sketches" for string quartet by Marin Goleminov. The movement which inspired the work is called "Dance"; interestingly enough, the previous movement in the cycle is called "Harvest". Upon further discussion with the artist, however, she made it clear that she had only listened to the "Dance", without having any idea that one of the preceding movements of the musical work was supposed to depict the image which she presented in the painting. Some of the musicians involved in the project would later react to this fact by suggesting the following: it was clear that the new movement ("Dance") was musically related to the preceding one ("Harvest"), and the music had subconsciously communicated at certain moments the images which the composer had originally intended to be depicted in this preceding movement. Hence, the music must have communicated the images associated with both movements directly to the artist, without her ever knowing consciously that the composer must have had the image of a harvest in mind. In itself, such "direct musical communication" could be considered certain proof of the power of musical language to express reality "without the need for words", or even "before words appear."

Other similar examples of the direct transfer of ideas and images through the language of one artistic medium to the next can be observed upon examining the rich project archives. One such case involves the prize-winning work of the third edition of the Composition Competition, written by composer Joel Diaz from Cuba. In this case, Mr. Diaz had chosen to write an aleatoric work for solo piano which involves specific harmonic/sonoristic choices in terms of the intervals and chords/sonorities that are used. The work is inspired by a painting which, in turn, is inspired by the aleatoric solo piano work "Triomphe les Carillons" by Bulgarian composer Vassil Kazandjiev. Further inspection reveals striking, almost direct similarities between the sonorities used by both composers, though, of course, there are some differences as well. This case becomes all the more intriguing when one notes that the contestant, Mr. Diaz, was only given the painting by the organizers without knowing which work had inspired this painting. The strong similarity between the two musical compositions – the one at the beginning of the cycle and the one at its end – suggests that the artist who

created the painting truly “translated” some of what the musical language implied in Kazandjiev’s work and that, consequently, a second “translation,” this time from the visual medium back into sound, was made by the contestant!

It is through such remarkable observations that the notion of an “artistic language” becomes particularly potent; and, although all arts are centered around very different creative media, one could also think about a certain “universality of artistic languages”. This universality allows for real communication sufficient to maintain a continuous dialogue even before the employment of any actual verbal language. It is through such concepts that the project will present a particular interest to artists, scientists, and observers alike. To summarize one of the most common observations of the organizing team, one could say that the participating artists responded to each other’s art with such certainty that, in a way, their active and unambiguous responses prove both the validity and the concrete nature of the artistic languages that they all individually use.

Here, one cannot help but also make a certain “detour” into more philosophical grounds... In its essence, the SYN(es)THESIS Project was conceived right from the beginning, not only as a project about art and the many forms which artistic expression can take but ultimately also as a project about man himself... As such, it is meant to celebrate creative artistic activity of any kind as a reflection of our higher nature. Paradoxically, this activity is both an inner need for humans and an expression of our freedom of choice, an intrinsic part of our spirituality that allows us to create new “worlds of meaning” and, consequently, to communicate better, more precisely, and more powerfully. It was with such goals in mind that the project was first initiated, and while the vast possibilities for future artistic experiments that it has opened can both be explored through actions and analyzed through words, it is also meant to provide a rather different point of view – that of the “word” of the artist who speaks through his or her art directly, taking us to a place “where [ordinary] words fail!...”<sup>3</sup>.

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*About the Autor:*

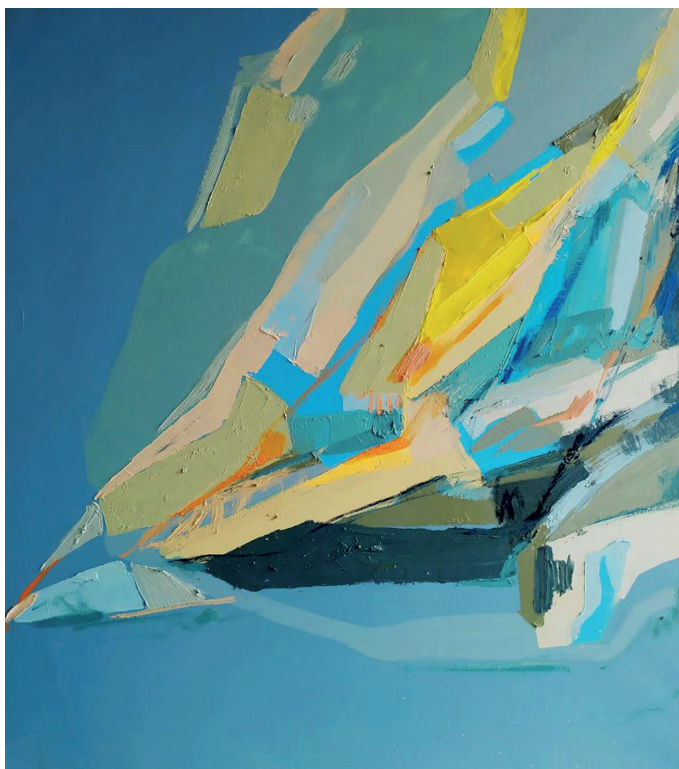
Alexander Lialios is a pianist and assistant lecturer in collaborative piano at the “Prof. P. Vladigerov” National Academy of Music in Sofia. He received his B.A. degree from Yale University in 2008 (where he studied piano with professors Anna Grinberg and Wei-Yi Yang) and his M.A. (2011) and doctoral (2015) degrees in piano performance from the “Prof. P. Vladigerov” National Academy of Music in Sofia, where his piano instructor and faculty advisor was Prof. At. Kurtev. The topic of his dissertation focuses on the

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<sup>3</sup> “Where words fails, music speaks.” – a quote attributed to Hans Christian Andersen.

melodic and thematic design of Schubert's piano sonatas. He has concerts regularly as a solo pianist and chamber musician and has performed in Bulgaria, Greece, the US, Germany, Austria, Norway, Italy, Russia, Romania, and Japan. He is laureate of a number of international piano competitions, both domestically and abroad. Alexander Lialios was also initiator and director of the SYN(es)THESIS Project in relation to his work managing projects at the "Pancho Vladigerov" House Museum. E-mail: [allias@yahoo.com](mailto:allias@yahoo.com)














# SYN(es)THESIS

ПРЕДСТАВЯ

## МЕЖДУНАРОДЕН КОНКУРС ПО КОМПОЗИЦИЯ ВЪРХУ ЖИВОПИСНИ ТВОРБИ

### КОНЦЕРТ НА ФИНАЛИСТИТЕ

С участието на: **Росен Ивандов, Сара Паноски, Димитри Ризов, Александър Кисефеларски, Велко Велков, Кира Миланова, Кристина Иванова, Александър Алавиос, Николай Стоев**  
Закриваща част: творби от Добринка Табакова и Александра Карастоянова-Хармениян (гост-членове на журито)

**20 юли 2021, 19:00 ч.**      Камерна зала „България“

### ИЗЛОЖБА ЖИВОПИС

С НОВИ ТВОРБИ НА СТУДЕНТИ ОТ  
НАЦИОНАЛНАТА ХУДОЖЕСТВЕНА АКАДЕМИЯ

**7 - 31 юли, 2021**      Галерия „България“

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